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Working Hard to Look Busy



Illustrations by Lars Leetaru

Refile papers back to 1980. Give telemarketers work number and pick up every time. Fold and pile merchandise into sculpture of Chrysler Building.

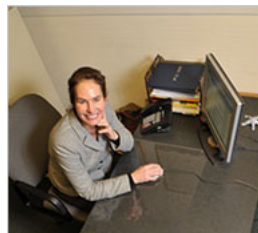
By JAN HOFFMAN
Published: January 23, 2009

TO a passer-by, the chic clothing store on Mott Street in Manhattan looked like a tumult of activity. On a recent weekday afternoon, Carolyn Bailey, a supervisor, was fussing with the window displays of women's clothing, shifting piles of perfectly folded sweaters, spacing hangers a finger-width apart, debating avidly on the phone with a higher-up about coordinating outfits.



Illustrations by Lars Leetaru

Write five-page thank-you notes to clients



Though she appeared occupied, intently so, she was creating an illusion of busyness. The NoLita shop was empty.

"You don't want anyone from corporate to walk in and see you doing nothing," Ms. Bailey said. "You've got to keep busy for them and the clients. You have to be proactive —" she broke off to reposition a handsome pair of boots, "so we'll do a lot of refolding and dusting. Hey, I might just mop!"

By day's end, six customers had wandered in. Ms. Bailey charmed three into making purchases.

"I'm putting the energy out there," said Ms. Bailey, a single mother. "I have to stay positive. And busy."

In a sunny economy, workers joke about frittering away the hours during traditional slow times, like January, confident that things will eventually pick up. Looking busy when you're not in order to fool the boss can be something of an art form.

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David Hansen for The New York Times
Refile papers back to 1980

But now, when business is *verrry* slow and the possibility of layoffs icily real, looking busy is no joke. In retail and real estate, restaurants and law offices, many workers are working hard to look necessary — even when they don't have all that much to do.

Their concerns are warranted. The unemployment rate is 7.2 percent, more layoffs have been forecast for 2009 and employers have been shrinking workweeks. While staff reductions have left many remaining employees feeling breathless with too much work, at companies where downtime is glaringly obvious, employees are becoming creative about disguising idleness.

A portfolio manager, 30, who works for a private equity firm in New Jersey, scatters papers on his desk. When he skips out for long lunches, he colludes with friends in other offices to call him — and deliberately leaves behind his cellphone, with the ringer's volume set to high. (Like many workers interviewed for this article he requested that neither his name nor his company be mentioned, worried that his position would be at risk.)

A lawyer at the New York office of an international firm wanted to give the impression he was working late at night — but he was stymied by office lighting that would dim when he left the room. So he brought in an oscillating fan, which tricked the motion detectors into keeping the lights on long after he'd departed.

A Manhattan advertising executive in his 30s who oversees the print ads for a major account that may be on the verge of collapse, positions his monitor to face the window, so colleagues can't see that he's designing toys for the baby he and his wife are expecting this spring.



Illustrations by Lars Leetaru
Say you're working on a three-month top-secret project.

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Rob Bennett for The New York Times
ALL HANDS ON DECK On quiet nights, Nobu servers fold wrappers for chopsticks.

In fact, cyberloafing — the nonwork-related use of computers by employees — often gives temporary cover to those who want to appear busy, if they can master the furrowed brow, the studious squint at the monitor (while bidding on [eBay](#)). Work e-mail messages can be programmed to be sent in the middle of the night, so that workers can seem 24-7 dedicated.

Flinging headlong into busywork itself is another way to seem indispensable. Re-indexing transaction papers. Studying regulations in areas with only a chimerical connection to yours. Writing notes to customers to thank them just for coming in to browse.

In these unbusy times, busywork's bad reputation may be due for revision. Busywork can give you a reassuring, small-bore task. It can trigger ideas for genuine productivity. It can stave off boredom for some, even as it drives others absolutely batty. It can spray a room with the smell of nervous fear.

But it is nonetheless something to do. A sales associate who works at a national clothing outlet in Westbrook, Conn., said she had readjusted her attitude toward refolding garments, retail's numbingly repetitive busywork. Now when customers leave clothes balled up in fitting rooms, the saleswoman feels grateful.

"On slow days, you realize you need that crumpled clothing on the floor, and you don't want customers to put them neatly back on the racks," she said.

Eric Abrahamson, a professor of management at Columbia Business School, said though busywork has no inherent productivity value, "It may have an individual value for the person who is doing it. It's difficult going into work and having nothing to do. Especially for people who are used to being overwhelmed with work."

Michelle Kirby, a real estate agent for Gustave White [Sotheby's](#) International Realty in

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Newport, R.I., was accustomed to being work-crazed.

But a wintry hush has settled over real estate. These days, Ms. Kirby shows up at the office largely for the companionship and to polish her existing listings. But how often can she check in with a seller to say that the house hasn't been shown in a month? To keep busy, she began an archaeological excavation of her desk. "I found files from 2003," she said. "Now I have a clear desk blotter. It's completely neat."

Experts on workplace behavior say that mustering a token show for the boss can backfire. If a worker isn't already regarded as diligent, "This is a bad time to manage the impression that you're a hard worker," said Robert Giacalone, a business school professor at [Temple University](#). "There's fear out there, and that fear generates suspicion among people in power that workers are trying to manipulate their images because they're afraid."

Of course employers do tend to notice when busywork doesn't contribute to the bottom line.

Can it really shield you from the ax?

"How can I stop the organization from doing this?" added Professor Giacalone. "Good luck!"

At law firms, which have been jolted almost daily by layoffs, busywork rarely translates into that all-important billable hour. One corporate lawyer, 40, who was a counsel in the Manhattan office of a 950-lawyer national firm, said that when the economy stalled last summer, he spent his days following the Washington news and calling clients in an advisory, nonbillable capacity.

"It was a way to show the client that even though things were slow, I'm still looking out for your best interests so that when things come back, you can turn to us as experts," said the lawyer, who specialized in structured finance.

Scrounging for work, he called lawyers in the firm's other practice areas, trying to market himself to pick up hours. Then calls went out to former clients. To old friends from law school. To friends from *college*. "But they were all looking to save their own skins," the lawyer said.

His time sheets increasingly read, "professional development." Earnest, but nonbillable. He volunteered for the firm's diversity recruiting program. Law firms have an ethical obligation to take on pro bono work, so he explored that, too.

"A lot of partners who were anti pro bono used to say, 'If you do that, find another job!' But they're the ones who are sitting at their desks, twiddling their thumbs and doing pro bono to keep busy," the lawyer said. He even read to a class once a week at a public elementary school in the city.

"I was busy not making money," he said. "But because I was out there trying to do things for the firm that were valuable in a different way, I thought that might be enough."

Three weeks ago he was laid off.

When work devolves to such a dead place that even token busywork isn't possible, employees usher in the silly season, if only to keep boredom at bay. A banker at a Wall Street investment bank said that as business ground to a halt this fall, "There were a lot of football catches on the trading floor, and occasionally you'd hear the sound of footballs crashing into monitors." In November, he was sacked in a fourth round of layoffs.

Certainly one beneficiary of so much downtime is the elusive client. On a recent Wednesday, the matinee lunch crowd at an elegant theater-district restaurant could charitably have been called sparse. But the *maitre d'* put on her game face. "It's an opportunity to treat customers like kings and queens," she said.

Concerned about staff morale during slow stretches, employers have ready lists of housekeeping chores. Richie Notar, managing partner at Nobu Restaurants, who flew around the country this month to rally the troops, remarked, "An idle hand is not good

for any employee. It gives the impression that nothing is going on.”

On quiet winter nights, servers fill soy sauce pots and fold paper wrappers for chopsticks.

“It’s like origami,” he said. “It’s soothing and relieves anxiety. It’s a project, and they all smile when they do it.”

Jonathan Spira, the chief analyst at Basex, a business research firm, said if employers sense that workers have too much downtime or busywork, they can start cross-training programs. But he added, taking initiative before the boss does is preferable. Rather than try to kill time, better to freshen a résumé or think of novel ways to be useful on the job.

EARLIER in the slowdown, Patrick Gray, who works at Corrao, Miller, Rush & Wiesenthal, a legal recruiting firm, realized he was endlessly making cold calls to lawyers who were hanging up on him. “It was making me miserable and tense,” he said.

So he set up a blog for alumni of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, where he worked several years ago as an associate. When the economy improves, he hopes the blog will bring clients. “I’m busier because I have a direction,” Mr. Gray said. “It’s purposeful busywork.”

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