

Hustle culture is destroying our clients. It's time they let their impossible standards crash to the ground

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

- a. 'Hustle culture' is an attitude in modern society. It encourages hard work, long hours and success. It convinces people to value work more than their health, wellbeing and personal lives. Look at the list below. Tick the activities that you think are a part of hustle culture. Then add your own ideas.

- going to work early and staying late most days ☐
- working at the weekends or during festivals ☐
- bringing work with you when you go on holiday ☐
- missing family events like birthdays because of work ☐
- cancelling social plans with friends because of work ☐
- thinking about work when you are at home ☐
- working when you feel exhausted or unwell ☐
- _____ ☐

2 Key words

- a. Choose the correct word or expression to match each definition. Then find and highlight them in the article to read them in context. Some words may appear in a different form in the article.

contingent

slack

fatigue

output

buffer

compounded by

grit

virtuous

counterbalance

debilitating

hectic

outwardly

burn out

drive

idleness

rigidly

chronically

delegate

loop

trap

1. a process that continues again and again, as in a circle _____
2. to become emotionally exhausting and unmotivated due to stress _____
3. extremely busy, chaotic or intense for a period of time _____
4. appearing a certain way to other people, in contrast to the reality _____
5. when a negative situation is made worse by another factor _____

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6. resilience, mental strength and determination _____
7. following strictly and lacking flexibility or willingness to change _____
8. a scheduled gap of time before or after tasks _____
9. the amount of goods or services produced during a period of time _____
10. continually or repeatedly over a long period of time _____
11. the state of being inactive or unoccupied _____
12. causing serious physical or emotional weakness _____
13. morally good, honourable or noble _____
14. dependent on something else _____
15. a difficult situation that someone is caught in and get out of _____
16. extreme physical or emotional tiredness from stress or work _____
17. to assign responsibilities or tasks to another person _____
18. a force or influences that acts in opposition to another _____
19. a period of reduced activity, demand or work for a period of time _____
20. a strong inner desire or motivation to do something _____

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity.

1. The day before the wedding was _____, but the wedding day was lovely.
2. Many celebrities' lives are _____ perfect, but they have struggles too.
3. In time travel films, characters are often stuck in a never-ending _____.
4. There was a(n) _____ in retail sales after the busy holiday season.
5. Erik lost his job because he was _____ late and unprepared.

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6. Our camping trip next weekend is _____ on the weather.
7. Teenagers are often accused of laziness and _____.
8. Alicia finished her degree through hard work, determination and _____.
9. A good manager _____ work fairly and responsibility.
10. My job feels like a(n) _____ – I'm miserable, but I know I can't leave.

c. Use the remaining words from task a to write your own sentences.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

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The modern mind is a column where experts discuss mental health issues they are seeing in their work

Gaynor Parkin and Dave Winsborough
15 March, 2026

- 1 Outwardly performing brilliantly in a high-profile role, Ariana* races through her days. When her baby sleeps, she jumps on calls, replies to messages, sometimes squeezing in a few exercises to try to stay fit. When the baby wakes, the loop begins again. Despite exhaustion, Ariana holds herself to her internal standards of high output and pace.
- 2 Many media commentators have labelled this way of living “the cult of productivity”. It’s compounded by popular “hustle culture” – do more and do it faster!
- 3 In our work we increasingly see people struggling not because they are failing at productivity and hustle, but because they are succeeding at it too well.
- 4 Phil* sought guidance after a health scare. A successful senior manager at a national health service (this irony wasn’t lost on him), his days were always hectic with back-to-back meetings, a huge team to manage, and operational duties that made it difficult for him to take time off. Despite noticing more fatigue and slowed decision-making, Phil struggled to prioritise his rehab.
- 5 Murray* reached out after experiencing debilitating panic attacks at work. Professionally successful, he was juggling a complex workload with a busy blended family and caring responsibilities for an ageing parent. “I know I’m in that sandwich generation trap – working, looking after kids and an elderly parent – but I don’t think I can make it all fit together”.
- 6 All three described a similar pattern: a strong internal drive to be productive, combined with daily habits of doing everything at pace. For Ariana, there was genuinely little slack in the system. For Phil and Murray, some flexibility existed. But psychologically, for all of them, any solutions felt unavailable. In this they are not alone.
- 7 For them and, in fact, many of us, we see this pattern clearly in other people but rarely in ourselves. We spot the signs a colleague is burning out, a friend is chronically over-committed, or when a partner is running on fumes. We offer wise counsel: breathe, slow down, delegate, take a break, rest, be kinder to yourself. Yet logic evaporates when it comes to our own lives – none of us can read the label from inside the bottle.
- 8 Here’s the psychological trap: our business feels necessary, virtuous and inescapable. Other people need boundaries. We just need to push through.
- 9 Our clients, and many people, have grown up absorbing powerful messages that productivity equals worth. In business especially, endurance, grit and “pushing through” are rewarded. Hustle culture ignores exhaustion, or glamorises it. Over time this becomes our default operating system and, when everyone is doing it, it stops being a choice.
- 10 How then, do we create alternatives?
- 11 One first shift is to reframe a productivity mindset as an over-used strength. Strengths like drive, reliability, high standards and responsiveness can make us successful and effective. But applied rigidly and without counterbalance, strengths can dominate. For Ariana, Murray and Phil, reframing started with curiosity – when is this strength helpful for me, and are there alternatives? What might happen if rest, restoration, reflection, play or “idleness” were injected into my day?
- 12 Learning to value other strengths requires another shift: loosening rigid beliefs. Moving away from black-and-white rules (“more is better”, “I should push through”, “rest is earned”) and toward more flexible assumptions (“recovery has value in its own right”, “not everything needs to be optimised” or “a slower pace can be legitimate, not lazy”).
- 13 Generating flexibility matters because if rest is solely justified to become more productive, we never truly rest at all. Of course it helps sustain productivity but that’s not the end goal.
- 14 A third shift is experimentation: curiously testing small changes or new ways of being. Ariana tested: “What happens if I stop 10 minutes earlier? Leave one thing undone? Take a lunch break?” Murray tried out finishing work an hour earlier some days to create a buffer for himself before family duties. Phil asked his operation team what he could delegate so he could properly engage in rehab, testing a new belief, “it is reasonable for others to step up”.
- 15 For now, Ariana, Phil and Murray see creating alternatives not as a radical life redesign but rather a way to free space in a system that has become too tightly wound.
- 16 If they decided to shake things up in the future, we recommended Oliver Burkeman’s book *Four Thousand Weeks*. Drawing on his premise that there will always be more to do than can possibly fit into a human lifetime, Burkeman writes: “Let your

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impossible standards crash to the ground. Then pick a few meaningful tasks from the rubble and get started on them today.”

- 17 Letting impossible standards crash can be liberating. Sometimes the most radical act in a culture obsessed with doing is simply learning how to be. Our clients’ deeper lesson is simple but not easy: play and recovery are not contingent on finishing the list (it will never be finished, and that’s OK).

*The people named in the article are based on a mix of real clients.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Decide if the statements are True, False or Not mentioned in the article. Correct the false statements.

1. Clients like Ariana feel the need to work hard because of pressure from other people.
2. Hustle culture means more work, more stress and less rest and relaxation.
3. The 'sandwich generation' are adults who look after both their children and their parents.
4. It's easy for people to recognise when they are burning out in their own lives.
5. The 'cult of productivity' only affects people who have stressful family situations.
6. Hustle culture recognises the dangers of physical exhaustion.
7. Hustle culture is made worse by influencers and social media sites.
8. The experts recommend rest and breaks as a way to become more productive.
9. The only way to recover from hustle culture is to make several big life changes.
10. It's important to accept that we can't always complete everything on our 'to do' list.

4 Key language

a. The words below are used in the article. These words are frequently used to talk about sport, exercise and physical activity. Match the words below to the sport-related meaning.

run on fumes
endurance

push through
hustle

pace
jump

race
sustain

1. the speed at which an athlete moves or a match progresses _____
2. to push off on one's feet and lift the body high up in the air _____
3. the ability to maintain a consistent performance over a long period of time _____
4. to continue with physical activity despite pain, difficulty or fatigue _____
5. to end up playing at lower or slower level because of exhaustion _____
6. to put in 100% effort; to play with maximum speed and energy _____

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7. to keep to a high-level of physical activity for a short period of time _____
8. to run, cycle or swim competitively with the aim of going as fast as possible

b. The words above are used in the article to talk about productivity in people's professional and personal lives. Why do you think the authors use these words? How are the people in the article similar to athletes?

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

1. Do you experience hustle culture in your own life? In what ways?
2. Do you think the advice in the article is helpful? Why or why not?
3. What else would you recommend to help people recover from hustle culture?
4. Do you think hustle culture will get better or worse in five years? In ten years? Why?
5. The authors say 'people [are] struggling not because they are failing at productivity and hustle, but because they are succeeding at it too well.' Explain this idea in your own words.

6 In your own words

a. Find out how hustle culture affects your classmates, coworkers, friends or family. Make a survey with 10 questions. Ask about people's attitudes about work, breaks, health, personal life and other areas. Include these types of questions:

- Yes/No questions
- Multiple choice questions
- Ordering questions
- Open-ended questions

b. Share the results of your survey with your class. Use graphs, posters or other creative ways to show the information.