

Taking Up Slack

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Most slackers can be turned into better performers by removing organizational conditions that create or enable loafing behavior.

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Imagine young Billy in the fourth grade bringing his report card home from school. Written among the straight A's is a glowing note from his teacher: "Billy is a smart child who is a naturally gifted student. He grasps concepts easily and quickly, and is a delight in my classroom."

Fast-forward two decades. Billy is now Bill occupying a cubicle at your headquarters. You hired him because of his natural intelligence and solid experience. So far, Bill has been an adequate performer, doing what his manager tells him to complete projects. Yet he fails to contribute extra effort to reach the next level of performance, preferring to slack off when possible.

Because Bill does just enough to meet his goals, it is hard for managers and HR systems to catch and address his slacker behavior. Bill and other slackers, loafers, time bandits—whatever you call them—are stealing opportunity from your organization and may be demoralizing co-workers who go the extra mile.

"Slackers" are people who know they could be much more productive but make a conscious decision not to be. According to Sibson Consulting's 2009 Rewards of Work Study released in August, 44 percent of 2,000 employees surveyed are not committed to perform even though they know "what to do." That number is down from the last Sibson study in 2006, but it's still troubling: "A workforce where almost half of employees have low commitment likely falls short of what employers desire," says David Insler, senior vice president at Sibson in Los Angeles, and co-author of the survey.

"When commitment to the organization decreases, individuals tend to engage in more counterproductive work behaviors," explains Meagan Brock, HR specialist at the Office of Personnel Management at the University of Oklahoma in Oklahoma City.

Researchers and psychologists say most people want to be productive. Yet something might be holding them back, whether it's procrastination, poor sleep habits, depression, some other illness or disability, or something in the workplace culture or organization.

Why an employee's commitment to the organization decreases depends on various factors—and HR professionals can address many of them. Well-intentioned workers may become slackers because "they don't understand their jobs clearly, are frustrated by the lack of resources or support to do their jobs, feel demoralized because co-workers slack off without consequences, or because their intrinsic motivations are not matched by the rewards offered," says Roland E.

Kidwell, associate professor of management at the University of Wyoming's College of Business in Laramie.

These types of slackers can be reformed through intervention by HR managers. "Clear leadership direction, improved communications, support and feedback to employees, setting a high performance bar, and rewarding top performers accordingly can mitigate the behavior," Inslar says.

Other slackers "are just lazy," Kidwell notes. HR professionals "can weed out chronic slackers in the selection process or through progressive discipline."

The worst course of action is to do nothing and allow slackers to fly under the radar, Brock warns.

Psychology of Slacking

Slackers are made, not born, which should give HR managers hope, says Carol Dweck, professor of psychology at Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif.

Dweck's decades of research on why certain people succeed and others don't reveal a societal bias toward natural ability vs. hard work. "Our society, from school to the workplace, rewards smarts rather than hard work," says Dweck, author of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (Ballantine Books, 2007). In Bill's case, "he was rewarded for good grades with little effort. He never learned the value of hard work."

People who grow up being rewarded solely for natural intelligence are more susceptible to slacker behavior because they give up when things get hard, Dweck's research has found. And organizations that reward smarts and natural talent more than commitment breed "slackism."

Psychologically, Dweck explains, many people equate speed with ability. In addition, they believe that "you shouldn't need to work hard if you truly excel at something," she says. "Managers feed this notion by praising people for achieving effortlessly." In turn, workers give the impression work is easy so they can appear talented.

At Stanford, professors call it "duck syndrome," where people appear to be calm and serene on top but underneath they're working like mad. "It's the façade of slacking," Dweck says. "It's demoralizing to other students who think, 'I'm working so hard. And they're getting A's without even trying.' And the truth is, they are working hard but don't want to admit it."

Everyone Slacks

Typical workers waste about two hours a day at work, not counting lunch, according to Salary.com. In a survey, 2,000 workers identified surfing the Internet for personal use and socializing as their primary time-wasters.

Salary.com estimates the financial loss of potentially productive time to be \$759 billion a year nationwide.

“More than hours wasted, the fact is if someone is withholding effort—effort that could lead to innovations—that should be of deep concern to companies,” notes Roland E. Kidwell, associate professor of management at the University of Wyoming’s College of Business in Laramie.

Perhaps more disturbingly, Dweck conducted a study that found that children whose intelligence was praised were more likely to exaggerate their achievements to peers.

"When you communicate that talent is what you value most, it makes even the talented person feel vulnerable," she explains. "It forces the talented person to go to desperate measures to keep looking good. It prevents them from taking on more challenging tasks that may expose their weaknesses. It also leads them to lie about performance and to hide their mistakes."

After the collapse of Enron, author Malcolm Gladwell wrote in a 2002 New Yorker article that the company’s environment of "talent worship" led to its downfall by forcing employees to look and act invincible by any means necessary. Executives, celebrated for perfection, resorted to lying about their mistakes and covering up problems instead of finding ways to fix them.

To combat this culture, Dweck advises HR professionals to "reward behaviors that convey passion and dedication over natural talent. Reward people who improve performance, come up with creative solutions to problems, take risks and work hard. Don’t praise the ‘ace’ worker who keeps doing the same thing well over and over again."

To Catch a Time Thief

Time banditry is a silent behavior that is easy to mask—and hard to prove. "Think about it," Kidwell says. "If you are able to generate acceptable performance at a low level of effort, why wouldn’t you do it?"

Brock says slackers engage in "expectation management" where "they learn to manage what the supervisor is expecting. Slackers become really good at manipulating their bosses or team members to keep up the impression that something takes longer than it should or invent barriers where none exist."

Kidwell cites the example of an employee who writes an e-mail and sets the delivery time for the middle of the night to make it look like he worked all night. Or, the employee who slacks off and then buys time blaming computer glitches.

"Slacker behavior has been around since the dawn of organized work. But knowledge-based work, and especially technology, make it much easier to mask," says Kidwell, whose research has focused on technology’s impact on loafing behavior. "Technology has enhanced our ability to get work done without a high level of effort."

When technology makes workers more efficient and managers' expectations don't adapt, it creates a recipe for slackism.

A new web-based system in Brock's department simplified work processes and made employees more efficient. But, she says, her manager kept the same expectations of project completion time.

"Co-workers abused that system and used the extra time to slack off," Brock says. "Employees are happy to let managers believe that it takes longer to accomplish a task than it really does."

When employers integrate a new piece of software or technology system, managers should assess how much it improves efficiency and recalculate deadlines. "Managers need to be more knowledgeable about how long a project takes and break down each step with the help of employees," Kidwell says. "When it takes longer or falls below expectations, ask why. Doing so will unearth problems in the system, such as unnecessary red tape or employees who hold up the process."

Another way to prevent expectation management or manipulation of time, Kidwell advises, is to connect effort and performance to a valued reward such as time off, incentive pay or stretch assignments. Google, for instance, allows high-performing employees to come up with new projects or work on other projects of their choosing. This practice encourages innovation and collaboration, and it reaches those people at risk of checking out because they feel that their skills are underutilized.

It also contributes to employees' sense of job security, which was the No. 1 aspect of job satisfaction for the third year in a row in the Society for Human Resource Management's (SHRM) 2010 Employee Job Satisfaction survey report. Sixty-three percent of 600 respondents ranked job security a "very important" aspect of job satisfaction.

Employees reported that having the opportunity to use their professional abilities and skills increased their sense of job security. "Employees frequently have skills and abilities beyond the position that they have been hired for," the report stated.

Poor job fit, often manifested in boredom and frustration, can cause people to withdraw and give up. SHRM's 2005 Workplace Productivity Poll Findings found that the top two factors that negatively impact employee productivity are poor management, reported by 58 percent of employees and 61 percent of HR professionals, and no longer being motivated by the work, reported by 38 percent of employees and 63 percent of HR professionals.

"Employees who are bored, don't have clarity in their job or lack the resources to accomplish the job engage in time banditry," Brock says. "Individuals logically seek to avoid frustration and replace frustrating tasks with counterproductive tasks that are more rewarding to them but not to the organization."

Hiding in Plain Sight

Knowledge work, which is increasingly performed in teams, allows slackers to hide unchecked within the group dynamic. In the 1880s, researcher Max Ringelmann proved that individuals don't try as hard when working in a team. Ringelmann attached a rope to a dynamometer and measured volunteers' hardest pull. The average force for one man was 85.3 kilograms. As Ringelmann increased the number of men pulling on the rope, the average force of each individual decreased.

What he discovered more than a century ago remains true today. Later variations of his study also demonstrate that, as individual effort becomes invisible in a team, slacking off also becomes invisible. Without clear identification of an individual's role and responsibility, social loafing is more likely to occur.

People will work harder when they believe their particular tasks or efforts are indispensable to the group's success and when they are rewarded for those efforts, Kidwell says. The problem is "designing performance appraisal systems that truly capture individuals' contributions toward the team's accomplishments."

Kidwell suggests identifying employee actions "that truly constitute helping behavior vs. actions that reflect impression or expectation management." Reward relevant organizational community behaviors—such as participating on task forces, responding to customer queries or helping colleagues in need—as a performance measure when effort cannot be easily observed and when such behaviors are of value.

When individuals withhold effort—and get away with it—even high-performing employees can become slackers. Brock found herself in this predicament at her previous job. "I saw my co-workers doing half as much work for the same salaries," she recalls. "A high performer sees that and says, 'I'm not going to work as hard, then.' You will still get your work done, but you don't work to your full potential."

Sibson's Insler works with managers to explain that top performers are always going to be good performers, but frustration about managers who don't confront slackers will erode their discretionary effort and morale.

In workgroups where slacker behavior goes unchecked, conflict increases and communication and information sharing shut down.

"In this environment, co-workers start to protect each other and help hide the loafing behavior," Kidwell notes. Create mechanisms to flesh out and address team conflict, he advises.

"HR professionals also enable slackers and demoralize high performers through this spirit of egalitarianism that persists in organizations," Insler says. "Faced with smaller merit increase budgets, HR will give the same percentage increase to everyone, justifying that it's too small to motivate or 'de-motivate' anyone. But the fact is, if you differentiate and reward only the top portion of your employee population, the message is more important than the amount."

Slacker-Free

The next time a manager or co-worker complains about someone not pulling his weight, determine if the person is "just lazy" or has a justifiable reason to slack. "You have to ask yourself, 'Could this person succeed in another environment either within your organization or in another place? And if the answer is yes, then you need to determine what organizational conditions are contributing to the person's loafing behavior and correct them,'" Kidwell says.

"True slackers cannot be reformed," Insler adds. "You will know because the idea of rewarding high performers and praising high performers differently won't matter to the true slackers. But these people won't last in companies that use progressive discipline performance management properly."

Top performers want to perform at their peak. When they feel they can't, they will be vocal about it. "It is beneficial to employees to feel like a contributor," Brock says. "This is not about organizations squeezing every ounce of productivity out of each employee until they die an early death. I feel much more satisfied and happier when I can be my most productive."

The author is a contributing editor and former managing editor of HR Magazine.