BUSINESS INSIGHTS

It's time to end productivity theater

Bossware isn't helping productivity, it's hurting it

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Fairly early in my career I worked at a marketing agency. Off the heels of executing the most successful campaign in the admittedly short history of the agency, leadership identified a problem. Despite getting more inbound inquiries than ever, fewer deals were closing, despite having a record high stable of clients, fewer assets were being produced. In short: productivity was down. But leadership devised a solution.

Every day, everyone in the company had to turn in a log sheet. This log sheet had to account for every single thing we achieved that day, along with the hour and minute it was done. After two weeks, the results spoke for themselves. More emails were being sent, more calls being made. Yet deliverables ground to a halt, and we closed even fewer deals than we had in the weeks prior.

As the senior project manager, I was called into a meeting with the C-level executive who implemented the initial productivity reform. The logs spoke for themselves, people accounted for all of their time, they were diligent and kept up with the incredible volume of inbound inquiries. He wanted to understand why, if everyone was so busy, so little was getting done.

As I explained, the issue was that what he asked for wasn't for the team to be more productive, but to look busier. He wasn't incentivizing business, he was prioritizing busyness. We couldn't really be productive, because we were too busy doing the things that make us *look* productive. This, I said, was productivity theater.

If you've read any business publications, you're no doubt familiar with the term "productivity theater." Though it's recently come in vogue as a talking point in the ongoing war against hybrid work and remote employees. The premise behind many of these articles is simple: remote workers, high on the power afforded to them by their commute-free lifestyle, have devised the perfect system to pull a fast one on their beleaguered employers. It goes something like this:

1. Prioritize work that makes you seem busy over work that accomplishes your goals.
2. Report your busy-ness to your unassuming managers, and have lavish praises and bonuses be visited upon you.
3. Profit.

Now let's get one thing out of the way: there are absolutely workers who make it their mission to get by doing the bare minimum. There always have been, and always will be. The logical fallacy is in assuming that these people are the same people as the remote workers being accused of productivity theater. It forces you to presume that the vast majority of workers are inherently lazy, and have only been kept honest by their presence in an office.

Now let's get another thing out of the way: I have every reason to believe that these studies and articles pointing to an increase in productivity theater have data to back up their claims. However, many stop short of trying to understand what factors may account for this uptick in productivity theater. The hypothesis that this is a result of the shift to remote and hybrid work is a compelling one, however it ignores that *many* studies showed that people became *more* productive after transitioning from an office to a home workplace.

I have another theory: I think changes to company policies are incentivizing productivity theater.

The rise of corporate spyware

Corporate spyware, sometimes referred to more delicately as "bossware," is a whole range of software designed to monitor remote employee behavior. This software has also been finding its way into many office settings as well. This software goes above and beyond the prevalent and ethically dubious practice of reading employee communications on channels such as Slack. By monitoring all the processes on an employees workstation, this software gives managers real-time telemetry on the behavior of their employees.

Corporate spyware also provides analytics dashboards where workers are ranked on metrics such as hours worked, or the percent of their day that they were "engaged." There are also more invasive practices, such as utilizing software that randomly takes screenshots or uses an employee's webcam to monitor and track time spent at their workstation. Some do this through continuous monitoring, while others opt to randomly take a photograph once every ten minutes. This has led to some workers forgoing basic human activities like eating or bathroom breaks, for fear of being deemed "unproductive."

Aside from being outright ghoulish, some of these practices are overt invasions of privacy that some courts have already determined to be illegal. When faced with a suite of surveillance tools that rate you based on arbitrary metrics such as your time spent at desk, number or emails sent, or time spent utilizing different software, it's understandable that employees would begin to prioritize tasks that maximize these metrics, rather than tasks that achieve corporate goals. In essence: they've been conditioned to work harder, not smarter.

But there is another way.

The right tools for the job

So how do we actually help employees, remote, hybrid, or in office, to be more productive? The answer is maddeningly simple: give them the tools to do so. The modern digital workspace is riddled with inefficiencies and inconsistencies that, like a thousand cuts, can spell death for a productive workday. Chief among these inefficiencies is context switching, sometimes referred to as app switching.

App switching is exactly what it sounds like: switching between apps in order to accomplish different tasks. Every time a user moves from a CRM to Slack to ask a question, they're app switching. But this comes at a cost. According to research from Asana, app switching has lead to:

- 24% duplicated work
- 26% less efficiency
- 27% lost communication

Whenever you ask an employee to set aside a task to do something else, even something as small as replying to a message, you're forcing them to do something our brains simply aren't wired for. Human beings are incredibly linear thinkers and objectively terrible multitaskers. Has someone ever interrupted you while speaking and forced you to lose your train of thought? Or walk into a room only to forget why you did so in the first place? That's exactly what happens every time we force an employee to shift from one context to another.

Don't misunderstand: I'm not advocating for less communication in the digital workplace, it's actually quite the opposite. I believe that the best way to enable effective workplace communication is by bringing those conversations, direct or ad hoc, into the platforms where most of the work is done. That means utilizing tools that have in-app chat, in-app feeds, and in-app file management baked in. Now your workers don't need to leave their digital desk to access the digital file room, or step into the digital conference room, or leave a message on the digital notice board.

Three years into our hybrid first work paradigm, this functionality should be a standard on every platform. But unfortunately that's not the case. Thankfully, there's no shortage of API providers who offer developers large and small to integrate this functionality quickly and inexpensively into their apps. So if the tools your team uses on a daily basis don't have that functionality, it's time to demand them, because adding chat, files, and feeds to an application is easier than it ever has been.

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