

Why working smarter means conserving your energy

By Alina Dizik

In the last few years, I've tried all kinds of productivity tricks to work smarter. I've tried the "pomodoro" technique to work in 25-minute increments with breaks in between, blocking addictive social media sites through a desktop app and disabling my internet altogether. I thought that if I could keep distractions at bay and just stay focused and on track, I could be productive for as many hours in a row as I wanted to keep working.

Energy-saving tips

1. Be mindful of wasting time, which can deplete energy levels for tasks later in the day.
2. Plan to rest or take a mental break between your most complicated tasks.
3. Retain your energy by meeting your spiritual, physical, mental and emotional needs.
4. Don't overdo it. Keep energy levels steady by working manageable hours.
5. Keep track of your energy levels or "high-energy zones" to understand when you work best.

But the distractions weren't the problem. My mindset was.

Emails and text messages popping up on my phone left my mind wandering — even when I would try to refocus on a work task. And despite a detailed to-do list, I felt like I could only finish part of my list each day before calling it quits because I was tired.

That jibes with the latest research on productivity. Working smarter is not really about being focused on details to assure productivity, but rather being focused on the energy we harness while we're working and relaxing.

Energy levels can be difficult to measure, but tracking how you feel at a given hour during a workday can help you set your own schedule for doing your best work, according to Flip Brown, author of *Balanced Effectiveness at Work: How to Enjoy the Fruits of Your Labor Without Driving Yourself Nuts*.

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Most workers aren't truthful with themselves about how much they can take on each day, he said. "People have some delusions around time management and that creates problems in our energy management," explained Brown, who saves his most difficult tasks during his "high energy zones" between 8:00 to noon and 19:00 to 20:00.

Keeping tabs

The managing-your-energy approach can throw off people who believe maximising face time with colleagues and putting in long work hours are the key to getting ahead. That approach can, in fact, damage productivity. But understanding how and when you feel best can help you monitor your own energy and optimise it for your work, experts say.

"You don't want to maximise it — it's more like your body's pulse rate," explained Theresa Welbourne, a business professor at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln in the US, who has been studying the concept of energy for 20 years.

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For starters, you will need to understand how your workday impacts your energy levels.

When working with companies, Welbourne asks the employees to keep notes on their own energy ups and downs. Recently she launched an energy assessment app to help people track their energy levels daily. This more formal recordkeeping can help people understand the differences between energising tasks (such as interacting with favourite colleagues) and assignments or people that tend to be “energy vampires” (such as sitting through a boring meeting), Welbourne said.

Once you’ve got a sense of when you have the most energy for important tasks, you can begin to shift your energy use during key times (rather than feeling depleted later in the day).

For example, a software developer might want a more steady flow of energy throughout the day, while a salesperson may find bursts of high energy during client meetings more beneficial, she added. During more stressful situations, adrenaline can give a quick energy boost but contributes to higher rates of stress overall.

To be sure, don’t expect perfection when it comes to energy management. Accepting that both your personal and professional life won’t always have a positive impact on energy is key. To make the most of your days, Welbourne tells students to aim for 60% of their day to be energising and fun. Using those positive experiences can help people deal with the other 40%, which is often more challenging, she said: “Not all of your work is going to be energising.”

Learn the energy tricks

“Managing our energy by managing our attention is a core skill to prevent burnout,” said Brisbane-based mindfulness coach Lindel Greggery, who hosts corporate workshops on the topic. Being focused and aware of the task at hand can help “free up mental space to respond rather than react”, he added.

To help employees deal with stress and low energy levels, Greggery suggests a daily 10-minute meditation or quiet time away from the screen or your to-do list while at work. Mindfulness also plays a key role in helping you stay focused in order to keep your energy targeted at specific tasks.

“Mindfulness breaks our addiction to busyness so we can focus on the right things rather than just things,” Greggery explained.

Know how to harness it

Whether you’re at home or at work, there are four main areas of harnessing energy, which include the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual, according to Annie Perrin, an executive vice president at the Energy Project, a consulting firm based in Yonkers, New York, in the US, who works with companies including Sony and Google. Often times, workers feel unbalanced in one or more of these key areas, which can lead to low energy levels. Knowing how to combat stress in all four areas can make it easier to stay productive.

For fuelling physical wellbeing, Perrin recommends focusing on healthy eating and leisure time away from work. Going on a walk, for example, can be a quick way to re-energise because it releases more endorphins to help reduce stress. Snacking on something with a low glycaemic index such as yogurt or oatmeal can provide more sustained energy over a longer period of time by keeping blood glucose levels steady.

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Emotional wellbeing can entail avoiding stress or anything that triggers negative emotions such as constantly refreshing your email or scrolling through Facebook to see how much fun friends are having on holiday.

And boosting or renewing mental energy can mean stepping away from work for short periods throughout the day. “The way to renew your mental energy is to give your analytical thinking brain a rest,” said Perrin, adding that even browsing social media constitutes as a kind of “low grade renewal”.

Another trick to re-energise between meetings is to focus away from the task and spend time on non-work-related chitchat with colleagues.

Lastly, keeping up energy through spiritual fulfilment means “balancing care for yourself with your care for others,” in both the workplace and outside of work, Perrin explained.

Understanding how to manage those key areas can help optimise energy levels. “The way we need to think about energy is multidimensional,” she said.

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