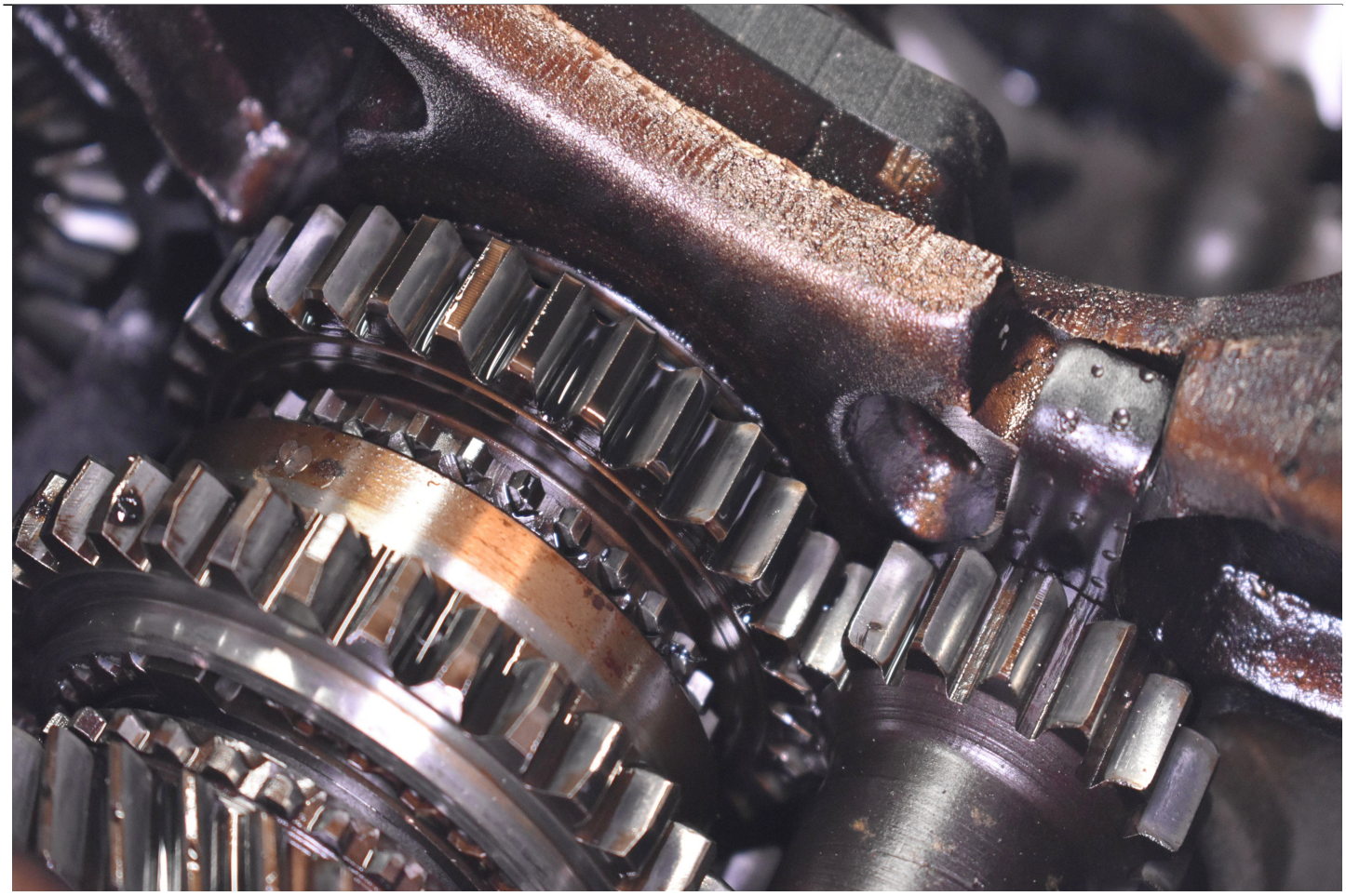


Career Path: Do You Know Your Gear Ratio?

Career Development



One of the best things I did to improve the *quality* of my work was to decrease the *quantity* of it. I don't know why it took me so long to figure out that simply working more hours was not the only or best path to better performance.

You'd think I'd have learned this lesson in my first associate job after putting in 100-hour weeks and pulling regular all-nighters. There comes a point when just grinding out more hours definitely becomes counter-productive. If you've tried writing a coherent sentence after working for 36 hours straight, you'll know what I mean.

Exercise re-energizes and reduces stress

But I didn't learn the lesson for almost 10 years. I let myself get overweight and sedentary, avoiding any kind of physical exercise until my 30s. But after an epiphany one day (I'll tell you about it sometime, if you're interested), I looked to my fitness with a passion. I was prepared to accept sacrifices in my work by devoting time each day to my health. To my surprise and delight, substituting work time for exercise time made all my remaining time that much more productive.

Exercise is beneficial for so many reasons. When I mentor and coach newly promoted managers, the first and best advice I share with them is to develop an exercise habit if they don't already exercise regularly. In my particular overworked case, exercising reset my stress levels and allowed me to return to work feeling relaxed and ready.

The Yerkes-Dodson Law

Perhaps you've heard of the Yerkes-Dodson Law, deriving from research the pair of psychologists published in the early 1900s. When undertaking challenging mental tasks, which I think describes a lot of legal work, performance increases with mental arousal up to a point, after which it decreases. Visualize a bell curve showing performance increasing as stress increases, but then dropping off as the stress continues to go up.

Gear ratio

Let's consider Yerkes-Dodson as it applies to exercise. Perhaps because I started working out at a more mature age, I was definitely a nerd about my exercise. I loved the gear and gadgets (and still do), such as functional clothing, heart rate monitors, and GPS trackers. Tracking workouts and seeing what insights I could tease out of the data was sometimes as satisfying as the workout itself.

In automotive terms, a gear ratio refers to the number of rotations a driver gear makes to the gear being driven. For each rotation of a 28-tooth gear, for example, a 7-tooth gear must rotate four times, expressed as 4:1.

We can think of our gear ratio in terms of our personal performance. First our physical performance, then our mental performance. I started out by running, and eventually experimented with triathlons (swimming, biking, and running), before adding hiking to the mix. My tracking data showed I have a reasonably consistent 2:1 gear ratio. That is, I bike twice as fast as I run, I run twice as fast as I hike, and I hike twice as fast as I swim.



This says absolutely nothing about whether I'm fast or slow. In fact, I'm pretty average, despite lots of practice. What the ratio tells me is there is a level of effort at which I am most efficient in each sporting discipline. If I push my speed (or effort) too far beyond what I'm geared for, I run the risk of burning out much more quickly.

Past a noticeable point, more effort makes things worse, not better. Anyone who's started out too quickly in a race has learned this the hard way. I must be a slow learner, for I am still prone to over-estimating my capabilities on race day.

Know your high and low points as you schedule your day

So it is with work. In the work setting, your gear ratio will refer to things like the following:

- **What time of day** are you sharpest? Are the morning hours your friend, or are you at home among the night owls?
- **How long can you profitably work** before you take a break? Most people find something between one and two hours ideal.
- **What types of work** do you most enjoy, for example writing, talking, thinking, etc.?
- **What sorts of situation stress you out** and drain your tank the quickest? Do you thrive or shy away from negotiations, public speaking, terminations, investigations, and so on?

Your particular variables will differ and you will probably be geared differently than your colleagues and me. My advice for you: Spend some quality time thinking about how you're geared. You can then mindfully leverage your strengths to ensure you work most effectively.

Taking a break and switching gears is sometimes the best way to improve your performance.

Be well.

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