Avoid Burnout With These Small Changes to the Way You Work

Follow these five tips to work smarter, not harder.

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Workplace burnout is real. I know, because I've been there, and I know most others have as well at some point or another. Thrive Global's Arianna Huffington is no different. She's on a mission to fix what she deems a "culture of burnout," after her own collapse from exhaustion in 2007. Huffington rightly says, "When we take care of ourselves, we are more effective, we are more creative and we are more successful in a broad definition of the word."

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Medical News Bulletin recently published "Can Positive Psychology Traits Prevent Burnout?," referencing a study where participants completed a survey about the balance of the effort versus reward from a job. This particular research was focused on the manufacturing industry in China, given the "monotonous and repetitive nature of their work," but this can be said for many professions and sectors. It was found that hope, self-efficacy, resilience and optimism can help to manage work stress, and people with these qualities are less likely to become burnt out.

There have been many studies published over the years that working less results in higher productivity (hint: the optimal

number is less than 40 hours per week). Perhaps even more important is that it's nearly impossible to stay focused for long stretches at a time. Some research suggests that you should be breaking as frequently as every hour.

In line with that, I believe in working smarter, not harder. While there are 24 hours in a day, they weren't all made for work. I'm in the camp that working eight hours nonstop is actually more unproductive than it is beneficial. Your brain has peak operating times, and what works for one may not work for another. Some people are at their best in the mornings, while others are most efficient late at night. I firmly believe that dictating what hours you should work and when is not the best method to yield quality work.

I often get asked how I can get things done. I work from home, and some have the perspective that I have no one to hold me accountable throughout the day. Inquiring minds wonder everything from what my daily schedule looks like, to how I motivate myself to finish up a project or prospect for my next client.

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Let me start by saying that I strongly value flexibility. It's the reason why working for myself is the best fit for me. But I hold myself accountable, and there's a certain amount of self-discipline involved in doing that. Everything I do is because I've set goals for myself. I have a duty to uphold to my clients and my partners, and a commitment to myself about the success of my business. I also pride myself in the underrated aspect of efficiency. It's not how long you do something for, but how well you do it.

Several books I've read over the years on this topic have stuck with me. *Getting Things Done,* by David Allen, addresses the two-minute rule. If you can do something in two minutes or

less, do it now. Don’t make a note and come back to it later. The time you spend thinking about it, planning it and recording it is more than the time it actually takes to complete the task. Tim Ferriss’s *4-Hour Work Week* covers the topic of efficiency as well. He’s a prime example of taking the phrase “Work smarter, not harder” to a whole new level. To be successful, it doesn’t necessarily mean you need to work more, only that you need to work more efficiently.

Based on experience, I’ve adopted these top five tips to do just that:

Free up your mind.

There is no need to remember everything. You read that right. Why are you keeping everything in your mind, which only serves to bog you down and make you feel overwhelmed? Find a record-keeping system that works for you. Some people prefer old-fashioned paper notes. I prefer electronic. With a Mac laptop and an iPhone, I use Notes and Reminders apps to store everything I need to do or think about. I schedule reminder times to make sure I’ve checked something off my list. No matter what device I’m on, I know it’s available to me.

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Schedule.

Plus, I schedule everything on my calendar — my morning activities to start my day, hours allocated for every client and even things like time to take a walk. But again, I’m flexible. I move things around as needed, but I know I have set time to focus on a task at hand.

Plan and bucket.

Some projects seem daunting from the start, but they need to be done whether you want to or not. Oftentimes the hardest part of a project is starting it. Create a plan and break it down into manageable chunks. If you can complete a portion each day, not only will your mind stay sharp, but that focus will also help to make the task more bearable. As the saying goes, Rome wasn't built in a day.

Follow the 80/20 rule.

I'm a longtime follower of the 80/20 rule, also known as the Pareto Principle: 80 percent of results come from 20 percent of the work. Why are you spending time on things that take 80 percent of your resources but deliver 20 percent of the value? Stop doing meaningless tasks, or outsource them if they must be done. Prioritization is one of the most important keys to efficiency.

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Take breaks.

It might seem counterintuitive that you can get more done by working less, but the human mind was not created to work nonstop. As research suggests, breaks are beneficial. Go for a walk, have lunch away from your desk, read a book, catch up with a friend or colleague — I promise you'll feel refreshed and ready to reengage.

The 40-hour workweek is so synonymous with the American culture that it's unlikely to change in the corporate world anytime soon. Most of us know that 40 hours isn't really 40 hours anyway, it's "whatever it takes." That being said, with influencers like Huffington working to educate companies on

the detriments of overwork, there’s hope.

There’s nothing wrong with working hard – it’s to be admired and valued. But don’t work long hours only for the sake of it. The companies that are getting it right realize that face time isn’t everything. The results you deliver, the reputation you hold and the relationships you build should always outweigh the hours of your workweek. As an entrepreneur, you can take advantage of this and you can evangelize this approach to others. Work smarter, not harder, and you’ll be better for it.

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