Why "Working Smarter" Isn't Working: White-Collar Productivity Improvement

by Edward Shaw

Ask the survivors. Ask the lucky ones—the white-collar workers who still have jobs in the downsized, flattened-out, re-engineered corporation of today.

Ask them if they feel they're working smarter and not harder these days. Ask them if they're working shorter hours. Ask them if they're spending more time on fire prevention rather than on fire fighting. Ask them if the quality of their work life has improved, or their sense of job security, or their feelings of company loyalty.

The answers you'll get won't paint a very pretty picture. From more than 3,000 informal personal and group interviews I've conducted with white-collar workers over the past five years, I'm persuaded *not only* that "work smarter, not harder" isn't working, but also that—while we've tweaked, tampered with, and re-engineered the corporation six ways 'til Sunday—there hasn't been any substantial improvement in white-collar productivity almost from the moment Upton Sinclair coined the term "white collar" in his 1919 sociological study *The Brass Check* (1919).

In fact, my data suggest that white-collar workers in America today are, with rare exception, working harder, putting in more hours, spending less time with their families, suffering higher levels of stress, missing more work because of illness, and getting less satisfaction from their jobs than ever before. They're less optimistic about the future, less certain about their career paths, and chronically preoccupied with when and where the downsizing ax might fall again. And the current trend toward "empowerment" has made them not *less* risk-aversive, but more. As Michael Hammer and James Champy, authors of the one-time best-seller *Reengineering the Corporation,* admitted in a 1995 *Wall Street Journal* interview: "We're brutalizing the work force right now… [and this] has to stop. [And it] will when we dramatically downsize and learn to do much more with much less" (Lancaster, 1995)—something we haven't been able to do very well in more than half a century of trying.

The Product of the Mind

What is the product of white-collar work? What do white-collar workers *produce* that we can actually measure if we wish to quantify their *productivity*? What are the inputs and outputs of the white-collar productivity equation?

White-collar work is *mental* work, as opposed to manual labor. Its input is information, and its output is *thought.* This output might be expressed in words (written or spoken) or through pictures (drawings, sketches, diagrams, etc.); but the defining characteristic of white-collar work is that its only product is the product of the mind.

Thought is pretty hard to measure, either qualitatively or quantitatively. How often does it make sense in most corporate settings to talk about (let alone monitor) thoughts per hour, ideas per employee, or decisions per day? And how do you gauge the *quality* of thought, since some time must pass, and some consequent action must be taken by others, before the correctness, validity, or effectiveness of a given thought-product can be judged?

It's a real dilemma. On the one hand, it's virtually impossible to measure the only real product of an *individual* white-collar worker's output (i.e., his or her thoughts); on the other hand, draconian measures such as downsizing and re-engineering, while they've undoubtedly spurred many necessary changes in corporate structure and *modus operandi*, have had virtually no impact on *collective* white-collar productivity whatsoever, and have in fact exacerbated the situation dramatically in many instances because of the culture of fear they so commonly foster.

Where, then, might we look for *meaningful* approaches to white-collar productivity improvement?

There can be no meaningful improvement in white-collar productivity until we can achieve significant gains in white-collar efficiency. For, while we might not be able to quantify the *product* of white-collar work very well, we can certainly analyze the *processes* by which that product is created and shared.

These processes (and there are only a few of them) all involve *specific human actions* and activities that can be observed, measured, and analyzed in much the same way that we observe, measure, and analyze production processes. So if we could streamline these white-collar processes, then each white-collar worker would, at the very least, be able to produce the same amount of thought product, but in far less time!

Isn't *this* the fundamental prerequisite for "doing more with less"?

In the final analysis, it's as true of white-collar productivity as it has always been of blue-collar productivity: Time is of the essence. Time is *always* an input in the productivity equation. And in our case, it's the *only* input! For when a company hires a white-collar worker, what's that company actually buying for that worker's annual salary?

They're buying the worker's *time.* They're purchasing the worker's knowledge, the sum total of his or her intelligence, background, education, and experience, to be applied over a 12-month period to the solution of problems important to the company. The *quality* of that worker's thought-product will be a function (largely) of the employee's intelligence, background, education, and experience; but the *quantity* of product, and thus, ultimately, the worker's productivity, will depend on the efficiency with which he or she (and the company as a whole) produces and processes thoughts.

Unfortunately, most companies don't do this very well. And to find out why, we must begin, as the pioneers of industrial engineering did more than a century ago, with a fundamental question.

The "Three-Task Reality" of the White-Collar Day

What do white-collar workers *do* all day long? How do they spend their time? In what discernible activities do they actually engage day after day? My research has shown that white-collar workers engage in only three distinctive tasks throughout the day, and in what might perhaps be called one additional activity:

Conversing Task—Worker is on the telephone, in a meeting, in a car, on an airplane, (etc.), in conversation with one or more other people, exchanging thoughts and ideas.

Writing Task—Worker is (typically) alone, in an office, in a car, on an airplane, at home (etc.), translating thoughts and ideas into words, through a variety of media.

Reading Task—Worker is (typically) alone, in an office, on an airplane, at home (etc.), reading thoughts and ideas previously written down by others—*the vast majority of whom are other white-collar workers in his or her own company*.

Thinking/Planning Activity—Subject is engaged in one or more of the above tasks, or is simply *thinking by himself or herself*, focusing specifically on "Important/Not Urgent," fire-prevention issues.

This is the "three-task reality" of the white-collar day. The thoughts and ideas about which our workers are talking, writing, or reading are immaterial to the efficiency equation.

What's germane is how well they carry out the *processes* of talking, writing, and reading.

If you were to ask any white-collar worker what his or her job is, the *last* thing any of them will likely tell you is talker, writer, reader, or thinker/planner. They'll give you organizational answers such as Supervisor, Manager, Assistant, or President. Or they'll offer content titles such as Salesman, Engineer, Specialist, or Buyer.

Yet the only way for any of these white-collar workers to become more *productive* as managers, presidents, engineers, buyers, and so forth is to become more *efficient* as talkers, writers, readers, and thinker/planners. That is, they must learn how to produce and process their products of the mind quicker, better, and more *efficiently* than they're doing now.

By far the preponderance of all white-collar waste occurs in the performance of two of these tasks: reading, specifically with respect to written materials produced intracompany; and conversing, specifically with respect to the scheduling, conduct, and control of meetings. These two tasks alone consume 75% or more of the typical white-collar worker's day. It is through the dismally inefficient performance of these two tasks that white-collar workers squander half or more of their time every day.

"Businessese": The Language of Waste

The reading that white-collar America creates for itself every day is truly colossal—that's the only word for it. My data suggest that the typical white-collar worker spends from 20%–50% of his or her productive working day on reading alone, with the allocation ranging as high as 80% in some cases!

In the Big Three auto companies, for example, the typical white-collar worker writes 10 documents a day (about 50 per week, on average); and each of these writings is typically addressed to a dozen readers. Meeting minutes I've analyzed over the years average combined distribution lists of 35 readers. In one automaker's Engineering Office alone, I estimated that the white-collar staff of 2,800 at the time was generating nearly 12 million individual readings a year for internal consumption. In another (nonautomotive) company in the Midwest, a 950-person white-collar staff wrote more than 7,000 messages a week. And I consulted once in an insurance firm where the white-collar workforce wrote an average of 21 messages *a day*! And these are by no means extreme examples. In companies all over America, white-collar workers routinely spend one-fifth (or more) of their time on the job as a silent, invisible congregation of readers.

When you have lots of people doing essentially the same task during a large part of the working day, even modest improvements in individual task efficiency can go a long way toward improving productivity in the aggregate. And when you look at the typical company's total reading, three of its features in particular recommend this task as a prime target for white-collar process improvement:

1. *Its size.* Since so many white-collar workers spend so much of their time reading every day, even incremental gains in task efficiency in this area would yield significant improvement in overall worker productivity, or at the very least an enormous savings of time.

2. *The fact that it's self-imposed.* The vast majority of any *single* worker's share of his or her company's reading is made up of writings produced by *other people in the company*, which means that any potential remedy can be mandated and controlled entirely from within.

3. *The fact that* businessese *is so unreadable.* Most of the things white-collar workers write in American companies today are perhaps twice as difficult to read as they need to be (or could be).

Most business writing I see tests out at the 18th grade level or higher on the Gunning FOG Readability Index—even though most people (including most white-collar workers themselves) read most *efficiently* at around the eighth-grade level. White-collar writing is often ungrammatical and uses the wrong syntax. It's typically unappealing to the eye, badly organized, and poorly laid out on the page or computer screen. And the result is that most corporate writings take at least twice the time to read as they would take were they written in plain English.

What if it were possible (and it is) to cut the average white-collar worker's reading by half, through the simple stratagem of writing all the documents comprising that task in a language that's twice as quick to read as businessese? What if every 1-minute memo now took but 30 seconds to read, every 2-hour report less than an hour? The answer is as obvious as it is (in fact) easy to achieve: A permanent, 10% (or better), improvement in white-collar productivity, across the board, companywide.

Meetings: Whose Time Is It, Anyway?

Most white-collar workers spend more time in meetings than in any other single activity during the day—up to 90% in many cases, with 50%–60% being the norm! Most white-collar conversing is in fact carried out in meetings, in face-to-face (or media-assisted) gatherings of three or more people producing and processing thought-products together; the remainder is carried out mainly in one-on-one

conversations. Yet despite the fact that conversing in meetings makes up the lion's share of every white-collar worker's day, nine out of ten workers believe that the majority of the time they spend in meetings is wasted!

Of the major reasons given by respondents for why they feel meetings are such a waste of time, leading the list by a huge margin is some form of the statement, "I didn't need to be there." The other leading reasons for their collective distaste of meetings are, in roughly descending order of mention:
• Meeting unnecessary
• Meeting too long
• Meeting poorly prepared/focused/run
• Meeting lacked essential people
• Outcome unclear

> *Nine out of ten workers believe that the majority of the time they spend in meetings is wasted!*

A white-collar worker is hired to apply his or her intelligence, background, and experience, over time, to the solution of thought-problems important to the company. But who decides *which* problems are important? Who determines how much time, and particularly how much *meeting* time, should be spent on each problem? Or in what *order* they should be tackled? Or when? Or with whose help, at which location, with what frequency, and so on?

You'd think that a company investing a very large salary in each of its white-collar workers would hope and expect those workers to exercise substantial control over decisions of this sort. You'd think that companies that can track and control everything from Accounts Receivable to Zone Sales by Week would possess both the desire and the means to track the single most important (and expensive!) corporate resource of all: white-collar time. Remarkably, this is not the case.

In fact, most American companies provide *no effective surveillance whatsoever* over the use or allocation of white-collar time, which is to say, they exercise no control over the scheduling, timing, preparation, and conduct of meetings. Because the process isn't inspected, it's become totally undisciplined. In almost every large company I know, just about anybody can invite just about anybody else, at almost any time, to almost any kind of meeting, for almost any pur-

pose, at almost any location … and at least *half* the invitees will show up, despite the fact they know going in that the meeting will likely be a partial or total waste of time.

Wherever there's no discipline, there is tremendous waste.

The first step any company must take to salvage the huge amount of white-collar time now being squandered needlessly in reading and conversing is to establish a new corporate respect for time. Until the corporate culture can truly be said to reflect the following philosophy, there can be very little success at white-collar process improvement:
• One of the most important resources this company possesses is the time of its white-collar workers.
• Each white-collar worker is the principal custodian of his or her own time.
• Every white-collar worker respects and appreciates the value of his or her fellow-workers' time.

The point is not merely to transcribe this verbiage into some mission statement or policy edict. The point is for top management to recognize two things: that white-collar time is both a precious and a controllable commodity, and that, in the final analysis, the most *effective* control over the use of this commodity is that exercised *by the individual workers themselves*. What this simple act of trust can lead to is as dramatic as it is straightforward, for in the context of an institutionalized respect for time, the problem of white-collar process control becomes entirely, and easily, manageable.

Attacking the Reading Task

As we've already noted, the attack on a company's reading must perforce focus on writing, because it's mainly documents from others in the company that make up each *individual* worker's reading load. Hence, we need a policy on clear writing. The existence of such a policy won't guarantee that our white-collar workforce will improve in writing, even in the most supportive corporate climate. But without such a policy, without an explicit corporate statement of standards and expectations, they almost surely won't improve.

A good policy has three attributes: It's unambiguous; it has a clear and important business purpose; and it provides some means by which compliance with it can be assessed. The example below shows a clear writing policy that meets all these criteria.

ABC Corporation's
POLICY ON CLEAR WRITING
The operating philosophy of the ABC Corporation is based on a fundamental respect for the individual

worker's time. A high-priority goal of the corpora-tion, therefore, is to help every worker make the most productive use of his or her time. One way to achieve this goal is to ensure that each of the thou-sands of messages that employees of this company send to one another is quick and easy to read, easy to understand, and easy to put into action with effect.

Therefore, employees of ABC Corporation, when writing for the company, will write in plain English. They will attempt to use every means they can to get their written ideas across in a clear, simple, and effi-cient way, as shown in ABC Corporation's *Handbook of Standards for Written Communications*. No supervisor will accept or approve any document that does not meet the standards of plain English.

This policy tells our white-collar people in clear, objective terms precisely what good writing means at our company, and operationally how they can achieve it. They can now hold *any* piece of writing up to the standards laid out in the policy (and elucidated further in the *Handbook*) and deter-mine quickly and unequivocally whether the writing's clear or not. But most important, we've told our people that it's *okay* to write in a simple, direct, comfortable, i.e., conversa-tional, style. It's *okay* not to be high-falluten and verbose. It's *okay* to write to someone as if he or she were just sitting across the table, having easy conversation. It's not only okay; in fact, *it's preferred!*

To close the remaining loophole in our company's reading, we might wish to consider one additional policy—born, again, out of a respect for our white-collar workers' time and their ability to allocate that time wisely (i.e., in the best interests of the company): reading reduction.

ABC Corporation's
POLICY ON READING REDUCTION

The operating philosophy of the ABC Corporation is based on a fundamental respect for the individual worker's time. A high-priority goal of the corpora-tion, therefore, is to help every worker make the most productive use of his/her time as possible. One way to achieve this goal is to ensure that no employee is required to read material that is not essential to the performance of his or her job.

Therefore, no person will send any document to any other person in the company that the prospective recipient has not asked or agreed to receive. The distribution of all intracompany communications will be governed by the policies and procedures set forth in the *Handbook of Standards for Written Communications.*

These procedures needn't be complicated or sophisticated, maybe just a rubber stamp or Post-It™ note saying "Please remove my name from this distribution list." Or a simple form that every publisher is required to use at least once or twice a year to freshen his or her copy-to lists. Or an e-mail "Respond" that says "You're clogging up my memory!" We simply want to assure our white-collar workers that we expect *them* to be the sole determiners of what they read and when they read it, and we encourage *them* to be indi-vidually proactive in asserting these prerogatives.

Now that we've mandated that our white-collar workers will all have to start writing in plain English (and nothing *but* plain English), we'd better teach them how. This is not difficult. All the rules and procedures for producing highly readable sentences and documents can be taught to corpo-rate white-collar professionals in about an hour of training. The eight or nine most common grammatical errors that white-collar writers make can be identified, analyzed, and corrected in another hour-and-a-half-long module. And the other basics of readability (page layout, mechanics, tone, style, etc.) can be covered in a final 60-minute segment—a half-day training program, basically, or a 3- to 4-disc set of CD-ROMs. I've trained more than 1,000 corporate employ-ees with just such a program; now my company has almost completed development of a web-based version of this course that can be easily installed on any company's Intranet (or accessed via the Internet).

But if our new clear-writing policy and "Writing for Readability" training program are to yield any substantial reduction in our reading load, two requirements will have to be met.

The first is that our plain English policy must be understood to be both universal and mandatory—no exceptions or waivers, please. The second is that *everyone* in the company must receive the *same* training. That means, literally, *every* white-collar worker and every secretary in the company, and even (perhaps) every vendor and supplier company with whose people we regularly communicate in writing—*everybody*, in short, who contributes in some way or other to our company's collective reading. Unless everybody's moving toward plain English all at once, it'll never become a reality.

You can't clean up a polluted lake just by treating the water in front of your *own* cottage; likewise, no one's reading load will go down until the *whole company* starts writing better.

Indeed, the most difficult challenge to achieving any kind of white-collar process-improvement is that white-collar processes are collective processes which perforce can only be collectively reformed.

Toward Empowered Time-Management

Every manufacturing engineer knows that to control a process you've got to *monitor* that process, and do so continuously. Inspection is the bedrock of all quality control; yet, as we've seen, when it comes to how white-collar workers spend their own and each other's time in meetings, *there's no inspection at all!* And as we've also seen, the results have been devastating, a veritable spending spree of white-collar conversing time, with virtually no discipline, no monitoring, no limits, and no accountability.

To put an end to this, we must (again) start with a policy. The following presents a simple corporate statement on meetings that would do the trick in almost every kind of company.

ABC Corporation's
POLICY ON MEETINGS

The operating philosophy of the ABC Corporation is based on a fundamental respect for the individual worker's time. A high-priority goal of the corporation, therefore, is to help every worker make the most productive use of his or her time as possible. One way to achieve this goal is to ensure that no employee is required to attend any meeting or participate in any activity that is not essential to the performance of his or her job.

Therefore, in the scheduling, conduct, and control of meetings, every employee of the company will follow the rules and procedures set forth in ABC's *Meetings Management System Handbook.*

This simple policy statement accomplishes three important functions. First, it reiterates the corporate philosophy of respect and empowerment. Second, it tells employees that management will now be looking at the expenditure of white-collar time in a systematic and continuous manner. And third, it establishes the new *Meetings Management Handbook* as the "law of the land" with regard to the scheduling, conduct, and control of meetings.

What the *Handbook* describes is a meetings management system (MMS) comprising three basic components: a meeting scheduling function, a meeting-evaluation reporting function, and a data-analysis/documentation function. Here, too, my company is completing development of a comprehensive, web-based MMS that can be easily installed on any company's intranet (or accessed via the Internet) to perform all three of these functions automatically.

Scheduling. In most calendar/scheduling systems, the convener usually has to provide only the time and place of a meeting, sometimes an idea of how long the meeting will last, and a brief (and usually cryptic) summary of the meeting's agenda. Our system, however, requires the scheduler to be more explicit in three particulars: the meeting's agenda, the meeting's purpose, and the necessity of each prospective attendee's participation. This last item is especially important, since it forces the convener to think carefully in advance about who *needs* to attend.

Meeting-Evaluation Reporting. For any meeting to qualify as a good meeting—for it to represent, that is, a cost-justifiable expenditure of white-collar time—it must meet seven tests:
- Did it start on time?
- Did it end no later than it was scheduled to?
- Was there an agenda?
- Did the meeting stick to its agenda?
- Were all the right people there?
- Were none of the wrong people there?
- Did it accomplish its purpose?

Our MMS translates these criteria into a meeting report card form that looks roughly like the one shown in Figure 1. This report card isn't intended to address the subjective quality of the thought-product a meeting produced, the intelligence of the discussions, the validity of their conclusions, or even the wisdom of calling the meeting in the first place. It's a statistical process control-based system, not a values-based system. Its sole purpose is to gather data on how well each white-collar worker is handling the process of calling and conducting meetings.

In my company's computer-based MMS, incidentally, the report-card scores for each meeting are averaged and then translated into a single numerical grade, based on a perfect score of 100. Conveners know after each meeting what this overall grade is, and also what their average score for each item is; but they *can't* determine the specific "grades" given by individual attendees. Individual attendees *are* tracked, however, with respect to their tardiness at meetings, as well as any untimely departures from meetings.

Data-Analysis/Documentation. Most people can get through the meeting report card in less than 30 seconds, but the collective data-yield provided is enormous. For now, managers at every level can compute and display a wide range of tallies and tabulations that provide them with all
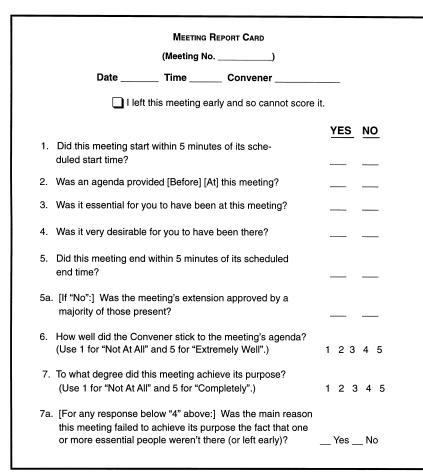
Figure 1. Sample MMS Report Card.

kinds of information they've never had before, allowing them to answer questions they never could ask before. And now meetings-management competency can become a measurable, gradable performance indicator.

Following is just a tiny sample of the kinds of important questions that any manager in our company can now ask and get answers to quickly and easily:
- What was my overall grade on the last meeting I convened?
- What's my cumulative meetings management grade to date?
- What's "X" employee's meetings management grade to date?
- How many total hours did "X" employee spend in meetings?
- How does department "A's" meeting load compare to "B's"?
- How many person-hours were spent in meetings that I convened?
- How many times did "X" convene a meeting without an agenda?
- How often did "Y" start a meeting he or she convened late?
- What is my average score on the "stuck-to-agenda" scale?

- What's my department's average score on the "Stuck-to-Agenda" scale?

Our managers' ability to ask and answer these kinds of questions (and literally hundreds more like them) will be of enormous benefit to the company, not so much for the answers, but for the asking. For as in statistical process-control generally, it's not the data-points themselves that are crucial; it's *the discipline that the act of inspection instills.*

Sustaining a Climate for Change

The kind of cultural change that we're trying to bring about in attacking our company's reading and conversing problems can be achieved only through encouragement, example, exhortation, and constant reinforcement—in other words, by a serious and intensive companywide program of promotion. What's required (and yet almost always absent) is a set of ongoing communications as well as motivational and awareness-building activities that will reach and touch *every* employee.

It all has to start with the CEO. This company's white-collar processes (like anything else that might be "broken" here) won't get fixed unless the president wants it fixed, and that's all there is to it. Once the CEO is on board, he or she must do several things:

Declare next year "A Year of Working Smarter," and make it a crusade. Send a personal mailing to every worker's desk (or home) announcing the crusade and explaining the enormous benefits it has to offer everyone. Describe the huge toll that inefficient white-collar processes are taking every day on the company's collective productivity, and how much everyone will gain if it collectively makes those processes work better. Videotape a brief message addressed to each and every white-collar employee at the company. Read the company's new clear writing policy and meetings control policies, and tell employees what they mean and what's going to be expected of each and every employee. Make it clear that managers will henceforth be looking carefully at every subordinate's writing and meetings-management performance, and that improving this performance will become key objectives for every white-collar worker. Offer incentives. Fund a program of awards, with monthly and annual prizes offered at all levels of the company.

And keep the pot boiling all year long. Send out monthly process-improvement reminders in pay envelopes. Put process-improvement messages on the company's e-mail system and electronic bulletin boards. Hang process-improvement posters in the lunchrooms and halls. Put tent cards in the cafeterias. Include process-improvement recognitions in management videotapes or videocasts. Regularly cover the "Working Smarter" program in the company's newsletters and house organs—all of this promotion geared to persuading people to *believe* in the tenets of sound process control and responsible time management.

The total cost for all such activities combined, even at their most expensive, will be minuscule when compared to the permanent, recurring productivity gains this single culture-change initiative could bring about almost overnight.

Time in a Bottle?

Having freed our white-collar workforce from the dual (and essentially self-imposed) burdens of reading and conversing, the question now becomes: What will employees *do* with their 50% or better aggregate savings in time?

For one thing, everyone who has been putting in 10- and 12- and 14-hour days will now be able to get the same job done in half the time and will therefore be able to see their kids more often than maybe every third weekend and *some* holidays. And even a worker presently spending 100% of his or her time doing the wrong things (worst case scenario) will now have half that time available for working on the right things.

Those workers who like to read can spend more time reading—catching up on all that interesting-but-not-urgent material they never could seem to get to before.

The vast majority of white-collar workers who hate to write (but have to) will now have much more time in which to get their writing done less hurriedly, more methodically.

Many managers will surely use some of the time savings for those nice-but-never-important-enough meetings (training, employee-recognition, professional development, etc.) that can so enrich the workplace but that all-too-often don't get held.

But by far the greatest bulk of the 50% savings in white-collar time that we're about to gain will go to the only place it *can* go once we've taken care of writing, reading, and con-

versing: the thinking/planning activity! When you've done everything you have to do and still have time left over, the only thing to do is put your feet up on the desk, sit back, and … *think*! 🐚

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