

Sacrifice your health for your startup



“Pencil.”

Editor’s Note: This was written in 2009, before “Hustle Culture” and indeed two years before Lean Startup. It was somewhat controversial even then, but did not have the stigma of modern ideas of work and life, and especially what some call toxic hustle culture. I stand by the assertion in the original article—that startups take all the time, and take sacrifice, without also accepting the ways people interpret these things more than 15 years later.

The Internet is full of good advice about how to lead a healthy, balanced work/home life.

- Leo Bauboa of Zen Habits built his Technorati 100 blog on one hour a day,² leaving plenty of time for a day job and a family.

- Tim Brownson reshuffles our priorities³ so we realize what’s important to accomplish and what’s not important to worry about.
- Merlin Mann of 43folders shows us how merely admitting what we don’t like⁴ about ourselves and our life leads to a vast menu of options for fixing it.
- Penelope Trunk demonstrates that the point of a job is fulfillment and happiness,⁵ not the blind pursuit of money.

If you don’t have your health and your family, nothing else matters. On your deathbed will you wish you had worked longer hours or been a better parent? Will you wish you had spent more time Twittering or more time exercising, extending your life by five years?

Compelling. And yet, in my experience this attitude is not the path to success in small business.

Maximizing your chance for success means sacrificing health and family.

This sounds controversial, but it's not just me:

- Jeremiah Owyang of Web Strategist:⁶ “How do I Keep Up?” This is one of the most common questions I get from folks, or a variant: “Do you sleep?” or “Do you have a family?” I can answer succinctly: “I don't, in shifts, and yes... I think.” ... I'm lucky I fell into my passion. It comes with costs however, I'm out of shape, stressed, I don't sleep well, and my blood pressure is up.
- Mark Cuban, self-made millionaire and owner of the Dallas Mavericks on how he achieved success:⁷ “I slept on the couch or floor ... Because I was living on happy hour food, and the 2 beer cover charge, I was gaining weight like a pig. But I was having fun. ... Every night I would read [software manuals], no matter how late. ... I remember sitting in that little office till 10pm ... I would get so involved with learning that I would forget to eat ...
- More from Mark in an interview with YoungMoney Magazine: Question: “Did you have to sacrifice your personal life in order to become a business success?” Answer: “Sure, ask about five of my former girlfriends that question. I went seven years without a vacation. I didn't even read a fiction book in that time. I was focused.”
- Penelope Trunk (yes, she has insights on both sides of this issue) on how all-consuming her company is:⁸ “I'm desperate. ... You're always sick, but not take-a-day-off-work sick. ... So I suffer with the pink eye, because it's not having all that gross green discharge yet, so I think I can deal with it after funding. ... I diagnose my [temporary] blindness as stress related. ... I say, 'My eyes are nothing compared to the pain of raising money.' ... There's no time for family.

“So what,” you could argue, “just because many successful entrepreneurs are workaholics doesn't mean that's the *only* path to success.”

Indeed, study after study has shown that “working more hours” doesn't translate into “accomplishing more shit.” If you're not getting enough



sleep, for instance, working extra hours doesn't make up for your foggy brain.

Also, optimizing *how* you spend your time can increase productivity several times over¹⁰—an increase you couldn't possibly match by working more hours.

Yeah, but here's the problem.

The “Rule of Closets” is that the amount of crap you own will expand to fill all available closet space. You can create more space by adding shelves and organizers, but then you'll soon discover you have more stuff.

Well I have a “Rule of Time in Startups”: **How much time does a bootstrapped company take? All of it.**

Even ten people could hardly keep up with everything you do in small business—creating, consulting, designing, fixing, self-promotion, blogging, networking, bookkeeping, taxes, customer support and cultivation, reading startup blogs for ideas and inspiration (!), and all those little crappy things like losing an afternoon troubleshooting your fancy outsourced IP phone system that was supposed to let you “work from anywhere.”

One, two, or even three people can't do everything, so *of course* it takes *all* your time. If you're working a day job while starting something on the side, *of course* you don't have time to exercise or play with your kids before bed.

It takes obsession to make a little company go. Forget “passion”—everyone's favorite word—it's “obsession.” It's not just that you love working, it's that you can't stop working. You're putting your entire self on the line—your finances, your career, your ideas.

The obsession is there even when you're away from the office, having lunch with a friend or reading to your kids. As my wife would frequently point out in the early years of Smart Bear, my “mental and emotional bandwidth” was entirely consumed. You're physically there, but you're not really there.

Read those quotes above again and you'll see not just passion but **self-destructive devotion**. You don't put yourself through this meat grinder just because you “like something a lot.”

“If you love it so much, why don't you marry it?”

Exactly.

Of course those life-coaches are still correct: This isn't a great way to live your entire life. You need to accept that this is going to happen and ask whether it's OK to incur this penalty right now. For me, I did all this in my 20's when I had no kids, I had enough savings to risk everything for a while, and I had a wife who had her own business and who therefore understood how much work it took and why I was spacing out over dinner.

Bottom line: **Every *successful* bootstrapper I know puts work before self.** (Until financial freedom is achieved.) I did too.

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