

Lowering the Water Level

Toyota calls it “lowering the water level.”

Imagine a value stream or a production process as a river. Reducing the inventory in the process – “lowering the water level” – exposes the “rocks” that represent all of the hidden costs and waste in production. Only by revealing those rocks can you improve the process and reduce the waste.

This metaphor works for knowledge workers, too. In this case, however, their key inventory item is time. Having too much time to do one’s work hides the waste and inefficiencies in the process.

Now, most people would deny they have too much time to do their work. Not too many people are taking three-martini lunches anymore, or leaving the office right at 5:00pm. Hell, on average Americans only take about 79% of their vacation time, and 20% of people work on their vacations. And with our cellphone- and Crackberry-addled days, nights, and weekends, it seems as though there’s an infinite torrent of work. Ironically, these same vacation-skipping, Blackberry-beholden employees complain vociferously about a lack of time for their personal lives.

But here’s the thing: your cellphone, Blackberry, and general willingness to work late and on weekends are part of the problem, not the solution. Counterintuitive, but true.

Yeah, yeah. I can hear you now: “If I didn’t have my Blackberry, if I didn’t put in a few hours on the weekend, I’d never get on top of everything I need to do. I’d be buried. I’d get fired. I’d end up on the street with two Dixie cups and a string instead of an iPhone.”

Let me ask you this (in the words of Dr. Phil): How’s that working for you so far?

Has it helped? Are you on top of your work? Do you spend enough time with your friends and family? How’s your fitness level?

The fact is, if you had less time for your work, you’d get it done more quickly. Parkinson’s Law – work expands to fill the time available for its completion – recognizes this painful aspect of human nature. And if you don’t believe it applies to you, think about what I call the Vacation Paradox: even though you never seem to be able to get all your work done on a regular day, the day(s) right before you go on vacation, you somehow manage to crank through all your daily work plus the backlog of stuff that’s been moldering on your desk for the past month.

What’s going on? Well, when you’re short on time, you work more efficiently. You reduce the waste in your work process so that you can get stuff done. There’s no choice, because you’re on the plane to Maui or St. Moritz tomorrow.

But (to go back to the analogy I started with) when the water level – your inventory of time – is high, there's less urgency to reduce inefficiency. Why bother removing the waste in your work habits when you can just stay at the office an hour later, or get it done over the weekend? This is just another manifestation of the normalcy of waste.

And that's the nefarious aspect of living on your Blackberry 24/7, and your willingness to work on weekends and give up your holidays: you effectively raise the water level by increasing the amount of time you have to accomplish your work.

Lower your inventory of time available for work, and then you can reveal and address the inefficiencies in your work habits. In the spirit of kaizen, commit to leaving the office 15 minutes earlier one day this week. Then make it two days next week, and three days the week after. Carve out time for the non-work activities that you regret missing. Schedule time with your family; go for a run; read a book. Fill your calendar with these important commitments, decrease your inventory of work time, and you'll find ways to become more efficient.

Not only will you expose the rocks, you just might enjoy the trip down the river.