

When You're Underchallenged At Work



Mark Swartz

Question: I started a promising new job 2 months ago. However I'm unchallenged, bored, and have finished everything by 3pm every day. My boss has no other work for me. How do I keep myself motivated?

Jessica N, Montreal, Quebec

Dear Jessica,

Ironically a growing number of Canadians report that they have *too much* work and not enough hours in the day. In your case, it's the opposite. You are faced with a situation many overworked people believe they would like to be in, though the truth is that being underworked can be stressful in its own ways.

For instance, there may be the nagging feeling that if everyone else is so busy, maybe you're not as important to the company as you thought you were. Or could it be you're being held back for some reason? That can keep you up at night. So can the anxiety from bugging your boss to give you more work. Since you're essentially announcing that you aren't really busy, how many times can you request more assignments without making it painfully obvious you may not truly be needed?

In your case, Jessica, there are several things you can do to try and contribute more fully, if that is your goal. You say your boss has no other work for you. Sometimes this is just a sign that the boss is simply too busy to make time to find you more assignments. You can help change this by offering to speak to other people in your department, or elsewhere in the firm, to find out if they could use a helping hand from you. Or your boss could speak to his or her colleagues on your behalf to see if they are in need of your skills. Lending you out is a great way for your supervisor to earn brownie points for the future. Meanwhile you gain exposure to other management staff and new co-workers, maybe even expanding your skills at the same time. Not a bad deal at all.

Are there projects or assignments you can think up that would benefit both you and the company? How about completing work that was started by someone else but needs a person like you to finish it off?

Usually it's best to plan your approach with your boss's prior approval. You want to show initiative while also making it easier for them to assist you. When you walk in with a list of possible tasks you could be working on, and indicate which ones you'd prefer to tackle, and how this will add value for the company, you show a real team player approach. You also take pressure off your boss!

Eventually the workflow may increase for you and you'll be busier than you can handle. But if this doesn't happen, and your boss is fine with you being under-utilized, consider spending some time developing yourself as a marketable employee. Try networking internally to get yourself known by senior staff. And stay up to the minute in your field by reading trade publications and surfing the web for information.

As time progresses you can decide whether this job does or doesn't provide sufficient challenge for you. Until then, get as involved as you can on committees, cross-functional teams, and anything else that makes you visible - and more valuable.