The symptoms of boreout

In this chapter we want to follow up the question of how boreout expresses itself in affected persons. In doing so, we need to draw a distinction between the way the sufferers feel in themselves and the way they behave at work. Let us first venture to tackle the latter and have a look at how an employee suffering from boreout behaves in the workplace.

CAN BOREOUT BE OBSERVED FROM THE OUTSIDE?

You may have sometimes wondered what exactly your work colleagues actually do, and what they are busy with all day. If you know about boreout, certain patterns of behaviour take on a different meaning: the bustling activity of your neighbour
is suddenly revealed as nothing more than a helpless attempt to hide gaping boredom. The symptoms make it possible to unmask a person suffering from boreout. Of course, we don’t want to call for targeted and systematic testing, for when managers start to analyse how long their workers spend on the internet or how many e-mails they are sending, then trust is called into question – which could make it harder to deal with the possible work-related causes of boreout. Do not test, but rather observe.

If someone is aware of the existence of boreout, then, the concealing strategies can be seen through and behaviour in the workplace suddenly shows another face, one that, despite all the unhappiness, is in many ways amusing. Our Alex has begun to observe his colleague Erica as she ‘works’. And he thereby discovers an interesting pattern of behaviour, which is related to four important locations in the office.

Actually, at first glance everything looks normal. Erica is not overloaded right now, admittedly, yet there is apparently no obvious sign that she is suffering from boreout. Not yet. But here is the straw that broke the camel’s back: she has moved. She has changed her desk – not her employer. She now sits at the edge of the room with her back to the window, no longer in the thick of things. What does that have to do with boreout? A great deal.

I have been watching Erica for three months now. She used to sit roughly in the middle of our open-plan office, separated off by glass partitions. She attracted my attention for the first time because she looked so busy, and yet was often to be found outside in front of the entrance, smoking or talking on her mobile. Then I began to trace her strategic pattern of movement, and came to a surprising conclusion – she lives by the ‘four-location principle’. Desk, coffee corner, entrance area and toilet. Something was clearly not right: the time she spent away from her desk was simply too long. So I began to watch her more closely, and soon diagnosed a case of intensive boreout.
The course of Erica’s day seems to be roughly as follows: she arrives somewhat later than most of us, and then leaves somewhat earlier in the evening. She takes a leisurely lunch break, but then eats a small salad at 2 pm in front of the computer at her desk, which gives the impression that she is dedicated and under a lot of stress. In reality, she is mealtime-outsourcing so as to have more time to shop and take care of personal matters during her actual lunch break. The impression she makes has two advantages: she appears busy and indicates that she only has time for a snack. That is healthy, but also a cry for help, for release.

Erica often goes to the toilet. This is not bladder weakness, nor a sign of acute, long-term diarrhoea; I do the same when I need a nap. Erica can hide in perfect peace in the toilet. There, she does not have to put on an act for the outside world, but she can simply sit there and ‘be’. The toilet is the last refuge of stressed boreout patients. The key to achieving nirvana – the WC door, which can legitimately be locked.

Erica has a mobile phone. That is practical, as with it she can call from anywhere, even outside the office. She does this often. We know the disadvantages of open-plan offices: private telephoning is hardly possible, so people try to dodge their way outside, as Erica does several times a day. Even there, she feels the pressure of time: she cannot telephone in such a way that it looks like a private call. She must pretend calls are business-related. Remember the little number with the salad: the pressure of time leads this boreout patient along step by step. If she is aware of the problem, she can skilfully manipulate the signs. Giving a private conversation the appearance of a business call, with appropriate facial expression and supporting gestures, is one of the most difficult tasks. Of course, she also has a reason for always going outside: she needs a cigarette break. This too helps her to send out a signal: namely, that she combines her smoking break with a business phone call and so wastes less work time. Bit by bit, however, Erica has become more careless, and so I begin to see through her camouflage.

After a short – very short – detour to her new work desk she often slips off to the secretaries; it seems a good place for a chat. Erica has begun to use the internet to exchange photo
albums, to discuss hotels and shopping opportunities, and is found more and more often chatting with the secretaries. She seems to have fewer and fewer inhibitions about putting her boreout openly on show. And yet again and again there are cute little attempts to hide the lack of work, the boredom: for example, while Erica has an impressive file, clearly relevant to work, open on her computer screen, she has minimized this and is flicking through a couple of women’s magazines on her desk. The message is clear: a lot to do, but taking some time out in the interim for a moment of relaxation. But that message has nothing to do with the reality. That was and is the other way around: not much document, a lot of magazine.

Erica seems to be comfortable with her new work desk. Here, she is less subject to the pressure of observation, as only the tree outside her window has a free view of her computer screen. Now she can do business on the internet, pick holiday destinations, can pile up women’s magazines on her desk – and she still has the options of the secretaries’ area, the coffee corner and the toilet. The four-location principle is still her guide. And the pressure to put on an act has been lessened, at least in one location.

So, if the sufferer has such a command of the behavioural strategies that no one really notices the lack of interest, the boredom and the sluggish pace of work, then of course there are no clear symptoms. Only if you are fully aware that workers could be suffering from boreout do you recognize the patterns of behaviour that could reveal it. The symptoms that can be noticed from outside provide your first evidence. Of course, evidence is not proof. However, when the signs multiply, and when patterns emerge from them that correspond to the strategies, then it is reasonable to conclude that they are symptoms of boreout.

The external symptoms are less unequivocal than the internal ones: while it is initially possible to lie to yourself, once you