



Jeff Davidson: Breathing Space

Both Work Distractions and Productivity Are on the Rise

Without offering an involved and wearisome discussion about rising productivity levels, today's career professional—frittering and all—could beat the pants off of yesteryear's career professional in terms of getting things done. Today, workers in all types of organizations, including associations, travel, government, non-profit sector groups, healthcare, education, as well as those in the private industry, devote a slightly higher percentage of their time to the tasks and responsibilities for which they actually were hired, and they have advanced tools that aid them in ways that their workforce ancestors could hardly imagine.

The computer has vastly increased U.S. labor productivity, at least in terms of output per hour. Robert Gordon, author of "Macroeconomics," reported in 2008 that labor productivity is now on the order of more than 10 times beyond that of when the first electricity plant began operating in 1882. In 2013, it might be 20 times higher.

And Still We Dawdle

To be sure, many people goof off at the click of a mouse. Surveys show that non-job related web-surfing and e-correspondence is rampant. Who doesn't make personal phone calls or handle personal business during the workday?

Even with the latest diversions, most workers are making diligent efforts a decent percentage of the time. The higher-level of industriousness among today's workforce may be a sensible reaction to the competitiveness in the workplace, a scarcity of higher paying jobs, or simply the fear of being axed. It could be because they're dedicated, goal-oriented, highly ethical, fearful of losing their jobs or a combination of all the above. Or, it may be a result of improved workplace monitoring techniques.

Big Brother

An employer's ability to gauge actual performance levels of employees has never been greater than it is today. Local area networks rule. So do surveillance cameras. Surveys show that more than 60 percent of employers monitor employees' activities and at least 15 percent of employers observe employees via hidden camera.

Perhaps an underlying element for the increase in productivity across the board is the increase in expectations. As soon as greater technological capabilities come along, BAM! So do expectations. In 1827, the Erie Canal became functional for the passage of horse drawn canal ships—at the blazing speed of four miles per hour. So many vendors wanted to transport their goods from the west through the Canal to the Hudson River and down to New York City, that the Canal immediately became clogged. So, it was enlarged. And then again, this time more dramatically. Then it was enlarged again, one more time.

At every junction expectations about the traffic volume that the Canal could handle rose and then, almost instantly, existing Canal capacity was never enough. Soon the railroads became popular and for many the Canal fell into disuse until it became a recreational and tourist attraction in the 20th century. It went from expectation to over-expectation to abandonment within a generation. How cold!

In the typical office—before electric typewriters and certainly before PCs—getting 25 to 30 original business letters out the door in a day represented an impressive achievement. It was all an employer could expect from a worker in one day. Now, anyone, including 10-year-olds, can generate 500 to 1,000 letters in a day if one chooses, and that wouldn't be news.

On any given day, the aggregate of emails sent by individuals—and we're not talking about spam here—is more than 500 to 600 times greater than the entire aggregation of web pages accessible on the Internet. Distraction is inevitable with this much information, no matter how productive the worker.

So, if you want to be your most productive self, buck the trend and forsake excessive online survey and e-correspondence. Your resulting productivity might amaze you.