

BostonWorks

VIEW FROM THE CUBE

Daydreamer raises issue uppermost in everyone's mind

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Who says you can't be in two places at once? Last Friday I was sitting comfortably in the conference room, listening to our office managers discussing project workload projections. At that very same moment I was curving through the lush, green hills of southern Wisconsin on my motorcycle, adding a few items to our family grocery-shopping list.

It sounds like something you might see at this year's technology gizmo trade show: "virtual" conferencing handlebar phones, palm devices, and "smart" refrigerators. Surprise, it's not.

My secret for being in two places (or three or four...) simultaneously is simple: I daydream.

I'm not alone. More than 70 percent of CEOs and senior managers admit to daydreaming during office hours, according to a recent employment survey conducted by Workthing.com. More than a third of these folks admit to spending at least 30 minutes each day with their head in the clouds.

In spite of having plenty of good company, I feel conflicted about my bemusement. Am I daydreaming because I'm bored at work? Or am I fortunate that my work allows me some time each day to daydream? Is it fair to my employer that I'm spending time, and his money, focusing less than wholeheartedly on my job?

Psychologists and therapists would say that this amount of daydreaming is symptomatic of severe work-related stress, or what the Workthing.com survey calls "executive escapism from the pressures of work."

I don't know of any motivational seminars preaching the positive effects of strapping into space. Daydreams are an unappreciated force. Imagine if we could harness the creative power of an office-wide worth of daydreams. If our brains were networked, I'd know when the woman sitting next to me was having the same creative spark that I was, and we'd know that the guy down the hall was daydreaming about his brilliantly conceived start-up. We'd join forces, quit our jobs and become billionaires. Of course, if our brains were networked, our boss would know

about all of this.

There's a lot going on in our noggins. To explore the deeper reaches of our co-workers' minds would be akin to watching Fox during sweeps month, combined with the Discovery Channel, and a bit of HGTV. Oh, the scandal! The adventure! The projects!

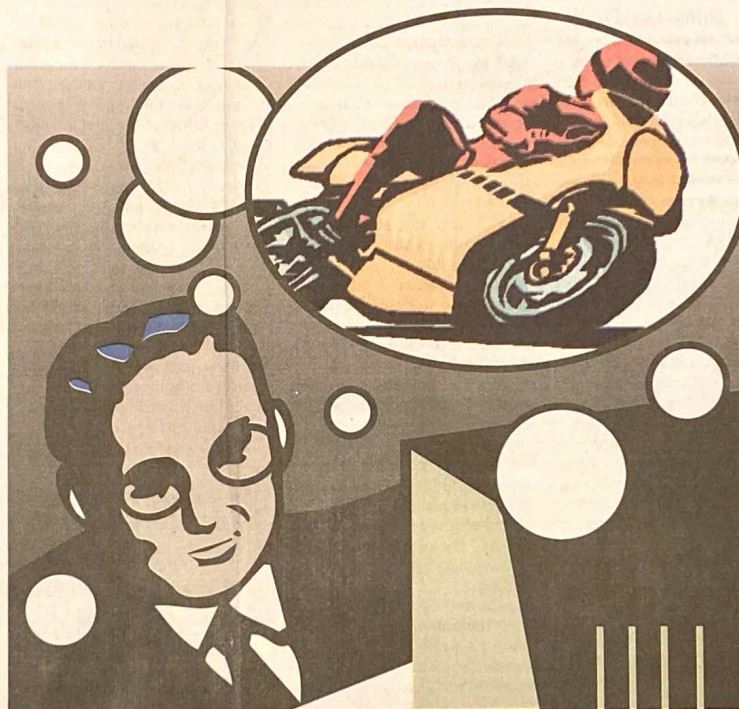
According to one study, 91 percent of folks admit to daydreaming during meetings. Clearly, I'm not the only one getting wearied. Often, during meetings, I'll glance around the room, analyzing the eyes and facial expressions of my co-workers, attempting to guess what's really going on in their brains. Sometimes I want to scream, "Can't we all just ditch the compulsory meeting blather and just say what we're really thinking?"

There are about 11 million meetings held daily in the United States, with the average Joe (or Joan) attending 61.8 of them per month.

Assuming that each meeting takes one hour, that's a full 40-hour workweek and a half of each month where we get to sit in a big room around a big table and zone out into our "happy place." That's a lot of daydreaming.

So what's everyone thinking about? There's a tendency to think of daydreaming as a technique of avoidance — a way for someone to drift off into a fantasy because he'd really rather not be doing what he's doing right now. Instead, I prefer to look at it as multitasking.

In my daydreams I can work on numerous projects at once. I create mental "to do" lists. I evaluate my response to a client's memo. I plan a menu for Saturday's dinner party. All while participating in a conference call with our subcontractor.



ILLUSTRATION/ANTHONY SCHULTZ

Dr. Eric Klinger of the University of Minnesota, a leading expert on fantasy and daydreams, writes, "Daydreaming is one of the ways in which you keep your life organized, a way to milk experiences for the lessons they hold, and a way of rehearsing for the future."

I'd like to believe that I've got some kind of rare super brain that allows me to be thinking about four or five things at once. Unfortunately, for my theory, this is normal human behavior.

Our brains don't waste an ounce. When our brains aren't churning at exactly 100 percent on some task or issue, when we are not completely involved in what we're doing, our brain uses the opportunity to do a bit of something else. Picture separating a river with a V-shaped

diversion: same amount of water, now going two different directions. And, it's fully automatic, as involuntary as blinking.

Each of us has some aspect of our job that is rote and second nature. We might be doing five hours worth of data entry, or assembling several FedEx boxes. I work in a design firm and spend a good portion of my days drawing lines on the computer screen — just a lot of straight black lines, thousands of lines, moving my mouse back and forth, click, click, more lines, straight and black, click. It's during these stretches of routine and monotony that my mind wanders.

In one sense, daydreaming is rehabilitative. How many times have you written a nasty e-mail in your head, logically knowing that you shouldn't and wouldn't

send it? How many full arguments have you played through in your mind? Mentally conceiving an unsent e-mail is a more mature release than throttling the office jerk. In my daydreams, I'm always the winner.

Daydreaming makes us better workers, better employees. In my wandering mind I evaluate past decisions (should I have handled that conflict with my manager differently?) and consider future behavior (next time I won't be so quick to get angry.).

Also, I have a secret outlet for my frustrations.

In the movie version of James Thurber's modern classic, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," Danny Kaye plays Mitty, a man whose mind is littered with preoccupation. His psychiatrist, played by Boris Karloff, consoles Mitty, "You've been frustrated your entire life, and so you live in your daydreams."

Mitty's psychiatrist meant this in a negative way, encouraging him to "get better." But the truth is that it's healthy to zone out when things are troublesome. I read a psychology article by David Gershaw, PhD, stating that daydreaming is "associated with positive emotional adjustment" and "lower levels of overt aggression." So the next time I have fantasies of maiming one of our more demanding clients, I'll recognize that I'm positively adjusting my emotions and that I'm a better person for it. Hey, free therapy!

I'm reminded of a D.H. Lawrence quote that was taped to the door of one of my college professors. "Thought is not a trick, or an exercise, or a set of dodges. Thought is a man in his wholeness wholly attending." Of course, normal, healthy thinking while daydreaming can be misconstrued by onlookers as a dodge. Some of us just spend a lot of time alone in our heads.

A co-worker recently asked me, "What's the difference between daydreaming and just simply thinking about something?" I was quiet, and after a few silent seconds, she chided, "Well?"

Startled, I said, "Oh, sorry. I was just thinking about something."

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