



The secret to succeeding at work without burning out, according to a management expert

I've met so many people who believe that a tradeoff exists between becoming great at work and achieving a sense of well-being in their lives. They forgo life outside of their jobs and put in huge amounts of hard work—long hours and maximum effort—to become top performers. Over time, however, this effort takes a toll, leaving them burned out, unhappy, and stressed. Yet still they soldier on, rationalizing that greatness at work comes at an inevitable price.

As my statistical study of 5,000 managers and employees has shown, that thinking is misplaced. In my study, many top performers were able to maintain a healthy work-life balance and not burn out on the job. That's because they embraced smarter ways of working, practices that allowed them to extract more value out of every hour on the job. They got more done, yet had more time outside of work to rest and recharge.

What is burnout?

The Mayo Clinic defines job burnout as a “special type of job stress—a state of physical, emotional or mental exhaustion combined with doubts about your competence and the value of your work.” Such job stress is quite common in the workplace. My research team and I asked a large portion of our sample—2,000 people—to rate their level of work-related burnout. Many experienced some level of mental and emotional exhaustion. About 19% strongly or completely agreed that they felt burned out. Another 25% agreed somewhat, with the remaining 56% reporting little or no sense of burnout.

So, how do the best performers lower their risk of burning out? Several “work smarter” practices we tested correlated with both better job performance and lower levels of burnout. Each practice entailed being more selective on the job.

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Whereas many of us take on more tasks, projects, or priorities in an attempt to excel at work, some people choose just a few key priorities and then channel effort into doing exceptional work in those areas. They work less, but then obsess so as to excel. Likewise, whereas many of us accept any opportunity for collaboration that comes our way, some people are more disciplined, taking on just a few partnerships but then taking steps to help them succeed. Both of these practices—“Do Less, Then Obsess” and “Disciplined Collaboration”—can protect people from becoming physically and mentally exhausted at work, because they leave people with fewer tasks to accomplish and keep track of.

Burnout and emotional exhaustion

There is another part of burnout—emotional exhaustion. As the Mayo Clinic’s definition suggests, burnout can stem from a sense that work is stressful, bristling with interpersonal friction, and lacking in meaning. Another smart-work practice—matching passion with purpose—regulated this emotional aspect of burnout. Some people love what they do, while others feel a strong sense of purpose in their jobs—they feel their work somehow helps others, whether it’s their colleagues, their organization, or the wider world. A number of people manage to cultivate both passion and a sense of purpose on the job. These managers and employees go to work excited about what they do every day, exerting more effort per hour worked, as opposed to piling on more hours. They’re more energized about their work and less burned out than people who lack passion or purpose, or both. They also perform significantly better.

My colleagues and I interviewed a high school principal and his staff who had turned around a formerly struggling school. Whereas their work had once enervated them, now it energized and inspired them, not least because it allowed them to devote more of their time to teaching students, rather than disciplining them and breaking up fights. For hours when we visited, this principal and his staff talked with us about their innovative educational model, what technologies they were excited to try, and most of all, how their model was impacting the students. They felt deep passion and purpose. They were still working hard, but they were accomplishing more and feeling less burned out.

If you’re driven to out-perform, but finding yourself overly stressed, strike out on a different path by adopting these work-smart practices. It’s indeed possible to perform great and have a great life, too.

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Planning ahead for the future

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