The Importance of Disconnecting from Your Work

By *Harrison Barnes*

Some of the happiest, most well adjusted, and most effective people I know are also people who have a profound ability to disconnect from their work. They can disconnect rapidly and put themselves in another state of mind which does not involve work. People who come to mind include Richard Branson, who set records in balloons, captains of industry who leisurely golf their days away, men in bars who slap each others' backs while drinking martinis and making deals, or CEO's of companies in their early 60s who run marathons.

One of the most important things you can do for yourself is learn to disconnect from your work.

Many people never do this, or don't know how. You see these people walking around with telephones in their ears wherever they go, getting up from dinner to talk on the phone, screwing around with their Blackberries at any given moment, and, in general, working every second of the day.

I have a secret for you: *The most important and successful people never behave like this. The most important people simply do not work when they are not working.*

If you are working all the time, you are not being nearly as productive as you could be. For example, typical German workers, when they are working, are models of efficiency. They are detail-oriented and more focused than the average worker. When they are not working, however, they are truly not working. They are done for the day.

There is a saying: "Work hard, play hard." I believe this expression exists for a reason. People who work hard and play hard contribute more value when they are working.

Think about the people – and you may be one of them – who inform you of how stressed out they are about work when they are not even working. Think about the people who are glued to their email and Blackberry and cell phone all weekend, no matter where they go. Think about the people who work on their laptop when they are sitting in front of the television with their family at night.

None of this is generally productive.

In fact, behavior that keeps you constantly attached to work is counterproductive. Your body and mind never has time to recharge. You are constantly at the beck and call of a job and you never get a fresh perspective. You never see the world. You just see the job.

I believe this problem is far more serious than people realize. Success should not necessarily be defined by how much you work, how stressed you are, or how dedicated you are to working all the time. Success should instead be defined by your ability to approach each problem you face at work with a *fresh perspective*, to maintain a cheery disposition, and be an all around happy and well-balanced person. Success should also be defined by your ability to enjoy your life when you are not working.

Your entire existence is not tied to your job. There is a lot going on in the world besides your job and the work you are doing. When you come home at night, or on the weekend, it is not productive to be focused on your job. Your mind should be on something else – your family, the weather, a book, a hobby.

You should be very aware of what goes on inside your head when you think about work. When you are thinking about work, you are thinking about how you can control and manipulate the objects of your work. If you are a writer, you are thinking about what you are writing; if you are a salesman, you are thinking about what you can sell; if you are a cashier, you are thinking about the transaction in front of you. You are focused on the people you are working with and what they are doing. You are focused on your clients. You are focused on how all of this affects you, what it means to your livelihood, and whether it makes you angry, happy, or sad. You are focused on a raise, a demotion, getting fired, getting a new client. Once you truly get into your job, this focus will become more profound and pronounced.

I am sure you have met people whose minds are totally focused on their jobs and the work they are doing. If they are attorneys, for example, they might be overly logical whenever you speak with them. It is important for people like these to go outside the state of mind they are in when working and start focusing on things not work-related (i.e., the external world). The state of mind that goes along with work is needed to do your job. However, in order for you to improve at your job, you need to be in a different state of mind each day when leaving the workplace.

The reason it is so important to disconnect from work is because much of work is an internal, introverted process. When we work, we are fixated on the object of our work. In order to get out of that mindset, we need to focus on objects outside of our work. There are lots of ways to do this, including exercising, socializing, taking a walk, or simply doing *anything* entirely unrelated to our jobs.

There are lots of clichés about work. There is the man who returns from the office and snaps at his wife. There is the person who throws himself or herself on the couch the second he or she gets home from the office. There is the person who gets home and talks and complains on the phone to someone for hours about a supervisor or a job he or she does not like. There is the aggressive driver on the road who yells at people on the way home from the office.

High school football players apparently get better grades during football season than the average student. A reason for this, I believe, is these players are able to disconnect from their studies and come back with a new perspective after playing. It is important to always have a new perspective on your work. This keeps you moving towards your goal.

Give yourself the luxury of disconnecting from your job. Remember your life is made all the better when you can see the world outside of your job.