

Young Professionals

“Shake Yourself Awake: Develop a Hobby”

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As the title of this piece suggests (taken from Dale Carnegie, author of *How To Win Friends and Influence People*), and with the new year approaching and resolutions top of mind, I’d like to recommend that you consider taking up a new hobby in 2020. While balancing a new extracurricular may seem daunting as a young professional with your nose to the grindstone, it is easier than you think to get started, and you may be surprised by the benefits you reap.

Much has been written about the positives of adopting and maintaining a hobby. Specifically, hobbies and active leisure activities (as opposed to passive leisure mainstays like social media and streaming content) can add structure to an otherwise hectic schedule, provide an outlet for singular focus and creative energy, relieve stress, boost confidence, and enhance networking with colleagues. Business luminaries from Mark Zuckerberg to Warren Buffet have extolled job candidates with hobbies as having passion and drive (search “Warren Buffet playing the ukulele” if you don’t believe me). Some even claim that having a hobby improves performance and productivity at work, although others maintain that hobbies should be divorced from productivity as they can remind you that work isn’t everything.

Where you take your hobby and how you treat it is up to you. In my own life, I’ve found that baking, and sharing my baking with my family, friends, and coworkers, has given me many benefits. I’ve been baking since before my first legal job, a habit I developed studying for the bar when a mental break, sugar, and instant gratification were badly needed. It is easier than you think to get started with a hobby, so do not be intimidated. Nobody becomes Martha Stewart (or Christina Tosi or Stella Parks) overnight.

Over time, baking has become something I regularly incorporate into my life and something I look to as a life-long learning project. While it is definitely something that I have to find time for, I’ve discovered that when I’m planning to bake I look forward to it and adjust my workflow and commitments accordingly. While baking can be time consuming depending on the confection, it forces me to pay more attention to time management and to schedule time for myself.

With my schedule free from distraction, baking enables me to focus solely on the task at hand—how much flour, sugar, butter, and eggs I’ve put in the bowl. At work, with the competing pulls of productivity, efficiency, client demands, and non-billable work, I rarely have the freedom to focus so singularly on a task. It is even rarer that I can focus on a task of my choosing and that I am passionate about—I have the freedom to alter the recipe; add, delete, and substitute ingredients at will; and see what happens. While I hope for success, baking also gives me many opportunities to confront and cope with failure.

Psychologists call active leisure activities that challenge your skill and demand your attention “flow activities” where you can enter a quasi-meditative “flow state” and shut your mind to everything other than the task at hand. Research shows these flow states can help us access perception and creativity that otherwise might be closed off and reawaken it in the context of a professional or personal challenge. The benefits of engaging in an active hobby can extend hours or days beyond the conclusion of the activity, with studies showing that people with hobbies continue to be happier and experience lower levels of negative feelings after the activity is finished.¹

In the baking context, I find this to be true of a successful bake, especially so when I share the baked good at my office and with my friends and family. For whatever professional and productivity benefits I may glean through my baking hobby, sharing it with others at the office has provided me some side networking benefits, including bringing more of my identity to a new job as a lateral associate, engaging my coworkers on topics other than the law and legal practice (and the weather), and being noticed as the associate with the cake carrier. This sharing also affords me the opportunity to practice soliciting honest feedback and incorporating it into my next baking project.

Ultimately, the main benefits that I derive from my hobby are the creative escape and stress relief it provides, the opportunity to build skills and a confidence that I can carry with me or lean on when needed, and the happiness it gives me to share my baking with others. Whether you’re looking for escape from work or a way to improve work performance, productivity, and connection, do yourself a favor and, in the words of Dale Carnegie, “Shake yourself awake. Develop a hobby.” And if it’s baking, please share!



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¹ See Zawadzki, M.J., Smyth, J.M. & Costigan, H.J. *ann. behav. med.* (2015) 49: 605. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12160-015-9694-3>; Qian XL, Yarnal CM, Almeida DM. Does Leisure Time as a Stress Coping Resource Increase Affective Complexity? Applying the Dynamic Model of Affect (DMA). *J Leis Res.* 2013;45(3):393–414. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261035195_Does_Leisure_Time_as_a_Stress_Coping_Resource_Increase_Affective_Complexity_Applying_the_Dynamic_Model_of_Affect_DMA.