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Teamwork is not always the best way of working – new study

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Social Skills / Teamwork

Take-Aways

- Contrary to popular belief, teams don't always outperform individuals.
- “Social loafing” – that is, a failure of one or more team members to contribute a fair share of the work – sabotages the team's results.
- Boost performance with social learning, coordination and the strategic use of teams.

Recommendation

The prevailing wisdom, rooted in the belief that “collective intelligence” trumps individual intelligence, says that team efforts outshine solo attempts. But Taha Yasseri, a sociology professor at University College Dublin, shares research from a new study that challenges this assumption. He explains how to anticipate “process losses” when working in teams, and he offers insights into underperformance. Discover how to harness the benefits of teamwork, and explore why working alone is often more beneficial.

Summary

Contrary to popular belief, teams don’t always outperform individuals.

Collaborative teamwork dominates the modern workplace due to the rapid progress of communication technology since the turn of the century. Moreover, organizations deem teamwork’s collective intelligence to be of greater value than the sum of its parts – that is, the combined intelligence of its discrete contributors. Harnessing collective intelligence supposedly enables teams to increase performance by boosting “task accuracy” (finding better solutions) and “task efficiency” (finding effective solutions faster). But research shows that collaboration has limits, as sometimes the costs associated with coordination dwarf the benefits.

“If ‘two heads are better than one’ suggests the benefits of collaboration, ‘too many cooks spoil the broth’ suggests the opposite.”

Researcher Taha Yasseri led a study comparing teamwork with solo efforts, which revealed that individuals working alone – with either generalist or specialist knowledge – often perform better than collaborative pairs. Using webcam photos from Gorongosa National Park (sourced through WildCam Gorongosa, a citizen science project), the researchers asked participants to work in teams of two to complete tasks related to describing images, such as identifying animal species and their behaviors. The researchers gave some participants expert training and gave other participants generalist training. The study found that while teams of experts outperformed teams of generalists overall, individuals working alone tended to deliver better results: A single generalist working alone could best a team of generalists, as well as a mixed team containing an expert and a generalist, while a single expert could outdo two experts.

Meanwhile, the study found that the presence of an expert on the team improved the team’s accuracy but slowed down its decision-making. For simple tasks, the inclusion of an expert offered no advantage. In fact, the time that team members spent coordinating with each other exceeded the benefit of having an expert on the team.

“Social loafing” – that is, a failure of one or more team members to contribute a fair share of the work – sabotages the team’s results.

Underperformance in groups occurs due to “process losses,” a term social psychologists use to describe how the cumulative characteristics of certain team members can result in decreased performance. For example, teams can undergo a “herding effect” when members whose confidence exceeds their competence overly

influence decision-making. Additionally, social biases, whether conscious or unconscious, can contribute to process losses, negatively impacting decision-making.

“While collaboration offers benefits in specific contexts, it is essential to consider the trade-offs between time, accuracy and efficiency. Coordination comes at a cost.”

Teams must also be wary of what psychologists call “social loafing,” which occurs when one or more group members shirk their share of the work because they believe that others will step up and contribute on their behalf. If enough team members engage in social loafing, the team’s efforts may produce worse results than the sum of the solo efforts.

Boost performance with social learning, coordination and the strategic use of teams.

Work toward sustainable and consistent performance results by doing the following:

- **Harness the benefits of social learning** – Research participants in this experiment didn’t have the opportunity to engage in social learning, which occurs when individuals learn by watching their teammates complete tasks. When groups work together on longer projects, members can benefit from social learning.
- **Context matters** – Bear in mind that teams will have different dynamics and needs if they are coordinating remotely as opposed to face-to-face, which can shift the cost of collaboration.
- **Know when to ditch the team approach** – For simpler tasks, especially those that don’t require complex problem-solving and creative solutions, a cost-benefit analysis will likely reveal that the time you’ll waste in coordinating group work outweighs individual efficiency.

About the Author

Taha Yasseri is a sociology professor at the University College Dublin, and a former University of Oxford senior research fellow in computational social science.



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