

Understanding The Three-Hour Work Cycle

Written by [Maren Schmidt](#) on March 13th, 2016



Tired and agitated, Sara got ready for bed. What had happened to the day? She had woken up fresh that morning, ready to have a productive day.

During breakfast, Sara's assistant had called to alert Sara that she wouldn't be in to copy the reports for the next day's meeting. When Sara went to make copies of her presentation, the toner cartridge was low, the paper jammed and the machine ran out of staples. When Sara reviewed the copies, page 17 had been skipped by the machine. Sara's lunch appointment cancelled while Sara was waiting in the restaurant. After lunch, she couldn't get online to do some research. Then Ron, a co-worker, came in and complained about his weekend for half an hour.

What went wrong with Sara's day? Sara was unable to get a work cycle completed.

A work cycle consists of selecting an activity, doing it, achieving some internal satisfaction for the work and then selecting the next task.

When we experience this cycle of "choose-do-return to order-satisfaction, then choose again," we create a powerful success cycle with feelings of accomplishment and contentment.

When we are having a productive work cycle, we'll say we are "on a roll." We go from task to task, choosing progressively harder tasks as time allows. On those high-achieving days, we feel unstoppable.

Then there are the days when we get off to fits and starts because we are interrupted, don't have enough time to complete a task before another commitment or lack the necessary supplies. How that trip to the hardware store can sabotage the best efforts for a productive workday!

Most of us, even small children, have a built-in three-hour work cycle. We might contrast and compare it to our sleep cycle. When we know we have at least three hours of uninterrupted time, we will tackle a multitude of jobs and enjoy doing it. If our time is interrupted, we may

not even try to start anything. "It's not worth the effort," or "I don't feel like doing anything," we might say. Sound familiar?

When given a regular three-hour period, children (and adults) learn to tap into a success cycle. After accomplishing a series of short and familiar tasks in a 90-minute time frame, a child will choose a task that is challenging and represents "true learning." At this 90-minute mark there is a period of restlessness that lasts about ten minutes, until the choice for the challenging activity is made. The new activity may last for 60 to 90 minutes.

Here's an example of a recent Saturday morning three-hour work cycle for me. Not very glamorous, but I was on a roll.

- Clean kitchen, 15 minutes.
- Start laundry, 15 minutes.
- Make phone calls for appointments, 20 minutes.
- Vacuum, 20 minutes. Feeling of restlessness. What should I do next?
- Cup of coffee, 10 minutes.
- Balance bank statements and pay bills, 90 minutes.

Here's an example of a four-and-a-half-year-old's work cycle that I recently observed.

- Work puzzle, 10 minutes.
- Build with blocks, 15 minutes.
- Water plants, 20 minutes.
- Sweep floor, 10 minutes.
- Number counting cards, 15 minutes.
- Walk up and down steps, 5 minutes.
- Talk with dad, 10 minutes.
- Do 100-piece puzzle, 45 minutes.
- Practice tying shoes, 45 minutes.

When we have achieved a three-hour work cycle, normally we are eager to begin the next cycle. Productive adults have two to four work cycles a day. Children under the age of five usually have one work cycle a day. Around five, children will start a second work cycle if given the opportunity.

The gift of uninterrupted time gives us, children and adults, the opportunity to engage in our own powerful three-hour work cycles, creating personal success in learning, concentration and independence.