

# Wrong and ineffective: Companies target toilet breaks to improve productivity

January 27 2020, by Madeleine Gabriel

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Credit: Ono Kosuki from Pexels

Productivity growth in the UK has [stalled since 2008](#). The puzzle has become so tricky that toilet makers are getting in on the act of suggesting solutions. The company StandardToilet has designed a tilted toilet, whose seat slopes downward at a 13 degree angle. Its goal is to stop users

lingering too long on the lav. After about five minutes, sitting on a tilted toilet will put a strain on users' legs, said to be similar to a "low level squat thrust."

The idea is it would [save employers money](#) because, according to [the company's press release](#), "extended employee breaks cost industry and commerce an estimated £4 billion per annum" in the UK.

An uncharitable commentator might question where the company pulled this (unsubstantiated) figure from. But a steady stream of news articles suggests that employers around the world are indeed clamping down on toilet breaks in a bid to improve productivity. A [Chicago-based firm hit the news](#) when a union filed a complaint against it for "bathroom harassment." The firm, which had introduced swipe cards to monitor toilet use, advised that employees should spend no more than six minutes on the loo per day and even gave gift cards to workers who didn't use the toilet at all during [work time](#).

Meanwhile, in Scotland, [call center staff were asked to sign a new contract](#) limiting toilet breaks to 1% of their shift—just two minutes for those working a four-hour part-time day. In Norway one company required [female employees to wear red bracelets while menstruating](#), to show they were allowed to visit the toilet more often.

## **Toilet talk**

Time away from the desk or production line may not be an employer's only concern when it comes to toilet use. As studies on workplaces as diverse as [Japanese-owned car firms in the UK](#) and [textile factories in Kenya](#) have found, toilets are also places where workers express anti-company sentiment, share advice and even covertly organize.

A [study of Italian factories in the post-war period](#) – an era of union

suppression—found that toilets became a [focal point](#) for resistance. As one of the few places in a factory that wasn't monitored, toilets were used as a meeting point as well as a place where anti-company feelings could be more freely expressed and union literature shared.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In one case, a female [worker](#) found graffiti accusing the factory boss of being an "idiot and a buffoon" inscribed on a toilet door. Perhaps scared that she would be accused of writing it, she reported the infraction to management. The door was removed and, to root out the culprit, all workers were forced to write out the phrase in front of a handwriting expert. The guilty party was found and relieved of their position—but, as researcher Ilaria Favretto points out, at least they got to see every worker in the factory repeat the insult.

One thing stands out in all these examples: it's lower paid, more precarious workers who are more likely to have their workplace activities—and toilet breaks—more tightly controlled and monitored. Writing about workplace surveillance technologies, economist Joelle Gamble points out that as employers collect more data on their workers, [they increase their power over them](#). In some cases, workers' wages are directly affected. Companies using [just-in-time scheduling technologies](#) have been canceling workers' shifts at short notice when sales are down.

## Critically panned

But is this drive for ever more rigid control of workers' (bowel) movements actually good for productivity? A [new collection of essays published by Carnegie Trust and the RSA think tank](#) suggests not. Instead, it makes a strong case that good quality work is the key to improving productivity, especially at the bottom end of the labor market, where job quality is poorest. Instead of trying to optimize every minute of their workforce's time, employers might be better off improving working life.

Rather than punitive measures, several of the essays argue that giving workers voice and agency is crucial in increasing productivity. New workplace technologies are more likely to be successful when workers feel involved in decision making. A report by the Living Wage Foundation makes similar points. Focusing on the retail sector, it argues that [standardizing tasks while empowering staff to use their discretion](#) is important in improving productivity and profits. This helps improve staff retention and motivation, among other benefits.

As colleagues' and my own work at Nesta argues, in a knowledge-driven economy, [the most successful firms are constantly innovating](#). We need to spread the practices that these firms use—collaboration, decentralization, autonomous teams—if we want a step-change in

productivity.

So the next time someone tries to sell you a productivity-enhancing [toilet](#), don't just take it sitting down.

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