

S A B I N E T O B B A C K

OUT OF OFFICE

THE SUCCESS FORMULA
FOR HARD WORKERS

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To enhance readability, I am talking about the collaborator, the entrepreneur, the director or the manager in the masculine form (he/him).

Dad,

You were the first hard worker I encountered.

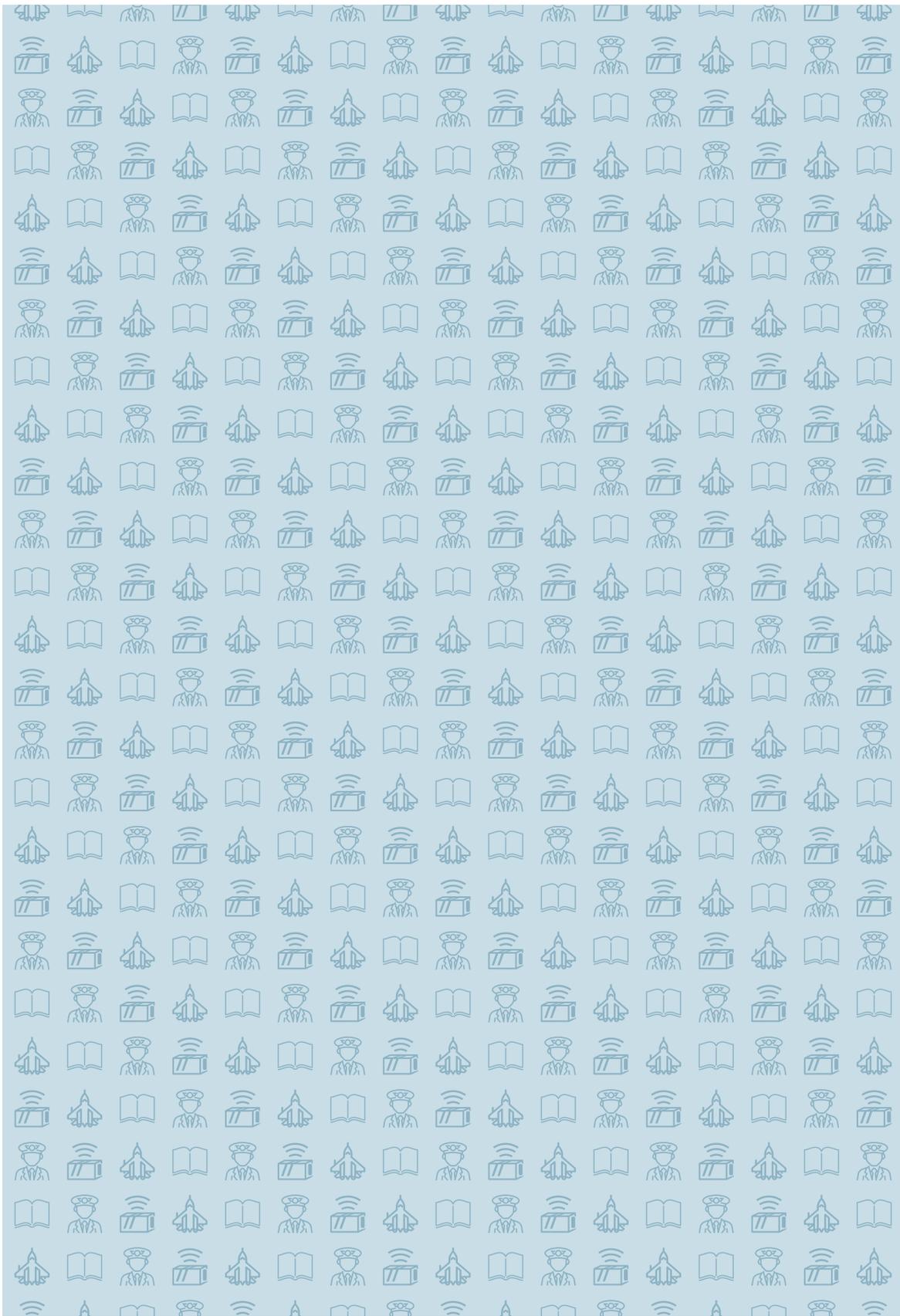
Many followed.

PART 1

HARD,
HARDER,
HARDEST

HARDEST

HARDEST



'Icarus was seduced by his own power. He made himself wings from feathers and wax so that he could fly. Full of self-belief, he flew too close to the sun. The sun's heat melted the wax, and he plummeted into the sea and drowned.'

You are reading the book *Out of Office*. The title probably attracted you because you rarely enable an automatic out of office response for your email. Or you may enable an out of office, but you read your emails regardless when you are away. Admit it. Being a hard worker is fun; it gives you a rush and tons of satisfaction. Hard workers can be found everywhere. You can spot them a mile away, and they can spot you. It is not the bags under your eyes that give you away, but that look of self-righteousness on your face. If everyone worked as hard as you, the world would be a better place.

You are getting ahead through your hard work. You are climbing the career ladder. Others admire you. You are a hard worker, and it suits and pleases you. Your job is often your first and last thought of the day. Maybe it is because of your sense of duty, maybe it is because of your passion, but the point is: you never stop. You are continually working on something. Sleep is for the dead, is it not? Working hard is your oxygen, your route to the top. But what happens if you get too much oxygen? That's right: you will start to hyperventilate. If you dive in too deep, it can backfire.

Is the hard worker in you protesting? Do just these few words make you want to put this book down? Not another book about burnout, you might think! No, this is not a book about burnout. Who knows what else goes on in your mind? Where does the author get the nerve to tell me how to behave? Or you may feel a sense of duty to work hard for your family to guarantee them a good future! My advice? Keep on reading. My book did not end up in your hands by accident. Maybe reading this book will save your life, your relationships or your career. Your future self, family and friends already thank you for reading on.

Let's make a few things clear from the start.

- Point one: it is anything but my intention to make you work less hard, that is not in your nature. During my 13.235 hours of leadership coaching, I have never asked a coachee to slow down. I also will not tell you how many hours you should work in a day, week, year or lifetime. After reading this book, you are going to make an honest and conscious decision for yourself, and you will make that choice every hour of every day.
- Point two: I am a hard worker, just like you. I recognize hard workers since I am one myself. Working hard is a part of me. I grew up in a family business with activities in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. We all had to help out. Working hard, self-management, self-reliance, a results-driven mindset and independence were instilled in my sister and me from an early age. After many years of denial, I finally dare to admit it: I love working hard.

To this day, I remain a hard worker. I always go the extra mile. At the same time, I am very aware of the dangers of working hard. Working hard is not a disease, but it can make you ill. My father died at the age of 67, after a long struggle with cancer. What saddens me most is the likelihood that this hard worker passed away before his time because he was not aware of the consequences of working too hard. Sleep deprivation alone, only one of the many health effects that can be caused by working too hard, increases your odds of getting cancer.

Working too hard increases the risk of succumbing to another leading cause of death: heart and vascular disease. Töres Theorell, an epidemiologist at the Stress Research Institute of the University of Stockholm, has published a retrospective review of studies conducted to determine if there is a relationship between work-related stress and physiological changes and disease. One of the many findings was that the number of hours worked in a week (a correlate for stress) increases the incidence of stroke. Specifically, people who routinely work in excess of 55 hours a week for five years have a 30% higher risk of stroke compared to those who work 35 to 40 hours a week (*Journal of Occupational Health*, 2019).

The health impacts of working too hard raise an obvious question: are you aware of how hard you work and its effect? Do you choose to work so hard, or is there some outside force that compels you to do it? Are you aware of the sacrifices you are making for this lifestyle? What sacrifices are you willing to make at the cost of working so hard? In this first part, I will help you to come to a standstill.

Standing still is probably the most challenging task of all. You work hard because you want to be successful, however you personally measure success. You may justify your long hours as essential to be effective, to increase profits or to ensure quality. You want speed, action and control. You prefer to be actively doing something. The faster the activities follow one another, the better. Standing still feels like moving backwards. You are driven and focused. You have no time, no desire and no energy to stop. What use is catching your breath? More than you think.

Are you a hard worker?

If you put in 10 hours a day, is that putting in hard work? At what point does hard become too hard and too much? Does everything have to be done to the highest possible standard or is enough good enough? I have asked myself these questions my entire life, subconsciously, of course. A hellish pursuit and not just for me. For hard workers the question of when to stop is usually answered by: 'I won't stop until I absolutely have to, when I am exhausted,' or 'because someone asked me to stop'. Maybe your partner asked you, maybe your doctor asked you, or maybe, just maybe, you subconsciously asked yourself to stop.

Let us take a different approach. What level of alcohol consumption is too much? Is alcohol a problem if you drink daily, if you drink spirits versus wine or beer, or only if your drinking has affected your health? Depending on whom you ask, you receive different answers. According to the medical world, you are safe if you drink up to 21 (for men) or up to 15 (for women) standard units of alcohol per week, on condition that you have two alcohol-free days within the same week.

The safe limits for alcohol consumption are well established, but it remains unclear at what point working too hard becomes hazardous to your health. You might be exceeding your safety limits when your partner, children, friends or colleagues say things like: 'When are you going to stop working?', 'My mom works a lot', 'Ah, mate, good to see you outside for a change' or 'You should take the day off, you could use it'.

Yes, but Sabine, you may be thinking, what do you call working hard and where do I draw the line between working hard and working too hard? You are right. I owe you an answer to both questions.

What is working (too) hard?

Let us start with an answer to the first question: what is working hard? In other words, what classifies you as a hard worker? As a coach, I set the working too hard limit as anything above 1.000 km per hour. Why 1.000 km/hr?

I compare hard workers with fighter pilots. Pilots who routinely fly at speeds of 1.000 km/hr or more are classified as fighter pilots, a class distinct from that of standard pilots. If you work at speeds of 1.000 km/hr or more, you are not a standard pilot, but a fighter pilot. You're flying in a different class, using a lot of fuel and needing extra training. Fighter pilots are members of a select club. They must undergo numerous medical tests, get plenty of sleep, be excellent communicators and much more.

To measure is to know. My tool to detect hard workers contains 40 criteria, and you can use it to determine whether you fall into this category and to find out if you have broken the 1.000 km/hr limit. The results can be an eye-opener. They can give you an idea of what a typical work rhythm should be like, or, put otherwise, how much and how often your working habits exceed those of most people. An analysis of this type is not a medical diagnostic, but it can give you some idea of the relative risks you may be taking by working too hard, too often.

Rate each question below on how well it describes you using the scale provided. Be spontaneous because one's initial response is usually the most accurate. Remember that there are no wrong answers and that the quality of your input determines the quality of your output. Put another way: *shit in, shit out*.

HARD WORK INDICATOR	NEVER	SOMETIMES	OFTEN	ALWAYS
1. Does working sound generally more appealing than sitting still and resting?				
2. Do you like action at work (the day flies by, and you have a lot on your mind)?				
3. Do you take on tasks you do not actually like doing, simply because they have to be done?				
4. Do you have trouble saying no?				

5. Do you take your work to bed? Do you work during the weekends? On holiday?				
6. Are you in a rush and always working against a deadline?				
7. Do you work until late at night, or pull an all-nighter if necessary?				
8. Do you take on more work than you can handle?				
9. Do you avoid intimacy?				
10. Do you fight fatigue and exhaust yourself?				
11. Do you use stimuli (alcohol, smoking, medication ...) to prolong your workday?				
12. Do you take on tasks because you are afraid no one else will do them (or will not do them fast enough)?				
13. Do you underestimate how long something takes so you end up in need of extra time?				
14. Do you bury yourself in work, so you do not have to think about other elements in your life (grief, fear, relationships, pain ...)?				
15. Do you respond impatiently if people do not do their work correctly or promptly?				
16. Do indirect people get on your nerves?				
17. Are you afraid others will look down on you if you do not work hard?				
18. Do you get agitated if you are not in control of the situation?				
19. Do you use the term 'I have to ...' or 'I must ...' a lot?				
20. Are you afraid of rejection, criticism, failure and/or mistakes?				
21. Do you want to prove yourself and leave something behind?				
22. Do you try to get more work done by multitasking?				
23. Do you get annoyed when people ask you to stop working?				
24. Have your long workdays negatively affected your health?				
25. Have your long workdays negatively affected your relationships?				
26. Do you think about work or outstanding tasks while you drive, talk, listen, go to sleep?				
27. Do you wake up at night thinking about work?				
28. Do you feel restless if you have to wait for something or someone, or if you have nothing to do for a moment? Do you then have the impression that you are running in circles?				

29. Do you get the feeling that you are a slave to your emails, your computer or another form of technology?				
30. Do you think results matter more than the work process?				
31. Do you spend a lot of time planning and determining future projects?				
32. Do you struggle to find a work-life balance?				
33. Do people sometimes comment on how hard you work?				
34. Do you think it is essential to see the results of your work?				
35. Do you work longer hours than your co-workers?				
36. Do you have trouble forgiving your own mistakes?				
37. Do you agree to new projects without knowing all the elements?				
38. Do you get agitated if others do not comply with your standards?				
39. Does everything take too long in your opinion?				
40. Are you very motivated or driven?				
TOTAL NUMBER OF X'S				
	x1	x10	x50	x100
TOTAL				
END TOTAL				

Count the number of X's per column and write down the total number of X's. Multiply your score as indicated, and you get your total per column. Now add everything together and you get your end total. Read your speed based on your points. 100 points equals 100 kilometers per hour.

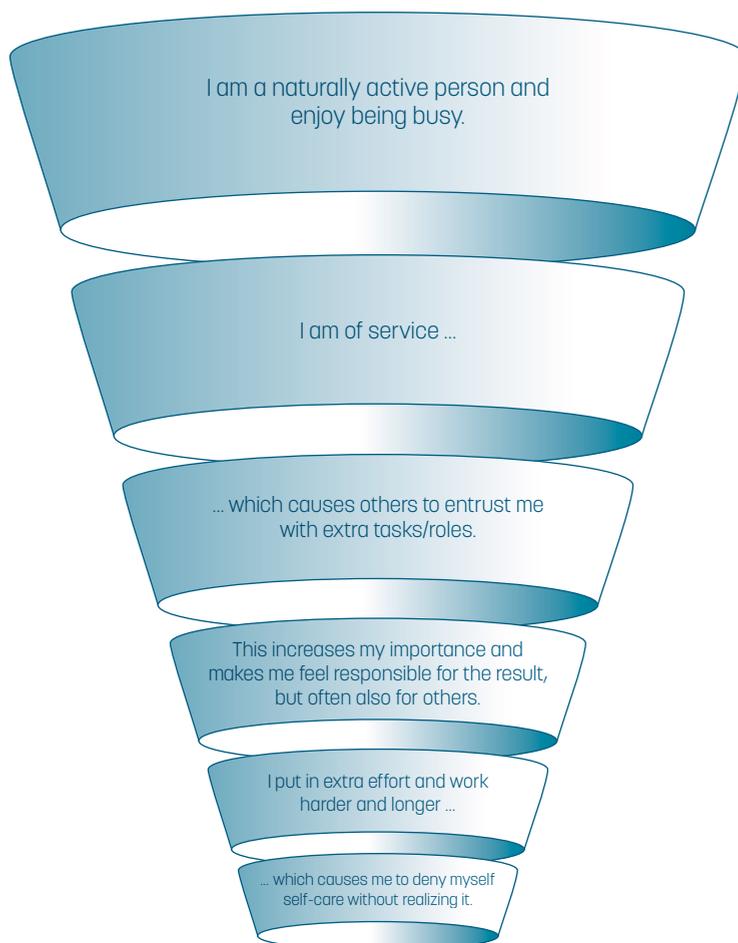
- **up to 399 km/hr:** hard work is not an issue. Take care not to underestimate the amount of hard work that you do. In other words, be very aware of how you characterize how hard you work.
- **400 km/hr to 999 km/hr:** you exhibit hard work behavior in particular circumstances. However, you know how to slow down, so your velocity remains acceptable. But be warned that the hard work indicator is merely that, an indicator. We need to consider the degree of difference between you and your colleagues to accurately classify how hard you work. For example, if you work four hours more each day than your co-workers, your speed will be higher than if you work two hours more.

- **1.000 km/hr to 1.999 km/hr:** you flirt with the limit of hard work. Sometimes you are under the threshold, and sometimes you are over it.
- **2.000 km/hr to 3.999 km/hr:** you are over the limit of working hard. You work hard at different times, in different circumstances or over more extended periods.
- **4.000 km/hr:** you are in overdrive. Your health could be in grave danger.

This brings us to the second question: when does working hard become working too hard? Hard workers work hard, yes, but they rarely acknowledge that they work too hard. The arguments? 'I work a lot, but not that much', or 'I might work hard, but I am not overdoing it, work is not drudgery, I am not bending over backwards'. You might believe that it is not a crime to work hard and that on a relative basis, you do not work as hard as many other people. In fact, most people do actually believe that working too hard is crazy, but often they do not recognize this behavior in themselves. You can get an indication of how your work habits compare with those of most people to gain insights into the relative risks you are exposing yourself to as a hard worker. The goal is to help you to face reality. If you are working above the 1.000 km/hr limit, you are working too hard and exposing yourself to avoidable risks to your health and overall quality of life. A limit is a limit!

Let me illustrate this principle with an example. After a coaching session, I listened to a voicemail I had received from a local police department, stating that I had driven too fast and asking me to contact them. I panicked, surely, I had been driving way beyond the limit. In my panic, I imagined the worst. I called them immediately and asked about my speed. The answer? 51 kilometers an hour, rounded off, where 50 was allowed. I burst out laughing in a combination of relief and frustration and asked, 'Why all the fuss? I wasn't really speeding.' The answer was witty: 'If we agreed with that reasoning, no one would be, ma'am.' They were right, of course. Sometimes, a clear line is needed.

You can always find excuses to add another minute, hour, day or week to your hard work limit. For example, perhaps you are determined to go home early one Friday, but a critical email arrives just as you are preparing to leave. You think, 'Oh well, it will only take a minute to reply.' You look at your watch and see that it is again 7 pm. 'At least I will not get stuck in traffic, I will have dealt with that issue and earned my weekend', you tell yourself. But there are still traffic jams on the way home. You receive a reply to your email on Saturday morning, and you feel compelled to respond. You are trapped in a vicious cycle that goes something like this:



Hard workers often feel responsible for tasks outside their control. You do not just work hard; you also attract it, seek it out or create it. You look for it, entice it, you even create work. My question to you is: do you *have to*, or do you *want to*?

I coach the employees of an IT-department at a retailer. Tom, one of the project leaders, told me he was too busy. During the day, his life was dictated by his calendar, emails and meetings. In the evening, his life was dictated by his son, whom he helped with his homework. Each evening he spent at least two hours making mind maps, overviews and summaries for his son. I looked at him questioningly. 'My son has trouble studying and helping him succeed is my job as his father, right?', Tom replied, 'There's nothing wrong with that, no?'

If you consciously choose all the tasks on your calendar, there is little wrong with that. But often that is not the case. Hard workers display specific patterns of behavior and set ways of thinking, often automatically taking responsibility for projects that are not theirs and exceeding their limits. When others question this behavior, hard workers can become defensive or even aggressive.

Hard workers exceed responsibilities and limits. Exceeding the limit of your time, energy and responsibility can arise because of a particular situation, the time of day, your mood, and many other things. Eight hour days can easily stretch into twelve. My coachees offer many different rationalizations. These include: 'Others do it too', or 'It is impossible not to work hard with a boss like mine', or 'Checking my emails over the weekend eases my mind', or, my favorite, 'Working hard is normal'. I do not accept any of these excuses. Not from myself, not from my coachees and not from you. Comforting ourselves, making excuses for, or defending our actions is human nature. We all hope that what we do has meaning and is the right thing to do. But we often behave automatically, without questioning ourselves. Have you finished making excuses for overdoing it at work and can we agree that too hard is always too hard? Can you accept that from the moment that you start working too hard, you need additional training, just like fighter pilots? Deal? Then we can move on.