

The working weak

By Stuart White
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Somewhere in the back of my mind I remember being told the joke about the HR Manager enquiring of a prospective employer, "How many people work here?" to which the MD replies "About half". My staff are going to hate me for this but I know that they're only working half the time, the other half they are doing their own personal stuff, chatting, stretching out jobs that should take minutes into hours. And it's not just my staff - I am guilty of it myself. We all do it and there are a hundred of reasons for it, none of them worth listing except that for the most part discipline, interest and motivation to work a full 40 hours, every week of every month of every year is a big ask. So is it Draconian to expect people to do it?

I have been running my business for nearly two decades now and it has been a very educational experience, especially in showing me that many things we think we know about business are often wrong. This is a bit of a shock, especially for well-worn chestnuts which have intuitive appeal, which we have come to invest with moral significance, and which we believe so self-evidently true. One of the most ingrained of them is how many hours we should work in a week.

Like many people, I have concluded that working on overdrive and putting in overtime is overrated. It is an idea I have been playing around with for a while; the notion that working longer hours is correlated to better business results, is in fact a flawed perception. From this belief comes silly strategies that propose things like "If your nearest competitor or neighbour works X hours, you must work for X+1 hours." Now that's dangerous. For a start it is one your competitor can adopt as easily as you. More importantly though, you can't win but you can certainly lose, ending up with an entire workforce where soul-crushing hours are the norm.

Part of the problem is the mind-set that putting in time at work is really important, a belief fuelled by the notion that working for less time is somehow cheating and if you are of the protestant work ethic, immoral. Take the reactions to the book *The 4-Hour Workweek*, a self-help manual that suggests basically we can achieve a lot more doing a lot less, effort and time wise. Read the hate mail on the internet on this, and all because so many people are emotionally invested in the way that they have always done things - the correct, proper, morally acceptable way of doing things like working 8 to 5. A friend of mine recently developed a Facebook page advocating for the much less revolutionary 4-Day week... not many takers even for that, I'm afraid... and loads of reactionary resistance.

It is easy to fall into the trap where productivity is defined in terms of hours worked and all because managers find it easy to measure attendance as opposed to results. It's easy to see the hard-workers and committed employees – they come in early and leave late. Clock watchers are frowned upon and this equates to poor performers. And what about those putting in heroic efforts burning the midnight oil every night? I have had a few of them in my employ, always leaving late with piles of files, to reappear flustered again the next morning with files back and hardly a moment to spare – they were useless managers, even though I never always saw it at the time. But as soon as they left, my colleagues and I couldn't figure out what they did all the time when the position didn't need to be replaced. Yet it's obvious really – if they can't manage time, how can they be managers?

I am asking myself what is the 'right' amount of hours we should work? I am personally most productive on average about 4 to 6 hours per day. I'd be happy doing that four days a week, with minor incidental tasks on the other days (on the level of checking email or whatever). But so much of what I produce is influenced by motivation, interest and goals. There are days when I am so engaged and fired up that I will happily plough through everything, with an adrenalin rush all fuelled by excitement and purpose. Then there are times when I do a week's work in a morning, and at other times a morning's work takes me a week. What I do know is that rarely can I achieve better results by lengthening the number of hours I work in a day. I work when it makes sense to do so!

It really is the old 'quality over quantity' debate and the 'work smarter not harder' argument - I am just not convinced the world is quite ready for it yet. So for now it's still business as usual, Monday to Friday with a part-time workforce on a full-time wage but after all, they do say half a loaf is better than no bread.

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