

What we can learn from hot worms, or why it's OK to be a 'workaholic'

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Did you know that there are worms that live in water so hot that it would kill other worms?

This unusual preference for the scalding heat may be because of food, since these worms are the only animals that can get to lush carpets of bacteria flourishing around sizzling deep-sea vents. "We speculate that these worms have evolved to prefer and tolerate these temperatures because it allows them to graze on bacterial lawns that no other organism can access."¹

What would happen if some of the cooler worms (those in the luke-worm, cool-worm, and berg-worm ponds) decided that, since hot water is fatal to them, it is therefore bad for all worms? Remind you of some of the arguments and declarations we hear about work/life balance?

I suspect there may be entire law firms composed primarily of hot worms. These lawyers thrive on conditions that might prove injurious or even fatal to other lawyers. I am concerned for the hot-worm lawyers and the damage that might be done to them if someone decided that these torrid wigglers needed to swim in cooler waters in order to achieve life balance as defined by some other worm.

In many cases, a cool worm may be an unhappy or dead worm. In a book profiling people who have found their life's work in unusual professions, author Chris Ballard writes, "There's no proper balance for everyone's life, only a proper balance for each individual's life. Some of us can dedicate 70 percent of our lives to our work and be happy; for others doing so can be disastrous."²

Lawyers come in a wide variety of temperaments, each with a unique, individual, ideal allocation of what and how much goes on each side of the life-balance scale. That uniqueness is best respected for the sake of the lawyer, the firm, and the client.

Paul Pearsall, in his book *The Beethoven Factor: The New Positive Psychology of Hardiness, Happiness, Healing, and Hope*,

writes about how we tend to focus on the half-empty glass when we consider health risks.

[M]uch of what keeps us alive or kills us remains a medical mystery. People who by all medical predictions should die young often don't, and those who it seems should not too often do. The field of positive psychology suggests that the answer to this paradox may rest in part in learning less about why we get sick and die and more about why we don't become ill and why we thrive.³

I hear many "health terrorists," as Pearsall calls them, discussing the legal profession and how lawyers need to achieve work/life balance. What is work/life balance? While the phrase is ubiquitous these days, there is a definitional void; perhaps this is due to the infinite variety of responses one might give to the question. Balance is a combination of many things—personality, goals, values, interests, and more—together in a composite, a blend, for each of us as unique as our genetic make-up or fingerprints.

For a hot worm, work/life balance may be very different from that of a berg worm. One size does not fit all, and a life that may seem to one person to be out of balance may appear to another as thriving. Maybe we should be looking at the thriving lawyers, regardless of their behavior, to learn what factors are a part of resilience. Pearsall makes another interesting, half-empty-glass point.

Health terrorists fail to look at "the other group" in their research. For example, researchers have shown that being overweight, not exercising, having high blood pressure, and smoking result in about a 30 percent chance that we will die prematurely. They fail to ask about the other group, the 70 percent who despite engaging in these unwise behaviors don't die prematurely. They show little interest in the 50 percent of those people with three or more of the major risk factors who will not die of a heart attack. This pathogenic view causes us not to be able to see a healthy forest because we are too busy looking for diseased trees.⁴

Are we looking through the same biased lenses when we look at the stress, balance, and health of the legal profession? As psychologist Abraham Maslow said, "If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail." I hope that the advocates for cooler ponds will put down their hammers and watch the hot worms closely. Some worms have deep and canny wisdom.

And just what is workaholicism? The quizzes used to test for the "condition" are puzzling.

On one work-habits questionnaire, you need to answer 12 or more of the questions with "yes" to qualify as a workaholic. Some of the questions are:

- Do you make daily lists of things to do and/or carefully keep a calendar of appointments and commitments?
- Are you energetic and competitive?
- Can you work pretty much "anytime," "anywhere"?
- Do you really enjoy your work?
- Would you say you're a time-conscious person, looking for ways to save time, sometimes irritated by delays, and usually "on time" yourself?
- Do you often wake up in the wee hours with your mind so full of ideas and things to be done that it's hard to get back to sleep?⁵

If you answered in the affirmative to most of those, you are well on your way to the requisite 12. It sounds as if they could be testing for entrepreneurs.

Why is there a need to label someone a workaholic? Perhaps it is because there is a whole industry of training, books, coaching, and consulting that needs ever-growing numbers of people to be designated as workaholics who will then become potential buyers of the industry's services and products. These cookie-cutter diagnoses are sometimes laughable, sometimes hurtful, and sometimes arrogant. Many of the people answering "yes" to the above questions are happy people who serve themselves and the greater good.

Seattletimes.com business reporter Shirleen Holt calls these yes-sayers “doers” and cites their importance to our country.

Doers built the country and the economy. Thomas Jefferson was a doer, as was Abraham Lincoln. Former General Electric Chief Executive Jack Welch is a doer. Taskmaster Martha Stewart, who boasts that she sleeps as few as four hours a night, would qualify as a doer. Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos—doer, doer, doer.⁶

Holt asks a couple of excellent questions: “What causes these achievers to work longer and harder than the average person? Are they joyful creators, people so passionate about their work they can’t bear to be apart from it? Or are they workaholics with low self-esteem, desperately trying to prove themselves?”⁷

Holt explains that either may be true (although the media focus more on the latter). The distinction is an important one, one that the quick-draw labelers might want to learn out of respect for differences. Holt consulted some experts, who provide a good shorthand method of looking at whether someone is a doer or a workaholic:

“There are people who decide that work is truly a source of gratification for them,” [Sharon] Lobel [a professor at Seattle University’s Albers School of Business] says. “When you are doing something that really aligns with who you are, there’s a feeling of deep satisfaction. It’s not about promotions, glitzy accounts, or prestige; it’s about a sense of identity and integrity and doing the right thing.”

...

“You can tell if you spend [a] significant amount of time with people whether they’re motivated by fear or motivated by fun,” says Janet Scarborough, a Mercer Island [Washington] career counselor and coach. “Oprah is having fun. She’s incredibly busy, but I think she’s having a good time.”

Fear or fun? That’s really the critical question. And I don’t think the labelers

are asking it. To them, each “yes” is the same, even if rooted in very different ground.

Holt presents another take, quoting Scarborough, the career counselor: “It’s simplistic to say that everyone who spends a great deal of time at work is doing so out of unhealthy motivation. I think it’s highly individual. For some people, balance is a value; for others, they have a driving passion to achieve something, and it can’t be done in 40 hours a week.”⁹

Let’s not call everyone with an extreme job a workaholic. That’s not only simplistic but myopic. Why try to spoil all the fun? ■

Notes

1. Sara Goudarzi, *Creature Prefers Deadly Scorching Water*, *LiveScience* 2 (Apr. 14, 2006) (quoting Peter R. Girguis, assistant professor of organismic and evolutionary biology at Harvard U.), www.oeb.harvard.edu/faculty/girguis/documents/LiveScience.com_paralv_rlease.pdf.

2. Chris Ballard, *The Butterfly Hunter: Adventures of People Who Found Their True Calling Way off the Beaten Path* (Broadway Random House 2006).

3. Paul Pearsall, *The Beethoven Factor: The New Positive Psychology of Hardiness, Happiness, Healing, and Hope* 31 (Hampton Roads Publg. Co. 2003).

4. *Id.*

5. See Peter Vaill, *Work Habits Questionnaire* (citing Jerrold S. Greenberg, *Comprehensive Stress Management* (Brown Benchmark 1990)), www.listproc.bucknell.edu/archives/obts-1/200412/msg00105.html.

6. Shirleen Holt, *Workaholics Glad to Labor While Others Play* (Sept. 6, 2004), <http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/archive/?date=20040906&slug=doers86>.

7. *Id.*

8. *Id.*

9. *Id.*

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practice, perhaps teaching and humor.

While knowing your values is critical, it’s actually incorporating them into your life and living from them that maximizes energy. Attorneys often benefit from writing their top values or priorities onto several small cards or sticky notes and placing those notes near their computers, telephones, and calendars—anywhere that they’re likely to look when making a decision about how to use their time. Acting in accord with your values and priorities increases purposeful energy; acting in dissonance with them decreases that energy.

Adopt healthy habits

Once you’ve learned how to maximize the four sources of energy, it’s important to create habits and structures that support the changes you’ve decided to implement. Anyone who has ever made a New Year’s resolution or gone on a diet knows how easy it is for good intentions to fail, especially in the face of stress. Entrenched habits become default behavior. If you want to create change, you must create a new default.

Intentionally designed habits carry many benefits. Most notably, self-discipline becomes largely irrelevant, because a well-planned habit operates even when self-discipline might falter. For example, most people have a nighttime routine that might include brushing their teeth, washing their faces, perhaps removing and cleaning their contact lenses. Because this ritual behavior requires little or no conscious thought, it will happen every night, except in truly extraordinary circumstances. Your task, then, is to create energy-maximizing rituals that operate automatically and from purpose.

When designing your energy-enhancing rituals, consider the following suggestions.

Ensure that your basic ritual creates periods of engagement and selective disengagement. The engagement builds and expends physical, emotional, mental, and purposeful energy, while the disengagement allows renewal of that energy. By defining periods of *selective*