

BANG ON TIME! STATEMENT WATCHES

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BY Nazley Omar

CAPITALISING ON

collaboration

In today's tech-savvy world, innovation and collaboration are more than buzz words – they're survival traits. While collaborative work aims to offer companies a competitive advantage, what impact does it have on individual employees?

"Great things in business are never done by one person – they're done by a team of people," Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple, once said.

As business becomes increasingly global, collaboration is seen as key to information-sharing, better coordination of projects and organisational success. A recent study by Nielsen reveals that CEOs rank collaboration among the top three most critical factors for innovation success, outpacing strong leadership and access to financial resources.

Even so, 74% of CEOs surveyed believe their companies aren't collaborating effectively, because the outcomes of collaborative work don't always justify the time and resources invested.

Consider how much time you spend on collaborative activities such as attending meetings, talking on the phone and responding to emails. A study by the *Harvard Business Review* reveals that this can take up to 80% of employees' time at the office, often resulting in an increased risk of burnout, higher stress levels and even higher staff turnover.

THE DOWNSIDE TO COLLABORATION

The risk of doing everything by consensus or collaboration is that it slows down decision making and action. It can also lead to decision laziness, whereby individuals wait for a general view to emerge or are reluctant to speak against the majority, even if their opposing view is better for the business.

Deirdre Elphick Moore, co-founder of The Office Coach, says collaboration can also create a lack of accountability. When things go wrong, who do you turn to? Who faces the music?

Furthermore, collaboration requires employees to be constantly communicating and few of us can resist the temptation to react to a new message or email.

"Our minds are continuously switching between tasks, which makes us highly ineffective as tasks take longer and many go unfinished," says Elphick Moore.



A study conducted by the University of California found that it takes the average person 23 minutes and 15 seconds to get fully back on task after an interruption. Multiply that by the number of interruptions we experience daily due to technology and it's clear why there's a need for extended working hours.

COLLABORATION OVERLOAD

Being connected and communicating constantly puts strain on the pre-frontal cortex, the part of the brain that deals with reasoning, decision-making and problem solving.

Executive business coach Penny Holburn says that when the pre-frontal cortex tires, the quality of your work deteriorates, your health suffers and it affects other aspects of your life, such as your relationships.

She adds that women are more likely to suffer from collaborative overload as they're often expected to do the lion's share of collaborative work because they're stereotyped as communal and caring. New York University psychologist

Madeline Heilman conducted an experiment on collaboration and found that men who stayed late to help their colleagues earned 11% higher ratings than women who did the same. When neither helped, the women were rated 12% less productive than the men.

"Women have often been acculturated to believe that being nice will get you places," says Holburn. "In the work environment, however, this doesn't apply. Therefore, it's important to learn to say 'no' to the work and not to the person. Boundaries aren't about shirking work—they're about respecting your time and energy, which will enable you to do your job well."

Holburn offers the following tips for not absorbing the work of others:

- Become strategic about your work. Prioritise and spend your time on what really matters to the organisation first.
- If you need to, have a discussion with your manager about what to prioritise. If you can, delegate or train others to share their load of the responsibilities.

- Be sure about your skills set and don't be afraid to ask why you've been invited to collaborate. If the reason is anything other than that you have the requisite skills or are a key decision maker, then decline the offer.
- Use your hours at work productively. Remove time wasters such as social coffee chats or smoke breaks during the day. A daily planner will help to track your goals and time spent.
- If you're continually interrupted while working, set aside a specific time of the day for questions or discussions. Close your door at other times.
- Learn to say "no" to work that isn't yours to do. People won't think you're slacking if you don't do it. They'll think you're unassertive if you say "yes" to everything and will continue loading work onto you.

How to improve your productivity

With the added pressures of collaborative work and technology, a study by Stanford University reveals that on average, you only have about four high-impact hours in your working day. Here's how to make the most of them:

- Carve out time to work quietly and in solitude. If you work in an open-plan office, block time in your diary and work in a meeting room or put headphones on to indicate that you don't want to be disturbed.
- Understand what energises you and make time for it every day. It may be exercise, meditation, music, or having conversations with uplifting people.
- Set aside time to address emails each day. Read each email and either respond, action or delete. When you leave work at the end of the week, your inbox should be empty.
- Have a to-do list for each day and prioritise items on it. Tackle the most difficult tasks first. Plan the amount of time for each activity and tick off each item as you complete it. Apps such as Do.com or Wunderlist help to monitor and prioritise your daily activities.
- Try not to make working from home a habit. Schedule some downtime each day to ensure that you unwind and get some rest.

MAKING COLLABORATION WORK

Successful collaboration requires work to be evenly distributed and collaborators' efforts to be recognised. Challenges arise when there's a clash of personalities, competition, a lack of contribution between partners, or a lack of consistency and clarity on roles and responsibilities.

Unassertive individuals and people pleasers are most likely to take on the work of others, resulting in a collaborative overload.

"It takes a confident person to decline an invitation to collaborate, especially if that invitation comes from someone senior," says Elphick Moore. "People who wish to progress in their career or those who feel they're at risk of losing their jobs also tend to suffer from an overload."

She adds that it requires a clear plan and an allocation of responsibilities for collaboration to work successfully. "It needs to be done in such a way that no one can hide and shirk their share of the responsibility. Each person will need to be assertive, as conflict will arise and people need to be held accountable."

How to deal with colleagues who shirk their share of the workload

Ensure that each collaborative activity has a clear agenda and deadline and that tasks are allocated to specific people. This helps to keep everyone involved on track and accountable.

If your colleague is slacking, insist they do their work. The best way is to be polite and direct and tell them exactly what you want them to do. If this doesn't yield results, you may need to escalate the matter to senior management. **D**



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