

The Lie That Perfectionists Tell Themselves

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Many of us hold principles that keep us from pursuing a more productive lifestyle.

For example, one of the most common ones is the belief that increasing productivity, or getting the most out of your time, will decrease the quality of your work, or your ability to do tasks perfectly. In the [online program](#) we run to help working professionals develop more productive work behaviors, about half of our participants have agreed with the statement: “I’m sure I could get more done in less time, but the quality of my work would go down.”

You’ve probably experienced this in action: it’s 5:30 PM and you could probably just hit send on that last deliverable and leave work. But you figure you might as well spend 30 more minutes on it before sending, and you stay a bit later.

Did the extra half hour make that much of a difference? Perhaps, but it’s more likely that it just made you *feel* more confident in the quality of your work. And so we end up believing that spending more time on our work makes it better.

Yet, more time doesn’t necessarily translate into better quality work. In fact, spending more time at work and on specific tasks can actually hurt our performance, reducing the quality of our work. Research has shown that when weekly hours worked exceed 50 or 55 hours, cognitive performance (e.g., [emotional intelligence skills](#) and [the capacity to reason and solve problems](#)) and work engagement levels begin to decline, dragging down the

quality of the work produced with it. The relationship between reduced quality and working more is not new. In fact, [Henry Ford's primary motivation for cutting weekly hours](#) from 48 to 40 was to reduce the number of errors his employees were making. Employers in a number of manufacturing industries have similarly found that they could [maintain output and quality while decreasing employees' hours](#).

If that weren't enough, according to [research done at top strategy consulting firms](#), managers struggle to distinguish between those who work 80-hour weeks and those who work 50-60-hour weeks, suggesting that the extra work generally isn't noticed.

At the task-level, spending more time on something doesn't always result in it being better. We know that [longer, more complicated emails are less likely to be read](#) and spending the time to provide [more strategic options/choices generally leads to poorer decisions](#).

When this belief — that more time leads to better quality — is the unwritten rule, there is always more to do. As a result, work will fill the time it is permitted to fill, killing the hope that increased productivity will yield a better work-life balance. One participant in our program said, “Why should I get my work done more quickly if I'll just be given more work to fill the time?” To break up this cycle, we need to stop associating more time with higher quality work.

Instead, we must recognize that productive behaviors are what actually improve, not hurt, quality. When we look outside of business, we instinctively know that speed, a component of productivity, is associated with better quality, not less. Meb Keflezighi, [2014 Boston Marathon winner, associates the connection between speed and form](#) (i.e., quality) with his 2014 win: “If it wasn't for form, I don't think I would have won. I think about my feet, where they're going to land. My hips, knees, legs, arms, neck. Where my head should be positioned. Where my chin should be going uphill, downhill.” In the automotive industry, we see the same thing: the best quality is associated

with the greatest speed. This is why parts and processes developed for race cars are later used in leisure vehicles: “[the automotive industry has always relied upon motorsports-borne technology](#) [i.e., race cars] as an innovation test-bed for road cars.”

Increased productivity leading to increased quality is not only seen in racing. A simple, but powerful example in the professional environment is the use of keyboard shortcuts. Keyboard shortcuts save us time and lead to higher quality work because they enable us to avoid the easily-made mistakes of dragging and dropping items in the wrong spots and clicking on the wrong items.

The misconception that productivity hurts quality also leads us to believe that when it comes to work, quality is the supreme goal. Quality is undoubtedly important, but it's questionable whether it should be the top goal. In some cases, focusing solely or too much on quality can actually set us back: think about the flawless strategic plan that took three months to develop ... only to collect dust on the shelf because the business context changed, making it no longer relevant. The real goal of all work is impact — whether it be impact on sales, profits, or one's community. And prioritizing productivity guarantees that work will be done at a level of quality that has the most impact.

In our work with companies, we have seen what happens in a quality-first culture: people spend a lot of time perfecting work that would have had the same impact without the extra hours of tweaking. One participant in our program from a leading consulting firm shared, “If we could just relax our standards for internal emails, we would save so much time!”

The reason additional investments in quality don't always lead to greater impact is the opportunity cost of time. If we had an infinite supply of time, this may not be the case, but we know that choosing to spend time on one task means that we are choosing not to spend time on a million other tasks. And if we believe the [Pareto Principle](#) (80% of the value comes from 20% of the work), then we can see how perfecting our work generally returns small

value for a high cost. It doesn't mean we shouldn't ever perfect our work. It just means we should only do it when it will contribute significantly to the impact of the work.

In contrast to quality, productivity is, by definition, linked to impact. Most of us have thought about productivity as the amount of work we can get done with the time we have. But we should start thinking about productivity as the amount of *impact* that the work we produce in a given time can have. With this definition, productivity, not quality, is the superior aim for our work.

Some workplace cultures understand this. In our conversations with some of the leading technology companies, we've heard stories of poorly designed, typo-ridden presentations being shared with C-suite leaders. Leaders were often unphased by the lack of perfection.

Becoming more productive will not hurt the quality of our work; it will increase it. But even more, it will increase the impact of our work every time. We may not be able to shift our company cultures from quality-first to impact-first right away, but we all can invest in our own productivity and stop thinking this focus will hurt the quality of our work.