

Over 2% of total productive time of any organisation may be lost in smoking

Productivity up in smoke

"A cigarette in my hand, I feel like a dead man".

Something that happened to me a few days ago reminded me of this old television commercial. He collapsed in office and had to be rushed to hospital, where he was diagnosed with lung cancer, a direct fallout of his smoking habit. On the same day, as I rushed in and out of hospital, a strange sight greeted me each of the three times



office AFFAIRS

I drove back into my office. Every single time I found a bunch of colleagues standing at the gate, smoking. While they were different sets of people each time, there was one guy, who was there all the three times.

That day, it struck me. If in a matter of four hours, I saw that individual out there smoking, three times, how much time in a day would he be spending, out there on the road, smoking. I decided to spend some time doing research. The next day, hidden from public view, I stood outside my office, timing the smoking breaks people take.

In a matter of 45 minutes, I timed about 62 employees going out to smoke. On an average each smoking break lasted about 670 seconds (approx 11 minutes). This 670 seconds was only the time taken while smoking, and did not take into account the time taken to walk from their respective workstations, looking for someone to accompany them, taking the lift down and trekking out of the office compound to the road side, to smoke.

Imagine an organisation with 1,000 employees, where 10% of the employees smoke an average

of five cigarettes a day (for an average smoker, this is a conservative assumption). This translates into smoking employees wasting 10% of their daily working hours, taking smoking breaks and when you spread the time lost in smoking, over the entire workforce, it translates to over 2% of the total productive time of any organisation lost in smoking.

Krishna Rao, a non-smoker, is very critical, "Smokers tend to hold up meetings when they are out for smoking breaks. Responses to critical mails get held up, discussions get postponed. And what is most frustrating about smokers, particularly smoking bosses, is the fact that they drag along non-smokers with them, wasting their time, and probably risking their health too." If you factor in Krishna's comments, the time lost because of smoking during office hours can end up being a lot more than the 2% estimated above.

Two percent of productive time lost every month is reason enough for HR to stand up and take notice. "I am aware", says Rahul Bhattacharya, HR manager in a private bank. "But there is little I can do to control this menace. It's viewed as a fundamental right of employees. And banning smoking may be a big demotivator." While Rahul may be partly right I would like to point out that in these days where cost control and retrenchment are the order of the day, a smoking break, costs the organisation a lot more than just the time it takes to smoke. Organisations should seriously consider ways and means of controlling this menace.

Anti-smoking campaigns, incentivising people who stop smoking, smoke-free days and capping smoking breaks are initiatives which organisations can implement, says Krishna, and I can't agree more. While organisations can do a lot to curb this menace, nothing can be achieved without self-realisation. And, to all the employees who spend hours on the road smoking, my only message to them is to pause for a moment and think. You are in fact stealing company time for your smoking breaks and in the process impacting your own productivity, and more importantly, your and your co-workers' health. Is it worth it?

RAVI SUBRAMANIAN
Banker and author of
'Devil in Pinstripes'