

These are the characteristics of people most likely to cut corners at work

December 7 2016, by Peter O'connor And Peter Karl Jonason



Credit: Pexels

In a [newly published study](#), we found that employees who "cut corners" tend to be morally compromised, low in conscientiousness, self-focused and impulsive. This in addition to the potential for corner-cutting to increase risks.

Surveying more than 1,000 Australians and Americans, we found approximately one in four [employees](#) regularly cut corners. Men are

slightly more likely to cut corners than women.

Cutting corners at work

Cutting corners is a workplace behaviour characterised by skipping or avoiding steps important to a task, in order to complete the task sooner. Corner-cutting is generally considered an undesirable behaviour, with research linking it to a range of negative outcomes such as [low job performance](#), safety violations and [serious injuries](#).

Although corner-cutting comes with a set of risks, it also comes with a clear possible benefit – cutting corners can possibly lead to greater productivity. Consistent with this, studies have shown that corner-cutting is more likely in jobs characterised by high demands and [few resources](#). It is also more likely in organisations that prioritise efficiency [over risks](#).

However, even in such organisations, corner-cutting is openly discouraged. Mistakes caused by employees cutting corners are typically met with harsh consequences.

To investigate whether corner-cutters can be identified, we surveyed employees from a range of industries including health care, education, hospitality, retail and construction. We looked at several demographic variables and [personality traits](#) to determine who is more or less likely to cut corners at work. We focused on both common personality traits (e.g., extraversion, conscientiousness) as well as "darker" personality traits (e.g., Machiavellianism, narcissism).

We didn't just stop at a questionnaire. We also exposed employees to a hypothetical scenario where they could choose to cut corners or not. We conducted two variations of the study across Australia and the US.

The personality traits of corner-cutters

Across both studies, we found that both common and darker personality traits were associated with corner-cutting. Most significantly, corner-cutters were likely to be low in conscientiousness, low in honesty and high in psychopathy (i.e., impulsive, callous social attitudes). Corner-cutters also scored high in Machiavellianism (i.e., manipulation, self-interest) and narcissism (i.e., grandiosity, pride).

Age and gender were also factors in corner-cutting, such that employees who cut corners at work tended to be younger and male.

But there are also various contexts that play into the decision to cut corners. While a third of employees cut corners when it would likely save them time, they were less likely to do so if they could be reprimanded (only one in six employees cut corners in this situation), or if there was the potential for a poor-quality outcome (only one in four cut corners then).

These results paint a seemingly negative picture of workplace corner-cutters as individuals who are generally self-interested and low in conscientiousness. However, it is plausible that employees sometimes cut corners with noble intentions. For example, the related concept of "workarounds" [refers](#) to the more accepted behaviour of "clever methods for getting done what the system does not let you do easily".

To explore this possibility, we investigated whether corner-cutters were more proactive than those who tend not to cut corners. Our results strongly suggested that this was generally not the case.

Proactive employees were not more likely to achieve their goals by cutting corners at work, even when their goal was to save time. In fact, we found that proactive individuals were slightly less likely to cut

corners at work than non-proactive individuals.

We also found little relation between corner-cutting and career success. There was no relationship between corner-cutting and income. However, it was associated with higher income for those who scored high in psychopathy.

This indicates that while corner-cutting generally does not relate to career success, it can result in career benefits for impulsive, self-focused individuals. These individuals are likely to cut corners as a strategy to be more productive, despite possible costs to the organisation or co-workers.

Implications for managers

Overall, we found that corner-cutting is not a desirable workplace behaviour. Those most likely to cut corners are likely to be poor performers aiming to meet minimal standards in contrast to good performers looking to excel. The possible exception is individuals high in psychopathy looking for short-cuts to get ahead.

Clearly, it makes sense to minimise the number of employees with corner-cutting tendencies. This is particularly true for jobs in which mistakes caused by cutting corners can lead to serious injury (e.g., jobs in mining, construction). At the very least, we suggest employers take into account certain characteristics of applicants (e.g., conscientiousness, psychopathy) when selecting for such positions.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: These are the characteristics of people most likely to cut corners at work (2016, December 7) retrieved 15 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-12-characteristics-people-corners-atwork.html>

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