HUSTLE & FLOAT

RECLAIM YOUR CREATIVITY AND THRIVE IN A WORLD OBSESSED WITH WORK

Rahaf Harfoush

There is something troubling happening in the world of work.

As knowledge workers struggle to keep up in an information economy that never stops, the pressure is mounting to produce more ideas, solutions, and content. Our driving need to do more is reflected in a productivity market that is over saturated with apps, books, and videos, each promising to provide relief.

There's just one problem.

It turns out, the strategies we're putting in place to increase our productivity are hurting our creative performance. By industrializing our creative skillset, we've prioritized performance and ignored critical hidden forces at play—our cultural, historical and biological baggage—that underlie and influence our conceptions of work.

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Why do we act against our best interests?

In white water rafting, riders battle waves, heavy rapids, and unpredictable drops. They have to hustle hard to avoid obstacles, respond quickly to changing river conditions, and paddle with all of their strength to safely reach their destination. These heart-pounding bursts of strenuous activity are punctuated by periods of rest, when the water becomes calm enough that riders can float and enjoy the scenery. As any experienced river guide will tell you, the ideal trip is comprised of both hustle and floating—a balance between focused exertion and intentional recovery. Too much hustle leads to exhaustion that can jeopardize the split-second decision-making that's needed to avoid injury. Too much float will result in a boring and aimless ride, devoid of challenge or purpose.

As it turns out, there are many similarities between the way we white water raft and the way we work. The rise of the creative economy has engendered a work ethic among creatives that focuses exclusively on the hustle. Amazon's productivity category boasts nearly 80,000 books designed to help us work better and faster so that we can "worry less" and "achieve more." The Apple App Store has a dedicated productivity category with over 3,500 apps. In the rush to boost performance, we have become over-worked, over-scheduled, and overwhelmed.

Is "productivity" a worthwhile goal in and of itself?

Have we become so focused on paddling that we've lost sight of our destination?

To answer these questions, I enlisted the help of my sister, and think tank co-founder, Riwa Harfoush, to undertake an exhaustive study of the experts, systems, and frameworks that promised to provide that ever-elusive work-life balance. We tried everything, from daily morning rituals to 90-minute productivity sprints, but each time, the results were the same: inevitably, we fell back into our old patterns of overwork and exhaustion.

Our new post-industrial economy has given birth to a work culture that idolizes creativity but worships productivity. As knowledge workers, we are trapped in an untenable tug of war between two irreconcilable ideologies. As we strive to eke the most out of our creative talents each day, the processes that we have implemented to make us more productive are actually depleting our creative resources. Despite our best efforts, trying to integrate the contradictory ideologies of productivity and creativity in our work is actually hurting our mental and physical well-being. This piqued our curiosity: intellectually, we all understand the virtues of taking breaks and managing our energy.

Why don't we do it?

It wasn't the way we work that is the problem, we realized—rather, it's why we work. Our quest to understand what drove these contradictory and often self-defeating behaviors became a three-year deep dive into the social, historical, and biological constructs that have shaped our subconscious attitudes and beliefs about work, creating an irreconcilable tension between our need to safeguard our creative abilities while optimizing our performance. Understanding these forces is essential if we're going to have any real and long-lasting change.

Creativity ebbs and flows; it doesn't conform to schedules or quotas. Simply put, we can't apply the metrics of productivity to it. But not only do we persist in trying to do just that, we have internalized those metrics, and not just to measure our work output, but our worth as human beings. This is why so many of the fixes that we tried didn't work: they address the surface symptoms, not the underlying cultural beliefs that define our values and our sense of identity.

If we don't restore that balance, if we don't reclaim our float, we will prevent ourselves from doing the kind of creative work that we want to and have to do—and we will be woefully unprepared for the even bigger disruptions that await us in the future. While others have

sought to define the changing nature of work in our post-industrial economy, we wanted to focus on how we've allowed our work to define us. Let's dive into two major disruptions that are on the horizon:

I Work, Therefore I Am

First, the so-called creative class is in a state of crisis. As the global knowledge economy becomes faster-paced and ever-more-competitive, knowledge workers are pressured to be both maximally productive and incessantly creative. The dysfunction that results from these incompatible expectations can be seen all around us. According to Glassdoor's 2014 Employment Confidence survey, the average U.S employee only uses half of their paid vacation leave. More depressing still, when they do manage to take some time off, 61 percent admit to feeling pressured to do some work anyways.

A study published by the Families and Work Institute estimated that one third of American workers are chronically overworked—a condition that has been linked to an increased risk of clinical depression and poor job performance. In fact, sleep deprivation has been labelled a public epidemic by the Center for Disease Control. If that seems overly dramatic, consider this statistic: sleep deprivation cost American companies a staggering $411 billion in lost productivity in 2016 alone.

Our culture idolizes creativity but worships productivity. These two contradictory ideologies are now colliding. And we're caught in the middle.

It is a paradox and a conundrum: as creative professionals, we have come to believe that we can be ultra-productive and highly-creative in equal measures. We come to work armed with to-do

lists, life-hacks, and inbox-zero mentalities. We are trained to respond to interruptions at a moment's notice, juggle competing priorities, and jump from task to task. We aspire to generate creative solutions at the same pace and with the same rigor that we complete our work-a-day tasks. When that doesn't go as we planned, we force ourselves to push through, to work longer and harder, to chase down the new ideas that seem to elude us. We are trying to have our cake and eat it too, and this is not just making us sick and crazy, but less productive and less creative.

Second, Technology is moving us inevitably towards a post-work society—a shift that will be one of the greatest disruptions our species has ever experienced. As if competing against each other and ourselves isn't hard enough, we're now competing against machines, and it's a contest that we're doomed to lose. Automation, AI, and algorithms are developing at an exponential rate, rewriting the best practices that have served us for decades.

When thinking about the future of work within the context of technological disruption, most of us productive creatives breathe a sigh of relief. At first glance, the jobs that seem the ripest for

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displacement are those that fall within the blue collar and service sectors: production jobs in manufacturing, transportation (taxi and truck drivers), retail clerks, and routine administrative functions (steno, filing). But this sense of security is false. Although it is not as far-along as its manufacturing counterpart, creative automation is being developed and deployed to do the kinds of tasks that are carried out by everyone from lawyers and doctors to writers and artists.

Some points to ponder:

- At least one advertising agency has replaced its Creative Director with an artificial intelligence program.

- An AI program developed by Google started producing original works of art mere hours after it went on-line.

- Companies like Goldman Sachs are using software that can do the work of ten analysts in seconds.

- Sophisticated legal chatbots help users do everything from updating their wills to contesting traffic tickets.

What happens when our society realizes that our problems can't be solved by working smarter or harder? For centuries, we have taken our identities, our status, and our values from our work. What will happen when those foundations of our self-image begin to crumble? The technological revolution will spare no one. As obsessed with work as we are, we are woefully unprepared for the tectonic upheavals that are yet to come.

The Three Hidden Forces

When the solutions we were trying kept failing (or, more likely, we were failing these solutions), we knew we had to dig deeper—that there was more going on here than a simple "life hack."

In trying to understand how our ideas of productivity and creativity evolved, we stumbled upon a mix of historical, cultural, and biological influences that underpin the foundation of our modern-day belief-systems about work. These forces manifest in specific ways across organizations and in individuals.

1. Our Systems: A Matter of Scale

Instead of Human Productivity, we need to focus on Humane Productivity. And to do that, we need to examine what led to the work culture of today.

Contemporary work culture is the product of hundreds of years of thinking about the role of creativity, productivity, and the value of work. Before we can correct our biases and update the basic assumptions that are entrenched in the business systems that govern our lives, we must understand their origins.

Take the notions of creativity and productivity, two of the most often repeated words when talking about work today and are imbued with enormous cultural significance. Mastery of these two concepts represents the pinnacle of professional success. The push to be equally productive and creative (as a result of a highly competitive knowledge economy) is a new demand. Historically, creativity and productivity used to have nothing to do with each other. To understand the tensions that exist within our contemporary work culture, we must understand how (and why) they became intertwined. The answer is that both concepts have undergone a fundamental shift in terms of scale.

The concept of productivity as we understand it today began when governments and militaries developed practices to manage large groups of people performing standardized tasks. They were then adapted by businesses during the industrial revolution to improve the speed, quality, and quantity of manufacturing output.

Today, the concept of productivity has moved away from its group-oriented roots to become a deeply personal practice. As individuals, we are now responsible for our own productivity, in both our personal and professional lives. What began as a collective metric has become a personal obsession.

Creativity, in contrast, is moving in the opposite direction. During the Enlightenment, the Romantics defined creativity as a state of being. In the 1950s, social psychologists measured it as a cognitive strength. In both cases, the focus was on the smallest unit possible: the individual. The knowledge economy has forced creativity to become big enough to encompass the entirety of the organizations that value it. Instead of a personal attribute, it has expanded into a factor of production.

The result is a workplace culture that idolizes creativity while worshiping productivity—two concepts that require vastly different conditions to succeed. And yet, we remain enslaved by our history, evidenced by performance systems, policies, and management best practices that are outdated leftovers of a bygone era. Organizations are still shackled to management practices left over from the industrial revolution, that focus on a way of work that doesn't make sense for most creatives today.

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2. Our Stories: The Mythology of Self-Made Men

The American Dream is one of the most powerful and enduring ideas in our history; it resonates on a visceral level. By exploring its inception, evolution, and representations in pop culture, we can begin to understand how we came to see work as a representation of morality, success, and achievement, wrapped in an optimistic hope for a brighter future.

Our modern-day heroes include entrepreneurs, CEOs, and celebrities who have turned their talents into financial success, usually through highly-mythologized accounts of hard work. These stories share common themes, including putting in long hours, forgoing sleep, and taking pride in outperforming their competitors through sheer endurance and strength.

It is a reinforcement of the American Dream, that deeply powerful belief, embedded in our collective psyche, that promises prosperity to anyone who is willing to work hard for it. Because we believe in the American Dream, we internalize productivity metrics so that we can measure our deservingness of a better life. We treat our work as an extreme sport, glorifying our struggles and sacrifices. No wonder we feel guilty when we turn our phones off. And let's not forget the flipside of the American dream, the unspoken judgement that proclaims: if you're not successful, then you're simply not working hard enough.

3. Our Selves: The Biology of Success

Finally, we ourselves are a type of biological machine: our brains are programmed with inputs and impulses that are not altogether within our control. Some of the latest neuroscience studies show how modern-day work culture has hijacked some of the primal instincts that our ancestors used to survive. It turns out that many of our cultural work practices go against what's best for our brains.

Our obsession with productivity means we are singularly focused on continuous output, so we try to account for every minute of our days to prove that we are indeed contributing. Neurologists tell us that unlocking our creativity requires large chunks of unstructured time. We cannot corral creativity through sheer will and endurance, but that hasn't stopped us from trying.

We continue to favor models of work that reward sustained performance and falsely believe that doubling (or tripling) our efforts will result in a proportional increase in creative output. Ironically, all this frantic striving is sucking our creative juices dry. As we strive to eke the most out of every second, we are depleting our creative resources.

As scientists and researchers steadily improve their understanding of the human brain, one thing has become startlingly clear: there are alternatives to the punishment we are inflicting on ourselves. There are ways of working and being that can enhance rather than hinder creativity and productivity, but it will not happen by trying to simplistically tie them together.

It's time for an Integrative Approach to Knowledge Work

Many organizations are already experiencing challenges in recruiting and retaining skilled knowledge workers. Unless they take steps to resolve the tensions between those hidden forces, their dysfunction will drive away (or burn out) the very people they need to survive.

Countless books address issues such as mindful leadership, the cultivation of focus, and good habits. But for all the variety of their approaches, they make the same promise: that work-life balance can be achieved. That's all well and good. But with so much good advice available,

through such a variety of channels, including apps, podcasts, videos, books, and more, we believe that the question that needs to be answered is not "What should I do to work better?" but "WHY aren't I doing it?" Clearly there is a disconnect between what they should be doing and what they actually are doing.

The tactical solutions and frameworks that most books and business gurus offer merely address the surface symptoms of something much deeper: an entrenched yet subconscious worldview that has been fused together from our history, our media, our culture, and current events.

It is this forced marriage of creativity and productivity that has engendered the incompatibilities that so many of us experience on a daily basis at work. We are all hustle and no float. Our belief systems are leading us away from the balance that we actually need. Only by recognizing and openly addressing our subconscious prejudices about work can we shift towards a more sustainable state of working and being.

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The Future is Now

These changes in our work culture are part of the biggest inflection our species has faced. If companies, governments, and individuals are going to be able to survive a post-work society, they must take a hand in designing it. To do that, they must understand how these hidden forces work to shape our present and future.

When most theorists talk about the future of work, they take the long view, preferring to envision scenarios in which the disruptions have already occurred, and then sketching out the new models and philosophies that will govern when the dust has settled. However, between now and then there will be a severe period of intense transition—a phase in which we will experiment with different models and probably fail and make a lot of mistakes along the way. This transitional period has already begun, and if the shockwaves being felt around the world are any indication, we have a rough ride ahead of us.
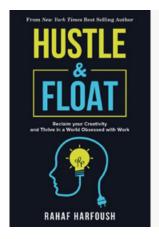
We are on the brink of a post-work society, for both blue collar and creative workers. The choice we are facing is stark. We can either carefully untangle the core cultural functionality of work and purposefully address it in new ways, or face an era of unparalleled psychological devastation. Discussions about "robot taxes" to offset the social costs of automation have already begun. These are early signals of the political battles that will determine whether our technological revolution brings about an enlightened future where humans can enjoy life without working, or a dystopian nightmare in which robots help create a new sort of technocratic aristocracy, and the gig economy becomes nothing more than a digitally-created caste system. If governments, businesses, and individuals want to shape this future in a positive way, they will need to rewrite their roles and imagine unprecedented possibilities.

Much of the current discussion about the future of work has been framed around the technology itself, the tools and the business models that will make new kinds of commerce feasible. You can probably guess what we're going to say next: what's been missing is a nuanced understanding of the ways that our deeply-held belief systems have failed to keep up with the speed of technological change. Even though we might believe we're quite forward-thinking, most of us are subconsciously influenced by outmoded expectations of what having a job means.

What we are experiencing is not just a new phase of technological disruption, but an existential reckoning. **We have no choice but to face up to it.** ▯
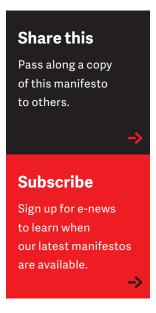
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About the author

Rahaf Harfoush is a Strategist, Digital Anthropologist, and Best-Selling Author who focuses on the intersections between emerging technology, innovation, and digital culture. She is the founder of Red Thread Inc., a Think Tank and special projects agency specializing in Digital Culture. She currently teaches "Innovation & Emerging Business Models" at Sciences Po's MBA program in Paris. Formerly, Rahaf was the Associate Director of the Technology Pioneer Programme at the World Economic Forum in Geneva where she helped identify disruptive-startups that were improving the state of the world.

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