

## Management

*Julia Martin, Col. Ed.*

# Library Cyberslacking

## Some Suggestions

Karl Bridges

A story about a man, a computer, and an aardvark. First, though, let's talk about our bosses.

Supervisors in libraries prefer to believe their employees are working. When I was a library administrator, I liked the idea that my employees were cataloging or buying books or whatever else it was I was paying them to do. It made me feel good as a manager—and gave me something to talk about with my boss. The reality—I knew, my boss knew, and my employees certainly knew even though we all pretended otherwise—was different. People were gossiping, chatting, visiting, drinking coffee, and making excuses to visit their friends in other offices—presumably to drink yet more coffee. I'm not saying lots and lots of work wasn't getting accomplished. It was. It's just other things were happening, including playing on the computer. There's a word for that: cyberslacking.

Research in 2011 by Vitak, Crouse, and LaRose established the term "cyberslacking," stating, "Cyberslacking (also referred to as cyberloafing, non-work-related computing, cyber deviance, personal use at work, Internet abuse, workplace Internet leisure browsing, and junk computing) is the use of Internet and mobile technology during work hours for personal purposes."<sup>1</sup>

For the record, as a manager, aside from the stuff our computer use policy banned, which was a compliance/enforcement issue that I had to deal with, I never especially cared whether people on work time were buying shoes on Zappos or watching CNN or checking their retirement accounts as long as the work was getting done—an opinion I feel many managers don't share. All I can say is my view is that micromanagement of employees guarantees misery for everyone involved.

I understand productivity is an issue. Your monthly management meetings go ever so much better if you can convince your boss, even slightly, perhaps using fuzzy statistics, that your unit is indeed doing what they (and you) are being paid to accomplish. The nature of library work means that it is sometimes hard to track. Some productivity, like number of books bought, can be measured. Other aspects, not so much. Many librarians aren't closely supervised on a daily basis, making slacking easy. The question for managers becomes whether cyberslacking is a detrimental time and money wasting deviant behavior that drags down the organization, or if it can contribute positively towards better employee morale, creativity, and job satisfaction.

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# Contributing Factors to Employee Cyberslacking Behaviors in Libraries

There is probably no way to make a completely inclusive list of all reasons for cyberslacking since there are probably as many individual rationalizations as there are employees. The top three seem to be—based on my totally unscientific observations and casual reading of the literature (casual anything is all I do anymore...I burned my ties):

## **Procrastination**

J.N. Choi et al. in 2009 made a useful definition by stating, "*Passive procrastinators* are traditional procrastinators who postpone their tasks until the last minute because of an inability to make the decision to act in a timely manner. In contrast, *active procrastinators* make intentional decisions to procrastinate, using their strong motivation under time pressure, and they are able to complete tasks before deadlines and achieve satisfactory outcomes."<sup>2</sup> In short, why work on the tedious annual report when you can be doing something (anything) that's more interesting?

## **Boredom**

Some tasks are boring. Let's face it, libraries have many tasks, like weeding collections, which are just tedious. They fall under the category of what my mother Karen used to say, "You don't have to like it, you just have to do it." For me, this included homework, working in the garden, and washing the car, but I digress. At some point, most people will have task avoidance whether that is a long lunch hour, daydreaming, or playing on the computer. I once considered a library job where I was told that I would be spending every Saturday night until midnight alone in a remote facility in west Texas—a renovated cosmetics factory next to a truck repair facility—in case there was a telephone reference question. If someone told me they cyberslack from boredom, I understand.

## **Moral distress**

Moral distress was developed in 1984 by Andrew Jameton, who defined it as "when one knows the right thing to do, but institutional constraints make it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action."<sup>3</sup> At some point, employees realize what the reality of their organization is as opposed to whatever their bosses (or marketing) say it is. The next step is to realize there's nothing that they can do about it. Brown and Gillespie state that over time, the difficulties encountered by employees in exercising moral agency in their ability to make change due to challenges such as financial issues or poor leadership ultimately can result in an individual "feeling it is too futile to act, or that it will take too great an effort to counter an ethically disturbing practice, we end up doing nothing."<sup>4</sup>

George Orwell once stated that he had no objections to people driving Rolls Royces, but felt it was bad for morale. Moral distress seems a modern statement of the same idea. It seems reasonable to suggest that librarians, especially those in positions with limited opportunities to exercise moral agency, such as entry level employees or those from traditionally underrepresented groups, may be prone to cyberslacking. *Playing World of Warcraft* on company time becomes a kind of protest against the system. Plus, you get to kill orcs.

## Personalism as One Approach to Cyberslacking in the Library Workplace

Workers in libraries are encouraged to be constantly productive, which would seem to argue against allowing cyberslacking, a particularly problematic issue for people in telecommuting environments where the possibility of workplace interruptions by domestic events could be an issue. ("Kami – you're a good cat, but please take that squirrel outside." "No. I caught it. I did the hard work. YOU take it outside.") It used to be easier. There's an old library management book, which I no longer remember the title of, that advised library managers to have offices where the reference desk was clearly visible so an eye could be kept on all employees. Not necessarily a bad thing. As a young librarian, I found having Kathy Jenkins or Milton Crouch within eyesight to be reassuring.

One idea from the management literature is personalism. Personalism emphasizes the uniqueness of the individual, seeing personality as a central concept. It asserts the importance of community while rejecting the exploitation of the individual. The background for personalism is long reaching from Plato to management practices at AT&T. In short, it suggests treating employees decently and getting buy-in to policies gets better outcomes than telling people, "My way or the highway."

A library manager can make people's lives easier just by being flexible or forgetful. I once had a new hire come in on their first day at 8 a.m. to tell me she had to quit. I asked why. She said she hadn't been able to find childcare for her special needs child. I reminded her that her start date was next Monday. We quickly agreed that, indeed, we had both "misunderstood" the start date was a week later, which, totally coincidentally, was the length of time she required to find child care. In another instance, I simply paid an employee's parking tickets out of my own pocket. A wonderful person who spent their spare time and money on animal rescue. ("Yea!!!" says Kami the Cat. "Can I keep the squirrel? I brought it inside to say I love you. Really. Like lots." "No. Outside. Now.")

## Making sure that employees understand the why of policies is important

Library managers can benefit from studying servant leader management principles, and perhaps the wider philosophical concepts of personalism, to find ideas that can produce better positive outcomes in relation to cyberslacking behavior. Use the *why*. I recently dealt with a paperwork issue where I was told the reasoning for me signing off, which included some draconian penalties possibly, was "policy." I didn't sign; I asked "why" and the problem went away since, as it turned out, it was a misunderstanding by someone else. The fact is, people are more likely to go along with things if they understand why they are being asked to go on the trip rather than just being stuffed in the trunk of the car. Why matters.

Filippa Anzalone in a 2007 article about the use of personalism gives several good examples of where personalism could be useful. She suggests getting employee input to decisions, like setting library hours, rather than just dictating them. Another example she gives is addressing behavioral issues in a positive way rather than as simply part of a discipline process.<sup>5</sup>

Persuasion is seen as preferable to coercion, an ancient idea that goes back at least as far as Cicero's *On Moral Duties* in 44 BCE. In my own experience, I used to have a co-worker who routinely showed up late to the reference desk. I could have complained to my boss, but instead I just quietly spoke with the person's best friend, who was able to explain to the person what an issue this was.

Problem solved. In another instance, we had a new employee with performance problems. My supervisor finally asked me what to do as they were out of ideas. I gently explained the person is a new employee. Yet you let them work at home on projects they are picking themselves with no oversight. Of course they have no sense of being part of the group so they don't care what effect their actions have on the rest of us. Person starts working in house on projects with measurables and, more importantly, other people. Problem solved. In both instances the solution is about people, not policy enforcement. Plus, in the latter instance, I was gently correcting my boss in a way that didn't get me fired or upset them – personalism applied all round.

Job descriptions often are deficient. These can be vague. They can include language that states "Other duties as assigned." Vague, undefined, and rarely reviewed job descriptions where they have little input create issues for employees. With language like "other duties as assigned," they may end up doing boring and repetitive tasks, which they see as being meaningless and not leading anywhere. Job descriptions that are specific, engage the employee in their creation, and which are regularly reviewed, would result in better outcomes.

Evaluations can be problematic. The reality of leadership is that upper management has to depend on the judgment of department managers. A busy unit head can write a lukewarm review which does not aid the employee in their career. Issues like cyberslacking as an impact on employee productivity could be mentioned in evaluations. A 2018 article by researchers Stilling et al. on library performance appraisals found defects with current evaluation systems, including lack of feedback and a need to move the system towards positivity aimed at employee improvement. They noted, "It is more useful to view PA systems in libraries as a preventive health system (including an annual preventive health checkup) than a disease."<sup>6</sup>

It seems unlikely an average employee review would be questioned. Obviously, if an employee is "meeting expectations," they are doing what they were hired to do. However, it's an answer that does not answer whether the employee is happy or engaged. It seems reasonable to have policies where a certain percentage of employee evaluations are flagged annually for review. Perhaps with a desk audit to see if their tasks actually matched their job descriptions. As one example of an alternative method of evaluation that works in the direction of a desk audit system, the library of Northern Kentucky University adopted a point-based evaluation system for faculty that resulted in both better management outcomes and higher levels of faculty performance.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly stated expectations by means of an internet use policy is one way to manage cyberslacking. Researcher Steven Grover found that users preferred paper computer use guidelines, preferably administered remotely as opposed to by their direct supervisors, with a relaxed view towards compliance.<sup>8</sup> The preference for the human monitor to be more distant and for the policy agreement to be in paper form seem useful conclusions that can help IT and human resource professionals to better design and implement internet usage policies. It seems like it would be better to, aside from clearly stated policies, to have discussions with employees so they understand that, while we know cyberslacking happens, they need to keep it within limits. As a manager, I don't care if you listen to a YouTube video or a podcast while you do something else, but when you start acting like that's the job, it's an issue.

Integrating cyberslacking into the job might be useful. Having someone scour YouTube for useful instruction videos could be valuable. Or adjusting their job assignments so they have some role in the social media component of the library. More importantly, give them public recognition and credit for their accomplishments. Having employees integrate research and application of such tools

into their jobs seems a good thing. Cyberslacking behavior is going to happen. Channeling it into a proper outlet seems an appropriate way to handle this.

## Conclusion

Library managers should be taking cyberslacking seriously, using clear written policies and increasing accountability of employees through well-enforced computer use policies. Create a climate of well-understood organizational expectations about behavior. Orient with ideas about the role of the servant leader which have been widely used in business for many years with success.

Engage employees in both the development of policies and activities that enhance the organization and their own careers. Don't make the job a boring slog from hiring to retiring. The alternative would seem, if proactive action is not taken, to be that the larger organization, which might not have an extensive background in library services, might impose institution wide policies and/or procedures. Possibly in the name of risk management, such as the use of keystroke monitoring or Internet filters, which may not serve the library well.

Wait...you're still here? The column is over. Go listen to Jeremiah Babe or drink coffee. Oh. What about the aardvark you ask?

In the mid-1970s, newspapers were converting from using paper to computer systems. In a major metropolitan newspaper, reporters and editors wrote their stories, which were then sent downstairs to be printed, produced with huge expensive German presses that took five years of training to operate and could be ruined by dropping a bottle cap in the works. These press operators, many grizzled veterans of Anzio or the D-Day Landings, didn't like people messing with their Well-Paid Union Job.

The workflow for a morning paper meant the editors' and reporters' work was mostly done by 1 a.m., after which they stayed for another hour in case there was a problem or a late news story. One night, they are standing around, and the conversation went, I imagine, sort of along these lines:

Reporter: Hey Editor Bill I have a question.

Editor Bill: Yes. That is what the paper pays you for.

Reporter: This new system has search and replace right?

Editor Bill: Yes. And a handy feature it is.

Reporter: What would happen if we replaced every occurrence of the letter "e" in today's paper with the word "aardvark."

Editor Bill: I have no idea.

(General discussion ensues. Finally, consensus reached. Button pushed. System locks up. Lights flash. Sounds of doom and error messages come from computer terminals.

Screams heard from basement where the printing presses are. Sounds of angry printers rushing to elevators prepared to storm newsroom.)

Reporter (paging through manual feverishly): Uhh...doesn't look good guys.

Editor Bill (Being a good Baptist): Jesus is coming. Look busy.

Reporters take hint and find tasks—even the atheists.

Elevator dings. Doors open. Editor Bill talks printers off ledge. And more importantly from throwing reporters off ledge. Order is restored. Newspaper is printed on time.

Perhaps the earliest known instance of cyberslacking. It shows it's nothing new. The newspaper survived. Libraries will too.

(Kami the Cat: "Aardvark? Is that like a squirrel? Can I...?" "No, absolutely not. Get on your hassock and take a nap—after you take the squirrel OUTSIDE !!" "Ah, you're no fun." Purr, Purr, low muttering about how hard it is to find good Human Servants. Sn...oo...ze.....)

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