

MANAGERIAL SOLUTIONS TO REDUCE SOCIAL LOAFING IN GROUP ACTIVITIES OF COMPANIES

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Annotation

The article provides the managerial solutions, offered to eliminate the causes of social loafing identified in Lithuanian companies. The structure of classification of the problem areas is designed, showing the relationship between the problem areas identified by the scales of the instrument and possible alternative solutions to reduce the identified problems.

Key words: social loafing, group work, organization, managerial solutions.

Introduction

Relevance of the research and the level of problem exploration

Social loafing is a multifaceted problem, which attracts interest of both social psychologists and organizational management professionals, who are looking for ways to increase the efficiency of group activity. Various studies show that a person's social loafing is a natural phenomenon occurring in the areas where some kind of social activity takes place, and which requires concentrated efforts of the members of the group [33, 43]. More than a century ago it was noticed and described that as the size of a group increases the individual efforts of members of the group decrease [5]. This is also called the *Ringelmann Effect* which was later confirmed by many experiments [16, 25]. That is, a member of the group, while contributing less, aims to get more personal benefit from this activity [11, 6]. As Liden et al. (2004) [29] note, an increased interdependence of tasks at an individual level and a reduced visibility of the task and fairness of distribution are related to a greater social loafing. In addition, the fact that a larger size of the group and the reduced social cohesion are associated with the increased social loafing is highlighted at the level of the group. And while the first experiments carried out investigated physical contribution of a person to the activities of the group, subsequent studies have shown that social loafing is not less relevant in intellectual, creative activities of persons [20].

The prevalence of the phenomenon, regardless of age [e.g. 43, 39, 10] shows that this behaviour can be developed when acquiring new, more sophisticated skills, and/or area of human activity [13, 14, 35, 40, 5] and emphasizes the scale and significance of the problem, as it hinders the achievement of better results in activities of groups [28]. Therefore, the question of how to reduce the damage of social loafing to organizations, how this phenomenon can be controlled has been raised for more than a decade.

Results of researches show that social loafing in the organization does not have any single fundamental reason, but it is a complex consequence of individual psychological, value-related and organizational factors. Several groups of such factors, which highlight the problems of the organization to be solved, can be distinguished: the size of the work group [23]; employees' individual motivation [44, 30], ensuring the equality of employees in the assessment of the contribution of all employees [13, 14, 15], internal communication [27], the development of social relations of various nature [24, 35, 40, etc.], employees' social competence [32], quality of management and tasks [26, 28, etc.]. In addition, attention is drawn to the norms of the group, social and task cohesion, which shows a decreasing trend of social loafing [13, 14]. Another study, carried out with the students, showed that knowledge of team activities, understanding of the influence of personal behaviour on team activities significantly reduces both social loafing and conflict behaviour [37].

All of this shows the extremely wide range of factors, which must be considered in the organization in order to minimize the risk of social loafing and the resulting harm. For these reasons, the elimination of factors affecting social loafing, the reduction of a negative influence of the phenomenon on the performance of the individual and the whole group in the organization become a difficult management task. Although the problem of social loafing is relevant to representatives of different cultures, it cannot be denied that distinctive cultural traditions and management culture that influence both individual and group work are characteristic of organizations of distinct populations [8]. A number of studies of empirical and theoretical nature, which examined the problem of social loafing were carried out in Lithuania in recent years [17, 47, 48, 45]. However, research is not abundant and covers quite narrow separate areas, and this only emphasizes the relevance of the problem. Therefore, the **problem**

of the research is raised by the question: what are the managerial decisions to reduce social loafing in groups of companies?

Purpose of the research: to develop managerial solutions to eliminate the identified problem areas of social loafing found in groups of companies.

Objectives of the research: (1) to classify the problem areas, which have an influence on social loafing in the organization; (2) to propose managerial solutions to eliminate the causes of social loafing.

Methods of the research. Methods of analysis of academic literature, logical comparative analysis and analogy were applied during the research. The method of systemic analysis allowed the synthesis of approaches of various authors, assessments and interpretations of social loafing issues based on a logical abstraction with a view to develop managerial solutions to eliminate problem areas.

Solutions to eliminate the causes of social loafing in work groups

Solution of the problem of social loafing consists of two stages. At the first stage, on the basis of the analysis of academic literature, the problem areas of organizational activities, which encourage social loafing, are distinguished and classified. At the second stage, on the basis of results of empirical research, managerial solutions are offered. The managerial solutions presented in this article are based on the research, which was carried out in 2017 and surveyed the departments of 8 manufacturing companies, when departments were equal to groups. The groups that participate in the research consist of from 4 (min) to 11 (max) persons (i.e., two groups that consist of 4 employees; two groups of 5 employees; two groups of 6 employees and two groups of 11 employees [see more about the results of the research: [46].

Table 1

Classification of problem areas in respect of the scales and subscales of the research instrument

| Scales | Subscales | Code of the problem | Problem | Code of the solution |
|--|---|---|--|----------------------|
| Reputation, image, aims | Individual aspirations | A3.1. | Loafing of individuals because of the disposition to personal aims. | B3.1.1. |
| | Personal image, reputation | A3.2. | Loafing due to the inability to distinguish own personality from the group and unsatisfied need of personal image formation. | B3.2.1. |
| B3.2.2. | | | | |
| Social loafing | Activities not related to work | A1 | Social loafing in conditions of group work. | B1.1. |
| | Perceived social loafing | A2 | It is understood that there are some loafers among colleagues. | B2.1. |
| | | | | B2.2. |
| Identification of loafing | A3 | Disposition to loafing. | B3.1. | |
| Fairness | Role of the manager/leader | A3.3. | Loafing determined by an unclear role of the manager in the group. | B3.3.1. |
| | Fairness of the interaction (interaction with the supervisor/manager) | A3.4. | Loafing because of inappropriate behaviour of the manager (leader of the group). | B3.4.1 |
| | | | | B3.4.2. |
| Satisfaction with authority and governance | A3.5. | Negative approach towards the manager(s) and decisions the manager(s) make. | B3.5.1. | |
| Commitment | Commitment to the organization | A3.6. | Low employee commitment to the organization. | B3.6.1. |
| | Commitment to colleagues | A1.1. | Low employee commitment to colleagues. | B1.1.1. |
| Group support | Atmosphere of the group | A2.1. | Low employees' trust in colleagues. | B2.1.1. |
| | Cohesion of the group | A2.2. | Distrust in colleagues. | B2.2.1. |
| Group coherence | Group links | A1.2. | Relationships between colleagues do not exist. | B1.2.1. |
| | Group cooperation | A1.3. | The employees are not likely to help each other to achieve a common goal. | B1.3.1. |
| | Relationships within the group | A1.4. | Inconsistent relationships between members of the group. | B1.4.1. |
| Group results | Satisfaction with the work process | A1.5. | Satisfaction with the work process is not felt in the group, and there is no tendency to strive for great results. | B1.5.1. |

| Scales | Subscales | Code of the problem | Problem | Code of the solution |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|--|----------------------|
| | Satisfaction with the result of work | A1.6. | There is no satisfaction with the results in the group. | B1.6.1. |
| Competition vs. cooperation | Cooperation, collaboration | A2.3. | Members of the group are indisposed to cooperate and help one another. | B2.3.1. |
| | Orientation to achievement | A2.4. | Individuals are unwilling to achieve the best results. | B2.4.1. |
| | | | | B2.4.2. |

Source: prepared on the basis of: Karau, Williams (1991) [19], George (1992) [9], Karau, Williams (1993) [21], Karau, Williams (1997) [22], Chen, Bachrach (2003) [4], Ferrante *et al.* (2006) [7], Høigaard *et al.* (2006a, 2006b) [13, 14], Stark *et al.* (2007) [41], Suleiman, Watson (2008) [42], Bluhm (2009) [2], Hung *et al.* (2009) [15], Omar *et al.* (2010) [34], Barnes *et al.* (2011) [1], Woodman *et al.* (2011) [49], Luo *et al.* (2013) [31], Rubino *et al.* (2014) [36], Seitchik, Harkins (2014) [38], Chen *et al.* (2014) [3], Jones *et al.* (2014) [18], Lee *et al.* (2015) [28], Czyz *et al.* (2016) [5], Perry *et al.* (2016) [35], etc.

After identification of certain problem areas in groups of companies with the help of the items constituting the scales and subscales of the research instrument and following the prepared classification of solutions, a specific plan to eliminate identified problems can be drawn up.

Since 5 main problem areas have been identified in the research, in accordance with the summary of classification of problem areas presented in Table 1 (the detailed classification is given in Table 2), the action plan for the elimination of each problem area in the company is prepared.

Social loafing conditioned by perceived loafing. Respondents think that there are some loafers among their colleagues, so the perception of loafing through the “sucker effect” may encourage the remaining employees to engage in social loafing activities or to provoke the motives of revenge, directed both to colleagues and to the organization. In order to avoid (reduce) the impact of perceived social loafing on employees it is purposeful:

- To reduce the possibilities of loafing, emphasizing the significance of their work and goals to the employees [15];
- It is advisable to make the results of the contribution public and apply sanctions against the loafers [4]. The departments of the organization, which are characterized by a clear perceived social loafing, should increase visibility of the tasks by presenting the results of the groups for public comparison;
- The formation of the team, which emphasizes different aspects of the relationship combined with the rules of activities [14].

Strong influence of the role of the manager on the extent of social loafing in a company. In a company, the role of the manager for social loafing and the employees’ efforts has the strongest effect through the interaction with managers and the attitudes conditioned by the role of managers (i.e., the loafing can be determined by misbehaviour of the manager and under the influence of the unclear role of the manager in the group). In order to avoid (reduce) the impact of social loafing on employees of a company, it is purposeful:

- To identify the existing views and approaches of the managers of the company towards organization of work in work groups and motivation of employees;
- Identification of the managers’ attitudes (towards the current organization of work in groups), introduction of key problem areas of the organization that have been found;
- Training for the managers (especially at the middle management level) to improve relationships between employees, organizational climate and the relationship with subordinates.
- If the goals are not clear, the structure is not strict, if there is a lack of coordination and the employees don’t know how to complete the tasks, to oblige the managers of the groups to provide clear instructions, i.e. a directive leadership improving the employees’ satisfaction and performance [28];
- To foster cooperation of the managers and members of the group by committing the managers to form groups based on the coherence [7].

Weak employees’ emotional commitment to the organization. The commitment of employees to the company is not strong (especially among the young employees, and those

who work for the company for a short time). Organizational commitment reduces the extent of social loafing in organizations, thus, in order to reduce social loafing it is purposeful:

- To identify the reasons that determine the low level of employee commitment to the organization and to develop guidelines for preventive actions to increase the emotional commitment;
- To observe the employees' behaviours and identify the first signs of an intention to leave the organization on time (i.e. to increase the responsibilities of immediate superiors related to employee motivation, involvement and monitoring of these factors);
- To oblige the managers to seek to actively identify employees' intentions of turnover and reduce them by increasing the satisfaction with fairness and emotional commitment [31]. This means that the employees' trust in immediate superiors allowing to identify the employees' problems, provide possible alternative solutions to the problems before an employee makes the final decision to leave the organization must be strengthened.

Weak interrelationship of the staff and relationships that influence the reduction of group support and coherence. The tendency that employees maintain good relationships limited by the work environment has been revealed. During the research carried out it was found that the relationships between colleagues in the company are of moderate strength, and the employees are unwilling to establish friendships with co-workers. In accordance with the summary of classification presented in the table, the main solutions, which may strengthen the coherence of the employees and relationships within an organization, include the following:

- To organize team sports events, competitions, teambuilding trainings for employees of the organization. Previous team sports (and their code) experience of individuals affects the reduced social loafing, as the success achieved by the team is also the individual success of each member of the team [5];
- To foster strong social links in the organization, taking into account the interests of employees and the similarities between them. Social identity theory argues that the similarities encourage confidence, communication and mutuality between similar individuals, which results in strong social links (i.e. the relationship), positive attitudes and mutual support [35];
- To observe relationships between employees, responding accordingly to the situations determined by employees' relationships (i.e., to watch whether the employees' coherence does not reach the extreme level, when the employees are involved in other activities not related to work).

Weak employees' orientation to achievement in the departments creating the greatest added value to the company. It was found that the respondents are characterized by quite a strong disposition to cooperation, but striving for the best results is not typical. During the research it was often emphasised that the competitive situations do not motivate employees, but most employees like the feeling induced by achievement. In accordance with the classification presented in the table, the key solutions which may increase employees' willingness to achieve the very best results include the following:

- In organizations, it is important create the conditions for the groups to compete at the same level of capacity [12], i.e. to select and form equal groups. Competition between groups of the different level of capacity can lead to the reduced employees' efforts, based on the pessimistic forecasts when the employees accept the possible loss in advance, i.e. the employees do not see any point to compete with stronger rivals. Since not all members of the employees' work groups increase the efforts knowing that other colleagues are doing better, a detailed assessment of the situation and the conditions for comparison of results in respect of equal groups are necessary;
- The selection of employees to the groups, in which the important teamwork should take into account the employees' disposition to work in groups, and paying attention to whether the employee is characterised by orientation to achievement [41]. This is particularly relevant for the groups of employees whose performance results are the most important indicator of the activities of the organization (e.g., sales, production, etc.). It is advisable to evaluate the profiles of employees in the groups by applying various tests for the identification of the team roles, personal traits (e.g., Belbin Team Roles test, Myers Briggs Personality testing, etc.), and to (re)design the groups of employees on the basis of the results.

When drawing up an action programme to reduce (eliminate) the extent of social loafing in a company, these design solutions must be combined with design solutions of other problem areas.

Table 2

Classification of problem areas

| Subscales | Code of the problem | Problem | Source | Code of the solution | Solution |
|---|---------------------|--|------------------------|----------------------|---|
| Activities not related to work | A1 | Social loafing in conditions of group work | [2] | B1.1. | Solution: to monitor whether the conserved resources (energy stock) are transferred to the work activities. |
| | | | [9] | B1.2. | In the cases when the visibility of the task is low, employers are recommended to maintain a high level of involvement of employees. This can be done by redesigning tasks, communicating the importance of the tasks carried out for the success of the group and the entire organization to the employees. Also it should be noted that some of the work (tasks) can be very tedious, boring, but too simple to be worth redesigning them. In such cases, it is necessary to monitor the outcomes, to increase the visibility of the task, to form as small groups as possible, and to highlight the employees' responsibility for the tasks performed. |
| Perceived social loafing | A2 | It is understood that there are some loafers among colleagues. | [15] | B2.1. | The perceived loafing of colleagues causes revenge motives. Researchers suggested reducing the loafing opportunities for loafers by emphasising the significance of their work and objectives. |
| | | | [4] | B2.2. | Since the knowledge of members of the group about the loafers can affect their productivity (productivity of those who compensate), it is recommended to make the results of the contribution public and apply sanctions to the loafers. |
| | | | [14] | B2.3. | The research has confirmed that both the perceived productivity norms and perceived social support norms suppress the perception of social loafing. Productivity norms are related to the task-oriented motivation directed to performance and a high level of effort. Solution: teambuilding, which emphasizes different aspects of the relationship combined with activity norms. |
| Identification of loafing | A3 | Disposition to loafing. | [9] | B3.1. | In the cases when the visibility of the task is low, employers are recommended to maintain a high level of involvement of employees. This can be done by redesigning tasks, communicating the importance of the tasks carried out for the success of the group and the entire organization to the employees. Also it should be noted that some of the work (tasks) can be very tedious, boring, but too simple to be worth redesigning them. In such cases, it is necessary to monitor the outcomes, to increase the visibility of the task, to form as small groups as possible, and to highlight the employees' responsibility for the tasks performed. |
| Individual aspirations | A3.1. | Loafing of individuals because of the disposition to personal aims. | Prepared based on [49] | B3.1.1. | Solution: to increase the visibility of tasks and individual contribution of the groups, in which there are persons who are inclined to highlight their ego and individuality, by providing feedback for all groups; to introduce the system of incentives based on the possibility to form the desired image (the team of the month, the team leader of the month, etc.). |
| Personal image, reputation | A3.2. | Loafing because of unsatisfied need of personal image formation. | [36] | B3.2.1. | To create the environment where high performers should be mentors of "loafers" in the teams, which are characterized by a variety of activities. |
| | | | [42] | B3.2.2. | Feedback from all members of the group is necessary. Feedback may create the possibility of social comparison for all, and reduce loafing. |
| Role of the manager (leader) | A3.3. | Loafing determined by an unclear role of the manager in the group. | [28] | B3.3.1. | If the goals are not clear, the structure is not strict, there is a lack of coordination and the employees don't know how to complete the tasks, the leader should provide clear instructions, in this case a directive leadership will improve the employees' satisfaction and performance. |
| Fairness of the interaction (interaction with the supervisor / manager) | A3.4. | Loafing because of inappropriate behaviour of the manager (leader of the group). | [20] | B3.4.1 | To increase the coherence, cohesion between the employees and the degree to which the members of the group identify themselves with this group. |
| | | | [7] | B3.4.2. | The leaders, who treat team members with respect and take into account the proposals of the team members are more likely to face a better performance of their group members than the leaders who are rude with their group members and do not take into account the efforts of the group. Solution: to encourage cooperation of the leaders and members of the group by obliging the group leaders to form the groups based on coherence. |
| Satisfaction with authority and governance | A3.5. | Negative approach towards the manager(s) and decisions the manager(s) make. | [1] | B3.5.1. | Managers must understand what kind of behaviour they want to foster in each specific team task and apply the appropriate system of incentives. In the cases where precision and help to colleagues are less important than the speed and focus on individual contribution, mixed or individual reward system may be used. In the cases where precision and help to colleagues are crucial, a mixed reward system can cause the opposite effect than expected. |

| Subscales | Code of the problem | Problem | Source | Code of the solution | Solution |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------|--|---------------------------|----------------------|---|
| Commitment to the organization | A3.6. | Low employee commitment to the organization. | [31] | B3.6.1. | Organizational commitment reduces social loafing. Managers should seek to actively identify employees' intentions of turnover and reduce them by increasing the satisfaction with fairness and effective commitment. |
| Commitment to colleagues | A1.1. | Low employee commitment to colleagues. | [5] | B1.1.1. | Previous team sports (and their code) experience of individuals affects the reduced social loafing, as the success achieved by the team is also the individual success of each member of the team. Solution: to organize team sports events, competitions, teambuilding for employees of the organization. |
| Atmosphere of the group | A2.1. | Low employees' trust in colleagues. | [5] | B2.1.1. | Previous team sports (and their code) experience of individuals affects the reduced social loafing, as the success achieved by the team is also the individual success of each member of the team. Solution: to organize team sports events, competitions, teambuilding for employees of the organization. |
| Cohesion of the group | A2.2. | Distrust in colleagues. | [34] | B2.2.1. | Dehumanization is a significant predecessor of social loafing, as individuals who do not realize that interaction should be personalized and human generated fewer ideas than individuals with lower levels of dehumanization during the research. Solution: to weigh the costs related to the relocation of employees (in respect of distance) and losses because of decreased employees' productivity. When the distance between the employees is unavoidable, employers have to ensure that understanding of humanization would be maintained in groups (i.e., that the colleagues would understand about feelings, emotions, etc. of remote colleagues). To seek that the employees would know one another. |
| Group links | A1.2. | Relationships between colleagues do not exist. | [35] | B1.2.1. | Social identity theory argues that similarities encourage trust, communication and mutuality between similar individuals, which results in strong social links (i.e. the relationship), positive attitudes and mutual support. Solution: to encourage as much face-to-face employees' work as possible in order to form a strong social connections. |
| Group cooperation | A1.3. | The employees are not likely to help each other to achieve a common goal. | [41] | B1.3.1. | Selection of employees to the groups, in which teamwork is important, should be based on the employees' disposition to work in groups, and paying attention to whether the employee is characterised by orientation to achievement. |
| Relationships in the group | A1.4. | Inconsistent relationships between members of the group. | [35] | B1.4.1. | Social identity theory argues that similarities encourage trust, communication and mutuality between similar individuals, which results in strong social links (i.e. the relationship), positive attitudes and mutual support. Solution: to encourage as much face-to-face employees' work as possible in order to form a strong social connections. |
| Satisfaction with the work process | A1.5. | Satisfaction with the work process is not felt in the group, and there is no tendency to strive for great results. | [18] | B1.5.1. | Leader (acting as a coach) Solution: to enable members of the group to make more decisions; communicate with team members on a regular basis in order to avoid the formation of subgroups and identify problems at an early stage. To transfer responsibility for the maintenance of certain standards and requirements to the members of the group. To create opportunities for the group to improve focussing on improvement of colleagues' skills as well as on their own ones (team development tasks). To create opportunities to develop the team's coherence and interrelationship. To create a competitive environment (within the limits of common sense) that encourages the members of the group to get involved and feel satisfaction with work outcomes. |
| Satisfaction with the result of work | A1.6. | There is no satisfaction with the results in the group. | Prepared based on [3, 38] | B1.6.1. | Understanding of individuals that their tasks are important and unique is important. This is confirmed by the fact that the results of participants, who are given a complex aim, surpass those who are simply asked to do the job as good as they can. Solution: to communicate to the members of the group about the importance and meaning of the tasks carried out. |
| Cooperation, collaboration | A2.3. | Members of the group are indisposed to cooperate and help one another. | [5] | B2.3.1. | Previous team sports (and their code) experience of individuals affects the reduced social loafing, as the success achieved by the team is also the individual success of each member of the team. Solution: to organize team sports events, competitions, teambuilding for employees of the organization. |
| Orientation to achievement | A2.4. | Individuals are unwilling to achieve the best results. | Prepared based on [12] | B2.4.1. | Solution: create the conditions for the groups to compete at the same level of capacity, i.e. to select and form equal groups. |
| | | | [41] | B2.4.2. | Selection of employees to the groups, in which teamwork is important, should be based on the employees' disposition to work in groups, and paying attention to whether the employee is characterised by orientation to achievement. |

Conclusions

This article contributes to the development of knowledge about the causes of social loafing in work organizations and the ways to overcome the problem by applying management interventions. Three main problem areas that create conditions for social loafing to thrive in groups of the organization have been distinguished: the individual employees' disposition to social loafing, the quality of managing people and the quality of relationships between the employees (social cohesion). These problem areas overlap in group activities, and the main responsibility falls on the management, the task of whom is to highlight the expedience of work tasks and individual achievements, at the same time applying sanctions to social loafers. The research has shown that managers often lack competence in dealing with the issues of motivation, organizational climate, employees' social cohesion, employees' commitment to the organization, and other issues that can be addressed by providing for training programs to the management staff. In addition, the closer relationship of the management and employees is necessary in order to identify employees' behaviors that present risk, as well as to ensure greater confidence in the development of the organizational justice. The other two essential directions of change should be focused on the strengthening of the relationship between the employees by organising joint activities and improving internal communication, as well as the strengthening of employees' orientation to achievements, accompanied by redesigning of groups, taking into account individual characteristics. This means that the management systems should be improved taking into account the impact on the internal dynamics of the group, and changes should become a permanent feature, which has a preventive effect on social loafing.

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