

Career Path: Can You Be Too Good at Your Job?

Career Development



“Too good at your job,” you wonder. “Is that even a thing?” Believe it or not, there are ways in which stellar performance may create some unintended consequences. You can decide for yourself whether the benefits of being a super-employee are worth the potential risks.

The reason for your initial skepticism is that most employees are far from being too good at their jobs. Many colleagues show up, do their work (sort of), and scurry off. I hear far more complaints from in-house friends about their needing to work extra hard to compensate for others’ inefficiencies and thoughtlessness than that they are overcome with awesomeness.

This post is about you, though, not your sometimes suboptimal colleagues. You didn’t get to where you are today by being a slacker. In fact, the habits you learned in law school and earlier serve you well in the workplace. You prepare, show up early, work hard, and pay attention. You observe your behavior and that of others around you so that you may more successfully navigate the sometimes turbulent currents of your company’s culture.

You really don’t have a choice but to learn to work well because you’re too busy to waste time on lower priority tasks. You hone your skills every day by necessity. As a result many in-house counsel are superb at their jobs. Because of their broad exposure to all corners of their companies’ businesses, their analytical approach, and their ruthless prioritization on strategic tasks, in-house counsel are among the best employees overall.

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I used to tell my team my goal was for the business to “cherish” in-house counsel. That when there

was a vacancy, the business should be delighted with the opportunity to add another lawyer to the team because of how greatly we added value to the company in every opportunity that presented itself.

Competence attracts new work like bees to pollen

What are some consequences of being great at your job? Well, one obvious consequence that will no doubt have occurred to you is that competence attracts new work like bees to pollen. To whom do you assign important projects as a manager? The employee who has free time but a spotty track record or the superstar who crushes everything you throw at them?

Work is not at all evenly or fairly distributed because managers are selfish. We want the best person for the job even though that person is already doing twice as much as their colleagues. I call this the "curse of competence." People who are busy because they are good at their jobs will receive a disproportionate amount of additional work.

Colleagues sometimes take advantage of high-performing team members

And it's not just bosses who notice this. Your colleagues notice your work performance as well. Most will greatly appreciate all that you do. A certain subset, however, will take advantage of your desire to outperform by being just a little bit more incompetent. Say you are on a project together and a summary of a meeting needs to be drafted, or some work product needs to be created for the project to advance. Your opportunistic free rider just sits back and lets the pressure build, even if they've been assigned part of the work. They care more about managing their time than they do advancing the project. You care more about doing a good job and before long you feel compelled to step into the gap.

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Result? Your colleagues will, by inaction, invite you to do some of their work on top of the load you are already carrying. This leads to a spiral of overwork that has led many great performers to burn out. While some enlightened managers look for this and will help protect their stars, you simply can't count on it.

Do you really need to move from twice-as-productive to three-times?

If you recall that your goal is not short-term overperformance but long-term sustainable performance, it may easier for you to take steps to protect yourself. You're already twice as productive as others. Do you really need to be three times as productive?

Find a pace you can sustain and stick to it

How do you protect yourself from the perils of being too good at your job? By finding a pace of work that you can sustain and sticking to it. No one who appreciates their fine car would push the engine past the redline for extended periods of time. What makes you think pushing yourself beyond your

comfort zone at work is any better for you? Work deliberately and steadily, take breaks when you need to, and stop when you've put in a full day.

No matter how much you have to do, no matter how much additional work your colleagues try to pile on, work on the most important priority first and take the time needed to do a good job. You are not slowing down as much as you are working well at a manageable pace.

If you do this, you will notice good things start to happen. Your boss will see your response time is no longer immediate, even though you're still producing first-rate work on everything you do. If they're in a hurry, they will start to look elsewhere. When you fail to do your colleagues' work for them, they will either fail themselves (sad, but not your problem) or, more frequently, they will rediscover their own capacity for work.

In other words, people will pick up on how you work and they will adjust themselves to your work habits. Thus, I recommend you continue to maintain high standards for everything you do, but find ways to not do everything you may be asked to do.

I trust you'll find your business still cherishes you just as much.

Be well.

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