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body+soul

Making Life Work: Prevent Burnout When Home and Office Collide

It used to be that you could deduce what someone was doing based on where she was. Sitting in an office typing? Probably doing work. Camped out on the bleachers during a soccer game? Must be off the clock.

But now at 10 a.m. on a Tuesday, you might be Facebooking your old college roommate. And at 10 p.m., you could be in a bathrobe and clay mask conducting serious business (while catching up on reality TV). Thanks to portable technology and a shifting work-life landscape, duty and play have become strange bedfellows -- and not only because you occasionally fall asleep next to your laptop.

The boundaries separating work from leisure have all but dissolved. In fact, the only way to really define what you're doing is not by where you are, but by where your attention is. You might be at dinner or even on a beach somewhere, but if you're responding to an e-mail from your boss, are you really there?

Actually, we're all living in a permanent state of Elsewhere, says sociologist Dalton Conley, author of "[Elsewhere, U.S.A.](#)," published last year. Conley, who coined the term "weisure" to describe this hybrid of work and leisure, says that since we're physically able to work around the clock now, we often feel we're in the right place only when we're in two places at once.

"Distinctions like home-office, public-private, and self-other no longer hold fast," he says.

None of this means we're doomed to 24/7 enslavement, however; we just have to figure out a new way to work. In the '80s, we worried about managing our time. Now we need to manage our energy.

Welcome to Elsewhere

We can't blame the current chaos on our cell phones. The shift to working around the clock began long before that, when more of us went from making things in factories to working in knowledge-based jobs (think scientists, engineers, graphic designers, city planners).

Today, about half of us make our living from our brains rather than our brawn. Since 1980, says Richard Florida, author of "[The Rise of the Creative Class](#)," 20 million knowledge-based jobs have been created.

The upshot of using your mind as a means of production, rather than a machine, is clear: engaging work that's far more satisfying than an assembly line. But because we tend to identify with this kind of work (and maybe even enjoy it), we also tend to overdo it.

"The injuries of the old factory economy were bad backs, falling off ladders," Florida says. "The injuries of our time are stress-induced disease, anxiety disorders, substance abuse -- all of which are a consequence of the creative age."

And the more stressed we are, adds Conley -- by the pressures of the two-career household, by economic uncertainty -- the more likely we are to scramble to keep working, just to hold our lives together.



Your Brain on Buzz

As complex as the brain is, it cannot (despite your best efforts) make brilliant decisions consistently from morning till night. That's because the heavy lifting is being done by your prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain located directly behind your forehead, which handles planning, decision-making, and problem-solving. This is a lot of responsibility for one little bit of machinery.

Consider this example: If the prefrontal cortex represented the amount of change in your pocket right now, then the processing power of the rest of your brain would be roughly equal to the entire U.S. economy, says executive coach David Rock, author of ["Your Brain at Work."](#)

To extend the money metaphor, Rock adds, think of your brain power in terms of a limited allowance per diem. You wouldn't want to spend all your cash reserves up front, but that, he says, is exactly what we tend to do. Rather than use our morning energy to

prioritize projects and take advantage of fresh, focused thinking, we open our e-mail and start out in reaction mode. Before you know it, it's lunchtime, and our energy cash flows are drying up -- yet we keep pecking away.

And while the chronic stresses of our lives can take their toll, it's actually a lack of strategic recovery (i.e., adequate rest and nutritional fuel) that's at the heart of our personal energy crisis, says Jim Loehr, Ed.D., author of ["The Power of Full Engagement."](#)

"If all you do is expend energy with no opportunity for recovery," he says, "the whole system begins to degrade." Consider how you build a muscle: You increase demand on it during a weight-lifting session, followed by rest, when the body accommodates the new challenge and heals itself. You wouldn't dream of lifting weights all day, and yet that's the physical equivalent of what we're doing when we try to work around the clock.

Loehr, who's devoted 30 years to helping professional athletes manage their energy, points out that while 90 percent of an athlete's time is spent preparing and 10 percent performing, your average worker is expected to give peak performance 100 percent of the time.

Make Waves

The good news is that our bodies and minds are resilient, renewable systems. However, we're essentially cyclical beings living in a linear world. The idea that we can or should work for hours at a time goes against our biological wiring. "Everything in nature is oscillatory," Loehr says -- sunlight, seasons, even our sleep patterns move through cycles. "If you spend too much time in the hot zone, you're in trouble."

To honor these natural cycles of energy, it's far better to sprint and then break, rather than push or coast all day. "Our system works best when it's fully on and fully off," Loehr says. Working in 90-minute to two-hour stretches separated by 15-minute breaks will yield your best results. To get the most out of those sprints, minimize distractions by logging out of e-mail or silencing your phone.

Rock is another proponent of the interval technique -- "If you learn to understand your brain, there can be great advantages to living this way," he says -- especially when you're able to add in some play. Rock claims he can work right through a 12-hour flight if he stops every hour to watch something funny, like a few minutes of stand-up comedy. This is not only a mood-booster, he says, but it encourages new connections in the brain, helping you process information more easily.

So now that we're already working from our living rooms, we can make a case for goofing around in the office -- in contained bouts. New research bears this out: A recent study at the University of Melbourne found that workers who surfed the Web for fun (less than 20 percent of their total work time) were slightly more productive than those who didn't.

The New Rules of Work-Life Balance

No one is trying to say we should save our brainpower by chucking our smart phones. Even Conley, whose own family struggles with screen time at the dinner table, says there's no golden rule about how to make technology work for us. "There are probably a lot of silver rules," he says -- for instance, put down the BlackBerry while someone's trying to talk to you.

Don Tapscott, author of the book "[Grown Up Digital](#)," in which he looks at the impact of the digital age on the next generation, believes that to make this all work, we need to apply design principles to our lives instead. Like an innovative piece of technology, our lives can and should be engineered to support our needs.

"Consider your objectives first, then decide which principles you want to operate by," Tapscott says. That means not just asking what we want our lives to look and feel like, but also what purpose we want them to serve. Do you want your home to be a haven from work, or a place from which you can comfortably, flexibly manage your career? Do you see yourself as seamlessly connected, or on and off the grid at regular intervals?

In the end, we're better off thinking less about rules, and more in terms of establishing the rhythms that allow us to maximize our attention, restore our minds and bodies, and bring to every activity, be it business or pleasure, the kind of energy that best represents who we are to the world.

+ Think sprint, not marathon. Rather than seeing your day as two chunks (before lunch and after, or more likely, at the office and at home), start to plan your work in one-and-a-half- to two-hour blocks. A 15-minute pause every few hours is critical. Without it, you erode your ability to catch errors and snuff out that creative spark that invites insights.

+ Step away from the laptop. You'll get your biggest bang out of a rest period if you're active. Moving forces you to use your motor cortex, giving your prefrontal cortex time to recover -- which is why if you're still for too long, you'll make poor decisions and even feel emotionally flat.

+ Change the channel. Your brain craves novelty, so switch to different tasks as your energy levels ebb and flow. "I call it one-, two-, and three-level thinking," says Rock. "Level one is the surface stuff (deleting e-mails, for instance). Level two requires a little more focus. But level three, the deeper thinking, is what we need more of. It involves writing, creating, planning, and strategizing." You can do your best level-three thinking first thing in the morning or when you're fresh from a break. Bar distractions as much as possible. Even just 30 interruption-free minutes, Rock says, can make you much more productive.

+ Have a YouTube moment. When your energy's waning, a shot of something funny or novel can raise your levels of dopamine, which you need for clear thinking.

+ Forget goals (temporarily, at least). Psychiatrist Daniel Siegel, M.D., author of the new book "[Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation](#)," says that to experience true leisure, we can't just zone out in front of the TV. "Leisure sets the stage for creativity and novelty, which research suggests can keep the brain young," he says. Immerse yourself a few times a week in non-goal-related activities, such as visiting a museum, going to a park, or even just wandering a bookstore with no agenda except to open you up to new insights and connections.

+ No heavy lifting at night. If there's one natural boundary worth shoring up, it's between waking and sleeping. Choose a cutoff time for checking e-mail. Then stick to it.

+ Don't conserve energy by cutting back on your relationships. "A CEO shared with me recently that his five-year-old son said of him, 'I don't think my daddy likes me very much,'" Loehr says. "He's always tired when I'm around." That man learned quickly that if you don't invest in your relationships, Loehr adds, you'll get no return. And in the end, the people we love deserve the greatest gift we can give them: the unfettered power of our attention.

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