

How To Work On Your Business, Not In It

[Benjamin Laker](#) Mar 17, 2023,

We've all heard the saying, "work on your business, not in it." But what does that really convey? It means investing time and energy into building a business model and strategy, not just completing day-to-day tasks. After all, a successful enterprise needs both short-term goals (hitting sales targets) and long-term objectives (developing new products/services or exploring new markets).



For any owner-managed business, the key to success lies in discovering ways to free up invaluable time so that you can devote it solely on what will bring about long-term growth [-] GETTY

But, this is particularly challenging for small business owners to accommodate. Without sprawling administrative teams, these leaders often have no choice but to put out fires and focus on the immediate rather than the important. With limited resources, escaping the day-to-day tasks and taking a more strategic view can be almost impossible: there is often no one else to take on the immediate tasks.

According to Kate Dobson, head of strategic academic partnerships and employer-led education at London's University of Roehampton, the key is understanding that it's not an either/or situation and learning how to balance time between "working in" and "working on" a business. "You need to have systems in place that will allow you to step away from the day-to-day details and focus on the long-term," she said in an interview. "This could involve delegating tasks to other staff members, outsourcing whenever possible, or utilizing software solutions that automate low-level tasks."

Think of it like this: if you invest the time and energy into creating a solid business plan now, you'll save yourself both headaches and resources in the long run. That means taking a step back to assess the current state of your business, its potential opportunities and threats, and how best to move forward—rather than just muddling through.

The rewards for this kind of strategic thinking can be great—from increased profitability to scalability and growth potential—suggests Cory Sprunger, managing partner of Sprunger PEO, a business that partners with small law firms to optimize their operations by consolidating administration.

Sprunger, who, before law school, worked in the White House in Washington, D.C., for President George W. Bush, at the Republican National Committee

for Chairman Michael Steele, and in the United States Senate for Senator Richard Lugar, believes that small businesses are the backbone of America. Still, day-to-day “fires” choke a business owner’s ability to think strategically, meaning that many are not taking full advantage of the resources available to them.

Consider the legal profession. Lawyers typically focus on their clients’ needs and legal cases to the exclusion of everything else. As a result, they tend to neglect the business side of their operations. The problem is compounded by long hours in court—a reality that leaves many law firms feeling pressed for time and resources.

“In Indiana, the average attorney only bills 2.4 hours out of an 8-hour day because they are forced to waste so much time running the day-to-day details,” said Sprunger via a representative. “But by consolidating non-legal administration, these firms usually reclaim so much time that they more than double their revenue. They are then free to build their practice instead of managing printer leases or fighting with computer problems.”

Sprunger’s view of the legal profession is mirrored in many other industries. For example, in Dentistry, one survey found that only a minority of clinicians spend more than two hours per week leading. Meanwhile, in the restaurant industry, very few operatives spend more than five hours per week strategizing, concluded research. This lack of focus on the business side of operations can lead to missed opportunities, lost revenue and an overall lack of efficiency.

So, what can leaders of owner-managed businesses do?

The first step is to make time to think strategically. This means carving out blocks of time—whether it’s a few hours per week or one day every two weeks—to specifically focus on longer-term goals. Accept you will never grow if you only ever put out fires: if you want to move forward, you must find time to horizon scan. Doing so can build a larger capacity for the owner to focus on strategic decisions and long-term goals, according to Minna Gröning, the regional sales leader for Northern Europe at the Parker Hannifin Corporation. She advocates delegating and outsourcing tasks, automating low-level jobs, or taking time away from the company in order to consider its long-term health. “It can be hard to step away from the details, but it’s essential for business growth and success,” she said in an interview.

The next step is to create a plan of action with specific tasks that must be completed to reach your goals. This includes setting deadlines for each task and assigning responsibility to appropriate persons. Having a plan of action that everyone can follow will make it easier for everyone to stay on track. It’s also important to review progress regularly so that you can adjust your plan as needed and keep moving forward. “The key is to have a plan—and actually follow it,” said Paula Kilpinen, director for executive education at Henley Business School Finland. But, she added, “It’s not enough to just have a plan; you need to be able to execute it and make measurable progress. People want to understand the big picture, the company’s direction and their role in it.”

Finally, use technology to your advantage. Investing in the right tools and systems will make it easier to stay organized and get things done faster. Automation can be a great way to manage time-consuming tasks that don't require direct involvement, such as scheduling appointments or issuing invoices. [Research](#) undertaken by Mckinsey & Company found that companies which adopt automation technologies often experience significantly higher productivity and financial performance. So, taking control of the business side of operations will help you get more out of your time and resources, allowing you to focus on what matters most—growing your company.

Overall, the key to success for owner-managed businesses is finding ways to free up time so that you can focus on what will make the most significant difference to your long-term success. By gaining control of administrative tasks and making time each week or month to plan strategically, leaders can create a larger capacity for growth and success. Technology can help with this process and make it easier to stay organized and on track towards long-term business goals.