

Working smarter, not harder, as an entrepreneur

The decision to start a business is momentous. Working for yourself is an entirely different ballgame than working for someone else, and making this decision will forever change your life. In this sense, entrepreneurship is a giant undertaking, and it's easy to quickly become overwhelmed with the amount of work required to keep your small business afloat.

Many people fall into the “hustle” mentality of working excessively until they become burned out. This ultimately pushes some entrepreneurs to quit while they're ahead and try to find a job instead. However, although starting a business does require a lot of work, working hard just for the sake of it won't cut it. Instead of working harder, many entrepreneurs now realise that working smarter is the key to running a successful business, not working harder.

Working smarter as an entrepreneur

Working smarter means minimising the time you spend thinking about and handling work tasks and maximising the productivity of the time you put in. Here are ten simple tips every entrepreneur can follow to make the best use of their time and grow their business.

Tip #1: Clock in and out

Set working hours for yourself. Make sure you are “at work” at the same time each day, even if being at work means parked with your laptop at the dining room table. You must keep your mind in “work mode,” even if you’re working from a home office, coworking space, or coffee shop. Being there at the same time each day will help your mind switch from “on” and “off” regarding your working mindset, which is as essential while you work as it is while you don’t.

Just as you clock in at the same time each day, make sure you’re also clocking out at the same time at the end of the day. Your mind needs the chance to rest and recharge, so when you set your work down in the evening, make sure you don’t pick it up again until it’s time to clock back in.

Tip #2: Schedule e-mail and notification times

E-mail and social media notifications are great because they keep you in the loop and create an instant way to stay in touch with business contacts, customers, and colleagues. They also help you manage other aspects of running a business like tax payment dates, loan payments, and more. However, they can also be very distracting from other daily functions of the business.

Schedule time each day to handle e-mail and notifications. You may need to schedule more than once daily, but make sure you are limiting and sticking to your schedule.

For example, you might decide only to check notifications at 9 am, noon, 3 pm, and at the end of the day. If you do this, check once, respond as necessary, and don’t look again until the next scheduled time.

Of course, there may be situations where you are dealing with a pressing client issue or other work-related urgencies that will require you to check more often. These things happen, and it’s okay to “cheat” the schedule in those situations. However, don’t allow this to become a habit, and make sure you are not stretching the definition of “urgent” to peek more often than necessary.

Tip #3: Focus on results

Focusing on the results of your labor rather than the labor itself is the key to success. An example is someone who hopes to open a food truck franchise

eventually. They might find that, despite all their business sense, there will be days when their job is simply to be a fry cook.

Some might become disenchanted with running a business by doing work that they feel is beneath their level of expertise or education. However, understanding that rolling up your sleeves is less about you and more about the business's ultimate success is step one to ensuring positive long-term results.

Focusing on results is also about tracking your progress based on what you manage to achieve over time, not on how long you've been working. It's easy to feel overly satisfied with ourselves at the end of a bone-breaking 12-hour work day, but if you notice that all that work didn't get the results you hoped for, you're doing something wrong. Focusing on results and long-term goals rather than on the amount of work you feel you're doing will push you to be more efficient and to think of better ways to get things done.

Tip #4: Set deadlines and move on

It's a good idea to set clear deadlines for every task, even if they seem minor. Then, once you finish the task, move on. This includes payroll, inventory, primary job functions, and simple tasks like "change the printer toner" and "organise desk."

Doing this will prevent you from getting lost in the small mundane details of life and avoid feeling overwhelmed by the number of tasks you are staring down at the beginning of every work week.

Tip #5: Book "leisure days"

It's not enough to take a day off. We often consider a "day off" a day of house cleaning or running errands. Make sure you are booking regular "leisure" days with activities you enjoy, like getting a massage, soaking in a hot tub, or taking a hike with your favourite four-legged sidekick. Or simply stay in your pyjamas and binge-watch "Stranger Things."

How you choose to spend your *leisure* day doesn't really matter. There is only one firm rule: No working. Your brain and body need this time to rest.

Tip #6: Create your own office rules

I know—one of the perks of working for yourself is avoiding the suffocating rules that often come with working for someone else. Employee Handbook?

Who needs it?

Well, you do. It's not a bad idea to sit down and write yourself a handbook outlining rules and expectations for yourself and then stick to them. Some ideas of rules include:

No personal cell phone usage while on the clock

It's easy to get distracted by social media or texting friends and family, especially when there's nobody around to keep us in check about the time we spend staring at the screen. Consider getting a lock box or setting up a "home" for your cell phone to keep temptation at bay during work hours.

Some people even spring for a separate phone that they only use for work to keep them from feeling any urgency to look at their texts and social media accounts while on the clock. It's not a bad idea, especially if you already know you might have a slight problem with fear of missing out.

Dress appropriately

Even if you're working at home, you should get up and get dressed in the morning. Being dressed for the day sets you in the mindset that you are out of bed and ready to be productive.

Dressing appropriately doesn't have to mean business attire. If you want to dress business casual or even in jeans and a t-shirt, that's totally up to you-but don't wear the dingy sweats and pyjama pants you slept in last night. Engage work mode by making yourself presentable.

Keep your workstation clean and free of clutter

Our minds work better in clean and clutter-free spaces, so keep your workstation organised to maximise efficiency and mood. This is one of the principles that catapulted Toyota to international recognition in quality management. If it worked for them, it will also work for you.

Outline a code of conduct

Be clear about expectations for how you will treat colleagues and customers, but also outline a clear expectation for how you will allow yourself to be treated. Remember that you, too, are a person worthy of respect, so don't settle for less.

Be clear about what behaviour toward themselves, the business, and others will get your employees (if you have any) in trouble. You should also set clear guidelines about when you might leave a client or supplier.

In summary, demand the respect you deserve and give the respect you wish to receive.

Abide by scheduled break times.

Take scheduled breaks and always come back from them on time. Don't get caught up in a movie over your lunch break. Don't decide on a whim that the weather is too nice to be at work. Be as serious about working for yourself as you would be about working for someone else.

Maintaining these rules in your office will help keep your mind focused on work and transmit a professional image when dealing with potential clients and business partners. With the freedom to bend them from time to time, there's literally no reason not to make rules for yourself.

Tip #7: Delegate and outsource as needed

Don't be afraid to hand off work to someone else if you need to and the opportunity arises. This is especially true with big tasks like accounting and Human Resources. Plenty of firms will take over these areas of the business for you, allowing you to focus on the more critical tasks of providing the product or service you are in business to create. Many small companies hire brokers to handle the company's retirement fund, for example. Also, hiring these tasks to a firm means presenting them to seasoned professionals who know how to handle the challenging problems that might lie ahead.

You might also consider hiring an assistant to take care of all the small day-to-day business tasks. If you find yourself overwhelmed by everything you have to do, bringing in a part-timer to make copies, clean, or answer the phone could benefit you in the long run, even if it seems like an unneeded expense at the time.

Tip #8: Batch tasks

Group similar tasks together to help you streamline your day. Our minds struggle to move back and forth from one activity to the next, so maintaining a streamlined schedule where similar tasks are placed together increases our brain's capacity to work well at the jobs at hand.

Examples include doing employee scheduling and payroll on the same day so that you are at your computer and dealing with employees and hourly commitments simultaneously. Later, you might schedule a day or a time of day

to handle outreach for all your potential leads.

Tip #9: Eliminate low-value tasks

We sometimes get stuck in routines and don't really pay attention to whether or not they're benefiting us long-term. Other times, business practices that have worked in the past stop providing as much value as they used to. While these tasks may seem significant, they can take up a considerable amount of time you could spend on something more valuable. As Pareto's principle states, "20% of our efforts produce 80% of the outcomes," so it's essential to cut away as much of that 80% of tasks that provide only a tiny fraction of the results we need.

Keep a log of what you do and pay close attention to how each task truly benefits you over time. Perhaps, in the beginning, you attracted a lot of interest by appearing on a local Podcast's weekly business feature, but now it just isn't generating the interest it used to. Similarly, maybe your uncle told you that his business grew through hours of cold-calling and drumming up business "the old fashioned way," but you tried it and came up with zilch.

If these methods aren't working for you, stop doing them. It's that simple. This frees up time in your schedule to find something that will be more beneficial, even if leaving behind familiar business practices seems like a risky move at the moment.

Tip #10: Have fun

It's been said that if you find something you love doing, you'll never have to work a day in your life. This is the mantra most people have in mind when they decide to become entrepreneurs. Unfortunately, the stress of operating a business often bogs down our passion for what we do.

When you find that what you used to love doing is no longer enjoyable, it's time to take a step back and take a deep breath to examine why.

Are there tasks you can hand off? Are there tasks you can eliminate? When was the last time you took a break? Find the joy in what you do, re-focus, and get back in the game.

The bottom line

Working for yourself is often far harder than people realise when they initially set out to become entrepreneurs. They often wind up lost in the monotony of

building a business and forget the passion that inspired them to grow their business in the first place.

By following the tips outlined above, you can give yourself a better chance at success by maximising your productivity at work without sacrificing the freedom and joy you had hoped to find by being your own boss. Work smarter, not harder, and you'll soon find yourself living the entrepreneurial life you once dreamed of!

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