



WHITEPAPER

Managing ambition in a healthy way

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RESOURCESOLUTIONS

Hustle culture

Noun [**huhs**-uhl **kuhl**-cher]

The mentality that one must work all day every day in pursuit of their professional goals.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction



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Hustle culture glorifies ambition as a lifestyle. It's almost a quasi-religion, complete with received wisdom, rules, and mantras. For the acolytes, it's not enough to just "do your job" or like your work, you must love it – to the point that your beliefs, personality, and identity are represented by it. After all, until you "make it", there's always more money to be chased, promotions to be gained, and success to be achieved.

"Some people want it to happen, some people wish it would happen, others make it happen."

– Michael Jordan

It's true that hustle culture has seen a recent surge in popularity. Currently, [46% of people in UK](#) and [40% of people in the US](#) have a secondary job in addition to their main job, also known as a side hustle. This can be anything from freelancing, to selling goods online, to developing an app, to ridesharing and food delivery gigs. The economic ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic – including furlough and mass redundancies – left many individuals with little option but to pursue a secondary source of income. But the impact of lockdowns and the freedom they gave budding entrepreneurs to explore their creativity and innovations, which may have previously been on the back burner due to their full-time job, cannot be discounted.

By the end of 2020, new business registrations in the UK were [8% higher than from 2018 to 2019](#), driven by first-time solo entrepreneurs and new e-commerce retailers, while [53% of all UK side businesses](#) were started within the last two years. Interestingly, pre-pandemic figures show that hustle culture was already well established among employees across the world. In 2017, [a global survey](#) revealed that significant numbers of people were investing their time and resources into side hustles throughout the UK (54%), Hong Kong (37%), and Singapore (54%), the Philippines (77%).

Hustle culture doesn't always involve pursuing passions or interests outside of your day-to-day job. For many people, work is the hustle. While remote working has brought more flexibility, it has also blurred the boundaries between work and leisure time. In the UK, [52% of employees](#) reported working longer hours when working remotely than before Covid. This flexibility and lack of boundaries, coupled with economic uncertainty, all feeds the concept of the hustle.

Some employers actively encourage this "grindset" among their people. Celebrating an employee's productivity and success is the right thing to do, but if left unchecked, the cost of relentless ambition seems to be burnout, which workers are currently experiencing at unprecedented levels. A recent study looking at knowledge workers across seven countries found that approximately [70% of people](#) have experienced burnout in the last year.

At the same time, the internet is resplendent with those that have hustled until they made it, realised their dreams, and have the lifestyle to prove it. The message is: you can be there too, if you're prepared to graft, grind, and hustle. If you're not there yet, how much do you really want it?

In this guide, we'll look at the colourful history of hustle culture from the 1400s to the present day, as well as the motivations behind the hustle mindset, the potential pitfalls, plus ten ways employers can manage their hard-working employees in a healthy and responsible way .

"I've got a dream that's worth more than my sleep."

– Eric Thomas

CHAPTER TWO

Not all hustles are equal

When you hear the phrase “hustle culture”, what comes to mind?

Is it junior executives, “putting in the hours” to get that promotion and climb the corporate ladder?

Or is it luminary entrepreneurs, on a mission to change the world through making their dreams a reality?

Perhaps it’s a single parent working three jobs so they can put food on the table, clothe their children, and keep a roof over their heads.

As different as these examples are from one another, they all represent examples of hustle culture. The common thread between them is the notion that “hard work” is a direct route to success, however that success is defined. The truth is hard work is no guarantee of success – whether that means meeting a professional goal, exploring a passion or dream, or building financial wealth.

Nonetheless, there’s no doubt that if you don’t put the work in, you’re unlikely to realise your goals. There are many success stories and inspiring tales of people who put in the hours and were rewarded for their graft – whether that means climbing the corporate ladder or starting a side business that became highly successful.



**“Nobody ever changed the world on 40 hours a week.”
– Elon Musk**

Elon Musk, the co-founder and leader of Tesla and recent acquirer of Twitter, is a self-confessed workaholic and credits this mindset for his success and wealth.

For some, a side hustle is a hobby, interest, or a future business idea that they are looking to develop. The extra work is a choice, a decision they have made to further themselves, perhaps to be their own boss, or develop and grow an idea.



But for an increasingly large number of people – especially in the worsening economic climate – this is what they need to do to get by. It’s not a choice, but a necessity. The idea of “making it” and earning extravagant wealth is far from their mind – it’s more about supplementing their pay cheque so they can make ends meet.

Within the idea that hard work is good and will lead to success, there are considerable variations on what that means on an individual basis.



CHAPTER THREE

The 3,000-year shift

The “hustle” mindset has been part of cultures for thousands of years. Hustle culture as a 21st century phenomenon is just the latest version of an ideology whose roots reach much further back in time.

“Idle hands are the devil’s workshop” comes from Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, written at the end of the 14th century, which in turn, took the concept from a passage in the bible (Proverbs 16:27), which was written almost 3,000 years ago. Paul the Apostle said something similar in the New Testament.

In 1609, John Smith spoke to the colonists of Jamestown: “You must obey this now for a law, that he that will not work shall not eat”.

Social scientist Max Weber wrote extensively about this subject at the end of the 19th century. He saw the religious work ethic as being the fundamental basis of the advent of capitalism and the creation of the industrial world, underpinning and driving the economic growth and development of modern nations and societies.

It’s easy to see the impact that “hustle” concepts have had throughout history – from the equivalence of being idle, poor, or workshy with being undeserving of food, or the belief that working hard now will lead to a better future.

In subsistence societies – that could scarcely afford to carry people who didn’t pull their weight – it’s clear to see why such an idea became a virtue. It’s a concept that, through religion, has been right at the foundation of modern western societies that, until recently, were largely illiterate. Simple phrases and concepts such as this were easy to preach and for the populace to remember. They became ubiquitous. Over time, they transcended their religious basis and became societal norms and cultural memes.

Fast-forward a few hundred years to the more secular societies of the 20th and 21st century and the core message is still there, just dressed in shiny new packaging.

CHAPTER FOUR

Broken dreams, broken people

The key challenge with hustle culture is not that it's untrue. While there are numerous examples pointing to its success, these instances cannot be true for everyone, or even the majority.

This means that for many, who work very hard, who hustle and grind, their dreams are never realised. They never "make it".

History points to the longevity of the "work hard = win big" ethos in multiple societies, but it's an unfortunate fact that those societies are also represented by large disparities in equality of opportunity and equity of outcome.

For those that engage in the hustle, but don't receive the rewards, the deal is stark. The wisdom of the hustle tells you that you didn't make it because you just didn't work, or try, or want it hard enough.

In a world where multiple economic, social, and educational factors contribute to an individual's success, hustle culture insists that the individual

is solely responsible for realising their ambition and ensuring the hours they dedicated to their hustle were worth it. Not making it yet? Your fault! Hustle harder! It's easy to see how this could become problematic.

A key challenge is that there is no defined marker between working hard and working too much.

In a 2019 article, the New York Times described hustle culture as "[performance workaholism](#)". Admittedly, this isn't as catchy a term, but, in some cases, the hustle can be little more than this.

There's a limit to what the human body can take, both mentally and physically. This varies from person to person at different points throughout their lives.

Overwork, for many, can cause mental and physical stress. Over time, insufficient rest – combined with a lack of focus on your own

health, diet, and wellbeing – can lead to a range of issues, including burnout and exhaustion, but also heart disease, stroke, obesity, anxiety and depression – all the major maladies of the modern world.

Even among those who do make it, become financially successful, and/or achieve high status, there are often health ramifications or regrets about the time spent away from family, or the failure to pursue other activities they loved and enjoyed.

Commitment to work is broadly seen as admirable and often worn as a "badge of honour" in many organisations. If you're not giving absolutely everything at all times, then how can you be fully committed? If you're not fully committed, how do you expect to get that promotion, pay rise, or even keep your job?

From this mindset, it's a short step to workaholism and toxic work environments. Action and objective are decoupled, and

individuals can lose sight of their wider purpose as demonstrating the hustle becomes, itself, the purpose. After all, for many, their job is an important part of how they see themselves. Failure, perceived or otherwise, can be highly damaging to self-perception, mental wellbeing, and the very core of a person's identity,

There's often a lot of peer pressure to comply with long hours, even if those hours are not productive in any meaningful way. Away from the individual issues hustle culture causes, economies are seeing employees working increasingly long hours, but productivity going down. Something is wrong.

CHAPTER FIVE

The digital hustle

The internet has enabled the spread of ideas and concepts in a way that has not been seen since the invention of the printing press. In terms of the speed and reach, this proliferation is unprecedented in human history. More and more today, our societies and cultures are created and evolve as the result of a feedback loop with these ideas and concepts. For better or for worse.

As well as being a tool for entertainment, information and insight, the internet also allows for the portrayal of a partially or wholly created narrative and ideology that defines another individual's perception of reality. One of the ways this ideology can be spread is through memes.

Most people who use the internet will have seen memes. Often funny, always seemingly apt "truths" about the world, life, people, and experiences. In many ways, they are the digital equivalent of those little signs you may have seen in shops or workplaces, emblazoned with

a truism that resonates. Their digital format enables them to be spread far and wide, typically using social media as their transport – Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter in particular. Today, that witty sign on the wall of your local fish and shop can now be seen and shared online by billions.

There are many memes out there centred around the subject of work, success, and aspirations. Some of these memes relate to the concept of "hustle" and the culture, attitudes, and psychology that it creates. Thus, the concept of the hustle has spread fast and wide.

Hustle culture is rooted in the concept that, if you really want something enough, then through hard work and application, you can make it a reality. It lionises the idea that working hard towards an objective is the surest way to realise that objective.

These memes are a highly visual and pervasive part of what is termed hustle culture.

“

Hustle until your haters ask if you're hiring.

“

The hustle brings the dollar. The experience brings the knowledge. The persistence brings success.

“

Hustle in silence, and let your success make the noise.

“

0% small talk. 200% grind. They Talk. We Hustle.

“

The dream is free. The hustle is sold separately.

CHAPTER SIX

Harness the hustle

From a moral perspective, employers have a duty of care not to overwork their employees. Legally, there are laws and legislations in most industrial countries that regulate this. However, they can be waived or ignored by employees, under duress or otherwise.

There are many studies that show that overwork is commercially and developmentally counter-productive for organisations over time. They show that taking holidays, working regular hours, and having a work/life balance increases productivity and output and reduces attrition, sick days, and absenteeism.

Good organisations will have measures in place to monitor the overtime hours their employees are working and policies that encourage them

to take leave and work regular hours. They will identify areas of the business where overwork is happening and address it directly.

Good managers will enforce these policies, but will also understand the various approaches to work by the individuals in their teams. A key part of their role is generating productive output for their business, while also ensuring the wellbeing of their employees.

Here are ten ways for employers to harness the hustle and manage hard-working employees in a healthy and sustainable way...

 Embrace the enthusiasm

For many employees, short-term hustling in pursuit of a target, aim, or objective provides a sense of buzz, excitement, and meaning that can be enjoyable and yield real results. For others, it's a cause of stress and anxiety. Understanding your employees and their relationship to their work is vital.

 Know and police the limits

Practically, the hustle can only be maintained for a period of time before cracks begin to appear and problems arise. Recognising these limits and determining what is fair individually and collectively is important. Set and observe those limits.

 Allow employees to "tap out"

Create a state of "psychological safety" – an environment where employees can stick their arm up for help, in confidence and without shame.

 Provide independent support

The public's understanding of mental health has grown exponentially throughout the last decade, and people are generally more comfortable than ever to access support where available. Consider incorporating an employee assistance programme (EAP) – typically comprising face-to-face, telephone or online counselling and expert support – into your benefits package. This will send a message to your workforce that employee wellbeing is a top priority.

 Lead the way

It is important that organisations lead from the top in showing that a proper work/life balance is not only acceptable, but preferable. The C-suite or senior management might make it known that they are on leave. Or that they have taken the day off for their child's birthday, for example. Modelling behaviours in this way sends an important message that it's acceptable for others to do the same.

 Boundaries training

If many employees managed boundaries between work and life poorly before the pandemic, lockdowns and remote working certainly haven't improved the situation. Consider training and awareness content for your workforce to help them set and manage those boundaries in the new world of work.

 Respect those boundaries

If you're a leader, make a point of respecting the boundary between work and life. Setting the example will encourage this behaviour. For example, limit anything other than emergency communications to regular work hours. Emails can be set to deliver at an appropriate time which can help if teams are working in different time zones.

 Prioritise employee experience

Customer experience is a focus for most organisations, but what is it like to work for your organisation? Understanding the good and the bad experiences of your employees enables proactive actions to deliver improvement for all.

 Promote balance

Everyone is different, and individual people change over time. Getting the right balance for you and your employees can be hard, but the benefits for you, your employees, and your organisation are many.

 Understand performance

Elite athletes can perform at the very highest level for extended periods – that's partly why they achieve extraordinary things. For the other 99.999%, performance levels vary individually from person to person. This means that, for most people, a period of exceptional performance will naturally be followed by a period of more average or lower performance, before they are ready to excel again. The science of performance is complex, but even understanding this basic tenet, that performance goes up and down over time for most people, and applying it to your expectations of your individual employees will help.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

The compulsion to work has been part of human society for a long, long time. Arising in subsistence societies to ensure collective survival, it has metamorphosed over the centuries from a religious doctrine, offering heavenly reward, to a founding principle of the modern world we all live in today.

In its latest form as hustle culture, it offers a pathway to achieving both material and professional rewards, even if these only come to fruition for a lucky few. However, it's also a belief system that can cause real damage, both physically and mentally. It can become endemic in organisations, or in groups within organisations. The detrimental impacts can cancel out any original benefits and deliver burnout, discontent, and reduced productivity.

Therefore, it's essential that organisations work to promote balance and provide support to enable the best outcomes for their employees and their business.



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