Excuses hurt job productivity when performing simple tasks

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Giving employees a built-in excuse for lousy performance in humdrum or nasty tasks also gives them a way out of doing a good job, a new University of Florida study finds.

“Benjamin Franklin once said, ‘He that is good at making excuses is seldom good at anything else,’” said Ryan Johnson, a UF psychology graduate student who did the study for his master’s thesis. “Having a good excuse for not performing at one’s best can lead to a worse performance on the job.”

While excuse-making has been recognized in other studies for boosting self-esteem and lowering the risk of depression, the UF research finds it dampens worker productivity on relatively simple, mundane tasks.

“These findings have important implications for education and industry, where people are often asked to work in groups on tasks that aren’t particularly motivating or interesting,” Johnson said.

In the UF study, 193 students from an introductory psychology class were divided into two groups to perform a brainstorming task. The participants were asked to write down as many different uses for a knife as they could think of in 15 minutes while seated in cubicles listening to crowd noise played on a stereo system.

One group was told the background noise interfered with concentration and creativity, while the other group was told the noise had no effect.

Participants who were given the socially acceptable excuse not to do well – in the form of information from an authority figure that background noise was detrimental to their performance – generated fewer uses for the knife than those who were told the noise probably would not affect their performance, he said.

Studies on excuses have focused on difficult, meaningful tasks such as learning to read or taking a math test, but ignored the unpleasant boring tasks that people encounter on a regular basis, Johnson said.

“It’s not difficult to think of a good reason for doing a second-rate job washing the dishes or scrubbing the toilet,” he said. “Such tasks have two things in common: They need to be done, and most people do not enjoy doing them.”

Generally, research shows excuses help people do well when facing an activity that is unusually demanding or stressful, Johnson said. “To get the best performance out of someone in these circumstances, you give them some sort of handicap or excuse and that takes the pressure off a little bit,” he said.

For example, one study showed that if people who were extremely socially anxious listened to noise that was said to interfere with their social performance and then were put in a situation where they met a group of strangers, they would feel more at ease and appear more outgoing, he said.

People who don’t hesitate to employ excuses have been found to be both mentally and physically healthier, perhaps because they are less likely to brood over their mistakes, Johnson said. “If you look at depressed individuals, you find that they take personal responsibility for every bad thing that happens to them,” he said.

Excuses also may be a relief for the person on the receiving end, Johnson said. For example, rejecting a dating invitation with an excuse, such as illness, instead of professing a lack of interest in the person can avoid hard feelings, he said.

One study found that managers who used excuses to explain unpopular actions toward employees, such as pay cuts, were perceived as fairer by employees than those who gave justifications or no reasons at all, he said.

Johnson said he became interested in the subject of excuse-making after talking with his professors, who said they found the practice increasingly more prevalent among their students than they did 15 or 20 years ago.

“Avoiding the use of excuses can be a monumental task for even the most responsible person when there is some perfectly good excuse available to cushion the blow,” he said. “Blaming a late arrival on a traffic jam or a failed exam on an inept professor can often make people feel better about themselves and reduce the likelihood of negative impressions.”

Thomas Britt, a Clemson University psychologist, said Johnson’s study is an important contribution and “suggests that part of the negative effects of noise on performance may be a function of excuse-making rather than the noise itself.”

Source: University of Florida