

## Viewpoint

# Working hard vs. hardly working

It might not seem like it, but when I am sitting in a zombie-like trance staring at a computer screen, I may actually be working. That is, if you define working as sitting in a zombie-like trance while waiting for brain synapses to provide passageways for traveling ionic fluxes. Ideally, my synapses would send those little fluxes on useful errands. For instance, it would be nice if they could track down a more profitable grain marketing plan or locate the math error that is causing my checkbook imbalance. Unfortunately, my synapses are more likely to fire off drivel like this column, guide me toward misguided grain marketing decisions and leave my checkbook with obscure entries like “fudge — \$1.73.”

Farming has always required a certain amount of mental effort. Even the ancient Mesopotamians considered how irrigation, fertilization and planting practices affected crop yields. Now with computerized recordkeeping systems and precision farming technology, farmers have ever-increasing amounts of data to digest, interpret and use in decision-making. As a result, we're spending more time than ever slouched in desk chairs, staring at images on a screen, waiting for something helpful to happen in our cerebral cortexes.

While brainwork is increasingly necessary, it doesn't meet traditional criteria for farmwork. It can be done without work boots — in fact, fuzzy bunny slippers are fine unless you happen to have a neurotic border collie sleeping under the desk. Brainwork is also unlikely to result in discolored fingernails, busted knuckles or permanent clothing stains, although I've had a few unfortunate encounters with candy bars.

This type of work does not meet the definition I learned in high school physics either: work equals force applied to an object causing motion. With that definition, I am actually performing work when I use a little slingshot made of paper clips and a rubber band to shoot candy wrappers toward the trashcan. This activity is not useful work, especially since the wrappers usually end up on the floor. However, there is at least some visual evidence that something happened. Otherwise I might spend an entire day in a desk chair and leave the room looking exactly as it did when I started, leading certain people to assume I've spent the day doing nothing. At least with the candy wrappers, they think I spent the whole day doing nothing but sit around eating bonbons.

It's certainly more satisfying to have physical evidence of work — fields planted, bins filled, hay stacked, fences



## The Back 40

By GAIL KECK

mended, or hogs loaded. But in reality, it's not this type of physical work

that's most profitable for farmers. Just about any able-bodied person can do it, and the going rate for farm labor isn't much above minimum wage. The value farmers add to the production chain comes more from management and entrepreneurship than from labor. And a lot of that management is done sitting at a desk, staring at a computer screen.

I can't really say I'd rather be outside today applying force to an object causing motion because it's 14 degrees F. But I certainly don't want to dig into these tax records, marketing plans or crop budgets either. I guess in that way, all this brain activity does qualify as work.

*Keck writes from her Midwest farm.*

## You haven't seen anything until nematodes get into your corn.

## Of course, you won't actually see them either.

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