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Off Task and Lost Work Productivity: Why, How Much, and Implications for Vocational Expert Testimony

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One of the most frequently asked questions of vocational experts in Social Security disability hearings by the Administrative Law Judge (ALJ) is what percentage of the time employees are allowed to be off task before being terminated. Anecdotally, without any research or literature to support their opinions, most vocational experts typically follow the common-sense party line by opining a range of 10% – 20% in an eight-hour workday. A comprehensive literature review of employers, employees, and human resource personnel was conducted regarding observations of off task work behavior. Overall, several factors were found to be consistent across studies/surveys including industry and occupation type, worker dissatisfaction, education level, the advent of cell phones and social media, employee health status, and work conditions. Implications for vocational experts in providing a more educated opinion regarding this question is discussed.

Perhaps one of the most frequently asked questions of vocational experts (VE's) in Social Security adjudication hearings for disability by an Administrative Law Judge or claimant representative is "How much time off task is an employee allowed before being terminated?" Anecdotally, VE's have traditionally had no hard data from which to proffer opinions on what is acceptable to employers, but typically give a range between 10% – 20% when asked (Judge Wyatt, personal communication, July 18, 2018).

The purpose of the following paper was to review any existing literature on the topic of off task behavior and its prevalence in the workplace. The researchers explored what kind of literature was available on the topic, surveys that have been conducted with employers/employees or related personnel, differences in off task behaviors between business industries or occupations, worker dissatisfaction, educational differences, and the types of off task behavior engaged in. The implications for VE's in proffering opinions regarding off task behavior is discussed.

A comprehensive review of the literature suggests that the over $15 billion per year lost work productivity is more complex than just the advent of the Internet and smart phones (Bresiger, 2017). However, Melendez (2012) noted from a liability insurance company computation that employees waste about $134 billion per year in lost work productivity. Dance and Service (2013) and other researchers

have cited numerous reasons for worker distractions or time off task at work including inequity in pay, job dissatisfaction, boredom, production quotas, cameras in the work setting, supervisor proximity, shift work, over time, employee health, and office illumination (e.g., Hawthorne studies) (Abdou, 1997; Albensi, 2003; Frank, 1979; Levin, 2006; Snapp-Conner, 2015; Wallis, Steptoe, & Cole, 2006).

Smerd (2007) cites worker chronic illness such as obesity and secondary complications costs businesses over $1.1 trillion per year of lost work productivity. He further cites obesity-related hypertension alone costs $123 billion in 2003. All cancers accounted for $120 billion in lost productivity annually. These statistics exclude absenteeism and deal primarily with these illnesses causing lost productivity while at work. When chronic illnesses are added to the complexity of off task behavior of healthy workers, it becomes clear that lost productivity at work is a multifaceted problem requiring further exploration.

It appears that the most obvious reason cited among researchers over the past two decades has been the advent of the Internet and smart phone. Bresiger (2017) found that of the 600 employees and senior office managers across 20 businesses in the US, lost work productivity averaged about eight hours per week per employee according to Department of Labor statistics. The major cause of this lost work productivity discussed next is due to this latest technology. Brooks (2011, p. 92) indicates that when workers are distracted; "A person who is interrupted while performing a task takes 50% more time to complete it and makes 50% more errors."

How Much Time is Off Task

There have been a number of surveys of late including employees and employers as well as human resource personnel responses to not only how much time they spend daily off task, but what off task activities they are commonly engaged in. Gouveia (as cited by Connor, 2015) from salary.com cited 2014 data from 750 employees who indicated the amount of time they were not productively working on an average day. This included 31% who indicated being off task about 30 minutes, 31% indicating being off task for at least one hour daily, 16% reported being off task two hours per day, 6% stated they wasted three hours per day, and 2% each indicated they wasted four or five hours per day respectively.

In another survey by salary.com (Anonymous, 2012) of 3,200 employees and employers wasting time at work, 39% of participants admitted spending about one hour per week or less on non-related activities, 29% reported spending up to two hours per week wasting time on their computers, 21% indicating wasting up to five hours per week, and 3% spending 10 hours or more on nonwork related activities. Sixty-four percent of employees admitted to visiting non-work-related websites every day. Of the employees surveyed, 35% indicated they engaged in off task behavior because their job was not challenging enough, 34% indicated their hours were too long, 32% perceived the company provided no incentives to work harder, and 30% experienced job dissatisfaction. Connor (2015a) cites an earlier salary.com survey on wasted time noting that 63% of respondents admitted to wasting approximately 1.7 hours per day at work equating to roughly 50 days per year of wasted time.

Bresiger (2017) notes that employees concede to wasting approximately eight hours per week on non-related work activities, and 42 minutes of that on average per day engaging in cell phone use, answering emails, and visiting social media websites. Poppick (2016) similarly cited a career builder.com survey of 3,000 employees and 2,000 employers/human resource managers regarding time off task at work. Of the employees, 80% indicated they bring their smart phone to work and 70% of them keep their phone within eyesight. And although 10% of employees indicated using their phone during work hours, employers perceived that use of personal cell phones was the number one off-task activity workers engage in. In addition, 20% of employers expressed that their employees put in about five hours of productive work in an eight-hour shift. Finally, Grasz (2014) cited a Harris interactive poll funded by career builder.com noting that 24% of employees admitted to spending about an hour on a typical work day making personal calls, sending emails and texting on their phone. An additional 21% estimated they spent approximately one hour more during a typical work day searching the Internet for non-work-related information/photographs.

A U.S. Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division (2008) fact sheet indicates that personal time, fatigue, and delay (PF&D) factors must be considered by employers when calculating piece rate or below minimum wage pay to employees. The government recommends not less than 15% or 9–10 minutes per hour and not less is a minimum requirement for PF&D.

Finally, an interactive Harris poll (2016) of 2,186 hiring and human resource managers nationwide indicated that 75% of their employee's waste approximately two or more hours per day of work related productivity, while 43% of employers/managers indicate employees waste about three hours per day. They noted that low morale among coworkers exists when they have to perform their time-wasting coworkers job duties in 38% of cases. It also leads to negative supervisor/employee relations as reported by 28% of respondents, and 27% and 26% respectively reported time-wasting employees missed deadlines and lost revenue for the company.

Most Common Off Task Activities

By far, the most commonly reported off task work activities noted over the past decade has been related to the Internet and smart phones (Bresiger, 2017; Connor, 2015, Poppick, 2016). Several study findings support this assertion. An Interactive Harris poll cited by Grasz (2014) for careerbuilder.com of 2,138 hiring managers and resource personnel as well as 3,022 full-time private-sector workers across industries reported a variety of time waster activities at work. Employers cited the most common productivity time killers were cell phone/texting 50% of the time, gossiping 42% of the time, using the Internet 39% of the time, social media 38% of the time, eating snacks and smoke breaks 27% of the time, interruptions by noisy workers 24% of the time, perceived unnecessary meetings occupying 23% of their time as did sending emails and coworkers stopping by at their workstation.

A recent Harris interactive poll commissioned by careerbuilder.com (Anonymous, 2016) of 2,186 hiring and human resource managers nationwide noted that 65% of employees wasted time with their smart phone engaged in personal messaging, 51% check the weather, 44% read the news, 24% played games on their phones 24% shopped online, and 12% checked traffic. Participants also noted that 41% of employees used the Internet on their cell phone for gossiping (39%), social media (37%), and emailing (26%). The most common websites visited were Facebook - 41%, LinkedIn - 37%, Yahoo - 31%, Google - 28%, and Amazon - 25%. Non-cell phone time wasters were also reported by 27% indicating coworkers dropping by to talk, 24% noted excessive or unnecessary meetings, and 9% noted distractions simply from working from a cubicle.

Industries/Occupations, Education, Age, and Employment Setting Environment

Snapp-Connor (2015a) reported on 2,000 employees from US companies who were surveyed on a variety of topics related to wasting time at work in terms of occupations, industries, and in employment settings. Occupations/settings that reported spending less than one hour a day off task included construction workers at 61%, hotel and food services at 59%, publishing at 57%, wholesale and retail sales at 53%, agriculture/hunting and fishing at 52%, transportation and warehousing 50%, education at 47%, manufacturing at 45%, and medical and healthcare 44%. Conversely in the same study, industries reporting wasting three or more hours per day included utilities 17%, telecommunications 15%, government and public administration 14%, real estate rentals 13%, and information data processing at 11%.

Snapp-Connor noted other nuances of the same survey findings. Employees also responded to their time off task based on their occupational role. Those reporting wasting less than one hour a day were 52% skilled laborers, 45% middle-management, 43% upper management and trained professionals. Those reporting wasting more than three hours per day held positions including administrative staff -16%, support staff - 9%, some middle managers at 8.8%, and 8.3% temporary employees. Overall, it appears that administrative staff who work in an office setting with a computer aside from their smart phone are the greatest culprits of off task behavior. In addition, when all administrative staff completed their work or when the supervisor was not around, this increased off task behavior among

office staff. A majority of off task behavior was due to Internet and smart phone use referred to as *cyber-loafing*. It was also noted that 46% of hourly wage earners reported off task behaviors versus 41% of salaried employees.

Regarding education level and age differences, Snapp-Connor noted that those with a higher level of education waste more time. Specifically, those with a doctorate degree wasted the most at 67%, bachelor's degree at 66%, graduate degree at 65%, and high school graduates at 59%. In the same survey, the age group spending the most time visiting websites were those between 26 – 35 years of age reported by 75% of them, the next highest was 72% of 18 to 25-year-olds, followed by 65% of 36 – 45-year-olds, 58% of employees between 46 – 55, and 55% of those age 56 and older.

Health Impact on Work Productivity

The nuanced loss of work productivity thus far has been confined to healthy workers and not addressed the impact of poor health and lost productivity at work. The impact of one's mental health and related stressors as well as an individual's physical health also costs billions of dollars per year in lost work productivity. Studies regarding absenteeism due to mental and physical health concerns have been well-documented (Hargrave, Hiatt, Alexander, & Schafer, 2008; Hargrave, Smerd, 2007). A related term, "presenteesism" is defined as employees who are not well because they show up to work but are not productive due to being unhealthy.

Messemer (2013) notes a ComPsych Stress Pulse survey indicating that the effect of stressors accounts for 15 – 30 minutes of productivity daily according to 41% of those surveyed, 36% reported being unproductive for one hour or more daily, and 23% reported their productivity was not affected. Similarly, 46% indicating coming to work one to four days per year and being unproductive, while 30% reported feeling the same over five days per year.

Smerd (2007) reported on how Americans are becoming older and sicker with subsequent rapidly increasing healthcare costs per year. Those with obesity type II diabetes (approximately 90%) is projected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016) to account for $3 trillion per year by 2050 with as many as two thirds of Americans expected to be suffering from it. This growing epidemic often leads to secondary complications including heart disease, stroke, blindness, kidney disease, and amputations.

The impact of a negative work environment in and of itself can facilitate poor health among employees and begin with presenteeism and spiral into excessive absences if the employee does not fear being terminated (Hemp, 2004). Hargrave et al. (2008) note that lost productivity related to mental health problems leads to an estimated 217 million complete or partially lost work days costing businesses approximately $12 billion per year among workers 18-54 years of age. Hargrave and associates define the effects of off task behavior to include difficulty concentrating, quality of interpersonal communications, the need to repeat tasks, working to slowly, and poor quality of one's work. Hemp (2004) cites depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety, and personality disorders as the greatest causes of presenteeism or off task behavior. Stewart, Ricci, Chee, Hahn, and Morganstein (2003) published a comprehensive study on the impact of depression, noting that 82% of lost productivity among those with psychiatric disorders contributed to 5.6 hours per week of lost productivity compared to 1.5 hours of nondepressed employees per week. Hargrave et al. (2007) found the positive impact of Employee Assistance Programs have on helping troubled employees to cope saves an estimated $2.5 million per year for businesses following treatment.

Pohling, Buruck, Jungbauer, and Leiter (2016) surveyed 885 Public Service Employees in Germany regarding presenteeism facilitated by mental and physical health difficulties. Caverley, Cunningham, and MacGregor (2007) listed presenteeism arises from neck, back, and musculoskeletal pain as well as stress, smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, headaches, flu and fatigue as contributors. They cited work related stressors such as being understaffed, insufficient resources, fears because of job insecurity, and time pressures causing mental and physical health problems. Johns (2010, 2011) similarly discussed poor working conditions such as financial dependence, absence policy, job security, perceived

inequality, and ease of being replaced in one's job. These findings were also previously supported by Hensen and Andersen (2008, 2009) who discussed poor social support from supervisor and/or coworkers, low control over work, and low effort-to-reward imbalance as contributors to presenteeism.

Implications for Social Security Vocational Expert Testimony

What has become one of the most predominant and highly subjective questions Administrative Law Judges or claimant representative in hearings over the past several years has been "What percentage of time can employees be off task before being terminated". Anecdotally, vocational experts generally cite 10% – 20% which otherwise equates to 6 to 9 minutes out of every work hour in an eight-hour workday. To our knowledge, there does not appear to have been any research conducted empirically or a comprehensive literature review by vocational experts in our field, so this represents the first comprehensive literature review of which we are aware. Overall, this research suggests the answer to the question varies in numerous ways including one's health status, by industry and occupation, education level, work environment, access to technology (e.g., smart phone, computer, Internet), job satisfaction, workload, and presence of a supervisor.

Although all these conditions have been shown to factor into answering that question, the responses for vocational experts can be narrowed down by summarizing the significance of the many factors explored in this literature review. Overall, vocational experts that have been opining somewhere between 10% – 20% off task behavior is acceptable productivity for employers without being terminated appears to be supported by the literature depending on occupation and industry on average. The literature supports findings indicating that office workers with desktops and smart phones are off task the most at approximately 37% of the workday. Other surveys suggest 1.7 hours per day off task, 2.2 hours off task, 2.5 hours per day, and 2.7 hours off task per day from unidentified occupations. Conversely, employees seemingly off task the least include physical manual labor workers for the most part reporting to be off task less than one hour per day include construction workers, retail sales and warehouse workers, and hotel/food services. Table 1 highlights in summary form more critical statistics required to respond to that question discussed earlier.

Paper Limitations

Although this literature review was comprised of a number of peer-reviewed journal publications, other than the Harris interactive poll survey findings, a primary limitation of the study was needing to rely upon nontraditional survey sites such as careerbuilder.com, Paychex.com, and salary.com sites. Although these sites are visited by employers and employees alike for relevant information and in this case completing a survey of off task behavior, we are uncertain as to whether respondents answered truthfully or in a socially desirable way. One could argue that in any survey that has not been deemed reliable or valid, there is no way of knowing these limitations. Second, we recognize that although some vocational experts use websites such as salary.com to establish wage information in various geographic locations as well as Department of Labor statistics, other vocational experts do not. Finally, we are unable to find any studies or surveys that cited how much time off task employees can get away with before being terminated, but rather how much time survey respondents reported off task behavior was being tolerated when they completed the survey.

Conclusions

Some off-task behavior is acceptable in every occupation in the US as employers have never really been expected to obtain 100% productivity from employees in any industry. The findings here suggest several key variables that impact off task behavior. First, those performing office work such as administrators and support staff with easy access to a desktop computer in addition to their smart phone tend to be off task the greatest amount of time, and perhaps more so when their supervisor is not nearby or if they have a low workload. Second, optimal employee mental and physical health tends to lead to greater productivity than those in poor health. Third, manual labor jobs facilitate less

Table 1

Time Off Task and Industry / Occupation

Industry/Occupation	Author	Time Range Off Task	Average Per Day
Unknown	Bresiger (2017)	8 hours per week	2.2 hours or 27%
Unknown	Poppick (2016)	3 hours per day	3 hours or 37.5%
Unknown	Grasz (2014)	1-2 hours per day	1.5 hours or 18.7%
Unknown	Unknown	2-3 hours per day	2.5 hours or 31.2%
Unknown	Gouveia (2014)	30 mins. to 3 hours per day	2 hours or 25%
Unknown	Anonymous (2012)	.025-1.25 hours per day	.075 hours or .09%
Unknown	Connor (2015a)	1.7 hours per day	1.7 hours or 21%
Construction workers	Snapp-Connor (2015b)	< 1 hour per day (for 61%)	< 1 hour per day or 9%
Hotel/Food Service	Snapp-Connor (2015b)	< 1 hour per day (for 59%)	< 1 hour per day or 9%
Publishing	Snapp-Connor (2015b)	< 1 hour per day (for 57%)	< 1 hour per day or 9%
Wholesale/Retail Sales	Snapp-Connor (2015b)	< 1 hour per day (for 53%)	< 1 hour per day or 9%
Telecommunications	Snapp-Connor (2015b)	< 1 hour per day (for 57%)	< 1 hour per day or 9%
Skilled Laborers	Snapp-Connor (2015b)	< 1 hour per day (for 52%)	< 1 hour per day or 9%
Middle Management	Snapp-Connor (2015b)	< 1 hour per day (for 43%)	< 1 hour per day or 9%
Administrative Staff	Snapp-Connor (2015b)	< 1 hour per day (for 16%)	> 3 hours day or 37.5%
Support Staff	Snapp-Connor (2015b)	< 1 hour per day (for 16%)	> 3 hours day or 37.5%

off task behavior, especially when the supervisor is on site. Fourth, there still seems to be some off-task behavior noted in these findings of at least 30 minutes per day in any industry accounting for 6.25% off task behavior. For example, this may be more applicable to assembly type work as well as construction work. Finally, low productivity also results from job dissatisfaction, work overload, inequity in pay, boredom, unchallenging work, and perceived poor social support from supervisors and coworkers.

When taken altogether, the central question regarding vocational expert's opinions of what is acceptable off task behavior before being terminated cannot be definitively answered in this paper since studies or surveys could not be found on the topic. The present literature review uncovers the amount of time off task respondents were reporting they engaged in which varied 10% – 20% of the workday (6-12 minutes per hour on average) depending on the work environment and other factors cited here. Our findings are similar to the average of 15% or 9-10 minutes per hour as an acceptable minimum time off task cited earlier by the U.S. Department of Labor (2008) for PF&D in establishing peace rate payments for workers with disabilities.

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