



The Truth About Hamster Wheel Productivity **by Betsi Bixby**

When is the last time you could honestly say you had plenty of spare time for family and fun? You finished your to-do list by 5 pm and then, over an early dinner with your spouse, you decide your company is running so smoothly you will take that long relaxing vacation without any cares. If this is you, just stop reading right now and enjoy the waves and your margarita! However, if you are not on the beach, your business doesn't always run perfectly, and most mornings you come in to your leftover to-do list, read on!

Every family business owner I know, in fact just about every business person I know, wants the same thing—not more cash (although that's always nice), not higher profit (although that's great too), not even better margins (might have to shoot your competitors for that one!) – No, what they really want is more hours in the day. Why? So they can actually finish their work and still have play time!

In this new economy, however, most CEOs tell me they are working harder and putting in longer hours than ever before but aren't seeing the fruits of that extra labor. Even aggressive growth company CEOs, who thought they would reap productivity gains from economies of scale, tell me they are experiencing unexpected skyrocketing payroll costs and painful integration issues stretching out months longer than anticipated. And these are highly successful companies!

Time worries are spilling over to employees as well. CFOs and entire headquarters staff are feeling overloaded which leads to reluctance towards new projects, even important high ROI ones. They think they just can't fit in one more thing. This hyperactivity, often coupled with abysmally low productivity, oozes its way down to the lowest levels too. For instance, even though first line managers may desperately need new training, fear of falling further behind in regular duties keeps them stuck and out of the training.

It's an incredibly vicious cycle — work harder and harder and faster and faster, but guess what — no real results! It's a Hamster Wheel! Everyone is sweating and feeling like they are working hard, but where are the results? So let's dive right to the root of the problem. Most people confuse busy with productive, efficient with effective. You see anyone can fill 8, 10 or even 12 hours each day. The question is, are they doing the right things? (The answer is usually not!)

And, as long as the hamster stays on the wheel, nothing changes. We can modify the wheel for faster spinning or give the hamster spiffy tennis shoes to run faster, but it still doesn't get anywhere. To get results, to actually reach a goal, requires stopping the warp speed wheel and stepping completely off.

In the business world, getting off the wheel means stopping all the urgent activities, delegating, and then carving out time for strategic work, the non-urgent important. It's not enough to do the



same processes faster and smarter. You must challenge whether the processes are even necessary. As CEO, it means empowering your staff to the degree that they can handle all the day to day decisions allowing you to focus on what you get paid the big bucks for –strategy!

I've really had fun posing “get off the hamster wheel” questions to clients in my monthly coaching program. While I start out with what everyone expects (quick cash producers), the real value is the program thinking they are going to just tweak up a few processes here and there, the quick sampling tools often produce results so startling that whole new strategies bloom.

As you think about you and your staff and the Hamster Wheel, answer these questions:

- How many times a day are you interrupted? (phone calls, emails, visits)
- Why are you interrupted? (look for recurring themes)
- Have you delegated and trained to the point your company can run without you?
- Is your company missing key, critical processes or training?
- If all your people were accountable for the “right” work daily, including all your family members, what would happen to profit?
- What changes are happening to the customer pool in your geography?
- What new strategic opportunities are available to you as a result?

Answering these questions (and I've got lots more!) will stimulate “right” priorities on your to-do list, will allow you to leave the office on time without guilt, and who knows, by this time next year you might take another look at this article and chuckle as you watch the waves lapping the beach, sipping your margarita as the sun sets over the water. Ah.....

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