

Rest: Why You Get More Done When You Work Less by Alex Soojung-Kim Pang

Book Summary

Alex Soojung-Kim Pang is a consultant in Silicon Valley and a visiting scholar at Stanford University. It is an empirical argument in favor of more limited working hours and greater understanding of the advantage of active rest as a means of increasing creativity and productivity. After years of pushing himself to the limit, he took a sabbatical. Living a life of free time and its activities for a few months wasn't just a luxury – he quickly realized that he was getting more serious work done than ever before.

Advance your creativity and productivity by having an early start, then work for around four hours.

Eight hours of work a day sometimes just doesn't feel like enough. Surely you have to put a longer time in your work if you want to be the next New York Times bestseller, right?

Well, not that well. What doesn't really make the difference is how much you work, but when you work.

It is the best time to start to work is in the morning. If you really want to increase your creative productivity, you need a daily routine that starts in the early hours. Getting up at the

crack of dawn gives you free time frames to reflect on your work without the interfere with everyday life getting in the way.

Get it from Scott Adams, the creator of the Dilbert comics.

He's been waking up at five in the morning every day for the past twenty years. The first thing he does is drink a cup of coffee and eat some protein food. That's the perfect breakfast to set him up for the next four hours of drawing, answering emails and taking care of administrative things.

After his four fours, his creative energy is spent so he hits the gym to lift weights.

This routine has more than paid off. Dilbert has been syndicated by two thousand newspapers in 65 countries. Scott Adams has also written five comic books, nine nonfiction titles and produced both a TV show and a movie.

The key to his success is spending those first four hours working purposely, then planning for some downtime afterward.

That's because it's much more effective to work intensely for a shorter period of time than to work half-heartedly for the whole day. That also gives him more free time to pursue your hobbies, go for a walk or just take a nap.

Researchers at a music conservatory in Berlin came to the same results when they looked into students' practicing habits in the 1980s.

All the best young musicians practiced for four hours a day and slept an hour longer than their peers. Like Adams, they worked most intensely in the morning. After that, they took a nap and did some lighter practicing in the evening.

You can put that understanding into practice even if you don't have the luxury of clocking in and out of your job as you please. Just make sure you're fully focused on your work in the morning and give a break at lunch to rejuvenate.

Increase your later focus by taking a long walk or fitting in a midday nap.

What's the best way to recover from an energy-depleting mental workout? Well, there are two different scientific methods to recharge your creative batteries: walking or taking a short nap.

Let's start with walking.

Breathing of fresh air has been shown to enhance your relationship with your work and boost your creativity. That's because it's a brilliant way of tapping into your subconscious – the part of your mind in which many of your best ideas develop.

Think about William Rowan Hamilton, a nineteenth-century mathematician. He developed his most famous postulate in the field of algebra while walking along Ireland's Royal Canal with his wife. After some time he explained how he came to his idea, stating that an "undercurrent of thought" had suddenly revealed itself after "a spark flashed forth."

Indeed, walking is jointly related to creativity. It was proved by a study carried out at Stanford University in 2015.

The researchers wanted to test students' divergent thinking skills – a type of thinking aimed at generating creative ideas by exploring as many different possible solutions to a problem as possible. The research showed that the participants who'd spent their time taking a walk outside or on a treadmill had much higher scores than those who'd taken the test sitting at a desk.

Another good way to rejuvenate those grey cells is to take a midday nap.

Grabbing a quick siesta isn't just psychically restorative – it also helps foster information retention and emotional control.

Olaf Lahl, a sleep scientist based at the University of Düsseldorf in Germany, studied in 2008 that showed how getting some sleep supports the brain's ability to retain new data.

Lahl divided the participants into two groups and tasked them with memorizing 30 unfamiliar words in two minutes.

One group had been given the chance to take a nap before the test, while the other group hadn't been taken any sleep. The nap-taken group recalled a significantly higher number of words than the latter.

Embrace the right time to drop the tools and quit works wonders for your creativity.

There's a saying that it's best to quit while you're ahead. It's a great saying to remember when you're working. Choosing the right time to give a break greatly supports your creativity.

That's because there's nothing worse than overextending yourself. If you've just nailed a good scene in your screenplay, don't try to top it in the very next scene. Leave the next line half-finished and come back to it tomorrow. Who knows what your subconscious will have come up with by then.

This is truly important when you've come up with a new idea.

Take it from famous writer Ernest Hemingway. He was convinced that incubation was the key to creative work. His advice to budding writers was to "always give a break when you know what's going to happen next."

Taxing your brain with conscious thought tires you out before you've even started work. So let that idea sit awhile and take a break, or switch to a different task.

But don't just take Hemingway's word for it.

In a recent study, researchers at the University of Sydney's Center for the Mind showed how beneficial picking the right moment to stop working can be. They tasked two groups of students to come up with as many creative uses for a piece of paper as possible.

One group worked on the task with no interruption, while the other group switched to a different analytical task before returning to the original puzzle.

The second group came up with a lot more solutions than the first.

The point to remember is that just because you've clocked out for the day doesn't mean your brain has as well.

In fact, your brain is still busy coming up with new ideas. You just need to give them time to evaluate things. When you next sit down at your desk, you'll be amazed at how much they've grown!

Have a good night's sleep to make your brain ready for tomorrow's work.

Good sleep? Sounds like brain sleep!

Sleep it off isn't just a miracle cure for bad days at the office, hangovers, and break-ups; it also fights brain toxins. In fact, sleep helps repair your whole body. That's because when you sleep, your body is restoring depleted energy levels and fixing or growing cells.

Your mind doesn't stop either. It spends the night reviewing your day's experience, filing memories and subconsciously working on problems that have been bothering you.

All that happens during different cycles of sleep.

Stage 4 and REM deep sleep, for example, are the most important cycles when it comes to brain growth and memory consolidation.

Stage 4 sleep, also known as “slow-wave sleep,” is when your body releases a growth hormone called GHRH, which is used to repair bruises, fight infections and replace old cells.

REM, in contrast, is when your body produces myelin, a protective fat that’s vital for healthy neural function and memory.

Good rest can also help protect you against various degenerative conditions.

A 2013 study carried out at the University of Rochester found that mice removed the toxin beta-amyloid – a protein linked to Alzheimer’s – twice as quickly when they were sleeping.

Getting a proper night’s rest is also vital if you want to avoid the poor decision-making and serious physical illnesses associated with sleep deprivation.

A 2004 survey revealed that American pilots serving in Iraq had been awake for up to 36 hours. They had been bombing enemy positions while having improper sleep.

Those kinds of grueling shifts were responsible for all sorts of mishaps. Around 64 percent of all fatalities in the first week of the Iraq War were due to accidents and friendly-fire incidents, which were attributed to fatigue.

Night shift workers are also likely to suffer from the adverse effects of sleep deprivation.

Missing out on sleep disrupts their circadian rhythms, leading to health complications ranging from ulcers to heart disease and breast cancer. Other studied effects include obesity, higher rates of hypertension and diabetes.

Take some time out to rest and prevent yourself from burnout and then recover.

In every company, there's that guy who's clocked in every single day and hasn't taken one vacation day in the last 15 years.

Although this is often celebrated as a great example of hard work and dedication, it's not healthy. He gave his full capacity to the work. In fact, as we'll soon find out, he's probably on the verge of a burnout.

Like sleep, holidays are vital to your health and happiness. Vacation is when you feel exhausted and let your body and mind recover.

The data compiled by the Framingham Heart Study, a longitudinal study that looked at female homemakers between 1948 and 1991, shows that the participants who only took one holiday every six years were twice as likely to have a heart attack as those who vacationed twice a year.

Then there's a survey of 971 employees carried out by Oxford Economics in 2015. That showed that unused vacations cost companies \$224 billion a year.

Even worse is what happens in the workplace. Employees lose interest in their work, become less empathetic in their communications with clients and customers and are much more prone to burnout, depression and even suicide.

It's obvious to see how important recovery is. Now, let's look at how you can maximize your rest time.

According to German sociologist Sabine Sonntag, there are four factors to look out for: relaxation, control, mastery experiences, and mental detachment.

Relaxation is pretty much exactly what you think it is. It is very simple indeed. Close your eyes and imagine a laid-back weekend at the beach or in a spa, and you'll know what the relaxation means.

Control is a bit more complicated. Basically, this refers to how long you need to rest to fully recover. Sonntag points out that this varies from situation to situation.

Workers with a large number of office, family and household commitments beyond their control, for example, need longer than workers with more control over their schedules.

Mastery experiences are mentally stimulating, challenging and rewarding tasks you're good at – think of chess, brain games or playing an instrument. These are great ways to unwind because they're so absorbing.

Finally, there's detachment. That's all about getting away from your everyday routine both literally and in spirit. Spending a week in Italy or a long weekend in the mountains removes your stress and susceptibility to burnout.

Exercise to improve your cognitive performance.

What do Rhodes scholars, Nobel Peace Prize winners and footballers all have in common? Well, they all know that physical exercise is great for both the body and the mind.

That's because intellectual rigor and athleticism go hand in hand.

Take football player Byron "Whizzer" White, who played for the Pittsburgh Pirates and Detroit Lions in the 1930s. Or Pat Haden, a 1970s LA Rams player, and Myron Rolle, who played for the Tennessee Titans and the Pittsburgh Steelers between 2010 and 2012.

All three were distinguished Rhodes scholars. White even went on to become a Supreme Court justice.

In fact, academic success is often accompanied by physical fitness.

Marie Curie, a scientist who shared the 1903 Nobel Peace Prize, and won her own for Chemistry in 1911, was an avid cyclist. She spent her honeymoon touring France on her bike with her husband.

Exercise is also great for your mental health. That's something Nelson Mandela knew better than most.

After the apartheid government imprisoned him on Robben Island in 1962, he kept up the strict daily fitness regimen of a boxer. Up to his release in 1988, he ran on the spot for 45 minutes as well as completing 100 push-ups and 200 sit-ups every day.

It was that routine that prevented the government from achieving its aim of breaking Mandela. As he put it, "I worked better and thought more clearly when I was in good physical condition."

The strong relationship between exercise and cognitive performance has been proven many times over.

A 2015 German-Finnish study, for example, scanned the brains of overweight and obese participants before and after a three-month weight-loss and fitness course. The grey and white matter in their brains, which protects the central nervous system, increased in volume as the participants became more physically fit.

Scientists have also found that exercise helps the body produce neurotrophins – proteins key to neuron growth and formation.

Then there's a memory. Intense aerobic activity stimulates the development of smaller blood vessels, which can deliver oxygenated blood to your brain much more efficiently.

That's good news. A 2012 study found that as your maximum oxygen capacity increases, so too does your episodic memory.

Have a hobby and spare some time for it.

Did you know that Winston Churchill loved painting as a hobby when he wasn't determining the fate of the world? Like physical exercise, art is a type of deep play, as well as an obvious way of tapping into your creativity.

So, what is deep play?

The term deep play comes originally from Jeremy Bentham but a cultural anthropologist called Clifford Geertz popularised it.

Well, it's basically any activity that's mentally absorbing, changes your focus, provides a new context for your skills and gives a deep sense of satisfaction as well as a connection to your past.

For Churchill, that was oil painting – especially landscapes and seascapes.

What he loved most was how engaging it was to sit in front of a blank canvas. In his book *Painting as a Pastime*, he wrote that he knew of no other free time activity that “more entirely absorbs the mind.”

Deep play is a way of testing your existing skills of observation, strategy and problem-solving in a low-stakes context.

Unsurprisingly, Churchill likened painting to military strategy, claiming it was “like fighting a battle.” He put his ideas on it.

But deep play also provides respite. It's as satisfying as work but less hectic.

That means you can really enjoy the small details. Churchill loved the kaleidoscope of colors, for example, and took great pleasure in something as simple as squeezing paints out of their tubes.

The statesman took up painting in 1915, the second year of the First World War, shortly after ordering the Allied attack on Gallipoli, Turkey. It was a decision that resulted in devastating losses and threatened Churchill's entire career.

Painting, he later said, "came to me as lifeblood" when he was at his lowest. It was a therapeutic outlet in a moment of deeply personal and political crisis.

A painting might not be for you, of course, but there are plenty of other activities that offer the same benefits. You could find your own. So try chess, mountain climbing or cooking – anything that you find deeply rewarding is fair game!

Book Review

It's completely changed the way that we think about creativity. That's sometimes forgotten in a culture that values overwork. But taking time out to recover and rejuvenate is key to a productive and enriching life. It is good to treat work and rest as equals. Rest contributes to our ability to be the best of what we can be. Finally, no doubt of proof that to raise happy, healthy, and productive adults, educators and parents should teach the next generation how to practice rest on purpose; how to partner work with play, exercise, and sleep.

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