

The 90-Minute Solution: How Building in Periods of Renewal Can Change Your Work and Your Life

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The only way to meet rising demand is to work longer hours, more continuously and stay connected 24/7.

Welcome to the crazy credo that many of us now live by, encouraged by the companies that employ us, in a world that's been wildly accelerated by technology.

It's also completely contrary to everything we know about what makes it possible for human beings to perform at the highest level.

The human body is hard-wired to pulse. To operate at our best, we need to renew our energy at 90-minute intervals -- not just physically, but also mentally and emotionally.

When we build this rhythm into our lives, it changes everything.

Unfortunately, rest and renewal get no respect in the world we live in.

The modern model for success is to hunker down for long and continuous hours in front of a computer or at meeting, answer emails late into the night and work till we drop.

Consider some of the data from the poll we've been conducting over the past week at Huffington Post -- a poll you can take right here.

Among the 1000 or so respondents in the first week, more than 60 percent take 20 minutes or less for lunch, and 25 percent never leave their desk at all. Two-thirds fail to take at least some of their allotted vacation time and 25 percent leave at least a week's worth of vacation unused each year.

One third of poll respondents spend less than half an hour a day during the workweek completely disconnected from email.

But what are the costs of working so continuously? Do you work as well with your colleagues and clients, or think as clearly and creatively, or produce the same quality of work in the tenth or twelfth or fourteenth consecutive hour of a workday, as you do in the second or the fourth?

Of course not. And that's because human beings aren't wired to operate like computers.

More than 50 years ago, the pioneering sleep researcher Nathan Kleitman discovered something he named the "basic rest-activity cycle" -- the 90 minute periods at night during which we move progressively through five stages of sleep, from light to deep, and then out again.

Although it's much less well known, Kleitman also observed that our bodies operate by the same 90 minute rhythm during the day. When we're awake, the movement is from higher to lower alertness. Other researchers have called this our "ultradian rhythm."

When we need a rest, our bodies sends us clear signals such as fidgetiness, hunger, drowsiness, and loss of focus. But mostly, we override them.

Instead, we find artificial ways to pump up our energy: caffeine, foods high in sugar and simple carbohydrates, and, perhaps most interestingly, our body's own stress hormones -- adrenalin, noradrenalin and cortisol.

If we work at high intensity for more than 90 minutes, we begin to draw on these emergency reserves to keep us going. Effectively, that means we move from parasympathetic to sympathetic arousal -- a physiological state more commonly known as "fight or flight."

The problem is that many of us have become addicted to the adrenalin rush generated by our own stress hormones. Being wired 24/7 digitally also keeps us wired physically and emotionally.

We've convinced ourselves -- and we've been convinced by the cultures we work in -- that this is how we need to work to get it all done.

The problem is that more, bigger, faster generates value that is narrow, shallow, and short-term.

One consequence of relying on our stress hormones as a source of energy, for example, is that the prefrontal cortex begins to shut down in fight or flight. We become more reactive and less capable of thinking clearly, reflectively or imaginatively.

In his renowned 1993 study of young violinists, performance researcher Anders Ericsson found that the best ones all practiced the same way: in the morning, in three increments of no more than 90 minutes each, with a break between each one.

Ericsson discovered the same pattern among other musicians, athletes, chess players and writers.

For the first several books I wrote, I often sat at my desk for up to 10 or even 12 hours at a time. I never finished one in less than a year.

For my new book, *The Way We're Working Isn't Working*, I wrote without interruptions for three 90-minute periods, and took a break between each one. I had breakfast after the first session, went for a run after the second, and had lunch after the third.

I wrote no more than four and a half hours a day, and finished the book in less than 6 months. By limiting each writing cycle to 90 minutes and building in periods of renewal, I was able to focus far more intensely and get more done in far less time.

The counterintuitive secret to sustainable great performance is to live like a sprinter. In practice, that means working at your highest intensity in the mornings, for no more than 90 minutes at a time, and then taking a break.

Don't default to victim mode and tell yourself your company won't let you do it. Build at least one period of uninterrupted focus each day for 60 to 90 minutes and see how much more you get done.

Then start taking at least two or three short renewal breaks throughout the day. You can get a remarkable amount of renewal in just a short time. Try this technique.

Make these small changes in your life and you'll see what happens not just to your satisfaction and your sustainability, but also to your productivity and performance.

Then, let me know below how it makes you feel.