

# The boredom boom

*Be it at a desk at the Treasury Department, a spot on the factory floor, or a drab blue cubicle, boredom is a condition that can be more stressful and damaging than overwork (Washington Post, 10 August 2005: see [tinyurl.com/8pg9o](http://tinyurl.com/8pg9o))*



**SANDI MANN** on why boredom at work is no longer restricted to 'boring' jobs.

**T**HINK of boredom at work and perhaps you think of the factory assembly line, or the supermarket checkout worker scanning items all day. But I will argue that the ever-burgeoning demands of meetings, paperwork, routinisation, information overload and bureaucracy within many job roles are creating a boom in the experience of workplace boredom – well beyond those mechanised jobs that have traditionally been identified as highly boredom-inducing. What is behind this 'boredom boom', and are there 'boredom busters' that could be implemented to stop it?

## **Boredom – what is it?**

Contrary to popular wisdom, boredom is not the result of having nothing to do. It is very hard to come up with a situation where a person's options are so limited that he or she literally can do nothing. Rather, boredom stems from a situation where none of the possible things that a person can realistically do appeal to them.

Boredom is thought by some (e.g. Fisher, 1993) to be a distinct emotional state in which the level of stimulation is perceived as unsatisfactorily low. The lack of external stimulation leads to increased neural arousal in search of variety – failure to satisfy this leads to experience of boredom. This may be why there is thought to be an interaction between boredom and the personality traits of introversion and extroversion; on the one hand, extroverts require more stimulation to maintain optimal levels of arousal and so could be more easily bored (Wink & Donahue, 1997) but on the other hand extroverts may be better at seeking stimulation, especially

in social contexts, and thus be better able to reduce their boredom (Hill & Perkins, 1985).

Like all emotions, boredom is likely to have a function. Its main purpose is most probably to alert us that all is not well and something must be done (Gaylin, 1979, p.129). Bizarrely perhaps, boredom is thus seen as a motivating force that makes us engage in challenge-seeking behaviour:

boredom can be energising. Indeed, Sir Bob Geldof, who galvanised the entire country and beyond into action against African poverty, admits that he is continually motivated by a need for stimulation: 'I'm afraid of boredom because I get into all this emptiness' (quoted in *The Observer*, 12 October 2003).

Boredom has other functions; it

communicates to others our interests, values and beliefs (my being bored tells those around me that the current environment holds no appeal for me). Being bored might be an adaptive mechanism against societal noise or information overload (Klapp, 1986) by allowing us to switch off from less important inputs. It may even serve as a 'shield against self-confrontation' (Hoover, 1986) by allowing us to attribute our inability at a task or lack of understanding of something to boredom ('it's not that I can't do it or don't understand it – it's just that it bores me'). As an evolutionary tool, boredom was probably invaluable, allowing us to stop attending to a stimulus that proves itself neither dangerous nor reinforcing, and turn our attention to other, more worthy stimuli.

### A burgeoning trend?

Most early research in the field of workplace boredom focuses on task repetitiveness. Thus, workplace boredom has been studied in the context of a limited range of tasks such as mechanical assembly, vigilance tasks and continuous manual control. Professions studied by early researchers include heavy truck

## BOREDOM ON THE RISE?

- Nearly 45 per cent of hiring experts in a 1998 survey said firms lost top workers because they were bored with their jobs (Steinauer, 1999).
- A third of Britons claim to be bored at work for most of the day (DDI survey 'Faking It', 2004); in the financial services, half were often or always bored at work.
- Boredom has been found to be the second most commonly suppressed emotion at work (Mann, 1999).
- 55 per cent of all US employees were found to be 'not engaged' in their work in a recent survey reported in the *Washington Post* (10 August 2005).
- 24 per cent of office employees surveyed by Office Angels claimed that boredom caused them to rethink their career and look for alternative jobs (reported in *The Guardian*, 20 January 2003).
- 28 per cent of graduates claimed to be bored with their job in a survey by the Teacher Training Agency ([tinyurl.com/ltn6e](http://tinyurl.com/ltn6e)).

drivers, manual workers, government clerks, assembly autoworkers, clerical employees, long distance truck drivers and repetitive press-operators.

However, more contemporary researchers are beginning to accept that the experience of work boredom is not limited to blue collar workers or office workers performing repetitive or routine work (e.g. Fisher, 1993) and surveys or studies that have looked at boredom away from these jobs have revealed a burgeoning trend within boredom statistics (see box). Indeed, the phenomenon of 'rust out', a term used since the 1980s to describe workers who 'waste away, unchallenged and uninspired' at their desks is thought to be 'rampant' in today's offices (Wylie, 2004, p.40). Even one of George W. Bush's senior advisors admitted recently that boredom occasionally drove him out of his Washington office to seek relief at the movies; apparently, one afternoon, he even ran into a senior official from another department, which, he reported, they both found 'kind of awkward' (*Washington Post*, 10 August 2005).

### Why the boom?

In order to start to understand this supposed 'boredom boom', it is necessary to look at the causes of workplace boredom in relation to changing work practices. Ignoring for the moment variations in individual propensity to boredom (referred to as 'boredom proneness'), workplace boredom is likely to be a function of task and environment effects. For example, work tasks that are varied, have high significance for the worker, are performed under the control of the worker and elicit feedback about performance to the worker, are thought to be less boring. As far as the working environment is concerned, boredom can be mediated by the presence

of 'interesting' co-workers, or by the introduction of boredom-busting organisational practices such as less controlling environments in which people are free to organise their own work schedule and take breaks when they want.

In the absence of any valid comparative data, of course, it is difficult to declare with any accuracy that workplace boredom has grown over time. But what is clear is that the nature of work has changed dramatically and that many of these work practices are thought to be boredom-inducing. For example, workplaces today are increasingly automated, with faceless technology being the interface through which many tasks are completed. Many jobs in the past that involved skill use, decision-making and contact with people can now be achieved with the press of a few (boring) buttons. Take, for example, a highly-trained pilot, who is forced to spend most of the flight sitting back whilst autopilot takes over. This explains why it is oft said that a pilot's job is hours of boredom punctuated with seconds of sheer terror. They can't even reduce the boredom anymore by inviting children into the cockpit to show them what all the buttons do – such practices are becoming rare due to post 9/11 security.

Mounting paperwork is an all-too common feature of the modern workplace that produces ripe conditions for a boredom boom. According to the British Chamber of Commerce, the UK government introduced almost 900 new regulations affecting workplaces between 1997 and 2004 ([tinyurl.com/k2bk8](http://tinyurl.com/k2bk8)). Other causes of paperwork overload include the EU's Working Time Regulations and the Data Protection Act.

There is also what one author called 'Death by Meeting' (Lencioni, 2004). Overall, 82 per cent of white collar workers

report spending almost one-third of their working week in either formal or informal meetings ([tinyurl.com/f5gl4](http://tinyurl.com/f5gl4)). Perhaps as more work becomes teamwork, and fewer people remain to do the work that exists, the number of meetings will increase rather than decrease.

New working practices such as those in call centres also severely restrict job autonomy and worker control, leading to an upsurge in conditions traditionally identified as boring. According to *CallCenterOps.Com*, boredom is a major factor in staff turnover in call centres, with the following being cited as main boredom-boosters: the repetitive nature of the work, excessive control by managers, supervisors or team leaders, limited career progression opportunities, and limited job variation. A study by Call Centre College and Lucent Technologies ([tinyurl.com/s8n9p](http://tinyurl.com/s8n9p)) revealed that 28 per cent of staff leaving call centres cited boredom as the main reason.

The burgeoning 24/7 work culture is also contributing to the boredom boom, as lonely night workers miss out on the more social camaraderie and interaction that their day-worker colleagues enjoy. Another problem is the misfit between education and workplace demands; there are now many more graduates than there used to be, so many are having to accept jobs for which they are overqualified.

The global rise of the need for 'self-actualisation' or self-fulfilment means that as people become increasingly educated they want more mental stimulation and autonomy in their working lives. Moreover, they want and expect jobs to be more than just sources of income; they expect them to be stimulating and fulfilling. Yet this need is clashing in many cases with the relentless industrial pressure to drive down costs, which seems to involve controlling aspects of employee work with ever greater precision. Jobs are becoming more efficient, uniform and predictable, reducing work to a formula that is so resisted by the self-actualising employee.

Does any of this really matter? The harsh reality is that the workplace has always had some elements of boredom built into it. But boredom has been associated with a range of negative outcomes including poor performance at work and accidents (e.g. Branton, 1970), absenteeism (e.g. Brisset & Snow, 1993), errors stress, increased risk taking/thrill seeking (e.g. O'Hanlon 1981), sleepiness (e.g. Grose 1989), stress-related health

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problems such as heart attacks (e.g. Alfredson *et al.*, 1982), job dissatisfaction (e.g. Caplan *et al.*, 1975) and even property damage (Drory, 1982).

### Boredom busters – how to halt the boom

Clearly, there are no quick-fire solutions to the problem of boredom at work. The world of work is changing and the clock cannot be turned back to the arguably more exciting (yet more dangerous) days when workers really were at the coalface. But strategies that acknowledge the psychology of boredom should be put into place. These need to respect the known causes of

workplace boredom, as well as understand the human need for optimal levels of stimulation. Boredom busters need to be realistic, since total business process reengineering to combat boredom is unlikely to be a feasible option. So what can be done?

Firstly, the impact of automated workplaces needs to be considered by researchers and practitioners. Ergonomics experts are adept at adapting workplace designs to meet human functioning and sometimes they recommend decreasing reliance on automation and computer control in order to increase the skill needed by the operator. Other systems can create a

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virtual 'coalface' so that although the operator is merely pressing buttons, they can actually 'see' the results of their efforts.

Similarly, the de-robotisation of call centre employees so that they do not have to read scripts or work in highly controlled environments is recommended. Of course, this is not likely to change just because of the boredom created for employees. Labour is cheap and turnover rates at call centres an expendible cost, so the only way such practices will change may be with union or employee rights input.

The over-use of meetings in many organisations needs to be re-examined. Meetings should either be run more efficiently (i.e. be tightly chaired, highly focused and above all, brief), and/or replaced where possible with other procedures such as e-mail discussions or video-conference calls.

It is difficult to get over the problem of over-legislation and bureaucracy. Recent initiatives, such as giving more administrative work to support staff (as tried by Surrey Police Force), public

awareness campaigns to relieve GPs of unnecessary paperwork, and use of new technologies such as PDAs (personal digital assistants), to take school registrations without the admin, go some way towards solving the problem. Research should also be carried out to help identify the best way for individuals to cope with these increasingly necessary, but boring tasks. For example, interspersing such tasks with more interesting work, breaking down form-filling into smaller chunks, playing music in the background – these are all individual strategies that companies should allow to go some way to coping.

Perhaps it mostly comes down to control. Working conditions of all job roles should be re-examined so as to allow as far as possible, utilisation of job rotation schemes and less controlling environments in which people are free to organise their own work schedule and take breaks when they want.

Boredom at work is, then, a problem of which employers and employees are becoming increasingly aware. In the same

way that workplace stress is now given due consideration in most organisations, workplace boredom must be given equal prominence if we are to retain skilled, motivated and healthy workers.

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## DISCUSS AND DEBATE

Should some degree of boredom at work just be accepted as inevitable?

How much is the experience of boredom the result of individual factors (like personality) rather than elements of the environment (such as repetitive tasks)?

Is boredom motivating or de-motivating?

*Have your say on these or other issues this article raises. E-mail 'Letters' on [psychologist@bps.org.uk](mailto:psychologist@bps.org.uk) or contribute to our forum via [www.thepsychologist.org.uk](http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk).*