

Experts say women spend 200 more hours at work on tasks that don't help their career. Here's how they suggest saying no.

[businessinsider.com/how-women-recognize-say-no-nonpromotable-tasks-work-2022-5](https://www.businessinsider.com/how-women-recognize-say-no-nonpromotable-tasks-work-2022-5)

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- The authors of "The No Club" found that women take on more nonpromotable tasks than men on average.
- They say the best way to identify such a task is to ask if it's visible or requires a special skill.
- Saying no isn't always easy, so the authors suggest offering to rotate the task among staffers.

Linda Babcock, a professor of economics at Carnegie Mellon University, noticed that on nonteaching days she often attended multiple meetings while her male colleague was in his office working on his research.

She told Insider that when they compared schedules that day 10 years ago, she saw that his calendar had only two meetings: student presentations and a faculty meeting. Babcock's schedule included three additional meetings, an interview with a reporter, and preparing a talk for a women's group, leaving her only one hour to work on research — a task that's essential to promotion for college professors.

"We laughed because it was a little uncomfortable," Babcock said. "He asked me, 'What are these things you're doing, and how did you get into this situation?'"

That encounter led Babcock to start a "No Club" with four colleagues: Laurie R. Weingart, a management professor at Carnegie Mellon; Brenda Peyser, a former professor of communications at Carnegie Mellon; and Lise Vesterlund, a professor of economics at the University of Pittsburgh.

In addition to helping each other recognize and say no to tasks that wouldn't help them move up in their roles, they conducted research to understand why women working in industries from academia to hospitality are often tasked with unrewarding work no one else wants to do.

Their research found that women were 48% more likely to volunteer for nonpromotable tasks than men, regardless of their seniority, while the average woman spent 200 more hours a year than the average man on nonpromotable tasks — including screening interns, attending to a time-consuming client, onboarding new teammates, and helping colleagues with their work.

Those findings are in line with a [2021 survey](#) by Lean In and McKinsey & Company suggesting that women often take the lead on emotional labor in the workplace — and that work is rarely formally recognized during performance reviews.

Babcock and her colleagues, who wrote the book "[The No Club: Putting a Stop to Women's Dead-End Work](#)," which came out on Tuesday, spoke with Insider about how anyone can apply their findings to say no more often at work.

How to identify a nonpromotable task

Babcock and her colleagues found that many women believe that if their boss is asking them to do something, the task must be important, but that's often not the case.

For instance, you might believe that running a big event for the company will get you noticed by senior management — but after all the effort you put in, it never comes up in your performance review.

"It's a matter of learning and asking about whether these tasks are promotable," Babcock said.

Babcock's research found that nonpromotable tasks are typically:

- Not visible to others
- Not instrumental to the organization's mission
- Able to be done by many people because they don't require specialized skills

Examples of these tasks include organizing and coordinating (but not managing) others' work; editing, proofreading, and compiling others' work; logistical planning and organizing special events; and recruiting, onboarding, training, and mentoring.

Remote work and hybrid schedules can further diminish the value of a nonpromotable task. "When we're working more remotely, it's even harder to see what people are doing," Babcock said. "A nonpromotable task becomes even less promotable because no one sees you doing it."

How to get better at saying no to nonpromotable work

Initially, when Babcock and her colleagues said no, they found that the task would just go to another woman.

"Just saying no doesn't solve that problem," Weingart said.

Now when they say no, they try to suggest a colleague who might be good for the task, and often that person is a man. Babcock said another alternative is to say, "Sure, I'll do it now, but let's set up a schedule so we rotate the task amongst the staff."

If turning down a task isn't feasible, take a page out of Dolly Chugh's playbook.

Chugh, a social psychologist and associate professor of management and organizations at the Stern School of Business at New York University, said she's often asked to speak to alumni or participate in events because she's one of the few women of color in her department and her research is related to identity.

"I get a lot of alumni reaching out, far more than my colleagues do, asking for advice," she told Insider. "I've started tracking the requests in a special folder so when I do my performance review I can quantify it."

Chugh and her colleagues Modupe Akinola, an associate professor of management at Columbia Business School, and Katy Milkman, a professor at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, started a No Club several years ago after Milkman heard Babcock talking about it. Using the subject line "No Club," the three women will discuss by email whether to say yes to an opportunity and how to say no.

If one of the women says she's leaning toward saying yes, the other two will ask her why — is it something she really wants to do, or does she feel guilty not doing it?

"It's comforting when your gut is saying no to something to hear the why from your colleagues," Akinola told Insider.

If Akinola plans to say no, she'll also talk with her senior male colleagues about the request. "I let them know the many demands on my time, and I bring them in as a mentor," she said. She added that this approach has helped her decline tasks because her colleagues have at times volunteered to reach out on her behalf and explain that she doesn't have the time to help.

"No one will realize these requests you're getting, particularly if they are related to your identity," Chugh said. "You have to make things visible."

Managers, not women, need to solve the problem

Babcock acknowledged that her schedule still isn't free of nonpromotable work — that's because the problem isn't just women saying yes to too many tasks.

"In order to solve this problem, organizations have to change," Babcock said. Supervisors need to pay attention to who they're asking to take on extra work and ask male and female colleagues to take turns doing these tasks, she added — or better yet, they should recategorize the work so that it's part of an employee's performance evaluation.

"Managers and team leads who are doling out the task are able to effect the most change," Weingart said.