

## The truth about inefficiency

'You don't procrastinate, or miss appointments, or fail to communicate with your spouse because you're an idiot who doesn't realise there's a better way. You do it because there's a hidden benefit you're getting'



A few months back, the sci-fi author John Scalzi "finally did what I should have done about four years ago," as he put it on his blog: he broke up with voicemail. "I will never ever ever ever listen to the voicemail you're about to leave," his mobile message now says, "because voicemail is a pain in the ass. So if you actually want to reach me, you can either send me a text or email." Hatred of voicemail is nothing new, but it seems to be building. Surveys keep finding that millions of messages are ignored; one firm concluded that about a third go unheard for at least three days. Increasingly, I return missed calls without bothering to listen to messages, which irritates some friends – but who's got time to sit through endless instructions (stop telling me how to play my messages and just play them, goddammit!) when the message will inevitably require a call back anyway? Voicemail transcription services such as hullomail.com ease the pain a bit. But in an era of superfast messaging, you'd be forgiven for wondering why something as lumberingly inefficient and tedious as voicemail still exists.

Well, here's one good reason: it's profitable. In 2009, the New York Times columnist David Pogue calculated that American networks were making around a billion dollars a year by charging for those extra seconds of blather ("When you have finished recording, you may hang up") and many British networks do the same. In other words, inefficiency is subjective: what's experienced as inefficiency by me or you is perfectly efficient, actually, just so long as you're a phone company and your goal is making money. Voicemail thus has much in common with "dark patterns", a term coined by the tech consultant Harry Brignull, to refer to the sneaky ways in which websites "trick users into doing things they might not otherwise do, [such as] signing up for recurring bills". As with voicemail, these often look like incompetent design, but they're not. An example: on an iPhone, at least until iOS 7, it was incredibly hard to find the option to stop advertisers tracking your browsing. Why? It was meant to be. What feels like tiresome inefficiency, born of sloppiness, really arises because it serves someone's interests.

This point, that inefficiency is in the eye of the beholder, is one strikingly often ignored by purveyors of management advice and productivity tips. Suppose you're facing some inefficiency, such as an organisation slowed down by overlong meetings. It's tempting to conclude that all you need to do is devise a better way, then impose it. But what if those interminable meetings are an overburdened department's strategy for holding off more work? Or a needy employee's trick for grandstanding before an audience? No clever schemes for making meetings shorter will get far if sufficient people don't want it to happen.

In terms of personal psychology, the key concept here is the "payoff". You don't procrastinate, or miss appointments, or fail to communicate with your spouse because you're an idiot who doesn't realise there's a better way. You do it because there's a hidden benefit you're getting. And just as you'll never understand the persistence of voicemail's awfulness without asking who benefits, you'll never solve the procrastination problem, or the meetings problem, or whatever, until you figure out what that hidden something is.