

# They Work Long Hours, but What About Results?

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Published: October 6, 2012

IT'S 5 p.m. at the office. Working fast, you've finished your tasks for the day and want to go home. But none of your colleagues have left yet, so you stay another hour or two, surfing the Web and reading your e-mails again, so you don't come off as a slacker.

It's an unfortunate reality that efficiency often goes unrewarded in the workplace. I had that feeling a lot when I was a partner in a Washington law firm. Because of my expertise, I could often answer a client's questions quickly, saving both of us time. But because my firm billed by the hour, as most law firms do, my efficiency worked against me.

From the law firm's perspective, billing by the hour has a certain appeal: it shifts risk from the firm to the client in case the work takes longer than expected. But from a client's perspective, it doesn't work so well. It gives lawyers an incentive to overstaff and to overresearch cases. And for me, hourly billing was a raw deal. I ran the risk of being underpaid because I answered questions too quickly and billed a smaller number of hours.

Firms that bill by the hour are not alone in emphasizing hours over results. For a study published most recently in 2010, three researchers, led by Kimberly D. Elsbach, a professor at the University of California, Davis, interviewed 39 corporate managers about their perceptions of their employees. The managers viewed employees who were seen at the office during business hours as highly "dependable" and "reliable." Employees who came in over the weekend or stayed late in the evening were seen as "committed" and "dedicated" to their work.

One manager said: "So this one guy, he's in the room at every meeting. Lots of times he doesn't say anything, but he's there on time and people notice that. He definitely is seen as a hard-working and dependable guy." Another said: "Working on the weekends makes a very good impression. It sends a signal that you're contributing to your team and that you're putting in that extra commitment to get the work done."

The reactions of these managers are understandable remnants of the industrial age, harking back to the standardized nature of work on an assembly line. But a measurement system based on hours makes no sense for knowledge workers. Their contribution should be measured by the value they create through applying their ideas and skills.

By applying an industrial-age mind-set to 21st-century professionals, many organizations are undermining incentives for workers to be efficient. If employees need to stay late in order to curry favor with the boss, what motivation do they have to get work done during normal business hours? After all, they can put in the requisite "face time" whether they are surfing the Internet or analyzing customer data. It's no surprise, then, that so many professionals find it easy to procrastinate and hard to stay on a task.

There is an obvious solution here: Instead of counting the hours you work, judge your success by the results you produce. Did you clear a backlog of customer orders? Did you come up with a new idea to solve a tricky problem? Did you write a first draft of an article that is due next week? Clearly, these accomplishments — not the hours that you log — are what ultimately drive your organization's success.

Many of your results-oriented strategies will be specific to your job and your company, but here are a few general ways that professionals across all industries can improve their efficiency.

**LIMIT MEETINGS** Internal meetings can be a huge waste of time. A short meeting can be useful for discussing a controversial issue, but long meetings — beyond 60 to 90 minutes — are usually

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unproductive. Leaders often spend too much time reciting introductory material, and participants eventually stop paying attention.

Try very hard to avoid meetings that you suspect will be long and unproductive. When possible, politely decline meeting invitations from your peers by pointing to your impending deadlines. If that's not an option, make clear that you can stay for only the first 60 minutes, and will then have to deal with more pressing obligations. And be hesitant to call meetings yourself; you can deal with most issues through e-mail or a quick phone call.

If you're involved in calling or planning a necessary meeting, make sure it's productive. Create an agenda that organizes the meeting and keeps it moving briskly. Distribute that agenda, along with any advance materials, at least a day in advance. Appoint a "devil's advocate" for every meeting, whose job is to make sure that the potential negatives are discussed. At the end of the meeting, make sure that everyone agrees on the next steps, with each step assigned to one participant and with a specific deadline.

**REDUCE READING** You don't need to read the full text of everything you come across in the course of your work, even if it comes directly from the boss. Though reading a long article from cover to cover might make you feel productive, it might not be the best use of your time. Most likely, only a very small part of that article is vital to your work. Maybe you need to remember the big ideas, not the intricate details. Or maybe you need only to find one or two examples that illustrate a particular larger point. Once you start reading a text, make it a point to search for what's important, while skipping sections that are less relevant.

Of course, some materials call for you to become totally immersed in the details. If you are reading an article directly related to the company's newest blockbuster product, for instance, it probably makes sense to go over every word. But for less important tasks, this level of detail is often unnecessary. If you're not careful, these tasks can take over your entire schedule.

And avoid rereading your e-mails. I am a great believer in the OHIO principle: Only handle it once. When you read an e-mail, decide whether or not to reply to it, and, if you need to reply, do so right then and there. I have found that about 80 percent of all e-mails, whether internal or external, do not require a response. Don't let these extraneous communications clog your in-box and waste your time.

**WRITE FASTER** Even if you need to create A-plus work for a project, it needn't be perfect right off the bat. When some people sit down to write a long memo, they insist on perfecting each sentence before moving to the next one. They want to complete all the stages of the writing process at the same time — a most difficult task. In my experience, this leads to very slow writing.

A better approach separates the main steps in the writing process. First, compose an outline for what you are going to say, and in what order. Then write a rough draft, knowing it will be highly imperfect. Then go back over your work and revise as needed. This is the time to perfect the phrasing of those sentences.

In general, don't waste your time creating A-plus work when B-plus is good enough. Use the extra time to create A-plus work where it matters most.

As you try these and other results-oriented strategies, you may well find yourself spending less time at the office — and that can make some bosses nervous. The traditional emphasis on face time, after all, is easy for managers: it takes much less effort to count hours than it does to measure results. That's why you may need to forge a new relationship with your boss.

You must earn your boss's trust that you can accomplish your work in less time. In part, you can do this by thinking about your organization and watching your boss. Ask yourself: What are the most

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important goals of your unit? What sort of pressure is your boss under — to expand globally, to introduce new products, to cut costs, or something else? How might the boss's personality and management style shape these considerations?

But it's not enough to think and observe. You need to communicate — often. Every week, write down a list of your assigned tasks — short-term assignments and long-term goals — and rank them by importance, from your perspective. Then ask your boss to weigh in on the list.

You and your boss should come to a consensus about the metrics for every project. If your boss doesn't establish any, suggest them yourself. Metrics can include both qualitative and quantitative results. They provide objective measures for judging final results — and move your boss away from the crutch of face time. And the process of establishing these metrics can help you and your boss clarify how best to accomplish a project.

Once the boss is confident that you know what to do and how to do it, show that you can consistently create high-quality results on high-priority projects. There's no particular secret here: you need to do your best to achieve the established goals. And remember that most projects run into potholes or even roadblocks on the way. Be quick to report problems to the boss and to suggest possible solutions, including a revision the project metrics themselves.

I KNOW that a change in focus from hours to results may be a challenge in some organizations. But your boss is likely to be receptive if you politely raise the question of productivity and show you're willing to be held accountable for results, rather than hours worked. You may also be able to do more work from home, if that's what you prefer.

Even in a culture oriented toward results, however, you sometimes will need to be physically present in the office to do your work. And some jobs absolutely depend on it. In almost all workplaces, colleagues need to get together to brainstorm ideas, solve tough problems or build communal bonds. But there's no reason for these interactions to take up large amounts of time.

By emphasizing results rather than hours, I'm able to get home at 7 p.m. for dinner with my family nearly every night — except when there are true emergencies. This has greatly enhanced my family life, and has given me a secondary benefit: a fruitful mental break. I've solved some of the thorniest problems in my home office at 10 p.m. — after a refreshing few hours chatting with my wife and children.

Focusing on results rather than hours will help you accomplish more at work and leave more time for the rest of your life. And don't be afraid to talk to your boss about these issues. To paraphrase the management guru Peter Drucker, although you don't have to like your boss, you have to manage him or her so you can have a successful career.

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/07/business/measure-results-not-hours-to-improve-work-efficiency.html?pagewanted=all>