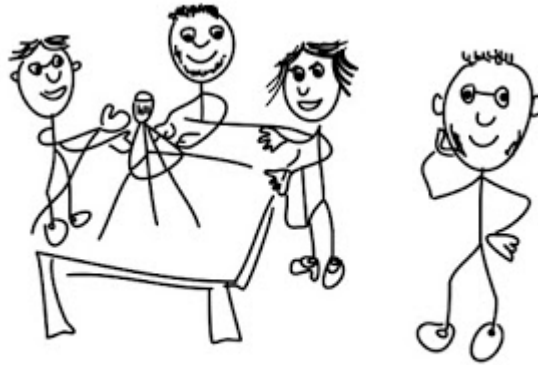


# Lazy team members ... about social loafing and ways to prevent it in your teams

 [ontheagilepath.net/2016/01/lazy-team-members-about-social-loafing-and-ways-to-prevent-it-in-your-teams.html](https://ontheagilepath.net/2016/01/lazy-team-members-about-social-loafing-and-ways-to-prevent-it-in-your-teams.html)

By Sebastian Radics



Some years ago I was presented with an interesting article describing the social loafing effect.

Social loafing is the phenomenon of people exerting less effort to achieve a goal when they work in a group than when they work alone.



It was referenced directly by the CEO and chosen as argumentation against teams (maybe against bigger teams).

During the last month I stumbled upon that topic two times again while reading the great books Team Genius and The Art of Thinking Clearly .

Time to read more about it and to share my insights and opinion with you.

## My experience in teams

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The first time I encountered laziness in a team constellation was during my studies when we had to solve a longer running (some weeks) programming task. We worked in a group of 3 and it was amazing to watch one team member taking a free ride while me and the 3rd team member did all the work.

I made the complete opposite experience when I was playing handball in former years. What a level of engagement by everyone. It was a question of honor and membership to win the game and to train hard on a daily base.

No one took a free ride and in case there was a sign in this direction the team had integrated ways to solve it.

During my professional career I worked in many teams so far. In my experience I did not encounter social loafing effects when there was a motivated, not too easy to fulfill goal for the team and a setting of team members with high alignment and willingness to achieve that goal.

I worked in lousy environments too – but social loafing (if you can name it like that, I guess demotivation would be the better term) was a consequence by missing motivation through missing goals and orientation and often meaningless work.

## Some more background on social loafing

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Social loafing is also known as the Ringelmann effect named after Ringelmann's experiments (1913) who found that having group members work together on a task (e.g., pulling a rope) actually results in significantly less effort than when individual members are acting alone. (in his experiments it was not clearly distinguished whether the reduction was due to extra coordination efforts or less engagement).

Further explanations by Alan Ingham concluded that social loafing is based on motivation deficits, team design, task and team size.

Causes of social loafing stem from an individual feeling that one's effort will not matter to the group.

Individuals who are more motivated are more likely to engage in social facilitation (that is, to increase one's efforts when in the presence of others) whereas those who are less motivated are more likely to engage in social loafing. (Karau and Williams 1993, 2001)

Social facilitation can be defined as a tendency for individuals to perform differently when in the mere presence of others. Specifically, individuals perform better on simpler or well-rehearsed tasks and perform worse on complex or new ones.

Individuals are more likely to loaf when their co-workers are expected to perform well and when individual inputs are not identifiable (based on Bibb Latane).

On the other hand “individuals reduce social loafing when working with acquaintances and do not loaf at all when they work in highly valued groups” (Karau and Williams 1993).

## How can social loafing be prevented – 16 suggestions?

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According to Dr. Erich H. Witte preventions are:

- identifiable contributions – the individual’s contribution is still visible
- the individual’s contribution is valued (and not removed and valued by having too much redundancy, making the individual seem to be less important)
- tasked to be performed must have a meaning
- there is a slight competition among team members
- increasing the individual’s identification with the team
- show the value of being a team and the team results (e.g. by using the NASA game)
- small group sizes (following e.g. the magical team size numbers) – in smaller groups, each member will feel that their contribution will add greater value. Breaking up a big project into smaller components can be beneficial (as we anyway aim for in agile projects)
- a team works on complex tasks (not for every task we need a team working on it)
- having a gender mix
- the results depend on everyone’s contribution
- the team has clear and motivating goals (e.g. by following the 10 steps workshop to define great team goals)
- motivation is kept high (e.g. by learning more about everyone’s drivers for motivation using the moving motivators game)

### From other sources

- Peer evaluations: Peer evaluations send a signal to group members that there will be consequences for non-participation. It has been found that as the number of peer evaluations during a project go up, the incidence of social loafing goes down.
- Three Cs of motivation for groups to get a group moving: *collaboration, content and choice*
  - *collaboration* – get everyone involved in the group by assigning each member special, meaningful tasks
  - *content* – identifies the importance of the individual’s specific tasks within the group
  - *choice* – gives the group members the opportunity to choose the task they want to fulfill. Allowing group members the freedom to choose their role makes social loafing less significant, and encourages the members to work together as a team.
- Also, challenging and difficult tasks reduce social loafing.
- Social loafing is also reduced when individuals are involved in group work and their rewards are received as a team, rather than individually.

### My conclusion

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Important to know social loafing and social facilitation effects.

Imho it's a further argumentation why building agile team environments and considering complexity is the way to go. It addresses many of the suggested preventions like goals, small projects, intrinsic motivation, small team sizes and diversity.

As soon as we assume there are lazy teams members it's time to check for a better environment and ask what keeps them from being highly motivated and engaged. Time for suggesting the next coaching session 😊

What is your experience. Do you know free riders and what are you doing about it? How do you keep teams motivated? Thanks for sharing your insights with your highly welcome comment 😊

## Further readings

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- [Social loafing](#)



- [Social facilitation](#)
- [Great presentation](#) from the university of Hamburg by Prof. Dr. Erich H. Witte
- A [video course describing social loafing](#)