

PACE YOURSELF: DEVELOP A PAY-AS-YOU-GO APPROACH TO WORK



JEFF DAVIDSON, MBA, CMC, on the web at www.BreathingSpace.com, holds the registered trademark as “The Work-Life Balance Expert®.” Jeff is the leading personal brand in speaking, writing, and reflecting on work-life balance, harmony, and integration, and he has a passion for speaking to law firms that want to help their professional staff members make rapid progress in this arena. Jeff is the author of *Everyday Project Management*; *Breathing Space*; and *Simpler Living*. Jeff’s books have been published in 18 languages including Arabic, Chinese, French, Japanese, Malay, Spanish, Turkish, and Russian.

It might be de rigueur in the legal profession, but overwork is not pretty. It can even be deadly. In Japan, “karoshi,” or death from overwork, claims anywhere from 200 to 10,000 workers annually. The problem is not unique to Japan. In the first global study to analyze the effects of working long hours on health, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) found that 745,000 people died in 2016 from stroke and ischemic heart disease as a direct result of having worked at least 55 hours a week.¹ Working 55 or more hours per week translated to a 35 percent higher risk of a stroke and a 17 percent higher risk of dying from ischemic heart disease than those who worked only 35 to 40 hours a week.

Why can it be dangerous to work exceedingly long hours? When you encounter stressful situations by working longer and harder, your muscles contract, your blood thickens, your heart pumps blood faster, and your arteries narrow. You’re prepared for fight or flight. If you actually did fight or flee, the situation would largely take care of itself.

Instead, your internal “engine” is revving for eight hours to 10 hours on end. You arrive home where more stressors might emerge. You cannot sleep as many hours as your body requires, or if you do, it’s fitful sleep with tossing and turning. As a result, you’re being worn down and your immune system is becoming weaker. Thus, you’re more susceptible to illness.

Some researchers believe that consistently having too little sleep could impact your whole life, to your detriment.² Combined with too much work and too little sleep, any illness that you might contract can be more troublesome.

Beyond Tired

You feel tired, but when are you bordering on danger? Among many signs, here are a few:

1. Lack of appetite or indigestion. You normally look forward to meals, but when highly fatigued, you have trouble getting them down. Maybe, you’re eating less. Your fatigue is prolonged;
2. Extra sleep doesn’t help. Getting many nights of extra sleep in a row or sleeping for an entire weekend doesn’t seem to diminish your fatigue. Perhaps worse, you feel as if you’ll never catch up;
3. Excessive sleepiness. You doze at inopportune moments, such as during an important meeting, or when driving; and
4. Loss of sex drive. This isn’t obvious because decline in libido usually occurs a bit at a time and you don’t notice, although your partner likely will.

Adopt a Pay-as-You-Go Approach

If any of the four conditions cited above is true for you, take heed. Attorneys everywhere, on average, are living to older ages. To arrive in style, you need

to pace yourself for the long haul, and not take on too much on any given day. A personal story from another line of work helps illustrate the point.

The summer after I graduated from high school, I worked with my friend Peter, for Smyth Manufacturing Company, a book binding equipment manufacturer. It was my only time in a job shop, and I learned many lasting lessons.

Before you left for the evening, you oiled your machine, wiped the floor and counters, and cleared away scraps and extraneous items so you could begin the next day without impediments. The craftsmen sometimes elaborately cleaned and reorganized items in the middle of the day as well, as they switched from one job to another. When you're working with potentially dangerous industrial equipment, you can't afford to have a stray bolt or paper clip lying around that could catch in a gear and fly across the factory floor into someone's face.

As deftly as these job shop professionals worked, they always maintained control of their immediate

environment because they understood how important it was to the entire process.

Any one of these workers, who were paid by the piece, could have easily increased their output by taking shortcuts on the cleaning and maintenance procedures. After all, if you can turn out seven pieces in a day spending 30 percent of your time cleaning and maintaining, you might be able to produce more than 10 pieces if you completely concentrate on your output. But they didn't. They knew that even if they could make more money in the short term, in the long term they could injure themselves or others, create more waste, shorten the equipment's life, or get fired.

Similarly, we need to make sure we are spending the requisite time on our personal "cleaning and maintenance procedures": sleep, exercise, vacation, and nutrition. We also need to pay as we go: clear the decks each night, arrive ready for the next day, and pace ourselves for the long haul. 🍷

Notes

- 1 Frank Pega et al., Global, regional, and national burdens of ischemic heart disease and stroke attributable to exposure to long working hours for 194 countries, 2000–2016: A systematic analysis from the WHO/ILO Joint Estimates of the Work-related Burden of Disease and Injury, *Env't Int'l Vol.* 154, 106595 (Sept. 2021), available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envint.2021.106595>.
- 2 See, e.g., H.R. Colten and B. M. Altevogt, eds., *Sleep Disorders and Sleep Deprivation: An Unmet Public Health Problem*. Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Sleep Medicine and Research (National Academies Press 2006); A.I. Qureshi et al., Habitual sleep patterns and risk for stroke and coronary heart disease: A 10-year follow-up from NHANES I. *Neurology*. 1997;48(4):904–911; D. J. Gottlieb et al., Association of sleep time with diabetes mellitus and impaired glucose tolerance. *Archives of Internal Medicine* 165(8):863–867 (2005).