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# Why Showing Your Face at Work Matters

A brief discussion of research suggesting that nontraditional work arrangements such as telecommuting can negatively impact the way managers evaluate employee performance, by Kimberly Elsbach and Daniel Cable

## [CAREERS]

# Why Showing Your Face at Work Matters

Although it's increasingly common, telecommuting may be hazardous to employee evaluations. But employers can take steps to ensure that remote workers are judged fairly.

BY KIMBERLY ELSBACH AND DANIEL CABLE

These days, more and more corporate employees are working at least part of the time from home offices. Working from home, or other types of remote work arrangements such as using a drop-in work center, can be beneficial to both employees and companies. However, our research suggests that these nontraditional arrangements also have hidden pitfalls. Employees who work remotely may end up getting lower performance evaluations, smaller raises and fewer promotions than their colleagues in the office — even if they work just as hard and just as long.

The difference is what we call *passive face time*. By that we are not referring to active interactions with coworkers or clients, but merely to being seen in the workplace. To be credited with passive face time you need only be observed at work; no information is required about what you are doing or how well you are doing it.

Even when in-office and remote employees are equally productive, our research suggests their supervisors might evaluate them differently because of differences in their passive face time. Especially in white-collar settings, the presence or absence of passive face time may influence evaluations used to determine the fitness of employees for specific tasks such as team leadership. As Jack and Suzy Welch wrote in a 2007 *BusinessWeek* column:

*Companies rarely promote people into leadership roles who haven't been consistently seen and measured. It's a familiarity thing, and it's a trust thing. We're not saying that the people who get promoted are stars during every*



*“crucible” moment at the office, but at least they’re present and accounted for. And their presence says: Work is my top priority. I’m committed to this company. I want to lead. And I can.*

For the last decade we've studied the concept of passive face time from the perspective of hundreds of corporate workers, including both supervisors and subordinates. (Details of our research were published in the June 2010 issue of *Human Relations*. See “Related Research.”) We used observation, unstructured interviews and tightly controlled experiments to gather information about how passive face

time affects employee evaluations. This data led us to three key findings.

**1. There are two kinds of passive face time.** The first, which we call *expected face time*, is simply being seen at work during normal business hours. The second, which we call *extracurricular face time*, is being seen at work outside of normal business hours — arriving before most employees

## RELATED RESEARCH

► K. D. Elsbach, D. M. Cable and J. W. Sherman, “How Passive ‘Face Time’ Affects Perceptions of Employees: Evidence of Spontaneous Trait Inference,” *Human Relations* 63, no. 6 (June 2010): 735-760.

arrive, staying late or coming in to work on the weekend. *When* you are at work is noticed by your coworkers and supervisors. “Who cares?” you might legitimately ask. It turns out your boss and coworkers do. This leads to our second finding.

**2. Different kinds of face time lead to different evaluations.** The two forms of passive face time lead to two kinds of “trait inferences,” or conclusions about what type of person someone is. Specifically, we found that expected face time led to inferences of the traits “responsible” and “dependable.” Just being seen at work, without any information about what you’re actually doing, leads people to think more highly of you.

You get labeled when you put in extra-curricular face time, too. But rather than just being considered dependable, you can get upgraded to “committed” and “dedicated.” As one manager said:

*There seems to be a norm that anyone hoping to move up in the management ranks needs to be here late at night and on the weekends. If you're not willing to do that, you're not going to be seen as dedicated enough to get promoted.*

**3. Managers may not be aware they are making evaluations based on face time.** Our interviews suggest that managers’ inferences based on passive face time are unintentional — even unconscious. This supports research findings that people generally form trait inferences spontaneously, without realizing they are doing so. As one subject we interviewed noted:

*I think it really has sort of an automatic negative effect when a manager is in crisis mode, and they look and notice you're not there. It's kind of irritating to them if you're not immediately available, or [on the other hand, comforting] if they can check and see you are there in the office, just in case they need you. Because they're in crisis mode they may not even really*

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*remember what it was that irritated them, but they've just got this feeling that you're unreliable or something.*

To test our interview findings, we conducted a series of experiments in which managers from a dozen industries were asked to recall employee traits after reading written descriptions of the employees. If a participant mistakenly said that a trait — for example, “committed” — had been listed in a description of someone who was described as working late in the office, they were said to have unconsciously inferred that trait. The results were clear and robust across multiple samples: Managers were 9% more likely to unconsciously attribute the traits “dependable” and “responsible” to

people who put in expected face time and 25% more likely to unconsciously attribute the traits “committed” and “dedicated” to people who put in extracurricular face time. These results were statistically significant across each of our experiments.

**Implications for Managers**

Our findings suggest several steps managers should take to prevent unfair employee assessments.

**1. Don't use trait-based evaluations.**

Growing evidence from research on performance appraisal suggests that these evaluations are flawed in a number of ways, including not being linked to companies' strategies or objective outputs and not helping employees understand what to change. Our findings add to this evidence by showing that trait-based evaluations — measuring em-

ployee “leadership ability” or “teamwork,” for example, may be biased by the mere physical presence of employees at the work site.

**2. As much as possible, use objective output measures.** Critics of remote working arrangements have long suspected that telecommuters lose out on specific types of information, such as hallway conversations or impromptu help from coworkers. Our findings suggest that remote workers might be further handicapped by perceptions that they are not as responsible or committed as other employees. To avoid such unfair perceptions, managers who implement telecommuting and flexible hours should revise their performance appraisals to measure mostly objective outputs, such as number and type of projects completed or expert evaluations of project quality.

**3. Consider work arrangements when using peer feedback.** Many organizations use “360-degree” appraisals in which employees are rated by peers and subordinates as well as managers. However, our research suggests that coworkers and subordinates may be just as prone to making unconscious trait judgments as managers are.

The bottom line is that employees should be wary of work arrangements that reduce their office face time, and supervisors should be wary of using trait-based performance measures, especially when evaluating remote workers. Finally, employees working remotely need to make sure they are evaluated on objective outputs. Barring that, you might consider sending an e-mail to your boss tonight . . . say, around midnight.

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**REMOTE WORKERS' FACE TIME TACTICS**

Many remote employees use “virtual” face time to make up for their absence from the office. Here are some common tactics, as described by employees in our study:

**Make regular phone or e-mail status reports. Used by 83% of remote workers.**

*“Take advantage of technology to let colleagues know you are working from home. When I work from home, I send my colleagues e-mail messages reporting progress. I try to make them aware that, while they left at 5 p.m., I am still working after 9 p.m.”*

**Be extra visible when in the office. Used by 35% of remote workers.**

*“I work hard when I am at the office and point out to colleagues and my boss when I do things such as miss lunch and breaks because I am working to meet a deadline. I also make sure I meet with my supervisor every time I'm in the office to make sure he sees me and I can update him on what I've accomplished.”*

**Be immediately available at home. Used by 26% of remote workers.**

*“When I'm working from home I respond immediately to e-mails, so that somebody isn't sitting around saying, ‘She's not in the office today so now I've got to wait for her to get back to me.’ I make sure I respond to people just as quickly as I would if I was in the office. And I have our phone systems' pagers, so if somebody leaves me a message, it's going to page me. So it's not as if I'm not available if people need me. It's not like I'm sitting in the back yard sunbathing or something. They know they can get me.”*

**Get others to talk you up. Used by 22% of remote workers.**

*“I try to make sure that my peers and the other directors know who I am. I make sure they know my name and what I'm doing. Whenever I get a chance I go say hello, say a couple of words about what I'm working on. The more they see me, the more they are going to remember me when it comes time for my appraisal. And they are likely to say a positive thing about me and talk about me to my supervisor.”*

**E-mail or voice mail early or late in the day. Used by 20% of remote workers.**

*“I send voice mail late in the evening because my boss's voice mail system would report what time the message was left and if it came from home or work. It was an important cue that I was working hard, even though he couldn't see me.”*

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