Red tape can strangle your key asset as an employee: Your motivation

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Are you spending more and more time at work doing paperwork and

filling in forms rather than the thing you were trained and hired for? Does this busy work often seem to resist rational purpose or questioning? Does it kill your productivity, initiative, motivation and, frankly, your self-worth and sanity?

If any of this sounds familiar, you are experiencing a classic dilemma of the 21st-century workplace. The unique and irreplaceable human qualities for which workers are increasingly hired tend to clash badly with the rules designed to reign in their worst excesses.

This insight is part of recent research that applies behavioral science to bureaucracy. But more than that, the research also suggests how to design rules for employees in a way that suits human psychology.

Although stories of creeping bureaucracy abound in many industries, evidence—and our own experience—suggests nowhere has the problem of red tape exploded as much as it has in universities.

Staff complain the time they have for teaching and research is being eaten up by filling in forms and writing reports of questionable value. But this gripe goes beyond the inefficiency of bureaucratic excess. Some rules demotivate because they are interpreted as patronizing.

Red tape in the academy

Academic bureaucracy is proliferating. At Yale University, for example, the number of managerial and professional staff has risen three times faster than the number of undergraduates since 2003. In Australia, leading research universities say the cost of complying with "unnecessary, redundant and duplicative regulation" has doubled since 2013.

Factors contributing to this, as identified by a 2022 UK government

inquiry, include external demands for assurance that research is being done according to funding terms and conditions; risk-averse cultures leading to unnecessary hierarchies of approval; and growth in organizational size leading to more layers of management.

But while universities may be the most chronic examples, red tape is increasing in most workplaces. In the United States, the number of managers, supervisors and support staff has grown at more than twice the rate of other jobs since the 1980s—and the shift to hybrid and remote work is likely to compound this trend, as managers institute procedures to keep workers accountable.

As management experts Gary Hamel and Michele Zanini wrote in their 2020 book Humanocracy: "bureaucracy has been growing, not shrinking—a fact that is correlated, we believe, with the worrying slowdown in global productivity growth, a phenomenon that bodes for living standards and economic opportunity."

How did it come to this? And how can organizations with bloated bureaucracies go about cutting their red tape?

The perils of scientific management

While all organizations need processes to run, increasing bureaucracy has led to a proliferation of what economic anthropologist David Graeber pithily termed "bullshit jobs":

"Huge swathes of people, in Europe and North America in particular, spend their entire working lives performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed. The moral and spiritual damage that comes from this situation is profound. It is a scar across our collective soul."

This helps explain why productivity is slowing and worker engagement [is declining](#), with so many [dissatisfied with their jobs](#).

One problem is many managers are trained in "[scientific management](#)," which aims to improve efficiency by encouraging individuals not to problem-solve but to focus instead on performing simple, repetitive tasks as effectively as possible.

But people aren't cogs in machines. Rather, they relate to their organizations on a personal level. Bureaucracy undermines that relationship.

Unnecessary bureaucracy signals to workers that they are not to be trusted. This suggests an uncaring and low-quality relationship, to which the natural human response is to want to quit the relationship—either overtly, by resigning, or quietly, by simply making less effort.

Beating the bureaucratic urge

The good news is there are ways to turn the tide of red tape.

"Defenders of the status quo will tell you that [bureaucracy](#) is the inevitable correlate of complexity," write Hamel and Zanini, "but our evidence suggests otherwise."

We know many examples of good practice from our own experience. Some universities have [lean teams](#) tasked with cutting red tape. In others, [senior managers](#) regularly visit the proverbial campfires. Some vice-chancellors retain teaching duties to stay in touch with changing demands. Leaders can glean much about the impact their middle managers' rules have by engaging with the rank and file.

Canadian tech firm Shopify has created a meeting calculator to quantify

the [true cost of meetings](#). It also eliminated all reoccurring meetings with three or more people. As a result, the average Shopify employee now spends [14% less time meetings](#) compared with this time last year. It serves as a reminder that time is money and there may be other ways to get things done.

For any manager who is nervous about the prospect of giving workers more autonomy and fewer forms to fill in, here are some [words of reassurance](#) from Google's former human resources chief, Lazlo Bock:

"Give people slightly more trust, freedom, and authority than you are comfortable giving them. If you're not nervous, you haven't given them enough."

[Research suggests](#) managers who trust their employees elicit higher engagement and performance, and less burnout among their staff.

As Christian Hunt, former head of behavioral science at investment bank UBS, [explains](#):

"If we hire people because they're smart, then it's probably not a good idea to treat them in a manner that suggests we think the opposite."

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