

# WHY BEING BUSY DOESN'T EQUAL BEING *productive*

BY MICHELLE GIBBINGS





Despite results from the 2016 census highlighting that the length of the working week for most Australians hasn't increased since 2011, many workers feel pressed for time and in a constant state of 'busy-ness'. For some, they simply can't find enough time in the day to get everything done that is demanding attention. With 'busy' being the new catch-cry, it can be hard to slow down, reflect, and on occasions, stop. People worry that if they do they may miss something, or worse, get left behind.



## Set your focus

When you are constantly 'on' and rushing you can easily miss what is happening around you. Your brain gets so focused on the task at hand it ignores other ideas or inputs that should be factored in.

You become blinkered to alternative perspectives. Rushing is easy. Anyone can look busy. Finding time to think and reflect is much harder. It's far harder to not look busy, in a world that rewards busy-ness. It becomes important to consciously consider what you are doing and whether you need to go slow or fast.

## Deliberately set the speed

There're times when you need to operate with speed, and times when you need to cruise. Cruising is not about kicking back and doing nothing, but rather considering how you deliberately construct your day so you have time for reflection, to think and ponder, to wonder and daydream. It is in this space that ideas will arise, problems will be solved, and new perspectives will be gathered. Issues that were challenging, will no longer appear so hard; while problems that looked perplexing will get resolved.

## Sleep is your friend

The health risks associated with a lack of sleep and being a night owl have long been documented – including higher rates of obesity

and cardiovascular disease. Now, Professors Kristen Knutson and Malcolm Von Schantz's have found that night owls have a higher risk of early death. As well, when your brain isn't rested it doesn't function at optimal capacity. The pre-frontal cortex, which is the part of the brain that's involved in thinking, analysing and reasoning gets tired easily. Consequently, the brain has found a way of conserving energy - it takes short-cuts. A mental short-cut is known as a heuristic. Your brain uses heuristics to make big things and complex issues easier to manage, and ultimately remember.

As the brain takes in new information it tries to make sense of it, so that it knows what it needs to do. To ease the cognitive load this processing takes, it compresses information and sorts it into patterns. It looks for things that it's seen or experienced before and says – 'I now know what to do'.

Of course, the brain's short cutting process isn't always reliable, and gives rise to bias in decision making. For example, the brain may expect to see something in a certain way, and so it will seek out information to validate that view. It filters out information that doesn't fit with its view of the way things should be. All of this is much more likely when you are rushed, stressed and tired.

## Build new habits

Being able to slow down is a habit,

just like setting up a regular exercise routine, meditation practice or reading every night before you go to sleep. Academic researchers, Bas Verplanken (University of Bath) and Wendy Wood (Duke University), found that more than 40% of the actions people performed each day weren't decisions, but habits. This means there is an incredible amount of behaviour that is automatic and carried out almost unconsciously. If you want to replace the 'busy' habit with a more 'reflective' habit, ask yourself:

- Do you have any allocated time for reflection and creative thought? If so, is this enough or do you need more time?
- How much of your day is spent productively and focused?
- What could you stop doing or do less of to create some cruising time in your day?
- What are the benefits of having some allocated cruising time for you and those around you?

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