

Focusing!

Attention, Emotions, and Pressure

GR2 Report

MEET THE TEAM



Yiheng Feng
21'

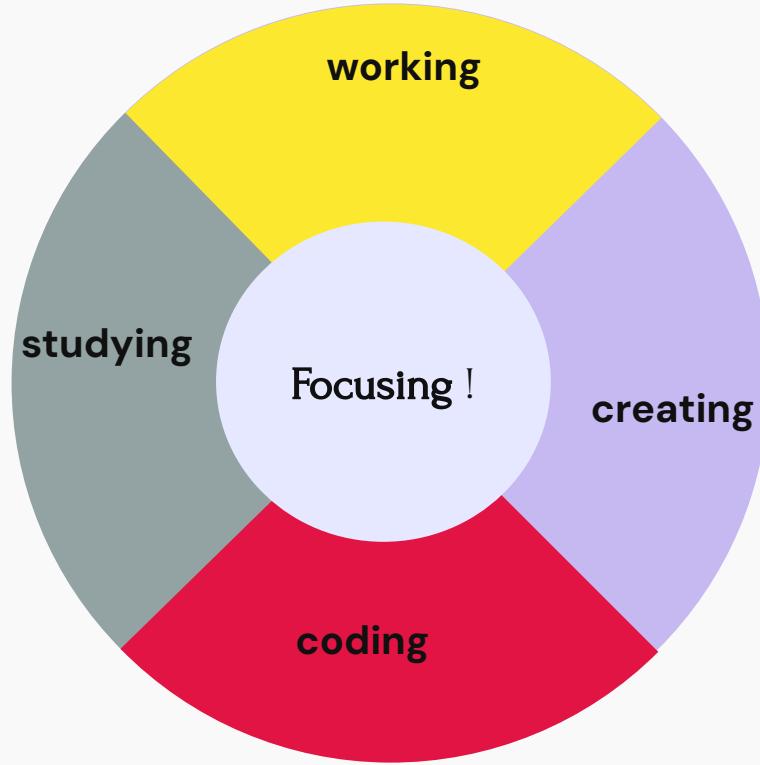


Andy Wang
20'



Tiffany Nguyen
22'

We are exploring how people who rely on self-directed work (such as studying, coding, or creative work) experience fluctuations in focus and motivation over time, especially when progress feels invisible or difficult to sustain.



Finding Participants

1

College Students

College students often engage in long periods of self-directed studying and rely heavily on personal motivation to maintain focus.

2

Workers

Workers with flexible or remote schedules frequently manage their own focus without strict external supervision.

3

Extreme Users – Job Seekers

Job seekers working from home without a fixed daily schedule represent an extreme case of self-directed work.

We spoke to ...



Skyler Su

Brand &
Packaging
Designer



Sara

22-year-old job
seeker,
Los Angeles
Extreme User



Tommy Wong

Contractor from
LA

We spoke to ...

Additional Interviewees



Jerry

25-year-old WFH
Software
Engineer
Bay Area



Samantha Tran

22-year-old
student from
University of La
Verne

We asked:

1

When and why they lose focus during tasks

2

How focus issues affect their sense of progress and emotional state

3

What strategies they currently use to manage or recover focus

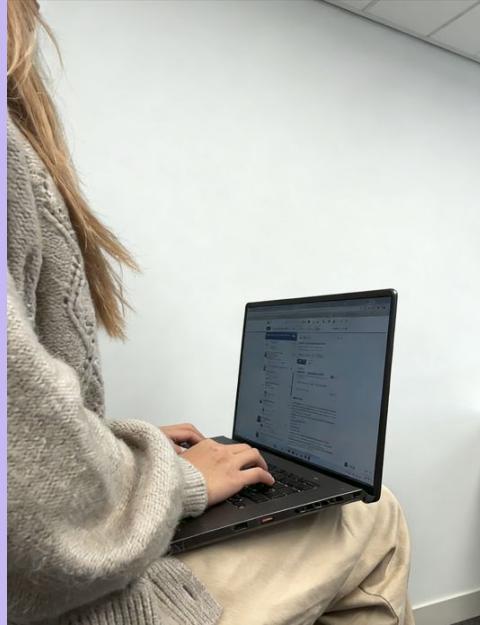
4

Specific moments that illustrate breakdowns in motivation

Sara

"Procrastination is killing me,
I live on Tiktok"

New grad, unemployed



Where? When? Why?

1

We contacted Sara through LinkedIn.

2

We took the interview in the UCSB library.

3

The Interview took 30 - 60 mins.

4

She spent over 10 hours per day to find a job. We thought she was the extreme user.

Apparatus & Roles

1

Interviews were audio recorded with participant consent.

2

One team member Yiheng asked questions and led the interview while Andy took detailed notes.

3

Andy used phone to record the audio and took pictures, also used an iPad to take notes.

4

Audio recorded via iPhone, notes taken in Google Docs.

SAYS

Since I live at home and no one forces me to work, I always feel like I can just do it tomorrow.

I use focus timers, but they just feel like annoying alarms that I can easily ignore.

I spend all day "working" on my resume, but at the end of the day, I haven't actually applied to anything.

The lack of a fixed schedule makes time feel infinite and meaningless.

I feel guilty every time I close a TikTok video, but I open another one five minutes later.

I've revised my resume a hundred times, but I'm still too scared to actually hit "send".

Focusing feels impossible when there's no immediate pressure or consequence for failing.

I miss the structure of college where professors gave me deadlines.

Searching for a job feels like walking into a black hole where I can't see any progress.

Procrastination is killing me, I live on TikTok.



THINKS

If I don't get a job soon, I'm a failure, but the fear of rejection makes me want to hide in TikTok.

Focusing is something I should be able to do naturally; why is it so hard for me?

Maybe I'm not actually working hard enough, even though I'm sitting at my desk for 8 hours.

Since my parents aren't pressuring me, I don't have a "real" reason to start right now.

Small progress (like fixing one sentence) doesn't feel like real progress, so it's not motivating.

I think I'm addicted to the instant hits of dopamine from short videos to escape my job-search anxiety.

Everyone else from my class seems to have their life together; I'm falling behind.

Standard focus tools aren't built for people with no external accountability like me.

I believe that if I just find the "perfect" job listing, I'll suddenly find the motivation to focus.

I'm worried that even if I get a job, I won't be able to stay focused there either.



DOES

Keeps 20+ job tabs open in her browser but spends most of the time on unrelated sites.

Frequently picks up her phone to check TikTok notifications during "work hours".

Manually overrides or force-closes focus-timing apps when they suggest a break or a start.

Spends hours "perfected" tiny resume details (fonts, margins) instead of submitting applications.

Works from comfortable, non-dedicated spaces like her bed or the couch, leading to sleepiness.

Starts unrelated household chores (like cleaning her room) as a way to "productively procrastinate."

Scrolls through LinkedIn for "research" but ends up comparing herself to others and feeling worse.

Repeatedly refreshes her email inbox looking for responses that haven't arrived.

Sets multiple alarms to start working but hits snooze for over an hour.

Deletes and reinstalls TikTok multiple times a week in a failed cycle of self-control.



FEELS

Heavy chest feeling after spending three hours on social media instead of job portals.

A racing heart when thinking about the gap on her resume growing larger.

Feeling like she is "running in place" despite being busy all day.

The loneliness of working from home without peers or coworkers to mirror.

Brief relief when deciding to "start fresh tomorrow."

Paralyzed by the sheer number of job listings and requirements.

Viewing the "Focus Timer" as a judge or an enemy rather than a helper.

Feeling like a "child" because she still relies on her home environment for structure.

Using TikTok to tune out the stress of being unemployed.

Anger at herself for lacking the "willpower" to simply put the phone down.

When progress feels invisible or difficult to sustain over time.





Sara

|

Insights

Accountability Vacuum

Without the "social gaze" (like a library or boss), internal motivation alone is insufficient to combat home distractions.

The Anxiety Loop

TikTok isn't just for fun; it's an "emotional painkiller" used to numb the stress of job searching, which only increases guilt.

Passive Tool Failure

Standard timers are too easy to ignore. Users like Sara need "hard" boundaries or social consequences, not just notifications.

Needs

Sara needs a way to feel immediate consequences for distraction to replace the lack of external workplace pressure.

Skyler

“I did a lot today, but nothing actually moved forward. The motivation didn't fade away, it just snapped.”

Remote Designer



Where? When? Why?

1

We met Skyler on a lift while snowboarding, we had a quick chat ,and I found her to be a fitting interviewee for this interview.

2

The interview was over Zoom.

3

The Interview took about 50 mins.

4

She represents users who struggle with self-management in unstructured environments.

Apparatus & Roles

1

Interviews were over zoom, screen recorded with participant consent.

2

One team member Andy asked questions and led the interview while Yiheng took detailed notes.

3

Andy set up a zoom meeting with Skyler, Yiheng noted down key points on the side.

4

The recording is stored on a personal computer.

Skyler's Current Strategies

The Notion workspace shows a 'To Do List / NOV 2024 todo' page. The sidebar includes sections for 'Personal Home', 'Meetings', 'Notion AI', and 'Inbox'. The main content area is a weekly calendar:

- Monday:**
 - ✓ spatial-graphic
 - ✓ interactive compass
 - ✓ cad-container-box
 - ✓ cad-polaris-box
 - ✓ 重新排版grad show
 - ✓ layout-pic
 - ✓ 切换每一个照片
 - ✓ 手写postcard
 - ✓ 打印, 贴在教室
 - ✓ 找到vinyl cut和resume的商家
- Tuesday Morning:**
 - magnet
 - postcard
 - tote bag
 - 还有网站ui?
 - apply chocolate bararararar
 - 尝试ps一下实体照片
- Thursday:**
 - ✓ linkedin-post
 - sketch render layout
 - 贴贴巧克力bar
 - ✓ 画interactive compass
 - 去render
- Friday:**
 - magnet
 - postcard
 - tote bag
 - 还有网站ui?
 - 尝试ps一下实体照片

A sidebar on the right lists 'spatial graphics' with checked items:

- ✓ 墙上指示每个section-(灯牌)-
- ✓ 地上区域的指示
- ✓ 排版星星在半球哪里

1

She wears a bracelet that she switches between hands whenever she catches herself zoning out, using the physical sensation to "snap" her attention back to the present.

2

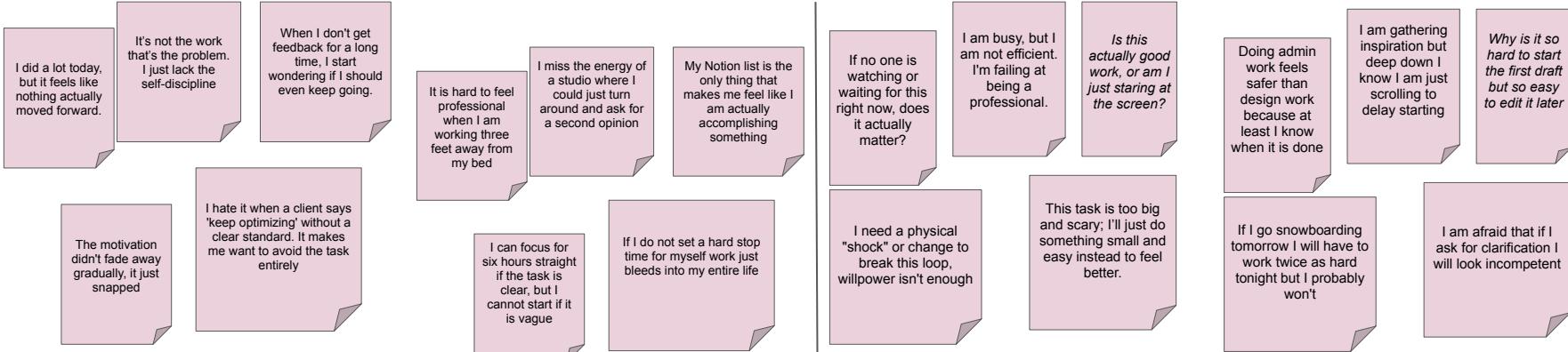
To fight the anxiety of vague, large projects, she breaks everything down into tiny, bite-sized checklists in Notion so she can constantly feel the small "wins" of crossing things off.

3

She intentionally limits her work hours instead of trying to be available all day, because she realized that having "infinite time" actually destroys her motivation to start.

4

When her focus hits a wall, she stops trying to force it. She physically gets up and changes rooms or environments to "reset" her brain before trying to work again.



SAYS

Observations: What did this person SAY that surprised you?

THINKS

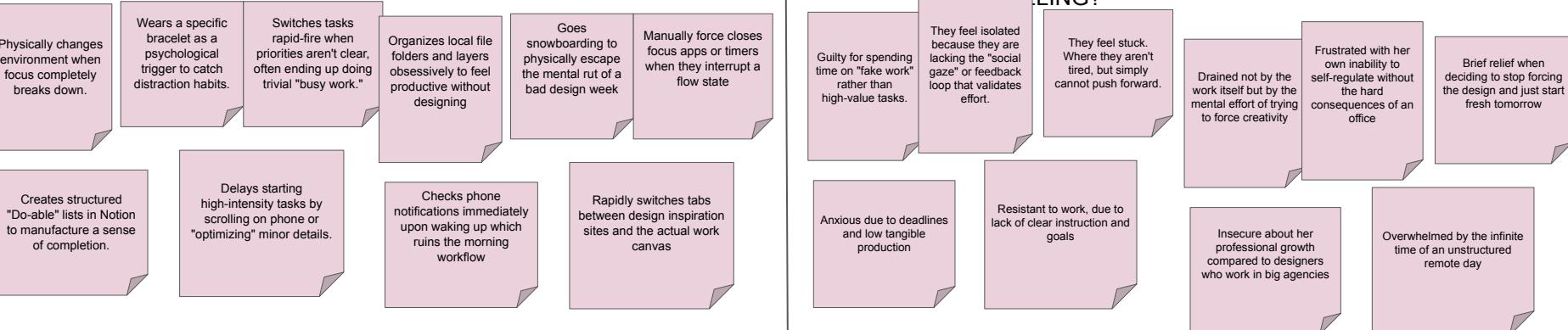
Inferences: Based on what they SAY and DO, what might they be THINKING?

DOES

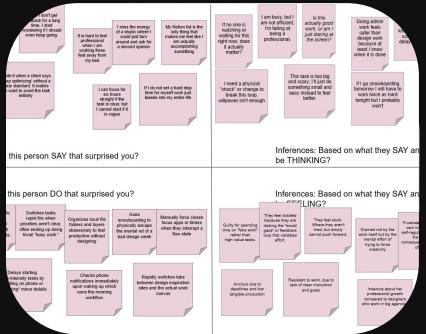
Observations: What did this person DO that surprised you?

FEELS

Inferences: Based on what they SAY and DO, what might they be FEELING?



Skyler



Insights

The "Definition" Paralysis

Without a clear "definition of done" or tangible milestones, vague tasks trigger avoidance behaviors like scrolling or task switching.

The "Busy-Guilt" Trap

High activity on trivial tasks creates a false sense of work. The result is not satisfaction, but guilt and anxiety over a lack of "real" progress.

The Feedback Vacuum

Isolation isn't just lonely; it breaks the motivation loop. Without external "pings" or validation, motivation doesn't decline gradually, it snaps suddenly.

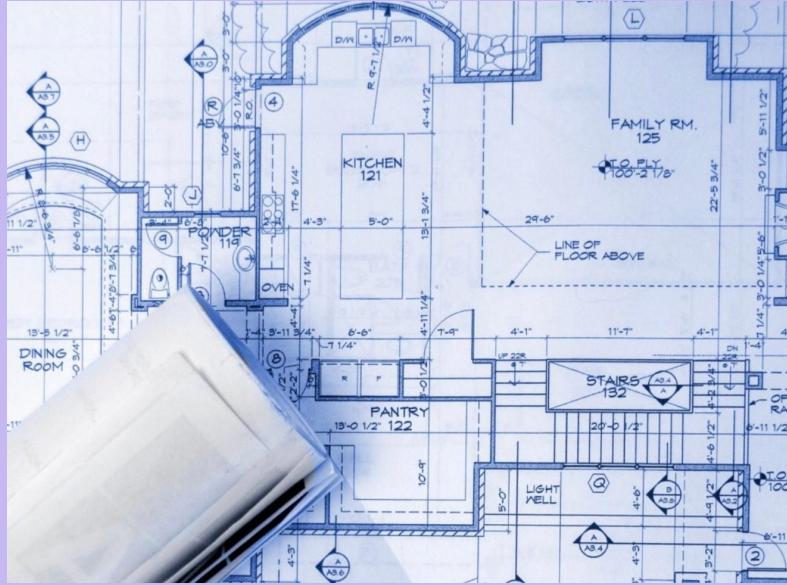
Needs

Skyler needs externalized boundaries and frequent feedback loops to visualize progress, rather than relying solely on internal willpower to structure her day.

Tommy

"If you plan it in the morning or a little bit late, then you're going to not be as productive."

Contractor from LA



Where? When? Why?

- 1 Tiffany met Tommy at a nearby coffee shop.
- 2 Tiffany took a quick interview at the coffee shop.
- 3 The interview took 30 minutes.
- 4 Tommy works as a contractor in Los Angeles who manages some workers and projects.

Say

Sometimes you're not focused. Somebody might be talking to you, but you're not really listening ... you're not really paying attention because your mind's thinking of something else.

For a contractor, it would be something like remodeling a kitchen and the measurement doesn't measure out, it doesn't fit like it's supposed to. You can always solve the problem - I could always solve the problem.

If you plan it in the morning or a little bit late, then you're going to not be as productive. Much more productive if you plan things out the day before.

Sometimes I would have to tell [my employees], "remind me" of something I need to do this week or even next week. I try to remember or write it down. If it's something important, I would tell one of the others, "Oh, could you remind me next week that I need to do this, just in case I forget."

Every night, the night before, I would sit down and go over the things I need to do for the following day ... And the next day, as a reminder, I would go pick up whatever it needs, and then have it there to make it a productive day.

[A particular project that I recently worked on is] a kitchen. A kitchen cabinet where it doesn't fit like it's supposed to, where the appliance doesn't fit exactly running on space. So you got to be creative and size your cabinet or your appliance a little bit smaller to make it fit.

This is pretty weekly where I have to sit there and try to get something solved. So if I can't solve it, I would sit there ... and I can't figure it out. Then I would wait till the next day when I'm free and I would come back to it again. But eventually I'll get it solved ... It might take me an extra day to figure it out, but I'll solve it.

You have to stay focused. If you ... lose your focus, you gotta go back and start all over again. You lose your focus, you just might get tired after like 20, 30 minutes, you're tired. Only I'm going to go back to my notes ... Try to make it out again, and I'm going to see if I want to make it work. And it always works out.

Sometimes I tell the people, "Could you remind me like two days before, just in case, just to be safe, just text me two days before I'm supposed to go by the day before." I would probably remember it, but just in case, remind me anyway.

On the phone it would take too long. The fastest way for me is I write on a piece of paper, a little notepad ... and I'll stick it in my car somewhere ... If it's important, I'll put it next to my dashboard. If I'm not ... if it's not super important, I would put it maybe on my little notebook. I carry a little notebook, then I look at it daily.

Confident stature and posture when speaking of his ability to solve problems

Speaks with a motivated pace

Attentive to the interview and seems to listen intently

Do

Not much else to note for "Do".

"Having someone to remind me of something is useful."

"Remind me, just in case and even if I remember it anyway."

"Plan ahead of time and it will boost your productivity."

"I often notice people who aren't focused in a conversation because they're thinking of something else."

"Writing on a phone takes too long - I prefer a piece of paper or notebook."

Annoyance or frustration when others are not focused in a conversation.

Frustration with problems that may be harder to solve

Confident when approaching problems

Stressed when handling projects

Has a tendency to state "stay focused."

"I have to stay productive due to the nature of my job."

"I'll come back tomorrow if I can't solve something."

"If I carry a notebook with me and look at it daily, it will boost my productivity."

"No matter the problem, I always get it solved one way or another."

"I can always solve something, even if I have to come back to it later."

Focused on productivity and solutions

Motivated to stick to solving problems he's given

Less focused when tired

Feel

Think

Apparatus & Roles

1

Interviews were audio recorded with participant consent.

2

Tiffany both asked the interview questions and recorded the interview.

3

Tiffany used their phone to record the audio and to take notes of the user's thoughts and answers.

4

Audio recorded via iPhone, notes taken in Google Docs.



Tommy

Insights

Problem Solver

Tommy often has to solve problems during his work as a contractor, forcing him to find solutions and boost his productivity.

If Not Now, Then Later

If Tommy can't find a solution right away, he comes back to it another day with a refreshed mind and productive state.

Remind Me Anyway!

Preferring people and paper over his phone, he wants people to remind him of things even if he remembers it anyway.

Needs

Although Tommy doesn't seem to have a direct need, perhaps a tool or utility to help him keep track of his tasks and productivity may be useful for workers like himself.

Persona - Jerry

Background

- Remote SWE in Bay Area
- 8 hours/day WFH

Goals

- Maintain deep focus without burnout

Frustrations

- Knows what to do but avoids starting
- Resists “controlling” productivity tools

Behaviors



- Short breaks turn into long avoidance
- Prefers autonomy over reminders

"TO WFH or NOT, that is a question"



Liked

SAYS

"I don't like tools that feel like they're watching me."

"I know what I need to do, but sometimes I just don't start."

"I don't want my tasks broken down too much—it makes me more anxious."

"I know procrastination isn't great, but sometimes I just feel stuck."

Sticky stack

"It's not that I'm lazy—it's hard to start."

"I prefer to control my own pace."

"Some tools help at first, but later they feel like a burden."

"Too many reminders make me want to avoid the task."

"WFH gives me flexibility, but it also makes it easy to drift."

"I want a gentle push, not commands."



Learned

THINKS

"If my energy is low today, maybe I shouldn't even start."

"I should be able to manage my focus on my own."

"Once I lose momentum, it's hard to re-enter the task."

"If I push myself too hard, I'll burn out."

"Why does focusing feel harder than it should?"

"Once I break my flow, it's hard to get back in."

"Am I expecting too much from myself?"

"I might need help, but I don't want interference."

"If I can't see progress, is it worth continuing?"

Sticky stack

Lacked

DOES

Works long hours at home on cognitively demanding tasks.

Avoids using strict timers or aggressive productivity tools

Prepares the workspace repeatedly before actually starting

Opens the task but checks unrelated content first

Switches tasks when stuck instead of pushing through

Sticky stack

Takes short breaks that unintentionally turn into long distractions

Relys mostly on self-regulation rather than external structure

Lowers expectations when pressure increases

Works for long stretches when motivated, then stops completely

Ends work based on "feels done enough" rather than clear completion

Longed for

FEELS

Mentally fatigued after long focus sessions

Mild guilt when avoiding work, even though tasks are clear

Mild guilt when procrastinating, but not enough to act

Calm during deep focus, followed by mental exhaustion

Sticky stack

Resistant to pressure, but quietly frustrated with inconsistency

Subtle resistance before starting a task

Discomfort with being told to be "more productive"

Frustration when progress feels invisible

Wants support without feeling controlled or judged

Wants understanding rather than correction or judgment

Samantha Tran

Background

- 22-year-old junior from the University of La Verne
- Diagnosed with and struggles with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Goals

- Studies psychology and mental health

Frustrations

- Has trouble with emotional barrier of ADHD and self-esteem on top of executive dysfunction symptoms

Behaviors

- Short breaks turn into long avoidance
- Prefers autonomy over reminders

“... [My mind is] actually too full.”



Say Paraphrased or taken from transcript of interview.

"At some point I open a new tab on my laptop to quickly check something for my homework ... and ... after an hour or two, it finally hits me every time that I was watching videos that had nothing to do with my assignment."

"Pomodoro timers help sometimes, especially when I promise myself I only have to focus for 25 minutes. Knowing there's a break coming makes it feel manageable."

"One thing that's helpful for me is **body-doubling**, even if it's virtual or online. So like, I'll be working at home while working, or bring on a quiet video call where we're both doing our own tasks keeps my attention better."

"After about an hour of fighting myself with switching tabs, pacing my room, and rereading the prompt — I just kinda ... stopped. I closed my laptop and laid down in bed, angry at myself and fully aware that I was giving up."

"What's frustrating is that I actually wanted to focus. I wasn't bored or lazy — I actually cared about the assignment.... The longer it went on, the more anxious and guilty I felt about myself, which made it even harder to get started on the assignment again."

"What's weird is that it's not like my mind is empty — it's actually too full. There are a bunch of thoughts in my head all the time ... it's exhausting, because I'm always aware that I'm not focusing like I wanted to, but I don't feel like I have control over my own brain."

"When I care, my brain can hyperfocus, and I actually enjoy the process. It usually gives me the momentum to keep going."

"I think that's one of the hardest parts about having ADHD while I'm studying in school. When a topic aligns with a fixation or interest, I can get lost for really well and even enjoy myself. But when it doesn't, focusing becomes difficult."

"Everyone else can sit and work, why can't I do the same?"

"I can perform well if something piques my interest, but if not, it's difficult to lock in."

"If I had better emotional regulation from my ADHD, I could improve my focus greatly."

"If I care, I can really hyperfocus and get things done."

"I already wasted my time procrastinating, so what's the point on trying?"

"When someone affirms my point or adds to something I said, it really helps my attention span."

"It feels like I'm constantly fighting my own brain and body."

"I'd rather give up than keep sitting here hating and emotionally draining myself."

"I can focus, given some part of the task is interesting to me, or if I have someone with me."

"If things aren't going well in a group project and I don't feel affirmed, I can't focus on the project as efficiently."

Observations made while making the interview. Do

Talked more quickly when talking about their interests

More lighthearted, energetic demeanor turns more serious when talking about struggles

Grateful for being asked about ADHD despite their struggles

Seemed exasperated when talking about how they stopped and laid down, perhaps b/c it happens often

Mentions emotions and mental fatigue frequently throughout interview

Sometimes seems upset when mentioning their ADHD or inability to start assignments

Paused to think about what they would choose one thing to change about their focus

Seemed to answer questions quickly for most of the interview

Talks with more frustrated tone especially with emotional aspects, but plays it off with jokes

Uses gestures more when using less serious tone

Wants to feel seen and feel connection, not necessarily validated

Interested especially when affirmed or subject material interests them (Psychology / Mental Health)

Feels a shared sense of companionship when working with others

Anxious when it finally hits them that they aren't focusing

Emotionally drained and less productive in groups if not seen or working alone

Motivated when they get the flow going

Frustrated with themselves for the emotional barrier between them and starting assignments

Overwhelmed when truly unable to focus, to a point of sometimes giving up

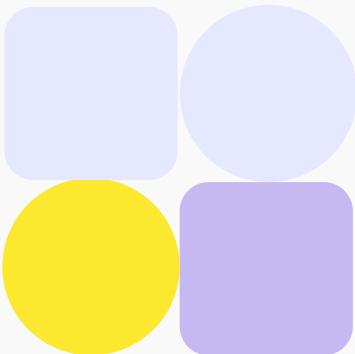
Anxious when it finally hits them that they aren't focusing

Self-deprecative / Low self-esteem when realizes they can't focus

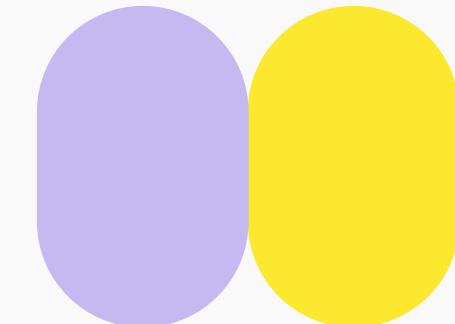
Think Paraphrased or guessed based on interview data.

Feel Paraphrased or guessed based on interview data.

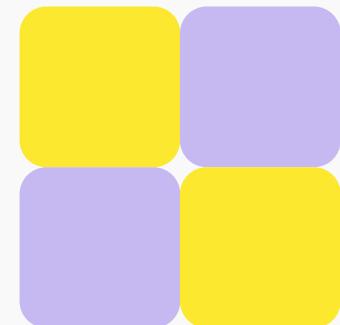
Key Learnings and Insights



Motivation often *snaps*, not fades, when progress feels invisible.



Distraction is frequently an *emotional coping mechanism*, not just poor self-control.



Without *external feedback* or *boundaries*, internal willpower alone breaks down.

Summary

1

Focus breakdowns in self-directed work are not just productivity issues, but emotional ones.

2

When progress feels invisible and external feedback is missing, motivation often collapses suddenly rather than fading gradually.

3

This shifts our focus from building “better tools” to understanding how people experience progress, accountability, and failure.

NEXT STEPS

1

Narrow our focus to the emotional experience of sustained focus in self-directed work.

2

Conduct additional interviews to validate patterns around progress, accountability, and feedback.

3

Use these insights to develop focused POVs, HMWs, and experience prototypes in GR2.

Initial POVs

1

Self-directed workers who rely on internal motivation need better ways to stay focused, because distractions easily break concentration when there is no external structure or supervision.

2

People working or studying from home need tools to manage distractions, because home environments lack the accountability and boundaries of traditional workplaces.

Revised POVs

POV #1 - Samantha Tran

1

We met Samantha Tran, a 22-yr old student from the University of La Verne who studies as a Psychology major. They have been a student in the university for about 3 years and have had many struggles with ADHD along the way, which has hindered some of their progress in the past.

We were surprised to notice that they found it also emotionally heavy to start and continually work on tasks, not just cognitively or mentally difficult, while it helped to also be working alongside fellow peers, even if it meant it was quiet.

We wonder if this means

that Samantha needs something that will help keep their emotions in check or body double at the same time while they are working.

It would be game changing to find a way to integrate something that can help someone hop over both the emotional hurdle while acting as a body double.

Revised POVs

POV #2 - Sara

2

We met Sara, a 22-year-old recent graduate and job seeker in Los Angeles who spends over 10 hours a day applying for jobs and preparing application materials while working entirely from home.

We were surprised that her biggest struggle was not time management or lack of effort, but the emotional weight of making no visible progress. Scrolling on TikTok wasn't just procrastination—it became a way to numb anxiety and stress when the job search felt endless and unrewarding.

We wonder if this means

that Sara needs a way to feel emotionally supported and accountable during focus sessions, especially when effort does not immediately translate into visible outcomes.

It would be game changing to help self-directed job seekers stay emotionally present with difficult, repetitive tasks even when progress feels invisible and external validation is absent.

HMWs - Samantha's POV

How might we pause or stop emotions from overwhelming a person into giving up on a task?

1

How might we find a body double for the user that isn't a friend or family?

How might we remind the user that they are doing a good (or bad) job at keeping focus?

How might we validate a person's feelings to keep them working?

How might we break the emotional barrier entirely?

How can we prevent the emotional barrier from getting too high?

How might we transform negative emotions / thoughts into positive ones?

How might we distract a person from their emotions?

How might we make the emotional barrier into one that is bearable instead of something too high to leap over?

How might we break down tasks into something more manageable and less overwhelming?

How might we motivate a person to jump the emotional barrier anyway, regardless of their emotions at the moment?

How might we lessen the emotional barrier, if we can't remove it entirely?

How might we inspire a person to create a body double of their own?

How might we change the emotional hurdle entirely?

How might we create a body double that can also give emotional encouragement?

HMWs - Sara's POV

2

How might we help self-directed remote workers stay with difficult or vague tasks without making them feel pressured or judged?

How might we break the tasks into smaller steps so that the tasks feel less repetitive?

How might we keep the worker emotionally present even when they can't see the progress?

How might we turn the tasks into something more entertaining or fun for the worker instead?

How might we improve the worker's ability to stay emotionally present?

How might we make progress visible in low-feedback work environments so motivation doesn't collapse suddenly?

How might we find someone / something who can keep tabs on the person's progress and validate them at the same time?

How might we make the tasks feel less difficult or repetitive when they can't break down into smaller ones?

How might we disengage the worker from their emotions?

How might we use other resources to keep a worker engaged?

How might we boost the worker's emotions even when under pressure?

How might we help a worker manage their emotions throughout the task?

How might we create better feedback and visibility when a task is completed?

How might we create a sense of validation even when it is absent?

How might we make the progress more visible to the worker?

TOP 3 HMWs

1

Avoid Pressure

How might we help self-directed remote workers stay with difficult or vague tasks without making them feel pressured or judged?

2

Emotional Body Doubling

How might we create a body double that can also give emotional encouragement?

3

Motivation

How might we make progress visible in low-feedback work environments so motivation doesn't collapse suddenly?

Solutions 1

Low-Pressure Presence Companion

1

Description

A low-visibility presence that stays with users during focus sessions, offering quiet companionship without reminders, evaluation, or performance tracking.

2

HMW

How might we create a body double that can also give emotional encouragement?

3

Matter

This concept reframes support as presence rather than pressure, helping users stay near difficult tasks without triggering resistance or feeling monitored.

Solutions 2 Visible Progress Anchors

1

Description

A lightweight way to externalize progress through small, tangible checkpoints that make effort visible even when outcomes are unclear or incomplete.

2

HMW

How might we make progress visible in low-feedback work environments so motivation doesn't collapse suddenly?

3

Matter

By visualizing effort rather than results, this concept reduces anxiety around vague tasks and prevents motivation from snapping when feedback is absent.

Solutions 3

Gentle Re-Entry Rituals

1

Description

Short, intentional rituals that help users re-enter focused work after disengaging, without relying on urgency, deadlines, or guilt.

2

HMW

How might we help self-directed remote workers stay with difficult or vague tasks without making them feel pressured or judged?

3

Matter

Instead of forcing productivity, this approach lowers the emotional barrier to restarting, making re-engagement feel safe and manageable.

Experience Prototypes

Solution 1: Low-Pressure Presence Companion



Critical Assumption

Users will feel supported by a quiet, non-interactive presence during focus sessions, rather than distracted or pressured by it.



Prototype Description

We simulated a “presence companion” by having a facilitator provide a desktop pet while the participant worked on a self-chosen, cognitively demanding task with the desktop pet as said companion.

The facilitator only provided the desktop pet and assisted with setup. Their role was limited to sending the file and helping with setup for the duration of the task.

This setup was designed to test whether the *presence alone* could influence focus and emotional comfort.



Participants

The participant was a college student who regularly engages in self-directed studying outside of structured class time. They were recruited through personal outreach and asked to work on an academic task they were already planning to complete. As a student who frequently studies alone and struggles with maintaining focus over long periods, they are representative of our target user group.



Results & Learnings

The participant reported feeling “less alone” and more willing to stay with the task, even when progress felt slow. They did not feel judged or monitored by the presence, and described it as calming and ‘cute’ rather than distracting.

Assumption validity: Supported.
Implication: Quiet presence may function as emotional support rather than pressure, suggesting value in non-intrusive companionship models.

Scene

The participant's area of choosing [University Library]

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Props

- Presence companion (Cat)
- Participant's device
- Participant's chosen task / assignment

Roles

- 1 participant ; Student
- 1 team member ; Facilitator [File / Setup]
- 1 team member ; Observer



Solution 2: Visible Progress Anchors



Critical Assumption

Making effort visible—even without clear outcomes—will reduce anxiety and help users persist on vague or long-term tasks.



Prototype Description

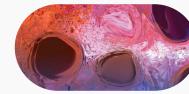
Participants were asked to work on a vague task and periodically externalize effort by marking small checkpoints (e.g., time spent, attempts made, sections explored) on paper or a device. No evaluation of quality or completion was provided—only acknowledgment of effort.

The prototype focused on testing whether visualizing effort alone could change emotional response to the task.



Participants

The participant was a full-time working professional who completes cognitively demanding tasks independently. They were recruited informally and tested the prototype while working on a real work-related task. Their experience with self-managed focus and limited external feedback makes them highly relevant to our design problem.



Results & Learnings

The participant reported reduced anxiety and a greater willingness to continue working, even though the task remained unfinished. They noted that seeing effort externalized made the work feel “less pointless.”

Assumption validity: Supported. Implication: Progress visualization does not need to reflect outcomes to be emotionally meaningful; effort-based feedback can sustain motivation.

Scene

The participant's area of choosing [Home / Place of Work]

Props

- Task checkpoints list
- Participant's chosen workspace [Paper / Device / Tablet]

Roles

- 1 participant
- 1 team member ; Facilitator
- 1 team member ; Observer

Task Checkpoints

Checkpoint: Patient entries

Time: ~60 min

- Attempts:
 - Tried updating work database with newer patients from the clinic.
 - Organized patient records & claims
 - Added some immunizations that were recently received.

Explored: Clinic's medical database

- New patient records
- Patient claims
- Immunization records

Solution 3: Gentle Re-Entry Rituals



Critical Assumption

Short, intentional re-entry rituals will lower emotional resistance to restarting work, rather than feeling like an unnecessary interruption.



Prototype Description

After a deliberate break, participants were guided through a brief re-entry ritual, such as writing one sentence about what they last worked on and identifying a single low-effort next action. The ritual avoided urgency, reminders, or time pressure.

This prototype tested whether structured re-entry could reduce the emotional barrier to restarting work.



Participants

The participant was a job seeker actively applying for positions and preparing application materials from home. They were recruited through personal connections and asked to engage with the prototype during a job-search-related task. Due to the unstructured nature of job searching and the lack of external accountability, they closely reflect an extreme case of our target users.



Results & Learnings

The participant reported that restarting felt "lighter" and less intimidating. They were able to re-engage without the guilt or pressure typically associated with returning to unfinished work.

Assumption validity: Supported.
Implication: Lowering emotional friction during re-entry may be more effective than increasing motivation or urgency.

Scene

The participant's LinkedIn page applying to jobs

Props

- Re-entry ritual
- Participant's computer

Roles

- 1 participant
- 2 team members ; Observers

The image shows a composite view of a participant's LinkedIn interface and a handwritten note.

LinkedIn Job Search Results:

- Assistant, Government & Community Affairs** at Los Angeles Dodgers, Los Angeles, CA (posted 3 days ago)
- Junior Quantitative Analyst** at Los Angeles Dodgers, Los Angeles, CA (posted 1 week ago)
- Premium Service Representative** at Los Angeles Dodgers, Los Angeles, CA (posted 1 week ago)
- Quantitative Analyst** at Los Angeles Dodgers, Los Angeles, CA (posted 1 week ago)
- Retail Associate** at Los Angeles Dodgers, Los Angeles, CA (posted 3 weeks ago)
- UGC Creator**

Handwritten Note:

Re entry Ritual
Last worked on:
Update resume
Next: Apply to jobs!

NEXT STEPS

WHY?

Selected Solution

Low-Pressure Presence Companion

Based on our experience prototypes, the **Low-Pressure Presence Companion** demonstrated the strongest potential to address our core user tension.

Participants reported feeling supported rather than pressured, and were more willing to stay with difficult tasks even when progress felt slow or unclear.

Compared to the other concepts, this solution most directly reduced emotional resistance without introducing control, evaluation, or urgency.

This aligns closely with our revised POVs and how motivation often collapses not just due to distraction, but due to invisible progress and emotional avoidance. It also serves as a type of body double that can lower the emotional barrier and reduce pressure.

WHO It Serves

This solution primarily serves:

- Self-directed workers and students who complete cognitively demanding tasks alone
- Remote workers who resist rigid productivity systems
- Users who value autonomy but still need emotional support during focus breakdowns

WHO Might Be Left Out?

This solution may be less effective for:

- Users who prefer strong external structure, deadlines, or accountability
- Highly collaborative work environments where social feedback is already present
- Tasks that require immediate urgency or performance monitoring

Ethical Consideration

- By avoiding surveillance, evaluation, or behavioral enforcement, this solution minimizes the risk of increasing anxiety or guilt around productivity.
- However, care must be taken to ensure that presence-based support does not create emotional dependency or blur personal boundaries.
- Future iterations should prioritize user consent, transparency, and easy disengagement.

What's Next?

In the next phase, we will further prototype and refine how presence-based support can be offered in a way that remains optional, respectful, and emotionally safe for users.

Appendix

Solutions Brainstorming

1. Avoid Pressure **How might we help self-directed remote workers stay with difficult or vague tasks without making them feel pressured or judged?**
 - a. Something that sits with the user during work without speaking
 - b. A way to acknowledge emotional effort, not just productivity
 - c. A presence that makes frustration feel normal instead of wrong
 - d. A system that reduces shame after avoidance
 - e. A way to externalize emotional weight so it feels shared
 - f. A moment of emotional grounding when anxiety spikes
2. Emotional Body Doubling **How might we create a body double that can also give emotional encouragement?**
 - a. Have a friend work with you
 - b. Have family around that can keep you in check
 - c. A stuffed animal?
 - d. Asking peers for help
 - e. Going to office hours (for students only though?)
 - f. Have an employee or coworker nearby that you trust?
 - g. AI chatbots to talk to
 - h. Asking strangers to work with you?
 - i. An app with a character in it, similar to self-care apps
 - j. Pomodoro timer character, similar to Shimeji characters on screens
 - k. Some kind of game maybe? Not sure
3. Motivation **How might we make progress visible in low-feedback work environments so motivation doesn't collapse suddenly?**
 - a. Writing down the progress after completing the task
 - b. Writing down the progress in intervals between progress
 - c. When feeling demotivated, take a break to write down what you've done
 - d. Sitting back for a moment to think about what you've done so far
 - e. After finishing each task, add it to a list of the things you've done so far so you can look at it in the end
 - f. Having a planner, notebook, etc.
 - g. Have a checklist prepared before taking on tasks, then check them off as they're completed
 - h. Tell someone about your progress so they know about it
 - i. Find something else to do that could boost motivation
 - j. Find work that has higher feedback
 - k. Find a way to quantify the progress so it feels more visible
 - l. Find a way to visualize the progress so it feels more visible

Screenshots taken from the Google Docs attached to GR2 folder.

THANK
YOU!