

FINDING FOCUS:
How to Preserve Your
Team's Productivity
in An Always-On World



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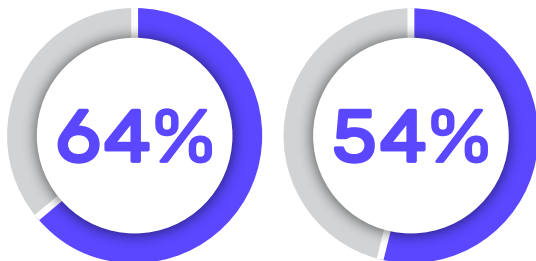


“Gone are the days when the workplace was merely a physical space employees occupied during regular office hours...As the distinction between professional and personal life dissolves, and the workplace becomes truly digital, employees are communicating and collaborating in unprecedented ways.”¹

The digital workplace: Think, share, do, Deloitte

Digital transformation has changed the types of work we do and how we do it. The past decade has seen companies embrace teamwork and collaboration as one of the best means to keep up with the rapid pace of technological change. With sophisticated tech stacks and a willingness to innovate, these companies assemble powerful teams from around the globe to solve their most challenging problems.

Modern teams are diverse and dispersed, hyper-connected, cross-departmental, and always-on. Their effectiveness is driven by high levels of alignment and powered by communication and team collaboration tools including SMS, team chat applications, document sharing platforms, email, social media, and video and voice communications.



The World Economic Forum predicts that by 2022, **64%** of companies will use external contractors to manage some business functions and **54%** will hire freelancers to cover workforce skills gaps.²

¹ Deloitte, "The digital workplace: Think, share, do," 2014, https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/be/Documents/technology/The_digital_workplace_Deloitte.pdf

² "The Future of Jobs Report," 2018, World Economic Forum Centre for the New Economy and Society, http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2018.pdf



But the shift to a hyper-connected workplace comes with a new set of challenges for managers and their teams. Time spent collaborating and achieving alignment reduces the time that your most talented team members can spend in uninterrupted, focused work.



“There is an urgent need for management to provide clear direction and limits so aligned workers can use their time more effectively.”³

Slack, The State of Work 2019

As technology enables us to connect with our co-workers any time and anywhere, the modern worker's attention is divided and our working hours fragmented. We continually check social media, email, team chat apps,

and other communication channels throughout the day and often expect others to do the same.

The apps that enable us to share or best ideas, may be preventing us from developing them.

This leads to the modern manager's dilemma:

How can you use communication and collaboration tools in a way that empowers your team and enhances their productivity while preserving their ability to focus and get things done?

In this ebook, we'll examine how our always-on mindset and an explosion in the number of available communication channels have changed the way we work and how these changes affect our productivity. We'll also supply you with a set of actionable tips that you can use to help you team regain their focus, better manage their time, and improve their performance and accountability.

To learn how to unlock the full potential of 21st Century communication tools without letting them limit your team's productivity, keep reading.

3 "The State of Work," 2019, Slack, <https://slack.com/state-of-work>

How we spend our time

In 2012, McKinsey analysts reported that workers spent 28% of their time during an average workweek reading and answering emails and predicted that using social technologies for team collaboration and communication would raise the productivity of workers by 20 to 25 percent.⁴

It's 2019 and we now know that things did not go as expected.

The mediums may have changed but human behavior did not.



RescueTime's research indicates that most workers still spend 10% of their computer time using email with an additional 5% spent using chat messaging apps such as Slack or Microsoft's Workplace.

"The total amount of time we spend communicating is roughly the same as it was six years ago," observes Rani Molla in the article, "The productivity pit: how Slack is ruining work."⁵

Over the course of less than a decade, we embraced the new technologies that were destined to save us time. But as it turns out, we love them too much. Technology has become a distraction. On any given day, we are overwhelmed by the informational and entertainment resources available at our fingertips.



"People now have the problem of too many emails, too many meetings, and too many messages. For them, workplace chat software has become just one more demand for their time."⁶

Rani Molla, The productivity pit: how Slack is ruining work, Recode/Vox

Here are a few of the latest numbers related to time use and productivity.

⁴ "The social economy: Unlocking value and productivity through social technologies," July 2012, McKinsey, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/technology-media-and-telecommunications/our-insights/the-social-economy>

⁵ "The productivity pit: how Slack is ruining work," May 1, 2019, Recode/Vox, <https://www.vox.com/recode/2019/5/1/18511575/productivity-slack-google-microsoft-facebook>

⁶ "The productivity pit: how Slack is ruining work," May 1, 2019, Recode/Vox, <https://www.vox.com/recode/2019/5/1/18511575/productivity-slack-google-microsoft-facebook>

We spend between one and three hours of computer time each day using communication apps.

After studying

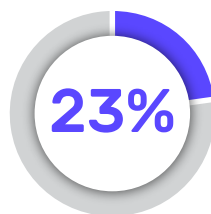
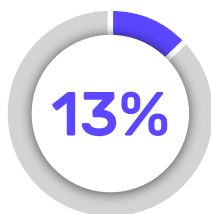
185 million

hours of digital activity recorded by its users, time management app RescueTime reports that workers spend an average of **5 hours** each day on their computers. Communication and scheduling consumed 1 hour of this time.



RescueTime's survey of 2018 computer use concluded that its users spent just 2 hours and 48 minutes of computer time each day on productive tasks.⁷

A study by Penga which also tracked workers' computer usage found that **13%** of the time workers spend using their desktop computers is consumed using email apps. That same study found that just **23%** of the time spent using email apps generated value.⁸



Jory MacKay, who reported on the results of RescueTime's study, noted that RescueTime's data is limited to that which is collected from the devices selected by its users. MacKay estimates that workers spend an additional 2.5 to 5 hours daily using their mobile or other untracked devices for both work- and non-work-related activities.⁹

Self-reported data from a 2019 survey of email usage conducted by Adobe revealed that the average U.S. knowledge worker spends 3 hours on work-related emails and another 2 hours on personal email each day. Survey respondents also told Adobe that they open just 80% of work-related emails they receive and found less than ⅓ of those emails to be useful.¹¹

⁷ The State of Work Life Balance in 2019: What we learned from studying 185 million hours of working time," January 24, 2019, RescueTime, <https://blog.rescuetime.com/work-life-balance-study-2019/>

⁸ Employees switch apps more than 1100 times a day, decreasing productivity," December 4, 2018, TechRepublic, <https://www.techrepublic.com/article/employees-switch-apps-more-than-1100-times-a-day-decreasing-productivity/>

⁹ "The State of Work Life Balance in 2019: What we learned from studying 185 million hours of working time," January 24, 2019, RescueTime, <https://blog.rescuetime.com/work-life-balance-study-2019/>

¹⁰ "Email Usage-Working Age Knowledge Workers (US Trended Results)," August 2019, Adobe, <https://www.slideshare.net/adobe/2019-adobe-email-usage-study>

¹¹ "Email Usage-Working Age Knowledge Workers (US Trended Results)," August 2019, Adobe, <https://www.slideshare.net/adobe/2019-adobe-email-usage-study>

Interruptions, most by our own choice, occur frequently.

Despite numerous studies indicating that multitasking is a myth, we still try to accomplish it. Many of today's knowledge workers keep their email tabs open and enable notifications to alert them to every email, instant message, or new team chat mention. These interruptions, while short in duration, are frequent in number.

According to productivity-analytics company Time Is Ltd., the average worker at a large company sends up to 200 Slack messages each week and receives 45 Slack messages each day. Some of the companies surveyed by Time Is Ltd. have more Slack channels than they do employees.

And, the time invested in handling each notification or email check adds up.

RescueTime users spend 40% of their days multitasking with communication tools, with most checking their email or instant messages every 6 minutes. Just 30% of knowledge workers go more than 60 minutes without checking their email or instant messages during normal work hours.¹³

35.5% of knowledge workers check their email or Slack every 3 minutes or less according to a time use analysis performed by RescueTime.

We aren't immune to the temptations of non-work related distractions either. RescueTime discovered that up to 21% of our computer time during working hours is spent on entertainment, news, and social media.

Finally, the sheer number of apps available--many of which are designed to facilitate our productivity--have become a time sink for many knowledge workers.

Business technology company Okta reports that in 2018 its client-companies with workforces of **2,000** people or more used an average of **129 different apps**. Small and mid-sized Okta client-companies average **73 apps** each.¹⁴



Slack's The State of Work report notes that 64% of aligned workers (those workers who are confident that they understand their organization's vision and strategy) and 81% of workers at innovator companies spend 30 minutes or more each day switching between apps.¹⁵ Half of the workers surveyed told Slack that switching between 6 or more apps each day made it harder for them to complete essential work.

¹² "The Illusion of Multitasking Improves Performance of Simple Tasks," February 19, 2019, Yale Insights, <https://insights.yale.edu/insights/the-illusion-of-multitasking-improves-performance-on-simple-tasks>

¹³ The State of Work Life Balance in 2019: What we learned from studying 185 million hours of working time," January 24, 2019, RescueTime, <https://blog.rescuetime.com/work-life-balance-study-2019/>

¹⁴ Business @ Work, 2019, Okta, <https://www.okta.com/businesses-at-work/2019/>

¹⁵ "The State of Work," 2019, Slack, <https://slack.com/state-of-work>

Productivity Lost:

Our divided attention



As you have probably realized by now, our ability to engage in deep work or focused thinking suffers the most in our always-on workplaces.

This is how Yet, the product of modern knowledge workers comes from focused attention and focused attention requires periods of uninterrupted. This is how you team creates value: by performing cognitive tasks such as creating content, developing code, or analysing data.

When we are interrupted while engaging in thoughtful work we lose not only the time

spent dealing with the interruption but also the time needed to recover from that interruption. Each time we mentally shift gears, we experience what is known as the context switching penalty.¹⁶

We lose valuable time regaining our focus and the effort to get back on track increases our cognitive load.

How much time do we lose when we our attention is divided?

According to one study, we lose an average of 23 minutes and 15 seconds

¹⁶ "The mental penalties of context switching," September 15, 2019, Phil-Hayes-St. Clair, <https://philhsc.com/context-switching-penalties/>

each time our attention is drawn away from the subject of our focus.¹⁷ And, if you have ever been interrupted while you were “in the zone” or a “flow” state, you know that any distraction can have a cascade effect which can setback your progress for hours, if not days.

In [How to Spend Way Less Time on Email Every Day](#), Matt Plummer reports that professionals check their emails every 37 minutes on average.¹⁸ Each of these email checks is a disruption that causes them to potentially lose hours of focused thinking time. Work may be completed, but it cannot be their best work

Imagine what your team could achieve if they were able to harness just 1 extra hour of deep work each day.



Each one of those just checks shifts your attention. Even if this shift is brief (think: twenty seconds in an inbox), it's enough to leave behind a residue that reduces your cognitive capacity for a non-trivial amount of time to follow.¹⁹

Cal Newport, author of Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World



Despite the costs, however, to function effectively, your team needs to communicate. So how can you as a manager help you team preserve the focus they need to complete complex tasks while ensuring that every team member is aligned and deadlines are met?

¹⁷ "How Distractions at Work Take Up More Time Than You Think," July 23, 2015, I Done This Blog, <http://blog.idonethis.com/distractions-at-work/>

¹⁸ "How to Spend Way Less Time on Email Every Day," January 22, 2019, Harvard Business Review, <https://hbr.org/2019/01/how-to-spend-way-less-time-on-email-every-day>

¹⁹ "A Productivity Lesson from a Classic Arcade Game," September 6, 2019, Study Hacks Blog, <https://www.calnewport.com/blog/2016/09/06/a-productivity-lesson-from-a-classic-arcade-game>

How to manage your team to maximize their productivity and effectiveness



Time management is broken, time management is dead...the flip side of that is to start thinking about the idea of attention management. Rather than thinking about how we manage our time, think about attention as being the most precious resource we have. ²⁰

Graham Allcott, author of *How to be a Productivity Ninja*

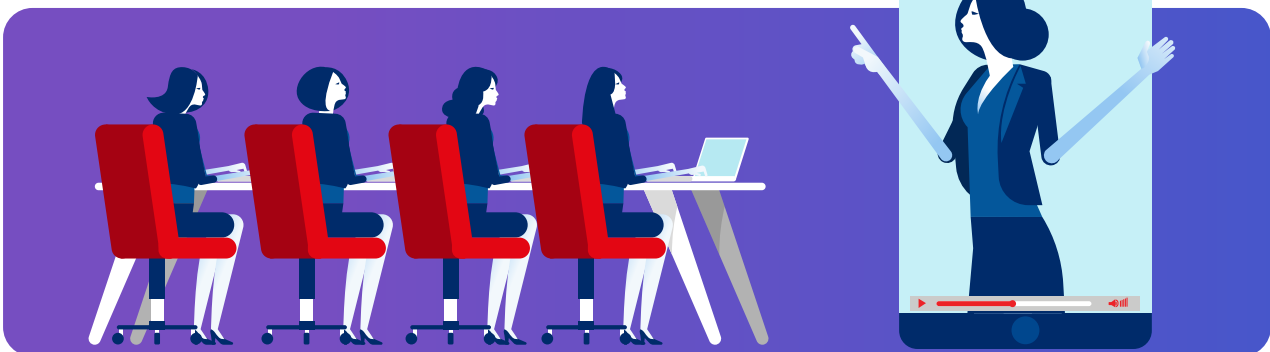
- *What should they do?*
- *When should they do it?*
- *What are the tools and collaborations they need to complete it?*

Achieving this alignment requires communication, but not just any communication. To keep your team energized and on track, the information they need should be easy to locate, understand, and parse.

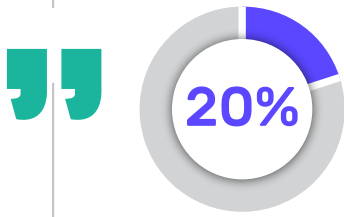
1. Provide clarity through centralized, task-focused communications

Effective use of our time begins with a clear understanding of our goals. As individuals, this means that we understand what it is that we want to achieve before we decide upon the tasks necessary to achieve it. As a manager, one of your primary roles is to provide this clarity for your team--to bring them into alignment with regard not only to the sought after results of their tasks but with regard to each task itself.

For example, instead of asking your team to spend time each day reviewing old email threads for guidance, filtering through multi-step progression in project management apps, or trying to find messages applicable to their task in the endless scroll of team chat apps, use an app that is intensely task-focused and gathers essential details like who, what, where, and when in a single location.



²⁰ "Graham Allcott: How to be a Productivity Ninja," February 25, 2019, Talks at Google, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTfNt70W8Q>



The average company loses more than 20% of its productive capacity...to what we call “organizational drag,” the structures and processes that consume valuable time and prevent people from getting things done.”²¹

Michael Mankins, Bain & Company

Simplify your task-related communications and remove the noise so that your team can focus on what matters.

2. Limit information overload and cognitive fatigue by prioritizing tasks

Making decisions is a costly endeavor from a cognitive standpoint. When faced with too many choices, we can experience what is known as decision paralysis. Each variable adds to the cognitive load that the decider must bear.²²

Productivity experts advise individuals to reduce their cognitive load by prioritizing tasks and creating daily, detailed to-do lists that highlight just those tasks that are of highest value. This prioritized to-do list helps individuals “hit the ground running” each day and focus on task completion instead of task selection.

If your team starts each day asking themselves, **“Which of my tasks should I complete first?”**



or **“What task should I perform next?”** they are wasting valuable cognitive energy that could be used for deep work.

Preserve your team’s mental energies by investing time upfront to prioritize what needs to be done by each team member each week and providing your team with daily assignments (and updates) that include only what they need to know to progress the project to the next step.

²¹ “Great Companies Obsess Over Productivity, Not Efficiency,” March 1, 2017, Harvard Business Review, <https://hbr.org/2017/03/great-companies-obsess-over-productivity-not-efficiency>

²² “Decision Paralysis: How to Stop Overthinking Your Choices,” Procrastination.com, <https://procrastination.com/blog/9/decision-paralysis-overthinking-choices>



Dr. Steven Covey's Time Management Matrix for prioritizing tasks

Source: FranklinCovey.com, <https://www.franklincovey.com/the-7-habits/habit-3.html>

Of course, understanding the big picture is important for team cohesion, so you don't want to cut off all non-task related communication. You can, however, reserve these zoomed out discussions for initial alignment meetings and updates. And, because not every decision can be anticipated, your team should feel empowered to make decisions ad hoc. But, your team will be better able to make critical impromptu decisions if you've relieved them of unnecessary distractions and cognitive burdens.

¹² "The Illusion of Multitasking Improves Performance of Simple Tasks," February 19, 2019, Yale Insights, <https://insights.yale.edu/insights/the-illusion-of-multitasking-improves-performance-on-simple-tasks>

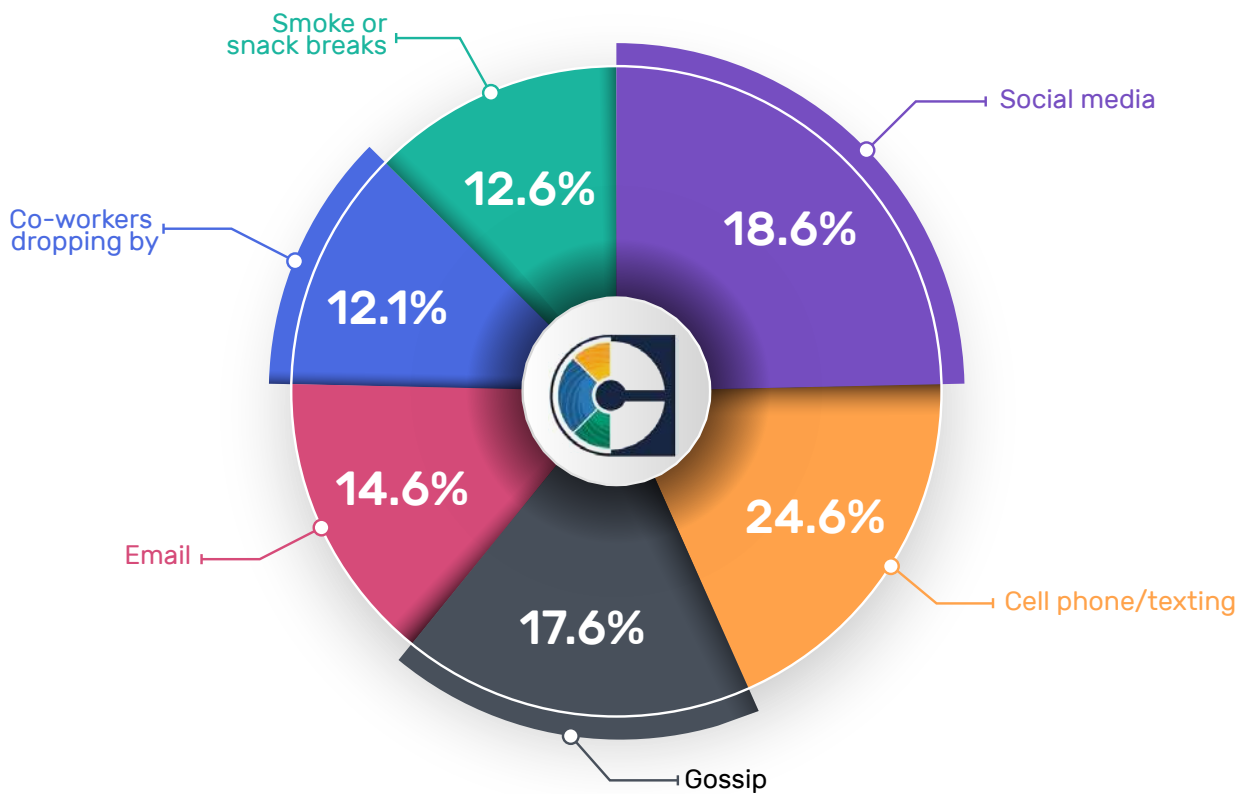
¹³ The State of Work Life Balance in 2019: What we learned from studying 185 million hours of working time," January 24, 2019, RescueTime, <https://blog.rescuetime.com/work-life-balance-study-2019/>

3. Set communication expectations

In *How to increase your productivity at work*, workplace productivity coach, Dr. Melissa Gratas, observes that distractions at work can be self-imposed or environmentally-imposed.

Self-imposed distractions include enabling notifications, checking our emails too frequently, or keeping multiple tabs open on our computers even when they aren't relevant to our current task.²³

TOP WORKPLACE PRODUCTIVITY KILLERS ACCORDING TO CAREERBUILDER.COM



Environmentally-imposed distractions include attending meetings, getting unexpected visits from co-workers, and receiving off-topic Slack messages or unnecessary emails that overload our communication channels without adding value.

As a manager, you have the power to help your team reduce some distractions of both kinds. Protect your team members' time by establishing guidelines and expectations for how they should communicate with one another.

²³ "Are smartphones killing productivity in the workplace?," June 29, 2017, CareerBuilder.com, <https://www.careerbuilder.com/advice/are-smartphones-killing-productivity-in-the-workplace>

Consider the following questions as you create a set of guidelines for your team:

- ◆ Which form of communication should team members use to discuss projects?
- ◆ How soon should team members expect a response from one another or from you?
- ◆ When it is appropriate to follow-up after a message has been sent?
- ◆ What types of messages require acknowledgement and follow-up?
- ◆ How will action items and responsibility for their completion be assigned?
- ◆ In what situations should a message be labeled urgent?
- ◆ What should they do if there is a breakdown in communication between two or more team members?
- ◆ How should meetings or conference calls be scheduled? Should team members consult with each participant or just check each one's calendar before setting a date and time?

If your staff know that emails can go unanswered for an hour or two and that important messages won't get lost in the fog of Slack, they will be more comfortable turning off their notifications and engaging in focused work. And, when you create a reliable system of accountability and follow-up, each team member can confidently hand off tasks to colleagues and check them off their mental to-do lists.

4. Provide your team with the right tools for the job

Emails and text messages allow us to stay connected with our teams. But these communication formats also consume our mental energy. As we wait for a reply, we are in a state of communication-limbo. Did the recipient receive the message? Was the communication clear? When will I hear back?



These modes of communication can also rapidly devolve into a mass of separate discussions, broken threads, and cross-chatter that prevents the very clarity we need to perform tasks effectively. We can easily find ourselves side-tracked and off task. Using instant messages can reduce our wait time but not the risks of confusion and distraction.

Voice and video discussion's real-time features can be both positive and negative. Participants get immediate answers but they also have to sync their schedules with every other participant to join the conversation.

So, what is a better option for team collaboration? In many situations, a task-focused app that allows team members to communicate asynchronously with each stakeholder without getting lost in a maze of unrelated conversations is the best choice.

²⁴ "How to Spend Way Less Time on Email Every Day," January 22, 2019, Harvard Business Review, <https://hbr.org/2019/01/how-to-spend-way-less-time-on-email-every-day>

As an additional benefit, choosing the right app for the job will make your team more aware of the need for clarity and focus. The format and structure of most task-focused applications encourages concise communication.

What about when you want or need to use email or a team chat application such as Slack, to coordinate with teammates?

Try some of the tips listed below to minimize complications.

- ◆ When collaborating using Slack or another team chat app, create a separate channel for each project and limit discussions within that channel to only those related to the project's tasks. Save off-topic conversations for your social-focused Slack channels.
- ◆ If your team prefers to communicate using email, establish naming conventions for project-related emails so that they are easy to find.
- ◆ Instruct your team to transfer any work-related emails that require further action to their to-do list instead of leaving those emails lingering in their inbox. After an email is converted to an action item, the user should delete or archive it. Otherwise, they may end up reading the same email again the next time they check their inbox.
- ◆ Integrate your team's to-do list, document sharing, calendar, and other apps with your team chat channel to make it easier for team members to transfer and share information.

5. Protect your team member's prime time



Remember that extra hour a day of deep work we asked you to imagine earlier?

Now, imagine what an extra hour a day of deep work from each of your team members performing at their peak could do for your organization.

You can empower your team members to take advantage of their brain's best hours of operation with just a few simple steps.

Very few people are capable of performing at peak levels throughout their entire day. Our physical and mental energies vary.

So, improve your team's productivity by preserving the hours of the day in which they perform at their best for their toughest work. For most of your team, this will mean keeping their morning calendars clear. As Graham Allcott explains in a talk presented at Google, during the [morning is when most of us are able to do our best thinking](#).²⁵

¹² "The Illusion of Multitasking Improves Performance of Simple Tasks," February 19, 2019, Yale Insights, <https://insights.yale.edu/insights/the-illusion-of-multitasking-improves-performance-on-simple-tasks>

¹³ The State of Work Life Balance in 2019: What we learned from studying 185 million hours of working time," January 24, 2019, RescueTime, <https://blog.rescuetime.com/work-life-balance-study-2019/>

Allcott recommends that we closely guard this time by turning off notifications and other distractions and hanging up a virtual "do not disturb" sign.

There are certain times of day when you are super productive or hyper creative. If you work on your most important tasks (MITs) at your non-peak times, you could be wasting your time or getting little done."²⁶

Thomas Oppong, author of Working in the Gig Economy

What can you do as a manager to safeguard your team's best moments of the day?

Start by holding team meetings during afternoon hours whenever possible. If you have to schedule a meeting during the morning hours, choose a time close to the start of the workday rather than mid-morning so your team members don't have to delay or interrupt their deep work to attend.

Next, set aside several "do not disturb" hours for your team each week. These off-limits hours can be the same for your entire team or you can allow each team member to choose their own best hours. During these time periods, allow team members to close their doors, disconnect from their digital world, and focus on just one thing. Members of your team can even work out a system to



cover for one another so that each person has a chance to spend several hours each week in uninterrupted work suggests Allcott.

Finally, work closely with each of your team members to identify the goals and expected outcomes of their focused work periods. Make sure that you have agreed upon tasks that can be completed or progressed during the allocated time and that they have all the tools and information they need. Then, track their progress.

You and your team may be surprised at what you can accomplish when you make preserving their peak hours a top priority.

²⁵ "Graham Allcott: How to be a Productivity Ninja," February 25, 2019, Talks at Google, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTfNt70W8Q>

²⁶ "The Sweet Spot for Deep Work," April 4, 2018, Thrive Global, <https://medium.com/thrive-global/why-11-a-m-is-the-sweet-spot-for-deep-and-focused-work-8cad53c8aaee>

Realize the benefits of collaboration without sacrificing your team's productivity

The complexities of the modern economy demand that we spend more time working in collaboration and technological innovations have enabled us to do so. But managing the challenges of multiple voices communicating across multiple channels is not easy. Leveraging the power of collaboration without losing productivity requires careful attention to the tools and processes we use to communicate.

By applying what you've learned in this ebook, you can empower your team work together without losing focus and get more done.

Do you have a productivity tip to share? Send us an email at team@mail.getbusy.com. We'd love to hear how you help your team get more done.





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