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Make More, Work Less

By Michael Sutton

I walked into a university administration office and found a pasted quote with an unknown author that reads, “Our problem is not that we can’t complete four days of work, but that it takes us five days to do so.” If this quote were true, we could compute that employees are paid for 260 days, yet responsible for only 208 days of work.

How is that possible? The answer is simple—poor productivity.

Regardless of any statistical evidence to support the above quote, the underlying meaning rings true to every company—that is, employee productivity concerns companies because of its direct effect on net income. As a result, more and more companies are hiring and infusing resources to increase productivity. However, common tactics such as “communicate more” or “set more goals” are broad instructions that ineffectively address the foundation of productivity. In order to successfully improve productivity, companies need to reduce employee fatigue by limiting work hours, ensuring ample work breaks, and aiding in healthy sleep habits.

1. HOUR LIMIT

Youngjoo Cha, an assistant professor of sociology at Indiana University, said, “Work hours get used as a proxy measure for productivity...but research suggests that time is not a good predictor of how productive workers are.”¹ Yet employees who do not work long hours or endure sick days are seen as less committed to their careers.² As a result, employees wish to work longer hours to impress their bosses. However, this notion of “perceived” productivity merely leads to less productive workers and a lower return on cost of labor.³

By use of conducted research, we can combat the myth that more work equates to higher productivity. Stanford University professor John Pencavel conducted a study that indicates human productivity declines after 49 hours of weekly work, and anything more than 70 hours of work a week is a waste of time.⁴ With nearly 80% of people feeling overworked, and 60% of them saying their workload has worsened, we conclude that companies are losing profits by working employees longer than 50 hours a week.⁵

Productivity diminishes as the brain fatigues during a long work week; therefore, companies that achieve limited work hours will produce the most productive employees. However, surveys of working adults show that 21% say they work 50-59 hours a week and 18% say they work 60 or more hours a week.⁶ The high ratio of employees working more than 50 hours gives evidence that companies are losing productivity by overworking employees. In contrast, these companies

need to understand that they will earn more by ensuring that employees work no longer than 50 hours a week. As Henry Ford puts it, “Improved productivity means less human sweat, not more.”

2. WORK BREAKS

The evading value of taking work breaks is beginning to affect worker productivity. One study shows that 20% of North Americans believe their bosses will not perceive them as hard-working if they take their regular lunch breaks. This study adds support by showing that 22% of North American bosses say that those who take regular lunch breaks are less hard-working.⁷

Similar to any athlete in the world, your mind needs a break as much as Lebron James and Cristiano Ronaldo need a halftime. Research has come to show that humans move from full focus to psychological fatigue every 90 minutes.⁸ To support this, additional research shows that the most productive employees work for 52-minute sprints with 17-minute breaks, and those who take lunch breaks score higher on engagement metrics.⁹

Once again, company executives are missing the fact that less work can equate to more work. Without breaks, the mind begins to fatigue and performs poorly as the brain struggles to get the job done. Not only should companies ensure daily lunch breaks, but also implement programs to engage employees in short breaks at regular intervals. Using regular work breaks to reduce fatigue will increase employee productivity across the board.

3. SUFFICIENT SLEEP

Last, and by far the most undervalued of them all, is the need to sleep. The human body requires a daily period to shut down and recover in order to continue functioning. However, regardless of the importance of sleep, sleep deprivation is plaguing work productivity and company profits.

Research shows that sleep directly affects our cognitive abilities to focus, perform, and be productive.¹⁰ One of the longest controlled studies conducted to assess the relationship between sleep and cognitive performance shows unmistakable evidence of the importance of sleep. The study tested multiple groups who received four, six, and eight hours of sleep a night. Each group then took a test, and the tests proved that the four- and six-hour groups performed progressively worse on all of the exams.¹¹

Furthermore, The American Academy of Sleep Medicine has conducted multiple studies that show that people who receive six hours of sleep or less experience exponential productivity loss compared to those who receive seven to eight hours of sleep.¹² This data, combined with the research provided by the CDC, who claims that at least 35% of U.S. adults do not sleep seven or more hours a night, is amounting to huge financial losses.¹³

Sleep deprivation alone was the direct result of US employees missing 1.2 million workdays a year and the US economy losing over \$411 billion in GDP.¹⁴ Comparing these numbers with numbers across the globe, one sees that sleep deprivation financially harms companies in vast amounts.

From an executive's standpoint, no task seems harder than trying to regulate and enforce the hours of sleep that employees receive each night. Nonetheless, companies can follow the direction of premium companies like Google and aid employees' sleeping habits by providing designated napping areas. Doing so will ensure individual productivity and guarantee company resources are being used effectively in order to boost profits.

NO TIME TO WASTE

Regardless of how "successful" a company is, no executive wants his corporation to be afflicted by poor productivity. As CEOs and corporate bosses seek to reduce the mental fatigue of employees, labor productivity will improve, and the monetary evidence will amount.

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- ² Wendy Dessler. "Work until You Drop: How the Long-Hours Culture Is Killing Us." *The People HR Blog*, October 17, 2018. <https://www.peoplehr.com/blog/2018/10/17/work-drop-long-hours-culture-killing-us/>.
- ³ Chris Sorensen
- ⁴ Ibid
- ⁵ Varuni Khosla. "Overworking Doesn't Add to Productivity, Say Employees: TimesJobs Study - The Economic Times on Mobile." *The Economic Times Mobile*. Economic Times, February 20, 2017. <https://m.economictimes.com/wealth/earn/overworking-doesnt-add-to-productivity-say-employees-timesjobs-study/articleshow/57220743.cms?from=desktop>.
- ⁶ Sahadi, Jeanne. "The Death of the 40-Hour Workweek." *CNNMoney*. Cable News Network, 2015. <https://money.cnn.com/2015/04/30/pf/40-hour-workweek/?sr=recirc05011540hourworkweek0930story>.
- ⁷ Alan Kohll. "New Study Shows Correlation Between Employee Engagement And The Long-Lost Lunch Break." *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine, May 30, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alankohll/2018/05/29/new-study-shows-correlation-between-employee-engagement-and-the-long-lost-lunch-break/#64f8a5824efc>.
- ⁸ "Want To Be More Productive In 2018? Take More Breaks.: MIT Sloan Executive Education Blog: MIT Sloan Executive Education." Accessed October 28, 2019. <https://executive.mit.edu/blog/want-to-be-more-productive-in-2018-take-more-breaks#.XbdOSJNKjOQ>.
- ⁹ Ibid
- ¹⁰ Jane McCarroll. 2018. "Building Personal PRODUCTIVITY." *NZ Business + Management* 32 (10): M14–15. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=buh&AN=132350638&site=bsi-live>
- ¹¹ Matthew Gibson and Jeffrey Shrader. 2018. "Time Use and Labor Productivity: The Returns to Sleep." *Review of Economics & Statistics* 100 (5): 783–98. doi:10.1162/rest_a_00746.
- ¹² "Poor Sleep at Night could Mean Decreased Work Productivity in the Morning." 2018. *Targeted News Service*, Jun 04. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2052880781?accountid=4488>
- ¹³ Lawrence Epstein. 2019. "STOP THE GRIND: How Employers Can Curb Workplace Fatigue and Drive Productivity." *Plans & Trusts* 37 (5): 20–25. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=buh&AN=138423561&site=bsi-live>.
- ¹⁴ "Bad Sleeping Habits Are Costing The U.S. Economy \$411 Billion." 2016. *Forbes.Com*, December, 6. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=buh&AN=120023365&site=bsi-live>.