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## Working hard to look like you're working hard

Fearing for their jobs, many employees are doing everything in their power to prove they are needed – even if they have little to do

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### ELEANOR BEATON

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To his co-workers, he probably looks supremely busy.

The lawyer is at his desk promptly by 8 a.m., puts in his standard 11-hour workday, and frequently works on weekends, too.

Anyone who passes by his office can hear him talking on the telephone, riffling through papers, tapping on his keyboard and opening and closing the doors to his filing cabinet.

But while his office may seem like a hive of activity, this corporate and property lawyer isn't as busy researching titles and registering deeds as he might appear.

"I've been light on work lately," he admits.

But he's not about to let anyone else in his firm know. Not long out of law school, he's painfully aware of how low he is on the totem pole. And so he's making a concerted effort to appear busy and productive.

He works slower and more carefully. He personally photocopies paperwork that he used to hand off to an assistant. He organizes files he's long since finished with. He makes more personal calls.

"If the firm is going to be making any cuts, I'm the fat that will be trimmed," he says.

There are lots of other employees feeling like that lawyer – and so they are working hard to look like they're working hard.

While a rash of layoffs has left some survivors struggling with too

much work, others find themselves with too little to do.

A Globe and Mail online poll last week found that, while 28 per cent of 8,440 respondents said their workload had increased because of the economic downturn, 14 per cent said it had decreased.

Fearing for their jobs, such employees are doing everything in their power to protect their positions – showing up earlier, staying later and trying to find creative ways to prove they are eager and necessary, even if looking busy is a make-work project.

The lawyer, who declined to be identified because he worried about how it would reflect on him professionally, says friends at other firms are also looking for ways to appear busy, from attending professional development conferences to volunteering to do pro bono work to needlessly organizing their offices.

All of his busy-work doesn't translate into billable hours. And that has him worried.

"I have just enough work to keep me going now," he says. "If this trend continues, I'm worried about what could happen to my job."

He's not alone. A recent survey by British-based HR consultancy Badenoch & Clark found that more than half of employees polled responded to job insecurity by putting their heads down and staying busy.

A third said they were spending

more time on individual tasks, and about one-quarter were looking busy by surfing the Internet, making to-do lists and taking shorter lunch breaks.

"Finding ways to look indispensable is a fear-based reaction in times like this," says Alan Kearns, founder of Career Joy, a career-coaching firm with offices in Toronto and Ottawa.

Skipping lunch, working longer hours and putting up an enthusiastic front are common ploys by employees worried about losing their jobs, Mr. Kearns says. "It gives the individual some semblance of control."

But if they think that looking busy will keep them busily employed, they'd better think again, career pros say.

Bosses already know what their employees are made of – and "smart leaders see right through it," Mr. Kearns says.

Even top talent has little to gain from pretending to be busy, the pros

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Daphne Woolf,  
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say.

“During a recession, layoffs often have nothing to do with an individual’s performance,” says Daphne Woolf, a managing partner at the Collin Baer Group, a management consulting firm in Toronto.

Ms. Woolf says the kind of organization-wide restructuring common in recessions eliminates the need for certain positions, regardless of the calibre of people who occupied them. “Layoffs are a means of becoming more operationally efficient, not an opportunity to clear out dead wood,” she says.

In fact, far from securing your future, putting in more “face time” – a term the experts use to describe unproductive time in the office – is the surest way to jeopardize it, Ms. Woolf says.

“We have found an increase in face time reduces productivity,” she notes, because most people stretch tasks to fill the time they’re in the office.

In her consulting practice, Ms. Woolf says she has observed that working longer hours is often a sign of insecurity and fear.

And while a fearful employee may be in the office in body, he or she is likely to be distracted, less productive and not present in mind, she says.

As eagle-eyed employers scrutinize operations to find ways to reduce inefficiency, taking too long to complete a task, working longer hours unnecessarily or engaging in busy-work are all likely to raise red flags with employers because they suggest inefficiency, the pros say.

“During a restructuring, busy-work is risky because leaders have less tolerance for it than they do during times of economic growth,” Mr. Kearns says.

Depending on how long they have to keep up the charade, employees may not be able to tolerate it either, says Roberta Neault, founder of Life

Strategies Inc., a career coaching firm based in Coquitlam, B.C.

“Chronic busyness isn’t healthy or sustainable – it leaves a hollowness inside,” she says.

Moreover, stress, sleep deprivation, burnout and mistakes all increase when employees work longer and harder, Dr. Neault says.

Rather than fake their indispensability, career experts say that smart employees should expend their energy finding ways to make themselves more productive.

The best way to do that is to deal with the problem head-on.

And that means taking your concerns to your manager, Ms. Woolf says.

While some employees may shudder at the thought, “it’s okay to tell your boss, ‘I’m feeling insecure about my job, and I’d like you to tell me whether my concerns are legitimate or not, and what I can do to ensure my position here is secure,’” she says.

Explaining your concerns to your boss calmly and rationally does two things, Ms. Woolf says.

First, it shows that you’re courageous, engaged and willing to adapt to new challenges. Second, if you are in danger of losing your job, it gives you time to begin to assess your options.

While this kind of honesty requires “courage and mental fortitude,” Mr. Kearns says it also opens the door for a frank discussion with your manager about how you can contribute more meaningfully to the organization.

“Employers are going to value people who bring low-cost solutions to the table, people who identify inefficiencies and take steps to fix them,” he says.

Employees who take on challenging activities during tough times are often seen as the most productive, Dr. Neault says.

“Volunteer to take on a significant project that will contribute to the

organization’s success,” Dr. Neault recommends.

Mentoring younger workers, or doing professional development work, are other ways to demonstrate your commitment and value, Dr. Neault adds.

Focusing on contributing something new, rather than just appearing to be busy, will help you now, and when the economy rebounds, Mr. Kearns says.

“Productivity is far better for your internal brand than busywork ever could be.”

» *Special to The Globe and Mail*

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## *Don’t fake it*

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How to deal with too little to do? Rather than fake being busy, here’s what the experts suggest:

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### **SPEAK UP**

If you need more work, approach your boss and say so. That will show courage, initiative and a desire to be engaged.

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### **EXCEED EXPECTATIONS**

Revisit your job description or ask your manager to clearly state your job expectations. Then you can find ways to over-deliver.

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### **CUT COSTS**

Managers are under pressure to do more with less. Helping them do their job by finding creative ways to cut costs could help safeguard your position.

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### **FIND WAYS TO HELP OUT**

Look for ways to help the organization you work for be more successful. Volunteer to mentor younger workers, ask colleagues if they need a hand completing their own work, or find ways to stretch yourself. Such moves could put you in good stead when times improve.

» *Eleanor Beaton*