

Finish Line or Executive Burnout: Which will arrive First?

by

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I met with the top executive who explained all the wonderful opportunities that awaited him. I was impressed, and waited for the executive to start describing the other side of the balance sheet. Finally it came: "There aren't enough hours in the day."

He described the last year, and how each successive plan kept having additional goals and tasks added to it. The Board of Directors that hired him one year ago had very high expectations for this turnaround. Even so, this executive had even higher expectations. Everything was urgent and high priority.

I was informed that his driver picks him up at 5:00 AM each morning, and he is able to get some work done during the 1.5 hr commute each morning. After a 12 to 14 hr day, he's had enough, and heads home. He has a couple of hours with the family (really, just his wife, as the kids are long ago in bed when he arrives home). He gets 6 hrs. sleep on a good night, then starts it all over again. He has already done one yr. of this, and is now concerned as he sees no end in sight with all of the opportunities and urgent, high priority tasks that he has underway. How much longer can he keep up this pace, I asked?

After thinking for a minute, he responded, "I don't know, as long as I can, I guess."

I said, "I don't think that answers my question." He returned a look of concern, but no answers. We both knew he didn't have an answer. Finally, I knew why I was here.

As we talked, I imagined him at a smorgasbord. As each succulent dish presented itself, he saw the need and benefits, and quickly added a spoonful to his plate. Soon, he could fit no more onto his first plate, and was soon balancing two plates as he continued to scoop. When I arrived, his selections were half-eaten, he had let out his belt a notch, and was worrying how he was going to finish everything he had put onto his plate. I came back to the present, seeing his quizzical look at me. I didn't feel comfortable explaining my smorgasbord vision and lapse of concentration at what he was describing.

To distract his quizzical stare, I quickly collected some more information on his situation, solutions tried, and constraints he felt. That night, I built a computer simulation of his past practices, and his future options available to him.

I took some basic statistics and assumptions on personal productivity, and created the following graph in **Figure 1**. Most people hit their maximum productivity 2 hours after waking. It continues to drop throughout the day. After being awake for 72 hrs., we are not much better than vegetables.

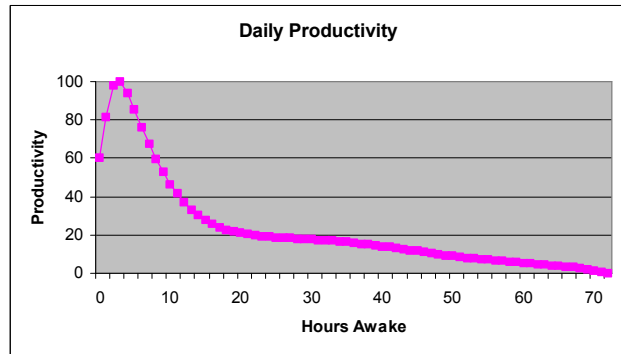


Figure 1 Personal Productivity vs. the hours awake, % of maximum.

When I showed him the graph the next morning, he agreed with the basic concepts, and that it seemed to match his personal experiences.

Allowing 30 minutes of personal time for shower, shave, & dress (no breakfast was the usual history), and 1.5 hrs. commute, we calculate that he arrives at work in his peak productivity moment. We both agreed that this was as good as it gets. We discussed how he used these high productivity moments when he first arrived. Unfortunately, they weren't being used as effectively as he would like. A small re-arranging of tasks, daily schedule, and expectations was in order.

I presented my next curve, shown in **Figure 2**. This is the same data from **Figure 1**, as a cumulative daily average based on the total number of hours worked. Of course, the maximum hours that can be worked in any day is 24 hrs. The busy executive inspected the second chart, and again agreed with the data as it related to his life experience.

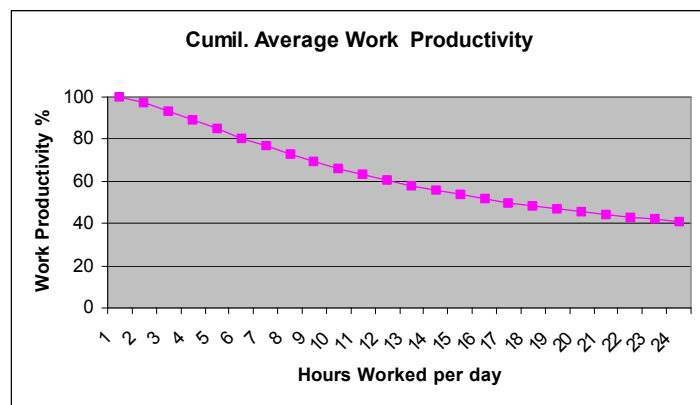


Figure 2 Cumulative Average Work Productivity vs. Hours worked per day

I then presented the simulation results when the data in **Figure 2** was used for a full year under a number of different scenarios. The 16 different scenarios that we examined are presented in **Figure 3**.

For the simulation, it was assumed that after work was finished, he had some “personal discretion” time which he could use as he felt best. This could be family time, golf, gardening, whatever. After this, he would get some sleep before starting his routine again on the next day. We used the “personal battery” model to account for the re-charging of his personal batteries by adequate sleep, or by sleep deprivation, as the case may be.

The most productive scenario was found to be 7 days worked per week, at 8 hrs. per day, 10 hrs.

sleep each night, leaving 6 hrs. each day for discretionary tasks of his personal choice.

As the executive scanned down the 17 scenarios, his face gained a scowl when he reached the bottom of the list. At 17.4% productivity (as compared to the maximum, most efficient Scenario), he found himself and his current work habits.

“So what your saying is, I’m my own worst enemy. I’ve done it to myself through my lack of prioritization, and workaholic approach?”

“Look on the bright side”, I said, “The solution to all your problems are 100% in your control. What could be better than that?”

“Nice try”, he retorted.

“Awareness is the first step to solving the problem”, I said. “You not only have awareness, you have a solution. Move from your Scenario #17 of the past year, to something more productive. For example, Scenario # 3 will give you 4 times your current productivity results. What would you say to one of your people if they increased productivity 400%? You can have your cake, and eat it too. Work smart. Don’t work so hard when you don’t have to. See your family. Get some balance back into your life.”

Getting down off my soap box before I was pushed off, I waited. It seemed like forever, even though it was only a few seconds.

Finally he said, “I guess that’s why you charge so much. You’re worth it.”

I blushed. A simultaneous embarrassment and complement could make most people blush, I guess. “We try to charge proportional to the value we deliver. I hope that is true for you?”, I inquired. He nodded.

Relieved, I continued, “The easy part was analyzing your situation. The hard part will be changing your habit. While I can help, the majority of that load rests on your shoulders”, I said. After going through a couple of helpful hints and implementation strategies, he was ready to try a different approach.

I await to hear about his latest success, now that he is on a better track to the future. In one of our future articles, we’ll discuss how to understand and build great work habits.

Scenario #	Days/wk Worked	Hrs/day worked	Off-Hours per work day	Sleep Hrs	Productivity per year	% of max Productivity
1	7	8	6	10	15,198.18	100.00
2	6	8	6	10	13,032.96	85.75
3	7	11	6	7	11,513.56	75.76
4	5	8	6	10	10,867.74	71.51
5	5	7	6	11	10,767.47	70.85
6	5	9	6	9	10,309.81	67.84
7	5	7	7	10	9,998.36	65.79
8	5	8	5	11	9,753.10	64.17
9	5	10	6	8	9,385.92	61.76
10	5	8	8	8	8,272.36	54.43
11	5	11	6	7	8,235.65	54.19
12	5	8	4	12	8,131.72	53.50
13	5	12	6	6	6,958.69	45.79
14	5	8	9	7	6,910.07	45.47
15	5	8	10	6	5,594.62	36.81
16	7	16	2	6	3,690.95	24.29
17	5	16	2	6	2,640.76	17.38

Figure 3 Various scenarios for working a job, hour per day, days per week, and sleep achieved.