

0.1 Chapter 2: work: Pleasures of Work

0.2 Pleasures of Work

1 How To Make Efficiency a Habit

Imagine someone who is deeply efficient. Their life is full of the best sorts of habits. They always take a break on Wednesday afternoon (unless theres a crisis) and play a game of tennis or go swimming. They always get to their desk by 8.30; they always send polite thank you messages when people have been especially helpful or made a big effort. They always take time to fix the main outline of a document before elaborating the details. They always read through messages to check for silly spelling or content errors before sending. They always file important documents as soon as they get them or as soon as they are finished with them. They have set days when they clean up all their files.

Weve got a tendency to see this as a personality type. We imagine this person who was always like this; that at kindergarten they always took their left shoe off before their right shoe; that they are maybe sometimes a bit admirable (their working life does seem more tranquil) but also somewhat freakish. You cant learn from them, you can only watch and wonder.



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In fact, human beings are generally very good at acquiring habits. Its just that various cultural forces have conspired to make habit formation look like an unimpressive, unexciting undertaking. At times habit has

even seemed like a dirty word the name of something a bit shameful, boring and pitiful. The creature of habit is the man with his slippers by the fire puffing on a pipe, always reading the same pages of the newspaper, always switching on the television news at the same time.

In order to get better at habit formation we need to...

One: Have a higher opinion of habits

Dont regard habit as the closing of the prison house door, the dying of the daylight, the triumph of the average over the individual. Some habits are pitiful, its perfectly true. But the mere fact that something becomes routine, and therefore easy and reliable cannot itself be a bad thing. Ideally, habits are glamorous if the habits themselves are beneficial ones.

Two: Set a time

The Romantic poet, Wordsworth, often wrote about the beauty of the moon.

Lo! where the Moon along the sky

Sails with her happy destiny;

Oft is she hid from mortal eye

Or dimly seen,

But when the clouds asunder fly

How bright her mien!

Wordsworth surely hoped that other people would share his experiences and look at the moon more often; that they too might one evening wander over the hillside (or walk round to the shops) and turn their eyes upwards and perhaps see the moon.

But Wordsworth couldnt make us care about the moon in the long-term, because he didnt take enough of an interest in habit-formation. He left our interest in the moon up to chance and the fleeting inclination of the individual.



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By contrast, Tsukimi, the Japanese ritual of moon-viewing, is scheduled to take place on specific dates: the 15th day of the eighth month and the 13th day of the ninth month (of the solar calendar). You don't need to wait for the mood to take you; you don't have to dip by chance into a book of poetry and find encouragement. The diary takes care of all this for you: you are supposed to take a careful look at the moon anyway. The approach sounds less romantic. But it is more aligned with the needs of human nature. The reality is that mostly we do need prompts and reminders to do things. And we should not feel awkward or ashamed about this. You set a date, write it in your diary. You make an appointment with the task.

If we schedule occasions regularly enough, an activity becomes a habit. After six weeks or so, we stop having to look in the diary, we remember anyway. Each time (after that) it becomes easier, more natural to repeat, the firm of behaviour gets entrenched.

Three: Someone checks up

Ultimately, habits are things we don't need to make much of an effort around, they become second nature, we do them with hardly a thought. But getting there can involve a painful exercise of the will. We have to make ourselves do things against inner resistance. We have to force ourselves to get out of bed earlier or to work off-line. It's tempting to give it a miss. It's too much effort, usually at the very time one

feels depleted.



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The military have long exploited the idea of being checked up on as part of habit formation. At first, when you might still be reluctant to iron your trousers and wish you could get away with not polishing your shoes very vigorously, someone quite hard to please is sent round to inspect. But its assumed that this wont have to go on forever. Instead most people will internalise their ambitions. And so, years after they have moved on to civilian life, they will continue to wear trousers with precise creases and highly polished shoes. The mere fact of reporting to another person gives us the tiny, but necessary, boost of determination to stick with something at the moment when we are most vulnerable to giving up. And so the habit is given a little longer to take hold.

The solution to developing habits will look a little odd, but thats OK... its a sign that were leaving behind some quite mistaken, but very widespread, views of how things get done. In a world in which inefficiency is the norm, to be an efficient person will involve learning some ways of behaving that seem pretty strange.