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Earn more without giving up your whole life

By [Ruth Mantell](#), MarketWatch

WASHINGTON (MarketWatch) — Do you work to live or live to work? You may have to do both to be a top performer who still manages to have a personal life.

Most workers aren't top performers, but smart choices and near-term sacrifice can put them on the road to greater salary gains, experts say. The key is an ability to think long-term: setting goals that allow you to vary how much effort you put in at work, cutting back on leisure and family time when necessary.

There are real rewards for a company's best workers. Top performers received average base-pay increases of 4.4% this year, compared with 2.8% for average performers, and 0.4% for the lowest performers, according to Mercer, a human-resources-services provider. [Read more about growing pay gap between workers.](#) Further, with most employers seeking to increase performance-based pay differentiation, even greater rewards could be in store for top performers.

In many industries, working long hours is expected -- for top performers and others, too. "If you choose to go to Wall Street or a law firm, work is 24-7," said Charles Wardell, chief executive of Oak Brook, Ill.-based Witt/Kieffer, which specializes in executive searches for health-care, education and nonprofit organizations. "If you are in a culture that works 24-7, you can't fight it."

Even in other industries, long hours at some point can be a necessary stepping stone to top-performer status. However, with slim staff levels, many workers feel that they are already giving 100%. For those who can't, or won't, put in more office time, working smarter and getting noticed can help them move up the ranks and reap greater rewards, experts say. Here are strategies to get ahead while still holding onto personal goals.

Think long-term

To get ahead, long hours will likely be required at some point, but having a long-term perspective can help workers feel better during the tough hauls, said Nancy Hauserman, a management and organizations professor at the University of Iowa's Henry B. Tippie College of Business. Some introspection will be needed.

“Be clear about your willingness to sacrifice some time at some period of your career, but not all the time, not unless you are willing to realign your values,” Hauserman said. “You can have it all, but not all at once and not all the time.”

Rather than looking for balance during each phase of your life, try to aim for a life that is balanced over your entire career.

“Personal values and how you want to live your life and what you want from life and your job — you have to be able to reassess those as you go along,” Hauserman said. “I don't know many people who don't expect to put a lot of hours in at some point in their career. But balance doesn't mean that every day, every week, every month you spend some certain percentage of your time on personal matters, and some on professional. Balance means that in the big picture, things are balanced, but some months, some years may be much more professionally focused than personally focused.”

Work smarter

Being a top performer isn't just about putting in hours. To be seen as more valuable, employees should work strategically, experts said. Employees should focus on their contributions to the company's profits, said Andrea Kay, a Cincinnati-based career consultant.

“Companies have always rewarded people who drive the bottom line. What's different in recent years is that the bottom line has become everybody's issue,” Kay said. “If you are not producing bottom-line results, the odds of you getting that salary increase are going to be less. It's really saying to yourself: ‘How do I make myself worth my paycheck? What can I do to be even more valuable?’”

She also said that workers should focus on prioritizing tasks.

“Most people are just so inundated with so many things that they are not necessarily [prioritizing] the most important thing,” Kay said. “Part of what you should do is bring the attention of your manager to what needs priority and what needs to be done well. Often people are skimming the surface of their work.”

For example, one of Kay's clients who works in banking reviewed his company's product line, identified holes when it came to customers' needs, and worked on ways to fill those gaps.

“He just worked smart and more strategically, but not a lot more hours,” Kay said. “It sounds like a small thing, but having products that weren’t selling was not effective for the bottom line, it was not endearing customers.”

Even when ramping up your creative output, balance is key, Hauserman said. “Most people aren’t good at being fabulously creative, innovative or team players if they are stressed, or too tired,” she said.

Get noticed

Workers who want to be top performers may need to work on how others perceive them. Joel Garfinkle, an Oakland, Calif.-based executive coach and author of “Getting Ahead: Three Steps to Take Your Career to the Next Level,” recommended that workers who want to advance their careers should make sure to receive credit for their accomplishments.

“Proactively shaping others’ perceptions of you is a key strategy for standing out,” Garfinkle said. “In order for you to advance, you must make people aware of the benefits you provide to the company.”

He recommended that workers involve themselves in high-profile projects so that their name comes up frequently and positively in discussions among company leadership.

“Taking part in projects that others consider to be a success can do wonders for enhancing the way you’re perceived inside the company,” Garfinkle said. “Identify and obtain exposure to key decision makers in your company. Make a list of all the key decision makers in your organization, and create a strategy to become visible to each of them.”

Also, workers can pick a niche in which to develop expertise, he said.

“As you become recognized as an expert, people will seek you out for your knowledge and consider you to be an industry leader,” Garfinkle said. “Find speaking opportunities that highlight your expertise at conferences and trade shows.”

Working the system is key for those who want to compete at the highest levels, Wardell of Witt/Kieffer said.

“It’s insane to go to a huge corporation and say you’ve never been political. You might as well go to a war without weapons,” Wardell said. “You have to have a reputation of integrity and ethics, and you have to build your team along the way as you climb the ladder, people who believe in you and trust you.”

Part of getting along means going with the flow, he added.

“If the boss wants to have dinner to discuss a deal, don’t give him a whole speech about how you’re a vegan,” Wardell said. “Politics are about getting along in the culture that you’re in.”

He recommended that ambitious workers try to associate themselves with a rising senior team member.

“If the senior guy you are associated with doesn’t make it or leaves, you may not lose your job, but you do have a good chance of being stalled in your career,” Wardell said.