

Turn Off Your Work Brain

Why It's Important; Why Employers Should Encourage It



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A little over a year ago, the world turned upside down in a flash. Most of us had only heard about, but never seen or lived through, a global crisis of this magnitude.

If you are one to see the good in everything, this world got a break from the repetitious grind and so did we as individuals. Most of us were forced to do something so natural and yet so foreign to our culture – connect with ourselves.

For a while, it was great to work from home and make time for family and other interests. But then, slowly and without overt awareness, that feeling of excitement turned into a feeling of dread. You were working more than you ever did before and yet it felt like the work was never done.

So, here is the big question: Why does it feel like the work is never done, no matter what?

The answer: Because you are always *ON*.

Rene Descartes, a French philosopher from the 1600s, gave us the gift of *cogito ergo sum* – I think, therefore I am. If he were around today, he would say – I think all the time, therefore I cannot be.

As humans, we are resilient and our brain is easily the most sophisticated information-transfer system on Earth, but we are not built to be on all day every day.

Now that we've discussed the problem, let's talk about the scientific solutions.

By now you've read on Google and discussed with your well-wishers that you should sleep eight hours, exercise every day, take breaks, practice meditation, take nature walks. Great recommendations, thank you Google.

Good solutions, however, create great outcomes only when there is an understanding of why and how.

Adjusting to new environment: When you do a certain activity every day, it becomes part of you and your subconscious/unconscious. For example: You drive to work five days a week and most days you don't even realize how you got there as it becomes a subconscious action. Here's the kicker though: There are thousands of subconscious/unconscious processes going on in your brain right now that may be working against your conscious self.

You stopped driving to work and your conscious self is aware, but you didn't invest in adjusting your unconscious self to the new work system. Now, you're missing a key element of what makes you ready for your day.

Solution: Find and adopt a new ritual. Follow your routine in the morning exactly as you would if you were going in to work and find something to replace the commute to make your brain prepared for what's coming next. For example: getting your coffee and watching 20 minutes of news before starting your workday.

According to a study by *Erhardt et al. (2016)*, workplace-related rituals are a powerful mechanism for productivity and a thriving culture.

Unconscious overload: When you went to work every day, all you had to think about was getting your work done. Your subconscious/unconscious self

knew that because you were at work, your boss and peers knew being at work equals focusing on work. That luxury is now lost.

While your conscious self is working hard to accomplish daily tasks, your subconscious/unconscious self is constantly looking for ways to make your presence known. It's exhausting. This results in overwork – not to be mistaken for productivity – and because you aren't physically at work, you are working harder to prove that you're working.

Solution: A simple self-awareness practice called mindfulness. Take five minutes after work to think about your workday. Mindfulness results from bringing your unconscious self to the forefront. When you become fully aware of the work you have accomplished, the need to prove your presence is reduced. According to a study by *Vugt (2019)*, mindfulness reduces stress significantly and shows improved immune response.

Burnout: All of us have experienced this phenomenon at one point or another in our lives. Especially in the past year, social isolation and work burnout have been top of mind for researchers. You feel like you can always do more, and those two extra hours in the day you're saving by not driving to work are going right down the work drain.

The emails have increased significantly, and Zoom has become the new normal. Email fatigue was already plaguing us – and now Zoom fatigue.

Solution: Burnout can cause your mental systems to misalign, which is the root of the problem. Start by taking control of your calendar and being OK with saying no politely. A recent study by *Butler & Jaffe (2020)* found the most challenging aspect of current work routines to be too many meetings and feeling overworked, which leads to mental and physical health issues.

At the end of the day, organizations want the same thing that people want – productivity and balance. While there are many solutions, the biggest one is to allow yourself to be your authentic self. When you suffer from mental fatigue, a lot of brain power is taken away from mental functions such as memory and ability to reason.

According to a study by *Parmer (2015)*, a positive attitude helps you cope more easily with the daily affairs of life. In a study by *Mora-Ripoll (2010)*, it was found that smiling and laughing showed significant physiological, psychological, social, spiritual and quality-of-life benefits. Adjustment will happen, one way or another. So, why not set it intentionally and enjoy the shift!

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