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## Fable of efficiency

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Stevelinck: Fable of efficiency

# A FABLE OF EFFICIENCY

by  
*Ernest Stevelinck*

The more time that one has to do something, then the longer it takes to do it. The person who is most busy is precisely the person who has the most free time. The lack of activity does not necessarily indicate idleness, nor does idleness necessarily indicate lack of work.

So, an idle older person can devote the whole day to writing a post card to a niece on vacation at the shore. This simple project can involve an hour in finding the card, an hour to search for reading glasses, half an hour to look for the niece's address, an hour and a quarter to think and to write the card, and twenty minutes to decide whether to take an umbrella to the mailbox. The task of writing the same card requires only three minutes for a busy person.

Assuming that the more time devoted to work, the more engrossing it becomes, particularly for clerical work, there is little, if any, difference between the amount of work to do and the strength of the clerical staff to accomplish that work. A task becomes exaggerated in importance and complexity; its importance is directly related to the amount of time devoted to it. This fact is commonly admitted, but little attention, especially in public administration, has been given to it.

Politicians and taxpayers have always assumed that the effectiveness of civil servants is indicated by their increasing volume of work. Some persons have suggested that the increased number of such employees must mean that some people are not working as much as they once did or that the number of work hours for the entire staff has been reduced. In fact, however, there is no relationship between the number of persons working and the

quantity of work to be done. The number of clerical staff and the amount of work to be done is determined by Parkinson's Law, which states that work is a constant, whether the volume increases, decreases, or is reduced to nothing. It is also accepted that officials and civil employees create work for one another and that they prefer to increase their subordinates rather than their competition.

Imagine an overworked official named Albert. Three options are available to solve the problem of his work overload, be it real or imaginary: (1) he can give up or resign, (2) he can ask that a colleague share the work, or (3) he can ask subordinates to assist him with the work.

Albert will undoubtedly choose the third option. Resigning would cause him to lose his retirement. Sharing the work with a co-worker would put the co-worker on his level, thus creating a future rival when it is absolutely necessary to name a replacement for Albert's supervisor when he finally retires.

Albert would obviously prefer to share the work with subordinates, which would clearly add to his prestige. Sharing the work with two people (Bernard and Bertrand) will allow him to have a comprehensive and general view of the work load. However, Bernard and Bertrand are inseparable. Appointing only Bertrand would be impossible because he actually should have shared the work with Albert and should have held a position similar to Albert's. The number of subordinates must therefore increase by two or more, or the one not sharing the work will fear the other will receive a promotion.

When Bernard, in turn, complains of being overworked, Albert will recommend

that Bernard and Bertrand help with his work. To avoid the risk of a disagreement between Bernard and Bertrand, Albert will also recommend that Bertrand, who holds a position similar to Bernard's also be given two assistants. Thus, with the appointment of Charles, Christophe, Désiré, and Didier, Albert's seniority and future promotion are almost assured.

Seven persons are now doing what one person alone was doing, but those seven are accomplishing such a great amount of work (or a portion of the work) that they have no time to waste, and Albert has more work than ever. For example, an incoming document must pass all hands; Christophe, decides that it must go to Désiré, who sends it to Bertrand for a reply. He studies the project from all aspects before asking Bernard's advice. Bernard, in turn, asks Charles to handle the matter.

Charles, meanwhile, leaves for vacation and sends the file to Didier, who writes a letter, which Bertrand signs and passes to Bernard, who revises it and then gives it to Albert to approve.

What does Albert do now? He will have ample excuses if he signs the letter without reading it. After all, he is concerned with many other matters. Knowing that he will be promoted next year, Albert must decide whether Bernard or Bertrand is more qualified to take his current position. And he approved the vacation for Charles, who should not be taking a vacation now. Albert worries about Christophe. Perhaps he should be on sick leave; he seems ill a times, and he does have family problems. Albert knows that there will be a problem with the large raise that Désiré received during the Conference, and with Didier's request for a transfer because of retirement fund considerations.

Albert has heard that Bernard is involved with a married typist and that Charles

Albert should, therefore, be tempted to sign the letter and think no more about it. But Albert is a conscientious man. He is bothered by the problems of his colleagues, problems created by the fact that they have been hired. So Albert reads the letter, omits the ambiguous paragraphs that Bernard and Bertrand added, ending up with the letter that Désiré, who knows his work well but is bad tempered, had written in the beginning.

Albert corrects the grammatical and syntactical mistakes — all of these young men are ignorant of grammar — and then revises the letter exactly as he would have written it himself if his subordinates had never seen it.

Thus, seven persons have been required to produce the same results that Albert could have accomplished alone. No one has idled away any time, and each person has improved upon the preceding person's work.

And, late in the evening, Albert can finally leave his desk for his home in the suburbs. The lights of the other offices fade in the evening twilight, marking the end of another work day. Round-shouldered Albert, with a bitter smile on his face as he thinks of the gray hairs and the late hours that are the price of success, is the last to leave the office.

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