

# Bob Kustka

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Factoring Human Capital Into Your Business Plan

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**By Lisa Belkin**

## **Time Wasted? Perhaps It's Well Spent**

WASTING time gets a bad rap. We pester our children not to do it; we take pride in the multitasking that ensures we never do it; and we bristle at our fellow workers, shop clerks and just about anyone else who slows us down by doing it.

But we all do it.

One of my favorite books as a child was "Cheaper by the Dozen," the story of Frank B. Gilbreth Jr., who introduced the idea of efficiency to 20th-century America. His time-shaving techniques ran the gamut from a new way of laying bricks to a quicker method of buttoning his vest (bottom to top, saving four seconds).

Inspired, I slept in my clothes for a few nights back then to save time dressing for school, though I don't think that's exactly what the man had in mind.

I can only imagine what Mr. Gilbreth would have made of the modern workplace, with its endless possibilities for distraction. His 21st-century counterparts are an army of product researchers, academics and personal improvement gurus, who all agree we are frittering valuable minutes, hours and even entire days, though they can't agree on how many.

American workers, on average, spend 45 hours a week at work, but describe 16 of those hours as "unproductive," according to a study by Microsoft. America Online and Salary.com, in turn, determined that workers actually work a total of three days a week, wasting the other two. And Steve Pavlina, whose Web site ([stevepavlina.com](http://stevepavlina.com)) describes him as a "personal development expert" and who keeps incremental logs of how he spends each working day, urging others to do the same, finds that we actually work only about 1.5 hours a day. "The average full-time worker doesn't even start doing real work until 11:00 a.m.," he writes, "and begins to wind down around 3:30 p.m."

The experts disagree on how we are wasting all this time. The AOL survey says time is lost to surfing the Internet (given the source, that is either self-congratulatory or self-incriminating).

The Microsoft survey pointed to worthless meetings. Respondents said they spent 5.6 hours each week in meetings and 71 percent of them thought that those meetings "aren't productive."

Searching through clutter is another diversion, says Peggy Duncan, a "personal productivity coach" in Atlanta, who maintains that rifling through messy desks wastes 1.5 hours a day.

But wait, you say, you spend all your time working. Your boss is a slave driver. You're the only one left in the office after the downsizing, meaning you are doing the work of three people. Well, there are numbers that also support this situation.

The average professional workweek has expanded steadily over the last 10 years, according to the Center for Work Life Policy, and logging 70-plus hours is now the norm at the top. And there are those of us who work even when we are at home, driving or worse. A poll conducted for Staples found that almost half of the small-business managers in the United States work during time meant for family, while 49 percent make business calls and check e-mail messages while behind the wheel; 18 percent read e-mail messages in the bathroom.

So how to reconcile the seemingly conflicting trends — the fact that we are working harder and wasting more time? A

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## Time Wasted? Perhaps It's Well Spent cont.

A crotchety boss might say that we're working longer because we're wasting time, but the opposite may also be true. We are wasting time because we are working harder.

"The longer you work, the less efficient you are," said Bob Kustka, the founder of Fusion Factor, a productivity and time-management consulting firm in Norwell, Mass. He says workers are like athletes in that they are most efficient in concentrated bursts. Elite athletes "play a set of tennis, a down of football or an inning of baseball and have a pause in between," he says. Working energy, like physical energy, "is best used in spurts where we work hard on a few focused activities and then take a brief respite," he says.

And those respites look an awful lot like wasting time.

It has taken me years to make tentative peace with my stops and starts during work. Every morning I vow to become a morning person, starting full speed out of the gate. And every morning I daydream, shuffle papers, read e-mail messages and visit blogs, and somehow it is time for lunch. Then, at about 2 p.m., a sense of urgency kicks in, and I write steadily, until about 5 or 6, when I revert to the little-of-this, some-of-that style of the morning.

Over the years I have come to see that the hours away from the writing are the time when the real work gets done. When a paragraph turns itself this way and that in a corner of my brain even while my fingers are buying books on Amazon.com. What appears to be wasted time is really jell time. This redefinition only makes me feel a little less guilty.

Mr. Kustka assures me that the problem is not the three to four hours of concentrated work I do each day, but rather the outmoded paradigm against which I measure that work. Productivity was directly related to time back when Mr. Gilbreth was measuring things, he said, but the connection is less direct today.

"We are in a knowledge-worker world," he says. "If you were building me a building, I could measure the number of bricks. If you were loading a truck, I could measure the number of boxes. But I can't simply count your words. That doesn't measure quality."

I didn't have the heart to tell him that word count is how nearly all freelance writers are paid.

Instead I focused on his more general point that it shouldn't matter whether I wrote these words in hours or days, at a desk or on a deck — the end result is all that counts.

"The old thinking says 'the longer it takes, the harder you're working,'" says Lynne Lancaster, a founder of BridgeWorks, a business consulting firm. "The new thinking is 'if I know the job inside and out and I'm done faster than everyone else then why can't I go home early?'"

A few companies are taking the concept of "watch what I produce, not how I produce it" even further. At the headquarters of Best Buy in Minneapolis, for instance, the hot policy of the moment is called ROWE, short for Results Only Work Environment.

There workers can come in at four or leave at noon, or head for the movies in the middle of the day, or not even show up at all. It's the work that matters, not the method. And, not incidentally, both output and job satisfaction have jumped wherever ROWE is tried.

In other words, what looks like wasting time from where you sit, could be a whirl of creative thought from where I sit. And, with due respect to Mr. Gilbreth, all the energy that's been poured into trying to force everyone to work at the same pace and in the same way — it seems that's the real waste of time.