Ants and Idle Time: A Productivity Lesson from the Insect World

Created:	4/24/2019 2:47 PM	**Updated:**	4/24/2019 2:47 PM
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Have you ever heard the phrase "too many cooks in the kitchen"? It's an expression that means a workspace has become overcrowded with too many people trying to work. This can lead to a gridlock as people fight for space and resources and, ultimately, kill the productivity of the group. And apparently, not only have ants figured this out as well, they even developed a solution to preventing it: Idle time.

How Ants Distribute Labor and Idle Time

When ants are digging a tunnel, if several of them clog up an area and a traffic jam forms, ants will begin to turn around and go back out to give other ants space to work. In fact, Daniel I. Goldman, a physicist at the Georgia Institute of Technology, and his colleagues discovered that only a small portion of ants are working at any given time. Only 30% of the ants do 70% of the work.

What does this mean, exactly? It's not that ants are lazy–anyone who's ever had an ant farm knows how hard they work–they simply realize that having too many workers around clogs up the workflow.

And, when space frees up, ants will go back down into the tunnel to help again. Even when experimenters removed entire groups of working ants, the idle ants quickly stepped in to pick up the slack.

This 30/70 split seems to work well not just for ants, but for robots. Taking what they learned, experimenters programmed robots to gather magnetized spheres. Without the 30/70 rule, the robots all rushed to gather spheres at once, and the area quickly got clogged. The resulting gridlock made it impossible for the robots to do their job.

With the ant behavior programmed in, however, robots who couldn't reach the spheres knew to turn back and leave the area. Once space was available, they could go back in, and productivity skyrocketed.

But would this work for humans?

How We Humans Can "Free Up the Tunnel"

We have stated [time](#) and [time](#) again the importance of breaking up your work time with some relaxation time. Being able to unplug from our everyday duties and truly relax in stillness frees up our brains for deep thinking. Downtime reduces our stress levels and makes us healthier. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. Whether we apply it or not, we know how important it is to have time off from work.

In fact, during an eight-hour workday, the average worker is only productive for less than three of those hours. A lot of what we do in an office is basically spent as idle time anyway. We chat with co-workers, catch up on the news and social media, eat, and mill around in other ways.

As we've seen with fire ants, this isn't necessarily a bad thing. Our idle time makes us more useful when it is time to work. However, forced idle time, brought on by interruptions and distractions, both reduces our productivity and can make us dissatisfied with our jobs. Have you ever gone to

work, been busy all day, then got home and realized you didn't actually accomplish anything? That's forced idle time at work.

So how do we encourage idle time for workers while also ensuring they work when they need to? We have some suggestions.

Minimize Interruptions

When people are actually working, they need to do so without distractions. Software entrepreneur Jason Fried compares working to sleeping in that there are multiple phases at play. If we're interrupted in the middle of a deep work phase, we have to mentally start from the beginning when it's time to focus again.

So, creating space for people to work for several hours uninterrupted is paramount. If too many people are flooding into the tunnel with interruptions and distractions, all you'll get is gridlock. Instead, set up quiet offices for people to work when they need distraction-free time. Instate a No Talking policy for a few hours a week to minimize interruptions.

Instead of meetings, try more passive modes of communication, like email or instant messaging. Granted, these are still interruptions, but they're interruptions workers can ignore until it's convenient for them to answer. Nothing is so urgent it can't wait a little while.

Create Relaxation Spaces

If workers are going to be idle for several hours a day, it makes sense to give those workers a place to do that. Instead of having a chatty coworker wander the office and interrupt people, let them wander to the cafeteria and bother people there all day. It satisfies the coworker's need to socialize while drawing the distraction away from the people working.

Plus, community resting spaces help frazzled workers recharge and mingle and network with people from other departments. This can lead to an exchange of ideas that wouldn't otherwise happen.

It's important to note that when we say 30% of workers are doing 70% of the work, we mean at any given time. Sooner or later, every ant (or person) contributes to the greater mission. Giving them the space to do that when they're willing and able makes for greater efficiency. More important than that, however, is giving the remaining workers the space to be idle without distracting those currently working.

Looking for more idle time in your life? There's no better way to find where your time is going than to log it each day. Take the Log Your Time Challenge on the Fabulous app today!