



print edition

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS

Workmate seems a slacker? Beware 'the ocular proof'

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Dear Susan,

My officemate often stares into space for a long time, picks her nails, and checks her Hotmail account when she's supposed to be working. This bothers me. It's unfair that she gets to waste time while everyone else here is working. Should I say something to her?

- *Feeling Like a Chump*

Print Edition - Section Front



Dear Feeling,

Your colleague seems bored, but is she really goofing off? All you have to go on is what Othello called "the ocular proof," that is, what you've seen. But as Shakespeare made clear, what you see is not always what you get.

It looked like Othello's wife was unfaithful; she was not. Your co-worker seems to be a slacker. What if she's not? Like all accusers, you'd better have more than just "ocular proof," or you point a finger at your peril.

Even if your hunch is right, there are good reasons why you should dial down your injustice meter. Far from black holes of productivity, little lapses of attention may serve a neural purpose.

In a 2006 review of brain-imaging studies, Washington University radiologists Marcus Raichle and Mark Mintun showed that the brain gobbles energy even when it is at rest, consuming just 5-per-cent fewer neural resources than when it's engaged in an activity.

And other studies show that brief periods of inattention can help us recognize what's new. For example, people with attention deficit disorder are quicker than average folks to spot novel stimuli. Meanwhile, tedious word association tasks prompt people to dream up ever wilder and more creative word matches once the goal becomes obvious and they find the task repetitive.

So even if it seems counterintuitive, boredom can prompt us to push the mind further. And even if it seems farfetched, your officemate may be generating new ideas while she stares out the window or picks at her cuticles. You can't know the content of her thoughts.

Even if you had proof that she was thinking about her weekend plans and not about how to pitch a project, it's not up to you to monitor the rhythm of her work or where she fixes her gaze. Keep your suspicions to yourself, lest you relish the idea of office "thought police" focusing their surveillance in your direction.

After all, when it comes to new ideas, daydreaming and cat-napping have a lofty history. It's not as if the brain shuts down when we zone out.

Take for example, Thomas Edison, whose best inventions were jump-started by loosely formed thoughts that came to him when he was half-asleep, or German chemist August Kekule, who became famous for discovering the benzene ring when he dreamed about snakes biting their tails.

When it comes to others' thought processes, I'd rather cast aside scruples about fairness and extend the benefit of the doubt. After all, if vacations are sanctioned as restorative, then day-dreaming and little lapses can provide the mini-pause that refreshes.

Dear Susan,

As a mid-career professor and researcher, I have become very busy over the past three years. To get everything done, I have to seclude myself so I won't get sidetracked by other peoples' problems. This has allowed me to complete my projects and write grant applications. But I have also become more isolated in my department, which worries my wife. Should I give up work time to socialize?

- *Waffling*

Dear Odd Man Out,

The short answer is yes, and here's why: Collaborative efforts with other colleagues can reap big dividends. In academic life in particular and in large projects in general, you get more bang for your buck if you join forces with others. You don't have to do the lion's share of work, or even be in the same place to get some of the credit. The more partnerships you establish, the more publications you rack up. You'll accomplish much more than you could ever do yourself.

The second reason is that social encounters can spark ideas. If you run into a colleague and mention a problem that you're facing, he or she might suggest how to avoid falling down a hole, or put you in touch with a source who can help.

Cleverly designed offices thus exploit the cohesion of a neighbourhood, with colleagues often crossing paths as one does on a street.

The co-founders of Pixar Animation Studios, Steve Jobs and Ed Catmull, set up its offices this way by locating the atrium, cafeteria, bathrooms, and meeting rooms smack dab in a central area to heighten the chance of people crossing paths and, thus, communicating informally.

"It's hard to describe just how valuable the resulting chance encounters are," wrote Mr. Catmull, the current president of Pixar and the Disney Animation Studios in the latest Harvard Business Review. By fostering inadvertent meetings and trusting that individuals would chat and gossip, Mr. Jobs built a creative company that was more than the sum of its parts.

But that cohesion depends on leaders valuing such encounters, and it sounds as if you need some convincing.

Even if you don't find it inherently fun and interesting to get together with your workmates, gossip and socializing perform an important function. According to social psychologists, comments bandied between colleagues transmit clues about coalitions and quietly, invisibly, enforce a group's rules. Among California ranchers, for instance, gossip held the community together, keeping cheaters and conflicting factions at bay, according to a study of how these farmers managed to solve their

conflicts without resorting to legal channels. When there were dishonest dealings, rumours travelled fast within the community, and the guilty parties were upbraided or shunned.

And research on business chatter shows that gossip firms up an organization's networks during slow times, when people don't need to communicate but still want to keep in touch.

I could go on about all the ways socializing brings tangible benefits, but then I'd be neglecting to mention the most important one of all. Your wife may want you to be connected and less lonely. If you stop and think a moment, you may also want that, too.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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