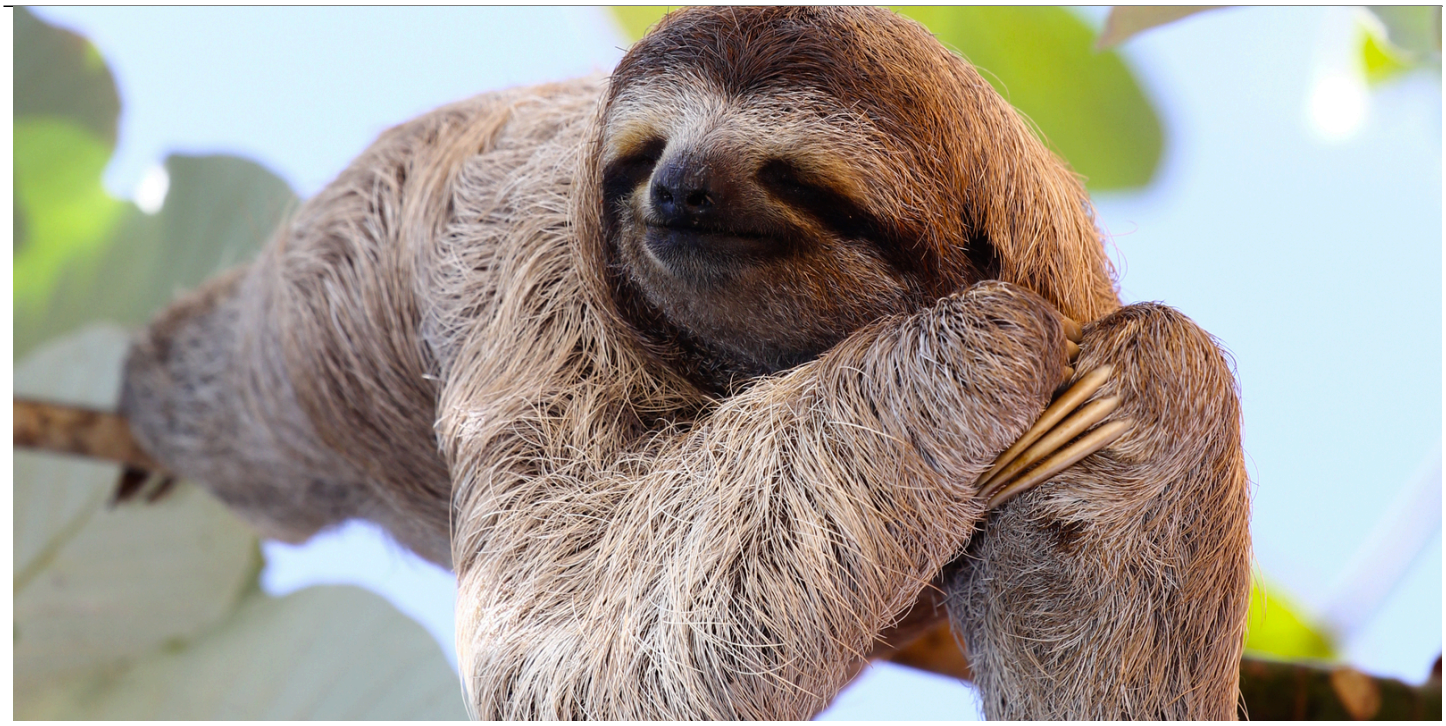


Career Path: Can You Succeed at Work Without Working Hard?

Career Development



You're busy, so here is the answer right up front: *It's complicated*.

Succeeding at work without breaking a sweat isn't impossible, but there are a few hurdles to overcome before you get to the "work smarter, not harder" point.

I know people who achieved success without appearing to work hard. They are in a tiny minority. But I will also tell you hard work is no guarantee of success.

"Yikes! Are you telling us that hard work is likely necessary for success, but that working hard does not mean we'll be successful?" Don't despair. Stay with me for a few minutes, and I will tell you what I learned about working hard in over 80,000 hours of working. You may be able to avoid some of my mistakes.

I am a big believer in the power of continuous improvement and habits. You don't need to take giant steps to achieve big progress. Small steps taken consistently over time will add up to large results. One way to take actions consistently is to make them into a habit.

Not all habits are good for you

We call harmful habits "vices," which otherwise means moral faults or weaknesses, and include in this category things like drinking alcohol, smoking, or eating too much chocolate. Where does working hard fall on the spectrum of virtue and vices?

For a long time, I considered hard work to be a clear virtue. Not only that, being able to work intensely for long periods of time is a great competitive advantage at work. Particularly with a steady stream of new workers coming along who have chronically short attention spans, a person who is able to stay focused on a task and work on it until they have made progress or completed it is well-

equipped to succeed.

I am aware there is a strong counter-current to this work hard ethos. Browse the self-help aisle, and you will find best-selling books advising you to learn "How Not to Give a F*ck" and the like. Similar articles in mainstream publications explain the danger of associating too much with your work, and the harm this can have on your happiness and health. Being a workaholic is not a good thing.

Now with some time and distance from my last senior management role, I have come to two realizations that I will share with you:

- Working hard is a key factor contributing to your success in almost any endeavor.
- Working hard is itself habit-forming, even as it crosses the line from virtue over into harmful vice.

What happened to me in working so many hours all those years is that my ability to work long hours became part of who I was and what I did. Not only that, I learned how to make each of those hours count more than most people's by focusing relentlessly on effectiveness and productivity, not just hours at my desk.

Do you know how much time most people waste in unproductive activities each day? Simply by avoiding wasted time, you can become massively more productive than the average employee. Add to that focusing on carefully chosen strategic targets, and then working harder than your colleagues, and you become highly effective. Unstoppable, really.

You will always outcompete someone who is not willing to put in the same time as you. I refer not just to hours spent working, but in learning how not to waste time, and how to productively use the time you have focused on the right priorities.

Here it is, the real answer

The reason people do not succeed on the basis of hard work alone is partly due to luck, but also, partly due to misplaced priorities.

You can be extremely busy putting out fires and responding to urgent tasks. To make your hard work pay off, it needs to be directed to your own priorities. If you work in a larger organization, your priorities must align with your company's. But that still leaves a lot of room for you to work on more and less helpful topics.

Working hard will not necessarily make you happy. As noted, more people are realizing that, done unthinkingly, hard work will make you miserable. I have lots of thoughts about how to achieve happiness and satisfaction in your life. Success at work is one path, but you must not assume that hard work by itself will bring you fulfillment.

It has taken me a long time, years actually, to break my habit of working long hours. After all, it was a key factor to my success, so why should I lose the habit? As with any habit, after a certain point it becomes easier to just continue it than to question why you are doing it.

This is because if you question your long-held habits, you also question the foundation of your choices. "Was I a fool to work so hard for so long? What did it bring me?"

The reason for me to ultimately seek a different balance, if not lose the habit of work entirely, was because I decided that success at work was not the only yardstick I would use to measure my progress. I did want happiness and satisfaction in life.

I leave you with this thought: Even if breaking a habit would cause you to question the validity of your earlier choices, is that really worse than continuing on a path that leads to a place you don't want to go?

Be well.

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