

SOCIAL LOAFING AND TEAM MEMBER BEHAVIOR IN CONTEMPORARY BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT: KEY INSIGHTS FOR LEADERS AND MANAGERS

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Abstract: This paper explores the phenomenon of social loafing, which is defined as the tendency of individuals to exert less effort when working in a team compared to their efforts when working independently. Such behavior can undermine the efficiency and adaptability that organizations strive for, resulting in decreased performance and increased interpersonal conflicts. Key factors contributing to social loafing are identified, including team size, task characteristics, and personal characteristics of team members. The paper also addresses the emergence of cyber loafing in the digital age, emphasizing its prevalence among employees. Furthermore, it presents practical strategies for leaders and managers to mitigate social loafing, such as fostering smaller teams, clearly defining responsibilities, and promoting open communication. These strategies aim to enhance both team performance and morale, ultimately improving overall organizational effectiveness.

Key words: teamwork, social loafing, cyber loafing, organizational behavior, contemporary business environment

1. INTRODUCTION

Understanding team dynamics is essential for organizational efficiency in the rapidly evolving business environment, which is characterized by a growing reliance on team-based structures as well as greater collaboration. Many organizations are turning to teams and teamwork with a plan to take full advantage of them. However, in teamwork, an individual may feel „lost in the crowd“ and/or „hide behind more people“, which results in poorer performance. In literature and practice, the term „social loafing“ describes the behavior of individual team member who reduce the level of work, commitment, effort and contribution when working in a team [1]. Social loafing is the tendency of an individual to exert less effort when working in a team compared to the effort he or she would exert working independently. The predominance of loafing could compromise the efficiency and adaptability that businesses aim for, resulting in lower performance and more interpersonal disputes [2]. Examining this phenomenon offers useful strategies for lessening its detrimental impacts on the team as a whole as well as on individual team members.

The aim of this paper is to explore the concept of social loafing and its impact on teams and teamwork, and to propose practical methods for leaders and managers on how to reduce/eliminate social loafing in teams. The importance of this paper is based on the fact that organizations may improve collective accountability, cultivate a more engaged workforce, and ultimately produce better results in a more competitive environment by addressing social loafing among team members. The research is especially important because it gives leaders and managers the practical approaches they need to foster a culture of cooperation and commitment, which is necessary for success in a complex and ever-changing business environment.

2. KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL LOAFING

The first research that identified the effect of loafing in teamwork was conducted by the French engineer Maximilien Ringelmann back in 1913. He found that team members exerted less effort when pulling the rope as a team compared to the effort they exerted when pulling the rope individually.

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Furthermore, he discovered that the larger the number of team members, the greater the loafing effect, and the individual's contribution and results decrease [3].

Other authors, who have dealt with this problem, have tried to find logical explanations why the loafing effect occurs. One explanation is that individuals are not motivated to pull as hard as they really could because they rely on others and their effort. Another explanation is that the team members are not synchronized and coordinated in the right way - while one may be pulling as hard as he can, the others are pausing at that time and vice versa. A group of authors [4] repeated the rope experiment, but in a slightly different way. First, they measured the individual efforts of the team members, and then they blindfolded them and told them that they should pull the rope in a team - that is, that other team members were next to them and pulling the rope. However, similar results were recorded in that experiment - when individuals thought they were working in a team, they exerted less effort.

The key negative effects that occur due to loafing in the team are [5], [6]: tension between team members who work hard and those who loaf; frustrations in the team that occur due to the behavior of members who are loafing and do not bear responsibility for their tasks; reduction of team spirit and sense of community; decline in work morale; mistrust and poor interpersonal relations; increase in the number of conflicts; reducing the motivation of other team members who observe the behavior of loafing members; the effect of burnout among team members who invest more effort and work in an attempt to compensate for the less effort and work of members who loaf; increased absenteeism and turnover of team members who are exposed to the burnout effect; reduction of efficiency, effectiveness, work productivity and achieved results.

In the digital age, a new type of social loafing in teamwork is appearing more and more often - cyber loafing. Cyber loafing is a term that describes the use of the Internet during work hours for non-work related activities [7]. These can be sending personal emails, time spent on personal social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, watching various videos, searching travel agency websites, searching cinema and theater repertoires, searching for different events, etc. It is estimated that employees spend up to 2 hours per day in cyber loafing activities [8]. With the increase in the number of jobs in which computers are used, the number of employees who practice cyber loafing has also increased. A 2007 American Management Association survey found that between 60% and 80% of American employees are prone to cyber loafing [9]. For this reason, many companies have started to apply various forms of banning the search of any sites and pages that have no connection with work (typical example is blocking access to social networks).

3. KEY FACTORS THAT AFFECT SOCIAL LOAFING

By reviewing the literature, there can be found several factors that affect social loafing (Table 1). These are: team size, task characteristics and team member characteristics.

Table 1 – Factors affecting the effect of social loafing in a team

Factors	Potential causes of social loafing
Team size	dispersion of responsibility harder visibility of individual contributions dehumanization
Task characteristics	interdependence of tasks activity visibility degree of routinization of tasks too ambitious/difficult to achieve goals too simple/easily achievable goals
Team member characteristics	gender of team members national culture preferences for teamwork personality characteristics of team members

Source: adapted from [6]

In larger teams, the phenomenon of social loafing tends to be more pronounced. There are several reasons for this [10]:

- Dispersion of responsibilities to a large number of team members. When responsibility is distributed among a large number of team members, individuals contribute less because they feel they are less responsible for team results.
- Harder visibility of individual contributions in teamwork due to the large number of team members. This reduces the desire and motivation of members to work hard because they are aware that their contribution is not easy to see.
- Dehumanization represents the feeling of individual team members that interpersonal relationships are insufficiently developed and that their work and efforts are not noticed or valued. Team leaders and managers in large teams have difficulty establishing closer relationships with team members, which often results in feelings of dehumanization and higher loafing.

Task characteristics greatly influence the effect of loafing, depending on the following [11], [12]:

- Task interdependence. The greater the interdependence of tasks, the greater the effect of loafing in the team because there are fewer opportunities to observe and measure individual contributions.
- Visibility of activities refers to the degree to which managers are aware of the contributions of individual team members. As the visibility of activities increases, opportunities for team members to engage in social loafing decrease.
- The degree of routinization of tasks implies their structure and repeatability. Highly routinized tasks provide less opportunity for the loafing effect because the tasks are familiar and it is easy to monitor the effort and contribution of team members. Non-routinized tasks, however, require a certain degree of creativity and innovation, and are more difficult to monitor and analyze, which increases the effect of loafing.
- Too ambitious/difficult to achieve goals. If the team members perceive the assigned goals as too ambitious and difficult to achieve, they often give up immediately and turn to the effect of loafing, considering that it is not worth to invest time and effort.
- Too simple/easy to accomplish goals. If team members perceive assigned goals as too simple and easily achievable, they often lose motivation and invest minimal effort and work, which again represents the effect of loafing.

The characteristics of team members also affect the loafing effect. Key features include [13], [14]:

- Gender. Research indicates that in team settings, men tend to exhibit higher levels of social loafing compared to women. The reasons for this stem from the fact that women are more oriented towards group work, coordination, interpersonal relations and that they devote themselves more to group results. However, men are generally more focused on individual outcomes, tend to place less emphasis on interpersonal relationships, and are often less inclined toward collaborative work.
- National culture. Members from national cultures characterized by collectivism exhibit a lower tendency toward social loafing, as they are more oriented toward the success of the group and demonstrate a higher degree of cooperation.
- Preferences for teamwork. Team members who prefer teamwork are less likely to engage in social loafing. Conversely, individuals who favor independent work tend to exhibit a greater propensity for loafing in team settings.
- Personality characteristics, such as irresponsibility, carelessness, intolerance, irritability, anxiety, impulsiveness, neuroticism. Typical examples in practice are narcissism and neuroticism of team members. A narcissist is an individual who places excessive importance on themselves and perceives themselves as unique and exceptional. In team tasks focused on member development, narcissistic individuals may prosper, as they seek to highlight their superiority. However, in the context of routine tasks, narcissistic personalities are more likely to engage in social loafing [15]. Similarly, narcissistic individuals are likely to loaf when their individual contributions to the task are not easily visible or recognizable. Neurotic individuals,

characterized by high levels of insecurity, anxiety, depression, anger, and emotional instability, tend to have a lower disposition toward teamwork. They often struggle with communication, are hesitant to seek help or advice, feel inferior, and frequently misunderstand team tasks. Consequently, they are more prone to engaging in social loafing.

Understanding the factors that contribute to social loafing within a team enables managers and leaders to respond proactively, taking steps to eliminate or at least mitigate these issues.

4. KEY APPROACHES FOR ELIMINATION OF SOCIAL LOAFING AMONG TEAMS

Key approaches that managers and leaders can use to reduce the effect of social loafing among teams are [12], [16], [17]:

- Limiting the size of the team because in practice it has been shown that small teams are more effective compared to large ones. The smaller the team, the more difficult it is for members to loaf and hide behind the team. Working in a smaller team makes it easier to inform team members and define their responsibility for results. In situations where it is necessary to have more team members, it is recommended to define sub-teams and to clearly define their responsibility for a specific segment of tasks and results.
- Effective selection of team members based on their knowledge, skills, experience, and tendency toward collaboration is essential. When a team player is placed in an appropriate team, they are motivated and eager to contribute their maximum effort.
- Promoting open communication and encouraging team members to share their opinions, suggestions, proposals, and ideas fosters a sense of belonging and value within the team. When team members recognize that their voices are respected, it positively impacts their motivation and productivity. Furthermore, the organization benefits from the diverse competencies of team members participating in decision-making and problem-solving processes, enhancing overall effectiveness and innovation.
- Clearly defining the responsibilities of each team member is essential for effective teamwork. The team's overall task should be broken down into subtasks, with specific responsibilities assigned to each team member. This approach ensures that everyone understands what is expected of them and what their roles entail. Additionally, during the evaluation process, it becomes easier to assess whether each team member has met their designated goals.
- Allowing each team member to select tasks aligned with their competencies fosters motivation and accountability. When team members have the autonomy to choose their responsibilities, they are more likely to invest effort and perform at their best, thereby reducing the likelihood of social loafing.
- Conducting performance evaluations of team members is essential for monitoring both their results and team dynamics. Recognizing the top performer based on their achievements can significantly enhance motivation among other team members, fostering a sense of healthy competition. This practice not only encourages individual excellence but also strengthens overall team performance.
- Providing regular feedback to team members is crucial for fostering accountability and reducing social loafing. When team members know they will receive public acknowledgment of their contributions and performance, they are less likely to engage in loafing behavior. A structured feedback system creates transparency regarding individual and team results, encouraging members to strive for excellence. This sense of exposure motivates individuals to maintain high standards in their work, as they are aware that their efforts will be recognized and evaluated by their peers and leaders. Consequently, the feedback process not only enhances individual performance but also contributes to a more engaged and cohesive team dynamic.

In addition to the previously mentioned strategies, team members themselves can adopt several approaches to mitigate social loafing within the team, such as [5], [18]:

- Building and nurturing a sense of belonging within the team is vital for fostering collaboration and engagement. Encouraging team members to socialize, exchange information, and seek each other's opinions can significantly enhance interpersonal connections. Organizing regular meetings, team-building activities, and informal gatherings allows members to strengthen relationships and develop a collective identity. This collective spirit motivates individuals to contribute equally and actively participate in team efforts, ultimately leading to greater cohesion and improved overall performance. When team members feel a strong sense of belonging, they are more likely to support one another and work collaboratively toward common goals.
- Highlighting and praising the achievements of team members is essential for motivation and enhancing overall morale within the team. Recognizing individuals who have made significant contributions or excelled under challenging conditions not only reinforces their sense of accomplishment but also fosters a positive team environment. Practical experiences demonstrate that public acknowledgment and appreciation from colleagues can have a profound impact on employees, making them feel valued and respected.
- Engaging in open and honest conversation with team members who are loafing is crucial for addressing performance issues. When team members observe colleagues exhibiting loafing behavior, it is important to approach the situation directly and constructively. This involves providing specific feedback, discussing observed behaviors, and offering concrete examples - such as unfinished tasks, missed deadlines, and absence from meetings. By highlighting these issues in a supportive manner, team members can encourage accountability and foster a culture of openness. This dialogue not only helps address the underlying causes of loafing but also promotes a sense of responsibility and teamwork, ultimately enhancing overall team performance.
- Self-control and the ability to resist the influence of social loafing are essential for maintaining individual accountability within a team. When working in an environment where others may be loafing, individuals can be tempted to reduce their own effort and commitment. However, cultivating self-awareness and a strong sense of responsibility toward the manager, team leader, and fellow team members can motivate individuals to be fair and active contributors. By recognizing the importance of their role in the team's success, individuals can develop the resilience needed to counteract the effects of loafing, ensuring that they remain engaged and committed to achieving collective goals.

In summary, fostering a collaborative environment through recognition, open communication, and personal accountability empowers leaders and managers to actively combat social loafing. By implementing these strategies, teams can enhance both individual performance and overall cohesion, leading to more successful outcomes.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper highlights the significant impact of social loafing on team dynamics and organizational efficiency. Key conclusions reveal that social loafing can severely compromise team performance, leading to diminished productivity and increased interpersonal conflicts. The factors influencing this phenomenon, including team size, task characteristics, and individual team member personal characteristics, highlight the complexity of team interactions in contemporary business environment and workplaces.

This paper enhances the understanding of social loafing by identifying specific psychological and social factors that contribute to this behavior. It encourages further research on the interplay between team composition and individual motivation, as well as the impact of contemporary business environments on team dynamics. By integrating these insights, the paper lays a foundation for developing more comprehensive models of team behavior that account for both traditional and contemporary challenges in teamwork.

For leaders and managers, understanding the factors that impact social loafing is essential for fostering effective teamwork. Implementing strategies such as forming smaller teams, clearly defining roles and responsibilities, and encouraging open communication can significantly reduce loafing behaviors. Additionally, addressing the rise of cyber loafing through appropriate policies can help maintain team focus and productivity.

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