



Stanford eCorner

Great Ideas Derive from Well-Rested Minds

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Being a workaholic is no guarantee of success. David Heinemeier Hansson points out that 37signals' main product, Basecamp, was created on 10 hours a week of development for a total of six months. When you're overworked, you can't think creatively. A great idea comes from a well-rested mind.



Transcript

Finally, there's tragic misconception that if you start a new business by yourself, you have to be workaholic. You have to work 60, 80, 100 hours a week because that's the only way you can succeed. No. We didn't do that. Our main product, our flagship product Basecamp was build off me spending 10 hours per week while still in school. And that is today, by far still our main revenue generator and made us millions and millions of dollars. Based off me, 10 hours per week, a few designers as well for six months. This 80 hours a week bull, because the problem is when you work 80 hours a week, you're just a rabbit. You're just running around trying to do everything you need to do to get your business going, without realizing what it is that actually matters. And usually about 5 to 10% of the effort you actually put in matters.

When you put it 80 hours of really hard labor, it's the 3, 5, 10 hours of actual stuff that ends up mattering. The rest of it's just the headless chicken running around. Being a workaholic is by no means either a guarantee of success or a requirement. I think there's just a lot of misconception out there about how hard you must work. I'm sure this was true in the industrial age when you were hammering on stuff. If you hammered for another five hours, you would produce another 10 widgets and you can sell those widgets. If you're working in stuff like software or anything else that doesn't require your personal labor in manufacturing widgets which is basically none. None of this stuff matters. The great idea matters. The less execution matters.

And all of these great ideas and less execution comes from a well-rested mind. It sorts of goes into the trophy that a lot of people bear. I only sleep four hours a night. And you hear a lot of entrepreneurs bragging about how little they sleep which is about the stupidest thing you can do. Like I'm bragging about how incompetent my performance is going to be when I can't stay awake tomorrow for this thing. Or a programmer, how many bugs I'm going to introduce in the system tomorrow? Like, what? That's a direct correlation. When you're not well rested, your mind is not working at peak performance. You're going to produce [worthless stuff]. And it's just not a factor of 10% [worthless stuff]. It's not like if you sleep half, your stuff is going to be half as good.

No, it's going to be 100th as good. So, that doesn't work.