

# Living Well

## Start up, chill out

Keeping your cool in the face of the pressure of starting a business can be difficult, but it is a great ally in achieving success.

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# BRW. *upstarts*

ZAC SWINDELLS and CHRIS  
MONCHING: Time management  
is the key.  
Image: Paul Jones

Founding a successful start-up business is a tremendous achievement, but the personal costs can be huge. Surviving the long days spent in the office, the weekends answering e-mails, the late nights sorting out crises and the constant pressure to put food on the table, and money in the bank, can take their toll. It is little wonder that almost 30% of *BRW's Upstarts* say they have suffered from start-up burnout. But with a little planning, a little determination - and perhaps a handful of vitamin pills - it is possible to beat burnout.

The co-founder of the wholesale internet services provider ispOne, Zac Swindells, says the typical burnout found in people in start-up businesses stems from the feeling of being overwhelmed with the intricacies of running a business. He says: "There is a lot of pressure to make your business a success." Long hours are mandatory. Because of a lack of funding, start-ups are almost always understaffed resulting in founders taking on heavy workloads and multiple roles. "I was wearing several different hats," Swindells says. "I was chief financial officer, chief executive officer, chief technology officer, the accountant and the lawyer."

Many entrepreneurs start their own business because they are looking for a change of pace, but Swindells says there is little time to relax. Most of *BRW's Upstarts* work between 51-60 hours a week (or between 10.2-12 hours a day in a standard five-day week). About 15% work 71-90

hours a week, and only three founders work less than 40 hours a week. This sort of commitment takes a huge personal toll. A little more than 15% of *Upstarts* believe their company has adversely affected their health or personal life. Not surprisingly, more than half say they do not see their loved ones enough.

Swindells says it is impossible to prevent burnout, but there are many simple ways to reduce it. He believes time management is the key - carefully organising your day to ensure that you make time for work and time for the other parts of your life. "You've got to have the balance - the work, rest and play. Otherwise your body will break down physically, mentally and emotionally." One trick he has learnt is to plan each work day. "I think the first thing you should do each morning is to take a clean sheet of paper and write down what you need to do. Tick them off as you go, and at the end of the day you will have a sense of accomplishment. It's a small step, but starting a business is all about taking small steps, then bigger steps and then running."

An Adelaide business coach, Richard Levy, nominates personal disorganisation and procrastination as two of the biggest causes of burnout, simply because they cause work to pile up. He says entrepreneurs who want to avoid burnout should write a plan and stick to it - even if it means leaving work unfinished. "It's about getting a life, really. If you have to go home at six o'clock, then go home at six o'clock."

Some other simple methods include not taking work home or, if you are unable or unwilling to do that, at least disconnecting home and the office. Swindells says: "As soon as I get home, the phone goes down and I don't look at the internet. With all the best intentions, you'll never stop thinking about your business. But you've got to look after yourself and your family."

Levy says having interests outside work is the key to minimising burnout. "Most of the burnout that I see happens just because the person doesn't have a life." He recommends breaking the day down into set periods - focused time, where you are working intensely; free time, when you are not even thinking about work; and middle time, when you are doing low-intensity preparatory work.

### **Spread the load**

For many *Upstarts*, the solution to burnout has been to employ more staff to share the load. Of course, many young companies lack the resources for hiring and need to seek lower-cost alternatives. Swindells says outsourcing parts of a business, particularly technical areas such as accounting or legal matters, is a big help. "You don't have to employ people full time. Get a group of good people behind you."

Another solution that worked during ispOne's start-up phase was to outsource the answering of inbound calls and create what Swindells calls a virtual office. Under the arrangement, customers would ring into a call centre operated by a third party and their messages were then passed to ispOne. The important thing was that Swindells and his co-founder, Chris Monching, were not stuck answering phones all day. Instead, they could return the calls in their own time and were better able to prioritise their customers and plan their day. The added bonus of a virtual office arrangement is that it gives potential customers the impression that your company is far bigger than it actually is. "It is very simple and pretty cheap to do, and the perception of your company in the market place will be great," he says.

Robin Sinclair and Ruby Lampard, the founders of the direct marketing company The Blue Group, also sought outside assistance to help cure their burnout. During the first 12 months of the business, they fell into the trap of accepting every job they could get, regardless of size. Lampard says: "What we ended up with was a lot of little bits of work. After two years, we were working really long hours, but not making much money."

Since a business coach helped refocus the business and advised the pair to concentrate on a few large clients, Lampard and Sinclair have been able to take regular holidays and their hours have decreased. They eventually hope to work nine-day fortnights or take at least one day off each month.

Kirsten MacKelden, the founder of Indigo Media Group and publisher of the bridal magazine *Real Weddings*, suffered a severe case of burnout during the start-up phase of the business she runs with her husband, Toby. A lack of staff, an acute fear of failure and a cashflow crisis meant MacKelden was working long hours and travelling constantly to sell advertising.

She started to miss meals and drank too much coffee. Soon she had shed 10 kilograms and noticed she was developing the shakes. She went to the doctor and was told that stress was depleting her body of vitamin B. "And the very thing you need to combat stress is vitamin B, so it's a vicious cycle," MacKelden says. She now takes a vitamin B supplement pill each morning and has also used a homeopathic flower spray as a natural calming agent.

Another of MacKelden's suggestions to combat burnout is to discuss problems with a spouse or partner, just to get them off your chest. "If you keep things to yourself, you can build mountains out of molehills." MacKelden and her husband take at least two trips away each year (although they will write about these trips in the magazine) to recharge and plan. She has also found that burnout has become less of a problem since she had a child. "There's nothing like a two-year-old to put your life and your business back into perspective."

The principals of start-up businesses may think they have to tough it out, as their business demands their full attention. But they need to remember that they may be doing their company more harm than good. A founder who is little more than a worn-out zombie is prone to making mistakes, which will only lead to more stress and burnout. Zac Swindells says he became more efficient, more productive and a clearer thinker once he decided to restore his work-life balance. "It allows you to put more back into the business if you are refreshed and firing."

## **Prevention plan**

### *Manage time*

Start each morning with a blank sheet of paper and write a plan for the day. Make time for work, exercise, spending time with the family and relaxing.

### *Disconnect*

Taking work home is a sure-fire way to burnout. After leaving the office, try not to worry about work.

### *Outsource*

Hiring new staff might not be an option for a cash-starved start-up, but hiring good accountants and lawyers is a good way to share the load.

### *Talk about it*

It sounds simple, but talking things over with a spouse, partner or business coach can help put problems in perspective.

### *See a doctor*

Stressed-out people are more likely to get sick. There may be some simple natural remedies, such as vitamins, that can increase energy levels and reduce stress.