



ARMY OF ONE
Pfizer's Cohen has radically streamlined employees' productivity.

SCUTTling SCUT WORK

Pfizer devises a new kind of outsourcing—just for the time-wasting parts of your job.

By Arianne Cohen

COME 3 P.M. EACH DAY, workers staring at computer screens everywhere share the same dream: a magic button that says **CLICK HERE, AND SOMEONE ELSE WILL DO THIS ANNOYING PROJECT FOR YOU.**

PS: BY 9 A.M. TOMORROW.

Starting this month, that button will become a reality for 10,000 Pfizer employees, though their button actually says **oof**, short for **Office of the Future**. "Our Harvard MBA staff was spending a lot of time doing 'support' work, not their actual jobs," says

Jordan Cohen, senior director of organizational effectiveness. "These are people we hired to develop strategies and innovate. Instead, they were Googling and making PowerPoints."

Who is at the other end of that magic button? Two outsourcing companies in India. Their existence is an extension of the booming Indian outsourcing market, which already handles customer-service and computer programming for U.S. companies, as well as concierge services for executives

Photograph by Mark Mahaney

too busy to answer email and arrange for dry-cleaning. But Pfizer's move is an acknowledgment that companies are wasting resources by saddling their most-prized workers with their own support work.

OOF was born of a financial crisis. In 2005, Pfizer announced a \$4 billion annual budget cut to counterbalance the expiration of lucrative drug patents. The company later laid off 10% of its workforce. "It was going to be pretty traumatic," Cohen says. "Were we just going to tighten our belts, or work differently?"

At the time, Cohen was reading Thomas Friedman's *The World Is Flat*, which profiles India's virtual-assistant companies. After analyzing the activities of Pfizer employees, he learned that they spend 20% to 40% of their time on four activities: creating documents, manipulating and analyzing spreadsheets, scheduling meetings, and researching. So he called the companies in Friedman's book. Could they do this stuff? He found hundreds of operations, many with thousands of employees, specializing in so-called knowledge-process outsourcing—dealing with information and data. He rounded up 30 adventurous souls at Pfizer for a test-drive with four employees at OfficeTiger in Chennai.

The initial test run didn't work well. Assignments came back unusable, sometimes marred with typos, and with data incorrectly analyzed. Cohen realized that the problem stemmed from Pfizer employees not specifying what they ultimately needed, and the Indian companies struggling with multistep projects. He spent months breaking complex Pfizer projects into repeatable tasks and training both sides to handle them. On a trip to India, he learned that OfficeTiger was decentralized and fragmented—the graphics people on one floor and the research people on another. OfficeTiger proposed a team system, putting a dozen skilled workers in one room and passing the project around repeatedly. "I didn't think it would work," Cohen says. "There were too many handoffs."

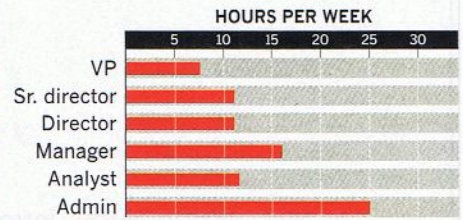
HOW MUCH WORK CAN YOU OFF-LOAD?

Pfizer conducted internal studies to find out just how much time its talent was losing on menial tasks and how much of that work it could outsource.

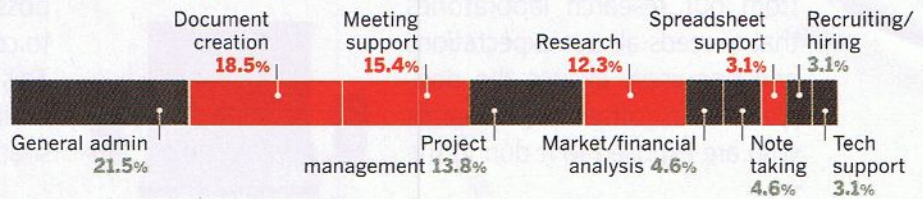
THE PROBLEM The average Pfizer employee spent too much time on support work.



THE PLAYERS Even the highest-level employees were affected.



THE SOLUTION Employees were asked to identify the type of work for which they most needed help. Red indicates tasks addressed by the OOF program.



But it did work, and the pilot took off. Word spread through Pfizer's towers, until the program included 200 employees. Meanwhile, Cohen worked to create a simple interface; now, when a Pfizer employee clicks the OOF button in Microsoft Outlook, a single triage worker in India receives the request and assigns it to a team, and the team leader calls the employee to clarify the larger purpose. The team leader then sends back an email specifying the cost. "At this point, the Pfizer employee can say yes or no," Cohen says. "That's the ultimate measure: Is this research project worth \$750?" The verb "OOFable" entered the lexicon of Pfizer's pilot users.

The benefits of OOF are unexpected. It's not a time-saver in the sense that employees can knock off at 2:30 p.m. Instead, people do more in a set period. "Rather than spending six months analyzing a segment to understand whether it's a market opportunity," says Nancy Steele, executive director of new business development, "we spend closer to three months." She recently OOFed a four-week research project on the blood-substitute market, which would

have bogged her down for months.

The financial benefits are also impressive. "When questions come in, like who are the key players in the stem-cell market, often I would hire external consultants," says Kristin Peck, head of worldwide strategic planning. "OOF does the same work for me at one-tenth the cost. It's sort of mini-internal consulting, for very specific questions." For OOF services, Pfizer pays \$15 to \$35 per worker hour, far less than they'd pay the McKinseys of the world, whose rates typically start at \$215 per hour.

Pfizer is alone in rolling out a large-scale knowledge-outsourcing program, but many companies are experimenting within individual departments. And U.S. conglomerates have started to scoop up outsourcing companies. RR Donnelley acquired OfficeTiger in 2006; Genpact, which Pfizer has also worked with, is 22% owned by GE.

Pfizer employees, though, don't care about such corporate machinations. They are simply smitten—particularly during budget season, when everyone suddenly needs a PowerPoint presentation. "It's kind of amazing," Cohen says. "I wonder what they used to do." **FC**