

## Meet the Slackkeys

By Jeffrey Jolton, Ph.D., Kenexa

Organizations are made up of individuals. Although these individuals tend to act normally and productively, some react adversely to the specific roles and situations they face at work. At any level of an organization, you will find individuals who impede productivity and success through their interactions. Consequently, people can be dysfunctional at work in many different ways. Perhaps those who irk the most people are those who do the least work.

The worst of these offenders is the individual who remains committed to staying at the company, but isn't engaged. That is, he or she does not make a meaningful contribution, and isn't going anywhere.

You know exactly who these individuals are. You wonder, "Why are you here?" You cringe when you find out they are included on your project team. Some appear quite content, just non-productive. They just exist, occupying space in your organization. Other problem people fall at the opposite end of the satisfaction scale, complaining about anything and everything, but never proposing solutions or taking action to make it better.

### Meet the Slackkeys

*Happy Slackkeys* are those who harbor no real dissatisfaction with the company. They just come to work, punch the proverbial (or literal) clock, and maintain some level of minimally acceptable job performance. They are friendly and pleasant, but don't really contribute anything. They don't see any issue with their behavior. In fact, they are shocked, to receive feedback that they aren't meeting performance standards.

*Whiney Slackkeys* are those who are dissatisfied. These are the employees with an attitude problem. Unlike their content brethren, these employees complain about everything—whether it's real or

not—that is wrong with the company. Nothing is good enough. Management never makes the right decisions. Problems that arise are always someone else's fault. These are the people who, if you ask, "How are things going?" you get the response, "Awful, as usual." Despite their perception that all is wrong in the world, they do little to make things better or more positive. Why should they? The joy they get is in making the rest of the world look bad.

It is important to distinguish between the gripes of Whiney Slackkeys and the legitimate criticisms of engaged individuals. Some truly engaged individuals also make constructive, critical comments about their organization. They are engaged enough to want to make a difference. These individuals, however, are working to be part of the solution. They offer suggestions for improvement, take initiative and actually work to make the situation better. You want these people in your company—they are engaged, action-oriented, and want the best for the organization. Whiney Slackkeys are none of these things.

Slackkeys are allowed to flourish when organizations fail to hold people accountable for standards of performance, fail to provide honest and direct feedback about performance, and fail to communicate clear standards of performance. Slackkeys often fly just under the poor performance radar. They aren't your worse performers because they don't want to leave the organization. They are committed to staying as long as they can. They just aren't going to make a real contribution.

As a result, companies end up reinforcing the Slackkeys through neglect and avoidance. For a manager, these are difficult people to engage and motivate. The Happy Slackkey is pleasant and their good cheer makes it difficult for some managers to have performance discussions with them. The Whiney Slackkey is caustic in attitude and people tend to avoid them.

Slackkeys won't walk out the door, so you have to document performance issues if the organization would benefit without them. After appropriate warnings and opportunities to do better, show any Slackkey the door if his or her performance doesn't improve. Some Slackkeys are victims of their environment, and when put in the right role, are motivated to do more. Others will never improve. As a manager, you have to give it your best try, but realize you are paying the Slackkey when you could be using the same salary to pay another productive worker, or give a raise to the other workers who make up the slack.

You can also make sure those you hire have characteristics that fit with your organization, which will make them less likely to be Slackkeys. These individuals tend to behave and think quite differently from productive performers. Knowing that these differences exist can help you avoid hiring Slackkeys.

Finally, Slackkeys can exist at all levels of the organization. Some are very skilled at hiding their incompetence or weak performance. Others are carried forward by systems that don't recognize real performance, or promote people to "get them out of here."

Watch out for the Slackkeys. They will drain your resources, and in some cases your personal energy. Recognize them for what they are—weak performers—and encourage them to move on.

### Does Your Work Environment Breed Slackkeys?

Which of the following phrases could be heard in your organization?

- The only time people hear anything about their work performance is at their annual performance review.
- Performance review? What performance review?
- Yes, he has an attitude problem, but what can you do?
- I don't know what our company objectives for the year are. Should I?
- We hired her because she is such a nice person.
- I should probably talk to him about it, but he is so caustic I rather just avoid him.
- Everybody gets a bonus!
- She has been here three years, so it was just time for a promotion.
- Our employees complain, but we don't hold them accountable to help make things better.
- I'm too busy doing my job to deal with my direct report's whining.
- Oh I suppose I should fire him, but he is a good person, he just doesn't perform.
- She seems to have a lot of potential, but we just can't seem to get her to do more than status quo.
- He didn't really meet her performance goals, but I gave her a pass anyway.
- Performance goals? What performance goals?
- Why doesn't she just leave if she is so unhappy here?

### Scoring

***If Less Than Four Apply to Your Organization:*** You probably have a good performance-oriented environment that holds people accountable for performance and provides regular feedback. Poor and marginal performers probably get the feedback they need to know where they stand. Risk for breeding slackkeys is low.

### ***If Four to Eight Apply to Your Organization:***

You have some good things in place, but need to identify areas where you can enhance communications and processes that promote high performance. Build on your strengths, but address those areas of weakness. Risk for breeding slackkeys is moderate, and growing.

### ***If More Than Eight Apply to Your Organization:***

Your organization has too many loop holes that allows for marginal or poor performance. Objectives are not clear, poor performers are treated the same as high performers, and managers don't see managing performance as part of their "real jobs." Best place to start is by building in more structure to your performance management process and develop managers to do more coaching and feedback as part of their job (and get rid of those slackkey managers while you're at it). Risk for breeding slackkeys is high and hazardous to the health of your business. ■

### About the Author

#### Jeffrey A. Jolton, Ph.D.

Jeffrey A. Jolton, Ph.D., is the director of global services at Kenexa, overseeing the project management and thought leadership for many of Kenexa's largest global survey projects. Dr. Jolton has more than 15 years of extensive consulting experience, which have made him a leading expert in assessment-based organizational change. He has applied his innovative and insightful guidance to number of global businesses including Accenture, CVS, Ernst & Young, HSBC, Johnson Controls and PricewaterhouseCoopers.

Dr. Jolton is a regular presenter at numerous professional conferences and has more than 25 publications in professional and scientific journals. Recent topics of his works include understanding dysfunctional organizations, global truths about employee engagement, the role of critical thinking in strategic planning and behavior change across the global spectrum. He holds a Doctorate and a Master of Science degree in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from Ohio University.

[www.kenexa.com](http://www.kenexa.com)  
866.391.9557