

Toby's Connotation Dictionary

(Part Two: People at Work)

Let me introduce John to you. John is famous at his job for his dedication to his job. He comes early, works long hours with few breaks, and does good work. The work he does is very good, but he's not as fast as some of his colleagues.

How can we describe John?

- He's *industrious*. This is a positive word meaning, basically, the same thing as 'hard-working.' You can see that it comes from the same root as the word 'industry,' and it has the connotation of 'like a machine.' “John's *industrious*, he'll work at it until it's done!”
- He's *diligent*. This is also a (mostly) positive word. It means he's careful to do what he has to do, and to do it well, but it has the extra connotation of not being very fast about it. (I think of bureaucrats as being very diligent.) “John can sit down at a desk covered in work to do, and *diligently* work until it's all done, even if it takes him hours.”
- He's *conscientious*. This word comes close to meaning the same thing as diligent. You can see the same root in it as in 'conscience,' and a conscientious worker will always have a clear conscience. He's the kind of person who observes every rule, does what he's supposed to. When he crosses the street—even if there are no cars in sight—he stops, looks both ways, and then crosses. As you can guess, this has a connotation of slowness and a little inflexibility. Still, it's a positive word. “John *conscientiously* checked every fact in the report he'd written before he sent it to his boss.”
- He's *plodding*. Imagine a child who is tired—*really* tired—walking. Every step the child takes is heavy. The child is *plodding*. (That is, I think, the original meaning of the word.) This is a negative word for slow work, and it has the connotation that someone is making the work more difficult than it has to be. “John was a *plodding* worker who finished his work with three times the energy of his colleagues.”
- He's *resourceful*. This is another word that's mostly-positive. It means that he makes the best of his resources. But, because of that, it's a word that's sometimes used to describe a person who will do anything—even things he shouldn't do—to get the job done, and it has the connotation of being a 'loose cannon.' “Do you know where our printer is? You don't think that John was being *resourceful* again, do you? If it's in his office, I'll complain to the boss!” (Really, 'resourceful' isn't the best word to describe the person described above.

Now it's time to talk about Peter. You're Peter's boss, and you're stepping into his office to see how he's doing. You catch him playing Tetris on his computer, even though that's not allowed in the company. You know Peter, and you know he does good work, but how should you think about the fact that he was just enjoying himself on company time?

- He's *goofing off*. To 'goof off' is to do something other than what you're supposed to do. (The word used to be slang, now it's normal—but informal—English.) Usually, goofing off is more than doing *nothing*. It's having fun when you should be working. It has the connotation of 'innocence:' a normally good worker is entitled to goof off from time to time. “Uh oh, Peter, did I catch you goofing off? As long as you get your work done on time, I'll forget I saw anything.”
- He's *screwing around*. Funny thing about English: 'screw around' means the same thing as 'goof off:' to be having fun when you should be working. But it has the connotation of being destructive or disruptive somehow. “Peter, I'm sick of your screwing around. And your colleagues are starting to complain about it, too.” (Though, really, that doesn't fit the description above, does it?)
- He's *blowing off steam*. Imagine a giant steam locomotive, working hard, building up more and more pressure. . . if it doesn't release some of that pressure—blow off some steam—then it just might explode. And that's the meaning of this here: to do a little relaxing in order to continue working hard. As you can guess, to 'blow off steam' has a positive connotation: it's healthy and productive. “Blowing off some steam, Peter? You're entitled after the job you did this morning. I have to say I was impressed.”
- He's *putzing around*. I particularly like this one, because it is something I do a lot. To putz around is to do something else, just to avoid doing the job you want to do. If I know that I have to study for a test, I'll start cleaning my apartment. I 'putz around' instead of studying. “Peter, stop putzing around and get to work!” (Note: you might remember this as having another meaning: doing work-like stuff for the enjoyment of it. '[Putz around in the garden.](#)')