



Doing less to achieve more! How to work sustainably in challenging times

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Is working flat out sustainable?

Working flat out is easy to do, especially during lockdown, when most of us can work at any time of the day (or night)! Whilst we are under pressure to implement contingency plans many of us are spending every waking hour in front of a screen. Working with so much underlying uncertainty can trigger our 'fight or flight' response, and, back to back virtual meetings and calls can use more of our energy too.

When our foot is on the accelerator, we use more fuel and so how can we re-fuel and recharge more often?

Working relentlessly can be damaging for our health, our productivity and our relationships. Therefore, it's vital to take a proactive approach to balancing work before warning signs, for example sleep difficulties, irritability and exhaustion, inevitably emerge and affect our well-being and performance.

5 things you can do to work in a more sustainable way

1. Self-checks

The first step to achieving a more balanced and sustainable way of working is to notice when you start to feel depleted. It's natural to want to just power through your to-do list, however allowing yourself to take a break, even a short one, can boost productivity and effectiveness.

Check in with yourself regularly by asking:

- **How am I feeling right now?** Notice which parts of your body feel uncomfortable or tense. What is your posture like? Are you taking full breaths or short shallow ones?
- **What do I need?** Are you tired, thirsty, hungry, lethargic, or perhaps in need of some fresh air?

2. Committing to breaks

Just as we commit to meetings by scheduling them in our calendars, we also need to block out breaks between work activities. If we don't, we are more likely to suffer from 'brain fog', which happens when we move from one task to the next.

Think about which activities help take your mind off work, e.g. walking, preparing food, gardening, and weave these into the breaks in your working day. Doing something completely different in between tackling your 'to-do' list helps your brain to reboot and recharge. It's often when we are doing more menial tasks that our best ideas emerge!

Keep a note of when you feel at your best.

People often tell me that they feel more productive, focused and attentive in the morning. Make a mental note of when you are most productivity (and least) and plan more frequent breaks when your energy and attention levels dip.

Switching off

Get into the habit of switching off your laptop and phone when you take a break – it's difficult to relax if you can see and hear messages coming in. It's okay not to be instantly available all of the time.

3. Transitioning from work to home life

Building in transition time from work to home life at the end of each day helps you to switch off and 'download' the things that are still on your mind.

- **Daily reflection:** make a note of which activities and conversations during your working day left you feeling upbeat and energised
- **List the things you need to do tomorrow:** prioritise the three things that are necessary, urgent, important and commit to doing these first

- **Pack up:** physically packing away your files and laptop out of sight will help you to switch off and put work to bed for the day

4. Preparing for sleep

When we feel fatigued at work, it has the equivalent effect on our performance as drinking alcohol at your desk!

Most of us need eight to nine hours sleep a night. It's during deep sleep that our bodies repair and when we dream our minds are processing the experiences and emotions from the day.

Calming the mind

You can prepare for a restful night's sleep by doing activities that help you to wind down. This means defending the hour before bed and using this time to read a book, take a bath or do some stretching exercises (and to avoid blocking the sleep hormone melatonin, it's vital to switching off our screens too – no horror movies or work emails!)

Restorative sleep

Now more than ever, we need to take sleep seriously – try going to bed and waking up at the same time each day. Even if you are tempted to burn the midnight oil or sleep in at weekends, just an hour or two difference can throw our biological clocks and you can end up suffering from Monday morning jetlag.

Finally, caffeine helps mask fatigue, however when we already feel stressed, we don't need excessive cups of coffee as this interferes with the quality of sleep.

5. Start the day as you mean to go on

What is the first thing you do when you wake up? If it's checking your phone or listening to the news, then this is likely to exacerbate your stress levels. In the first 30 minutes after waking, our brain is in a highly suggestive state and so this presents a window of opportunity. Use the first moments of waking to set your intention for the day.

Ask yourself:

- **What feels important to you today? What do you want to focus on?**
- **How you want to feel and how do you want to show up?**



Summary

We often set out with good intentions and yet things inevitably get in the way. Take a minute to think about what might get in the way of you adopting some of these practices?

It's worth remembering that work can meet an emotional need, for example feeling validated and more secure, and so it's so important to take a structured approach to managing the balance between work and wellbeing.

I know from personal experience that when I get into the 'work zone', hours can disappear without me coming up for air. Setting alarms and reminders on my phone helps me to inject more balance into my working life.

Doing less work is not necessarily about doing nothing – it's about using time wisely and allowing yourself time to recharge. It's during these periods of downtime that we can experience moments of insight and creativity. Building in breaks throughout the day will facilitate your strategic thinking and help you focus on the priorities. By doing less you can achieve more!

Finally, don't discount the importance of getting a restful night sleep as, if we can't solve our fatigue, it's hard to solve anything!

What is the one thing you will take away from reading this - what will you make a point of committing to do each day?

How can we help?

IDPE's priority is to be here for you right now. To arrange a time for a confidential conversation about any of the above email info@idpe.org.uk.

So that we can respond to your challenges, tell us what you need right now. Share your experiences and views:

- **What do you need to learn more about right now?**
- **What support do you need?**
- **What do you think you will be doing more of and less of in future?**

Email us at info@idpe.org.uk.