

Priming Students for Success through Energy Management: The Balancing Act

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ABSTRACT

University students are increasingly more involved as they juggle managing life away from family, making time for coursework, organizational commitments, and social engagements as well as, for many, holding full-time jobs. At a time when students' lives are more intense than ever, many are at a distinct disadvantage because of inadequate energy management. Unfortunately, 74 percent of today's employees are not maintaining optimal energy across physical, emotional, mental and spiritual dimensions, according to The Energy Project. This paper describes a method to prime students for enhanced energy management through self-awareness, self-analysis, reflection, intervention and plan for change.

Keywords: Business Education, Energy Audit, Student Success

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INTRODUCTION

As technology prompts ever more rapid change, our daily demands intensify because of the speed in which our lives must move. The average worker today experiences “constant distraction and task switching. The results are perpetual stress and being busy instead of being productive” (Thomas, 2016). News reports of company mergers, downsizing, and reorganizing promise changing job responsibilities for individual workers. As a result, employees extend working hours in an effort to maximize performance. Time management is sought by many as a way to achieve new and extended performance goals. Thus, training in time management with daily, weekly, and monthly to-do lists promise skills for enhancing performance in both personal and professional endeavors.

However, Loehr and Schwartz, along with colleagues in The Energy Project, encourage us to manage our energy, not our time (Loehr & Schwartz, 2001; Loehr & Schwartz, 2003; Schwartz, 2010; Schwartz & McCarthy, 2007). Schwartz and McCarthy (2007) posit that “managing energy, not time, is the key to enduring high performance as well as to health, happiness, and life balance. Whereas our time is limited and finite, energy can be renewed via four main wellsprings in human beings: the body, emotions, mind, and spirit” (p. 2). Thus, individuals can renew and expand their energy sources, resulting in maximized performance and enhanced quality of life (Loehr & Schwartz, 2003; Schwartz and McCarthy, 2007). Wamp (2009) also promotes a culture of movement and recovery to manage our energy at optimal levels. Unfortunately, 74 percent of today’s employees are not maintaining optimal energy across physical, emotional, mental and spiritual dimensions (The Energy Project, 2017).

The study of how energy is expended and replenished in expert performance of musicians was conducted in 1993 by Anders Ericsson and colleagues. Loehr and Schwartz applied this idea of the relationship between intense practice and intermittent rest into the sports arena, focusing on performance of athletes. They worked on the belief that “if sustainable great performance requires a rhythmic movement between activity and rest, it also depends on tapping multiple sources of energy” (Schwartz, 2010, p. 7). Spritzer and Grant (2012) operationalized energy management to integrate into the business curriculum as a way of enhancing student success. In academia, we want our graduates to enter their careers with the technical knowledge for their fields as well as some breadth of knowledge across the arts and sciences. At the same time, we are becoming cognizant of the importance of energy management as one competitive advantage that sets students apart from peers in work/life balance and career advancement.

Drawing from the work by Loehr and Schwartz, Spreitzer and Grant introduced energy management into the classroom stating that “the more we can help students develop healthy habits around energy while still in school, the better we can help them sustain their energy for high performance for a lifetime” (2012, p 16). Building on Spreitzer and Grant’s work (2012), this paper describes one way to prime students for enhanced energy management through self-awareness, self-analysis, reflection, intervention, and plan for change. An energy assessment was added at the beginning and end of this project so students could self-assess personal energy management habits.

ENERGY MANAGEMENT

Optimal energy management results when our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual energies are maximized (Schwartz and McCarthy 2007). The following is a description of each of the four sources (dimensions) of energy management.

Physical Energy

Physical energy should be the introduction that students have to energy management. It is important to start with the explanation of physical energy, the basis of energy maintenance, so students can build upon a foundation in which they can both quickly and personally identify. As we expect our bodies to produce our core energy, we often associate levels of sleep, balanced nutrition, and regular exercise as positive fuels for our consistent and heightened energy levels. There are many factors that inhibit students from maintaining physical energy. These include academic and work-related responsibilities, social schedules, improper nutrition, lack of sleep, and lack of motivation. Possible negative results from a lack of physical energy could be decreased hours of sleep as well as attention to physical fitness. Making students aware of their current levels of physical energy as well as how they can regulate this important dimension can assist them in minimizing a possible crash and burn.

Emotional Energy

Emotional energy requires students to view each day an opportunity to better the world around them. While our bodies produce our physical energy to maximize our movement, emotional energy levels help us to sustain our motivation by building enthusiasm for what we are accomplishing throughout our daily routine. Students can combat the negatives of the day by changing their mindset to a positive one filled with the motivation and inspiration needed to complete the tasks of the day. Challenging themselves to start the day with a positive disposition and move successfully throughout the day will allow students to increase their self-awareness of their energy levels in times of negativity, depression, and stress. Once students realize the difference between energy levels, they can utilize positive emotional energy to help regulate their productivity.

Mental Energy

Mental energy is a dimension that directly connects to a student's ability to stay focused, retain information, and be productive in the moment. With attention spans decreasing and levels of focus negatively impacted by multi-media and increased out-of-class stimulation, the ability to increase mental energy is imperative to the success of today's students. Students can combat low mental energy levels by setting short-term and long-term goals for their productivity, only focusing on a single task at a time (decreasing the amount of multi-tasking), taking the time to write notes and making scheduled times to take short breaks once goals have been met. Making students aware of their mental energy levels and how to regulate mental energy can help them to achieve increased levels of success through studying and work completion.

Spiritual Energy

Spiritual energy is having the ability to be mindful and thankful for all that one has accomplished throughout the day. As students find that the roller-coaster of their day will lead them through both controlled and non-controlled levels of energy, it is important that they are reflective of the day's activities. Tools for success such as gratitude journals, self-talk, listing three positive things that happened during the day, meditation, and praying all assist in the documentation, communication, and application of increased spiritual energy. Making students aware of their current levels of spiritual energy and how to maintain their positivity throughout the day will help increase levels of presence and gratefulness.

PRIMING STUDENTS FOR ENHANCED ENERGY MANAGEMENT

In this current study, undergraduate students taking the Introduction to Business class were introduced to the concept of energy management through a series of short (15-20 minute) assessments, conversations, and activities. The five-phases of integrating energy management into the curriculum included an energy assessment, energy audit, reflection, intervention, and post-energy assessment.

Phase One: Self-Awareness

Before introducing students to ways in which they can enhance their energy management, a "trigger" activity was used to build buy in to the energy management project. Each student completed an energy self-assessment in order to make them aware of their current energy management practices. Students assessed their current levels of managing physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual energy. Students also self-reported on resources available to them, their level of sleep, and general basic demographics. In general, students found this energy assessment to be a "trigger" that engaged their interest in energy management and fostered commitment to participate in the energy management program.

Phase Two: Self-Analysis

The second phase (self-analysis) encouraged students to track their own individual energy during a 48-hour period of time. This tool, the Energy Audit (Spritzer and Grant (2012)), encouraged students to identify their energy levels and to increase their self-awareness, documenting highs and lows in their energy levels. Spritzer and Grant (2012) found that the Energy Audit was effective and had a positive long-term effect on students. Students tracked their energy levels (from 1-10 with 10 being the highest) every hour during the two-day period. Because students were well aware that this intense personal documentation process would take a great deal more time than the normal class activities, this activity replaced the traditional homework assignment for this two-day period. When the Energy Audit was introduced, students brainstormed ways in which to stay on target. While some students suggested electronic reminders, others agreed to remind each other as a team, and as a whole, the class agreed that at certain periods throughout the day, they would do their best to remember to track their energy – even filling in the times that they missed if they fell behind in the activity.

Phase Three: Reflection

Phase three (reflection) was conducted following the two-day energy audit process. The class discussion primarily consisted of the challenges and/or ease of collecting the personal data. Students, while sharing their experiences, concluded that the directive was not as negative as they thought it would be and that it was interesting to see the final results. One student stated that "the energy audit made me realize that without defined goals, my energy levels plummeted, which usually occurred in the early afternoon." Many cited spikes in their energy around mealtimes and social times with their peers. Follow-up conversations about energy management during this class period also evolved into a narrative about health habits, time management, prioritization, and best practices for repeating the experiment.

Phase Four: Intervention

The fourth phase (intervention) consisted of the energy management and energy management intervention. This portion of the activity gave the students tools needed to increase their ability to maximize their energy management. The in-class lecture explained the four dimensions of energy management, including physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual energies. Students gave examples of each category, citing ways in which they could increase their own personal energy levels. A pre-written checklist was given to the students that highlighted specific ideas and examples of how they could demonstrate the four dimensions of energy management in their own lives. After reading the bulleted items, students were encouraged to come up with their own ideas for how to "bring their energy to life." Conversations extended to include ideas for being more productive in managing their energy for a more successful personal and professional life.

Phase Five: Plan for Change

The fifth and final phase (plan for change) consisted of the post-project energy assessment and requested documentation of their self-developed plan for increased personal energy management. After completing their energy self-assessment, students were asked to write a one-page summary of their own energy management habits. One student typifies the groups' general reaction. She planned "to begin to exercise and start to eat healthier in order to get my energy levels back to where they used to be while starting to eat healthier. In addition, I plan on doing things that I genuinely liked to do in my spare time." Student conversations, overall, were very positive about the energy management project.

ROADBLOCKS TO ENERGY MANAGEMENT PROJECT SUCCESS

The time it takes students to reach success in developing a habit is 66 days, according to one researcher (Lally, et al., 2010). Unfortunately, we as educators, do not often have the luxury of interacting with our students frequently enough to make sure that they are maintaining their healthy habits. Throughout a semester, while the students are enrolled approximately 100 days, we might only interact with the students anywhere from 20-30 times depending on if we see them two or three times a week in class (minus breaks and holidays). As previously, students are constantly being bombarded with stimuli from various areas, resulting in competition for their

time and energy. Expectations (self-imposed as well as societal) via multi-tasking, social media, and managing a work/life/school balance create a need for the importance of forming healthy habits. Using the classroom to empower students to manage their energy levels is crucial in helping them achieve next-level awareness.

Students who did not utilize their own technology, such as phones or their computers, to remind them of their time tracking agreed that it would be easier to be more accurate with technological assistance. Students were instructed on how they could create their own energy-audit tool, using either Microsoft Word or Excel. They were given flexibility with their variables, such as the number of days and also the frequency of their tracking. Upon further discussion, some students suggested tracking their energy when they were actually cognizant of a significant change in energy, thus changing the documentation from a consistent narrative to one reactionary in nature. Students were encouraged to continue using their customized tool in any way that they thought would be productive to their success in energy management.

Eating habits are also a factor to take into consideration when discussing the success of the energy audit. In a world where students are eating protein bars from vending machines, coffee and energy drinks are the (daytime) consumed beverage of choice, and organic options are not always available, students without the ability to manage their own long-term energy levels through the four dimensions might turn to sugar, chemicals, and other aides to help boost their short-term energy levels to achieve what they think is productivity. While taking the energy audit, for example, students often “self-medicated” their low energy level with either an energy drink or sugary food, not thinking about the future consequences (the crash in an hour) that their quick fix was going to have on their energy levels.

Dedication to the completion of the project, time-management, and data collection self-imposed reminders could also be considered limitations to the study. As the current energy audit is a honor-based, hand-written, and self-regulated activity, we must assume that the assignment was honestly and thoughtfully completed by the student, given the parameters of the project. Since students were asked to given hourly updates, one must assume that, unless students set an alarm on their computers or phones to remind them to log their data, there would be times in which some would forget and then would have to go back and complete the data at a later time. This might result in lapses in memory and incomplete data. Suggestions on transforming the study to one that was digital was brought up throughout the process, but after personally interacting with the students throughout their journey, retreating inward to a digital experience would not be as collectively rewarding for the classroom, nor for the instructor.

CONCLUSION

In order to trigger students' interest in energy management, this research furthered the previous work of Spreitzer and Grant (2012) by including a self-assessed energy measurement at the beginning of the project and at the conclusion of the project. At the onset, taking a self-assessment at the beginning of the project acted as a “trigger” to obtain buy-in to engage fully in the energy management project. The final self-assessment, then, aimed to measure changes in self-reported best practices. By introducing students to the concepts of energy management through self-awareness, self-analysis, reflection, intervention, and plan for change, they became more aware of the importance of balancing the expending and replenishing of their energy for maximum performance.

This initial entry into introducing energy management within the freshman business curriculum shows that students can connect with the need for energy management and are, in fact, eager to utilize the tools available to them. From the beginning of the semester to the turning in of their final survey and future plan, students were engaged in the process of learning more about how they could maximize their success and productivity. Through the five phases (self-awareness, self-analysis, reflection, intervention, and plan for change) of activities, lectures, and measurements, students seemed to be interested, inquisitive, and even enthusiastic about learning more about themselves and how they could improve their own energy management. Future statistical analysis of the initial and final energy self-assessments might substantiate that energy management could be an important additional concept within the business curriculum.

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