

# How passive 'face time' affects perceptions of employees: Evidence of spontaneous trait inference

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## Abstract

We examine how passive 'face time' (i.e. the amount of time one is passively observed, without interaction) affects how one is perceived at work. Findings from a qualitative study of professional office workers suggest that passive face time exists in two forms: 1) being seen at work during normal business hours – or *expected face time*, and 2) being seen at work outside of normal business hours – or *extracurricular face time*. These two forms of passive face time appear to lead observers to make *trait inferences* (i.e. they lead observers to perceive employees as either 'dependable' or 'committed', depending on the form of passive face time). Findings from an experimental study confirm our qualitative findings and suggest that trait inferences are made spontaneously (i.e. without intent or knowledge of doing so). We discuss the implications of our findings for theories of person perception and the practice of performance appraisal.

## Keywords

face time, performance appraisal, person perception, trait inferences

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## Introduction

About two years ago, Wayne Weita, a 33-year-old producer and director in the media department at Management Recruiters, began going to work at 8 a.m. instead of everyone's usual 8:30 a.m. start time. He takes a half-hour lunch, then leaves at 4:30. He started this schedule so he could get his 18-month-old son to and from the babysitter's house on time. He admits that he still occasionally feels as though he needs to slither out so no one sees him leaving early: 'Sometimes, if I'm at the elevator and someone's going downstairs for a drink or candy bar, I do try to throw a reason [for leaving early] into the conversation subtly' (Joyce, 2002: H06).

As this quote illustrates, employees' display of 'face time' at work can affect how others perceive them (Alley, 1997; Munk, 2001). The term face time is widely used in the popular business press to mean either 1) the amount of face-to-face interaction that occurs between employees and relevant others, or 2) the amount of time an employee is merely seen at work or around the office. The first definition – face-to-face interaction – is typically used when discussing how to improve effectiveness in work groups (e.g. initial face time between project group members is critical to developing trust), or in improving client relations (e.g. sales executives need to get more face time with their clients if they are to fully understand their needs; Gilbert, 2004). The second definition – merely being seen at work – is typically used when discussing how an employee can improve his or her impression on others (e.g. extensive face time in the office is crucial for new employees who want to be seen as hard workers; Ryan, 2005). Thus, the first usage of the term face time is more interactive and dynamic, while the second usage is more passive and observational (see Table 1 for popular press evidence and illustrations of both usages).

**Table 1** Definitions of 'face time' in the popular business press: 1999–2009

Definition of 'face time'	Examples
Interacting face-to-face	<p>Corporate high flyers still take to the skies: 'Virtual' meetings are hampered by uneven technology and a bias towards face time ... most people continue to prefer the relative anonymity of an email message or telephone call for routine conversations and physical face-to-face meetings for important business discussions. (Taylor, 4 April 2002)</p> <p>Amid budget cuts and lay-offs, the chief executives of some of the largest US companies say they need to use their aircraft more, not less. The buzzphrase is 'face time' – with customers, employees and potential partners. (Hill, 12 May 2001)</p> <p>Offices will be mostly used for 'face time' – when you really need to meet someone. Companies will be smaller and more specialized, so many of these meetings will be with external experts who will be brought in as necessary (Stuart, 25 September 2004)</p> <p>In the mayor's office, as in his business career, Michael Bloomberg knows that some deals can be made over the telephone, others over coffee. Very important matters sometimes require days of face-time. Which is why Mr Bloomberg recently spent two days in Croatia, personally submitting</p>

**Table 1** (Continued)

Definition of 'face time'	Examples
Interacting face-to-face	New York's bid for the 2012 Olympics and then sitting through long international Olympic committee meetings. (Grimes, 11 December 2004)
Being passively observed at work or around the office	<p>My company is big on 'face time' and it's impossible to get ahead here if you don't stay at work until at least 6 p.m. every night. (Duxbury, 23 April 1999)</p> <p>But as one woman said, her New York firm told her at a review that she needed to hang around the office a bit more. 'I'm working 80 hours a week, on the road most of the time. Do you just want face time?' she asked incredulously. (Joyce, 23 June 2002)</p> <p>Full-time consultants typically work up to 50 or 60 hours a week, but they're not expected to, and even discouraged from, spending all that time in the office. 'We're actively discouraging face time for the sake of face time. It's about results and outcomes,' says Kilian Berz, Toronto-based partner and managing director at Boston Consulting Group of Canada. (Grant, 7 February 2009)</p> <p>Although access to technology is often viewed as the key ingredient of an increasingly dispersed 'any time, any place' work environment, our research shows that workplace attitudes and management practices – such as measuring employee performance by long on-site hours or 'face time' – can be greater obstacles to remote work. (<i>The Boston Globe</i>, 11 November 2001)</p> <p>I define [face time] as the love some managers have for the sight of workers sitting dutifully at their desks hour after hour. (Ryan, 22 April 2005)</p>

In this article, we focus solely on the second usage – *passive face time* – which we define as *the amount of time one is passively observed (i.e. without any interpersonal interaction) at the work site*. Examples of passive face time include being seen sitting at one's desk when an observer casually walks by, or being noticed walking down a hall. Passive face time may also include being seen talking with a co-worker from across the room, or being noticed several rows away in a large meeting. In all these examples it is important to note that getting credit for displaying passive face time involves merely being seen at the work site, without the observer knowing what you are doing or interacting with you in any significant way (i.e. nothing beyond incidental eye contact).

We focus on passive face time in the present study because the qualities of dynamic face time (i.e. face-to-face interactions) have already been studied in several domains including communication (e.g. Cramton, 2001; Daft et al., 1987), information processing (e.g. Knapp and Hall, 2002; Siegman and Feldstein, 1978), impression management (Giacalone and Rosenfeld, 1989, 1991), and leader–member exchange (e.g. Duarte et al., 1993, 1994). In contrast, organizational researchers have not specifically investigated passive face time and its links to perceptions of employees (Dunn-Jensen, 2004). This lack of research is surprising given the growing anecdotal evidence (i.e. from case studies and popular business press stories) describing the anxieties of remote professional workers whose work arrangements keep them out sight of co-workers and supervisors

(Ryan, 2005). As we discuss next, this anecdotal evidence suggests that the display (or lack of display) of passive face time may have important consequences for these workers and their careers.

### **Effects of passive face time in professional work contexts: Anecdotal evidence**

Most anecdotal and case study evidence suggests that the display of passive face time by professional workers (e.g. salaried workers in corporate business environments) is interpreted positively by co-workers, supervisors, and subordinates who may observe it (Kossek and Van Dyne, 2008). In fact, it appears that managers in corporate settings use passive face time to judge employees' work contributions, creating a disadvantage for employees who are seen less often or are not seen as putting in adequate overtime. As Perlow (1997: 41) notes in her case study of an employee named 'Chris', who was efficient, and thus did not need to put in overtime on Saturdays:

The manager saw the other team members as putting in the extra effort when it counted [by coming in on Saturdays] and faulted Chris, who had worked steadily throughout and did not need to put in this extra time. In the end, when his level of commitment was being judged, the fact that Chris was the only member of the group who was on schedule seemed to go unnoticed.

Further, according to the popular management press, lack of face time is a central problem for remote employees (i.e. telecommuters, employees with non-permanent 'hoteling' office arrangements), who are routinely perceived more negatively than on-site workers. In the long run, these negative perceptions may hurt the career progress of remote workers (Duxbury, 1999; Joyce, 2002). As one reporter noted:

Although access to technology is often viewed as the key ingredient of an increasingly dispersed 'any time, any place' work environment, our research shows that workplace attitudes and management practices – such as measuring employee performance by long on-site hours or 'face time' – can be greater obstacles to remote work. (*The Boston Globe*, 11 November 2001)

Practitioner-oriented case studies suggest that this outcome occurs in white-collar professional contexts because passive face time at work is commonly used to assess employees on traits such as 'initiative', 'dedication', 'leadership', and 'teamwork' (Brandel, 2002; Gopinath, 2003). These types of trait evaluations are central to many corporations' performance evaluations, and may be used to determine the fitness of employees for specific work tasks (e.g. project management or team leadership). In fact, psychologists have shown that such trait assessments have effects on other types of employee evaluations, even if the actual work behaviors of the employees do not support these evaluations (Krzystofiak et al., 1988). Business icon Jack Welch, explains the importance of passive face time as follows:

Companies rarely promote people into leadership roles who haven't been consistently seen and measured. It's a familiarity thing, and it's a trust thing. We're not saying that the people who get

promoted are stars during every ‘crucible’ moment at the office, but at least they’re present and accounted for. And their presence says: Work is my top priority. I’m committed to this company. I want to lead. And I can. (Welch and Welch, 2007: 92)

## **How passive face time affects perceptions of employees: Clues from extant research**

Despite this accumulation of anecdotal evidence linking passive face time to evaluations of employees in professional work settings (Conlin, 2006), organizational researchers have not systematically examined how and why passive face time affects perceptions of employees who display it. Yet, some clues about the effects of passive face time on perceptions of employees do appear in organizational and psychological research. In particular, two streams of research relevant to person perception in organizations (Gilbert, 1998) provide hints about how and why passive face time might affect perceptions of those who display it.

First, research on organizational citizenship behavior (Bolino, 1999) provides evidence that *causal attributions* (Fiske and Taylor, 1991) of employees are made based on the observation of salient behaviors (such as the display of passive face time). Second, research on *trait inferences* (Carlston and Skowronski, 1994; Uleman et al., 1996) provides evidence that dispositional inferences and categorizations of employees are made based on observation of salient behaviors (Anderson and Klatzky, 1987; Reeder, 1993). Findings from these two research streams provide a starting point for learning about the effects of passive face time on perceptions of employees by revealing what we do and don’t already know about this phenomenon.

As we explicate below, these existing research streams do not provide a clear theoretical explanation for how and why passive face time affects perceptions of professional employees who display them. Instead, they suggest that we need much more information about the observation of passive face time in context if we are to understand its effects on perceptions of employees. Thus, our review here is not intended as a basis for developing hypotheses about the effects of passive face time, but as a means of justifying and clarifying our exploratory study of this phenomenon.

### ***Clues from research on organizational citizenship behavior***

Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) has been defined as ‘individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization’ (Organ, 1988: 4). Research on OCB has suggested that ‘engaging in citizenship behaviors may be quite impression enhancing and self serving’ (Bolino, 1999: 82). To the extent that employees exhibit high levels of passive face time – particularly beyond normal working hours – this research suggests that those employees might be judged more positively by others.

Yet, recent research suggests that extra-role behavior is not always viewed positively by others nor is it always appreciated (Johnson et al., 2002). For example, Bolino et al. (2006: 289) examined a set of ‘job-focused’ impression management tactics (i.e. deliberate behaviors intended to signal a desired image), some of which appear similar

to passive face time as described in the popular press (e.g. 'arrive at work early in order to look good in front of my supervisor'; 'work late at the office so that my supervisor will see my working late and think I am a hard worker'). Although these job-focused tactics might be categorized as extra-role behaviors, they were *negatively* related to supervisors' ratings of employees' OCB, as well as supervisors' liking and performance evaluations of those employees. These findings contradict what employees and supervisors have reported in the popular press about the positive effects of passive face time on performance evaluations (i.e. passive face time may actually hurt rather than help employees).

Other OCB researchers have explained these findings by suggesting that helping behavior may be coded positively or negatively depending on how the observer interprets the motives for behavior (i.e. what *causal attributions* observers make about persons exhibiting OCBs). For example, Eastman found that raters were more likely to attribute an employee's extra-role behaviors to 'good citizenship' than to 'ingratiation' if those behaviors were commonly exhibited by others. Eastman (1994) suggests that this outcome could have occurred because observers viewed with suspicion (i.e. they perceived ulterior motives associated with) those individuals who displayed extra-role behaviors when others did not. In this case, whether or not others were engaging in a citizenship behavior may have been an important contextual cue about the motives of employees.

Together, this research on OCBs suggests that observers might make positive causal attributions of displayers of passive face time, but only if they also observe contextual cues indicating that such face time was motivated by sincere and benevolent intentions. Yet, extant OCB research does not provide direct and clear evidence about which behaviors and contextual cues might be important to observers who are making such attributions about the displayers of passive face time. Further, there is no empirical OCB research that suggests which type of attributions (e.g. they are trying to look good vs trying to do a good job) might be assigned to the displayers of passive face time. Thus, the research on OCBs is inconclusive about how observers might interpret passive face time and how they might assess those who display it.

### *Clues from research on trait inferences*

Trait inferences are defined as trait knowledge about an actor that is derived from other information such as visible behaviors (Carlston and Skowronski, 1994). For example, observing a person cutting in line at a grocery store checkout may lead observers to infer that the person is rude. Thus, an important aspect of trait inferences is that they influence judgments of '*person attributes* and not simply *behavior interpretations*'; that is they are associated with the actor and not with the behavior' (Carlston and Skowronski, 1994: 841).

Psychologists have found experimental evidence that participants routinely infer a number of common traits (e.g. shy, dedicated, clumsy, conceited, honest) from descriptions of specific behaviors in specific contexts (Carlston and Skowronski, 1994; Lupfer et al., 1990; Todorov and Uleman, 2004; Uleman et al., 1996). Further, psychologists have found that trait inferences are likely to be made spontaneously – that is, 'without

having a particular goal or even a general impression-formation intention in mind and without [observers] becoming aware that they have made an inference' (Todorov and Uleman, 2002: 1051). Experimental studies show that such *spontaneous trait inferences* occur both with strangers and familiar others (Carlston and Skowronski, 1994, 2005), and with relatively short (e.g. 10-minute) and long (e.g. one-week) intervals between observation of behaviors and trait assignment (Uleman, 1999).

Research on inferences of common personality traits in real world contexts also suggests that such dispositional traits are often inferred based on the observation of salient behaviors (Hoffman et al., 1981). For example, a stranger is rated high on conscientiousness if he or she merely dressed neatly (Albright et al., 1988). Researchers have suggested that such personality traits – including performance-relevant traits in particular – are used to organize observed behavior because they are well-established in memory and contain an implicit evaluative component that helps observers to make comparisons or decisions (Krzystofiak et al., 1988).

Based on these findings, one might expect passive face time to be associated with one or more personality traits. For example, the Big Five personality trait of 'conscientiousness' (Goldberg, 1990) – which has been defined as acting dutifully, responsibly, and aiming for achievement – might be assigned to a person who displays extensive passive face time at work. Similarly, the personality trait of 'agreeableness' – which has been strongly associated with the behaviors of consideration, cooperation, thoughtfulness, and helpfulness (Hampson and Goldberg, 2006) – may be associated with working late or being reliably at one's desk.

Yet, like the findings about OCBs, the research on trait inferences suggests that contextual cues may determine if these types of traits are assigned to actors, even when those actors engage in well-known behaviors (Reeder et al., 1992; Uleman et al., 1996). Reeder and Brewer (1979), for example, suggest that individuals may a) develop schemas associated with common traits, b) identify specific behaviors linked to those traits, and c) internalize context rules indicating when those behaviors are most predictive of those traits. Thus, a young woman may be considered 'caring' if she gives up her bus seat because an elderly man has just boarded, while the same woman may not be considered 'caring' if she gives up her bus seat because she sees a more desirable seat open up on the other side of the bus (Kammrath et al., 2005). In the same manner, it seems plausible that an employee may be perceived as 'conscientious' if he works late even if no one is there to see him, but may not be perceived as 'conscientious' if he works late only when he knows the boss will be around to notice him.

Together, these findings suggest that observers may assign dispositional traits to employees who display passive face time, and that their assignment of these traits may depend on the context in which such face time is observed. But, like the finding regarding OCBs, no past research has examined which dispositional traits are assigned to employees displaying passive face time at work. Further, no trait inference research has examined which contextual cues may influence the assignment traits to displayers of passive face time. Thus, existing research on trait inferences is inconclusive about how observers might interpret passive face time and how they might assess those who display it.



## Summary and research question

To summarize, our review of anecdotal evidence suggests that the display of passive face time in corporate settings is common and important to perceptions of employees. Further, extant research on OCBs and trait inferences suggests that passive face time may be a highly salient behavior that leads observers to make causal attributions or dispositional inferences of its displayers, and that contextual cues may influence these assessments. Yet, none of this research has explicitly focused on passive face time, and does not provide direct insight about the assessment of displayers of passive face time. That is, we don't know if observers make causal attributions or trait inferences (or both) based on the observation of face time, and we don't know the specific nature of these attributions or inferences in real life contexts. Given these gaps in understanding, our goal in this article is to answer following research question:

*Research question:* How do observers perceive displayers of passive face time in professional work contexts?

In the following sections, we describe two studies we used to address this research question. We begin our investigation with an inductive, qualitative study of passive face time in corporate office contexts.

## Study 1: How passive face time affects person perceptions

In this study, we hoped to gain a better understanding of how observers evaluated people who displayed passive face time. We also hoped to better understand which (if any) contextual variables played a role in these cognitive processes.

### Methods

Because past research has not examined passive face time in real-life contexts, and because understanding the effects of passive face time in professional work contexts was central to our research question, we chose to conduct an inductive, qualitative study in which we interviewed a broad range of professional employees, from a variety of organizations, who had observed passive face time in the workplace. *It is important to note that our research objective was to understand how real-life observers came to make evaluations and judgments of displayers of passive face time in real-world contexts.* To do this, we needed to talk to expert observers (i.e. workers with supervisory responsibility who were also supervised themselves) who were actually immersed in a context in which passive face time was displayed and observed on a routine basis. We could not rely on our own, non-expert observations to achieve our objective.

*Research setting* We focused our research setting on corporate offices because these settings were most commonly discussed in the popular press as the context in which passive face time was noticed and observed (see Table 1). Thus, our research setting consisted of 30 different corporate office settings in Northern California.



**Participants** We sought participants who both supervised others, and were themselves the subjects of performance evaluations. All participants responded to an email to alumni of a local MBA program, asking for volunteers for an in-depth interview regarding employee performance perceptions. We continued to add participants to our study until we reached theoretical ‘saturation’ in our data analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In the end, participants comprised 39 managers (25 men and 14 women, average age 30.7 years). Participants had worked an average of 9.1 years in a corporate environment, and an average of 5.4 years in their current job. All participants worked in corporations in Northern California, and a majority worked for high-tech companies in the computer or biotechnology industries. All participants had supervisory responsibilities that required them to make judgments about the work performance of others. All participants held jobs in which they were expected to do their primary work in the office (i.e. they were not telecommuters), and their supervisors and subordinates were also expected to do their primary work in the office.

**Interviews** We conducted open-ended, in-person interviews with all participants. We used Kvale’s (1996) framework of conversational, qualitative interviewing as a guide to ensure that our interviews produced data most relevant to our research question. Based on these guidelines, we developed an open-ended interview protocol that focused on the themes of passive face time observations and evaluations by participants. We began by asking participants to describe their work setting, and their observations of passive face time in that setting. We then asked them to describe face time, as they defined it in their work setting, and what it meant to employees in their work setting. These questions helped us to understand participants’ everyday experience of face time, and to determine if our conception of passive face time existed in participants’ work settings. We next asked participants to provide specific examples of observations of face time and detailed descriptions of those specific instances. We also asked participants to describe their own display of face time, and if they had any indication of how they were perceived in specific instances. Finally, we asked specifically about face time and remote workers or telecommuters. We asked if they had any evidence or experiences that led them to believe that reduced face time by remote workers affected perceptions of these workers.

For each specific instance of passive face time observation, we asked participants to describe the whole event, from beginning to end, including discussing what they thought of the displayer and why. We tried to get them to reconstruct their actual thinking process as accurately as possible. We then asked if participants had heard others at their work site comment about these specific instances or employees in terms of face time, and what those others said. We asked participants to recall as many specific instances of display or discussion of face time as they could remember (starting with the most recent), and to provide as much detail as possible in their descriptions. Finally, if not already provided, we asked for specific stories of individuals who displayed face time, but whom they had not personally observed. All interviews lasted approximately one hour, and were tape-recorded and transcribed. Our interview protocol is included in Appendix A.

**Analysis** Following Strauss and Corbin (1998), we analyzed the interview data using an iterative, qualitative approach that moved back and forth between the emerging findings and extant theory. In a first stage of analysis, a research assistant entered all of the responses to the

interview questions into a spreadsheet (so that interview comments were sorted according to the topic of the question). Next, two other research assistants coded all of the comments into four broad categories, based on our research goals. These categories included: 1) explanations of how passive face time was defined and viewed in professional work settings, 2) discussion of actual observations of passive face time in professional work settings, 3) descriptions of different forms of passive face time observed in professional work settings, and 4) descriptions of how and why passive face time affected perceptions of employees.

In coding the data, we first looked for common descriptions of behaviors as forms of passive face time (e.g. 'always sitting at her desk', 'his door is always open', 'I always see him when I walk by his office', and 'I always see him if I happen to come in on the weekend'). We discussed all behavior descriptions until we agreed on seven common behavior descriptions (i.e. being seen at work early in the day or late at night, being seen at one's desk during normal working hours). We then looked to see if we could further combine these seven common behaviors based on contextual information (i.e. we looked for common contexts in which one or more of the behavior took place), and we found that two primary contextual factors (i.e. whether the behavior was observed during normal working hours or outside of normal working hours) could be used to categorize all seven of the behaviors. We re-coded all of the data based on these two broad contexts of passive face time behaviors, and discussed all discrepancies until we agreed on the groupings.

We then looked for common evaluations or judgments of employees that were observed displaying passive face time behaviors (e.g. 'the committed managers are the ones here on the weekend', 'she's dedicated, I see her in her office late at night'). We determined that all evaluations of passive face time occurred in either the form of simple trait assignments, or more detailed causal explanations of employee motives. We found evidence of four common trait assignments and two less-common causal explanations (e.g. reflection on *why* people engaged in face time). We then linked distinct behavior codes to trait inference or causal attribution codes (i.e. we looked at the explanations surrounding the face time behaviors in the interview text and determined if these explanations resembled trait inferences or causal attributions). We found that a great majority of the passive face time behaviors observed were linked to trait inferences, and that very few passive face time behaviors were linked to causal attributions. We discussed all codings of behaviors linked to trait inferences and causal attributions and resolved all discrepancies.

We summarize our evidence linking specific face time behaviors to specific perceptions in Table 2. Column 1 of this table lists the two major categories of face time (extracurricular or expected face time). This table also lists the seven behaviors that were categorized as either expected or extracurricular face time (column 2 of Table 2), and lists the types of traits that observers inferred from them (column 3 of Table 2) or the causal attributions made when observing them (column 5 of Table 2). Finally, the table lists the strength of evidence for these trait inferences and causal attributions (columns 4 and 6 of Table 2), and provides an example of a common inference or attribution made for each behavior (column 7 of Table 2).

As the table indicates, if over half of all respondents mentioned a behavior as leading to a specified perception, we viewed this as strong evidence. Moderate evidence occurred when a quarter to a half of all respondents mentioned that a specific behavior led to a specific perception, and weak evidence occurred when less than a quarter (but more than zero) of respondents indicated a trait-perception relation.

**Table 2** Evidence of passive face time behaviors linked to trait inferences or causal attributions<sup>a</sup>

Type of passive face time	Behavior observed or displayed	Trait assigned to displayer	Evidence of trait inference	Causal attributions assigned to displayer	Evidence of causal attribution	Example
Expected	Sitting at desk on time	Dependable	Moderate	Trying to look good	Weak	When I judge them... if they're in their office when I need them, okay, that's good enough. That says that they're a dependable worker.
	Sitting at desk all the time	Dependable	Strong	Trying to look good	Weak	A lot of jobs are really defined by being there. And the job is very much defined as 'beginning, breaking for lunch, restarting, and then finishing' and so it's easy to see if somebody's doing their job if they're just at their desk... I know I can depend on someone that I see all the time at their desk.
	Engaging in work in public areas or in highly visible or audible ways	Trustworthy	Moderate	None found	None	This one employee was put on a Corrective Action Plan because he wasn't performing well, and in that case, it became important that his boss be very aware of what he was spending his time on. So he was always doing his work out in the common areas with other people on his team so his boss could see he was working. It increased his boss's trust in him when he saw him all the time.
Extra-curricular	Being seen in meetings	Dependable	Moderate	None found	None	So this one guy, he's in the room at every meeting. Lots of times he doesn't say anything, but he's there on time and people notice that. He definitely is seen as a hardworking and dependable guy.
	Seen in the office early or late in the day	Dedicated	Strong	Trying to be seen as committed	Weak	Arriving early and staying late in the office makes a good impression. I think of those workers as more dedicated than most.
	Seen in the office during weekends	Committed	Strong	Trying to be seen as committed	Weak	Working on the weekends makes a very good impression. It sends a signal that you're contributing to your team and that you're putting in that extra commitment to get the work done.
	Arriving or leaving office late or early in the day	Committed	Strong	Trying to be seen as committed	Weak	The company where I was working for before there was definitely a situation where let's say I would bump into my supervisor at 7 o'clock in the evening. She knows I'm there working. In those cases I get extra points just for being there late. I'm seen as having an extra level of commitment.

<sup>a</sup>Strong evidence = over half of all 39 respondents mentioned this type of behavior as leading to the specified perception. Moderate evidence = quarter to half of all 39 respondents mentioned this type of behavior as leading to the specified perception. Weak evidence = less than quarter (but more than zero) of all 39 respondents gave evidence that suggested the specified perception.

### Study 1 findings: Person perceptions in context

Our findings from Study 1 suggest that passive face time is primarily identified in two common forms that are differentiated by the contexts in which they occur and the dispositional traits that are inferred from them. First, we found that passive face time was commonly identified as 'being seen in the office during normal business hours'. Further we found that the observation of passive face time in the context of such normal working hours – what we called *expected face time* – led observers to characterize displayers as 'responsible' or 'dependable'. Second, we found that passive face was also routinely identified as 'being seen in the office outside of normal business hours'. We found that the observation of passive face time in the context of such extra work hours – what we called *extracurricular face time* – led observers to characterize displayers as 'committed' or 'dedicated'. As noted in our methods, we found that a large majority of the face time evaluations were associated with these types of dispositional traits, and not more elaborate discussions of individual motives for displaying passive face time. Thus, our findings support a trait inference approach to passive face time evaluation. In the following sections we explicate these findings in more detail.

**Expected face time and dependability** Participants identified what we refer to as *expected face time* when they saw employees routinely in the office or sitting at their desks during normal work hours. Participant comments indicated that expected face time cued positive employee perceptions because sitting at one's desk during normal business hours was physically salient and easy to observe during a quick walk through the office space.

These findings suggest that passive face time may occur as a concurrent aspect of normal work behavior, at least for employees who have traditional, permanent offices. As one respondent noted,

I've been a supervisor for I don't know, seven, eight years, and without a doubt, if I see the person at their desk I know they're working. Or if my boss sees me in the office, he, she, knows I'm working. If I am not physically in the office, they have to *assume* I'm working. So it's an easy way for them to check if I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing.

Further, in most descriptions of expected face time, participants noted that employees were doing work that wasn't easily quantified, and that their physical presence supplied evidence that they were working diligently (even if the output couldn't be measured). As one participant noted:

I think it's easier in some ways to sort of think that somebody is doing their job if they're always there. It's more of a perception, but I think it's easier for a manager to think that somebody's dependable if they physically see them there. Especially when they're doing things that aren't immediately visible. Like someone who most of their job is sort of creative and you really can't see that. But if you see them sitting at their desk then it's easier . . . for a manager to see that person as dependable.

In this manner, *expected face time* appears distinct from most organizational citizenship behaviors (Bergeron, 2007), which are defined as 'going above and beyond' normal

work behavior or task performance (e.g. doing favors, being friendly, working extra hours). By contrast, our data indicate that expected face time led to perceptions that the employee was 'responsible', 'dependable' even when doing the work that was expected of them. As one participant noted:

So if I see you there all the time, okay, good. You're hard working, a hard working, dependable individual.

Participants also used synonyms of responsible and dependable to characterize displayers of expected face time, including the categorizations of 'reliable', 'trustworthy', 'hard working', 'having integrity' and 'conscientious'. For example, another participant noted:

So this one guy, he's in the room at every meeting. Lots of times he doesn't say anything, but he's there on time and people notice that. He definitely is seen as a hardworking and dependable guy.

Similarly, another participant recalled:

It's about trust . . . and seeing employees as trustworthy . . . And if you can walk to their desk and there's more of a 'yes! this person is doing what I'm expecting of them' atmosphere, you just naturally think of them as more trustworthy.

*Extracurricular face time and commitment* Study 1 participants also reported that passive face time was demonstrated by being seen in the office late at night, early in the morning, or on weekends – that is, outside of normal working hours, when the office was mostly empty of workers, and often when it was dark outside. In these cases, what we refer to as *extracurricular face time* was relatively rare and stood out as evidence that an employee was emotionally committed to the company and willing to go above and beyond the call of duty for the organization. As such, extracurricular face time appeared to cue the categorization of 'committed' and its synonyms, including 'dedicated', 'devoted', and 'caring'.

For example, in a typical comment, one respondent explained that, at his worksite, working long hours was used to differentiate committed from merely responsible workers:

There's a definite distinction between the people who work here. There are special ones who are at the highest levels and they're there in the evenings, on the weekends and stuff. And if you also are there, I think it's seen as a higher level of commitment, and you get thought of as an overachiever because you're seen after hours. And the people who are at lower levels are doing so much of the work and aren't getting that level of credit just because they aren't there late. It's not really what you're doing while you're there. It's just that you're there. You get known by name, and you stand out.

In other cases, participants noted how those who wanted to be seen as committed need to be seen at work outside of normal business hours because such behavior was salient to supervisors. As one participant reported:

There seems to be a norm that anyone hoping to move up in the management ranks needs to be here late at night and on the weekends. If you're not willing to do that, you're not going to be seen as dedicated enough to get promoted. It's definitely one of the tests of management material.

Interestingly, we saw little evidence that informants viewed displayers of expected or extracurricular face time as 'inefficient' or 'manipulative' – as might be expected based on the literature reviewed in our introduction. Further, in the few instances in which these attributions were mentioned, informants appeared to be unwillingly to completely discount the value of merely being seen at work. As one informant reported:

There's always at least one person who either comes in early or skips lunch or stays late and they might be the most slack person in the building . . . But they're there when hardly anybody else is. And so if someone says 'that person is not putting forth', someone else will say 'but they're here before the coffee's starts and they lock the door'. And you're like 'oh yeah, they are, . . . and gosh, they must care . . . they are the committed ones'. And it's hard to argue with that, because at least they're there doing work.

### ***Discussion of Study 1: Evidence of trait inferences***

Our Study 1 findings about expected and extracurricular face time offer considerable information about our research question. Specifically, our findings suggest that observers use a trait inference approach (rather than a causal attribution approach) to evaluating passive face time, and that the context in which passive face time is displayed (i.e. during normal working hours or outside of normal working hours) is an important variable that may affect the specific traits (i.e. responsible/dependable or committed/dedicated) that observers may assign to displayers passive face time at work.

These findings suggest the following testable hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1:* The traits of committed/dedicated are more likely to be inferred following the observation of extracurricular face time than following the observation of expected face time.

*Hypothesis 2:* The traits dependable/reliable are more likely to be inferred following the observation of expected face time than following the observation of extracurricular face time.

### **Study 2: Testing proposed effects of passive face time'**

To test the hypotheses developed from Study 1 we conducted an experimental vignette study. Through this second investigation, we hoped to complete the loop in what has been called 'full cycle' research (Cialdini, 1980; Fine and Elsbach, 2000), and provide both theory building and theory testing in this article.

In addition, this experimental study allowed us to test whether or not the trait inferences identified in Study 1 were made spontaneously. As we noted in the introduction, researchers have shown that trait inferences about others are often made 'without [observers] becoming aware that they have made an inference' (Todorov and Uleman, 2002: 1051). Yet, tests of the spontaneous nature of trait inferences are difficult to make outside of experimental contexts.

The spontaneous nature of trait inferences is particularly relevant when examining passive face time because observers may not be cognizant that they are using observations of face time to make inferences about an employee's traits. For example, a manager may be aware that company policy encourages telecommuting, and may even personally endorse working from home because it saves office space and commuting time. Further, if asked directly, this manager may deny that he/she views employees who are physically present in the office more positively than those who are not present. Yet, spontaneous trait inference research suggests that it is nevertheless possible that the display of passive face time by on-site employees may lead the manager to assign more positive traits to these employees compared with telecommuters. For these reasons, we also included a test of the spontaneous nature of trait inferences in our experimental study describe below.

## Methods

**Experimental design and variables** We used a 2 x 2 experimental design with one between-subjects independent variable (i.e. type of passive face time described in the 'study phase': expected vs extracurricular) and one within-subjects independent variable (i.e. type of trait words observed in the 'test phase': dependable/responsible vs committed/dedicated). In the study phase of the experiment (described below), half of the subjects experienced the expected face time condition, and half experienced the extracurricular face time condition. All subjects saw all four of our focal trait words in the test phase of the experiment (also described below). The dependent variable in our study was the number of false recognitions of trait words.<sup>1</sup>

**Participants** Sixty people (36 male, 24 female, average age = 40.4 years) participated in the experiment. All participants were full-time working professionals who were attending an executive education conference put on by a prominent US business school. Work experience of participants ranged from six to 30 years, with a mean of 18 years. Participants worked in the following job categories (with the number of participants in each category in parentheses): manager (27), top executive team member (11), research and development staff (seven), technical staff (seven), and sales staff (seven). Participation was completely voluntary.

**Procedure** We employed a false recognition experimental procedure commonly used in tests of spontaneous trait inference (Todorov and Uleman, 2002). A typical experiment of this type begins with a 'study phase' in which participants read a description of a target person's behavior, sometimes ostensibly written by the target person (i.e. 'Today I went out and bought a car. I don't need it, but it struck my fancy. I like doing things this way – I hate to spend too much time mulling over a decision'; Carlston and Skowronski, 1994). After a time interlude of several minutes to several days, which may include a distraction task (to reduce the opportunity for participants to rehearse the behavior description), participants participate in a 'test phase' in which they are presented with a series of words and asked to identify which of these words was included in the original description (e.g. 'car', 'decision', 'angry', 'spontaneous'). If participants falsely identify a trait word that was not included in the description but implied by it (e.g. the trait 'spontaneous' is often



falsely identified as having been included in the statement above), it represents evidence that the trait was spontaneously inferred from the description.

Following this basic design, our study proceeded as follows. First, we gave participants the following introduction: 'We are studying how people remember information. In the first phase you will be given short paragraph to read. In the second phase your memory will be tested.' We used this introduction to focus on the memory aspects of the study, and avoid motivating participants to evaluate or judge the person described in the paragraph. In the initial 'study phase', we presented participants with one of two brief (three-sentence) descriptions of a person. The descriptions in the two conditions were identical, except that we manipulated them to include descriptions of the two types of passive face time we identified in Study 1 (i.e. *expected face time* = 'I always see him on the job when I regularly walk by his desk during the day'; *extracurricular face time* = 'I always see him on the job when I walk by his desk late at night, and even on the weekends').

We randomly assigned half of the participants to the 'expected face time' condition, and the other half to the 'extracurricular face time' condition. We allowed participants to spend 30 seconds reading this description. We then introduced a three-minute distraction task, intended to prevent participants from continuously rehearsing the descriptions just presented. This task involved solving six word jumbles. None of the words in the distraction task were related to performance, face time, or personality traits, and participants were told that it was important that they work on this task. Next, in the 'test phase', we presented participants with a list of 15 test words. We asked participants to circle any words that were included in the original paragraph that they read. Five of these words were actually in the original description, while 10 were not. Of the 10 words that were not in the original description, four were trait words we expected to be spontaneously inferred from the descriptions of passive face time (i.e. 'responsible', 'dependable', 'committed', and 'dedicated'). The remaining six words included three positive trait words (i.e. fair, friendly, creative), and three negative trait words (i.e. unproductive, lazy, and manipulative) that we did not expect to be spontaneously inferred from the descriptions of passive face time behaviors. We included these additional words to examine whether participants spontaneously inferred positive or negative traits in general (vs inferring the specific traits we hypothesized). We also specifically chose the three negative trait words to rule out the possibility that passive face time behaviors were viewed as manipulative behaviors, or as indicators that an employee was unproductive or lazy. These negative words were chosen from popular press accounts and our qualitative interviews as suggested possible negative implications of face time (although our interviewees overwhelmingly saw face time as leading to positive attributions, they acknowledged that some observers might see face time negatively). Finally, we asked participants to answer some background and demographic questions. Experimental materials are shown in Appendix B.

**Analysis** To calculate our dependent measure (false recognition of trait word types) we assigned to each participant a 0, 1, or 2 to denote the number of false recognitions of each trait word type. For example, for the dependable/responsible trait word type, we assigned a value of '2' to a participant who falsely identified both the words 'responsible' and

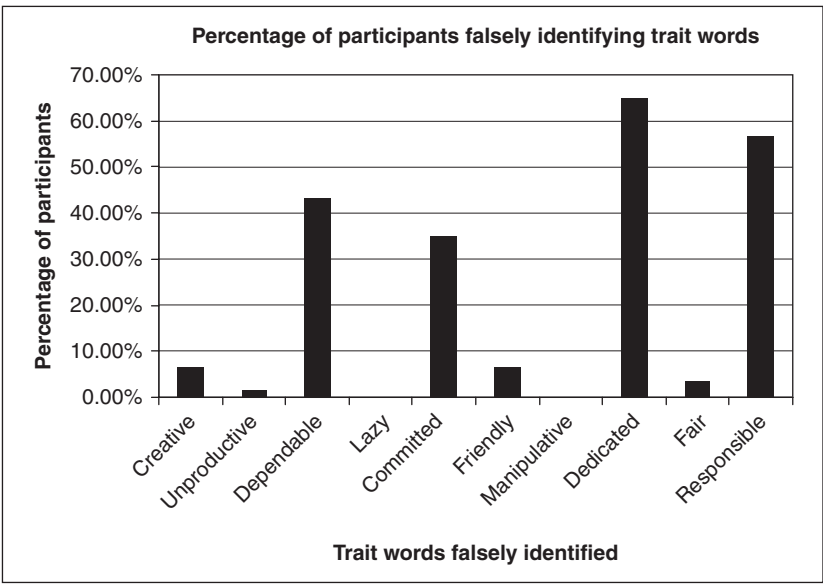
‘dependable’ as being in the original paragraph, while we assigned a value of ‘1’ to a participant who falsely identified only the word ‘dependable’ or only the word ‘responsible’. If a participant falsely identified neither word, we assigned to the participant a value of ‘0’. We did this same calculation for the committed/dedicated trait words.

To test our hypothesized interaction and to provide evidence of spontaneous trait inference, we performed a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA).<sup>2</sup> Specifically, we conducted a 2 x 2 (type of face time in study phase x type of trait words observed in test phase) ANOVA on the number of falsely identified trait words of each type.

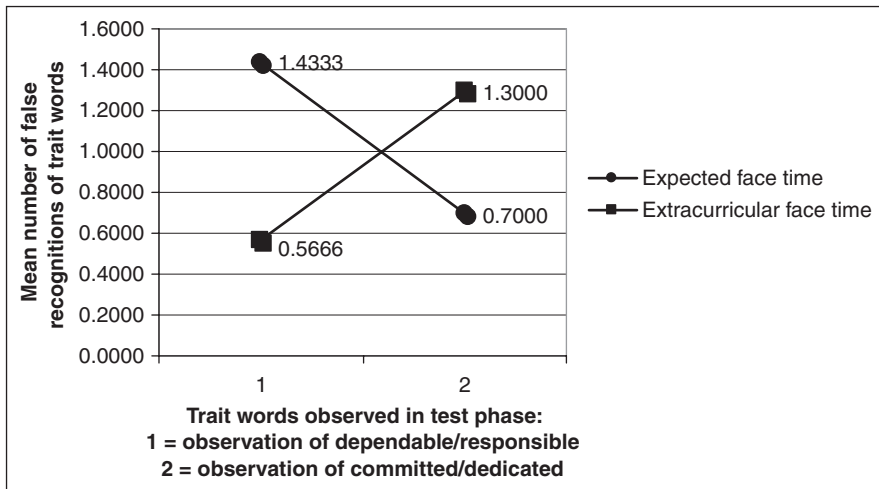
**Study 2 results: Evidence of spontaneous trait inferences**

Figure 1 shows the frequency of false identification of trait words (i.e. subjects’ identification of words in the test phase that were not, in fact, present in the study phase). This figure illustrates that the four trait words that we expected to be spontaneously inferred from descriptions of passive face time (i.e. ‘responsible’, ‘dependable’, ‘committed’, and ‘dedicated’) were falsely recognized quite frequently by participants, while all other ‘decoy’ trait words were almost never inferred by participants. Specifically, the number of false recognitions of decoy words (out of a possible 60) were: ‘creative’ = 4, ‘unproductive’ = 1, ‘lazy’ = 0, ‘friendly’ = 4, ‘manipulative’ = 0, ‘fair’ = 2.

Our ANOVA of the number of false identifications of trait words produced a significant interaction between type of passive face time and type of traits inferred  $F(1, 58) = 40.92, p < .001$ . The words ‘committed’ and ‘dedicated’ were falsely recognized more



**Figure 1** False identification of trait words



**Figure 2** False identification of trait words following descriptions of expected and extracurricular face time

frequently in the extracurricular face time condition ( $M = 1.30$ ) than expected face time condition ( $M = .70$ ),  $F(1, 58) = 11.77$ ,  $p < .01$ . In contrast, the words 'dependable' and 'responsible' were falsely recognized more frequently in the expected face time condition ( $M = 1.43$ ) than in the extracurricular face time condition ( $M = .57$ ),  $F(1, 58) = 26.42$ ,  $p < .001$ . These findings support Hypotheses 1 and 2, and are depicted in Figure 2.

## General discussion

Passive face time is often discussed in the popular press as a positive and perhaps even vital part of employees' performance evaluations (Duxbury, 1999; Joyce, 2002). However, extant research does not provide a clear conceptual picture of passive face time, or how it is interpreted by observers. Thus, the overarching goal of this investigation was to build theory about how observers perceive the often discussed, yet little studied behavior of passive face time in corporate work contexts.

### Conceptual and theoretical implications

Perhaps the most interesting finding from our studies is that observers appear to interpret passive face time as an indicator of specific traits (e.g. responsible, dependable, committed, and dedicated), and that the context of passive face time (i.e. whether it occurs during vs outside of normal work hours) is critical to the particular traits that judges assigned to those displaying passive face time. Further, these trait inferences appear to be made spontaneously, without intent or knowledge of the process by observers.

In terms of conceptual implications, these findings add to our understanding of lay perceptions of passive face time by including the important distinction between expected and extracurricular passive face time. In addition, these findings extend conceptions of

OCBs by suggesting that both expected and extracurricular passive face time lead to positive (i.e. dedicated, responsible), and not negative (i.e. manipulative, unproductive) inferences about people's personality traits.

In terms of theoretical implications – especially for models of person-perception – these findings suggest that passive face time may constitute a behavior that is perceived distinctly from most forms of OCB. As mentioned in the introduction, OCBs are typically defined as active and deliberate behaviors (e.g. volunteering for additional tasks, offering to help others accomplish their work) that may be associated with either positive or negative causal attributions, depending on the motives assigned to those behaviors (Bolino et al., 1999). By contrast, our findings suggest that observations of passive face time, in at least two common contexts, may be perceived as indicators of innate personality traits (i.e. dependability and commitment) and encoded rather spontaneously, without thoughtful deliberation. In other words, our findings suggest that the observation of passive face time may lead to automatic dispositional inferences, rather than more deliberate causal attributions (Carlston and Skowronski, 1994).

These findings support theories of person-perception suggesting that different types of person-information may be processed at different levels of thoughtfulness (see Gilbert, 1998 for a review), and add to these theories by identifying passive face time as a routinely encountered behavior that is more mindlessly assessed. Further, these findings support person-perception research suggesting that salient and common behaviors may be readily organized according to performance-relevant traits (e.g. dedication and commitment) because such traits provide a useful basis for comparison and decision-making (Krzystofiak et al., 1988).

### *Practical implications*

Our findings about how passive face time influences perceptions of employees also have several practical implications for managers, especially regarding the design and use of performance evaluations. In particular, our findings are relevant to the design of trait-based performance evaluations, judgments of remote workers, and the use of multi-source evaluations.

First, findings from this study confirm past research regarding the pitfalls of subjective, trait-based performance evaluations (Barrick and Mount, 1991; Schmidt and Hunter, 1992), in which managers rate employees on traits such as 'dependability', 'leadership', and 'initiative'. It is generally acknowledged that trait-based performance evaluations are flawed in a number of ways, including not being linked to the company's strategy or objective output, not helping employees understand what to change, and having low reliability and validity (e.g. Bommer et al., 1995; Landy and Farr, 1980; Prendergast and Topel, 1996). By showing that perceptions of employees at work are based on non-performance cues such as passive face time, without observers even being aware of the attributions they are making, the present study adds to the list of reasons not to use trait-based performance evaluation scales. Our findings thus contribute to the research stream suggesting that managers should explicitly consider employees' work output and contributions to corporate performance into their evaluations in order to circumvent cognitive biases.

Second, our findings suggest that trait-based performance appraisals may lead to an unfair advantage for employees who are willing and able to hang around the office a lot. Conversely, remote workers, such as telecommuters, may suffer unfair comparisons and poorer performance ratings relative to their in-office peers. Skeptics of remote working arrangements have long suspected that telecommuters may lose out on specific types of information while working at home. For example, telecommuters do not receive the benefit of hallway conversations that lead to insights about their work, or impromptu help from co-workers that would be difficult to obtain when working remotely (Hallowell, 1999). Thus, organizational leaders who implement telecommuting and flexible hours should be particularly aware of the pitfalls of combining such work arrangements with performance evaluations that encourage managers to rely on gestalt perceptions of employees' traits, which the present studies suggest are based in part on passive face time.

Finally, many organizations are adopting multi-source appraisals (e.g. 360 degree evaluations), where a focal employee is rated by peers and subordinates as well as managers, to try and circumvent some of the traditional problems with performance evaluations (e.g. Waldman et al., 1998). However, our results suggest that co-workers and subordinates may be just as prone as managers to making spontaneous trait judgments about employees based on passive face time. It would be interesting for future research to examine whether the effects of passive face time on inferences made about employee traits depend on whether the judge is a manager, a co-worker, or a subordinate.

### *Limitations and conclusion*

Although our findings provide some interesting insights about the under-studied concept of passive face time, these insights are not without limitations. One shortcoming of our findings is that our qualitative data about passive face time was based on participants' recollections. As with all data of this kind, recollections are rich sources of data but may be biased to fit with a rational explanation of events. For example, participants may report that passive face time led to positive trait inferences (e.g. commitment) for an employee who they know was later rated highly on job performance. Although we attempted to minimize such biases by asking about perceptions of employees exhibiting passive face time separately from asking about effects of passive face time on perceptions of employees, such biases still may have occurred. On the upside, our experimental findings supported spontaneous trait inferences in response to passive face time, suggesting that trait inferences can occur even if observers were not motivated to form perceptions of others.

A second limitation of this article is that we did not investigate individual or organizational differences in reactions to passive face time. For example, it is possible that individuals from different cultural backgrounds or with different moral predispositions might attribute different traits to employees based on passive face time. Similarly, organizations with different cultural norms about the importance of face time are likely to affect how observers assess those who display passive face time. Future research could examine how these types of differences across individual observers and workplace cultures might moderate the effects we discovered here.

Despite these shortcomings, we feel our findings are important in that they offer some initial evidence about the construct of passive face time. This is important because passive face time is a topic that is routinely discussed in the popular press and by managers, and that has direct implications for perceptions of employees, but one which has not been examined in scholarly investigations. Both our qualitative and experimental investigations suggested that managers recognize two forms of passive face time at work, and use the observation of these forms to make inferences about employees' personality traits, without even knowing that they are doing so. Put in the broader context of performance management, passive face time can affect employees' status, performance evaluations, raises, promotions, and job security – even though being observed at the work site may not be linked to actual productivity.

### **Acknowledgement**

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## **Appendix A – Open-ended interview protocol from Study 1**

1. Please describe your work setting, what you typically do, and what others in your work setting do.
2. What does the term 'face time' mean to you? What do you think of when someone says 'X needs more face time at work'. How do others in your work setting define face time? Do people talk about face time in your work setting? What kinds of things to people say? Is face time considered a positive or a negative in your work setting? What do people think of workers who display a lot or a little face time at work?
3. Can you provide some specific examples of observations of face time at your work setting? Were there any specific instances in which face time was noticed by you or others? Were there instances that were talked about by you or others. Please give detailed descriptions of those specific instances.
4. Do you intentionally or unintentionally display face time at work? Please describe instances of face time display by you. How do people perceive your displays of face time at work? Have you ever received any comments or feedback about face time at work? How do you think your display of face time at work has affected you, or others' perceptions of you at work? Why do you think this?
5. How are remote workers or telecommuters affected by their reduced face time in the office? Do people ever make remarks or comments that suggest that lack of face time by these workers is noticed? What do people say about workers who display little face time? Do you have any evidence that face time has affected any workers' performance evaluations or career progression? Describe in detail any specific instances you can recall.

## **Appendix B – Experimental materials Study 2**

### *Study phase conditions*

1. Expected face time paragraph. Jeff is a full-time, on-site manager in charge of human resources for our manufacturing operations. He hires and trains personnel in one of our busiest plants, and has worked for us for five years. He is efficient in planning projects and I always see him on the job when I regularly walk by his desk during the day.

2. Extracurricular face time paragraph Jeff is a full-time, on-site manager in charge of human resources for our manufacturing operations. He hires and trains personnel in one of our busiest plants, and has worked for us for five years. He is efficient in planning projects and I always seeing him on the job when I walk by his desk late at night, and even on the weekends.

### Distraction task

Please spend the next few minutes unscrambling the following words.  
It is important that you complete this task.

1. ORANYC
2. ADROI
3. BERNOK
4. GMTHI
5. KRAMTE
6. NCASK

### Test phase task

Circle any words below that were included in the paragraph you read.  
DO NOT LOOK BACK AT THE PARAGRAPH:

manager	committed	manipulative
creative	projects	dedicated
unproductive	efficient	manufacturing
dependable	friendly	fair
lazy	human	responsible

### Notes

1. To be clear, in this experimental design, the dependent measure is the *number of false identifications of trait words* that subjects erroneously perceive to have been included in a description of a person's behavior. To falsely identify these trait words, subjects must see them in the experiment. The observation of the trait words (i.e. responsible/dependable and committed/dedicated) then, is one of the independent variables in this experimental design. In this study, we used a *within-subjects, repeated-measures* experimental design, in which all subjects saw *both* versions of this independent variable (see Maxwell and Delaney, 1990, for a detailed description of such repeated measures, within-subjects experimental designs). The other independent variable was the type of face time (i.e. expected or extracurricular) that was described in the vignette. Subjects only saw one version of this *between-subjects* independent variable.
2. We hypothesized that subjects in the expected face time condition would falsely recognize more words in the reliable/dependable condition than in the committed/dedicated condition, while the subjects in the extracurricular face time condition would falsely recognize more words in the committed/dedicated condition than in



the committed/dedicated condition). In this situation, a repeated measures ANOVA is the correct method of analysis (this is addressed specifically in pp. 382–384 in Judd (2000). Moreover, ANOVA in this context is commonly used by social scientists in nearly identical applications (e.g. Carlston and Skowronski, 2005).

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