



CLEW'D In October 2015

Is Loafing at Work Necessarily Detrimental?

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Employees' use of the internet, making personal phone calls, and 'socialising' with colleagues during work hours is generally considered by managers and employers to be a waste of paid working time and as detrimental to workers' productivity (Bennett & Robinson, 2003; Dixon, 2005). But a study by Satya Duhita, as a Masters student in Victoria University's School of Management, examines the effects of 'loafing' - paid work hours in which employees undertake personal activities such as making personal phone calls, non-work errands, social conversations with colleagues or accessing the internet, e-mails, and social network sites (SNS) for personal benefit. In particular she was interested in looking at the effects collectively on both job productivity and job satisfaction via combinations of 1) the time of day when loafing occurred, and 2) different loafing activities and she found that unpacking 'loafing' activities and the effects challenges traditional perspectives on the impacts of these activities.

Loafing in the age of the Internet

Prior to the 1990s, any loafing was likely more visible – typically occurring away from one's desk – but with the rise of the internet and social networking sites (SNS), loafing behaviour has expanded to include the virtual world ('cyber-loafing'). Furthermore, the advent of smartphones and reduced prices for personal mobile data plans makes cyber-loafing harder for an employer to detect or monitor.

The extent of loafing in workplaces was highlighted in a recent survey where 89% of employees admitted to loafing on a daily basis, with 78% of them self-reporting their loafing as over 30 minutes every day, and 4% loafing at least half of the workday on average (Gouveia, 2014). The same survey noted that employees in the finance and banking industry are the biggest 'loafers', followed by those working in the arts, media, and entertainment businesses. The overall impact of loafing on companies' bottom lines is estimated to be as much as US\$1 billion (Lieberman, Seidman, McKenna, & Buffardi, 2011; Lim & Chen, 2012).

Paradoxically, though, being allowed some loafing has recently been argued to help employees to recharge their concentration and to improve their satisfaction toward their jobs (Coker, 2013; Lim & Chen, 2012; Messarra, Karkoulian, & McCarthy, 2011), creating debates about the overall impact of loafing at work.

The current research study

Satya Duhita's study focussed on loafing activities by white-collar workers, with respondents being employees in New Zealand-based office settings during fixed work hours (e.g. 9am-5pm). All respondents were required to have internet access and to be able to check their SNS accounts while at work, although they did not need to be members of any specific SNS. About 170 employees responded to the online survey in January 2015. All measures were self-reported, which has some potential for under- or over-reporting (e.g. for loafing or job productivity) although similar studies have found that these assessments are actually relatively reliable.

On average, these NZ respondents spent about 4 hours per week loafing at work. This is comparable but slightly lower than the weekly average of 4.2 hours spent cyber-loafing in the Asia Pacific region and suggests that loafing as a whole may be less prevalent across NZ workplaces. The most common loafing activities reported were tracking and posting on social network sites, reading news, checking personal e-mails, social conversations with colleagues and taking breaks / daydreaming between tasks. The analysis, though, combined both frequency and average duration when assessing whether statistically significant relationships were present.

Loafing and job satisfaction and job productivity

Results, derived from a structural equation model, found positive and significant relationships between autonomy, job satisfaction and job productivity. These results indicate that the more satisfied employees feel about their job overall, the more productive they report themselves to be. In addition, greater autonomy, that is the more freedom employees perceive they have for scheduling their work (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006), was associated with higher job satisfaction but did not exhibit a direct relationship to productivity, a facet that may have been missed in previous research that did not include both satisfaction and productivity. More autonomy did not seem to be positively related to the amount of loafing that occurred, whereas some other studies reported that those at higher levels within an organisation, who also likely have greater autonomy, tended to loaf more.

Figure 1 gives a broad summary of the key findings. As suggested by recent studies, some types of 'loafing' at some times of the day do exhibit positive relationships with job satisfaction and negative direct relationships with productivity. In combination, the model suggests that the increased satisfaction of allowing office workers some freedom to loaf and re-charge between work tasks, particularly during the morning (which employees have reported as their most productive time of the day; Gouveia, 2014), can offset the negative effects that loafing has on productivity (that is, reducing the time available for work tasks).

Looking specifically at different types of loafing, these offsetting relationships occurred for traditional loafing activities (which includes chatting while getting a tea or coffee or making a private phone call) as well as cyber-loafing involving online activities and communication (e.g., reading news, answering non-work e-mails, visiting entertainment, sports or investment websites), but not for cyber-loafing involving SNS, which had no apparent positive or negative impact. This may be due to SNS loafing, both reading and posting information, requiring relatively short periods of time, which neither greatly reduce productivity nor do they affect job satisfaction.

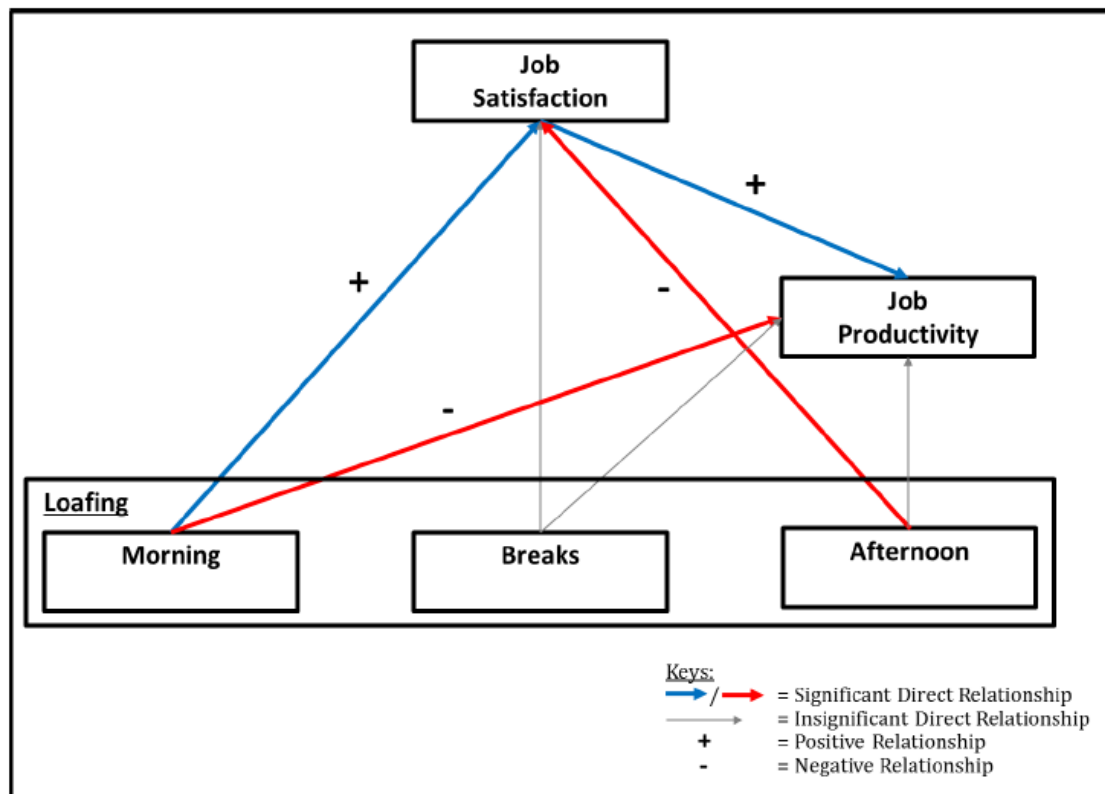


Figure 1. The Impact of the Time of Loafing on Job Satisfaction and Job Productivity

As would be expected, loafing activities during allowable breaks in the work day did not affect productivity negatively, but also seem to be neutral with respect to satisfaction, so perhaps this freedom is now just expected in an office setting and would only have an effect if closely scrutinised or decreased. In contrast, the analysis suggested that some loafing activities in the afternoon are negatively associated with job satisfaction. Again, this relationship was exhibited for non-SNS categories of loafing. One possible explanation for this finding could be that the more loafing a worker does in the second part of their work hours, the less happy they are with the workplace as a whole, and so the loafing is a reflection of that discontent. This interpretation partially supports previous studies which argue that employees who are dissatisfied with their jobs tend to loaf more (Mount, Ilies, & Johnson, 2006).

Implications for managers

Despite the common belief that loafing will have negative impacts for organisations, the research here reveals some loafing may also yield positive benefits in some situations. Some types of loafing also appear to have only a minimal effect on productivity and satisfaction.

A primary implication of the study is that management should arrange workplace practices so that employees feel satisfied with their jobs, which in turn enhances productivity. Some level of allowable loafing can contribute to employees' level of satisfaction.

The findings here also indicate that different kinds of loafing and the time it occurs will lead to different impacts. In particular, some allowance for loafing activities in the morning appear beneficial in

increasing job satisfaction. Furthermore, apart from checking of SNS accounts, loafing in the afternoon may be symptomatic of lower job satisfaction although future research needs to establish whether satisfaction levels tend to differ across the day due to factors such as fatigue or upcoming deadlines.

Having such information will hopefully help employees become more aware of their loafing behaviour and aid them in making more conscious decisions about undertaking loafing in a responsible manner. In New Zealand, stringent policing of employee loafing may not be warranted, with the total of such activities occurring with less frequency and duration than in other countries and regions where such loafing has been studied.

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