

Office hours

[Advice](#) [Careers advice](#) > [Office hours](#)

Spanner in the works

Every office has someone whose foolish behaviour infuriates their colleagues. So how do you know it's not you? By Humphrey Evans

Monday February 6, 2006

[The Guardian](#)

People who do not know what they are doing are the luckiest people in the world, because they are blissfully unaware of the chaos they create around them. And nowhere is this more apparent than in the workplace.

Office idiots abound. Their function is to cause mayhem while simultaneously believing they are being helpful. For example, an idiot thinks stacking a stash of important company files in a cardboard box and then placing the box on the floor is the best way to safeguard the contents overnight.

A spoof internet survey is currently doing the rounds that claims 62% of heart attacks stem from having to cope with coworkers so stupid that they multiply the workload of everyone else around them. Far-fetched it might be, but after a particularly bad day at work, it could seem all too believable.

In any office, some people may seem more prone to this kind of thoughtless behaviour. But in the right conditions - or, rather, the wrong ones - we can all come up with something similar. Angela Mansi, a senior lecturer in occupational psychology at the University of Westminster, says those people who seem to lack self-awareness, are particularly clumsy or appear eccentric often do so because they are highly focused on a very narrow range of activities.

We can all behave idiotically at times simply by not paying attention to what is going on around us. "Mindlessness most commonly occurs when people are distracted, hurried, multitasking and overloaded," says Adrian Furnham, professor of psychology at University College London, and author of *The Hopeless, Hapless and Helpless Manager*.

Our frustration with colleagues stems from the assumption that people process information in the same way and that everyone is equally attentive and aware. But people are distracted by many different things. Emails, telephones and iPods are just some of the reasons why people find themselves not paying attention to the job in hand. You simply cannot take in the details of what someone is telling you to do at the same time as reading an email or tapping out a text message.

Organisations can head off the negative effects of inattentive behaviour by having processes and practices in place. Michael West, a professor of organisational psychology and head of research at Aston Business School, advocates teamwork as a way of counterbalancing the individual

Search for jobs

 By Job Titles only[Advanced search >>](#)[Browse all jobs >>](#)

Rise
Weekly section for
graduate jobhunters
[>>](#)

Work
The essential
jobs supplement
[>>](#)

[Secretarial vacancies](#)

All the jobs from the newspaper.

[Secretarial jobmatch](#)

Match your skills with current vacancies.

[Secretarial job tips](#)

[Top tips for job hunting](#)[How to make a good impression at interviews](#)[Pay, promotion and office politics](#)

In this section

[WPM](#)[OK commuter](#)[The office anarchist](#)

JOBMATCH
MATCH YOUR SKILLS TO THE IDEAL JOB!



Free personality report
[click here](#)
in association with
people maps guardianjobs



RECRUITERS
Turn your website into a recruitment centre
[guardianjobs](#)



FREE CV REVIEW, CLICK HERE...
guardianjobs
THE FULLER CV



the guardian
The Observer
Guardian Unlimited
For JOBS click here



guardianjobs
People Profiler



Worksfm.com
Number one for ethnic recruitment
[Click here >>](#)



Soulmates
Find love and friendship online >



[You really, really shouldn't have](#)

[Extra curricular](#)

[Solve IT](#)

[How to ... look busy](#)

[I'm glad you love your job, just remember to play it cool](#)

[Canteen culture](#)

[The good mixer](#)

slips and combinations of circumstances that conspire to create cock-ups in the modern workplace.

"In my work in the NHS, we have found that true teamwork is associated with lower frequencies of errors and near misses," West says. But it must be "true" teamwork, he points out. He has found that while staff in many NHS trusts claim to be working in teams, they do not meet the criteria of real teamwork. This includes clear objectives that staff must work closely with others to achieve, and regular reviews of their effectiveness.

Working together efficiently, though, is not always easy when workers spot that a colleague is not pulling their weight intellectually. Mansi, for one, is convinced that the vast majority of secretaries and personal assistants are very bright, multiskilled and good verbally - in fact, often brighter than their bosses.

But those bosses may well have been promoted into the wrong job, where they consequently look incompetent and do apparently foolish things because they just do not possess the appropriate abilities. "You might have someone promoted because they're likable," says Mansi, "but they don't possess the necessary numerical skills, for example."

Maybe nothing can be done about the terminally foolish - except, perhaps, to encourage them to apply for jobs elsewhere - but it does look as though there are steps you can take to make sure you do not join their ranks. Mindfulness, rather than mindlessness, is one of the most important attributes.

Alternatively, if you pay no attention to what is going on around you in the workplace, you will at least fail to register that the "office idiot" tag has been applied to you.

An idiot's guide to fitting in

Do

- Make sure you're in an appropriate job equipped with the skills and knowledge you need to do it - being in the wrong position for your talents or experience means you're more likely to make mistakes and appear incompetent.
- Don't rush - prioritise urgent tasks and allow enough time not to have to hurry important jobs.
- Avoid individual cock-ups - encourage others around you to work as a team in order to catch each others' mistakes before they cause significant (or embarrassing) damage.
- Listen to your colleagues - learn what it feels like to be mindful, thoughtful and attentive.

Don't

- Get sucked into incessant multitasking that subsequently means you end up distracted, harried and overloaded with work you cannot handle.
- Let an endless flurry of emails, telephone calls and texts distract you from the job at hand.
- Think you can work efficiently when you are tired, stressed and under-trained for the job you are in. Take positive steps instead - ask for a change or retraining, if necessary.