

## Productivity: A Relentless Pursuit

Stated plainly, productivity is the state or quality of producing something. In the context of economic ventures, productivity is the sole objective in the eyes of those who own the means of production. After all, who wouldn't want to master the translation of their inputs into outputs? Although Americans see busyness and perpetual achievement as a marker of success and high status, this wasn't always the case. For much of history, having excessive amounts of spare time was viewed as an indication of wealth and power. As of recently, however, the definition of productivity has evolved beyond economics and class position, and with it, its connotation. Today, this term is more closely associated with mental turmoil and toxicity. This unfavorable association is exemplified by a rebranding to "hustle culture", a productivity-centric model that promotes overworking as a lifestyle, as opposed to something Americans fall victim to when they've bitten off more than they can chew. It is evident from the additions "hustle" and "-centric" alone that being productive is now seen as an all-consuming behavior pattern unworthy of praise. I belong to this community of "over workers", but it's not a membership I'm particularly proud of. It wasn't until my freshman year of college that I discovered the true burden of a hustle mindset, but, by this time, I had already been hit pretty hard by its effects.

I have always been more of an overachiever, but I was extremely underprepared for the constant push for progress that accompanies college-level coursework. Initially, I thought the blocks of free time between classes would be a beneficial departure from high-school learning, but I was mistaken. This "free time" was quickly occupied by studying for exams, completing homework, and even working on assignments that were due weeks or even months away. Being mildly aware of hustle culture prior to attending college, I was convinced this was a rut I'd

undoubtedly find myself in once the semester began, but what I did not foresee was the obsession and deceit this mindset was capable of fostering. No matter how often I warned myself of the unhealthy repercussions of overexertion, I still felt like any time not spent studying for exams or catching up on assignments was a waste. The consequences of this mentality reached their peak around the time of my calculus final. Since classes were out and I wrapped up my other exams, I was left with an entire week to study strictly for calculus. This seems like every college student's dream, right? Not quite. In my case, having minimal commitments inside and outside of school was troublesome because my obsession with maximizing spare time drove me to work from sunup to sundown every single day. I was not eating regular meals or maintaining a decent sleep schedule. When test day came, I was nervous, but mostly confident, considering I had spent the last seven days at my desk preparing. During the exam, my efforts were paying off because I had yet to encounter a question that I was totally unfamiliar with and was quite calm; that is, until my power went out. To the average student, taking a test in the dark might seem like a minor inconvenience, but since I was essentially enrolled in "Zoom university" due to Covid-19, a power outage felt like the end of the world. To make matters worse, the day after my exam, I woke up feeling extremely dizzy and unable to even support my own body weight because of how lethargic I was. I went to the hospital and received IV fluids due to severe dehydration and a compromised immune system. I have no doubt that this was the result of abandoning all forms of self-care for the past week. To most people, the solution to my situation is straightforward: stop studying and eat. I didn't see it as so black and white. I knew the lifestyle I was living was highly unsustainable and downright harmful, but I felt compelled by an inner voice to keep producing. Because I am also someone who carries a great deal of pride in their work ethic, adhering to a more relaxed version of traditional hustle culture seemed like an

appropriate course of action to both preserve my values and circumvent unnecessary harm. This constant toggle between accepting and rejecting the culture that was causing me so much distress sparked my desire to investigate its origins and decide which parts of it I could and should salvage.

The concept of productivity is rooted in economic theory, thanks in part to Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. In his text, Smith claims that the factor responsible for distinguishing productive from unproductive labor is whether value is added to the materials being worked on [1]. For example, a seamstress who converts a pile of yarn into a sweater is engaging in productive labor because the sweater is worth more than the yarn it was made from, but someone who simply cuts more yarn would be labeled unproductive. Aside from the output generated, manufacturing processes also fall under the realm of productivity. In the early 1900s, Henry Ford revolutionized the automobile industry with his invention of the assembly line. The same car that once took 12 hours to build could now be road-ready in as little as an hour and 33 minutes [2]. Both the public and Ford rejoiced at this boost in efficiency. Another instance in which systems were advanced to optimize production and profits was Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin. Because cotton was the primary crop grown and harvested by slaves throughout the 1800s, a machine that separated cotton fibers from their seeds 25 times faster than manually possible was viewed as an obvious triumph for productivity [3]. However, for factory workers and slave laborers alike, these advances were far from celebrated. With assembly lines ruling manufacturing, workers were required to complete the same mind-numbing tasks on repeat, almost like machines themselves. To feed the ever-hungry cotton gin, slaves were forced to work for even longer periods of time on even larger plantations. Considering these examples, it is evident that, historically, productivity revolved around labor, product yields, and profit for the

privileged. While this association is still partly true in the modern era, productivity is no longer tied so closely to physical labor. Instead, the term has come to suggest an alternative lifestyle characterized by a need for constant progress; this is the definition that is so plaguing to me.

Presumably because of my status as a second-year college student, I observe this modern conception of productivity and its effects most readily in academic contexts. As demonstrated by my freshman year college experience, routine eating and sleeping only occurred when I finished my assignments for the day (and anything I was working ahead on). Basic, life-sustaining practices felt like chores that I had no interest in doing or hobbies that I no longer had time for. I was a student first and human being second. I saw these same behaviors in my peers too and wondered why none of us thought to question such a damaging construct if virtually everyone was suffering at its expense. What did become routine for me during the semester, however, was constantly weighing whether it would serve me better to get an extra hour of sleep or watch an episode of a Netflix show. I frequently chose the former, but I couldn't help myself from contemplating the latter because, after all, people are always preaching the necessity of allocating a little time each day to a passion or simply relaxation. This suggestion, although seemingly innocent in nature, is quite hypocritical. As students living in modern day hustle culture, engaging in non-academically stimulating behaviors, even if the motive is to simply rest and recharge, has the potential to cause more harm than good. Because society's idea of self-care directly opposes the tenets of such a culture, students who listen to those that advocate for mindfulness in the heat of a packed semester are labeled as lazy and unmotivated by their peers, but forgoing forms of self-care for constant studying might also earn students the title of "try-hard" or workaholic. Similarly, the mantras "C's get degrees" and "Just relax and try your best" that are often repeated around exam time are disappointingly untrue in the lives of students

who are pursuing professional paths beyond the undergraduate level. Consider entering a law or medical school interview with a transcript full of C+'s. While these grades did earn you a bachelor's degree, interviewers and admissions officers are most likely not going to accept "I tried my best" as justification for earning straight Cs, and admittance into graduate school is doubtful. It becomes clear that the dueling opinions society has regarding the intersection of work and health make the relationship between productivity and academics a convoluted one, and students never seem to win. At the end of every night, I go to bed feeling defeated and ashamed about the amount of work I actually accomplished versus what I *had* to do. In reality, getting at least one item checked off a to-do list is progress, but society has somehow found a way to make what we don't accomplish invalidate what we do.

While I am significantly affected by the principles championed by hustle culture, I know this isn't the case for every individual. For example, in my own family, my mom is like me in that she is ambitious with the number and frequency of projects she takes on and defines herself based on her performance. In contrast, my dad views my intense study habits as more of a choice than a necessity and is often confused why I become so agitated when I'm interrupted or asked to leave my desk. Whenever I'm feeling frustrated about the progress I've made for the day, my mom usually asks me to name a few tasks that I did manage to complete instead of entertaining my incessant dwelling on what I have yet to do. Our conversations often proceed as follows: I'll say something like, "It's already 7 o'clock, and I got nothing done today. I still have so much left to do and so little time." She'll respond with, "Well, you must've done something since we talked last. What did you do between your two morning classes?" Even though I was indeed at my desk all morning, I always seem to resort to discounting my progress due to feelings of inadequacy. I seldom consider myself at peace at the end of a school day because I'm either too

focused on what I still have left to do or preoccupied by how much everyone else around me was able to achieve. In the latter scenario, the fact that I'm so consumed by peer comparison is senseless because, in the same way that no two students learn in identical ways, we are all following slightly different paths complete with unique quantities and types of coursework. In response to my plea for more time, she wisely points out there will rarely be a scenario where this isn't the case because, if I have spare time, I fill it. That's just the way I'm wired. Since I'm pursuing a career in the medical profession, she teases me that it's a blessing that doctors can't take their patients home because if that was the case, I'd never stop working. Although I clearly fall on the more extreme end of the spectrum, it's important to recognize that for some people, waking up and navigating between work and home is progress enough. This begs the question of how some individuals are so content with the bare minimum but others so unsatisfied. Where is the disconnect? I would argue that those who have the mental strength and desire to dissociate themselves from societal expectations of productivity are the ones who find contentment in survival-motivated progress. For example, people who are less materialistic aren't concerned with working long hours because they don't need huge paychecks to finance their lifestyles. In contrast, individuals who succumb to the social standards responsible for engendering such a deep-seated fear of dormancy never seem to reach a comparable level of satisfaction.

While productivity is obviously applied in the context of school and work, it is also starting to bleed into leisure time. Instead of enjoying a well-deserved night or weekend off, I am almost immediately overcome by guilt for abandoning my responsibilities in favor of nurturing my mind and body. The fact that I have such trouble putting away my work out of fear of incompleteness is ironic because taking a break to eat or sleep would actually result in higher levels of productivity the next day. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, working too

much decreases productivity by 68% in employees who feel they don't have enough hours in the day to complete their tasks" [4]. To put this into perspective, if an individual arrives at work in perfect mental condition but starts to feel as if he or she is racing the clock, productivity falls from the initial 100% to a mere 32%. We can't forget about the countless instances where individuals show up to work feeling less-than-stellar, though. Their already low productivity percentage will suffer even more, and they might even reach a point where completing any tasks at all is useless because a "negative" percentage means that the work will most likely have to be redone. The average person might be quick to suggest a flaw in these reported percentages because the concept of a single thought having that caliber of power over a person seems far-fetched. If this wasn't something I struggled with daily, I'd be skeptical of the statistic too. There's no question that a well-rested and fed body functions better than a sleep-deprived, hungry one, so why is it the case that countless Americans appear "married" to their careers? I believe that the answer lies in the nuances that differentiate hustle culture from conventional productivity. While the latter focuses on the quantity of goods produced, the former emphasizes avoiding idleness at all costs. It makes sense that a well-rested factory worker will be able to produce more goods at a faster rate when he is energized than when he is fatigued. However, in the eyes of those who view uber productivity as paramount, leaving the factory at sundown to get some rest is seen as an initiation of idle behavior on behalf of the worker. But, if he were to extend his stay at the factory, one might start to question if his progress is genuine or just a facade to ease his hustle mindset. It follows that whatever project the man is working on is likely not completed with the utmost precision, but nonetheless, he is keeping busy which is a win in both his mind and his fellow "hustlers."

The rise of social media and technology is closely linked to leisure time and can be interpreted as both a benefit and a drawback to productivity efforts. Unless some privacy software is paired with a company device or account, it becomes quite simple for anyone to access emails or documents from their own homes. For those who feel the urge to always remain in-touch with work responsibilities, the unlimited access that technology grants is a huge advantage for their personal productivity quotas. On the other hand, individuals who are members of such a culture but are trying to distance themselves from its principles might consider technology an obstacle to these endeavors for the same reason. Through posts and status updates, technology now functions as a platform to boast about flashy or “collectible” experiences one engages in outside of work to fill lulls in activity. Social pressure to participate in the most rewarding, adventurous, or benevolent acts makes those who prefer more low-key off days feel unproductive on the one day they are, or were, allowed to be. Instead of spending a Sunday afternoon watching a movie, one should consider rock climbing, volunteering at an animal shelter, or donating blood as more impressive alternatives. As if workplace competition wasn’t enough, the animosity and jealousy that’s cultivated between coworkers or peers who don’t take part in comparable events during their free time adds another layer of toxicity to productivity. The tension that’s produced makes it nearly impossible to “take a breather”, and as a result, burnout among working adults and college students is at an all-time high. According to the National Library of Medicine, “‘burnout’ is a syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, attitudinal hardening, and a sense of decreased accomplishment that often precedes depression and psychosomatic disorders” [5]. Aside from leading to a loss of productivity due to physical illness, burnout also makes recognizing the true gravity or value of tasks that one does accomplish that much harder. In a way, it functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy because



anticipating feelings of decreased accomplishment or distaste for work in general subconsciously creates a reality of poor production. An increasingly common coping mechanism among populations of college students and professional adults is alcohol. It serves as a distraction or escape from these unbearable feelings of failure and inadequacy, and while there are undoubtedly healthier methods of dealing with the mental drainage that accompanies overexertion, the go-to response remains drinking. Global studies conducted at the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health reveal that “people who log long hours [at work] are about 12% more likely to become heavy drinkers” [6]. Additionally, physical ailments like heart disease, diabetes, and high cholesterol are often exacerbated by overwork and certainly not alleviated by excessive drinking. In hopes of remedying this destructive syndrome, students might switch their majors and adults their career paths, only to find out that this cycle of work, burnout, and sickness is not a unique one.

Nowadays, it seems that if conformity is the ultimate goal, one must choose between self-care and productivity. I am troubled by the thought of a choice needing to be made at all, and frankly, cannot pick between the two. Why can't these two notions coexist peacefully in a guilt-free environment? One should not have to sacrifice their health or work ethic to appeal to such a blatantly harmful societal construct that discerns no clear boundaries between success and plain overwork. My ideal definition of productivity is something intermediate between the extremes I have discussed thus far. While I know there are some positives to being a “workaholic”, such as the affirmation of personal capabilities one receives in the form of impressive grades or praise from employers, these feelings are so fleeting and their consequences so long-term that it hardly seems worth it to continue this relentless pursuit of accomplishment. I start to ponder at what point negative health effects will outweigh the desire to produce; are we

already starting to tip the scale? Even though I do see the benefit in instilling values of hard work and self-discipline in future generations, I think their minds would be better served by learning practices or concepts that work to undefine productivity. For example, children should be taught that rigid time management isn't central to success. Since there are a finite number of hours in a day and some tasks usually take longer than expected, putting off an assignment temporarily becomes the healthiest decision. Ultimately, having a career in which one wishes to be immersed is an excellent goal, but this life won't be enjoyable if it's riddled with illness and self-deprecation.

While my disdain for intense productivity has been readily apparent throughout this piece, I do not see the need to eliminate the term from society altogether. I believe it does hold value in contexts where it can be explicitly measured, like economics. For example, automobile companies gauge their prosperity based on how many cars they can manufacture and sell in a period of time and growers analyze ratios of relative harvest to retail demand. In both cases, the focus is on time, money, and yield, and these businesses ensure that their product quality doesn't suffer at the expense of their quotas. Issues arise when the term's usage is extended to less tangible realms, such as academia, to refer to goals that are unobtainable and immeasurable. In these instances, quality over quantity, is reduced to superficial quantity. As long as an individual constantly appears busy and is producing something, what exactly the person is working on and whether that something is of quality becomes irrelevant. While I can confidently say I have grown to appreciate the hustler side of myself who is incredibly self-disciplined and motivated in her studies, I now see the pitfalls of this culture and the need for change. After all, no one on their deathbed has ever wished they'd spent more time at work.

## Works Cited

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