

I'm a former elite athlete and I call BS on tech's obsession with working long hours

As a champion gymnast, I trained 22 hours a week. Now, as a startup founder, I see how dangerous "hustle culture" can be.

Lots of people in tech are obsessed with putting in long hours. Elon Musk [once said](#) that "nobody ever changed the world on 40 hours a week" and suggested that the correct number was between 80-100 hours.

Freelance marketplace Fiverr, with [venture funding](#) to the tune of \$111 million, came under fire for an ad campaign that described an aspirational lifestyle where lunch is coffee and sleep deprivation is "your drug of choice."

Or there was the time when the cofounder of Coursera launched a machine learning company called DeepLearning.ai and in a job post [suggested](#) that the team had a "strong work ethic" and routinely worked 70-90 hours per week. (The post was later changed to 70-plus hours, as if that were better.)

Why working long hours is counterproductive

Few would question that working hard is essential to success. But the idea that working double a standard 40-hour workweek is just plain wrong.

Look, I'm no stranger to hard work. I'm a first-generation immigrant from China who earned a scholarship to attend Stanford, where I helped the men's gymnastics team win the NCAA championship. I've started multiple

venture-backed tech companies while serving on the board of a civic tech nonprofit.

Have there been times where I was stressed and working long hours to get everything done? Sure. Has it ever been anything near 80 hours in a single week? No way. I can feel my mental sharpness decline in the late afternoon, and the best way for me to push past eight or nine hours of work in a single day is if it's on a completely different project, like, say, a board meeting or an article for an outside publication. Long hours should be rare, because productivity always takes a hit afterward.

This isn't just my opinion. Stanford economics professor [John Pencavel](#) [found](#) that the output of employees falls off significantly after 50 hours per week, and becomes basically insignificant after the 55-plus hours per week mark.

What it really means to work like an elite athlete

In a Twitter thread about the DeepLearning.ai job posting, someone asked, "Would you look at it differently if it were a sports team?" And then said that working with the founder would be like being "in the Major League."

That really ground my gears, because the comparison to high-level sports is so common in tech. But it's also really wrong.

While at Stanford, I trained around 22 hours a week. Even factoring in the extra time we spent stretching, strength conditioning, icing, and physical therapy (on our own time), it was well under 30 hours. I wasn't the star of our team, but some of my teammates were exceptional—representing the United States in world championships and other international competition. They trained the same number of hours as I did.

Training 70 hours a week would be a nonstarter. Even if NCAA didn't

regulate training hours, it would be such an obviously bad idea that any coach proposing such a schedule would be fired immediately. Great performance in athletics requires short bursts of concentrated, intense effort, followed by rest and recovery. That's why using elite athletics to justify long hours is so foolish.

The Golden State Warriors have [made sleep a huge priority](#). Mixed martial arts fighters take months between fights. There is a tremendous amount of rest and recovery built in, and a huge focus on injury prevention. Athletes nap between practices, get eight, nine, 10 hours of sleep a night, and wear blue-light-filtering glasses to ensure deeper sleep.

Some people will inevitably point out that the physical body of course requires rest, but that modern work is more mental. So? Our brain is an organ and is supported by our circulatory, nervous, and skeletal muscular systems. People who consistently get less than six hours of sleep [are cognitively impaired](#), struggling as badly as if they had pulled multiple all-nighters.

Even in the world of competitive gaming, where 18-year-old players routinely train 10 or more hours a day, there's been a recognition that less is more. The Overwatch League's second season has [prioritized player wellness](#) after seeing the panic attacks and other mental health issues plague the community.

The danger of "hustle culture"

Our obsession with hard work is dangerous because it creates the narrative that if you don't succeed, it's because you didn't work hard enough. If you're sitting around watching YouTube videos all day, sure, you're not going to be successful. But just because something doesn't work out, doesn't necessarily mean you should have worked harder.

My first company, Ridejoy, went through the Y Combinator program in the

summer of 2011. We were building a long-distance ride-sharing company, competing with Lyft back when it was called Zimride. We weren't able to make the pivot into the city ride-hailing business. We worked hard and we still failed. Would it have made a big difference if we had somehow put in twice as many hours? I'm doubtful.

A YC founder once said to me that he found little correlation between the success of a YC company and how hard their founders worked. That is to say, among a group of smart, ambitious entrepreneurs who were all already working pretty hard, the factors that made the biggest difference were things like timing, strategy, and relationships. Which is why Reddit cofounder-turned-venture capitalist Alexis Ohanian [now warns](#) against the "utter bullshit" of this so-called hustle porn mentality.

There's something especially insidious about higher-ups using their own extreme work habits as a model for their staff. I'm a big believer of leading by example, but most leaders have a support system and resources that allow them to recuperate from their hard work. They live close to the office, get frequent massages, have healthy food made for them, have really good childcare, personal assistants, and much more. That's how they stay sane and avoid burnout.

But many of their employees don't have the same benefits. And so after working 80 or 100 hours a week for months or years at a time, they burn out. And maybe they did productive work for a time, but they pay for it with their mental and physical health. Burnout hurts individuals, their families, their communities, and our nation.

Sometimes what our jobs or our companies need isn't our our most brilliant selves. It's just completing a pile of tasks. But there's nothing glorious about that, and let's stop pretending that working 80 or 100 hours a week is a righteous, practical, or sustainable practice.

Sure, there are outliers. Perhaps Musk is the [Dean Karnazes of tech](#). But

even he admits that stress has taken an "[excruciating](#)" toll.

There's no denying that working hard is essential to success. But we need to stop worshipping at the altar of long hours and focus on getting things done in an intelligent, useful, and sustainable way.