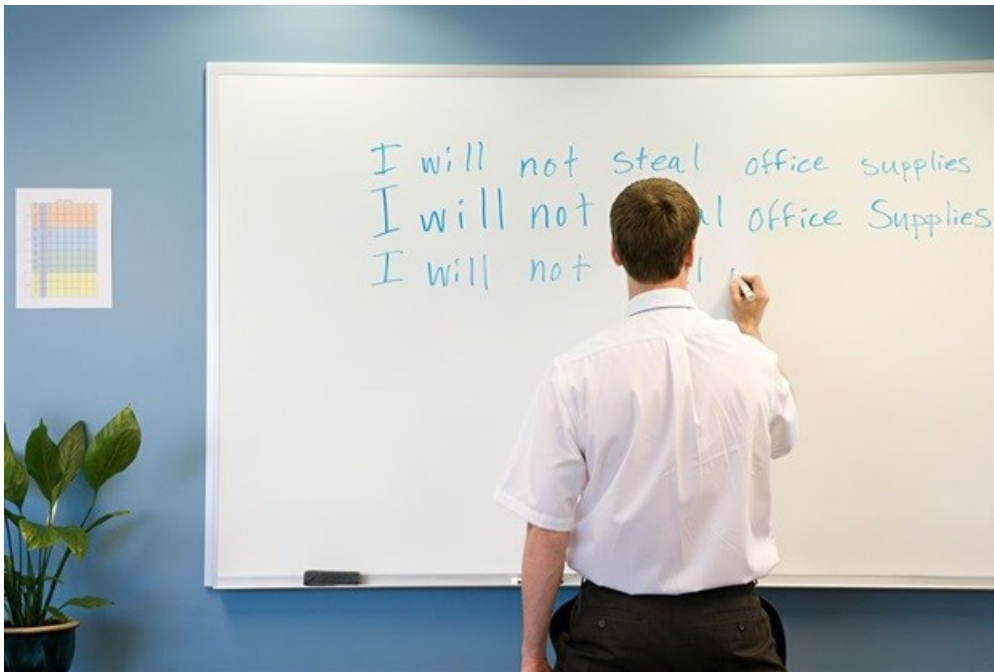


Why your lack of productivity could be tantamount to petty theft

 By [Khuthalani Khumalo](#)

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Productivity is often only measured in blue-collar environments, where staff clock in and out at specific times, and where very specific quotas are to be met within those times. If these quotas are not met, an employee's wages can be docked to reflect their failure to be suitably productive. Times have changed - and even the manufacturing sector has automated their operations with tools such as biometric scanners and geo-locators on staff mobile phones for those workforces that are mobile, like plumbers and telecommunications technicians.



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However, in the white-collar environment, immeasurable quantities of productive time can be lost. Allow me to clarify that there are labour laws that govern the operations of all employers, and these laws include the need for clearly defined working hours, with scheduled breaks for lunch etc. and a specific number of leave days per year and so on. When referring to productivity, my comments are focused on the eight hours of 'work' time during the day, where misuse of that time on the part of an employee is tantamount to petty theft.

Most of us would be slighted at being called petty thieves – because we were raised not to take things that don't belong to us. Yet I have deliberately chosen to describe this practice of avoiding productivity as petty theft, because an employer pays you to work for a certain number of hours per day; yet the 10 minutes here and 25 minutes there that are taken – no, stolen - from an employer are perceived as acceptable. However, were an employer to shave off a monetary equivalent from an employee's salary for these liberties, this matter would swiftly be escalated to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA).

As we are at the start of a new year, with resolutions hopefully still intact, I invite you to consider if you may need to review how to you treat your employer's time. Here is a short list of petty crimes often committed in the office – are you an offender?

Disorderly conduct

First up, we have what can be described as 'disorderly conduct', which is a very broad term used to charge anyone whose behavior is a public nuisance. Disorderly conduct can range anywhere from a long, heated conversation on your cellphone, to hosting a loud football tournament that runs 30 minutes beyond the allotted lunch hour, using the empty cold drink cans. While I don't mean for work environments to be morbid spaces of gloom and doom, having a collective laugh over a shared office joke is very different to being a public nuisance. If anyone is inconvenienced by your activities, you could be an offender.

In addition to stealing time, consider also, that we really didn't need to hear the intimate details of that break-up call. #TMI #didothereallygothere

An accessory to the crime

We all have that one colleague who 'likes things!', and it is so easy to get caught up in the activities of this person, from going along to buy tonight's dinner ingredients, to driving them to get their car from the panel-beater, to listening to the extended version of the weekend's activities while sitting at your desk.

While it may not be your offense, you, my friend, are an accessory to the crime. You are an accessory when you intentionally aid another person to engage in conduct that constitutes an offense. As an accessory, you can easily consume anything from 10 minutes, to collectively an hour, of your employer's time per day, in activities that have nothing to do with anything! If you are being an accessory to a petty crime every day, you could be costing your employer up to five working hours a week. That's a whole morning worth of time that your employer won't get back! How different is this from someone who only arrives at the office at lunch time, with no explanation for their absence, and who would expect everyone to turn a blind eye?

Embezzlement

When we think of embezzlement, images of millions of dollars going missing, and older men frantically shredding documents in lofty offices on Wall Street come to mind. But many in South Africa have 'embezzled' resources from their employers. Think about it: that pen that is in your car, for when you randomly need to sign something while driving – who paid for it? Those post-it notes that somehow left your desk and made their way into your bathroom so you can scatter quotes all over the mirror like Mary Jane Paul – that s*%@ ain't right! And let's not even start the conversation about where all the office teaspoons disappear to. If you are a senior, and need to 'entertain' clients, are all those receipts that you present for reimbursement related to your work? If your employer covers your medical aid as a benefit, was that tooth really only chipped last week (and not concealed as a pre-existing condition)?

The amount of creative thinking it takes to come up with ways of 'beating the system' could surely be put to better use?

Remember that the cost of running an office falls under your employers' overhead costs. Therefore, if the cost of overheads is inflated because of the misuse of resources, this chips away at the businesses' profit margin and hinders the company's growth. In the case of small businesses, this can have devastating effects. While the cost of some items of

stationery won't cause a company to go bust, when company assets like cars and electronic gadgets, and staff benefits are misused, this does warrant that action be taken.

Public intoxication

Last but not least, is the hangover. 'Wait!' I hear you say – 'How is having a hangover considered theft?' Let me break it down for you. There is a criminal offense known as public intoxication. This should not be mistaken with public drinking, which, hopefully, you aren't doing at work unless invited to. Public intoxication is when someone is drunk or under the influence of any intoxicating substance in a public place – and in this instance, the workplace.

While consuming alcohol outside the office is not an offense in most industries, the residual effect is unfortunately brought into the office, and here is how it becomes an offense: you woke up late and missed that window of 'not too much traffic on the highway'; you eventually arrive at work late and have already missed the morning briefing. You are visibly still intoxicated. You know it, and we can all smell it. Sometimes you try to pretend you're not drunk, but other times it's so bad you just have to own it and feign illness, so you can go home.

There are even people who think it's 'cute' to admit to being hungover at work – like it's a badge of honour to be worn with pride. Most polite people in the office may chuckle and think, 'Sho, that guy!'; however, this is really a problem.

Your offense here is the amount of time you spend during a working day, being drunk and therefore, unproductive. Not only do you steal your own time from your employer, you become the spectacle that distracts other employees from their work. So, your drunkenness is stealing their time as well. The disheveled sight of you causes visual pollution. And your grunts and groans of discomfort definitely don't fall into the category of 'white noise'. You could cause enough disruption to have stolen up to half a day from your employer before you start to feel even remotely normal. If this happens twice a week (on Monday morning and after Phuza Thursday) – that's a whole day of disruption.

In conclusion, while I may have taken creative liberties in describing offenders as petty thieves, this shouldn't lessen the gravity of the matter. Shifting your perspective on the issue of productivity can be helpful. It allows employees to understand what their obligations are to their employers.

And it gives new meaning to the expression 'time is money'.

You trust your employer to pay you each month without fail for 'services rendered'; the least you can do is hold up your end of your employment contract.

ABOUT KHUTHALANI KHUMALO

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