



Help Your Company Regain Its Energy And Balance And Boost Your Bottom-Line

Joe Santana

Go into the offices of any company in one of many developed countries today and you are very likely to hear everyone from managers to staff members talking about logging marathon work hours. For these people going out to lunch, having dinner with families and taking vacations have become practices of a distant past. Many of the people I speak with feel the collective strain of neglected homes, families, friends and activities they vaguely remember enjoying (One gentleman I often talk to tells me about how he misses playing tennis. Another tells me about having a son that he hardly knows). These people are all practicing a new breed of stoic self-sacrificing workaholism.

What drives people to forgo healthy habits, give up family, friends and pleasurable activities that renew them? Why do we ignore signals of fatigue and burnout while continuing to push beyond the point of pain? According to Bruce Van Horn, the CEO of [Yogaforbusiness.com](http://www.Yogaforbusiness.com) (www.Yogaforbusiness.com) and author of "Firm Footing in a Changing Marketplace," one primary reason is fear. Other experts point out that habit and workplace cultures that support workaholic practices also serve as powerful driving forces.

The fear, habits and culture elements that drive hyperactivity

Despite the prevalent belief that people who work this way do so because they want to or because they believe it is the most productive way to operate, there is ample evidence to the contrary. For example, more than 20% of the participants in Investors in People's survey responded that overwork stress was the single biggest barrier to their output. Furthermore, most of the professionals that I spoke to around the world (over 26 countries) considered themselves to be "running on empty". This ongoing, relentless pace results in errors and rework – in other words lower productivity and higher frustration. But why would usually sane people drive themselves with such desperation? The common response is, "Because I have to or I will lose my job to someone who is willing to do whatever it takes." In other words, these employees have concluded that their managers are measuring the value of their contribution based on the frenzy of their activity as opposed to the real total quality of their output. Other people may not be in the grip of job loss fear, but they simply cannot imagine working any other way. "I often find it hard to walk out of the office at 6pm even after my work is done when I look around and see most of my colleagues still in the office until way past 8pm," states one anonymous commentator. Still another tells me that they've worked from 7am to 8pm six days per week and mornings on Sunday for so long that it just feels wrong to work fewer hours.

When we look at recent business history, it's easy to spot the elements that have spawned this work frenzy. Economic slowdowns, the collapse of the Internet bubble, the rise in offshore outsourcing, increased global competition, "service commoditization" - all recent trends resulting in continuous corporate and individual employee turbulence. Many managers have responded to these growing competitive pressures by pouring more hours into their jobs and demanding more hard work and activity from their team members. One senior manager I recently heard about, told his team in a speech intended to whip them up to a new level of hard work that, "They could sleep when they retired."

So what are the messages to employees:

- Life and business have gotten tougher
- You've got to work longer hours and at a faster pace
- Skip meals and breaks
- Skip vacations
- Spend less time with family and friends
- Pass over the invitation to play tennis or golf with friends.
- Be manic and make the workplace, your place of worship, your home and your hobby.

The result is people who either from fear and/or habit supported by a corporate culture of overwork do nothing but work most of the time to the exclusion of rest and any semblance of a personal life. In essence by pouring all of the extra personal and staff hours taken out of their collective lives and rest time into their work, the managers in these organizations believe they and their teams are being more productive and effectively fighting the competition. The problem is that according to the facts and experts these practices do not result in increased productivity for organizations. In fact you will find that the truth is quite the opposite.

The business case for building and supporting employee balance and vitality

There are clearly hard dollar costs incurred by companies as a result of overwork. According to studies by the National Institute of Occupational Health, American industries incur losses of more than \$300 billion a year comprised among other things of absenteeism, employee turnover, and workers' compensation benefits directly resulting from the prevailing practices of overwork. Furthermore, experts, such as Dr. Krista Kurth and Dr. Suzanne Adele Schmidt, co-authors of "Running on Plenty at Work," and co-owners of Renewal Resources (www.renewalatwork.com), tell us that even when employees show up to work, their exhaustion is silently bleeding away corporate profit. "If people push through when they are tired, research shows it can take them up to five times longer to get something done as opposed to how the same person performs when they are at their full energy level," states Kurth. To drive her point home, Kurth shared with me the story of a young woman that put in a sixteen-hour day in order to meet her boss's deadline for a presentation. The next morning when she arrived at the office she discovered to her horror that in her "zombified," sleep deprived state she had sent him the wrong presentation. The net results for this overworked lady was a big delay in producing the desired end result.

Another, "softer," yet equally important loss in organizations where people are overworking is the toll on creativity. Organizations that are populated by folks that are running around in a frenzy are simply not going to be the places where people frequently come up with competitive advantage producing ideas. As pointed out by author Tom DeMarco in his 2002 book titled "Slack," without "slack there is no room for creativity". Van Horn agrees with this and cites reduction of creativity as one of the biggest losses due to overwork stress. "We need to be human beings not human doers. Human doers risk turning their businesses into mindless commodity operations, with negative long-term consequences to the company and its competitiveness," states Van Horn. Unfortunately, as Van Horn points out, our accounting systems are not designed to capture these types of loss or costs on the balance sheet. Common sense, however, clearly tells us that there is a loss of value to the company when its people are not effectively and frequently producing new competitive ideas.

The bottom-line is simply this: these marathon work efforts do not profit anyone, most of all employers and stockholders. What they actually do is cost companies money and reduce the overall productivity and creativity of the organization's workforce. So, what can organizations do to lower these costs and increase real productivity and creativity? The answer according to the work-life balance experts I spoke with is to encourage the organization, its managers and its employees to adopt best practices that support healthy work-life balance and effective personal energy management. As Kurth puts it, the organization needs to support people in "essentially managing their lives and energy for peak performance." Which now brings us to the next question: "What can HR do to help here?" The answer is .

. . plenty.

How HR can help restore balance and vitality

Here are seven simple practices you as HR Professionals can bring into your organization to help your team members regain their balance, improve their energy management and boost your bottom line:

1. *Train your managers on how to listen and use their best judgement to co-design arrangements with their employees that foster better work-life integration.* Notice that I did not say to adopt flexible hours, telecommuting or other practices per say into your work policy documents. Work-life integration is for the most part an individual arrangement that seeks to optimize the integration of the individual with the needs of the specific business unit of the company where that individual works. Some of the best arrangements combine elements from multiple practices. (Some people can even pull off a 60+ workweek without becoming fatigued or ignoring family and other important parts of their lives via better work-life integration). The key is to take a hard look at work requirements and the needs of the individual and come up with the best total solution. According to Linda Stokes, PRISM International, Inc. (www.prism-international.com) “The real challenge here is to identify actual requirements of the job versus traditions of the company or preferences of the manager that sometimes masquerade as real job requirements.”

2. *Bring back lunch.* Get everyone to at least take 30 to 60 minutes for lunch away from the workplace on a regular basis. Simply put encourage people to take one of the basic benefits you offer. Does that mean never working through lunch? Of course not, but try to make “working-through-lunch” the exception as opposed to the rule.

3. *Make it a point to encourage real vacations.* A real vacation is generally more than a few days away from the office while fielding cell phone calls and emails. To minimize the impact of these on business activity, encourage managers to do what managers in European countries with paid leave legislation have been doing for years, . . . cross train employees. For employees that need to log in a large number of hours during the year, a work compression approach (where they work say 10-hour days for a period of time before the vacation) may be a solution. However, you do it, make it a priority to encourage vacations that truly provide an opportunity for personal renewal.

4. *Encourage everyone to regularly take what Kurth calls “Productivity Pauses.”* “According to research the human brain is hardwired to take a rest, or shift in attention, at least every ninety to one hundred and twenty minutes. In fact, If we do not take this mental break, our brain will take it anyway,” according to Kurth. “This is when we most often make errors or misunderstand something we are reading. Our bodies are still going through the mechanical motions of focusing on the work at hand, but the mind is elsewhere on break,” she adds. Kurth likes calling these productivity pauses, because it indicates the outcome. “People who take productivity pauses, return to the task at hand with renewed vigor and focus,” she states.

Kurth and Schmidt advise that you encourage employees to use their productivity pauses not just to stop working, but rather to refresh their minds and bodies. Here are a few examples they provide of how you might do this:

a. Consider designating a room just for productivity pauses. Don’t schedule meetings in this room or allow smoking. Stock personally interesting non-work related magazines (similar to a Doctor’s office).

b. If your workplace has some grounds outside, you can expand your productivity pause space by placing a few chairs or benches outdoors around the building to encourage employees to get some fresh air during these breaks.

c. Have people engage in activities that renew them physically by doing the opposite of what their work demands. For example, if people mostly sit during work, have them get up, stretch, take deep breaths, or go for a walk outside. If on the other hand, their work calls for prolonged standing, have them use this

break to sit, rest their feet, have a healthy snack, and/or drink water.

d. Provide people with tools they can use to draw, listen to music, or do craft work. According to Schmidt, one successful Fortune 500 Company went as far as placing basketball hoops in areas where employees took their productivity pauses. A bank I worked for many years ago provided a 30-minute repeating segment of a currently popular movie video between 11am and 3pm Monday through Thursday.

e. You can also encourage people to use this time to do something as basic as talking with colleagues about what they enjoy about their work and life.

You can mix these up or add variations. The point is to make these productivity pauses active and reinvigorating.

5. *Offer articles, books, brown-bag lunches and online seminars about stress and overwork, work-life balance and personal energy management so employees will have the information they need to make better choices about their approach to work as well as balance their energies across their work and life.* Use the material in this article to begin designing your own seminar on this topic. Better yet, hire an expert to speak to your managers and employees.

6. *Look for ways to sneak a little fun into the workplace from time to time.* For example if you have a cafeteria, you can transform lunchtimes into concert times inexpensively by inviting employees with musical instruments (and hopefully a modicum of talent) to play and or sing for their colleagues. I recently attended for the first time such an event held in a company based out of Orlando, Florida. It was a huge success. Surveys indicated that people attending the event were refreshed and formed new positive bonds with the performers as well as the other audience members.

7. *Van Horn recommends also providing employees with training in practices such as Yoga and meditation, which help strengthen the body and lower stress.* Meditation, Van Horn points out is “the perfect vehicle to refresh physical and mental functioning and to enhance the emotional intelligence, which is a prerequisite for business building and developing entrepreneurial skills.” For those who feel this may be simply some new-age pop psychology approach, he readily points out that the largest hospital located in the state of New Jersey in the United States is about to implement this type of program. “A small investment in preventative activities can help organizations to contain and control escalating healthcare costs while increasing individual levels of personal energy and creativity,” states Van Horn.

Summary and conclusion

According to a recent study by analyst firm Aberdeen Group, service-centric companies known as Professional Services Organizations make up approximately 75% of the economy in developed nations. In their report, Aberdeen goes on to state that “these organizations are now realizing that their success hinges upon their ability to efficiently leverage their intellectual capital.” PSOs, comprised of accounting firms, banks, brokerage houses, computer consulting companies, insurance brokers, legal firms, marketing practices, outsourcing companies and other operations that primarily sell people-centric solutions, see their employees as their most valuable asset and a true competitive advantage.

Companies, organizations and particularly PSOs that adopt best practices that support maximum results through effective work-life integration and personal energy management, will possess a huge competitive advantage. By demonstrating support for the whole person and for a culture of balance, these companies will realize higher levels of productivity. They will also attract and retain top talent, which will become even more important over the course of the next decade as the workforce pool continues to shrink. So start now to position your company to regain its balance, harness the new level of energy needed to compete successfully and boost your bottom-line.

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