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VIEW

Where Attention Goes

Attention, the most critical resource in the business world today, often escapes unused. In many cases, people just aren't paying attention to the right things often enough, and are paying attention to the wrong things way too much. This problem is endemic throughout organizations, from the lowest manager to the highest executive and from the smallest company to those atop the Fortune 500. Getting a handle on your organization's "attention inventory" is the first step in a simple, but rarely employed, method of improving productivity in your organization.

Where is attention going?

In our national survey of 1,137 executives and managers, we saw attention doesn't always go where it should. Attention gets drained away by things people would just as soon avoid, and doesn't excite or take advantage of people's best talents nearly enough. Attention to different sources is also affected by an employee's position in and the size of their organization.

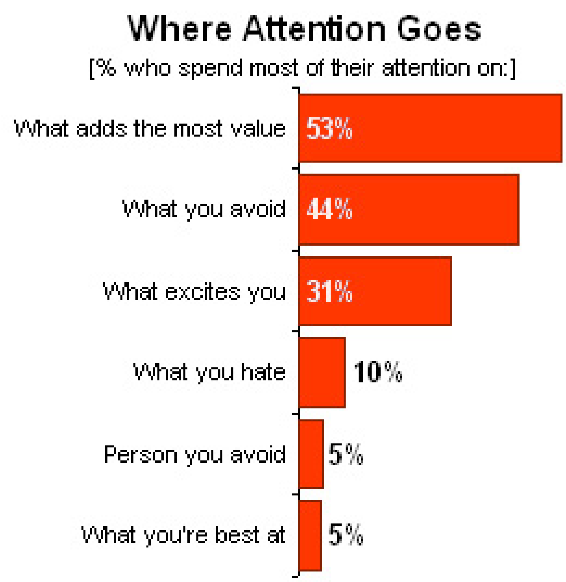
The big attention getters

Thankfully, two of the three things that occupy most people's attention are positive. A small majority of people get to spend the bulk of their attention on things that add the most value to the company, which is good news – adding value is clearly thought of as a high priority. Also, around three out of ten people said they get to spend most of their attention on things that excite them. For those lucky three out of ten, their jobs are probably a pleasure almost every day – imagine being excited by most of the things to which you have to pay attention!

However, 44% reported having to spend most of their attention on tasks they would just as soon avoid. Organizations should be doubly worried by the large amount of people who don't spend most of their time adding value *or* being excited by their work. Almost half the workforce aren't paying attention to adding as much value nearly as much as they could, and seven out of ten aren't excited by most of what they do.

The small attention getters

Two of the three of the smaller sources of attention are negative – but at least their effect is somewhat



minimized. Spending most of their attention on things they really hate or on people they would rather avoid was only reported by small percentages. So in most cases, organizations do a good job at minimizing contact with truly objectionable tasks or people.

However, organizations don't give people nearly enough chances to use their talents to the fullest. Only 5% of respondents said they got to spend most of their attention on things they were truly best at. This is a fundamentally inefficient use of labor and skills – imagine the leap in productivity if 95% of the people who currently aren't where they should be suddenly got the chance to excel at something they could do better than anyone else.

Managers versus Executives

When comparing managers and executives along these categories, more managers reported spending most of their attention on nearly every single category, both positive and negative. The most dramatic differences were that mangers seem to report more of their attention going to negative attention drains — 9% more managers felt they spent the bulk of their attention on things they avoid and 5% more on things they hate. 7% more managers say they are paying attention to what adds the most value. This is not surprising because managers should be more “plugged in” to the organization’s day-to-day value-creating activities.

This disconnect is ultimately not healthy for organizations. If executives don’t feel they have to spend as much attention adding value, what sort of signal does that send to the ranks below? And if managers look up and see their leaders not spending time dealing with unpleasant people or tasks, why should they?

Small versus Big Companies

Similar to the manager-executive divide, employees in smaller companies reported paying more attention more of the time to our six categories. The most striking differences were a 6% jump both in paying attention to what adds value and what they’d rather avoid, as well as a 4% difference in paying attention to what was considered exciting.

These differences likely exist because in a smaller company, you’re that much closer to where the rubber meets the road. You’d better pay more attention to what adds value, or you’ll be out on the street. Likewise, in a small business, noting the small things, no matter how annoying, can be the difference between profit and loss. Similarly, small companies are certainly more likely to be excited by what they do given the nature of entrepreneurs– no one starts a small business out of spite or anger. In fact, the surprising thing about this statistic is that the difference isn’t larger.

But these data tell us something else about big companies as well. Perhaps in large organizations, outside data filters through too many levels and loses any real meaning by the time it crosses your desk. Perhaps companies need to think about how they are organized internally in order to take fuller advantage of the more “plugged in” feeling their smaller counterparts seem to have.

Conclusion

Organizations that want to succeed could ask themselves the following: Are we spending enough time thinking about what excites people? How about what they might be trying to avoid. And though value may be getting added in the end, is it really what people are thinking about most of the time? And finally, have you taken inventory of the most important asset we have — the true talents of our people, and where they consider themselves the strongest? These questions could stand to be asked in organizations of any size and at every managerial level. As the data show, there’s a lot of attention there escaping unused.

To learn more about our unique think tank and findings, contact us at 602.504.8787 or info@nslg.net