



Article

THE OFFLOAD ROOM

The culture that is burning us out: Why busyness is not a badge of honor

Busyness looks like productivity. It feels important. In reality, it is killing focus, morale, and performance.

Always On, Always Behind

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Somewhere along the way, being busy became the new professional currency. The moment someone asks, “How are you?” the default reply has become, “Busy.” That one-word signals status, effort, importance, and ironically, exhaustion. The workplace is now a constant motion machine. Employees rush through meetings, emails, and back-to-back deliverables, often struggling to recall what they have accomplished. The pressure to appear productive has overshadowed the goal of being effective.

Across industries, the symptoms are familiar: overloaded calendars, mounting inboxes, declining focus, and chronic burnout. It is not a temporary season—it is a culture. Moreover, it is not sustainable.

Busyness has become a moral metric

The problem runs deeper than just bad time management. People no longer judge effort by outcomes, but by how much motion someone can display. Research shows that many perceive visible effort—regardless of effectiveness—as a sign of moral worth. Being overwhelmed signals dedication. Being calm or under control can be perceived as slacking.

This distortion has deep roots in social psychology. When people invest heavily in something, even if it is meaningless, they are more likely to value it. It is called effort justification. The more hours someone works, the more they convince themselves that the work must matter—otherwise, why endure the grind? This mindset creates a dangerous loop. People overcommit to meaningless activity in order to feel valuable, while failing to notice the creeping impact on mental and physical health. Eventually, chronic busyness becomes the measure of a person’s identity, not just their workload.

When “Hard Work” means waste

While activity can feel productive in the moment, evidence shows it is often the opposite. Performance declines when employees are rewarded solely for the hours they work or the effort they perceive. Firms that monitor time obsessively and reward visible overextension tend to see higher turnover, poorer health outcomes, and declining engagement. Rather than promoting creativity, innovation, or resilience, these organizations foster shallow work, encourage multitasking, and ultimately lead to disengagement.

One study highlighted that multitasking could reduce productivity by up to 40%. Despite this, tasks such as meetings, administrative work, and constant communication often dominate most schedules. As a result, employees remain perpetually busy without creating a meaningful impact.

Multitasking cuts productivity by up to 40%, yet it is still celebrated as a skill.

The pandemic amplified this even more. While many worried remote workers would slack off, research showed the opposite. People worked longer hours from home, often manufacturing work to fill their time—driven by discomfort with idleness and fear of being perceived as unproductive.

Deep work requires deliberate design

Organizations that want to break the cycle must move beyond superficial fixes. The goal is not just reducing hours—it is about redesigning how work gets done. Cognitive space must be protected. Deep work—the kind that requires focus, creativity, and complexity—cannot survive in a fragmented environment. Leaders can start by conducting an audit: ask employees to list their weekly tasks and rate how much focus, skill, and training each one requires. Identify low-value or cognitively shallow work and eliminate or automate it where possible. Some companies have gone as far as banning internal meetings or replacing email with more intentional communication systems. Others have implemented “no-call” policies during focus hours to protect thinking time.

Deep work demands protection, not availability.

These changes require cultural alignment. Without it, people will default back to the behavior that feels safest—staying busy to avoid guilt.

Time off is not optional

Rest should not be left to chance. Left to their own devices, most employees will not take enough time off. In fact, research consistently shows that even when vacation is unlimited, workers take less leave than when policies are clearly defined and encouraged. Some firms have implemented mandatory leave policies. Others have introduced vacation stipends that are revoked if employees check their email while away. The message is simple: stepping away is not abandonment of responsibility—it is part of being effective.

This is also supported by neuroscience. The brain’s task-positive network (used during focused work) cannot activate simultaneously with the default network (linked to creativity, meaning, and long-term thinking). Constant task execution suppresses the very neural functions that support deep insight, emotional regulation, and future planning. Giving the mind time to wander is not a luxury—it is a requirement for sustainable thinking.

The most powerful example comes from the top

No policy can undo a culture of busyness if leaders model the opposite. When managers brag about being available 24/7, respond to emails at midnight, or avoid leave, they set a damaging standard. Employees get the message: rest equals weakness.

Proper rest fuels creativity, clarity, and long-term output.

In contrast, when senior leaders visibly take breaks, respect boundaries, and discuss rest as a strategic tool, the culture shifts. A CEO who shares vacation plans or admits to taking a midday run is doing more than just practicing self-care. They are allowing others to pause the performative busyness and focus on real value.

The path forward

The busyness trap will not dissolve on its own. It has become ingrained in the rewards system, self-worth, and the perception of leadership. To dismantle it, organizations must challenge how they define effort, create systems that prioritize output over optics, and protect the conditions for genuine work to occur.

The most resilient organizations will not be those that do the most, but those that focus best.

Reference

Source: Based on Adam Waytz's article, "Beware a Culture of Busyness", Harvard Business Review, March–April 2023.

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