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# Busy! So Busy! Crazy Busy!

By Kelly Hennigan

*“If you live in America in the 21st century you’ve probably had to listen to a lot of people tell you how busy they are. It’s become the default response when you ask anyone how they’re doing: ‘Busy!’ ‘So busy.’ ‘Crazy busy.’ ... And the stock response is a kind of congratulation: ‘That’s a good problem to have,’ or ‘Better than the opposite.’”*

—Tim Kreider, *essayist and cartoonist*

Most of us have been on both sides of the above conversation a number of times. It may be in the workplace with a colleague in the hallway between meetings, or perhaps it is an exchange with a long-lost friend whom you bump into at the grocery store. In any case, at some point in our lives, we all have likely fallen into what Tim Krieder calls “The Busy Trap” in his synonymous 2012 *New York Times* article. But, the question is, are we really as busy as we think we are? Let’s examine some myths related to busyness and productivity.

## MYTH 1: BUSYNESS = PRODUCTIVITY

*“Being busy does not always mean real work. The object of all work is production or accomplishment and to either of these ends there must*

*be forethought, system, planning, intelligence, and honest purpose, as well as perspiration. Seeming to do is not doing.”*

—Thomas Edison, *inventor*

Consider the term “busy” vs. “productive.” How do you categorize the majority of your day-to-day activities? Busyness is often self-imposed and related to work assignments, volunteer activities, and other social or personal commitments that we have put upon ourselves. These days, even children of the busy bees fall into the “Busy Trap” as they too are encouraged to spend any spare moment in academic, sports-related, arts-

based, or other extracurricular activities.

It is obvious that many of these compulsions more likely fall into the “busy” category than the “productive” category. The following suggestions can assist with managing the busyness to allow you to strive toward greater productivity:

- Cultivate the ability to say “no.”
- Create time buffers, so that you avoid the hectic feeling of being rushed.
- Focus in on the priority items.

It is easy to get congested with items that are lower down on the priority list. When you start to feel worried or overwhelmed, take it as a sign to refocus and consider rebalancing your priorities. It may even help to concentrate on only the priorities—rather than the entire list of to-dos—and in doing so, repeat to yourself, “I’m

not that busy!” Then, create a “capture list” of all the other miscellaneous ideas and work that you have not yet had the opportunity to prioritize so that they are documented and not rattling around in your head as a distraction.

Consider setting aside time each week to contemplate your professional and personal busyness level. What occurred that was worthwhile? What was a colossal waste of time? How can you better strive for less busyness and more productivity going forward?

According to Kreider, “Busyness serves as a kind of existential reassurance, a hedge against emptiness; obviously your life cannot possibly be silly or trivial or meaningless if you are so busy, completely booked, in demand every hour of the day.”

## MYTH 2: TECHNOLOGY = PRODUCTIVITY

*“Technology can be our best friend, and technology can also be the*



*biggest party pooper of our lives. It interrupts our own story, interrupts our ability to have a thought or a daydream, to imagine something wonderful, because we're too busy bridging the walk from the cafeteria back to the office on the cell phone."*

—Stephen Spielberg, filmmaker

Technology has given us a crutch to allow us to think we are busier (and perhaps even more important) than we actually are. Our phones are continuously going off with beeps and buzzes from those who are trying to reach us, and we have myriad alarms set on our Outlook and iCal calendars to remind us of all the upcoming events. We thus are continuously checking our technological devices to ensure we don't miss a text message or email, or neglect to update our status on whichever social media site happens to be en vogue.

As such, technology can be a continuous distraction, causing us to become unfocused, and resulting in our brains darting off in any number of different directions. If we are able to take the time to focus, and get away from the technological distractions, that will ultimately enable us to strive toward more meaningful work and a quality work product.

Consider the following staggering results from a Tecmark survey of 2,000 smartphone owners about their tech habits:

- Average owners use their phones for 3 hours and 16 minutes a day.

- Many of us pick up our phones more than 1,500 times each week.
- The average user checks personal emails and Facebook before getting out of bed.
- Almost 4 in 10 users admitted to feeling lost without their devices.

In order to rise above the busyness to achieve ultimate productivity, it is essential to take an occasional break from technology. Doing so will enable us to reach a more productive state and also prime our mindset for creativity and innovation. In the words of author Harper Lee in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, "There are just some kind of men who're so busy worrying about the next world they've never learned to live in this one."

### MYTH 3: BUSY = BETTER

*"Never be so busy as not to think of others."*

—Mother Teresa, missionary

Despite what I have written, there are times when we are truly busy and all of our work and personal obligations collide to create the perfect storm of busyness. However, overuse of the "I'm too busy" line is a common excuse to avoid interaction with others. If you find yourself using this alibi, you may want to reflect on the validity of your response. Are you truly too busy, or are you instead just not interested?

For example, rather than brushing off a co-worker by saying "I'm too busy," perhaps instead try, "That is not on

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my priority list right now, but I expect it will be next week and we can talk then." Similarly, with a friend you could say, "My schedule is limited right now, but how about if we each skip the gym one day this week and meet up for tennis?" Both of these responses will allow a more symbiotic relationship to be maintained. The recipient feels considered and valuable to the coexistence of the relationship—particularly as those who are on the receiving end of an "I'm too busy" line may realize where they fall on the deliverer's priority list, thus ultimately damaging the relationship.

Falling into the "Busy Trap" can result in further isolation on a personal level as well, due to becoming more and more self-absorbed with our busyness. The continued excuse of busyness promulgates feelings of remoteness and inaccessibility. Socrates said, "Beware the barrenness of a busy life," as relatives or friends might revert to the "we knew you were busy and didn't want to bother you" justification.

In summary, consider the above three myths and the following takeaways to avoid falling into the "Busy Trap":

- Weigh the busyness vs. productivity of your daily activities.

- Contemplate the interruptions of and reliance on technology. Is technology contributing to your busyness and stifling your creativity?

- Reflect on your professional and personal relationships and the "busyness" excuse.

Author Jane Austen stated, "Life seems such a quick succession of busy nothings." I think that most of us would agree that we would prefer a life of productive somethings to busy nothings. ■



Kelly Hennigan, FSA, CFA, is vice chairperson of the Management and Personal Development Section Council. She can be reached at [kellymhennigan@aol.com](mailto:kellymhennigan@aol.com).