How to Prevent Overwork From Killing Productivity

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Introduction

Profitability is the holy grail of most organizations. Organizations want to have better margins so they can increase their footprint, invest in their future, and attract investors. However, organizations working to improve their profitability by expecting people to work too much may find themselves on the wrong side of the expense curve—because while doing more with less isn't always bad for the bottom line, overextending employees often is.

From a talent management perspective, there are two intertwined assumptions that can cause unexpected damage to the bottom line:

1. The assumption that more hours worked equals more productivity

2. The assumption that technology aids productivity

More Hours ≠ More Productivity

A common assumption is that the more hours people work, the more productive they are, and the more profitable the organization will be. At first glance, using hours-worked as a proxy for effectiveness and productivity seems to make sense, because when people are working more hours the presumption is that they are creating additional value.

The problem is, every additional hour of work doesn't equate to an increase in productivity. In fact, working too many hours actually impedes productivity, both for individuals who are working too many hours and for their teams, resulting in a substantial decrease in effectiveness. The costs are there—they are just hidden. People who work too many hours don't get enough time to recover. Without enough time to recover from work, the resulting exhaustion impedes productivity, leads to accidents, illness, emotional dysregulation, and mistakes.

The reason behind the diminishing productivity can be explained by what social scientists call the effort-recovery model.[i] This model emphasizes that recovery is essential after a period of extended effort.

Insufficient recovery can result in diminished performance. Rest provides the fuel necessary for hard work.

But more and more, people aren't getting the respites that are critical for their continuing effectiveness. This is especially true if they are working too many hours, which many seem to be doing today. For example, a survey of managers, executives, and professionals[ii] found that "workweeks" generally include weekends and an average of 72 hours of work. While the *per-hour cost* of employees may be lower because they are working 72 hours a week rather than 40, the extra hours they are working are actually reducing both their productivity and the productivity of others. They are losing the opportunity to rejuvenate and recharge.

Part of the reason they don't get to recover is because of technology.

The Psychological Toll of Technology

While many believe that technology makes us more productive, in many cases it actually inhibits productivity. One way technology inhibits productivity is that it is a major source of distraction.

People are constantly monitoring technology to get to the latest news, message, or e-mail. This leads to a state of continuous partial attention. A downside of continuous partial attention is that people shortchange the attention given to the task at hand, compromising the ability to reflect, respond, and plan. Continuous partial attention results in feeling overwhelmed.

Linda Stone[iii] says that by being constantly accessible to everyone, we are actually available to no one.

Many people are constantly monitoring technology because they believe the organizational culture requires it. Others may simply feel an urge to do so.

Psychologically, the option to do work all the time via technology can activate the Zeigarnik Effect—the inability to completely forget about something when it is left incomplete. The Zeigarnik Effect is more likely to be activated when completing the task is possible.[iv] The work of executives, managers, and professionals is rarely completed, and since they have the option to continue to make progress on the work because of the availability of the workplace through technology, their brains may nudge them to work even after they have moved on to other activities, making it challenging to get needed rest.

In essence, technology makes it difficult to detach from work and get the necessary time for recovery. Because they now carry a device that allows them to respond around the clock, people rarely feel off-duty, thus inhibiting recovery and interfering with the opportunity to refuel strength and energy.

Lack of Recovery Reduces Profitability

When people don't get time away from work to recover, they aren't as productive and are more likely to make mistakes. They are also more expensive. Reduced sleep is linked to health problems such as diabetes, strokes, heart disease, and risk of obesity. A lack of sleep is an obvious but profound implication of the long-hours culture impacting well-being, health, performance, and profitability directly through healthcare costs. When people work too many hours and spend too few hours exercising, connecting with loved ones, and sleeping, their health suffers—and so does the organization's bottom line.

But there is a better way to work that will improve productivity and profitability: Organizations can take recovery needs into account.

Improving Productivity (and Therefore Profitability), through Recovery Practices

Adequate recovery time can buffer against the negative psychological and physical effects of work, and help regain energy that is drained from workplace demands. Recovery practices are an important aspect of workplace resilience—building up more inner resources for the future. Stress and challenge are inevitable in today's volatile work environment, but getting burned out doesn't have to be. Human Resources can and should encourage employee-focused programs and services supporting recovery. Here are five recovery practices to consider incorporating into learning and development initiatives:

1. Sleep Recovery Practices

Better sleep is one of the easiest and least utilized ways to improve productivity. Sleep is critical both to functioning effectively and to recovery. Because sleep is such a personal topic, organizations are limited in the measures they can take to ensure their employees get good sleep. However, there are some things they can do. Companies such as Google and Huffington Post cultivate a pro-napping culture by providing nap pods, nap rooms, and flexible work hours to allow employees to rest when needed. Other companies employ educational strategies to help employees better understand the factors contributing to good sleep hygiene. It is vital to create a workplace environment that protects and promotes sleep to cultivate a culture of health and well-being. The American Academy of Sleep Medicine offers sleep information that organizations can distribute to employees.

Additionally, leaders should be conscientious about when they ask people to work and provide options to reduce the effects of blue light (e.g., installing time-based screen color shifts, glasses, or apps that decrease blue light). The blue light emitted by devices and computers has been shown to negatively affect sleep. An even stronger action would be to encourage moratoriums on using communication devices at certain times of the week (e.g., the middle of the night) to show that sleep is valued.

Most importantly, as an HR leader you should take steps to educate employees about good sleep and debunk the myth that less sleep equals more productivity. For more about sleep, download the Sleep Well, Lead Well white paper.

2. Physical Recovery Practices

While at first, physical movement might seem more like an activity that burns up energy rather than aids recovery, science suggests otherwise.

Today, the majority of the corporate workforce is sedentary—sitting at computers, staring at devices, and stuck in meetings. But humans were not built to sit still so long. Research shows that long hours of work without movement drains physical and mental wellness, while exercise not only increases physical fitness, but also boosts energy, mood, and cognitive performance. Physical activities also have the added benefit of helping burn off cortisol (a hormone that is released during times of stress) and lowering stress levels. Therefore, adding a bit of physical movement to the workday is likely to actually increase energy and productivity rather than using up energy and reducing productivity.

There are a number of things that HR leaders can do to encourage physical movement. For instance, they can offer on-site gyms or exercise classes, or launch group exercise challenges. They can also offer standing desk and/or yoga chair alternatives to the traditional office space. Managers can schedule "walking meetings."

3. Mental Recovery Practices

Being able to mentally recover is increasingly important in today's always-on, multitasking-heavy, global, and digital workforce. Mental recovery practices help individuals stay calm and focused, and increases mental capacity. One form of mental recovery that has been proven to be particularly helpful is mindfulness.

The term "mindfulness" covers a range of techniques. Common practices include mindful breathing exercises, meditations, mindful walking, mindful eating, body scans, and mindful journaling. Mindfulness entails paying attention, in a particular way, on purpose, without judgment.[v] It provides an opportunity for mental recovery in the moment. Mindfulness has origins in Eastern religions and traditions, but its application in the workplace is secular.

Organizations such as Google, General Mills, eBay, and the US Army have implemented mindfulness programs.

HR leaders can consider integrating mindfulness training into learning and development initiatives. Successful mindful initiatives tend to be flexible and multimodal (offering a combination of in-person courses, one-day retreats, online materials and modules, etc.), allowing employees to work around their busy schedules and find their own combination of practices.

4. Social Recovery Practices

Scientists have long understood that humans are group animals for whom connecting, caring, and sharing with others is important to group survival. However, it turns out that connecting with others also has short-term benefits on the individual level. Spending quality time with others can lower stress levels and elevate mood, both of which are important aspects of recovery. Environments that provide the opportunity for people to connect with others in ways that are meaningful to the individuals foster both wellness and commitment to the organization.

It is important that HR leaders help organizations find ways to help employees build social connections in the workplace to help buffer against the stress and fatigue of the long-hours work culture. Two possible ways to do this are

1. fostering social interactions

2. encouraging employees to be generous with one another.

Organizations can set up opportunities for people who might not commonly interact, to meet. HR can play a role by encouraging business lines to engage in cross-functional project task forces, activities, and teams that draw across groups. Other strategies are to have dedicated spaces that encourage people to congregate, and to have clubs that people who are interested in similar nonwork-related subjects can join.

In the book *Give and Take,*[vi] Adam Grant talks about how generosity fuels social relationships in the workplace. He argues that a sense of service to others both strengthens relationships and generates productivity. People underestimate how willing others are to give, and that once people are given something, they feel compelled to reciprocate. Plus the good feeling that people get from helping one another can create positive energy.

5. Emotional Recovery Practices

Understandably, long hours, lack of sleep, and high demand all tend to create negative moods and feelings of threat and stress. Science suggests that these "crisis modes" tend to narrow thoughts and creativity and cause fight-flight-freeze responses—responses which decrease productivity even further. In contrast, positivity tends to increase creativity, energy, and tenacity.

Increasing positivity in organizations is a great emotional recovery strategy. For example, organizations can encourage employees to keep gratitude journals. This is a simple way for people to reflect on one or more things they are grateful for. As an activity, it can be added to a variety of leadership development initiatives and provide experience with a positive emotion. Other strategies include purposely showing appreciation for the hard work of others, and showing kindness and empathy when others are stressed. Small acts of appreciation (e.g., personal notes acknowledging hard work) and random acts of kindness (e.g., leaving a gift on a coworker's desk) are beneficial for both the giver and the receiver, as well as the overall work culture.

5 RECOVERY PRACTICES

to incorporate into learning and development initiatives

IMPROVE SLEEP HABITS

01

Better sleep is one of the easiest and least utilized ways to improve productivity.

MOVE MORE

02

Exercise not only increases physical fitness, but also boosts energy, mood, and cognitive performance.

BE MINDFUL

03

Mindfulness entails paying attention, in a particular way, on purpose, without judgment.

CONNECT TO OTHERS

04

Spending quality time with others can lower stress levels and elevate mood.

SOAK IN THE POSITIVE

05

Positivity tends to increase creativity, energy, and tenacity.

Implementing Recovery Strategies in Your Organization

If you are invested in helping your organization become more profitable, inform the organization about how expecting employees to work too much can backfire. Not only is overwork not helpful, it is harmful to the individual and the bottom line. Overwork results in health problems which turn into absenteeism, turnover, and increased insurance costs. Exhaustion can also turn into mistakes, accidents, and poor decisions. If you haven't done so already, it is time to reconsider productivity in light of recovery. Productivity requires managing the balance between effort expended and recovery required.

Start by educating your organization about the links between individual well-being and organizational productivity. Clearly articulate the links between business outcomes and expenditures on healthcare and flexible work options. When people don't have time to recover, they are more stressed and less productive, and are more likely to need to avail themselves of services that cost the organization both time and money (thus reducing profitability).

Secondly, **identify the barriers to rest and renewal in your organization**, and openly discuss how policies can be used to reduce these barriers. Help individuals understand the cost of constantly being overwhelmed and introduce them to the recovery practices. You can nurture well-being directly by offering informational programs about the value of rest and not penalizing people who take advantage of these offerings.

For some organizations, talking about recovery practices and focusing on health and well-being sounds too "touchy-feely." It isn't—this is a profitability issue. Focus on why recovery is a business imperative as you make the case within your organization. Send the message that employees need to have clarity of mind and the energy to execute your organization's great programs and strategies, or the organization is wasting time and money. Help your organization to see that talent without health and wellness is a severely under-leveraged asset.

Learn more about CCL's research on health habits and leadership

https://www.ccl.org/multimedia/podcast/leadership-and-health-seven-tips-for-success-2/
https://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/CareFeedingLeadersBrain.pdf

Endnotes

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