

# Slow route is fast-track to business success

By **David W. Smith** - June 6, 2014



London-based Canadian author Carl Honoré became famous as the 'Godfather of the Slow movement' following the publication of his first book – *In Praise of Slow* – in 2004. He tells David W. Smith why the cult of speed has failed us and how a Slow Business strategy makes staff more productive

## **What are the origins of Slow and how do you define it?**

Some people argue that the Slow movement is a child of the Slow Food movement, which began in Italy, but that's only partly true. Slow Food provided the word "Slow" as a catch-all label for a new philosophy of life, but many strands of the Slow movement – such as yoga, meditation, working fewer hours and mindful sex – pre-date the creation of Slow Food.

To me, Slow with a capital "S" is about doing everything at the right speed, rejecting the dictum that "faster is always better" and savouring the hours and minutes rather than just counting them. It's about quality over quantity in everything from work, to food to parenting. I am not a fundamentalist of Slowness, however. If we slow down too much in one way, we run the risk of forcing ourselves to go faster than we'd like in another.

## **How does it influence your life?**

In the past, every moment was a race against the clock. Now I do fewer things, but I do the better and enjoy them more. I take breaks during the workday to relax, eat and meditate. I stopped wearing a watch, which made me less neurotic about time. I switch off my technology, email, iPhone – whenever possible, to avoid being always connected. I often say no to work social offers to avoid getting overloaded.

### **Many people will say, okay I need to slow down at home, but I can't at work. What you say to that?**

People get hung up on the work-life balance argument. I think it's a false dichotomy. People go off to work to be busy and frenetic then come back to be Slow. The virus of hurry has infested every corner of our lives. Where I live in London there are lots of ambitious alpha families. Many of the wives don't work, yet they still run around like headless chickens over-scheduling their children, constantly looking at their Instagram feeds, competing with the other triple A mothers.

### **How does the cult of busyness manifest itself in offices?**

One way is in feeling pressurized by the tyranny of "face time". This means putting in long hours even when you are not being more productive. We have inherited a vision of time from the 19th century when people used big clocks to time the workforce. But such an approach is much less effective in a knowledge economy.

People need to be thinking, letting their minds wander, building rapport with clients and team members, but we've imbibed with our mother's milk the notion that the more hours you spend at work the better an employee you are. You get absurd behaviour such as leaving a coat to give the impression you're there, opening up several windows on your desktop to show you're busy or timing emails to be sent out at 1am to suggest you're working late. Busyness becomes an end in itself.

### **How has technology exacerbated the cult of speed?**

Constant connectedness means our lives are a perpetual inbox. A recent McKinsey study shows that knowledge workers spend 28% of time dealing with their inbox. In what world is that efficient? Cell phones, email and texting are wonderful, but a 24/7 technology habit creates dependence and anxiety when texts aren't immediately answered. Research shows the deluge of messages and information can cause our IQ level to fall more than would smoking marijuana. It can also lock us into what a former Microsoft researcher called a state of "continuous partial attention" constantly flitting from one conversation, one information stream, one stimulus, to the next. You cannot be truly "in the moment" when you're juggling several moments at once. Constant

connection also makes us chronically impatient. As the actress Carrie Fisher once quipped, ten days “even instant gratification takes too long”.

### **What types of things are forward-thinking companies doing?**

The boldest and most imaginative workplaces are moving away from the obsession with micromanaging and measuring everything. A big part of that is the antiquated command and control model, where you have a guy – usually a guy – sitting in the corner counting working hours and watching over people. But that’s not how we will find the next Google, or solve cancer in a bio-tech lab. You’ve got to set people free.

There’s a huge move towards freedom in the workplace. In the US the WorldBlu movement is moving away from command and control fear-based environments to ones where people are encouraged to stand up and say “no, I don’t agree with this”.

Of course, we need hierarchies some of the time, but there’s a great deal of hard evidence that when you give people control over their own time you unlock untold emotional and intellectual riches.

The ROWE movement – Results-Only Work Environment – is a management strategy where employees are evaluated on performance, not presence. The boss says, “This is what we want, this is the deadline. Between now and then, you do what you have to do. If you want to work until midnight on Saturday, or leave at 2.30pm on Thursday to see your daughter’s ballet, that’s fine as long as you get the work done”. Once companies take that leap of faith, employees are happier, healthier, and come back to the office with better ideas. When it comes to the dead-end, they knock the ball out of the proverbial park.

### **CEO’s might think, well it all sounds fine, but I am under so much pressure. I can’t take the risk. What do you say?**

I say fortune favours the brave. That’s as true in business as in warfare. The tide is turning and a lot of companies are realizing that staff are not robots with one turbo speed. There is only so much productivity you can squeeze out of a human being before they start to suffer. That’s why some of the most innovative companies are experimenting with shorter working weeks. Even the biggest banks on Wall Street – such as JP Morgan and Goldman Sachs – have cut working hours for junior bankers. It boils down to the counter-intuitive idea that the best way to get ahead in a fast world is to slow down. Being stuck in roadrunner mode leads to inefficiency and stressed employees.

## **If an employee wants to slow down, but the company demands speed, what are the options?**

You cannot slow down quickly. You have to start a dialogue within the company. Start talking to your boss, your colleagues, the Human Resources department. Hold a seminar on using time more efficiently. The chances are other people are also yearning to slow down. You need to explain that the Slow worker will, ironically, end up being faster than the fast worker. In the workplace, Slow forms of communication often turn out to be faster than fast ones, too. For example, sometimes you can sort out a problem with a colleague by getting up from your desk and talking face to face – instead of spending the afternoon playing email ping pong.

## **What is the role of Mindfulness in the Slow movement?**

Meditation, or Mindfulness, is massively popular now in the corporate world. It's the slowest you can do short of going to sleep, but it has demonstrable payoffs. Research shows it improves concentration. People make better decisions and feel happier.

Meditation also rewires the brain by increasing the level of gyrification, meaning there are more folds in the cerebral cortex and that helps you process information faster. The delicious paradox of Slow is that by slowing down judiciously at the right moments, people are better able to go faster when they need to.

## **Is Slow business just about productivity?**

No, there's the much bigger question of what is the economy for? It's about what kind of world we wish to bequeath to our kids and grandkids. Do we really want them to live in an unfulfilling culture of turbo-charged, hyper-productive capitalism?

The system is broken anyway. In the lead up to the meltdown in 2008, the markets were based on fast growth, fast profits and fast consumption. No one had time to challenge the model, or analyze these immensely complex financial instruments. Turbo capitalism brought the economy to its knees and made us unhappy. People are desperate for an alternative.

Modern capitalism has also seen a modern version of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's dark satanic mills in call centres and Amazon warehouses where people are rushed around from pillar to post and their bathroom and lunch breaks are timed. It's dehumanizing and alienating.

So what kind of system do we want to have? We will probably end up going for the free market capitalistic model, but it's a question of not letting the deeper meanings get brushed aside

people are just looking at the next thing on the to-do list.

## Are you optimistic?

Yes, I am. When my first book came out 10 years ago I felt like a voice in the wilderness but change in the argument since then has been epic. The new generation of kids want to do well but they also want to do good. That's an important shift. My generation was more about just getting ahead. We're seeing a boom in social enterprises, as well as a greater awareness of inequality and the environment. It's like a giant Venn Diagramme with lines intersecting in the middle. The word I used to describe that middle is Slow. All the trends meet there.

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