

Boasting about how many hours you work is a sign of failure

5-6 minutes

Talking about how many hours you work is not impressive. Far from being an indication of industrious achievements or alpha status, it should be seen as a professionally embarrassing sign that, quite frankly, you have nothing else to boast about.

Showing off about overwork is now so ubiquitous it's difficult to remember a time when lack of sleep and hours spent at the office weren't talked of with a puff of pride. "We just maximize every hour we can, however we can do it," Twitter executive chairman Omid Kordestani [told the Wall Street Journal \(paywall\)](#) in 2015, explaining that he became chief executive Jack Dorsey's driver so they could talk business as they commute. "When you hear the so-called apocryphal stories about Tim Cook coming to work in the wee hours and staying late," Don Melton, who started Apple's Safari, [told Debug podcast in 2014](#), "it's not just some PR person telling you stories to make you think that Apple executives work really hard like that. They really do that." And, of course, just last month, the [patron saint of work boasts](#), Tesla chief executive Elon Musk, [declared](#) that "nobody ever changed the world on 40 hours a week." Musk said in November that he worked [120-hour weeks](#), and on Twitter claimed that 80 to 100 hours per week is [necessary to change the world](#).

As countless studies have shown, this simply isn't true. Productivity [dramatically decreases](#) with longer work hours, and completely drops off once people reach [55 hours of work a week](#), to the point that, on average, someone working 70 hours in a week achieves no more than a colleague working 15 fewer hours.

The massive, obvious counterpoint to Musk's boasts is that, despite working more than 17 hours a day for weeks on end, Musk hasn't yet changed the world. Not in a real, meaningful sense that will be remembered for generations to come like, say, biologist Charles Darwin, who [worked four hours a day](#), or United States founding father Benjamin Franklin, who was strict about [calling it a day after eight hours or work](#). Sure, Tesla was [ahead of the curve](#) on getting the auto industry to go electric but, as Geoffrey James notes in [Inc](#), AltaVista was the first ever search engine and no one says "let me AltaVista that for you." It'll be pretty good going if Tesla manages to make electric cars affordable and replace internal-combustion engines entirely, but that hasn't happened yet. Similarly, SpaceX has made rockets cheaper, which opens up a lot of opportunities, but we've yet to see the consequences. If Musk eventually manages to create a colony on Mars then that, of course, would be world-changing—but I suspect we'd then hear a lot less about how he skips breakfast or doesn't get much sleep, because Musk would have something far more impressive to boast about.

Most people don't have such lofty goals as Musk. But the same principle applies to all those business people and media types who just can't stop banging on and on about how much they do: If they'd actually done something truly, astoundingly

brilliant, they wouldn't need to talk about their work ethic to assert their worth. The account executive who trebles a company's income is indisputably a huge asset, and no boss will care if they leave work at 5pm and take lengthy lunch breaks while managing to achieve these results. The same goes for best-selling authors, world-class scientists, and revolutionary politicians: If you achieve stupendous goals, that's all that matters.

It's only when your results are pretty good—a decent sales record, or a few good papers published—that work ethic is over-emphasized as an indication of value. Or, if you're failing to produce quality results, then there's even more of a need to exaggerate working hours as evidence that if someone with your incessant-devotion-to-work and lack-of-personal-life can't achieve major results, then *no one* can. It's effectively an excuse masquerading as a boast.

Why though, if we know more work doesn't lead to better results, does anyone perceive overworking as “good”? Western society came to see work as virtuous [thanks to Christian notions](#) that work—and, in particular, work that involves suffering—is a noble endeavor that brings people closer to God. Though the religious overtones have since been abandoned, long working hours have retained their status as a token of worth. When Musk says you can only change the world if you work 80 hours a week, he's not presenting a serious argument, but is making a moral assertion that working more is inherently good. And so, those who boast about work are inadvertently revealing their devotion to an outdated and thoughtless principle. True world leaders don't need to prove their value by emphasizing their

slavish devotion to work. They have better things to do.