

TAMING THE “WORK MONSTER”

by Tom Warney

You’ve heard the expression, “Work smarter, not harder.” It makes sense, but often they forget to tell you *how* to work smarter, or why. Or, the techniques they suggest are too complicated, or not your style, or you have to buy some expensive piece of equipment to go with it.

Problem

The reality today is that work is complex, fast-paced and unpredictable. Too much work, conflicting priorities, stretching resources to the limit, multi-tasking demands, stress resulting in illness, wasted time and energies due to miscommunication, misunderstanding or lack of system, confusing organizational structure, insecurity about one’s job situation, lack of meaningful reward, anxiety, depression, workaholism.... Any of this sound familiar? This is the workplace today, and we need some powerful tools to adapt to it and survive.

For many people, work has become an evil, many-headed, multi-armed Monster looming over their lives, whether they are working at work, or working at home to “catch up”, or working in their sleep, having weird dreams of forgetting to do something or being unprepared for a meeting. (People used to just dream about flying, or being naked, which was more fun.) Some people have traded their lives for their work, giving up family, hobbies and vacations in order to “keep up”. The great monster Work has made them anxious, fearful, stressed and depressed, and, frankly, not much fun around the house. This is good news for therapists, but not for us.

We all know deep down inside that this isn’t the way it’s supposed to be, right? But we don’t know how to go about getting what we *do* want from work.

And what we want is simple, really, isn’t it? We want to do a good job at what we have chosen to do. We want engagement and satisfaction. We want to feel that we are in control, to know that we can deal professionally what comes at us, and to have that feeling of pride that comes from handling each and every situation well.

So let’s see if we can learn how to tame the Monster, and begin to return to a more natural, productive and enjoyable experience at work.

Solution

A lot of the problems associated with work come from the anxiety caused by having too much to do, of being overwhelmed by tasks, of not knowing what to do next. This usually stems from a lack of focus on *types* of work. Once you recognize that there are different types of work likely to occur in your job situation, and that each type can be handled with a specific method or tool, you can choose to organize your work in a practical and flexible way, using certain basic tools and systems that most of us are already familiar with.

Here are the main types of work that are likely to come your way:

- **Routine.** Regular tasks that can be scheduled regularly, such as reports, computer back-up, client check-ins, ordering supplies, and so on. They go on and on, and can be safely not-thought-of when they are neatly scheduled in your calendar or diary.
- **Projects.** The aim of a project is usually to find a better way to do something, and sometimes it actually works out that way. Examples of projects are updating a system, purchasing a system, implementing a system, sourcing new equipment, developing a new marketing plan, and so on. You might be in charge of the project, or part of the team. Or just a victim. Projects need to be handled separately, with a file (paper or electronic) and a schedule for each one, that you can refer to easily and regularly.
- **Communications.** This involves people you want to communicate with and all too often those you really would rather not deal with at all if you had a choice, and can include phoning, returning calls, emailing and answering of emails, checking voice mails, dealing with correspondence, chatting, coaching, or chewing out the mail delivery person.
- **Delegated.** This is work assigned to someone else. No one knows why it was given to you in the first place. Your challenge is to give it somebody who won't try to give it back until it's done. They'll try.
- **Delayed.** This includes certain things that you are waiting for, such as a report or quote that's due, information that's being prepared, results of delegated work, and so on. These are other things you can not-think-about once you've scheduled reminders for yourself.
- **Meetings.** This includes regular meetings and specially scheduled meetings, necessary meetings, unnecessary meetings and just plain silly meetings. Some people have taken up knitting just so they'll have something tangible after a meeting.

- **Reports.** This also includes regular reports and special reports, necessary, unnecessary and silly. They're like a print form of meeting, really, but you're allowed to make faces.
- **Presentations.** Anything that you need to prepare to present for others, individually or in a group. The bigger the group, the more scared you can let yourself be, and the more PowerPoint slides you can generate. "Just imagine them in their underwear." No, no — that's even more scary.
- **Immediately Do-able.** Anything that can be done right now, within a minute or two. Just do it now and you can forget it. Crossing things off your list always gives you a lift, right?
- **Emergencies.** This includes real emergencies ("The factory is on fire!") and (let's call them) "perceived" emergencies that someone has come up with ("Some of this stationery is less blue than the rest.") Let's face it: some people thrive on coming up with self-created "emergencies" and sometimes you're stuck with dealing with them. Deal with the real ones; maybe you can delegate the other ones.
- **Review.** This includes anything you'd like to look at and consider later. Items for review might include certain reports, magazine articles, new reference material, brochures for upcoming events, a funny but lengthy email you don't want people to see you laughing over, and so on. Have a file for each, for your "spare time".
- **Dumb.** Things that you have to do that you know are crazy and/or silly, but which you have to do because of that keeping-your-job thing.
- **Life.** This includes items that come up related to certain areas in your life such as family, health, home, financial, personal development, and so on. These have a way of suddenly appearing in the middle of your workday ("You broke a tooth HOW?").

System

That hopefully covers most of the types of work you are presented with regularly. Each type of work can best be dealt with in a specific appropriate way. Some types of work can be noted in a calendar/diary (routine items, meetings, appointments, when delegated or delayed work is due, when a report or a presentation must be made, and so on). Other types require files — either paper or electronic — of their own (projects, reports, presentations, etc.). Some types require placement in a file and a reminder as to when you might want to look at it

later (reading material, brochures, etc.). And immediately do-able items are, of course, best done immediately.

The idea is to get back control of the “Monster” by labelling each drooling head or waving arm and deciding the best way to deal with each of them. A “Master List” will be useful to make it easy for you to know where everything is and when each item needs to be reviewed, worked on and finished.

This is your basic “system” for streaming work into the appropriate places, and dealing with each item in a timely manner. Each of us is different, and each of us will choose the best system for our own personality and work style. Feel free to add your own bells and whistles (colors, artistic symbols, etc.).

The beauty of this system, once you get everything labeled and into it, is that you no longer have to think about all that stuff. You can focus on what you’re currently doing, knowing that everything else is tagged, flagged and organized for when you want to get to it. They say that the human brain can only consciously think of around five to nine items at once (depending on how much caffeine you’ve had) before it starts to get confused and drop some items. And you’ve probably been trying to juggle fifty or seventy, right? Does this help to explain the anxiety and stress? Could be.

Now, though, you can put everything in its proper place for either preparing or doing, and you can let your brain do what it does best – deal creatively and skilfully with the task at hand.

Work need not be a giant fearsome monster; with a little training and guidance, it can become a real source of satisfaction and personal power.

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