

# Lazy Work, Good Work

Dec 15, 2016 by Morgan Housel

John D. Rockefeller was the most successful businessman of all time. He was also a recluse, spending most of his time by himself. He rarely spoke, deliberately making himself inaccessible and staying quiet when you caught his attention.

A refinery worker who occasionally had Rockefeller’s ear once remarked: “He lets everybody else talk, while he sits back and says nothing. But he seems to remember everything, and when he does begin he puts everything in its proper place.”

When asked about his silence during meetings, Rockefeller often recited a poem:

A wise old owl lived in an oak,  
  
The more he saw the less he spoke,  
  
The less he spoke, the more he heard,  
  
Why aren’t we all like that old bird?

Rockefeller was a strange guy. But the more I read about him the more I realize he figured out something that now applies to tens of millions of workers.

Rockefeller’s job wasn’t to drill wells, load trains, or move barrels. It was to make good decisions. And making decisions requires, more than anything, quiet time alone in your own head to think a problem through. Rockefeller’s product – his deliverable – wasn’t what he did with this hands, or even his words. It was what he figured out inside his head. So that’s where he spent most of his time and energy.

This was unique in his day. Almost all jobs during Rockefeller’s time required doing things with your hands. In 1870, 46% of jobs were in agriculture, and 35% were in crafts or manufacturing, according to economist Robert Gordon. Few professions relied on a worker’s brain. You didn’t think; you *labored*, without interruption, and your work was visible and tangible.

Today, that’s flipped.

Thirty-eight percent of jobs are now designated as “managers, officials, and professionals.” These are decision-making jobs. Another 41% are service jobs that often rely on your thoughts as much as your actions.

Here’s a problem we don’t think about enough: Even as more professions look like Rockefeller’s – thought jobs that require quiet time to think a problem through – we’re stuck in the old world where a good employee is expected to labor, visibly and without interruption.

The point is that productive work today does not look like productive work did for most of history. If your job was to pull a lever, you were only productive if you were pulling the lever. But if your job is to create a marketing campaign, you might be productive sitting quietly with your eyes closed, thinking about design. The problem is that too many workplaces expect their knowledge workers to pull the proverbial lever – today in Microsoft Office form – 40+ hours a week when they’d be better off doing things that look lazy but are actually productive. The result is that most people have thought jobs without being given much time to think, which is the equivalent of making a ditch-digger work without a shovel. Maybe this is why productivity growth is half of what it used to be.

If you anchor to the old world where good work meant physical action, it’s hard to wrap your head around the idea that the most productive use of a knowledge-worker’s time could be sitting on a couch thinking. But it’s so clear that it is. Good ideas rarely come in meetings, or even at your desk. They come to you in the shower. On a walk. On your commute, or hanging out on the weekend. I’m always amazed at the number of famous ideas that came to people in the bathtub. But tell your boss you require a mid-day soak, and the response is entirely predictable.

Look at famous thinkers who didn’t have to impress anyone by looking busy, and you see a theme: They spent a lot of time doing stuff that didn’t look like work, but in fact was stupendously productive.

Albert Einstein put it this way:

*I take time to go for long walks on the beach so that I can listen to what is going on inside my head. If my work isn’t going well, I lie down in the middle of a workday and gaze at the ceiling while I listen and visualize what goes on in my imagination.*

Mozart felt the same way:

*When I am traveling in a carriage or walking after a good meal or during the night when I cannot sleep—it is on such occasions that my ideas flow best and most abundantly.*

Bill Gates got his best work done on what looked like vacation:

*“Hi, thanks for coming,” said Microsoft Corp. Chairman Bill Gates, appearing eager for company after four days alone at the waterfront cottage. He was there for his “Think Week,” a seven-day stretch of seclusion he uses to ponder the future of technology and then propagate those thoughts across the Microsoft empire.*

This meshes with a Stanford study that showed walking increases creativity by 60%.

Everyone eventually has to sit down and produce their work, and are held to goals and quotas. But as the economy shifts to knowledge work, we should respect that what actually produces good work can at first look lazy, and (even more so) vice versa.

In investing, where there’s the potential to win by pure luck, it’s wise to judge someone by their process, rather than their outcome. Work may be the opposite. Judge people by their outcomes, not by the visibility of their process, which is often hidden inside their head.



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