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Are You Taking on Too Many Non-Promotable Tasks?

by Linda Babcock, Brenda Peyser, Lise Vesterlund, and Laurie Weingart

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Summary. Though non-promotable tasks (NPTs) are often crucial to an organization's success, they rarely contribute to an employee's career progression.

Women are not only 48% more likely to volunteer for these jobs, but they are disproportionately assigned them. Next time... [more](#)

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Francesca, a sixth-year associate at a prestigious law firm (and a young woman we know), loved her job. When her boss asked her to help run the summer intern program, she immediately said yes. It was a chance for her to learn about different departments, meet partners, and showcase her organizational skills. She put a lot of time and energy into it. But once performance reviews rolled around, her efforts were never mentioned. Instead, her boss warned Francesca that her billable hours had fallen behind. She was baffled and disappointed — what she thought would benefit her career didn't seem to matter at all.

Does this situation sound familiar? We're not surprised.

Like Francesca, many workers we've encountered during the research for our book, *The No Club: Putting a Stop to Women's Dead-End Work*, devote excessive hours to tasks that help their organizations but do nothing to advance their careers. These are known as non-promotable tasks (NPTs) or unrewarded responsibilities. Maybe you're the person who trains new hires, takes notes at a meeting, organizes the holiday party, fills in for absent colleagues, or handles that low revenue and time-consuming client. Everyone benefits when these NPTs get done. But sadly, and too often, the person who does them ends up robbed of valuable time and the promotable work that actually grows paychecks and careers.

Our research shows that this problem is particularly pernicious for women. We asked the management team at a professional services firm to rank work assignments by how promotable they were, and then examined how employees spent their time. We found that, independent of rank, the median female employee spent 200 more hours per year on non-promotable work than her male counterparts. To put that into perspective: Women spent an additional month on dead-end assignments.

Further, in a controlled setting where men and women were equally good at executing NPTs, we found that women were handling a greater number of them — not due to preference or attitude — but because they were *expected* to say yes more often. As a result, women were asked and volunteered to do NPTs frequently, while men got a free pass.

This is why, especially for women, understanding what assignments are non-promotable, the consequences of taking them on, and the reasons you might feel pressure to say “yes” can help you steer clear of Francesca’s mistake.

How to Identify Non-Promotable Tasks

Non-promotable tasks have several characteristics that make them recognizable.

NPTs are not instrumental to your organization’s mission.

All organizations have goals and objectives, and they value some more than others. The less a task aligns with those objectives, the lower its promotability. For Francesca, serving clients is her organization’s mission, meaning anything that takes time away from that, like administering the summer intern program, is likely to be non-promotable. Francesca’s performance evaluation was less stellar than she wanted because she spent too much time on a task that wasn’t directly connected to the bottom line.

NPTs are often not visible to others.

Less visible tasks tend to be non-promotable because other people cannot see your efforts or impact. NPTs are often done in support of the team's work in a way that can't be credited to you — like editing your coworker's section of the report or making the team's presentations “look pretty.” Only Francesca's boss knew about her work on the summer intern program. It was invisible to everyone else.

NPTs may not require specialized skills and many people can do them.

Promotable tasks leverage the unique skills you were hired for; NPTs do not. Gathering resumes, scheduling appointments, and compiling interviewers' notes are tasks Francesca took on that almost anyone in the firm could have performed. None of these tasks relied on her legal knowledge or abilities.

Why We Feel Pressured to Say Yes

There are several reasons why we sometimes feel pressured to say yes, even when we don't have to. Here are some patterns we observed in our research.

You think you need to decide immediately.

We often feel the urgency of a request, even more so if it comes from someone more “powerful” or higher up in the organization than ourselves. For instance, let's say you bump into your boss in the hallway, and they ask you to take on a task. You may think you need to respond then and there — but you don't.

Rather than automatically saying “yes,” buy time to gather information, evaluate the task, and think about your career objectives and what you need to do to get there. Here's a rule we use for ourselves: Wait at least 24 hours before saying yes. Instead of “sure,” tell the requester: “Thanks so much for thinking of me

for this. I need some time to think about it and how it fits in with my other priorities. I'll be sure to get back to you by the end of day tomorrow." That will make it easier to say no later.

You have internalized the expectation that you should say yes.

Recognize that your discomfort and reluctance to say no (when you are asked once again to "take one for the team") likely stems from you internalizing the expectations others have of you. This is especially true for women, who may say yes to an NPT to avoid feeling guilty about failing to live up to these expectations.

The next time you are asked to volunteer, ask yourself if doing this task is the best use of your time. If the answer is no, then sit back and let someone else come forward, or better yet, propose that the task be randomly assigned, or that everyone takes turns doing the work.

You are flattered to be asked.

When you feel honored to have been asked, it's hard to see the downside. Francesca said yes because she felt good that her boss had noticed her abilities.

While it's nice to be called upon, that positive feeling will quickly disappear once you become buried in the actual work. And if the task is mostly invisible — like organizing an internship program was — it will provide no tangible upside. Remember, you can still feel flattered that you were asked, even if you are able to decline.

How to Weigh an Opportunity

The next time you're asked to do an NPT, give yourself some time, and use it to carefully evaluate the consequences of taking on the work. Be cognizant of the mistakes you might make when deciding whether to say yes or no.

Consider the “implicit no” of saying yes.

When you take on a new NPT you will have less time to do something else. When you agree to help another team streamline their workflow, you are implicitly saying no to another activity you could do in that time. It may be time spent helping your team with a new product launch where the opportunity cost of helping someone else do their job can be high. Francesca’s implicit no was her billable work. By adding the intern program, she had to cut back on her client hours, which hurt her performance review.



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Weigh the urgency of the task.

A task with a short deadline will trump a task with a longer one, no matter how insignificant it is. The big tasks such as recruiting new clients may not be very time sensitive, so taking on an NPT or two with short time horizons is likely to put off longer-term initiatives that are more valued by your organization.

Remember that you will also be busy in the future.

Three months out, your calendar looks clear, so today’s “yes” doesn’t seem so bad, but chances are that your current rush of activity will be the same three months from now. Before you say yes, imagine instead that this distant request is for next week. Would you be as excited to plan the office party next week with your current workload? Probably not!

Evaluate the indirect benefits of the NPT.

Not all NPTs are the same. Be intentional in choosing NPTs that are best for you. Some non-promotable tasks can help you later. We call these tasks *indirectly promotable* — they might help you gain knowledge, develop skills, or connections that you can leverage later on. Other NPTs are attractive because they align with your personal mission, like advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. In addition to considering the cost of taking on the NPT, be sure to assess the potential benefits. Knowing that most of us will have to do an NPT from time to time, try to choose the ones that are best for you.

Your road to success will be shorter if you recognize and steer toward the assignments that matter most for your career. You'll be surprised by the recognition you will receive when you finally have the time for the work that is valued most by your organization.

Linda Babcock is a professor of economics at Carnegie Mellon University. She is the author of *Women Don't Ask and Ask for It*. A behavioral economist, she is the founder and director of PROGRESS, which pursues positive social change for women and girls through education, partnerships, and research.

Brenda Peyser has held leadership positions in the corporate world and academia for over thirty years. Most recently, she was a professor of communications at Carnegie Mellon, where she also served as associate dean of the School of Public Policy and Management and was the

founding Executive Director of Carnegie
Mellon University Australia

Lise Vesterlund is a professor of economics at the University of Pittsburgh and director of the Pittsburgh Experimental Economics Laboratory. She founded and directs the Behavioral Economic Design Initiative. Published in leading economic journals, her research has been covered by NPR, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, ABC, *The Economist*, *The Atlantic*, *The Guardian*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Forbes*.

Laurie R. Weingart is a management professor at Carnegie Mellon University. She has served as CMU's Interim Provost and Chief Academic Officer and as a Senior Associate Dean and Director of the Accelerate Leadership Center. Her award-winning research has been covered by *The New York Times* and *Business Insider*, and published in top management and psychology journals.

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