

Garfield's Productivity

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I had only recently begun pairing Garfield toys with baby Nikes when I started reading Melissa Gregg's book *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy*. The book traces the genealogy of productivity as a metric for work, from home economics to the information services industry (office work). Regarding the latter, Gregg uses an expanded concept of athleticism¹ to analyse the productivity imperative for the contemporary information professional. Gregg explains that "the athlete is meant to want something that is not entirely impossible, but fairly improbable: An unbroken series of victories"², and in analogizing the athlete and the office worker suggests that the latter's victories are achieved through an unbroken series of appointments, long hours, short breaks and meeting successive demanding deadlines. The "ultimate effect of career-oriented athleticism is to render all colleagues competitors."³ Gregg acknowledges that the 'executive athlete' metaphor is not necessarily new, and that from at least the 70s onwards the athlete has been a recurring figure throughout management theory and self-help literature. This is exemplified by the globally popular *Getting Things Done*, a book cum 'work-life management system' by productivity consultant David Allen, who claims that with his help, "you can train yourself, almost like an athlete, to be faster, more responsive, more proactive, and more focused in knowledge work."⁴ The long-ingrained use of the terms 'training', 'teamwork', 'performance' and the like throughout the information sector is further testament to the pervasiveness of the executive athlete metaphor.

Curiously it seems to me that more recently professionals of this kind have embraced executive athleticism more literally, and have moved to present themselves, through personal accessories and attire, in an athletic register. I'm thinking here of items like the Fitbit wristband, or the lululemon water bottle, or the Patagonia puffer vest to name a few... These items of 'athleisure' have become mainstays for the office worker, and their functionality in the workplace is of course largely symbolic, used to parade an associative athletic attitude of discipline and determination. Infant Nike trainers, while not as frequently sighted around the work place (but then aren't all places work places now?) might also fall in to this category, another accessory with which to signal an elite work ethic. Why else might a baby need Air Jordan's?

And why might Garfield need Air Jordan's? I don't think it's a stretch to suggest that Garfield the cartoon character cum global merchandise phenomenon was once endemic to office culture. I'm thinking of the comic strip newspaper clipping on the kitchenette fridge, the 'Wake Me Up When It's Friday' branded mousepad, or the 'I Hate Mondays' coffee mug that once sat proudly on the desktop to signal with relatability—"I know, work sucks right?" Garfield's presence in the open-plan hot desks of today's coworking spaces has of course long since faded, his grin replaced with the swoosh. It's no longer a good idea to joke about one's love for the grind. And so, having amassed a half dozen stuffed Garfields, all wearing Nikes and looking at each other from atop the elaborate, gym-like cat trees that are scattered throughout the studio (itself a workplace of athletic aspiration), it occurred to me that the cat idol seems to be at an impasse; both lazing and competing, winding down and gearing up, seemingly lethargic and ever-ready. Even the once iconically lazy must today negotiate the productivity imperative.

¹ Gregg's use of athleticism is based on the philosophy of Peter Sloterdijk. Gregg: "I have found no better explanation of productivity as it manifests in the work settings of today's information professional than Sloterdijk's concept of athleticism. It is the primary model for career advancement in organisations that foster individual feats of heroism as the hallmarks of success." Melissa Gregg, *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy*, London: Duke University Press, 2018, 14.

² Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, London: Polity, 2013, 292.

³ Gregg, *Counterproductive*, 15.

⁴ David Allen, *Getting Things Done*, New York: Viking, 2001, 18.