N E X T I O N S

REMOTE AND HYBRID WORK

How To Master New Long Working Hours Like a Pro

SARA LONDON — JUNE 2, 2022

You're excited to explore the idea of a compressed workweek or to start that brand new project with your team. But the idea of working long hours every day feels draining and overwhelming. The good news is that long hours don't have to be something you dread – they can be a great tool to enhance and enable productivity. Read on for some advice about handling your long hours from Dr. Arin Reeves, the Founder and Managing Director of Nextions and author of *In Charge: The Energy Management Guide for Badass Women Who Are Tired of Being Tired.*

The popularity of long hours

From 9/80 schedules to compressed workweeks, flexible schedules containing longer days and shorter weeks are currently trending.

"It began as an operational efficiency mechanism for organizations," Dr. Reeves says, "and then grew into an entrepreneurial movement fueled by Tim Ferris and others. The last two years have caused a lot of individuals and organizations to reassess their relationships with both time – when you work, how much you work – and space – where you work."

This phenomenon was accentuated by COVID, as many knowledge workers felt that remote employment provided a measure of freedom which Dr. Reeves says "fueled the shorter workweek discussion."

The problem with longer hours

While long hours could be an excellent way to free up more weekend days on your calendar, they have their downsides – especially if you're working a schedule that you don't choose yourself.

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"Unfortunately, most people who are determining the length of workdays aren't taking into consideration the nature of the work, the different work styles on the team, and so on," Dr. Reeves says.

She adds that though working on one project for an extended period of time can result in difficulty sustaining attention, you might get more done. Working alone or with colleagues, just sitting and focusing together, can get your whole team in a productive groove. On the other side of things, jumping from task to task or meeting to meeting can make the day seem shorter and make you feel busy. However, it will result in further exhaustion, and at the end of the day, you might feel like you didn't get a lot done.

"It's different for everyone, and it can be different from day to day," Dr. Reeves says. "Focusing on the workday to analyze productivity is the tail wagging the dog. If you focus on productivity to set your workday, the flow can be analyzed better."

Managing your long workdays

Dr. Reeves adds that not everyone has flexibility in their work schedules, especially if they're working a compressed workweek with their colleagues. So, there might be situations in which you won't be in control of the hours you're working. But you've got to make the best of it.

If the length of time you're at your desk makes you feel sluggish or unmotivated, Dr. Reeves says, you should take some proactive steps to better your time management.

"If you are working a compressed workweek, but you are logging on when you are not technically working, then a compressed workweek doesn't mean anything in practice," she adds.

To refocus and take your time back, Dr. Reeves suggests breaking down your day into manageable bits called "segments" using the following steps.

1. Reassess your workload

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First, Dr. Reeves says, you should reassess how long you're actually working.

"Are you checking emails from home? Do you spend part of your workday taking care of personal things? Do you think about problems you are trying to solve at work while you are cooking or working out?"

While it might be challenging to be mindful about how much work is consuming your mental energy, it will help you realize how much you feel like you're "on the clock."

"Be brutally honest with yourself about how many hours a day you actually work," Dr. Reeves says, as only then can you see how many of those hours are productive ones.

2. Examine your productivity

Next, Dr. Reeves says, think about the times of day when you do and don't feel productive.

"Are you generally more productive in the mornings, or the afternoons, or the evenings?" Dr. Reeves asks. "Do you start your workday and hammer out what you need to get done, or do you putz until midafternoon and then hit your stride? Are you someone that isn't productive at all until your technical workday is over?"

She adds that it's also imperative to study how the individualism of your work style, your relationships with teams and managers, and your own personality impacts their productivity.

3. Create a structure of segments

Finally, you'll want to create a schedule each day that allows you to work at your best, even if the hours are a little longer than you're used to.

"Take your insights about when you are productive and when you are not, and structure your workday in segments," Dr. Reeves says. "You can have anywhere from 3-6 segments a day."

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These segments are sorted by project, type of task, or style of work (as in collaborative or solo). Then, as you review your days to get a sense of how your productivity is changing, you'll be able to look at each segment as a self-contained moment rather than your day as a whole.

If the latter segments in your day are consistently unproductive, Dr. Reeves says, it's time to examine whether or not a long workday is the best fit for you. If you have no choice, and you're on a deadline, or your workload is too heavy, you can find ways to put lower-priority items in later segments or take small, invigorating breaks beforehand.

"If your segments vary based on the day," Dr. Reeves adds, "longer work days may end up being just as productive as shorter workdays for you."

Working longer and working smarter

The takeaway when it comes to working long days, Dr. Reeves says, is that it's ultimately not about the hours you're working. It's about how much you're getting done.

"Focus on assessing your productivity and see how your productivity lines up with how many hours you work," she concludes. "If you start with your productivity, the ideal length of your workday emerges more clearly."