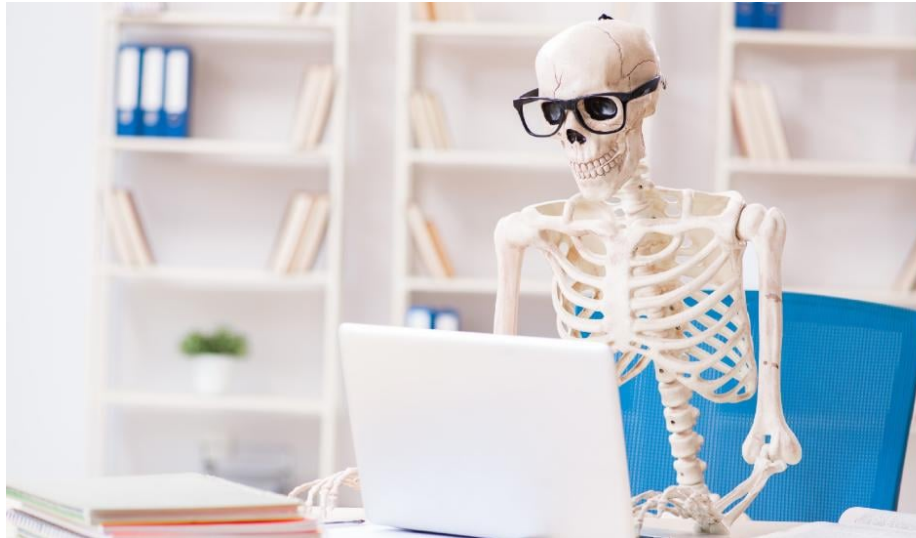

Is Working Yourself “To The Bone” Ever Worth It?



By Winnie Jiang , INSEAD; Claire Harbour , Capiès; and Antoine Tirard , NexTalent

Work conditions in certain industries are notoriously gruelling. We ask four professionals in demanding sectors if the benefits outweigh the costs.

In some sectors, workers are constantly pushed to extremes, not unlike stunt performers whose bodies are treated as tools – stretched and sacrificed to meet professional demands. Notably, similar patterns are observed in soul-sucking, albeit prized, careers such as consulting, investment banking and other financial services.

The recent deaths of employees from [Bank of America](#) and [Ernst & Young](#) resulting from overwork reignited the furore arising from the alleged 100-hour work week and “[inhumane](#)” treatment at Goldman Sachs that surfaced three years ago. While work in banking or consulting involves more of one’s brain than body, instrumentalisation – a process by which people are treated as mere tools or instruments to attain certain goals – appears to have become the norm as workers experience burnout from the stretching and sacrificing of their physical well-being.

What affects a young professional's career decisions? Is the prize worth suffering for? We speak to four professionals who shared their stories, and juxtapose their experiences against Winnie Jiang's ongoing research on stunt performers.

The art of bending over backwards

Stunt performers are the subject of Jiang's study. This work provides insights into their response when compelled to constantly push the limits of their body to complete overly dangerous stunts. Preliminary findings show that stunt performers persist in spite of the nature and conditions of their profession because they derive their self-worth from their work. This is especially so for the physical hardships they endure, as they claim that "injuries are badges of honour".

Only after suffering from debilitating injuries or witnessing the deaths of their peers at work would some of them begin to question the norm of "body instrumentalisation" and reassess the foundation of their self-worth. This is when they begin to find value in aspects of their lives outside of work.

The reality in "prized" sectors

To understand if the benefits outweigh the pain, we spoke to four professionals whom we shall name Emilio, Ravi, Apple and Jens to maintain their anonymity.

After working at Bloomberg and a Swiss NGO (non-governmental organisation), Emilio pursued an MBA at Harvard and eventually landed a tempting job with a leading consulting firm in Berlin. "Knowing how hard the work is in consulting, I also assumed that I would be learning and be supported a lot", he said. In reality, there was only one week of onboarding, followed by six months of making things up as he went along. There was a confusing mix of solidarity in suffering alongside selfish competition. The atmosphere was one of constant suffering and relentless complaining. While on one project in India, his standard working hours were 7.00 am to 4.00 am. As he felt his brain and body shutting down, he realised that he was literally killing himself. Within less than a year, Emilio saw 70 percent of his cohort pushed out.

For Ravi, he joined a top strategy consulting firm in New York immediately after his degree at UC Berkeley, where he studied political science and

economics. Unsure of what he wanted to specialise in, he welcomed the opportunity to keep his options open. He embraced the lifestyle as a young graduate in a tough but dynamic and developmental job. He was working 10-hour days twice a week with relative predictability and “pulling late-nighters” the rest of the time. At one point, when Ravi worked more or less non-stop on a project for weeks, traveling most of the time, and with no respite, he evaluated his situation and sounded the alarm bell.

Meanwhile, Apple’s decisions were influenced by a mix of media featuring superstar Harvard bankers, parental pressure to make “safe” choices and academic “limitations”. Having completed her bachelor’s degree in accounting and finance in the United Kingdom and a master’s degree at the London School of Economics, she aimed for the Big Four accounting firms and was offered a role at PwC in Birmingham. She enjoyed her first project, but things went downhill afterwards. She was working 18-hour days, her team was dysfunctional and inefficient, and she was dealing with multiple projects concurrently. She left when her health and well-being suffered, and was eventually diagnosed with thyroid cancer.

Driving forces

Just like stunt performers, other workers may derive their self-worth from their work and their ability to endure hardship. For instance, Emilio admitted that he wanted to “show the world that I could do these sorts of crazy hours”, and that the promise of “after two years in consulting, you can get whatever job you want” was seductive, despite the punishing environment.

On the other hand, for Ravi, it was a matter of whether he was willing to shape his lifestyle around his work. His entire Saturdays were set aside for catching up on sleep, and Monday evenings were his sacred and untouchable “early” evenings. He recognised that working hard during the week was a reasonable trade-off. To him, the work was challenging, interesting, varied, and gave him the opportunity to continue to postpone any aspiration to become a specialist. Ravi’s mix of resilience and self-awareness served him well.

As for Jens, who joined a large strategy consulting firm in Stockholm upon graduation, he persisted as he enjoyed the environment of support, kindness and collaboration, despite a highly demanding environment and having to work 10- to 12-hour days, Monday to Friday. He enjoyed the rush of adrenaline more than he suffered. Overall, he felt that the occasional

discomfort of intense work was more than compensated by his inherent interest in the job itself, not to mention the compensation package.

Jens stayed on as he enjoyed being a consultant. He had always been happy to go the extra mile to get to the bottom of things, rather than searching for shortcuts. He observed that one key characteristic needed is resilience, since intelligence alone is merely a commodity at a place like his firm.

Is it worth it?

There is no “one size fits all” answer as to whether these prized careers are worth the suffering – and, in extreme cases, the risk of death. The demanding nature of these careers is well-known. Carefully weighing the pros and cons and honestly evaluating the fit between your values, capabilities and lifestyle and the demands of such roles should help in making an appropriate choice and avoiding disappointment and frustration. In other words, self-awareness is essential.

Emilio eventually left his job after realising that consulting did not align with his values. “Learning on the job is great if you have someone giving you constructive feedback as you go, but without that, it just becomes frightening to make mistakes,” he said. He is on a quest for work where his contribution is valued, the learning is organic and it is seen as normal that he has a life beyond the office.

Similarly, after initially taking the prescribed path blindly, Apple eventually gained clarity, like the stunt performers who started questioning the norm of instrumentalisation. She now recognises that the training and learning offered are unparalleled, but recommends that any young person contemplating a career in finance take that path early on and “then jump out, once and for all”.

Are you in or out?

Based on these examples, there are patterns that point to reasons to embark on such careers – or not.

Seven reasons to choose a demanding career:

1. You have boundless energy and the willingness to expend it on this role for a few years.

2. You see value in the development offered and are willing to learn by making mistakes and stretching yourself constantly.
3. You are prepared to postpone gratification (apart from an attractive salary).
4. You value an intellectual challenge and interesting clients above work-life balance.
5. You are happy to be a generalist (at least at the beginning).
6. You are resilient and comfortable with direct feedback.
7. You are able to draw personal boundaries and protect them.

Seven reasons to run in the opposite direction:

1. You are independent-minded and do not respond well to frequent feedback.
2. You value work-life balance.
3. You prefer to specialise.
4. You do not function well on little sleep.
5. You are not keen to analyse information every day.
6. You want to work in a consistent team and to be recognised by your colleagues.
7. You are not yet sure of who you are and are still forming your “self” and “identity.”

Not all doom and gloom

In the stories of these four individuals, there were mitigating factors that affected their course of action. When Ravi felt burnt out and sounded the alarm, adjustments were made to his project, with an additional team member and a lighter travel schedule. This not only enabled Ravi to survive and continue to contribute, but also showed him that he could trust his firm to do the right thing.

Jens was lucky to work in an exceptional team. His interest in the job jumped significantly as increasing responsibilities, higher exposure to clients, interesting projects and a steep salary growth curve provided the motivation to build a long-term career there. He recommends setting milestones to constantly explore and evaluate the risks and benefits of staying.

An [article](#) in the *St Gallen Business Review* suggests that Bain & Company manages the energy of its consultants adeptly enough to earn its reputation as a good place to forge a career. The article alludes to breaks between intense projects, as well as time out to pursue other interests. This sort of balance, which Jens experienced firsthand as its employee, could suit those resilient enough for the role. Other consulting firms and financial institutions might have something to learn from this.

[JP Morgan](#), meanwhile, has created a new appointment with the aim of stopping analysts from working more than 80 hours per week. But changing a soul-sucking culture may take more than just one new role; it remains to be seen if this is a step in the right direction.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/working-yourself-bone-ever-worth-it>

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