

# PART 1

## Understanding Fake Work and Its Causes

# CHAPTER 1

## Fake Work: Building a Road to Nowhere

Joyful is the accumulation of good work.

—*Buddha*

**SUPPOSE YOU ARE** building a road on a mountainside leading to the site for your new cabin. You have worked for months clearing sagebrush and aspen trees. You've moved rocks and filled in roadbed through the exhausting heat, the raging downpours, even early snow. You've pushed forward, working from your best understanding of the surveyor's plans. Your road winds over a dusty hill, cuts through the trees, moves along a rocky ridge, and then—you find yourself looking down from the edge of a cliff.

Fake work looks and feels like that. The building of the road was purposeful. Your effort was admirable. The blood, sweat, and tears you poured into the project were real and your commitment was profound. *But none of that really matters!* You are still left with a road to nowhere.

So many of us have dedicated weekends and long nights to a project, proposal, or presentation that ended up being canceled, ignored, or dismissed—essentially roads to nowhere—and see all one's efforts lead to nothing. That is the road to fake work—work that, at the end of long days, weeks, months, or even years, just seems to drop off a cliff.

## What Is Real Work and What Is Fake Work?

We spend more than half our lives and a vast percentage of our waking hours going to work, being at work, leaving work, and thinking about work—even when we're not at work. What we sometimes miss, when we think about work, is outcomes.

*Real work, as we define it, is work that is critical and aligned to the key goals and strategies of an organization*—any organization, corporation, nonprofit company, government agency, church, school, or family. It is work that is essential for the organization's short-term and long-term survival.

Fake work, on the other hand, is effort under the *illusion* of value. Fake work is work that is not targeting or aligned with the strategies and goals of the company. Fake work is what happens when people lose sight of their personal or company goals—whether it's increasing sales, opening new offices, or designing new products—and what, amid all the work being done, they're *actually doing* to achieve those goals. Prime examples of fake work—which drains both the individual and the company—are meaningless paperwork, time-wasting meetings, empty training initiatives, or countless other activities that do nothing to move us toward our objectives, either as individuals or as companies.

Often it is easy to identify fake work, simply because it is so blatantly obvious and stupid. One manager, Ricky, describes one such situation:

### PICKED TO WASTE MY TIME

I was put on a committee to study my company's travel policy. A lot of complaints had surfaced, and employees seemed to have a lot of problems interpreting the policy correctly. But most of us on this committee felt that the real intent of upper management, which put together the committee, was only to validate the current policy, because we had been through the same kind of charade before with other issues.

In the first meeting, Katrina, a committee member, asked,

“Does anyone think that we can make any changes, or make any difference at all?” Most of us answered no. Kurt, another coworker, added, “Nothing is going to change, so let’s write up a proposal and get this over with.”

I had been here before. I’m in HR, and last year I was asked to renew our benefits plan and make recommendations on changes. So I wrote up a long analysis and proposed a lot of changes. Then later I learned from a coworker that most of those changes had already been determined. They just wanted to say that they’d asked for my contribution. I knew—most of us knew—that we could write or propose anything, and the leaders would say they had given all the issues due attention and were confident that the current policy was working.

There were a few committee members who felt honored to have a seat at the table. But not me, not most. I just wondered why management would pick me—“honor me”—with a total waste of my time.

But we went ahead and did our work. We reviewed the travel policy and benchmarked it against other company policies. We gathered data and recommended four key changes in the policy that seemed to respond to the criticisms. We filed a report and we presented our recommendations to some key people.

And what do you think happened? Sure enough, a while later, the company leaders announced that, after looking at all the data and reviewing our report, they would make “no changes at this time.” We can’t say we were at all surprised, but we sure were annoyed.

Other times, fake work can be hard, dreadfully hard, to detect, as we will explore in the following chapters. As the next story illustrates, the line between real work and fake work can be thin, but very costly and time-consuming.

## ENGINEERING VS. REPORTING

A large engineering firm asked us to pinpoint areas where its engineers and managers could be more productive. Management thought the fault lay with engineers who were not planning and organizing their work effectively. But we discovered a more obvious culprit that was stealing enormous amounts of essential, client-focused work time each week: the lengthy activity reports that the engineers had to write and file.

Management expected a thorough activity report from each engineer each week. In addition, the engineers were also to file monthly reports. The reports were extensive, averaging about fifteen pages each. In fact, the reports took about *four days per month per engineer* to prepare. Managers told us the reports were important. We didn't disagree, but we were concerned. For one thing, we found that most of the content in the weekly and monthly reports was lengthy narrative that was already captured in their daily logs.

We asked several managers if they would show us how they used the engineers' reports and what important information they disclosed. One manager, Rafael, seemed to represent the other managers well. He pulled a huge stack of reports from his in-box, complaining that he would never get through them. We asked Rafael to mark, with a yellow highlighter, the parts of the reports he was interested in reading – what was most important. He stopped reading and started hunting for the pertinent information by jumping from the front of the report to the back and then skimmed it over page by page. When we asked what he did with the reports when he was finished, he showed us a huge bookshelf crammed floor to ceiling with past reports.

We then asked him why he read the last page so early. He said, "If anything of value appears in the report, I usually find it in the last few pages." Then we tried to pinpoint what he was looking for. We reviewed the highlighted content and found that Rafael was looking for three key pieces of information:

1. Problems that had to be solved
2. Recommendations that managers or others needed to act on to solve the problems
3. Conclusions from projects. Something final of importance.

Given that most of the managers had needs quite similar to Rafael's, we helped the company design a two-page summary that the engineers could file every week, instead of the fifteen-page reports they were currently writing. It had three headings:

1. Problems found on \_\_\_\_\_ project
2. Recommendations for action
3. Conclusions regarding \_\_\_\_\_ project

Then we cut out the monthly report entirely because the short summaries gave the managers all the information they needed.

This simple change significantly reduced the time managers spent reviewing the reports. But it was the engineers who saved the most time; their reporting time was reduced by 75 percent, freeing three more days each month for them to do real work. More important, eliminating so many hours of wasteful, fake work on the part of both management and the engineers, added to their enjoyment of the work, helped solve retention issues, and improved overall job satisfaction.

As challenging as it sometimes is to answer, can you afford *not* to ask yourself the critical question: Am I doing fake work? And once you've asked yourself if you've fallen into the fake-work trap, other important questions will arise: Are my coworkers doing fake work? Where does fake work begin, and who has the ability to control it? How do leaders affect fake work? How can work teams control the value of their work? What about individuals? Throughout this book, we hope to illuminate these questions and offer meaningful answers. In the process, we will challenge readers to ask the right

questions, to understand the issues, and to find their way back from the road to nowhere.

### **The Changing Nature of Work**

Go to a bar, restaurant, hotel, or sporting event on any given night, and you'll find people checking their work voice mail and reading work-related e-mail on their BlackBerrys or iPhones; you'll see conference calls happening on commuter trains at 6 a.m.; and in the airport you'll see people who routinely travel to a faraway city during the day for work and return home at ten p.m., often multiple nights a week. As a culture, we're defined by our work, and many of us are consumed by doing our jobs all the time. We're working harder and faster than ever before, and we're doing it on a 24/7 schedule.

But our research points up a painful fact: All too often the incredibly hard work spent on a project or task is not what needs to be done to meet company goals: It is fake work. The intent is to accomplish good work. The intent is to be responsible. The intent is to be proud of our work. But can you be working hard, with good intentions, with amazing effort, and still be doing fake work? Sadly, yes, and way too often. Much of the reason for this grim reality is found in the fact that work has changed. In fact, the very nature of how we see and measure work has shifted dramatically in a very short time, and we must ensure that we understand real work and fake work in the context of these changes. Plenty has been written about the shift from products to services, from manufacturing to knowledge and information workers, from low use of technology to high use. And each of these shifts makes a huge difference in how we perceive work.

The following is a story shared by Collin, the CEO of a technology consulting firm, in which he takes a mental journey as he walks through his work environment and queries the activities he's observing.

## WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED WORK?

I am walking around our office building and people are busy—very busy. There is a lot of quiet space, and a lot of people are talking on cell phones—possibly to our customers or colleagues around the world. There are lots of people frantically typing on computers. I feel like peeking through the shades of offices and over the cubicle walls to see what is actually happening on those computer screens and eavesdropping on all those cell phone calls. I know we are billing for work, but I don't know how much is justified—I mean, how much of what we are billing for is real work? How efficient are we? Sometimes I don't know if work is happening at all. I know I employ good people who are highly involved and very busy. But I don't know enough about our focus. I don't know how much of the activity I see is just distraction.

I hear Janice laugh in the distance. Some people talk over their cubicle walls. The concept of work is not the same at all as when I was young. Information is a nebulous concept. Because we get paid for thinking, I am careful not to interrupt, but I am concerned that people don't know what is truly valuable and critical in our work. I am not sure I have helped make it clear. I am not sure I always know what is valuable and critical myself.

Vincent is at his computer. He answers e-mails, writes e-mails, develops ideas, shares them with his colleague working in Malaysia. He researches the Web. Is it what he—and we—need to be doing? Jared brings me two hundred pages of articles on design that he has reviewed. I didn't want to discourage him, but there was nothing in those pages that addressed our big issues or served our clients. I don't know how at-risk we are because I can't possibly know enough about all this amorphous work and how clients perceive the value. A lot of this activity feels like work. People stay late and come in early. Weekends are not much quieter here, and even then the e-mails keep flowing to me and everyone else. And yet I see

work tasks tackled on the weekends evaporating into meaningless discussions. I am guessing that I could change some lives if we could define “critical” and eliminate as much else as possible.

Collin’s ponderings explore the changing nature of work and point to the fact that it is sometimes hard to know if work is being done at all – because banging on the computer or searching the Web has as much potential to be fake work as real. The shift challenges the way we think about and how we see, understand, and measure the effectiveness and relevance of work. Activity alone does not define work’s value. In a manufacturing environment, drilling holes and placing bolts through the holes defines the work, making work and intent easy to connect. Baling hay in a field is easy to see as real work; farmhands are either baling or they ‘re not.

Collin won’t be able to see whether his company is on track unless he acquires a better understanding of the actual work his employees need to be doing and unless he improves his evaluation skills. Collin is wondering if he has done his job – defining and clarifying the critical elements of his employees’ work. He also wonders if he even knows what those elements are. So if he doubts himself, he has a right to wonder whether others in his company are doing what they need to be doing.

As companies employ more and more remote workers, people working at staggered hours, and people working on research and less product-related work, our view of work must be adjusted. The models for effective management, the measures of success, and our ideas about value have been turned on their heads. The result is that many of us still make the mistake of equating time spent with being truly useful to the company. We routinely run into employees who think they need to be the last one out of the office every night or who try to get involved in every project so that they become “indispensable.” But does that make these people great workers? No. An MIT study suggests that workers put in far more hours at work than is necessary.

Productivity is difficult to measure, and official statistics measure it merely as the Gross Domestic Product adjusted for inflation divided by the total number of hours worked. But if this measure means anything at all, an average worker today needs to work a mere 11 hours per week to produce as much as one working 40 hours per week in 1950. (The data here is from the U.S., but productivity increases in Europe and Japan have been of the same magnitude.) The conclusion is inescapable: a worker should be able to earn the same standard of living as a 1950 worker in only 11 hours per week.<sup>1</sup>

While many of us realize that we often spend unnecessary time on tasks and projects, it raises a critical question: How many hours do we need to work to accomplish the critical tasks essential to our business? Can we really succeed by working considerably fewer hours than our competitors? A young professional told us the following eye opening story.

### **REWARDS FOR THE ILLUSIONS OF WORK**

Because we bill for our time, we are rewarded for making twenty-minute tasks into two-hour tasks; we are praised for being up all night, and working long hours means good performance reviews. Our manager said that Carla, my coworker, was really dedicated because she had been online at two in the morning. So I left my instant messenger on all night so it looked like I was online working, and I got praised in our next group meeting. I had been asleep. What the hell! Someone told me that soldiers in Vietnam were told to dig a hole and then fill it in again just so they looked busy during inspections. That's what my job is like sometimes.

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<sup>1</sup> From US. Bureau of Labor Statistics. See <http://swiss.csail.mit.edu/~rauch/misc/worktime/>

I heard that some business manager said “The 40-hour workweek is dead—welcome to the 60-hour week.” Wow. It took them a while to catch up. This isn’t a new occurrence; it has been an escalating issue for a couple of decades. I think people are less happy, have less time at home, and participate less at home now that we are expected to be working all the time. People are not working efficiently; they take too much time for everything, and they stretch out their work (especially the meetings and conference calls). I think this is all about the need to create the illusion of work. If it looks like work, I can bill for it. If I see you are busy, you are fine. But this isn’t real work at all.

We aren’t suggesting that all companies suffer from the issues described above. We’ve observed work that was amazingly efficient and remarkably productive. However, every person, every manager, and every company should ask: How close could we get to an eleven-hour week if we focused just on real, critical work? Then, every company should ask: What additional work should we do that would add value to our company and to our people?

In an ideal workplace, every person would be doing real and valuable work that matters and gets results. Every person would be rewarded for results, not time; and people would prioritize and manage their time to focus on the work of highest value to the company.

### **Fake Work Is Illusory and Easily Misdiagnosed**

Almost everyone has experienced fake work by doing it, seeing it done, and being a victim of it. A common complaint that we hear is that “our company is buried in fake work.” That may well be true. But why? Meetings, e-mail, and endless cell phone time seem like easy targets, but they are not necessarily the culprits – not by themselves.

The changing work environment and the new forms of work developed over the last couple of decades make the issue of identifying fake work even more complex, and we want to explore that

complexity. Sometimes, *real work and fake work can be exactly the same work*—just under different circumstances. So we can't be dismissive about the subtle and challenging questions required to know the difference.

It's hard to tell whether the time doing research on the Internet is real work or fake work. Determining whether you're making a real contribution to your company can also be difficult when you are:

- Working through the 137 e-mails that came in overnight.
- Giving thoughtful analysis to the endless and mind numbing spreadsheets Accounting left for review.
- Leaving an endless array of voice mails for coworkers or clients.
- Working on the seventh draft of a proposal.
- Attending yet another critical meeting—at least critical in someone's view.
- Doing a marketing survey and collecting tons of new data.

In the rest of the book, we'll help you find out what may be burying your company in fake work.

### **Fake Work Is Misunderstood Because It Feels Like Work**

Many different people in many different roles are in the great chain of fake work. For individuals, fake work is easily mistaken for what you ought to be doing—and what you *want* to be doing—because it generally looks and feels like real and purposeful work. Working hard is not a barometer of fake work, so you may not even see that you are building a road to nowhere. Sometimes you fail to recognize your work as fake. Sometimes you do fake work because you were told to do it. Sometimes fake work is what you're rewarded for doing.

Doing fake work is not necessarily an indication of incompetence, inability, procrastination, or other things that make our work environments ineffective. Fake work occurs when you are

not focusing on the work that will move your company forward, and it can show up in many different ways. Some common signs that the road you are building is leading nowhere:

1. You don't really know the strategies of your company and the things that are most important for the whole company to accomplish.
2. You're unable to clearly connect those strategies to what you are doing.
3. You are simply ignorant about the importance of your work.
4. Your hard work is not getting results that matter.
5. You hold meetings without a clear purpose and invite a bunch of people to share in the waste of time.
6. You send e-mails daily to a huge distribution list of coworkers without considering whether they need the information.
7. You hold offsite meetings that provide distraction, not value.
8. You initiate projects that suck up time and are killed for lack of interest.
9. You don't follow through on plans to implement needed changes, or you undermine such plans.
10. You work on a report that you know nobody will read.
11. You assign a report and then ignore it when it's completed.
12. You require paperwork because, well, everybody has to do paperwork.
13. You write proposals that are seen as an important aspect of the selling process, but they don't lead to an increase in sales.
14. You set up a training program that is a lot of fun, is very interesting, and gets great reviews, but the program has no support from management because it doesn't really make a difference to the business.

That is a very short list for a very big problem. Fake work is everywhere. While you may recognize it, it is mired in the complex web of companies, teams, and individuals who don't understand what it is, choose to ignore it, or don't know how to get out of it.

It cascades down from managers. It percolates up from teams engaging in fake work that requires attention from others to resolve. Few can escape it. Some are trapped in its claws. It runs the gamut from an annoying nuisance to an insidious and cancerous attack on productivity, effectiveness, and viability.

### **Fake Work Thrives When We Don't Analyze the Value of Work**

So why are people doing work that is clearly fake? Is it because they are stuck in their traditional ways of working? Is it because management needs to keep people busy? Yes! And those are just a few of the neglectful practices that aid fake work.

Fake work thrives where old, outdated processes hang on. It thrives when companies do not clearly articulate the results they need. And it thrives when you and your managers aren't asking whether you are doing fake work.

Companies set expectations, write job descriptions, and review performances that actually promote fake work, which means that you can easily follow directions, complete your assignments, and get promotions – while spending most of your time on fake work. But in the end, people feel the fakeness. Your colleagues know it. You know it, too. You aren't succeeding and neither is your team. The people doing fake work are often at least vaguely aware of the problems that are plaguing the company.

### **Many Habitual Practices Create Fake Work**

The workplace is filled with tradition, precedent, and habit. These are often the harbors of fake work because they institutionalize bad practices. The following account describes employees of a company who are causing some of their own fake work, but they are probably victims of an outdated practice as well. This large service company hired Carl, a colleague of ours, to help them increase sales. Here's Carl's story:

## WRITING PROPOSALS AND SELLING ARE NOT THE SAME THING

I was hired by a new division of a large Fortune 1000 company. Rewards were generous and were a great recruiting tool for eager young salespeople. The employees were eager and aggressive. But performance was subpar and turnover was remarkably high.

The salespeople responded to over 2,000 RFPs (requests for proposals) each year, which is extraordinary for any business. They won about 5 percent of the bids, or about a hundred. Due to the size of the resulting contracts, the company was surviving, but on very thin margins. Sales managers were in a quandary.

I looked at all the data and talked to every manager and every salesperson. Then I focused on the proposal process—especially the number of proposals the sales team was drafting. I asked some simple questions:

- Why so many?
- Had they analyzed the losses?
- How strategically focused were the RFPs they were responding to?
- How strategic were the ones they were winning?
- What would the financial outcome be if the company submitted only half as many proposals but won 10 percent of the bids because they focused strategically and prioritized opportunities? (They liked that question.)

I suggested they should cut down on the proposals and work to increase the win ratio because they could see extraordinary financial benefits just by reducing workload alone. I also suggested scoring the proposals on a scale to develop a “go or no-go” strategy for responding to the RFPs to ensure they were working on the most valuable opportunities. Sales managers

felt that was a big risk and that without 2,000 bids they couldn't maintain their sales goals.

I analyzed the overall burden of the proposal process on the sales team and the management team. The biggest problem was that management focused on the wins, which they celebrated and rewarded generously. They paid little attention to the losses because, well, they didn't have time. Up to 60 percent of the sales team's time was spent on writing proposals—95 percent of which led nowhere.

We learned that they probably had no chance of winning about 30 percent of the bids. Potential clients were using them to justify going with another offer—but in what would appear to be an “open” bid. Another 20 percent of the bids weren't worth winning because they would cause serious delivery problems.

The salespeople were trying to force themselves into sales opportunities. And they weren't facing the fact that proposals don't sell anything. They needed to focus on client relationships. Their writing time was stealing the relationship time. Ultimately, we agreed that their goal would be to submit about 580 proposals with a goal to win over 40 percent—or about 235. This would allow them to dramatically increase revenue and decrease unproductive work. Also, winning more with less investment means they would have more money to put into salespeople or on the bottom line.

After months of work, they shifted the sales model, changed the focus to relationship-building, started retraining salespeople, created a bid process that analyzed the value of every RFP, and stopped writing proposals to bid on most of them. Salespeople had to win the right to propose and to dedicate resources to the effort.

One last note: When I looked at why the turnover had been so high, the exit interviews showed that sales professionals had thought the proposal process was stupid and overwhelming and that the rewards, regardless of how high, couldn't make up for the pressure and the senselessness of the workload.

Notice how hard people in Carl's story were working and with such good intent. Consider how much time they must have sacrificed to be effective, responsible employees. The company had, somewhere in the process, decided to ignore the aching concern about fake work. The executives had failed to understand the real goals—improving sales by providing the best products that truly served their clients' needs. Instead, they had translated it into the idea that more selling is better selling (more work equals productive work). Of course, this is wrong, but not always easy to see.

### **Fake Work Negatively Influences Employees and Companies**

In the previous example, fake work had serious consequences for both the salespeople and the business as a whole. They were leaving not because of lack of rewards, but because of faulty practices. Our research indicates that 87 percent of workers are not satisfied with the results of their work at the end of most weeks. The gap between real work and fake work is tangible and measurable—and it is the difference between success and failure. Many companies that were once flexible, interesting, and exciting places to work have become disenfranchised, meaningless, bureaucratic morasses that hinder innovation, suck the life force out of people, and produce lots of unprofitable fake work. They've become places where nothing of value seems to get done, and everyone seems to sense it.

Our research shows that no one wants to be doing fake work. (Okay, there may be a few exceptions, but not as many as some cartoons would suggest.) What most of us want is to feel that we're making positive contributions to actual company accomplishments. But not many of us feel we're there. We have found that:

- 87 percent of workers are not satisfied with the results of their work.
- 81 percent of workers do not feel strongly committed to their company's top priorities.

- 68 percent of workers do not feel that their work group goals are translated into real-work tasks.
- Only 52 percent of workers feel they are held accountable for fulfilling their commitments on time.
- 54 percent of all workers feel they have more creativity, resourcefulness, talent, and intelligence than their job requires or allows.
- 53 percent of workers think that the work they do doesn't count for anything.

Statistics like these paint a dispiriting portrait of the individual workers responsible for driving the global economy we're all a part of. And if you look at the company cultures these workers are a part of, the view isn't much better. We have found that:

- 56 percent of workers don't clearly understand their company's most important goals.
- 73 percent of workers don't think their company's goals are translated into specific work they can execute.
- 70 percent of workers don't routinely plan how to support agreed-upon goals and tasks in their work groups.

These statistics tell you how and why fake work is infiltrating every work environment—even the best of them. Whether you look at work from the individual's or the company's perspective, what you see is not a pretty—or productive—picture. It isn't that people don't work hard enough; they just don't feel their hard work makes much of a difference to their company. Often they tell us their work is not focused on company strategies. They say they don't know what those strategies are. Our research suggests they're right on all counts.

When we ask about the strategic relevance of their work, individuals typically respond, "What company strategy?" Or they answer, "The strategic work happens in someone else's department, not in mine."

The simple truth is that if people don't know how and why what

they do supports their company's strategies, it doesn't matter how hard they work, because their work doesn't connect them to the results that really count.

Fake work erodes one's quality of life and, therefore, a person's devotion and loyalty to any company. When people are assigned a project, wrapped up in a new initiative, or tasked with designing a new marketing campaign only to find out – months later – that all the work they've done has been ignored or, worse, thrown away, it's disheartening and debilitating.

### **Avoiding the Road to Nowhere: The Pathways Out**

In the next chapter, "Exploring the Causes of Fake Work," we will delve more deeply into the environment of fake work. Though it might seem a simple concept, fake work actual exists in a complex world of issues and is eradicated only by awareness, clarity, and sound processes for attacking it.

After we expose the causes, we will examine each of them and provide pathways out – the pathways to real work.