

Employing the fitness principle to increase productivity at work

Sitting and working at a desk for long hours may feel far removed from being a professional athlete but to improve at your job there is a principle you can borrow from them: rest.



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Linda Trim, director at Giant Leap, said: "If you want to improve at your job or any activity — from triathlons to theoretical mathematics to working productively — the method for getting better is remarkably similar.

"And it requires a key thing many of us neglect: rest."

Trim noted that the key to improvement and continued success is finding a balance between stress and rest. "Contrary to what many of the productivity-obsessed may think, rest is as important as the stress of hard work."

It's easy to see why athletes need rest. Physical exertion, like lifting weights or running long distances, puts stress on the body parts the athlete is trying to strengthen. Those physical challenges actually damage the body. You aren't getting stronger when you lift weight — you are tearing muscle fibers and getting weaker.

It's only during the rest and recovery period that your body begins to heal and adapt so it's better prepared for future stress.

This the fundamental principle behind basic athletic training.

A similar principle works for creative or professional work too.

Research has shown that a cycle of work and rest is key for people learning to master a skill, trying to be productive at the office, or striving for a creative breakthrough.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi — renowned for his work on the concept of “flow” (fully immersed in an activity, in the zone) — spent decades interviewing geniuses from diverse fields including inventors, artists, scientists, and writers.

“The research found that the brightest minds spend their time either pursuing an activity with ferocious intensity, or engaging in complete restoration and recovery,” said Trim.

“This approach not only prevents creative burnout and cognitive fatigue, but it also fosters breakthrough ideas and discoveries.”

Top performers follow a cycle of total immersion into their work, followed by a disconnected period of rest and recovery. Other productivity researchers have also suggested that regular breaks are essential for people who perform best in fields ranging from computer programming to agricultural work.

This cycle of intense work followed by a real breaks enables the “eureka” moments — since these revelations usually come when the mind is disconnected from work.

So when your energy runs low at work or you get stumped on a task, that's the time to take a break.

“Get away from what you are doing for at least five minutes — longer if you are particularly stressed — and do something that gives your mind a rest from what you were focusing on,” Trim advised.

That could involve taking a walk, sitting outside, or even taking a shower, but half-hearted breaks spent browsing the internet aren't restorative enough to take your mind out of work mode.

The hard part is actually doing this.

“Many of us have been told before that it's important to take breaks, yet we still eat lunch at our desks, half-working and half-browsing the internet,” Trim concluded.

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