

THE BOREDOM BOOM

WORKPLACE 'BORE-OUT' AND HOW TO STOP IT

By Katy Lawn and Colin Stuart



64% of
UK workers
experience
boredom²⁷

When we think of a bored employee, we probably think of the classic factory assembly line worker. Perhaps we even think of Charlie Chaplin's character in the 1936 film 'Modern Times', yawning and daydreaming whilst performing the same, repetitive task over and over again.

Boredom, however, is as prevalent in so-called 'white collar' work as it was on the early assembly line. We've all been there – staring at your screen, eyes glazed over – perhaps wondering whether we have any frozen peas left in the freezer. This is unsurprising given that, as Albert Camus famously wrote: "the truth is that everyone is bored".

But the serious side of boredom is that it's an exceptionally expensive problem for business, reportedly costing the US job market alone \$ 750 billion a year¹. Given that top-performing companies thrive on engaged, motivated employees, it's clear that high levels of boredom are problematic; and, with some psychologists claiming that we are now experiencing a 'boredom boom' in the workplace², now is the time to think seriously about boredom.

HOW BORED ARE WE?

Back in the 70's, psychologists ran a study that found that 79% of British employees interviewed said they sometimes felt bored on the job; and of those people, 33% found their entire job boring.³ We've come a long way since the 1970's – in terms of fashion as well as attitudes towards work – but these early statistics show little sign of waning. A Gallup study, published in 2011, found that 71% of US workers are 'unengaged' or 'actively disengaged' from their work⁴. In the UK context, research has shown that 64% of workers report being bored (although this is admittedly less than Italy and the United Arab Emirates, who top the chart, coming in with an astounding 83% boredom rate).⁵

 **5.3**
hours

The average
employee in the UK
spends 5.3 hours
a week bored
at work²⁸

It follows that boredom at work is an important, but often neglected area of human resource management research. It can be a symptom of disengagement or unhappiness. It is one of the most common symptoms of depression, and yet is also a completely normal part of human experience. You can be bored because you have too much work to do and it seems impossible, or because you don't have enough work to keep you busy. You can be bored because you feel that you lack new challenges; because you feel like there's nowhere to go in a dead-end job; or even because you feel isolated from your co-workers or your organisation. Given this complexity, it is hard to describe exactly what boredom is. But, one thing is for certain: it is synonymous with *disengagement* and a *lack of motivation*, and it has real business costs.

Where we might assume millennials would report the highest rates of boredom, some research shows that highly educated and middle-aged employees are in fact among the least likely to be engaged⁶. However, this is not always the case, with one US study finding that millennials are twice as likely to be bored than baby boomers. There is also research that suggests some unexpected differences, with arts graduates being less likely to positively respond to engagement-boosting initiatives at work than their science or maths-graduate counterparts.⁷ There are also differences at different levels of the career-ladder: people in entry to mid-level jobs are more likely to be bored than those at more senior levels. In addition, women are (according to some studies) marginally more likely to be bored than men.⁸

This said, boredom is also incredibly personal, and depends on personality factors too, which makes a broad-brush approach to increasing employee engagement difficult.⁹



**Bored workers
are 2 x more likely
to leave their jobs²⁹**

SIR MICHAEL MARMOT'S WHITEHALL STUDY: WORK, HEALTH AND BOREDOM

From 1967 until 1977, the now well-known Whitehall Study followed 18,000 civil servants and found that workers who reported high levels of boredom were more likely to die during the 10 year research period than those who did not report any boredom; and, significantly, that they were more likely to die from cardiovascular problems*. A second Whitehall study, begun in 1985, also found that monotonous work with low control and satisfaction was an indicator of higher mortality levels**.

The Whitehall studies were not without controversy, and there are many different theories as to why these correlations were observed. One theory is that bored workers are more likely to drink heavily and smoke – which would compound (or perhaps even cause) the higher mortality rates. But, it's also not just boredom that's the problem. When people are bored, studies have found that this emotion usually coexists with other negative emotions, like sadness and loneliness; and also has a particularly strong correlation with anger***.

*Marmot, M et al. (2011) [The Whitehall Study \(selected publications\)](#), [The Center for Social Epidemiology](#)

**Marmot, M et al. [Health Inequalities Among British Civil Servants: the Whitehall II study](#), [Epidemiology](#).

***Fradera, A (2017) [Boredom Proneness: not so much a trait – more about what you do](#)



Companies with low employee engagement have a **65% lower share price over time**³⁰

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM WITH BOREDOM?

Why is boredom bad for business? Lee Biggins, the founder of CV Library summarises that: "prolonged boredom in a job can lead, very quickly, to burnout, low productivity and inevitably a high turnover of staff for businesses".¹⁰ The fact is that high levels of boredom in the workplace have been associated with a vast array of other negative outcomes even beyond this, for both employees and organisations.

One of the biggest business costs of boredom is job hopping. A recent report found that boredom and frustration were the lead cause in people leaving their jobs, with 35% of workers citing it as their main reason.¹¹ As discussed in a previous Baker Stuart white paper, attrition is damaging to staff morale as well as bad for the finances, with the cost of replacing an employee coming in at almost a years' salary.

In addition, boredom is associated with low morale, leading to low productivity and low engagement, which also leads to lower levels of innovation. These are hard to measure, but if follows that bored employees are less likely to proactively contribute at optimum levels of productivity – and this is being more widely recognised, as research shows that companies with engaged employees see 2.5 times more revenue in comparison to their competitors with low engagement levels.¹²

54% OF workers have looked for a new job as a result of **A DULL WORK LIFE**³¹



There are also a suite of social impacts which stem from boredom. Boredom is bad for business because it's *especially* susceptible to social influence. This means that if co-workers and managers say they're bored, or look bored, it is likely to rub off on the people around them. In other words, boredom is highly contagious, which makes it a key management problem, because negative examples set by co-workers and managers can affect the overall culture of a company.¹³

It also comes with a range of serious health impacts for the individual, which have an impact on employers. Boredom has been shown to be associated with the release of cortisol, a stress hormone. This is because often, when we're bored, we get frustrated or agitated, and so we can actually see boredom as a form of stress; and prolonged periods with high cortisol levels in the body have been associated with increased risk of high blood pressure and heart problems.

In any case, research demonstrates that boredom at work tends to go hand in hand with behaviours which are damaging to both the individual and the organisation, from absenteeism to substance abuse.¹⁴ It has also been shown that bored staff are less likely to comply with health and safety regulations, and more likely to engage in destructive behaviours, more likely to make mistakes, more likely to have heart problems, more likely to drink, smoke and cause others to feel bored at work – and more unlikely to make unhealthy food choices.¹⁵ All of this adds up to more sick days, a loss of revenue, low innovation, high attrition and low morale. The \$ 750 billion loss to the US economy per annum (as calculated by Rothlin and Werder) takes into account all of these losses.



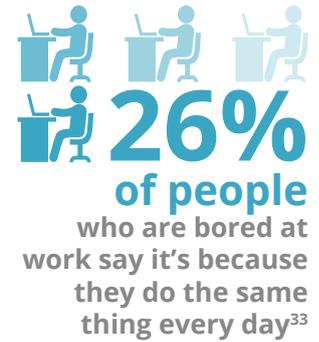
37% OF British workers think their job is meaningless³²

WHY ARE PEOPLE BORED?

In order to tackle boredom and its negative impacts, we need to understand why people are bored. Survey data from a recent UK study suggests that the following are the most common reasons for boredom at work: ¹⁶

- I do the same thing every day – 27%
- I dislike my job – 22%
- My daily tasks are tedious – 17%
- There's little for me to do – 14%
- I work alone – 8%

Management professor Cynthia D Fisher, back in the 90s divided boredom-inducing work characteristics into three categories: Task Effects, Work Environment Effects and Person Effects. ¹⁷ Task Effects related to the characteristics of work tasks themselves; for example unchallenging tasks, or not having enough tasks to do. Work Environment Effects covers all the various characteristics of the working environment, including relationships with co-workers, space layout and even management practices. Person Effects is perhaps the most vague category of the three, covering the individual personality traits of the worker.



6 WAYS



TO BEAT BOREDOM WHEN YOU'RE WORKING ON A DULL TASK

- Force yourself to be curious
- Look for inspiration outside of the task itself
- Make yourself laugh
- Take a hike (move desks, change the scenery)
- Make the familiar strange – try looking at your project in a new way
- Put your head down and move forward: just get on with it³⁴

And yet, because boredom is so subjective, it is dependent on how these factors *fit together* for each person. In other words, boredom occurs when there is “a mismatch between what the situation offers and what the person wants and can appreciate” as Fisher writes. For example, if you have an in-depth knowledge of football and your favourite team is playing, you are likely to find watching a football match to be an interesting experience. Compare this to someone who knows nothing about football (or even someone who has already watched three football matches that day), and they will likely find this a very dull experience. It follows that exactly the same tasks, environments or experiences in the workplace can be experienced as boring (or fascinating) by different people.

The key, really, is to look at your own workplace, and see how all of these factors might interact. Do your workforce have good interpersonal relationships with each other? Is there a good social atmosphere? Are your workers individually bringing positivity to the table? Is the design of your workplace conducive to innovation? Are your workers being given tasks suited to their skill level, or do they need more of a challenge? Are tasks too repetitive? Social isolation is also a huge factor, and will be a more prevalent issue in the future given that more and more workers will be working remotely. Not having enough to do – although it might come as a surprise to workers who feel overworked and overstressed – can also be a huge problem, especially since it often goes unnoticed because workers don't want to discuss it with managers.

THE UPSIDE OF BOREDOM?

The picture is not all bleak, however. Some studies show that a bit of boredom can be restorative. Like napping, periods of boredom (which may include daydreaming or absent-minded doodling) act as resting periods for your brain. This is perhaps why psychological experiments show that when people are asked to come up with a solution to a problem, they are more likely to come up with a creative solution after a period of boredom, than if they were not previously bored.¹⁸ Surrealist painter Salvador Dali used a rather strange method to dream up new ideas – he would nap with a key in one hand, above an upside-down plate. The moment he drifted into sleep, his hand would relax and the key would clang onto the plate, waking him up. This kind of in-between-ness, between sleep and waking, is similar to boredom. Many artists, writers and thinkers say that their most innovative ideas come when their minds are allowed to drift... so it might not be wise to try and banish boredom entirely.

A team of German researchers in 2014 identified a scale of five different types ranging from *indifferent boredom* (the mellowest and least unpleasant form, characterised by low arousal and daydreaming, similar to Dali's method) to *reactant boredom* (the most aggressive and unpleasant form, characterised by frustration and anger).¹⁹ It follows that perhaps the more mellow forms of boredom lend themselves to this kind of psychological recharging and new ideas, whereas aggressive forms of boredom are more destructive.

This is one reason why researchers have found that bored employees are polarised. Some will respond to boredom by rotating their tasks, creating interest for themselves; and even go above and beyond their contracted role in helping others with work tasks, or training other employees and contributing to the overall functioning of the business. Some workers, on the other hand, will respond to boredom by destructive behaviours like sabotage, negativity and wasting time.²⁰ So we can see that the same stimulus (boredom) can result in either positive behaviours or destructive ones.

Realistically, we can't avoid boredom altogether, as it is an integral part of human experience. So the question really is: how can we minimise it or make it useful? How can we harness what we can from it, or deal with it in a positive way? And, more specifically, how can we do this in a business context?



THE LEGAL BATTLE: BORE-OUT AND INTERPARFUMS

Bore-out is defined by Rothlin and Werder as a psychological disorder which causes physical illness in the workplace*. The first symptoms of workplace boredom are demotivation, sadness and anxiety – but left unaddressed, it can turn into a serious form of depression. It's "like burn-out, but less interesting" as Frédéric Desnard said when attempting to sue his former employer Interparfums for bore-out in 2015**. Desnard claimed that the meaninglessness of his role (which he held for four years) caused him to become seriously depressed and left him unable to sleep, and suffering seizures.

He demanded compensation to the tune of £280,000, but ultimately lost his case. This is perhaps unsurprising as 'bore-out' is not recognised in French law, but his arguments hint at some potential issues that could have been avoided. He said that he had been *mis au placard*, or 'put in the cupboard' – a French phrase that involves giving workers very little work, or menial tasks, and depriving them of responsibility. He describes feeling ashamed for being paid to do nothing, and that this left him feeling worthless. The key thing here is the fact that not having enough to do, not having responsibility, agency or recognition, is bad news for workers.

*Rothlin and Werder (2008) [Boreout! Overcoming Workplace Demotivation](#)

**The Guardian (2016) [Frenchman Takes Employer to Tribunal Over Tedious Job](#)

BOREDOM AS A MANAGEMENT PROBLEM:

Boredom is – to a large extent – a management problem. Workplace bore-out, ('like burnout, but less interesting') is defined by consultants Phillipe Rothlin and Peter Werder as happening when workers are "frustrated at being prevented, by institutional mechanisms or obstacles as opposed to by their own lack of aptitude, from fulfilling their potential". In other words, 'bore-out' refers to boredom as a management problem, rather than an innate 'laziness' or lack of aptitude in workers.

The good news is that because boredom is linked to organisational practices, there are things that can be changed within an organisation to reduce boredom and get people engaged.

In an effort to reduce time-wasting from bored employees, many companies increase their monitoring and surveillance to discourage unproductive habits, by blocking social networking sites and monitoring internet use. This increases resentment from employees and doesn't address the underlying issues, which, as discussed earlier, could be to do with workload or job role, co-workers and the working environment, or management policies. So, what *should* we do?

PERSON-SPECIFIC FACTORS

Psychometric measurements of boredom-proneness can offer some insight into individuals' different capabilities to deal with boredom. Research shows that people who score highly on the job-related boredom coping scale (i. e. are very good at coping with boredom) report far lower levels of work-related depression and anxiety than those who had lower boredom coping scores.²¹ This relates to a worker's own ability to find meaning in their tasks – and this is not something that can really be taught.

However, one approach is to identify low boredom-copers and offer them individualised, or "differential" job redesign solutions, such as regular breaks, shorter shifts, flexible working arrangements or task variation. This isn't always practical at an individual level, but people should nevertheless be equipped with the tools to deal with boredom. This could also take the form of a more indirect, general approach featuring (for example) wellbeing modules which tackle low motivation or problems at work which might lead to boredom. At heart, the central message is to communicate with your employees and keep tabs on how they're working, and how they're feeling about their work.

WORKPLACE CULTURE

A fundamental obstacle to combating boredom in the workplace is the fact that it is still often considered a taboo subject, that carries a moral judgement. As the adage goes: 'there are no boring things, only boring people'. And no one wants to flag this supposedly personal flaw to their management team. But it might be productive to make it acceptable to talk about boredom. If your workers are bored, it's a clue that something isn't working; that something needs to change. In an age of adaptable, flexible work, we should also be flexible in our attitudes. If people are not feeling engaged, we need to talk about it and work out what to do about it – because its bad news for workers, as well as management.

This said, workers with positive work attitudes are far less likely to be bored. Whilst this is personal, it can be influenced by a positive workplace culture and positive co-workers. Boredom is contagious, but so is positivity. Morale-boosting activities, ranging from providing break-out areas, to training opportunities; from free coffee to staff away days; from flexible working to early finishing on Fridays, all help. High morale lowers boredom and boosts engagement, so as Kate Hilpern at the Guardian writes: 'maybe managers should just be doing more to cheer us up'²²

AGENCY AND CHOICE

Research shows that people that can choose where, how and in what order they carry out their work tasks report far less boredom than those that cannot. There is a consistent link between autonomy, engagement and happiness: from choosing the level of lighting for your work area via a personal desk lamp through to choosing your hours of work, or having a say in which tasks you are allocated. This is one reason why studies tend to show less incidences of boredom in higher tiers of management than in entry level and middle-tier jobs. Whilst stress levels tend to increase the higher up the chain you go, the fact that more senior managers typically have more control over their personal tasks counterbalances this and actually makes for a more fulfilled worker.²³

Flexible working practices are also crucial here – and it's important that these are extended to everyone in the organisation. A recent study suggested that eight in ten millennial workers feel unable to ask for flexible working hours, and see it as a benefit reserved for senior workers, fearing criticism and judgement.²⁴ But practices like these, which allow workers more control over where and when they work, are crucial for engagement regardless of each worker's position in the management hierarchy.



People are
12%
more likely to report
being happy with
their job when they
have freedom and
autonomy in their
work environment³⁶

BURNOUT VS. BORE-OUT

Psychologist Steve Nguyen says that the effect on our mood of being bored at work and that of being overworked is actually very similar*. So... which is worse for our wallets? In financial terms, here are the numbers for the US:

Burnout

Forbes says burnout “costs employers a vast amount – whether it’s due to increased healthcare costs, loss of productivity, or employees calling in sick.” On top of this, as many as one million people per day miss work because of stress**. Studies suggest that all of this means a loss of anywhere between \$ 150 billion to \$ 300 billion annually for employers in the US.

Some, however, are unconvinced by this figure. Though publications from Forbes to the New York Times have quoted this figure of \$ 300 billion, the figure itself has “no basis” according to mathematician Rebecca Goldin***. This \$ 300 billion price tag includes accidents, absenteeism, turnover, diminished productivity, direct medical, legal, and insurance costs, workers’ compensation as well as tort and Federal Employers’ Liability Act judgments – and is *still* arguably rather overblown.

Bore-out

Bore-out, according to the scholars that coined the term, costs the US economy \$ 750 billion annually. Given the backlash against the \$ 300 billion claimed for stress, this seems unlikely. However, the figures for bore-out are obviously speculative, since it’s an issue that isn’t really talked about and is very subjective. It might be reasonable to assume that since burnout and bore-out are different sides of the same coin, the costs might overlap, especially since prolonged boredom causes the release of cortisol: a stress hormone. If boredom is a form of stress, then it can contribute to burnout. Similarly, burnout can cause a worker to disengage from their work, and therefore contribute to boredom.

What we’re really trying to do when managing a workplace is to strike a balance: not so much work that people are over worked and stressed; not so little that they have little to do and are bored. Since both burnout and bore-out are both bad news, you want to be aware of how staff are feeling and adjust workloads, responsibilities and teams accordingly. These are things that can be solved, but not if nobody notices them or talks about them.

*The Guardian (2016) [Stressed at Work? At Least You’re Not Bored](#)

*Forbes (2016) [Here’s What Burnout Costs You](#)

*Workplace Psychology (2011) [The True Financial Cost of Job Stress](#)

DESIGN



21% OF MILLENNIALS admit to rejecting a job offer because of an uninspiring or boring office space³⁷

What many classic accounts of boredom in the workplace don't specifically mention, are the environmental factors that influence worker experience in terms of the *design* of the workplace. We know, from our first-hand experience, that workplace design can be stimulating and increase motivation and staff engagement. Even though most office spaces have now moved beyond the drab cubicle, and companies now are taking seriously the impact of design as part of the drive to get the best out of employees, there is more to be done in researching the impacts of different design elements, like biophilia (the affinity of human beings with the natural world), open versus closed-plan offices, and the relationship between colour and productivity.

Other practical activity-based design elements, like an on site gym, can also help battle boredom, and this is a very good example of a positive boredom-coping choice. Feeling bored, bleary-eyed and in need of a break? A quick gym trip can energise and reset the mind – and that's without even considering the long term health benefits. Well-thought-out design is something that makes it easier for people to make positive, healthy choices.

TRAINING

Boredom can also come from feeling trapped. A task that was once fulfilling can easily become boring if performed for a long time, and this is why people need to know that there is somewhere to go in terms of skills development. The current environment of rapidly changing work which demands new skill sets and skill evolution fits well with boredom-battling. 80% of workers agreed that learning new skills would make them more engaged.²⁵ Upskilling and knowledge exchange is key to successful organisations and engaged employees: it's as simple as that.

PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR EMPLOYEES

Another major cause of disengagement is when employees feel overlooked. The Hawthorne experiments demonstrate this. In 1924 Western Electric commissioned Elton Mayo to find out how the productivity of its workers in their Chicago plant could be increased. He reasoned that the workers might be more productive if they had a ten minute break in the morning. Sure enough, productivity increased. He then added a ten minute break in the afternoon, and productivity increased again. Normally, a researcher might call this a success and close the study – but Mayo wondered what would happen if he withdrew the breaks. He withdrew the morning break, and productivity increased. He withdrew the afternoon break too, and productivity increased again. Mayo finally concluded that it was not the break that had increased productivity, but the sense of *interest* in their work. This is crucial to consider in terms of boredom and disengagement – other people taking an interest in an employee's work increases that employee's own interest in their work. So, it follows that as a manager, regular check-ins are beneficial for keeping people engaged.



80% of workers feel that learning new skills would make them more engaged³⁸

CONCLUSION: CHAIRMAN OF THE BORED

Boredom is widespread. It's experienced by workers in all types of jobs, at all kinds of occupational levels, and has been linked to a multitude of negative impacts for both the organisation and the individual. This makes it a serious concern for both the organisation and the employee. Though there are some benefits of boredom at work, these are far outweighed by the negative impacts, ranging from increased instances of smoking and drinking in bored workers (and therefore more incidences of ill health and absenteeism) to lower productivity and high rates of attrition.

The way the new entrepreneurial, agile workplace is structured could be seen itself as a response to boredom, as the emphasis on vitality, innovation and change is excellent remedy for boredom. Yes, work can be monotonous – but never more so than in past. The one thing that has undoubtedly changed over time is people's expectations of work. A generation or two ago, the idea of demanding fulfilment at work would have been completely laughable. Having lived through one (or both) World Wars, the most many people expected from a job was stability. Today's workers may be increasingly willing to trade stability for stimulation; but not to lose both.

Whilst evidence shows that people's different boredom-proneness levels do have a role, and

people's personal mindsets are determinants of boredom levels, the majority of evidence suggests that, actually, boredom has more to do with what you do with your time than who you are, and there are simple steps we can take to start to address this complex problem.²⁶ From giving employees more training opportunities, better workspaces, more control over when and where they work; to investing in creating good social relationships between workers.

But then, perhaps it's not boredom per se that is the problem – it's how we *deal* with boredom. Since some research shows that boredom leads to employee's positively impacting the organisation by doing extra work and helping others, and some shows that people are more likely to drink, smoke, and – ultimately – die due to increased levels of boredom, there are naturally positive and negative impacts of boredom: but these impacts come from our *responses to boredom*.

The key, therefore, is to minimise the instances of boredom which come from management practices or badly designed work environments, and then to ensure that employees have the right tools they need in order to deal with boredom in a *productive*, rather than *destructive* way.



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