

Friday Water Cooler: Productivity Theater

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A new survey shows that 83% of employees are striving to appear more busy than they actually are.



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When it comes to the state of productivity right now, leaders and rank-and-file employees suffer from opposing afflictions. Top brass might struggle with productivity paranoia—a term coined by Microsoft in 2022 to characterize a manager’s gnawing suspicion that remote employees are working less, even though meetings, calls, and emails haven’t lagged. Meanwhile, employees are meeting that paranoia by staging a bit of “productivity theater.”

According to a new survey of 1,000 US-based employees by the workplace analytics provider Visier, productivity theater occurs when “employees prioritize performative work over more valuable tasks.” Turns out the phenomenon is rampant, as 83% of respondents admitted to engaging in at least one common performative workplace behavior in the last year.

The results. While a mouse jigglers may represent a bulwark against the monitoring of remote workers, other behaviors noted by Visier were perhaps less ornate. Among respondents, 42% admitted to responding to “colleagues via email/instant message as promptly as possible, even though an immediate response was not necessary,” and there was a 36% tie among those who

said they'd "scheduled an email/message to be delivered at a future time" and "attended a meeting that wasn't necessary for me to attend." A further 28% said they'd "kept my laptop screen awake while not actively working," and 23% "completed extra research for a project that wasn't necessary."

Who are employees doing this for? According to the survey, 70% said it was to get the attention of their direct manager, 39% for their peers, 32% for department leads, and 29% for the company's senior leadership.

Productivity theater cut across work formats, though it remained the highest among in-office workers, 37% of whom prioritized "gaining visibility" at work, followed by 28% of hybrid workers, and 25% of remote workers.

Experts weigh in. The rise of workplace monitoring has compelled some employees to perform in a theatrical manner, Christina Janzer, SVP of research and analytics at Slack, told WorkLife via email. "We do sometimes see behaviors in our broader research where desk workers feel obligated to demonstrate when they are working, rather than focusing on hitting their goals," she told the publication.

This was echoed by Visier CEO Ryan Wong in a recent piece for Fast Company. He wrote: "As tech has enabled employers to track work down to the level of a mouse click, employees have responded by prioritizing visible work over important tasks or even deploying their own tech to fool the system."