



White paper

The midnight oil

Why working 90-hour weeks never works out

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Scoutwest, Inc.

The midnight oil

During the Internet boom it was popular to work 90-hour weeks. The new economy of the Internet promised to be the biggest land grab in a hundred years. If your startup didn't grab its piece of the Promised Land you weren't going to be a player, and that meant you were out. Working 'round the clock was the only way to secure your place in the new economy. Multi-year death marches of 90-hour weeks, usually tied to the promise of personal wealth, were all the rage. Actually death marches are nothing new. Companies have been doing them for a long time. They never worked for me, although I've taken part in more than one.

As I watched the "heroes" of these efforts, I always noticed the same thing. People can't sustain these kinds of efforts for long, and their natural instinct for health and survival takes over. In the beginning management tries to dictate an absurd standard for hours and production. Naturally, they immediately announce the accelerated schedule to customers and investors who shout for glee. Employees generally try to oblige, understanding the vision, and sensing the desperate need of their company; plus they see the tremendous upside for themselves if they participate. Management usually makes the need personal rather than corporate. That always helps push people a little more.

After a few months, people find a way to relieve the pressure they are under, without revealing that they are no longer on-board with the death march. Employees don't even admit it to themselves, but they take longer lunches, longer breaks, and come in later in the morning. I've even seen people come into work at noon because they burned the midnight oil the night before. Working late at night makes you appear to be working harder. Nobody notices when you come in at 6 AM. After a short period of time, production is back to normal or below normal because everybody is burned out. Management never gets it. They go on, believing they are achieving great things.

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