
In defence of workaholics

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I once designed a conference on a train in Italy. Travelling through a foreign country with different sights and sounds had turbo-charged my creativity. The kids were sleeping and I wanted to test out the concept before we reached the next stop.

All it involved was a few emails and texts to some colleagues I wanted to work with on the project. But those who knew that I was away on holiday all gave some variation of the same well-meaning response: “You’re on holiday. Why are you still working? Relax and enjoy the gelato.”

There’s never been as much emphasis on working less and living more. The hustle, we are told, is bad and time out is good.

But with so much stress on the value of relaxation and the seductive appeal of the 4-hour work week, are we in danger of shaming people who find genuine joy in their professional lives?

The 4-hour Work Week is a New York Times Bestseller written by lifestyle hacker Tim Ferris. Written in 2007, long before anyone predicted a global pandemic, it pioneered the location free lifestyle and shared some valuable ideas about how technology could streamline efficiency. It also made the promise “Escape 9-5, live anywhere and join the new rich.”

But even his biggest fans must suspect that there’s not much chance that a high-performing A-type like Ferris limits his work to four hours a week. Rather, four hours a week is the time your average executive will spend on a round of golf.

At the time of that family trip to Italy, I was at the stage of life when the twin-demands of parenting and working meant that I had become good at snatching the in-between moments to jot down good ideas before they disappeared. I was working hard but my compensation was that I was working to my own schedule.

According to people like Dr. Sanjay Gupta, Time magazine health columnist and neurosurgeon, extremely long work hours don’t necessarily add up to bad health. Workaholics can derive purpose, meaning and feel-good hormones from work they love.

This is the kind of narrative I find reassuring. It’s also what Sigmund Freud told us – that “Love and work are the cornerstones of our humanness.”

More than simply a way to pay the bills, if we are fortunate enough to have meaningful work, we also have purpose and a reason to get up in the morning.

In 1989, Bill Marriott, chairman and CEO of Marriott International, suffered a heart attack that his doctors told him was a result of an unhealthy lifestyle. Since then, he has modified his calorie intake, reduced late-night dinners, began Pilates, and incorporated daily treadmill sessions.

But according to Entrepreneur magazine, the one thing the self-proclaimed workaholic didn’t do, was to cut back his hours at work. Until the age of 75, Marriott was logging 90 travel days a year and 60- to 70-hour workweeks. “It’s good for your health,” he says “My work makes me very happy.”

According to some medical studies, what really harms health isn’t the number of hours spent hunched over your laptop, but rather the amount of perceived control you feel you have over your work combined with your position in the office hierarchy.

Sir Michael Marmot, professor at University College London and author of *The Status Syndrome*, looked at the mortality rates of employees in the British Civil Service and found that those with the lowest rank had a mortality rate three times higher than those highest up.

“What our study showed was a very clear gradient, stepwise: The lower you were, the higher the mortality from heart disease and other diseases.” he said.

This level of control over your life is an aspect that those who have chosen to work for themselves relate to. Many entrepreneurs choose to work on their own not because of financial gain, but because of the freedom it gives them over their daily lives.

This doesn't mean that there isn't an important place for rest and recreation. Taking time to recharge is good for both health and performance and it's why internet pioneer Tiffany Shlain and her husband, Robotics Professor Ken Goldberg, came up with the term “Digital sabbath.” It describes a day of complete rest from the use of all screens and technology.

Of course, we know that white space, time to think and a change of pace are valuable for keeping yourself refreshed and inspired - just as I experienced on that train.

But the kind of structure that works for some might not be the right rhythm for others. Working 9 to 5, taking weekends off and unwinding during a three-week, end-of-year holiday doesn't take into account the driven founder of a start-up, the person delirious about being back in the office after raising toddlers for five years, or the single mother working two jobs to create a better future for her children.

Dr Sanjay Gupta agrees. Not only does he have control over his jobs, but he also really enjoys them. And maybe that's the secret. “Loving your job is a large part of it,” he says. “People say a change of activity is a form of rest. When I go from neurosurgery to writing a column on aging, it lets other neurons in the brain rest.”

It's a positive sign that organisations around the world are more aware of the balance required for health and wellbeing. While working and studying in Germany, my son was surprised when his professor told him that he would prefer him not to email him over the weekend and that he would rather receive the document on a Monday.

That we're encouraging students and employees to look after their wellbeing is evidence of a growing consideration and compassion and it's to be encouraged. But when it's a personal choice to do work I love, please don't worry about me if I choose to pull an all-nighter to get my work done. I might just catch a nap later on the train.