



BOOSTING PRODUCTIVITY, QUALITY, AND WELL-BEING

BY STEVE RANDALL

In this age of “results-driven” businesses, companies might want to reconsider how they boost productivity and improve the bottom line. Rather than focusing on technological fixes and innovations, reorganization, and downsizing, improving employees’ work capacity may be the key to sustainable business success.

In the past, efforts to increase worker productivity have involved measuring how employees spend their time in order to identify process improvements. But conventional measures often fail to take into account much of the work that we do throughout the day. Also, these measurements tend to overlook the negative effects that the drive for bottom-line results can have on employee well-being. Employees may produce a great deal during a work crunch, yet burn out in the process. Thus, the push for productivity can actually undermine individual and organizational performance.

To foster truly continuous improvement and personal satisfaction, we need ways to measure how we think and feel about our work at any given moment—no matter what task we’re doing or whether we’re changing tasks—and not just the steps we go through to accomplish it. So what tools can we use to make this happen?

Increasing Involvement

Let’s take a close look at what we do when we successfully improve productivity on an individual level. Suppose you’re preparing a speech. And you’re really involved in the process. You write down a few key ideas that you want to present, then visualize yourself giving the speech.

At this point, you feel a little puzzled about the order of the ideas. You are stuck and don’t know how to

proceed. You look at the clock and wonder if you should take a break. You feel your involvement in the task decreasing and consider ways to avoid it completely.

You’ve reached what I call a *transition point*, where your productivity can continue at a steady pace, decrease, or maybe even improve. You know that taking a break now would waste time—you’d still have to face the task when you came back and you’d have to reestablish some momentum.

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So you drop your distracting thinking about escapes and concentrate on the task again. You remember being confused about the order of ideas and then realize it was actually the confusion that you wanted to avoid. This time you let yourself get confused. Your thoughts go back and forth about how to proceed, and then finally you get some insight about rearranging the ideas you want to present.

Now you’re really involved again. The flow of the work picks up and gradually accelerates. Your productivity increases beyond the level that you had achieved before the confusion arose.

What facilitated the improvement in productivity? Wasn’t it recognizing how you had previously responded to the confusion—by decreasing your

involvement and pulling away from the task? Wasn’t it necessary to distinguish productive directions from counterproductive directions, then choose a productive direction and gradually become even more involved than you had been before getting confused? Could we summarize and say that increasing productivity resulted from noticing the transition point where your involvement could either increase or decrease, and then choosing a direction of increasing involvement? Isn’t this the way that we generally improve productivity without even thinking about it?

To intentionally apply this strategy at work, try to recall a recent experience in which you weren’t completely involved in a task, just as tennis players review their recent game to look for ways to improve their stroke. Keep in mind that a high degree of involvement implies a melding of worker and task, a timeless and effortless flow of events, and an unrestricted sense of openness. If you felt any separation from your work, if you weren’t completely swept up in the energy of the project, or if you felt distracted by your work environment, you have identified a key to improving your work game. You can now consciously identify productive and nonproductive responses and choose how to proceed. Regularly noticing your level of involvement in this way provides feedback that you can then use to approach peak performance (see “Ways to Increase Individual Productivity” on p. 8).

Improving Quality

Noticing your level of involvement in a task can also be the foundation for continuous quality improvement. For

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example, what else triggers us to improve a work process besides a transition point—conflict, unnecessary complexity, confusion, or wasted energy or effort? These disruptions in work flow draw our attention to processes that we can change for the better.

Similarly, we usually discern inadequacies in the resources at our disposal only when our experience of using them is disrupted or disturbed. For example, when we're driving a car, if the vehicle is functioning properly, we don't usually notice it—it virtually becomes a part of us. (Some years ago, Volkswagen advertised that their distinction as an auto manufacturer was that they considered the auto and the driver to be one.) If a race-car driver feels somewhat out of control when making high-speed turns, this disruption to the driver's sense of flow could indicate an opportunity for increasing the quality of the steering mechanism. Whenever a tool or technology does not meet our needs or expectations, we cannot be completely engrossed in the activity that requires us to use it. Identifying a resource as a source of disruption can give us the opportunity to improve our work environment.

Optimizing Well-Being

At this point you may hear a little

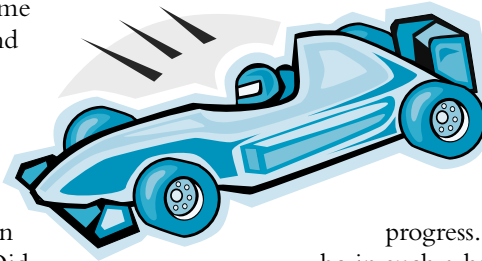
voice saying, "My company would benefit greatly from this approach of tracking involvement, but what would I get out of it?" The answer: your health and level of well-being should gradually improve.

Recall a time when you significantly improved your involvement in a work project by breaking through strong emotional resistance. Perhaps you found yourself avoiding a challenging new assignment that you felt uncertain about taking on. When you overcame your reluctance and delved into the project, did you experience an immediate change in your sense of satisfaction and confidence? Did the breakthrough boost your overall outlook on your job, and maybe even on life? The more we absorb ourselves in a task, the greater our feelings of well-being as we gain a renewed sense of commitment to it.

So boosting involvement can be a powerful means for increasing both productivity and well-being. Nevertheless, some managers might fear that people could use this approach to concentrate on self-improvement and personal satisfaction at the expense of their work commitments. This objec-

tion, while understandable, is unfounded. First, efforts to increase involvement often require letting go of personal desires and preferences in favor of dedicating ourselves to focusing on and accomplishing the job. The level of fulfillment we derive from our work largely corresponds with the degree to which we fully dedicate ourselves to the task at hand.

Second, the objection that tracking involvement could cause a decrease in productivity may simply reflect an organization's tactical rather than strategic approach to



progress. Businesses seem to be in such a hurry to produce and to improve this quarter's financial results that they can hardly see the possibility or importance of increasing employees' productivity over the long term. And while focusing on improving involvement may lead to slightly lower productivity in the short run, by intentionally working to resolve the conflicts that preoccupy us at transition points, our work capacity—including our awareness, available energy, and level of confidence—grows. We can then accomplish things at a faster rate and with greater levels of quality than before.

So how *can* we optimize our work efforts? Probably not by directing our attention to results, which doesn't guarantee improvement of well-being and quality. By improving involvement in our work, we can increase productivity, well-being, and quality all at once. ■

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WAYS TO INCREASE INDIVIDUAL PRODUCTIVITY

- When you're working on a task or project, notice when your attention drifts and your level of involvement declines. This is a transition point—your productivity can continue at a steady pace, decrease, or maybe even improve, depending on how you respond to the interruption in work flow.
- Take the time to identify why you're pulling away from the task. Are you uncertain about how to proceed? Distracted by other concerns? Feeling pressed for time? Aware that you should actually be doing something else?
- Identify productive and counterproductive ways in which you could proceed. What could you do to increase your level of involvement in the task? If you're overwhelmed by details, organize your thoughts by writing a quick outline, making a list, or drawing a sketch. If you're distracted by outside worries, then consciously deciding to address those concerns later may let you focus on the task at hand. The key is choosing a direction of increasing involvement.
- Later, review the experience to identify other ways in which you might have handled the distractions and increased your involvement.
- After a while, this process will become second nature!