

October 2010: Flies in the Urinals

Key Takeaways:

- ✍ “Nudges” alter behavior in positive ways without actually requiring people to actively do anything.
- ✍ Create nudges for yourself and your team to reduce or eliminate inefficient behaviors: spending all your time in email, having meetings run too long, procrastinating on critical tasks, etc.

The *New York Times* [reported](#) that the flies in the men’s-room urinals of the Amsterdam airport have been enshrined in the academic literature on economics and psychology. The flies – images of flies, actually – were etched in the porcelain near the urinal drains in an experiment in human behavior. After the flies were added, “spillage” on the men’s room floor fell by 80 percent.

According to Richard Thaler, behavioral economist at the University of Chicago and the co-author (along with Cass Sunstein) of *Nudge*, the explanation is simple: men like to aim at targets. Thaler says the flies are his favorite example of a “nudge” – a harmless bit of engineering that manages to “attract people’s attention and alter their behavior in a positive way, without actually requiring anyone to do anything at all.”

Thaler and Sunstein call this type of behavioral modification “libertarian paternalism,” a phrase that links the opposing concepts of freedom from constraint and firm, well-intentioned guidance.

They say that this apparent contradiction is reconciled through what they call “choice architecture.” This is the deliberate imposition of structure in an environment – etching flies in a urinal – to induce people to make better choices. Consider a cafeteria where healthy foods like fruit and yogurt are placed in a prominent location, while junk foods are relegated to an out-of-the-way spot. People are free to choose, but they are being nudged toward healthier decisions. (If you’re familiar with Lean manufacturing, you’ll recognize this as a close cousin to the concept of [poka yoke](#), or “error proofing.”)

That’s gotten me to thinking about simple nudges that we could create to make us act more efficiently in the workplace.

For example, people complain regularly about the useless “Reply All” emails that clog their inboxes and consume their days like a plague of locusts. Telling people not to use “Reply All” except when truly necessary doesn’t seem to work – even though it’s clearly in everyone’s best interest. Fed up with the burden of this electronic garbage, the CIO of the Nielsen Company

created a nudge by completely removing the "Reply All" button. (Actually, that might be closer to a "shove." A nudge would have moved the button to an inconvenient position on the toolbar.)

Similarly, turning off the email alerts is a nudge that would help us to stop grazing at the email trough and process email only a few times a day. {Here's how to turn off your alerts in Outlook: Tools > Options > E-mail Options > Advanced Email Options. Then clear the checkboxes in the middle section for when new email arrives.} Or you could give yourself three poker chips for handling mail, with each chip worth 20 minutes in Outlook.

What kind of nudges could you come up with to get meetings to start and end on time? A former boss of mine locked the door of the meeting room at the appointed start time – though of course, as president of the company, he could get away with that. At Google, the time remaining in a meeting is projected in four-foot high numbers on the wall. Nothing focuses the mind like the executioner's ax – or a giant countdown timer, if you're an engineer. I've heard of a CEO who removed the chairs from the conference rooms – you're less likely to climb up on your soapbox when you're actually standing up.

On a larger canvas, what nudges could you create to encourage yourself or your team to allocate time to projects more wisely and realistically, rather than chronically over-committing and failing to deliver on your promises? What nudges could you institute to encourage better communication within and among teams? How about a nudge to change cultural norms and expectations?

What's the fly in the urinal for those?