

Rush Hour Syndrome.

August 2011 Newsletter

Key Takeaways

- ✦ 100% utilization of any system inevitably causes the system to break, and leads to lower productivity.
- ✦ Scheduling slack time in your schedule will enable you to accomplish more and perform better.

Tony Schwartz [asked this question](#) over at the HBR Conversation blog:

But is it [the productivity gains in the economy since the market meltdown] good news? Is more, bigger, faster for longer necessarily better?

Tony argues that the fear of layoffs is driving workers to sleep less, work more, take fewer vacations, and have less downtime during the day. He says that this amped up work pace “ultimately generates value that is narrow, shallow and short-term.” (Personally, I think he takes his argument a bridge too far when he blames the more, bigger, faster ethic for Toyota’s problems and the sub-prime mortgage crisis -- more sales, more profits, damn the torpedoes.)

And yet, there’s an element of truth in his argument. One hundred percent utilization is perilous, whether for a system, for machines, or for people. The most obvious example of this is your local highway at rush hour: it’s at 100% capacity utilization, and people aren’t moving anywhere. One hundred percent utilization leads to dysfunction and waiting time. It’s true that hospitals don’t want their doctors to be idle any more than ZipCar wants its vehicles to be idle, but you must have some “slack capacity” in any system for things to flow.

The problem is that nothing ever works perfectly. On the highway, one driver taps their brakes for a plastic shopping bag blowing across the road, leading to a chain reaction of braking and stopping for miles behind. In a hospital, the Joint Commission drops in for a surprise inspection, and 20 people have to stop their scheduled work in order to attend to the inspectors. In the A/P department of a company, a client calls to complain about slow payment, and the manager has to spend an hour researching that one claim, keeping him from his regularly scheduled work. If there’s no slack in people’s daily schedules, if there’s no idle time, there’s no ability to absorb the unexpected -- but inevitable -- disruptions.

People always come to me for ideas on how to get more done during the day. To be sure, there’s often a high level of waste and inefficiency in the way they work, and we have no

problem coming up with ways to reduce that waste. But if all they're going to do is fill up their new "production capacity" (usually with more stupid email, pointless meetings, or non-value added work), then their efforts are ultimately self-defeating. By pushing themselves up to 100% utilization, they're guaranteeing that their system will break: they'll get sick, they'll make mistakes, they won't be a good bosses or husbands or dog owners.

Bottom line: you need some slack time to relax, recharge, and you know, actually think and reflect for a bit. Your performance will improve (as will your health). Otherwise you'll be stuck in rush hour gridlock.

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