

## The Pursuit of Busyness

**By Stuart White**  
**Printed in the Sunday Standard**  
**Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> June 2010**

My mother can stretch out a trivial task ad infinitum. At the glorious age of 80 if she decides to send a gift to her grandchild she can spend forever looking for the present and eons more dithering over the wrapping paper. Finally with gift in hand the real task can now begin. Half an hour looking for her spectacles before writing the birthday card, half a day composing the message, reading it back to my Dad, checking and rechecking the correct address to send it to, more time deciding if she should take an umbrella with her to the post office and which post office it is better to send it from. The total effort that would occupy a busy person for three minutes all told, may in this fashion leave another person exhausted after a day of doubt, anxiety, and apparent occupation.

There's a saying that if you want a job doing, ask a busy person. I don't have my mother's luxury of time and I can be a real hard taskmaster. 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. Ever been part of a work study group?– ooh, it can be quite frightening to see how much time-wasting there is at work. 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 this translates to - you're a somebody worthy of compliment "I know you are a busy (ie important) person...", even if you're like one of the 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) - it seems as though there's an infinite torrent of work – for the important people at least and that's because there are 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 – work expands to fill the time available for its completion – 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.

Parkinson's Law was in fact initially referring to the rate at which bureaucracies expand 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 appear to screen calls and stroll 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.

They say it is the busiest man who has time to spare – that's probably because it's only when he's going on leave that he ever really manages to clear his desk. The rest of the time there might be a busy signal but it's only cos the phone's been deliberately left off the hook.

Agree or disagree with this? Don's twitter amongst yourselves – tweet your chirps to [http://twitter.com/Stuart\\_Botswana](http://twitter.com/Stuart_Botswana)

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