Work Smart and Lazy

Idea In Short

Do the work first, then work smart and strategically lazy. Focus on the 20 percent of inputs driving 80 percent of outputs. Build career assets that compound, delegate process work and eliminate wasteful activity that fails to create leverage.

The Pressure of Constant Performance

Whether you are a university student or a corporate manager, life can feel like a constant fire. Exams, recruiting, conference calls, performance reviews, project proposals and everyday obligations pile up. It is exhausting to be a high potential all the time, always on the ball. The question becomes what to do and what hack exists to manage the load.

The answer is to work strategically. Focus more on outcomes than process. Ask what you are trying to accomplish, who the customers are and what they care about. Identify what is critical to quality and essential versus what wastes time. Determine what sets you up for long-term success and what plays to your strengths.

Do the Work First

Notice the first word is work, not lazy. If you are reading this, you are the type of person where work matters. You are paid well or will be, but intrinsic motivation matters just as much. Do the work, be good at what you do and add massive value to your clients, team and friends. Develop your craft because winning is fun and profitable.

Everyone has five things on their to-do list, including the project, the proposal, the deliverable and the financial model. Being smart or lazy does not excuse you from responsibilities. You have been successful because you take your personal brand seriously. You are accountable, you care and you are a professional, not just a technician.

The people worth admiring are grinders. They do the gritty work and push through the boring, repetitive tasks because they need to get done. They do not count credits or try to do less. These are people you would hire and people worthy of professional trust. The following advice applies only if you are already grinding away and doing great work.

If you are coasting, watching the clock or passing off work to others, stop reading. With generative Artificial Intelligence tools like ChatGPT and Copilot, coasting has become career death. Start with doing great work.

Smart Work Is Impactful

Management consulting is a $130 billion-plus industry. Executives hire consultants to get things done well. Clients would rather pay someone else to worry about the hard problems. They expect the work will be better or faster than if they did it themselves. Consultants must be strategic because clients hand over the hard, political and nasty problems. 1

Strategy is about creating sustainable competitive advantage. You figure out what winning looks like, then take smart shots on goal and score. Consultants scope projects, define success, gauge stakeholder temperature and deliver great work. The work makes sense, resolves client fears and has a good chance of success.

Even as an internal consultant, think like an outsider. Do not fall prey to the siren song of internal norms and habits. Run internal projects with the same rigor, process and verve of a consultant billing $300 per hour. Ask whether you are wasting time, making an outsized impact and delivering $10,000 of value per day.

Smart Work Is Foundational

Smart work should help you long-term, like the foundation of a house that supports everything built on top. Too often, professionals do transactional work that keeps the boss happy for now. It sits on the project plan and helps pay bills. Using the analogy of financial statements, this is revenue on your career income statement. It comes and then it goes. You want assets and equity on your career balance sheet, stuff that lasts and gives long-term returns.

Examples of foundational work abound. Your work becomes a best practice template that

colleagues reuse across projects. You become known within your industry and receive speaking invitations. You design a product, patent or service line generating residual income. You learn skills that accrue to you and make you more valuable. You build relationships with clients, experts and officials. You hone a point of view that feeds a blog, white paper or book.

Smart Work Creates Leverage

Consultants live by the 80/20 principle, the simple idea that life is non-linear. A few things have massive impact. Part of the game is finding the 20 percent of inputs delivering 80 percent of outputs. The Pareto Principle, named after economist Vilfredo Pareto, posits that 80 percent of effects come from 20 percent of causes. 2

You look for the one thing you can do now that creates a cascade of falling dominoes. This might mean working on a proposal that exposes you to new partners. It could mean working with a key client based in your hometown. You might learn core skills in short supply or difficult to acquire. You could create network effects where customers and suppliers need you. You might develop proprietary supplier relationships where you become the bottleneck. Delegation of process-oriented work to junior practitioners builds the next generation while saving your time.

Strategically Lazy Work

Lazy because of insolence, ennui or quiet quitting is no good. Someone hungrier will do the work for less money. Artificial Intelligence may automate the process. That kind of lazy is a trap. Strategic laziness raises different questions. Is this report useful and are people reading it? Can you outsource the task to robotic process automation? Would self-service work better so people find their own answers?

You ask whether three people need to be on a video meeting. You consider handling matters asynchronously by email or phone rather than in person. You wonder whether a frequently asked question could become a blog post or video. Strategy is what you decide not to do. What should you stop doing, and what activities should you fire from your portfolio of work?

Lazy Work Has Flow

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi described flow as a state where you become so engrossed in work that time passes unnoticed. Think about a date with someone you really like, when hours vanish. Think about binge-watching until it is past midnight and you need sleep. Flow has your complete attention. Now apply that concept to your work and ask whether you care that much. What if you were truly putting in your 10,000 hours and gaining mastery? 3

If you went to a party at a friend's house, what one or two topics do you know more about than anyone else? What can you research, learn, practice or discuss for hours? Donald Clifton and Marcus Buckingham wrote about finding your strengths. What are the talents, knowledge and skills that let you do great work consistently? What comes easy to you, and what do people compliment you for?

Questions for Reflection

Do you know which areas of your work should be smart and lazy? How can you manage expectations of clients and bosses so you can be strategically lazy? What leading indicators show that your smart and lazy approach is working?

These questions cut to the heart of sustainable performance. The grinders who succeed combine relentless effort with disciplined focus. They do the work, then sharpen their attention on what compounds. The rest becomes delegation, automation or elimination. That is how you work smart and strategically lazy without losing your edge.

- 1Harvard Business Review On How Artificial Intelligence Changes The 80/20 Rule
- 2Investopedia On The 80/20 Rule And Portfolio Construction
- 3McKinsey On Increasing The Meaning Quotient Of Work And Flow

Summary

Work hard, then work smart and strategically lazy. Find the 20 percent of inputs driving outsized impact. Build assets that compound over time, delegate relentlessly and eliminate waste. Mastery and flow create the leverage that separates grinders from coasters.