



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H02QGV
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
MARCH 15, 2016

ARTICLE **LEADING TEAMS**

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Most workdays aren't terribly productive. We spend too much time on email, have too many meetings, then struggle to find the willpower and energy to focus on what's really important.

Although plenty of experts have proposed systems and philosophies for getting more done at work, my writing partner Jake Knapp decided in 2009 to come up with his own solution: the sprint. It's a five-day process that helps teams focus on one big goal and move from idea to prototype to customer research in that short span of time. The idea is to fast-forward a project, so you can see what the end

result might look like and how the market will react. It's also a popular construct in [agile](#) project management.

At [GV](#), we've tested the process with more than 100 startups, helping them use sprints to answer big questions, test new business ideas, and solve critical challenges. We've seen firsthand, again and again, how they help teams get more done and move faster.

These aren't all-out, late-night, stack-of-pizza-boxes-on-the-conference-table types of affairs that only work for fledgling internet companies though. They work in larger organizations too, and they fit into a normal working schedule. The sprint day typically lasts from 10 AM to 5 PM, so participants still have plenty of time to see their families and friends, get enough sleep — and, yeah, stay caught up on email.

Why do sprints help teams get more done? It's not just about speed. It's also about momentum, focus, and confidence. The companies who use sprints (in fields like oncology, robotics, coffee, and dozens more) see consistent results from the process. Here are five of the most important outcomes.

Sprints help you start. When a big problem is looming, it can be tough to dig in. Sprints make an excellent commitment device — when you [gather a team, clear the calendar, and schedule customer interviews, you commit to making progress](#). GV portfolio company [Saviok](#) found itself in this same situation: the team had spent months developing a delivery robot for hotels, but felt paralyzed by big questions about the robot's personality and behavior. We planned a sprint, and by the end of the week, a simple robot personality had been tested with actual customers.

Sprints move you from abstract to concrete. Too many projects get stuck in an alternate universe where debates, theories, and hunches are plentiful, but progress is rare. For podcast startup [Gimlet Media](#), an abstract question — “Should we become a technology company?” — was causing anxiety for founders Alex Blumberg and Matt Lieber. They decided to run a sprint on the question, and almost immediately had an answer. After sketching out what their potential future as a tech company would look like and floating it with customers, they [decided it wasn't necessary to reach their goals as a company](#).

Sprints keep you focused on what's important. With all the noise, distractions, and demands for your attention at the office, it's almost impossible to see which issues are really the most critical. That's why every sprint starts with an entire day devoted to mapping out the problem at hand. Then, after your team has built a shared understanding of the challenge, you can figure out exactly where to turn your attention. When [Flatiron Health](#) began work on a new tool for cancer clinics, it naturally began by focusing on doctors and patients, typical stakeholders for their products. But a sprint helped the team realize that research coordinators (the folks who administered clinical trials) were actually more important. By the end of the week, it had tested a prototype with this group and gotten enough positive feedback to move forward with the project.

Sprints force crisp decision-making. Business-as-usual decision-making is busted: we strive for consensus; we don't make tough calls; we aren't transparent about how choices are made. The sprint corrects these problems. The leadership at [Slack](#) used the process to decide between two fundamentally different marketing approaches. One was unique, bold, difficult to implement, and the CEO's favorite. The other was more conventional but easier to build. The team could have endlessly debated the merits of each approach until everyone agreed on one, or just gone with the CEO's hunch, but instead they launched a sprint to prototype and test both. After Friday's customer test, the results were clear: the simpler marketing was more effective.

Sprints encourage fast follow-up. Your team will accomplish a ton in every sprint, but the knock-on effects — the confidence of knowing you're on the right road — are even more powerful. When [LendUp](#) began working on a new credit card for consumers with no or low credit, the team had many ideas for helpful features, but no clue how to prioritize them so it could design and launch the product. In our sprint together, we created fake marketing around all the possible features. Armed with the results — a clear delineation between essential and unimportant — the team went full speed ahead with the card.

Sprints work for teams and organizations of any size, from small startups to Fortune 100s to nonprofits. If you're a leader with a big opportunity, problem, or idea, it will help you get started, stay focused, decide quickly and build a workplace where more things get done.

John is the bestselling author of [Sprint: How to Solve Big Problems and Test New Ideas in Just Five Days](#) and [Make Time: How to Focus on What Matters Every Day](#). For nearly 15 years, he was a designer for technology companies, including Google Ventures and YouTube. You can follow John on Twitter at [@jazer](#).
