Study shows engaged workers should dare to daydream

July 13 2020

Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Two researchers from Washington University in St. Louis and another from Pontificia Universidad Católica in Chile found that daydreaming carries significant creative benefits, especially for those who identify

with their profession and care for the work they do. When not compelled by the problems and challenges of one's profession, though, it can impair performance, the detriment historically linked to a mind meandering on the job. In other words, daydreaming can be both a liability and a significant asset, depending upon certain attributes of the wanderer.

"Daydreaming can have significant upsides for one's tendency to crack difficult challenges in new ways. This, however, presumes that people deeply care about the work they do, what attracted them to the profession in the first place," said Markus Baer, Professor of Organizational Behavior at the Olin Business School. "Daydreaming without this focus has significant downsides, which show up most directly in one's overall performance ratings."

In today's "knowledge economy," a mind is a terrible thing to waste, whatever direction it may venture. This research, published July 1 in the Academy of Management Journal, opens new windows into the power of the mind. Specifically, this project "depicts daydreaming as a critical mechanism accounting for the connection between the type of work people do and the level of creativity they exhibit on the job," wrote coauthors Baer, Erik Dane, Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior at Olin, and Hector P. Madrid of Pontificia Universidad.

Don't mistake this activity for distraction or multitasking, staples of the modern workspace. Rather, the process at the heart of this study involves thoughts disconnecting from a task and/or "stimulus environment." The coauthors found such a wandering-thought process results in work that is highly creative and not universally counterproductive, as often assumed in the business world and suggested by science that has studied daydreaming for decades.

Granted, not all daydreaming is created equally. The researchers studied two types in particular: problem-oriented daydreams, or imaginative

thoughts loosely connected to one's challenges, and bizarre daydreams, or thoughts not linked to existing challenges or problems at all but rather improbable possibilities. As the coauthors explained, these bizarre thoughts usually involve scenarios that "might delight a writer of fantasy or science fiction." What they found, though, wasn't merely mental escapism.

Critical for creativity-boosting daydreaming, they found in their multi-faceted study, was professional identification—workers who are psychologically attached to their profession, who gain a sense of self from their job. When they perform cognitively demanding work, gathering both enjoyment and fulfillment from that work, their daydreams spark imaginative thoughts around the job's tasks and problems.

The researchers tested their model via two distinct studies: (1) sampling experiences of 169 professionals in a spectrum of industries, and (2) conducting a field study of 117 professional employees and their 46 supervisors. Each study was conducted in South America, and the research participants averaged 33.9 and 35.9 years old, respectively.

"Conducting two different studies enabled us to test our hypotheses across a wide range of workers and triangulate our findings," Dane said. "The methods and measures we adopted integrated cutting-edge techniques associated with studying creativity and daydreaming alike."

In the first study, workers—across a wide range of businesses, though mainly service (26%) and banking or commerce (22%)—provided daily, diary-like ratings of the job challenges and their minds' tendency to engage in the two types of daydreaming. Workers also rated the extent to which they generated new ideas and solutions during the day.

The second study involved employees across three technology consulting

companies, where creativity and problem-solving are rife, and where employees tend to identify strongly with their profession and its attendant values and challenges. This time, the authors also asked supervisors at those companies to rate their employees' creativity.

Workers were significantly more likely to daydream when they confronted tricky problems and new challenges in their work. And these daydreams, in turn, reliably boosted people's creativity, at least for professionally identified workers.

Interestingly, so long as employees' identification with their profession was present, the researchers discovered that both problem-oriented and bizarre daydreaming had virtually no impact on performance, neither positive nor negative. However, when professional identification was lacking, daydreaming significantly compromised performance.

"What this means is that daydreaming can boost creativity but does little to kill it; on the flip side, daydreaming does little to improve overall performance but can significantly reduce it," Madrid said.

In the end, the researchers concluded that most businesses could benefit from taking steps to remove the stigma around daydreaming at work. The mind wanders close to half of the day, previous science found, so it is unreasonable to assume that it can stay on task continuously. At the very least, perhaps we shouldn't shun workers for getting lost in their thoughts and dreams. There might just be a new idea in there.

More information: Markus Baer et al, Zoning out or Breaking Through? Linking Daydreaming to Creativity in the Workplace, *Academy of Management Journal* (2020). DOI: 10.5465/amj.2017.1283

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis