

Bored in the office: is it the new productivity killer?

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In the aftermath of the recession, unemployment remains at 8.1%, workers continue doing multiple people's jobs with little-to-no wage growth and scholars seem at odds about whether increased output is helping or hurting the economy.

At the same time, a less talked about and often unseen productivity killer may be rippling through the cubicle culture: Employee boredom. Multiple university studies have found that boredom can unhinge even high-performing professionals, resulting in sabotage, withdrawal, abusing team members and purposely failing at tasks. A recent headline asks, *Is workplace boredom 'the new stress?'*

"When people get bored they become disengaged," says Richard Chaifetz, a neuropsychologist and the CEO of ComPsych, a provider of employee assistance programs. "The costs can be extreme—lack of productivity, significant errors and catastrophic accidents."

According to 2011 research by management-consulting firm Gallup, 71% of American workers are either not engaged or actively disengaged from their jobs, with highly educated and middle-aged workers the least likely to feel involved in and enthusiastic about their work.

Workplace boredom can strike anyone from low-level service workers to well-paid corporate executives, says Angelo Kinicki, a management professor at Arizona State University's W. P.

Carey School of Business. Most often it stems from the inability to find meaning in their jobs and too little variety in their daily tasks. "It's repetitiveness that's the culprit," says Kinicki, noting that some corporate systems can routinize every task and interaction to the point of utter tedium.

Kinicki says employees also become demotivated and uninspired when they don't have much control over their jobs or input on important decisions, are not getting enough feedback or positive recognition to feel competent in their work, and don't feel like they are developing or making progress towards something that's important.

Boredom may be commonly understood as not having enough to do, but Chaifetz says it's really about not being challenged enough. So while employees may be busier than ever, they're not necessarily doing more interesting work. "When we talk about 'doing more with less,' you have to consider what kind of work is piling up on people's desks," he says. "Often with layoffs, the type of work that's doled out you wouldn't need additional training to do. If it's boring work, it just becomes more burdensome."

Mark Royal, senior principal at global management consultancy Hay Group and author of *The Enemy of Engagement*, says he sees good employees becoming increasingly frustrated at work

because the tough economy has made it riskier and more difficult to change jobs, keeping them in the same place doing the same things for so long that they end up feeling stuck. Concurrently, shifting market demands and the fast pace of change may mean that employees who once were a good fit for a position now no longer are. "The role is not allowing him to do what he can do best," he says. "So he feels frustrated, and the company is losing out."

Furthermore, Royal believes that those employees who aren't being challenged or developed enough still want to be seen as good employees, so they suffer in silence rather than complain.

"It's a silent killer, often slipping under the radar," he says. "Over time, these employees are likely to disengage or exit. It's a prevalent problem that managers don't recognize."

From the worker perspective, the best solution for combating boredom is to speak up, says Royal. An employee may ask to be challenged more, offer to take over stretch projects, discuss advancement paths with her manager, or look for a new work environment that values employee development and career satisfaction.

But while an employee may suffer some short-term psychological costs—stress, unhappiness, dips in self-esteem—boredom is more expensive to the employer, who likely will lose valuable contributions and talent in the long run. Royal believes the easiest fix is for managers to regularly initiate conversations with their employees, asking what would help them feel more engaged and productive. Moreover, hiring the appropriate person for the role and frequently reviewing how well people match with their responsibilities will help set them up for success.

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