

The illusion of work

We live in a world where everyone is frenetically busy. Against a backdrop of the increasing workplace obsession with ROI and accountability, I find myself more and more forced to consider the difference between being busy and actually working. I assume that busy means doing stuff and working means generating profit.

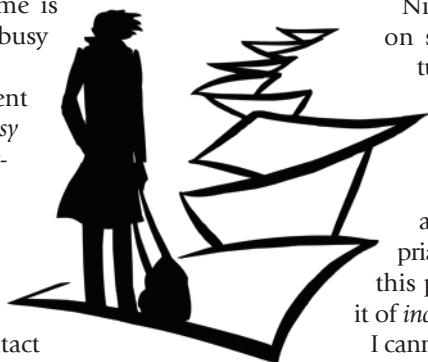
How much of this *busy-ness* is an illusion?

"I'm just too busy..." seems a blanket excuse for lack of performance. Often-times I think that more time is spent talking about being busy than actually working.

Take for example a recent desire of three extremely *busy* colleagues to set up a conference call. They all wanted the call and agreed to set it up. Five hours of e-mailing (I kid you not) finally brought a satisfactory time and the relevant contact numbers/procedure. Come the appointed time, the main player was not available: "I got busy with other things" was the excuse, followed by more hours spent rescheduling. The actual call involved nothing less than a long winded explanation that the person was too busy to meet promised deliverables.

Bungee-cording, or the B_ principle (Bull-s_t baffles brains), is another favourite way of appearing busy. Tiresome technical talk, tangential hype and outright deception as to achievement, more often than not appear to be readily accepted by the powers that be.

It seems to take so little to create a believable myth: "He/she really gets it" and/or "She/he does not have a minute to spare." Good news announcers are always popular: "We are on track", "Everything is moving forward well...", "It was a great success..." seem to be magic phrases of busy people.



Strangely, anyone who points out the contrary is almost always considered negative or having attitude problems, as if they have rebuked the very integrity of the team.

Similarly, politically correct meetings looking for indirect ways to pass an unpleasant message or to address employee/client concerns, etc., often consume hours and even days with little or no result—the convenors congratulating themselves on having skilfully handled the situation.

Is the underlying objective of not ruffling feathers more important than addressing issues in a timely and direct fashion? Sure, everyone at the meeting was busy... but did the time spent represent work that brought the organization closer to meeting objectives?

Nit-pickers, harping on safe, yet inopportune minutia add to time-wasting during meetings. Meeting chairs, afraid of appearing inappropriate, accommodate this prattle in the spirit of *inclusive collaboration*.

I cannot count the number of times, when players are changed on any given project, that I am asked to press reset and start again. I am kept busy resending briefing notes and other relevant material.

More irksome are the regular calls: "Just refresh my memory..." or "You haven't provided the information I need..." Should I choose to indicate that they have hit *reply* to the very message they require, their indignation is almost palpable. In the habit of calling people on this, I eventually got sick of hearing: "You don't seem to realize I have 3,000 messages in my in-box!" Another familiar deal is: "I'm on my Blackberry...I can't keep scrolling down."

Most senior business folk are also awfully busy managing technology. Struggling with mail-merges, labels, lost data/glitches, etc. keeps them burning the midnight oil—again lots of work, but no productivity. What happened to the



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secretarial profession—the very glue that held most businesses together? To my mind a senior person has no business struggling with administrative detail that hinders full deployment of their brainpower.

Okay, I've ranted a bit. Now what about my *busy-ness* when not directly serving clients?

Am I a slave to current *must-do* marketing/connectivity trends?

Daily I update my websites, write on my blog; participate in/monitor pod-cast initiatives; respond to endless Linked-In and other networking venue invitations; become peoples' friend on Facebook; read daily news and industry publications/bulletins; answer/re-answer e-mails (read obsessively keeping the *in-box* clear); remain a useful resource for clients; always answer the phone when it rings; write articles/books; and serve several community/charity/volunteer organizations.

I am a busy guy... always hard at it. Neighbours (my office is on street level) remark at how hard I work and speak in awe of the long hours I spend in front of the computer. Am I always busy? Yes! Am I always working? No!