

In praise of laziness

Businesspeople would be better off if they did less and thought more



There is a never-ending supply of business gurus telling us how we can, and must, do more. Sheryl Sandberg urges women to “Lean In” if they want to get ahead. John Bernard offers breathless advice on conducting “Business at the Speed of Now”. Michael Port tells salesmen how to “Book Yourself Solid”. And in case you thought you might be able to grab a few moments to yourself, Keith Ferrazzi warns that you must “Never Eat Alone”.

Yet the biggest problem in the business world is not too little but too much—too many distractions and interruptions, too many things done for the sake of form, and altogether too much busy-ness. The Dutch seem to believe that an excess of meetings is the biggest devourer of time: they talk of vergaderziekte, “meeting sickness”. However, a study last year by the McKinsey Global Institute suggests that it is e-mails: it found that highly skilled office workers spend more than a quarter of each working day writing and responding to them.

Which of these banes of modern business life is worse remains open to debate. But what is clear is that office workers are on a treadmill of pointless activity. Managers allow meetings to drag on for hours. Workers generate e-mails because it requires little effort and no thought. An entire management industry exists to spin the treadmill ever faster.

All this “leaning in” is producing an epidemic of overwork, particularly in the United States. Americans now toil for eight-and-a-half hours a week more than they did in 1979. A survey last year by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that almost a third of working adults get six hours or less of sleep a night. Another survey last year by Good Technology, a provider of secure mobile systems for businesses, found that more than 80% of respondents continue to work after leaving the office, 69% cannot go to bed without checking their inbox and 38% routinely check their work e-mails at the dinner table.

This activity is making it harder to focus on real work as opposed to make-work. Teresa Amabile of Harvard Business School, who has been conducting a huge study of work and creativity, reports that workers are generally more creative on low-pressure days than on high-pressure days when they are confronted with a flurry of unpredictable demands. In 2012 Gloria Mark of the University of California, Irvine, and two colleagues deprived 13 people in the IT business of e-mail for five days and studied them intensively. They found that people without it concentrated on tasks for longer and experienced less stress.

It is high time that we tried a different strategy—not “leaning in” but “leaning back”. There is a distinguished history of leadership thinking in the lean-back tradition. Lord Melbourne, Queen Victoria’s favourite prime minister, extolled the virtues of “masterful inactivity”. Herbert Asquith embraced a policy of “wait and see” when he had the job. Ronald Reagan also believed in not overdoing things: “It’s true hard work never killed anybody,” he said, “but I figure, why take the chance?”. This tradition has been buried in a morass of meetings and messages. We need to revive it before we schedule ourselves to death.

The most obvious beneficiaries of leaning back would be creative workers—the very people who are supposed to be at the heart of the modern economy. In the early 1990s Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a psychologist, asked 275 creative types if he could interview them for a book he was writing. A third did not bother to reply at all and another third refused to take part. Peter Drucker, a management guru, summed up the mood of the refuseniks: “One of the secrets of productivity is to have a very big waste-paper basket to take care of all invitations such as yours.” Creative people’s most important resource is their time—particularly big chunks of uninterrupted time—and their biggest enemies are those who try to nibble away at it with e-mails or meetings. Indeed, creative people may be at their most productive when, to the manager’s untutored eye, they appear to be doing nothing.

Managers themselves could benefit. Those at the top are best employed thinking about strategy rather than operations—about whether the company is doing the right thing rather than whether it is sticking to its plans. When he was boss of General Electric, Jack Welch used to spend an hour a day in what he called “looking out of the window time”. When he was in charge of Microsoft Bill Gates used to take two “think weeks” a year when he would lock himself in an isolated cottage. Jim Collins, of “Good to Great” fame, advises all bosses to keep a “stop doing list”. Is there a meeting you can cancel? Or a dinner you can avoid?

Less is more—more or less

Junior managers would do well to follow the same advice. In “Do Nothing”, one of the few business books to grapple with the problem of over-management, Keith Murnighan of the Kellogg School of Management argues that the best managers focus their attention on establishing the right rules—recruiting the right people and establishing the right incentives—and then get out of the way. He quotes a story about Eastman Kodak in its glory days. A corporate reorganisation left a small division out in the cold—without a leader or a reporting line to headquarters. The head office only rediscovered the division when it received a note from a customer congratulating the unit on its work.

Doing nothing may be going too far. Managers play an important role in co-ordinating complicated activities and disciplining slackers. And some creative people would never finish anything if they were left to their own devices. But there is certainly a case for doing a lot less—for rationing e-mail, cutting back on meetings and getting rid of a few overzealous bosses. Leaning in has been producing negative returns for some time now. It is time to try the far more radical strategy of leaning back.

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