

## Why showing your face at work matters

Kimberly Elsbach and Daniel Cable

*Although it's increasingly common, telecommuting may be hazardous to employee evaluations. But employers can take steps to ensure that remote workers are judged fairly.*



These days, more and more corporate employees are working at least part of the time from home offices. Working from home, or other types of remote work arrangements such as using a drop-in work center, can be beneficial to both employees and companies. However, our research suggests that these nontraditional arrangements also have hidden pitfalls. Employees who work remotely may end up getting lower performance evaluations, smaller raises and fewer promotions than their colleagues in the office — even if they work just as hard and just as long.

The difference is what we call passive face time. By that we are not referring to active interactions with coworkers or clients, but merely to being seen in the workplace. To be credited with passive face time you need only be observed at work; no information is required about what you are doing or how well you are doing it.

Even when in-office and remote employees are equally productive, our research suggests their supervisors might evaluate them differently because of differences in their passive face time. Especially in white-collar settings, the presence or absence of passive face time may influence evaluations used to determine the fitness of employees for specific tasks such as team leadership. As Jack and Suzy Welch wrote in a 2007 BusinessWeek column:

*Companies rarely promote people into leadership roles who haven't been consistently seen and measured. It's a familiarity thing, and it's a trust thing. We're not saying that the people who get promoted are stars during every "crucible" moment at the office, but at least they're present and accounted for. And their presence says: Work is my top priority. I'm committed to this company. I want to lead. And I can.*

For the last decade we've studied the concept of passive face time from the perspective of hundreds of corporate workers, including both supervisors and subordinates. (Details of our research were published in the June 2010 issue of Human Relations. See "Related Research.") We used observation, unstructured interviews and tightly controlled experiments to gather information about how passive face time affects employee evaluations. This data led us to three key findings.

### **1. There are two kinds of passive face time.**

The first, which we call expected face time, is simply being seen at work during normal business hours. The second, which we call extracurricular face time, is being seen at work outside of normal business hours — arriving before most employees arrive, staying late or coming in to work on the weekend. When you are at work is noticed by your coworkers and supervisors. "Who cares?" you might legitimately ask. It turns out your boss and coworkers do. This leads to our second finding.

### **2. Different kinds of face time lead to different evaluations.**

The two forms of passive face time lead to two kinds of “trait inferences,” or conclusions about what type of person someone is. Specifically, we found that expected face time led to inferences of the traits “responsible” and “dependable.” Just being seen at work, without any information about what you’re actually doing, leads people to think more highly of you.

You get labeled when you put in extracurricular face time, too. But rather than just being considered dependable, you can get upgraded to “committed” and “dedicated.” As one manager said:

*There seems to be a norm that anyone hoping to move up in the management ranks needs to be here late at night and on the weekends. If you’re not willing to do that, you’re not going to be seen as dedicated enough to get promoted.*

### **3. Managers may not be aware they are making evaluations based on face time.**

Our interviews suggest that managers’ inferences based on passive face time are unintentional — even unconscious. This supports research findings that people generally form trait inferences spontaneously, without realizing they are doing so. As one subject we interviewed noted:

*I think it really has sort of an automatic negative effect when a manager is in crisis mode, and they look and notice you’re not there. It’s kind of irritating to them if you’re not immediately available, or [on the other hand, comforting] if they can check and see you are there in the office, just in case they need you. Because they’re in crisis mode they may not even really remember what it was that irritated them, but they’ve just got this feeling that you’re unreliable or something.*

To test our interview findings, we conducted a series of experiments in which managers from a dozen industries were asked to recall employee traits after reading written descriptions of the employees. If a participant mistakenly said that a trait — for example, “committed” — had been listed in a description of someone who was described as working late in the office, they were said to have unconsciously inferred that trait. The results were clear and robust across multiple samples: Managers were 9% more likely to unconsciously attribute the traits “dependable” and “responsible” to people who put in expected face time and 25% more likely to unconsciously attribute the traits “committed” and “dedicated” to people who put in extracurricular face time. These results were statistically significant across each of our experiments.

### **Implications for Managers**

Our findings suggest several steps managers should take to prevent unfair employee assessments.

#### **1. Don’t use trait-based evaluations.**

Growing evidence from research on performance appraisal suggests that these evaluations are flawed in a number of ways, including not being linked to companies’ strategies or objective outputs and not helping employees understand what to change. Our findings add to this evidence by showing that trait-based evaluations — measuring employee “leadership ability” or “teamwork,” for example, may be biased by the mere physical presence of employees at the work site.

#### **2. As much as possible, use objective output measures.**

Critics of remote working arrangements have long suspected that telecommuters lose out on specific types of information, such as hallway conversations or impromptu help from coworkers. Our findings suggest that remote workers might be further handicapped by perceptions that they are not as responsible or committed as other employees. To avoid such unfair perceptions, managers who implement telecommuting and flexible hours should revise

their performance appraisals to measure mostly objective outputs, such as number and type of projects completed or expert evaluations of project quality.

### **3. Consider work arrangements when using peer feedback.**

Many organizations use “360-degree” appraisals in which employees are rated by peers and subordinates as well as managers. However, our research suggests that coworkers and subordinates may be just as prone to making unconscious trait judgments as managers are. The bottom line is that employees should be wary of work arrangements that reduce their office face time, and supervisors should be wary of using trait-based performance measures, especially when evaluating remote workers. Finally, employees working remotely need to make sure they are evaluated on objective outputs. Barring that, you might consider sending an e-mail to your boss tonight . . . say, around midnight.

**Fonte:MIT Sloan Management Review, 11 July 2012. [Portal] Disponível em: <<http://sloanreview.mit.edu/the-magazine/2012-summer/53407/why-showing-your-face-at-work-matters/>> Acesso em: 11 July 2012.**

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