

Redefining the working day for performance

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An employee-centred
approach to improve
performance and engagement



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Why now is the time to act



Email and digital messaging services changed work for knowledge and managerial workers. The ability to instantly communicate with anyone around the globe enabled unprecedented collaboration. The tools also increased the number of distractions.

Knowledge and managerial workers are now so conditioned to distractions that they distract themselves. Average users check email inboxes 70-80 times per day, equivalent to every 6-7 minutes for an 8-hour workday [1].

Mobile technologies revolutionised work further.

The boundary between work and personal life blurred when the **Blackberry** provided instant access to work emails. This phenomenon was amplified with the **i-phone** and its smartphone competitors.

Artificial Intelligence has arrived, but not alleviated the problem. **Workers are now reporting increased digital exhaustion and brain fry** [2], [3].

- **Purposeful action is needed to reset the work-life boundary and use technology to realise the potential in human capability.**



When governments enforced lock-downs during **the Covid pandemic**, office workers adapted to remote working and adoption of digital tools accelerated. As the pandemic eased, offices re-opened with reduced capacity. With some at the office and others at home, hybrid meetings became common.

Five years after the pandemic, people have developed their working preferences and working from home rates have stabilised [4]. Some prefer home, saving commute time and expense. Others prefer the routine and interactions that come with office work.

We have learnt to work more flexibility, and we have also learnt about our physiology: Our body's natural rhythms do not align to the 9-5 routine [5].

The result is a lingering disconnect between the needs of employees and expectations of employers [6], and a further **decline in workplace engagement to 20% globally and 12 % in Europe** [7].

- **Companies should avoid perpetuating employee-employer disconnects and find the middle ground to increase employee engagement.**



Now is the time to reinvent the working day to reflect available technologies and the post-pandemic new normal.

This paper's approach can be implemented immediately without extra budget.



What is included in this paper?

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The principles

1

Schedule work when people are likely to be productive. Arrange work to maintain productivity: Throughout the day we naturally have 3 different states, or gears [5].

- We start the day in gear 1, where we are calm and complete more simple tasks.
- We naturally move to gear 2 in mid-morning and mid-afternoon.
- We are best at focused, intense work in gear 2.
- Regular breaks help maintain gear 2.
- We are most creative as we drift between gears 1 and 2.
- Stress events and pressure can shift us into gear 3.
- In gear 3, performance may decline, mistakes are more common, and it can be detrimental to health.

Work to meet individual preferences and team needs: Some like to escape distractions and work at home, whilst others prefer the social connections created in the office. Many team members may be constrained by caring duties.

- Schedule collaboration events, such as daily ‘stand-ups’ when all team members are available.
- Be explicit about events that need to be in-person.
- Allow individuals to structure the remainder of the day around their own preferences, commitments and styles.

2

3

Collectively manage distractions: A workflow that relies on uncoordinated asynchronous interruptions reduces productivity [8]. Interruptions can also increase stress and move us into gear 3, where mistakes are more likely, and well-being may be compromised.

- Agree and configure messaging services to minimise non-essential interruptions.
- Create working patterns that balance the positive impacts from collaboration with the negative impacts from interruptions.

Trust your team, don’t control them: If you are concerned team members will take liberties, you have problems with other processes in your system – fix the problems where they occur. If people aren’t motivated or committed, the problems could be in:

- Your hiring process – Why are you selecting people who don’t share your vision and passion for your work?
- Your performance management and reward frameworks – Do you provide the incentives your team value? Does your process provide fair and equitable access to those incentives?
- Your leaders – Are leaders creating a culture that makes the team feel valued? Are leaders effectively communicating your priorities?
- Your culture – Do you prioritise employee presence over the value they create?

4



An employee-centred approach

Step 1 – Accommodate people's preferences and needs

Let people create schedules that increase the overlap of working hours with their most-productive gear 2 state.

The traditional 9-5 is unlikely to work for all:

- Different people move through gear states at different times.
 - Morning people, named 'larks' after the proverbial early bird, have an earlier rhythm.
 - Rhythms of others are shifted later. They struggle in the morning but are effective in the evening – colloquially called 'owls'.
- Some are constrained by responsibilities outside work, for example, caring for dependents.
- People have different preferences for office and home-working.

Provide people with flexibility to distribute their contractual obligation of 8 hours throughout the day in 30-minute segments.

Step 2 – Agree 'golden times' for collaboration

If your team is more than a collection of individuals, they need to collaborate. Select golden collaboration times where people commit to being available for teammates. They aren't the only moments people collaborate, but ones where people guarantee availability.

Golden times need to fit team member's schedules and the work rhythm. The best times will depend on the team's context. If you are unsure, three golden times would be a good place to start.

1. Many teams have a stand up towards **the start of the day** where they **align on priorities**. Even without a formal stand up, people may want to confirm a few items before they focus on key tasks.
2. People may develop questions or come across problems whilst working. In a desire to maintain momentum, our instinct is to message someone for help. Frustrations can arise when:
 - Your request isn't answered. The other person may be occupied or not online.
 - You are distracted from your deep work by a request from someone else.A golden time **an hour or two after** the stand up can **resolve emerging questions** and course correct for the rest of the day.
3. Personalised schedules will lead to different finishing times. A third golden time towards the **end of the traditional 9-5 day** provides an opportunity to **share lessons** from those about to finish, and **handover information** to those who choose to work later.



Step 3 – Build individual schedules

Once the working day has been set, schedule types of work by considering:

Whether events are necessary to be in person

Successful hybrid teams coordinate when they work at home and in the office [9]. Coordination removes the frustration of coming to the office to call a colleague on Zoom who is unexpectedly at home. Agree with, and inform, meeting participants whether events will require everyone in-person, everyone on videoconferencing software, or a mix.

The most suitable gear state

Work type	Align to gear	Example tasks
Collaborative	2 or 1	Daily stand ups, 1:1, team meetings
Focused	2	Problem solving, coding, calculations, email responses
Rote	2 or 1/2 boundary	Administrative tasks, formatting documents, reviewing emails
Creative	1-2 transition	Inventing new solutions

Schedule the highest-value, and highest-effort, **focused** work into gear 2 periods.

Whilst we are also best at performing **rote** work in gear 2, it requires less effort. If there are no more gear 2 slots available, place it into gear 1 periods.

People are at their most **creative** in the morning and evening at the transition between gears 1 and 2. Other constraints may prevent scheduling creative work at the start and end of the day. Instead, consider the middle of day transitions between gears 1 and 2.

Meetings can be scheduled with participants' gear state in mind. For example:

- A company-wide all-hands meeting where the audience is more passive would be best arranged for the afternoon gear 1 window.
- A detailed project planning session where participants need to problem solve would be better scheduled in a gear 2 slot.

Human limitations

Whilst everyone is different, none of us can maintain attention indefinitely. Most people can only remain focused for around 90 minutes under favourable conditions [5]. However, there are work patterns that can increase the time we can be focused and at our most productive. These include:

- **Take regular small breaks:** Use the popular Pomodoro technique. It consists of working in 25 minute blocks of focused work, separated by 5 minute breaks [10]. The short breaks help maintain focus and provide an opportunity to check non-urgent messaging platforms (most messages can wait at least 25 minutes before being read).
- **Use rote work to recharge:** Lower energy rote tasks have been shown to help people recharge through allowing them to regain control and calmness [1]. After 90 minutes of focused work, schedule rote work, after which it will be easier to return to a significant period of focused work.



A worked example

The illustrative table below provides an example implementation. It isn't exhaustive, but demonstrates how a team with different rhythms, preferences, and commitments could arrange their schedules to work best together.

Time	Gear	Office Schedule	Office 'Lark' Schedule	WFH Schedule	WFH 'Owl' Schedule	Childcare schedule	
07 :00 - 07 :30	1	Personal time	Commute	Personal time	Personal time	Personal time	
07 :30 - 08 :00		Commute	Prep for day	Prep for day		Take children to childcare (+ commute if going to office)	
08 :00 - 08 :30			Pomodoro 1	Creative work			
08 :30 - 09 :00		2	Prep for day		Pomodoro 2	Prep for day	Prep for day
09 :00 - 09 :30	Daily stand up / coordination		Daily stand up / coordination	Daily stand up / coordination	Daily stand up / coordination	Daily stand up / coordination	
09 :30 - 10 :00	Pomodoro 1		Pomodoro 3	Pomodoro 1	Personal time	Pomodoro 1	
10 :00 - 10 :30	Pomodoro 2		Pomodoro 4	Pomodoro 2		Pomodoro 2	
10 :30 - 11 :00	Break / check in with colleagues		Break / check in with colleagues	Break / check in with colleagues	Break / check in with colleagues	Break / check in with colleagues	
11 :00 - 11 :30	Pomodoro 3		Creative work	Pomodoro 3	Pomodoro 1	Pomodoro 3	
11 :30 - 12 :00	Pomodoro 4			Pomodoro 4	Pomodoro 2	Pomodoro 4	
12 :00 - 12 :30	1		Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Personal time	Lunch
12 :30 - 13 :00		1:1s / networking / work admin	1:1s / networking / work admin	Personal time	Lunch	Creative work	
13 :00 - 13 :30					Creative work	Pomodoro 5	Pomodoro 5
13 :30 - 14 :00		Pomodoro 6	Pomodoro 6				
14 :00 - 14 :30		Break / check in with colleagues	Break / check in with colleagues	Break / check in with colleagues		Break / check in with colleagues	Break / check in with colleagues
14 :30 - 15 :00	2	Pomodoro 5	Pomodoro 7	Pomodoro 5	Pomodoro 3	Work admin	
15 :00 - 15 :30		Pomodoro 6	Finish off	Pomodoro 6	Pomodoro 4	Collect children from childcare (+ commute if in office)	
15 :30 - 16 :00		Pomodoro 7	Commute	Work admin	Pomodoro 5		
16 :00 - 16 :30		Finish off		Pomodoro 7	Work admin	Children: homework / dinner / bed	
16 :30 - 17 :00		Commute	Personal time	Pomodoro 8	Pomodoro 6		
17 :00 - 17 :30				Finish off	Pomodoro 7		Pomodoro 7
17 :30 - 18 :00		Personal time		Personal time	Pomodoro 8	Pomodoro 7	
18 :00 - 18 :30					Creative work	Pomodoro 8	
18 :30 - 19 :00						Finish off	Finish off
19 :00 - 19 :30							Personal time
19 :30 - 20 :00	Personal time				Personal time		
20 :00 - 20 :30					Personal time	Personal time	
20 :30 - 21 :00						Personal time	Personal time
21 :00 - 21 :30	Personal time						Personal time
21 :30 - 22 :00		Personal time					

We recommend challenging assumptions during the process.

For example, our mindset of workdays being in the office or at home falls foul a version of the sunk-cost fallacy.

When commuting, many may tend to think they should spend the full day at the office to get the return on the travel investment. But once completed, the commute is a sunk cost. It may be better to start off at home, when the natural rhythm is aligned with focused work, and commute later. In addition to work productivity improving, quieter and faster roads would lead to more productive, and less stressful, journeys.

Considering the gear state can help extract value from perceived dead time. If we are pre-disposed to be more creative as we transition between gears 1 and 2 on the way to work, listening to podcasts may help spark ideas that can be put into practice later in the day. Conversely, the commute home may be a better time for relaxing music, as people may need to move on from the day's work and prepare for childcare duties.



Sustaining

Good intentions rarely sustain adoption. Sustained change requires deliberate actions that go deeper into the processes and procedures of the management system that guide organisations.

Team Working Agreements are owned by teams to support their performance by setting expectations and norms for communication and collaboration [11].

However, working agreements change with team members. **Formal documents** that endure through personnel changes also require updating (e.g. employment contract templates).

Example Team Working Agreement

In this example the team agree use one messaging service for urgent issues. Notifications are turned off for the remaining channels. As a result, people no longer need to check multiple messaging channels just-in-case something requires attention. Distractions are reduced whilst focused work and productivity increases. This example can be used on its own, or incorporated into a more comprehensive agreement.

When communicating internally, we will use:

-  Email – for formal issues and where conversation history may be useful
-  Teams chat – for non-urgent collaboration, and to schedule calls
-  WhatsApp – for mission-critical tasks that need action in the next hour
-  Teams calls – if there is a risk of misunderstanding

We will be available for the team by:

- Sharing our daily schedule and location in the Teams status
- Joining the daily stand up with the camera on when working remotely
- Being online and available for all other golden collaboration times
- Reviewing emails and teams chat after every pomodoro or switch of work focus
- Informing invitees whether meetings will be in-person, remote, or hybrid.

Example contractual language

A document that defines how employees work is their **employment contract**. The alternative contractual clause below provides the flexibility for the approach in this paper:

Typical clause:

- Your normal working hours will be 40 hours per week. Your normal daily working hours will be 08.30 am to 5.30 pm Monday to Friday inclusive, with a one hour lunch break, to be taken at a mutually agreed time.

Alternative clause:

- Your normal working hours will be 40 hours per week. Employees schedule their working time, but will be required to be available during designated core collaboration periods as defined by the supervisor in consultation with team members.





Limitations

This paper is targeted to knowledge workers and is most easily adopted for individual contributors. Despite this limit, transformational results are still possible because individual contributors often focus on generating value for customers and stakeholders, whilst managers focus on coordination.

Within the subset of knowledge workers, there remain additional limitations, including:

1

Roles working with **external customers and stakeholders** that expect immediate responses.

- Teams could provide continued support using a similar approach to vacations where teams coordinate personal holidays to provide continuous service. Teams coordinating on the more granular daily schedule, where one is available whilst another is offline, would ensure customers receive timely responses.

2

Roles in complex organisations whose schedule is **dominated by meetings** with other departments and functions.

- In the above example, individual schedules are built after agreeing golden collaboration times. People should also schedule cross-organisation meetings before building their schedule.
- For managerial roles whose schedule is dominated by meetings, there may be little flexibility remaining for their own focused, rote, and creative work.

3

Organisations where team members have **different commitment levels**, and **decision-making occurs by consensus**.

- This approach will find limits and individuals will need to compromise. There is potential for team harmony to be negatively affected if team members expect others to be flexible to their needs, but do not show flexibility in return. The likelihood of tension is increased in organisations where decision-making is by consensus, as opposed to those where there is a clear arbiter who helps to set the boundaries for compromise.
- The solution to this limitation is likely to be company specific. Previous LSB research did not find a consistent view regarding who should select the days employees need to come to the office for hybrid work environments [12].



If you want more information...

This paper is limited to the key information required to understand and adopt practices to improve employee productivity and satisfaction.

It combines the lessons from three books. The books are easy to read and contain greater context and thorough referencing of academic literature.

Hyperefficient: Optimize your brain to transform the way you work

How to think well in an age of relentless work and ambient technology — built on three principles drawn from peer-reviewed neuroscience.

Author: Mithu Storoni

For more information: <https://mithustoroni.com/books/hyperefficient/>

Attention Span: A Groundbreaking Way to Restore Balance, Happiness and Productivity

Our minds have undergone a fundamental shift in how they work in the digital age. This book presents two decades of research on the science of attention, why we are so distracted, and how we can restore balance, happiness and productivity in our lives.

Author: Gloria Mark

For more information: <https://mithustoroni.com/books/hyperefficient/>

A World Without Email: Reimagining Work in an Age of Communication Overload

A bold vision for liberating workers from the tyranny of the inbox—and unleashing a new era of productivity.

Author: Cal Newport

For more information: <https://calnewport.com/writing/>



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He achieved an undergraduate Master's at the University of Oxford, then completed his doctorate at the University of Cambridge. He left academia for a corporate career of over 20 years. Working in global corporations including BP and Amazon, he has led product, engineering, operations, and supply chain teams in regions spanning the UK, EU, US, and Africa.

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She is a University of Cambridge-trained physician, ophthalmic surgeon, and neuroscience researcher with a doctorate in neuro-ophthalmology. Her award-winning book ***Hyperefficient*** (Business Book of the Year 2025) reveals how the human brain achieves its highest-quality thinking amid the demands of modern knowledge work and the rise of AI.

Drawing on neuroscience, she challenges the industrial-era model of continuous, rigid work schedules and demonstrates how aligning tasks with the brain's dynamics improves productivity, creativity, and resilience. Her frameworks help individuals and organizations redesign workflows to prioritise the quality of performance over volume of output, enabling human intelligence to flourish alongside AI.

She advises multinational corporations on optimising mental performance in today's workplace.

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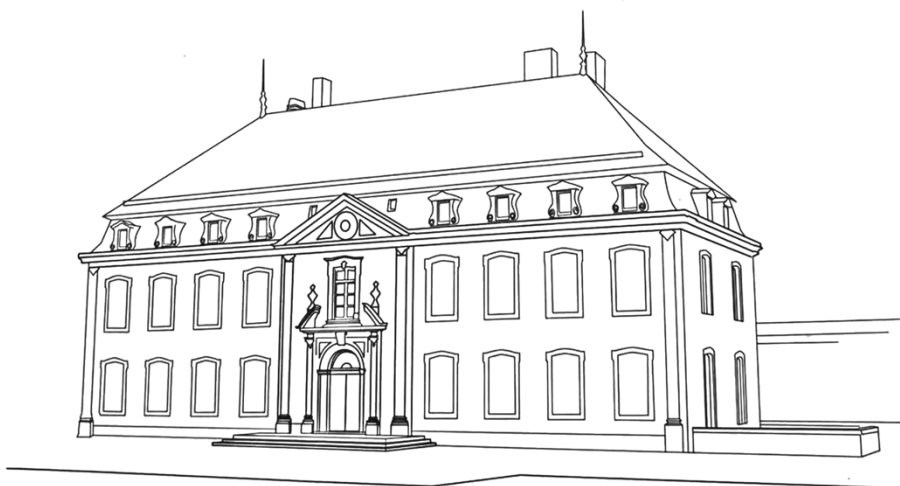
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