

CAPITAL BUSINESS

Career Coach: Why you should slow down and enjoy your coffee

By J. Gerald Suarez

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I had finished a series of lectures in Spain and was eager to head back to the United States to catch up on work. I should've taken a few days off for sightseeing, but this overpowering need to remain busy prevented me from indulging in some downtime and the chance to enjoy Spain.

I arrived at the Asturias regional airport, rushing from curbside to cafeteria to grab a cup of coffee and keep heading for the terminal.

"One large coffee to go, please," I ordered.

Greatly astonished, the waiter replied, "To go where, sir?"

"To the terminal!"

He pointed to it and said, "What's the hurry? The airplane isn't even here yet."

"I have work to do." Why was I explaining my life to this guy?

He smiled. "You should slow down and enjoy your coffee. Work will always be there."

I was annoyed by this intervention, unable to appreciate the wisdom of what he said. I made clear again my desire to take the coffee with me. He said I couldn't do it. "We do not have disposable cups, so you have to drink it here." He brought me the cup of coffee and, much to my surprise, a pastry. "On the house!" he said. He knew he would have the last word. "Drink your coffee, eat your pastry, enjoy your life."

I never forgot that encounter. I thought about how much I had traveled in my career and how little I had actually seen. Always moving onto the next thing, preoccupied with the next commitment. When you spend your life in boardrooms or classrooms, you might as well be in any country, I realized.

In the “gotta-go, gotta-do” environment in which we live, it’s easy to overcommit and confuse speed with progress and activity with advancement. Technological clutter makes it even more difficult to disengage. We multitask because our digital world allows us to, but are we really getting more done? Scientists have learned that as we multitask, we do each task more poorly than if we had tackled each one by itself, and those who multitask the most do the worst. One step forward, two back. We confuse means with ends, progressively eroding our sense of purpose and mission.

What would happen if we broke this pattern of busyness? Take a minute to reflect on the pace and busyness of your own life. To do this, find a quiet place. Imagine you are on a speeding train. You see the blur of tree branches outside as they whiz past, and a line of graffiti that blends into one. As the train continues, you pass neighborhoods and towns, each a dot that appears and disappears as you barrel ahead.

Picture this train as a metaphor for your life. Look out the window and think about what you see. Do you appreciate the views? Do you feel as though you are gaining ground on the week’s bombardment of meetings, deadlines, emails, voice mail, texting, phone calls, and engagements? Is it a feeling of satisfaction, of fulfillment? Of validation for all your hard work? Or do you feel overwhelmed, knowing next week will be the same? Now, look around you. Do you recognize those riding with you? Are you in good company?

Unfortunately, many people are riding fast on the wrong train. They are making “good time” in terms of earnings, promotions, and status, but are no longer thinking about the basic questions that would reassure them of the rightness of their direction. As the speed of the train—their life—gains momentum, they surrender to the flow.

We are seldom in the moment. William Wordsworth wrote about this in a poem that begins, “The world is too much with us; late and soon, Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers; Little we see in Nature that is ours.” It is very hard to slow down and reflect on what is going on because demands for our time and our energy don’t diminish.

Slowing down requires recognition that it’s important to do so. Instead of sitting as a passenger on a speeding train, we need to become the engineer. As we slow the train down, the images out the window are no longer a blur, but landscapes of our own creation, that speak to our goals, aspirations, and purpose.

If the “train” we are on is not going to get us there, then we may even decide that the best thing to do is hop off at the next station. It is there that we can begin the act of deep reflection, of pursuing what matters most to us.

I am not suggesting abandonment of our responsibilities. I am suggesting creating a mental space every day, the equivalent of a train stop that will bring renewed perspective to what we do and why we are doing it. Then we can re-board, knowing this will be the ride we will enjoy the most. This is, after all, the ride of our life.

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