

To Get Ahead, Use Your Head by Harvey Mackay

I'm the last person in the world who would tell you not to work hard. I'm also the first one to remind you that working hard must also be tempered by working smart, or you might just be wasting a load of effort. There is a reason why we were born with both muscles and brains.

Consider the story of two lumberjacks in a tree-cutting contest. Both were strong and determined, hoping to win the prize. But one was hardworking and ambitious, chopping down every tree in his path at the fastest pace possible, while the other appeared to be a little more laid back, methodically felling trees and pacing himself. The go-getter worked all day, skipping his lunch break, expecting that his superior effort would be rewarded. His opponent, however, took an hour-long lunch and then resumed his steady pace. In the end, the eager beaver was dismayed to lose to his "lazier" competition. Thinking he deserved to win after his hard work, he finally approached his opponent and said, "I just don't understand. I worked longer and harder than you, and went hungry to get ahead. You took a break, and yet you still won. It just doesn't seem fair. Where did I go wrong?" The winner responded, "While I was taking my lunch break, I was sharpening my ax."

Hard work will always pay off; smart work will pay better. Remember back in college, there were the kids who studied all day and all night, but still struggled to pass exams? Then there were the kids who studied hard but also found time for a game of cards or basketball, and still aced every test. Both groups studied the same material, attended the same lectures taught by the same professors, and took the same test. Was the second group just that much more brilliant? Maybe, but my money's on the way they approached their material and learned how to study. If they were smart, they applied those same principles after graduation: work hard, but work smart.

That's a lesson that can be learned by even young children. A little girl visiting a watermelon farm asked the farmer how much a large watermelon cost. "Three dollars," he told her. "But I only have thirty cents," the little girl said. The farmer looked around his field, and feeling sorry for the little girl, pointed at a small watermelon and said, "That one's thirty cents." "Oh good," she replied as she paid him, "Just leave it on the vine and I'll be back in a month to get it."

Call it creativity, call it ingenuity, call it whatever: I call it using your head. Knowing how to analyze a situation and how to execute an action plan will put you ahead of the game in the long run. There's nothing wrong with having a leg up on your competition—it's how you win. The combination of hard work and smart work is the formula for success. Think about what needs to be done, and then think again about the best way to accomplish it—not necessarily the way you've always done it, or the fastest way, and certainly not the hardest way. Never make work harder than it has to be. That's just a colossal waste of time.

Perhaps the ingenuity award goes to the fellow who came to the Canadian border on his motorcycle, carrying two saddlebags strapped across his seat. The border guards asked the obvious question, "What's in your saddlebags?" "Rocks," was the reply. So the guards emptied the bags to check out his story. Sure enough, all they found were rocks. So they sent him on his way. The next week, the same fellow came to the crossing, again on a motorcycle, again with the same payload. The guards checked once again, and found more rocks. Off he went. The scene repeated itself weekly for several months, until finally the guards couldn't stand it any longer. "We know you are smuggling something across the border, but every time we inspect your saddlebags we find only rocks. Please tell us what you are up to, and we promise not to turn you in."

"Well," the fellow replied, "It's really very simple. I'm smuggling stolen motorcycles."

Mackay's Moral: It's good to work hard. It's great to work smart. But it's best to work hard and smart.