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Leisure as Leverage: Why Founders Should Design Time Off

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“If you want to be an entrepreneur, it’s not a job. It’s a lifestyle. It defines you. Forget about vacations.”
— Niklas Zennström, co-founder of Skype

In startup culture, exhaustion is often a badge of honor. Founders proudly trade sleep for strategy decks, sacrifice weekends for pitch rehearsals, and wear burnout to prove their commitment. Hustle is glorified — and leisure, if it exists at all, is treated as indulgence.

Entrepreneurs spend a lot of time working, compared to employees. Yet there is less understanding around how they spend their time, and whether they spend any time apart from work. So we explore how founders design their work and life, and how it impacts their happiness and performance?

Our research suggests that how entrepreneurs spend time outside work may be just as crucial to their venture’s success as what they do within it. Specifically, we find that those who actively design their leisure — what we call leisure crafting — experience greater well-being and report more moments of unexpected value creation, from meeting future collaborators at casual events to spotting new ideas while engaging in hobbies.

The Productivity Trap in Entrepreneurship

Early-stage founders face immense pressure to do it all — build the product, manage the team, pitch to investors, and handle finances. Many founders start their venture wanting to ditch 9 to 5, but they end up working longer hours. [Data from founders](#) show that 33% of small business owners work over 50 hours weekly, with 25% exceeding 60 hours; 70% regularly work weekends.

A [recent study](#) even found that entrepreneurs who mention leisure activities in crowdfunding pitches receive less funding, suggesting audiences may penalize perceived lack of work devotion. But behind the scenes, the toll is real. One founder we interviewed shared:

“My employees leave sharp at 5. But I stay back till 10 when I have grant applications to submit or payroll to prepare. I can’t just walk away. This is my responsibility.”

While some of this commitment is inevitable, founders also possess unique autonomy. Unlike traditional employees, they often have more say in how they structure their time. The key question becomes: Are they using this freedom well?

What Is Leisure Crafting?

Leisure crafting refers to the intentional, proactive design of one's nonwork time to meet personal needs — whether that means rest, connection, learning, or creativity. It's not just about taking breaks; it's about thoughtfully choosing how to spend time in ways that recharge and inspire. In our study, we explored:

- How do entrepreneurs design their work and leisure?
- Do they have the freedom and inclination to shape their time?
- How does this affect their well-being and venture outcomes?

We conducted interviews with founders across industries, followed by a survey-based study. The interviews focused on understanding the overall work and life design of founders, and their well-being and venture performance. We interviewed fifty founders from various industries. A clear pattern emerged: entrepreneurs who actively craft their leisure are more likely to experience serendipity at work. Then we test this by conducting a three-time survey with founders.

Serendipity Doesn't Happen in a Vacuum

Several founders described moments when time spent outside work unexpectedly fed back into their ventures:

"I attend parties and art exhibitions just for fun. But I often meet people there who later become collaborators."

"Whenever I travel or read something unrelated to work, I return with more clarity. New ideas just click."

This isn't magic. Our survey data confirms this: leisure crafting is linked with higher self-efficacy, better perception of opportunity, and greater openness to unplanned connections.

Interestingly, we found that crafting work time (e.g., optimizing calendars, planning tasks) did not have the same effect. It's not the structure of work, but the space around it, that enables insight. A founder we spoke with put it plainly:

"I don't aim for perfect balance. But when I ignore everything else in life for too long, I get irritable and unproductive. That's my signal to pull back."

Ignoring personal needs doesn't just harm individuals; it can slow ventures, fracture teams, and stifle innovation. Designing time for recovery isn't a luxury — it's a necessity.

Takeaways for Founders

If you're building a company, the pressure to be "always on" is real. But so is the evidence that well-crafted leisure boosts both well-being and entrepreneurial performance. Here's what you can do:

- *Audit your time:* Track how you actually spend your nonwork hours. Are they restorative or passive?
- *Design for variety:* Mix activities that offer relaxation, challenge, and joy. Leisure isn't just rest; it's growth too.
- *Protect space:* Treat leisure time as sacred as meetings. Block it. Name it. Keep it.
- *Watch for signals:* Emotional fatigue, irritability, or creative blocks might be cues that it's time to unplug.

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