

How Finding a Hobby Will Make You A Better Entrepreneur

A good hobby is key to increased creativity, productivity, memory and focus.

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When he isn't busy working on the company that changed the internet forever, Google co-founder Sergey Brin has some interesting hobbies: ultimate frisbee, springboard diving and flying trapeze, to name a few.

The internet entrepreneur encourages his team to take up fun, physical activities, too. He's reportedly led Google employees on bonding events at the Circus Center, a training facility in San Francisco where students learn high-adrenaline hobbies like – you guessed it – flying trapeze.

Circus sports might seem to have nothing to do with Brin's day job, but as it turns out, they could be boosting crucial career skills. Because not only are hobbies fun ways to pass the time, they also increase our productivity, creativity, memory and mood.

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But we've reached a point where hobbies have a bad rap – the antithesis to the grind, aka, what it takes to succeed in business. That's why it's important to remind ourselves of the benefits of leisure activities, as well as how to find new hobbies (if we don't have enough already).

First, a quick look at the state of our work-fun balance.

We're more overworked than ever, but why?

In a 1957 essay for the New York Times, Erik Barnouw observed that “the increasingly automatic nature of many jobs, coupled with the shortening workweek [leads] workers to look not to work but to leisure for satisfaction, meaning and expression.”

As work became easier, leisure became more important, a trend that would presumably continue. But since Barnouw's article, the nature of work has shifted – from a necessity to passion – and the result is more hours at the office.

The Atlantic writer Derek Thompson explains:

“Rich, college-educated people—especially men—work more than they did many decades ago. They are reared from their teenage years to make their passion their career and, if they don't have a calling, told not to yield until they find one.”

Instead of basking in the free time that technology has provided, some people are working longer and harder because, in their view, their work defines them.

At the same time, burnout is surging higher than ever. A recent Gallup survey of 7,500 full-time employees found that 23 percent reported feeling burned out at work very often or always, and 63 percent said they experience it sometimes.

The World Health Organization (WHO) even added burnout to its International Classification of Diseases, ICD-11, describing it as a syndrome “resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed...”

On a higher level, burnout is taking a toll on the workforce. One study found that 95 percent of human resources leaders

agreed that burnout is sabotaging retention. And Harvard Business School researchers estimated that workplace stress costs \$125 to \$190 billion annually – that's 5 to 8 percent of national spending on health care.

Here's where hobbies come in – because spending time with non-work activities that we enjoy can be the antidote to burnout and stress, plus afford us a variety of other business-related benefits.

How your hobby can help your hustle.

1. Inspiration

Every summer, I spend a few weeks on my family's olive farm in Turkey for the annual harvest. Olive picking has no relation to my company JotForm, and nonetheless, I've gotten some of my best ideas during or just after my time away.

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That's because non-work activities can inspire us to look at familiar things in new ways. Consider the moon: prior to Galileo, the common thinking was that the moon's surface was smooth. But because of Galileo's experience with painting, where he learned how to represent 3D objects on a flat canvas, he recognized that the shadows on the moon's face indicated that its surface was rough and mountainous.

The most innovative ideas come from gathering a wide range of perspectives and knowledge, beyond the four corners of our daily job functions.

2. Productivity.

Hobbies can also increase our productivity through their restorative effect. Explains Carol Kaufman, founder and director of Harvard Medical School's Institute of Coaching, "When you're really engaged in a hobby you love, you lose a sense of time and enter what's called a flow state, and that restores your mind and energy."

By making time for fun and allowing ourselves to recover from the demands of our jobs, we return supercharged, with a renewed sense of motivation.

3. Performance.

Leisure activities can have a positive impact on the critical aspects of our job performance, too. For example, reading books stimulates the brain area associated with language and intelligence. Doodling can improve memory by 29 percent.

San Francisco State University organizational psychologist Kevin Eschleman, whose research focuses on the psychological effects of creative, non-work activities, has found that creative pursuits have a direct effect on factors such as problem-solving and helping others while on the job.

Physical activities boost our job performance also. Neuroscience research has shown that cardiovascular exercise, like jogging and biking, improves cognition and mental performance.

4. Mood.

Hobbies are foolproof mood boosters. Because when you're really engaged in an activity, you enter the flow state, which raises the levels of neurotransmitters in your brain – chemicals like endorphins, norepinephrine and dopamine that regulate your mood and relieve stress.

And as we all know, happier employees are better employees. Research by Shawn Achor, author of *The Happiness Advantage*, shows that happy employees are 20 percent more productive. Happier salespeople, in particular, increase sales by 37 percent.

By now, hopefully, the benefits of hobbies are inspiring you to carve out some free time in your schedule. The only thing left is deciding which hobbies to take up.

Tips for choosing a new hobby.

Start small – that is, when you were small. Rediscovering the activities we enjoyed as children is an easy way to choose a hobby. It also increases the likelihood that we're doing something for the sake of doing it, rather than because of the potential benefits.

As a child, I looked forward to olive-picking every year, and that's why I still make time for it as an adult. Whether it's harvesting or video games, coloring or tennis, engaging in your childhood hobbies will make you happy today.

Explained Dr. S. Ausim Azizi, chairman of the department of neurology at Temple University's School of Medicine in Philadelphia, "When people do things that make them feel good, like a hobby, it activates an area of the brain called the nucleus accumbens that controls how we feel about life."

Or, try an activity that taps into a completely new part of your brain. If you work with numbers and spreadsheets, consider studying a new language. If you're constantly meeting with people, consider something that demands focused solo time, like knitting. This "cross-training" will increase your mental agility.

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And make sure you select an activity that you genuinely enjoy, as that will help you get into a flow state. Ask yourself, when was the last time you were so engrossed in something that you forgot to eat? That's the kind of activity that leads to flow.

It's not easy to carve out time for a hobby. Doing something solely for fun may even make us feel guilty. But it's precisely this type of non-work activity that can actually help us on the job. With restored energy and a broader perspective, we're better equipped to hustle hard and innovate.

Find a new pastime that you love – and don't knock the flying trapeze until you try it.

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