

## TOO MUCH TO DO

by John Durel

### INTRODUCTION

When someone feels too busy at work, it may *not* be because there actually is too much to do. It may be due to a lack of focus. Either the individual does not know how to get organized and attend to the most important matters; or the organization itself has no clear direction.

Another cause of feeling too busy is a lack of energy. Some people are energized by their work, others are drained. Some people take work in stride, others feel overwhelmed. Again, this may be due to the individual's style, or it may be due to the organization's culture.

### INSTRUCTIONS

The following assessment is designed to help employees better understand the way a lack of focus or a lack of energy impacts their work. It may be used by a single individual, or by each individual in an organization or work unit.

This is a "self" assessment. That is, it is not an objective measurement, so it should not be used to compare one employee to another. Rather, it enables each individual to examine his or her own style in the context of the group.

The first step is to distribute only the assessment questionnaire (page 4), saying that it is a tool to help improve performance, without explaining that it measures focus and energy. Once everyone completes the questions, distribute the rest of the document, have them go on to steps 2 and 3, and as a group discuss the results.

**Note:** *In order to avoid influencing the answers, do not give out information about interpreting the results until all the employees have completed the questionnaire. In other words, give them the questionnaire separately and after they complete it, give them the rest of this document.*

### INTERPRETATION

This analysis is based in part on the work of Heike Bruch and Sumantra Ghoshal, published in the *Harvard Business Review* (February, 2002) They observed and interviewed managers in about a dozen large corporations and developed this model.

#### **Low Energy and Low Focus** (the lower left quadrant of the chart)

The authors found that approximately 30% of managers fall into this category. Such people procrastinate, are uncertain of what is most important to do, and have little enthusiasm for the job. They perform basic tasks but fail to take initiative or

## TOO MUCH TO DO

responsibility for anything beyond the minimum. They see barriers instead of opportunities in the challenges they face.

If most of the individuals in an organization (or work unit) fall into this category, it is a sign that the organization has no clear plan or vision, *and* it treats its people poorly. That is, employees do not have the guidelines and systems they need in order to set priorities, and at the same time they feel unappreciated and disrespected. This is an extremely serious situation, evidence of failed leadership. It requires a deeper diagnosis and remedies to change the organization's culture and dynamics.

If a single individual falls into this category, whereas most others in the organization do not, then the supervisor should engage in one-on-one dialogue with the employee to discover what is going on and to help her improve her performance. There are many possible reasons why she is out of sync with her work. She may be ill suited for the requirements of the job, she may have a personal situation outside of work that is distracting and draining her, or she may fear failure. Even her relationship with her supervisor may be causing the problem.

### **High Focus, Low Energy** (the upper left quadrant of the chart)

In the study, 20% of the managers were very focused on their work, but had little enthusiasm for it. Some were tired of their jobs. Others found their work meaningless. Such "disengaged managers" tend to be frustrated and angry, but bury their emotions. These are the people who "burn out."

If most of the individuals in an organization fall into this category, it suggests that the culture does not permit individual initiative. Direction in this organization comes only from the top. Employees have little say in the important decisions, and hence do not feel committed to the organization's success. As a result, talented employees disengage themselves after their ideas have been routinely shot down.

In cases where an individual has high focus but low energy, whereas most of his colleagues are energized by the work, then he and his supervisor (or a coach) should examine the following:

- Is this really the work he wants to do? It may be that this job is not making good use of his talent. It may be that what he is asked to do does not fit with who he really is.
- Does he suppress how he really feels about things at work? Can he find ways to express his emotions constructively, without damaging relationships.
- Does he feel that others do not listen to or respect his point of view on issues at work? If he is often at odds with the majority of his colleagues, does he know

## TOO MUCH TO DO

- how to express his view without alienating others? Does his supervisor recognize the importance of having a contrary perspective on issues?
- Does he have a way to recharge his batteries? Many people exercise, have hobbies, or a routine getaway place to stay in emotional and physical shape.

### **High Energy, Low Focus** (the lower right quadrant of the chart)

Four out of ten managers in the study had plenty of energy for their work, but were highly distracted, even frantic, in trying to get it all done. Such people focus on immediate tasks, and are often over committed. They really liked fighting fires.

When most of the people in an organization are unfocused or unable to agree on priorities, there is a clear need for strategic alignment behind a shared vision and institutional goals. It may be that there is no common vision to which everyone is committed, or it may be that in spite of a such a vision people do not understand how their own work relates to bigger picture.

Individuals in this category may lack skills and techniques to help them organize their work. They may be impatient with systems. They may focus more on activity than results. They may need training to help them take time to organize themselves, so that they attend to the most important tasks, and do not get distracted by less important matters.

### **High Energy, High Focus** (upper right quadrant of the chart)

Only 10% of the managers in the study were both highly energized by their work and highly focused on the most important tasks. Such “purposeful” employees tend to achieve more than others do, yet do not feel that they are overworked.

Some of their characteristics:

- They take time to reflect and plan, make choices, and stick to them.
- They pick their battles carefully.
- They identify the resources and people they need to meet their goals.
- They assume responsibility for the external world and shape the future. They do not wait for permission or approval, or for someone else to do something.
- They refuse to get distracted by emails, phone calls, etc. They set aside time for these, and do not let them intrude when they are focused on the important work.
- They minimize fire fighting by encouraging and teaching others to solve problems themselves.



## TOO MUCH TO DO

- They build in reflection time.
- They have ways to recharge their batteries on a regular basis.
- They understand their own emotions, and the emotions of others, and are able to express how they feel without getting stuck or confused.

*We know that an organization cannot be effective and productive unless its people are energized and focused. This assessment should result in an action plan for each employee to gain energy and focus, in order to enhance the success of the entire organization.*

## TOO MUCH TO DO

<b>STEP 1.</b> For each statement, circle the number that matches how you feel about the statement, and then record that number in the SCORE column.	Never						Always	SCORE	Row
1. I really enjoy my work.	1 never	2	3	4	5	6	7 always		<b>1</b>
2. I take time to set goals and focus on the most important tasks.	1 never	2	3	4	5	6	7 always		<b>2</b>
3. When something inhibits me from doing a task or reaching a goal, I try to overcome it, even when I don't have full authority to do so.	1 never	2	3	4	5	6	7 always		<b>3</b>
4. I understand my boss' expectations of me.	1 never	2	3	4	5	6	7 always		<b>4</b>
5. The people I work with discharge their feelings of frustration and anger in a constructive manner.	1 never	2	3	4	5	6	7 always		<b>5</b>
6. I am able to recruit the resources and people I need to meet my work goals.	1 never	2	3	4	5	6	7 always		<b>6</b>
7. My suggestions are well received by others.	1 never	2	3	4	5	6	7 always		<b>7</b>
8. I make the tough decisions on what not to do.	1 never	2	3	4	5	6	7 always		<b>8</b>
9. I build in ample time for reflection and thinking.	1 never	2	3	4	5	6	7 always		<b>9</b>
10. I deal with crises in a way that minimizes future crises.	1 never	2	3	4	5	6	7 always		<b>10</b>
11. I recharge my batteries on a routine basis.	1 never	2	3	4	5	6	7 always		<b>11</b>
12. I choose my goals and my battles very, very carefully.	1 never	2	3	4	5	6	7 always		<b>12</b>
13. At work I get to do what I am really good at.	1 never	2	3	4	5	6	7 always		<b>13</b>
14. I avoid distractions at work, even if it means closing my door or not taking phone calls at certain times.	1 never	2	3	4	5	6	7 always		<b>14</b>

**TOO MUCH TO DO**

**STEP 2.** Transfer the score for each row onto this chart, and total.

<i><b>ENERGY</b></i>		<i><b>FOCUS</b></i>	
Row	SCORE	Row	SCORE
1		2	
3		4	
5		6	
7		8	
9		10	
11		12	
13		14	
<b>Total</b>		<b>Total</b>	

## TOO MUCH TO DO

- STEP 3.** If both scores are below 40, place an X in the lower left quadrant.  
If your *Energy* score is below 40 and your *Focus* score is above 40, place an X in the upper left quadrant.  
If your *Energy* score is above 40 and your *Focus* score is below 40, place an X in the lower right quadrant.  
If both scores are above 40, place an X in the upper right quadrant.

