



Load Rage

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

As organizations wrestle with global competition and economic cycles, the pressure on productivity is more acute each year. I do not see an end to the pressure to accomplish more work with less. There comes a point when leaders ask people to stretch beyond their elastic limit, and they burn out. As the constant requests for more work with fewer resources starts to take a physical toll on the health of workers at all levels, people become justifiably angry. I see evidence of what I call "load rage" in nearly every organization in which I work.

An interesting flip side of this problem is the observation made by many researchers that working human beings generally operate at only a fraction of their true capability. I have read estimates of organizations extracting on average something like 30-50% of the inherent capability in the workforce; some estimates are even lower. It would be impossible for anyone to continually operate at 100% of capacity because that would require the adrenal glands to secrete a constant stream of adrenaline that would kill the person. However, if the estimates of typical capacity used are accurate, there is still a lot of upside in people, so why the "load rage"?

The reason is that we base our perception of how hard we are working at any moment on a sliding scale. We base our feelings of load on how busy we are, not on what percentage of our capacity is being consumed. Many of our activities are simply traps that we invent because of habitual patterns in our daily work. We tolerate a multitude of inhibiting actions that steal seconds from our minutes and minutes from our hours. We excuse these diversions as not being very important, but in reality they are exceedingly relevant to our output and to our stress level. Let me share a few examples.

Look at the inbox of your e-mail account. If you are like most people there are more than a few notes waiting for your attention. We have all kinds of reasons (really rationalizations) for not keeping our inbox totally cleaned out each day. I will share that at this moment I have 5 "read" notes and no "unread" notes in my inbox, and it is driving me crazy. I need to get that down to zero within the hour, but right now I am consumed

writing this article. If we are honest, it is inescapable that having more than 2-3 notes waiting attention will cause a few milliseconds of search time when we want to do anything on e-mail. That time is lost forever, and it cannot be replaced. We all know people who have maxed out the inbox capability and have literally thousands of e-mails to chew through. These people are drowning in a sea of time wasters just like a young adult with 20 credit cards is drowning in a sea of debt. It is inevitable.

You know at least a few people in your circle of friends or working comrades who spend a hefty chunk of their day going around lamenting how there is not enough time to do the work. Admit it - we all do this to some extent. Have you ever heard anyone say, "Looks like I have plenty of time and not much to do." OK, old geezers in the home have this problem and so do young children who are dependent on mommy to think up things to keep them occupied. For most of us in the adult or working world, our time is the most scarce and precious commodity we have, yet we habitually squander it in tiny ways that add up to major stress for us. I suspect that even the most proficient time-management guru finds it possible to waste over 30% of the time on things that do not matter.

One healthy antidote, especially at work, is to have a "stop doing" list. Most people have a "to do" list, but you rarely see someone crossing things off a "don't do" list. Think how liberating and refreshing it would be if each of us found an extra hour or two each day by just consciously deciding to stop doing things that do not matter. Whole groups can do this exercise and gain incredible productivity. The technique is called "work out," where groups consciously redesign processes to take work out of the system. If you examine how you use your time today, I guarantee that if you are brutally honest you can find at least 2 hours of time you are wasting on busy work with no real purpose. Wow, two hours would be a gift for anyone.

Another technique is to really load up your schedule. You think that you are overworked now, but just imagine if you added 5 major new activities that had to be done on top of your present activities. That would feel insane, but you would find ways to cope. Then if you cut back to your current load next week, what seemed like an untenable burden a few weeks ago would feel like a cake walk. I can recall a time in the Fall of 2004 when I was teaching 11 different courses at the same time. That was in addition to writing a book and developing a leadership consulting practice. I will admit that was a little insane, but did I ever enjoy the load when I cut it back to only three courses at a time.

Another huge time burner is conflict. We spend more time than we realize trying to manage others so our world is as close to what we want as possible. When things are out of kilter, we can spend hours of time on the phone or e-mail negotiating with others in a political struggle to get them to think more like us. The typical thought pattern going

through the mind during these times is "why can't you be more like me." The energy and time to do this negotiation can really eat up the clock time during the day.

Dither is another issue for many of us. I already shared that while I am writing this paper, I am really procrastinating from opening up and dealing with the 5 notes in my inbox (oops - now 6) (now 7). I typically get between 100-150 e-mails a day. There are other things I must do today, but I am having fun writing this paper, so the "work" is getting pushed back. I will pay for this indulgence later, but at least I do recognize what I am doing here. The point is that most of the time that we lose is unconscious. We have all figured out how to justify the time wasters in our lives, and we still will complain that there are not enough hours in the day.

There is no cure for this malaise. It is part of the human condition. I think it helps to remind ourselves that when we feel overloaded, particularly with work, it is really just a priority issue, and we honestly do have plenty of time to do everything with still some slack time to take a breath. If you do not agree, then I suspect you are in denial.

Now, I need to be excused to go clean out my inbox!

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