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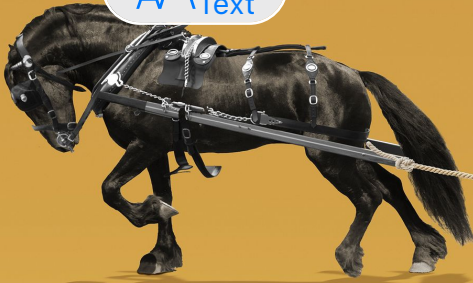


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WORK & LIFE

Why the Reliable Office Workhorse Rarely Gets Ahead

Working too hard can hurt your career trajectory, but there are other paths to office stardom

By [Rachel Feintzeig](#)

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You work so hard. Why aren't you getting ahead?

“Literally, what more can I do?” Alison Fragale, a professor who studies power, says the office workhorses among us think. We're the ones picking up the slack when teammates fall short, the ones the boss calls when she needs something done fast, or last minute, or after hours. And still we aren't the stars.

Maybe we missed the memo on what it takes to win at work.

[Putting in effort](#) is a given if you want [that raise](#) or promotion. But anyone can grind it out, researchers told me—that's just a matter of sacrificing your life. To get [that next job](#) or big, high-profile project, you have to be known for more than long hours. You have to change how your colleagues and bosses see you.

“We are given opportunities all the time to tell our story that we throw away,” says Fragale, a professor of organizational behavior at the University of North Carolina and author of a forthcoming book on the science of status.

The next time a colleague stops to chitchat in the hallway or asks how you are, don’t say “fine” or “[busy](#),” she says. Share your most recent win and its impact—this project is going to save us \$3 million a year, or that client just reupped their contract because they were blown away by our proposal.

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If you're worried about sounding like a braggart, consider that office show ponies are doing this all the time, Fragale says. Imagine how effective you could be if you paired your hard work with a dose of self-promotion.

Ask yourself: What positive parts of your work are invisible to others? [Share that](#), not complaints about how you worked yet another weekend, or how the office coffee is getting weaker.

The workhorse trap

We want people to like us. We want to help out. When we say yes, the boss praises us, or the colleague is grateful, and it feels good. Then we realize people pleasing isn't getting us anywhere.

“I never got into that seat even though I did that work,” says Alessandro Chesser, who lives in the San Francisco area. For years he ground it out at a startup, building a sales division of 200 people. He made a lot of money—millions a year including stock. But he never achieved his dream of being named chief revenue officer.

It was like he couldn't shake his image as the young, inexperienced salesperson who'd joined the startup in its infancy, he says. Eventually, he left to launch his own company, GetDynasty, an online provider of trusts.

First impressions can be hard to break. Lia Garvin, who spent a decade working for big tech companies, would start new roles with an internal pledge to be available at all hours, and take on everything.






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“That became the expectation,” she says.

She became stuck in the weeds, the go-to person to execute someone else’s big-picture strategy. When she raised her hand to work on higher-level projects and roles, bosses were incredulous.

“They’d be like, ‘Really? I don’t know if I see you that way,’” says Garvin.

She began sending weekly emails outlining her accomplishments to higher-ups. She stopped using phrases like “helped out” or “we” when she was the one responsible for a win. Instead, she chose words like “lead” and “drive.” She leaned on data, ginning up metrics like time saved when

there wasn't a clear revenue number tied to her project.

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When she started a new job as a team operations manager at Google, she drew up a document that outlined her responsibilities. It helped her look strong and strategic, while also enabling her to [say no](#) to requests that didn't fit the outline. Now she works as a consultant, helping companies with team management.

Invisible labor

We're increasingly doing extra work behind the scenes, as we log on from home and field requests from multiple managers. Research from Tessa West, a psychology professor at New York University, finds that 80% of us play multiple roles at work, say, running a committee or collaborating on a project for another department. More than half of those extra gigs come with no additional compensation, West says.

“People often assume they're getting credit for these things, but the credit just lives in the boss's

these things, but the credit just lives in the boss's head," she adds—if the boss remembers at all.

Your manager might not even want to publicly share the extra pinch-hitting you're doing.

Admitting that he's calling at 10 p.m. or asking you to redo a teammate's slide deck makes him look bad, West says, like he's a haphazard planner who lacks the assertiveness to cull underperformers.

West recommends asking your boss if the additional tasks you're doing come up during annual performance conversations, where bosses judge workers behind closed doors. Remind yourself that stars often say no to things and protect their time, spending it focused on their one defining skill.

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On a résumé, how would you describe the extra load you're taking on? If you can't think of how you'd crisply package it, West says, it's probably not helping your career.

Scutwork and shout-outs

Eager to please, Jessica Chen got tagged as the worker bee in her first television news job out of college. She couldn't say no to extra weekend shifts. So she decided to leverage them.

Stuck at the studio on a quiet Saturday or Sunday, she'd rally the small team present to help rehearse clips of her anchoring a newscast—her real dream. Soon she had a robust reel to send along to new jobs. Before long, she'd landed one.

We all have to do annoying work sometimes, says

Chen, who now runs her own communications training agency. Use it to get what you really want.

Meradith Stretz, of Boonville, Mo., tried to call attention to her work for years, outlining her wins in PowerPoint presentations for executives at her company. Instead of being promoted to director, she just got a bigger load: 18 direct reports, up from four. After she left, three people took over her responsibilities, she says.

Now working for a consulting firm that helps companies implement [Salesforce](#), she's been clear that exposure is important. She shares her wins on a company Slack channel and asks her boss to include her on high-profile projects with executives. She keeps track of compliments that come her way.

“To me,” she says, “it’s job security.”

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

How do you make sure your hard work gets noticed on the job? Join the conversation below.

Write to Rachel Feintzeig at

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