



# How to Avoid Non-Value Added Activities at Your Organization

By Mark Nyman

**B**etween my first and second year of graduate school, I was fortunate to land an internship with a Fortune 50 company. It was a great learning experience that did much to prepare me for my career. One of the events from my internship that stands out in my mind was an interaction with a senior executive who was openly considered to be next in line for the CEO position. He was a very bright individual who was both respected and gracious.

My boss and I met with him and another member of his team to review a development program that was being rolled out. His feedback was helpful, direct, and provided several ideas for program modifications. Near the end of the conversation, as the executive was leaving the conference room, he shared a few additional possible tweaks to the program in an off-handed way. To me, it seemed that he was thinking out loud and that there were no more activities to be done.

The next morning, I was surprised when my boss and co-worker called me into an unscheduled meeting to respond to the comments the executive had made as the meeting ended. During the next several weeks the three of us spent a tremendous amount of time building presentations and thinking through implementation options to add value and present the next time we met with the executive in direct response to those off-handed comments. As it turned out, the topic never came up again and our work was never presented or utilized.

Since that experience, I have seen the same phenomenon play out countless times in a number of different companies. **I have come to think of this as the “just in case” phenomenon.** Comments are made or emails are interpreted in a certain way, a whole bunch of work ensues, and no one is sure if it is really needed or desired.

The “just in case” phenomenon occurs more often in organizations where leaders expect their direct reports to have answers to all possible questions that might come up in a given meeting or presentation, but it is not exclusive to these climates. In almost every organization I have worked with in over 30 years, well intended (and sometimes very ambitious) employees devote significant time so they will be prepared, “just in case” a topic or question comes up.

Organizations sometimes adopt the “just in case” phenomenon to implement business policies. In one organization an individual received a minor cut on their hand while doing a daily procedure that was done in multiple locations multiple times a day. No one had ever been previously hurt doing this procedure but the singular event led to a new mandated and time-consuming process that overall was a significant slowdown in how work got done.

I was also part of an organization that implemented a very onerous process for submitting expenses because of a concern that a very small percentage of employees were taking advantage of the company. The new protocol was a time-consuming, non-value added process which made more work for the majority.

Being prepared and proactive are good things. In areas of safety and risk management, working through “just in case” scenarios and having “just in case” policies/processes is critical. However, in many organizations it goes to an extreme and comes with a very high cost. It causes employees to spend a tremendous amount of time guessing what supervisors want, creating hypothetical answers, and preparing back-up information so leaders can appear prepared and in control of their organization.

Often the results of the “just in case” phenomenon cause process steps that slow everyone down. In some cases, 99% of the workforce is hindered because of a business policy aimed at 1% of the workforce or 1% of the situations. It reduces strategic, organizational, and individual agility and slows down decision making. It also reinforces micro-management and contributes greatly to employee disengagement. While this happens in companies of all sizes, there are things leaders can do to avoid it.

**What can leaders do to avoid non-value added activities and ensure unnecessary time and effort is not wasted in their organizations:**

1. Be clear in advance of meetings about what people need to be well versed in and also what is not needed.
2. Make it acceptable for people to not have answers to questions or curiosities that are not central to the topic by prefacing these types of questions clearly. Deliberately saying “I don’t expect you to know the answer to this right now, but I’d appreciate it if you could look into it and let me know” can save hours of non-value added time in the future.
3. Be explicit about what to follow up on and what to not worry about when you have curiosities or secondary questions. Take the time to followup a curiosity or secondary question that clarifies your expectations. Taking the time to clarify with a phrase like “I’m not asking you to look into this just yet, I’m just thinking about it. I’ll let you know if I think it deserves additional exploration” helps everyone know what you’re expecting.
4. Be careful not to reward or praise people for knowing every detail about everything.
5. Deal directly with problem employees instead of making non-value added policies that are not helpful for the majority.

6. Measure outcomes, not activities. Rewarding or recognizing people by the amount of work they do instead of the quality of the outcomes they achieve encourages employees to find “just in case” work that they can be rewarded for.

In our work we are often asked to help companies identify non-value added work. The assumption is that most non-value added work is unneeded steps in a process or perhaps a process or output that is outdated. I submit that the most frequent type of non-value added activities is the “just in case” work that is pervasive in many organizations.

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