

Dwarfed by the enormity of the task ahead

By Stuart White
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'Work expands so as to fill the time allowed for its completion.' This was the theory of Professor Cyril Northcote Parkinson in his 1958 book 'Parkinson's Law – The Pursuit of Progress'. The author's cynical view of work, particularly when it came to public sector bureaucracy, was that most people spend most of their time looking really busy, when in actual fact they could work harder, faster and smarter and get through the task in a fraction of the time. Others spend equally long hours shuffling papers around without actually achieving anything productive. And before you condemn all these civil servants worker ants as wastrels and wage cheats, Parkinson also noted that all of this stretching out of short tasks to long tasks and needless re-hashing and revision is done in the clear belief by the employee that they are actually doing vital work and occupying an indispensable role on behalf of their employers.

I am not one to dawdle myself so I get incredibly irritated with people who aren't efficient, time-conscious, don't do their work, or more irritating, stretch it out far beyond it's do-by date. If I give work to a subordinate I expect it to get done. Simple as that. Whilst I accept that it isn't always easy to get through all the tasks one is assigned, I believe that one of life's rules is about responding appropriately to what's thrown your way and making a time-management and priority plan. I expect resourcefulness – shuffle the job around if you have to but make sure it's completed.

I subscribe to this belief because I know there is always time to do the important stuff – always. Yet because we 'value' busy-ness over effectiveness, we are surrounded by people looking busy. Busy is cool, busy means important. Doesn't matter what you are busy with – it could be counting the paperclips in your drawer - but if you have an air of hectic-ness somehow others will view you as busy and by association, hard-working and important, even if you're like one of Disney's seven dwarfs, busy doing nothing.

Most people would deny they have too much time to do their work. But I have been in business long enough to know that we don't work productively all of the hours in a day. Yet the buzz is that everyone is working so hard. People constantly on the end of their BlackBerries, working days, nights, weekends and even on vacation people are having to call into the office. 'Y'see that's' how needed I am – they can't do without me' mentality - a whole bunch of people who work hard on making it appear like they're working hard. Whenever I suggest that it's crazy, there position is defended with "Work less? Yeah, if only....If I didn't have my BlackBerry, if I didn't put in a few late nights and hours on the weekend, I'd never get on top of everything I need to do. I'd be buried. I'd get fired, blah, blah, blah

Here's the thing and I have proven this countless times - if you had less time for your work, you'd get it done more quickly. Parkinson's Law recognises this painful aspect of human nature and if you don't believe it applies to you, consider the Vacation Paradox: even though you never seem to be able to get all your work done on a regular day, the day(s) right before you go on vacation, you somehow manage to crank through all your daily work plus the backlog of stuff that's been moldering on your desk for the past month and enough extra to carry through your absence.

Bureaucracies are a classic example. Parkinson's Law examined the self-fulfilling manner in which they keep on expanding over time. We just assume that that as the number of civil servants rises this must mean that there is more work to be done. Parkinson's studies however showed that that the number of officials and the quantity of work are not related to each other. I notice in ministries there appears to be thousands of secretaries but they never seem to look very busy, unsurprising as they are defunct elsewhere in the world. They answer phones without any sense of hurry and stroll leisurely about with loads of big important files marked 'Urgent'. Bureaucracies tend to create work for themselves – self-justification through the busy illusion - layers of people checking and rechecking each other's work, turning everything into a process even when a process isn't needed. You know how it works An incoming document comes to a government official one who decides it not really his area and it should go to another colleague so he drafts a reply to his manager who amends it drastically before consulting his colleague in another department who then asks yet another manager to deal with it. But then this other manager goes on leave at this point and he delegates it to someone under him, who drafts a minute that is signed by someone else who returns it to the colleague next door who revises his draft accordingly and lays the new version back where it began, proving that the original document was surplus to requirements in the first place. Then all those involved go home weary from all that hard work they've put in and more convinced than ever of their indispensability.

They say it is the busiest man who has time to spare, probably because it's only when he's going on leave that he ever really manages to clear his desk just like most of you are probably doing right now, before the long week-end! Gotcha!

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