

A Minute to Think

What's in it for me? Dare to take your time.

Are you striving to live a more productive or creative life? Perhaps you're always giving your all to your career, and yet you feel like it's never enough. If that sounds familiar, you're probably doing too much – and thinking too little. That's where these blinks come in. You'll discover the value of taking the time out of your busy life to rest, think, and recoup. From emails to meetings to interpersonal relationships, you'll explore how carving out some breathing space can transform your performance at work. Packed with actionable advice, this is your manual for achieving more by doing less. In these blinks, you'll learn

how your smartphone is harming your friendships; why you need to go on an email diet; and what daydreaming can do for your productivity.

We don't have the space to just think.

Everyone, and everything, needs breathing space. The author realized this when she tried to build a fire during a family vacation. She piled up paper, fire starters, and logs of wood – but no matter how many matches she threw at the fire, it just wouldn't start properly. Eventually, it dawned on her. She had packed everything so tightly that oxygen simply couldn't circulate. In short, the fire had no space to breathe. Our daily lives are often a lot like the author's damp squib of a fire. We're so busy packing our schedules with endless tasks and to-do lists that we can't fan the flames of our own potential. The key message here is: We don't have the space to just think. Instead of thinking, we're constantly doing. From the moment our morning alarm wakes us, our day goes by in a blur of commuting, emails, meetings, and, often, family responsibilities. By the time we climb back into bed, exhausted, we wonder Did I really achieve anything today? If all this sounds familiar, then you've hit on an uncomfortable but valuable truth: being busy and being productive are not the same thing. What's more, being too busy can actually kill your productivity. Not convinced? Consider Linda, a high-flying sales professional in the healthcare industry. Linda was excited when she got promoted at work, but her promotion came with a crushing workload attached. To cope with her bursting schedule, she canceled her daily lunch break. Instead, she kept a jar of peanut butter on her desk at all times, so that she could eat while working. There were other sacrifices, too – but even so, she wasn't making headway. Her excellent results and attention to detail – things that had gotten her the promotion in the first place – suddenly dropped off. Without that little bit of breathing space she had enjoyed in her previous role, she couldn't thrive, and her potential was stifled. When we hear Linda's story, it's easy to appreciate that she was simply too busy. But when it comes to our own lives, many of us struggle to identify that we're doing too much. Instead of seeking out and enjoying some breathing space, we fall into a very modern trap: we begin to feel guilty when we're not busy. Economists call this phenomenon performative busyness. We have internalized the mantra that busier is better. Instead, what we need to do is push back against the tyranny of the packed agenda. We'll see why in the following blinks.

We work too much in order to fit in.

Where does our impulse for busyness come from? Part of the answer can be found in the most unlikely of places: the American TV show *Candid Camera*. Its creators covertly film ordinary Americans reacting to staged situations. In one skit, a group of actors get onto an escalator alongside an unsuspecting member of the public. Once on the escalator, the actors turned around and faced the wrong way. Incredibly, the other person did too. Perhaps you want to leave the office on time and get back to your family or friends. But then you see all your teammates settling into their chairs for an evening of work. Surely you can't be the only person that's not there! Or perhaps you know that your coworkers are always "on" and ready to respond to an email the second it arrives. Can you really leave your messages sitting unopened in that inbox? The key message here is: We work too much in order to fit in. Our conformity to the cult of overwork can resemble a subtle form of brainwashing, in the sense that our workplaces reprogram us to internalize the upside-down logic of busyness. Consider, for instance, a senior accountant in a corporate firm. Although he's a high-status employee, he struggles to find any downtime. He spends long hours in pointless meetings. Why? Because he's one of the millions of workers who have been brainwashed into believing that facetime is king and downtime doesn't matter. Sadly, our habit of conforming to the new normal of busyness is not doing us, or our productivity, any favors. A recent Gallup study revealed that nearly a quarter of all workers feel burned-out most of the time. In another study, consulting firm Deloitte found that over two thirds of employees think they have an amount of work that's "overwhelming." Perhaps the saddest thing of all is that all this stress and burnout are completely unnecessary. In Japan, Microsoft conducted research that showed something unexpected. Working a four-day, instead of a five-day, week boosted productivity by 40 percent. It also cut overhead costs by nearly 25 percent! This just goes to show that breaking away from busyness doesn't have to mean breaking away from profitability. In fact, the opposite is true.

Taking breaks can boost your creativity.

We have established that busyness harms productivity. But why exactly does this happen? Well, scientists have now discovered the answer: it all has to do with how different parts of your brain work together. Consider that hectic to-do list that's pinned to your workstation. What this list represents is a number of difficult, complex tasks. To complete these tasks, you'll need to engage an area of your brain called the frontal lobe, which carries out your most advanced thinking. But your frontal lobe has a short battery life; it gets tired quickly and needs regular breaks to recharge. This means that if you keep pressing on with your to-do list without taking a break, at some point your frontal lobe will lose efficiency. You'll no longer be thinking or making decisions to the best of your ability. You need a break. The key message here is: Taking breaks can boost your creativity. To understand why breaks are so effective, let's explore what happens in our brains when we get creative. The basis of creativity is the neurological connection between our current thoughts and our previous experiences. It can only happen when our brains get free, undisturbed time. In other words, your brain becomes creative when you give yourself time to think. It's easy to see the benefits of breaks in real life. A study by Carnegie Mellon found that pausing for only 30 seconds – or even just three – was enough to improve workers' engagement and focus on a task. What matters is not the length of your break, but how you spend it. Researchers from Harvard Business School identified four typical types of pauses. Type one is the social break – like talking to your coworkers. Then, there's the nutritional break that often involves a snack and maybe a glass of water. The relaxation break is time spent daydreaming or doing gentle exercise. Finally, there are cognition breaks, where you read a book or browse social

media. This study showed that the only types of break that boosted productivity were the relaxation and social kinds. What's more, cognitive breaks actually harmed performance. So, if you want to get the most out of your pause, close down that social media app, put away that newspaper, and wander over to a friend's desk instead!

Our basic drives are stealing our valuable free time.

What drives your behavior in the workplace? For most of us, there are two key motivators: we want to achieve excellence and seek out information. At a basic level, these drives are useful. But the problem is, in the modern workplace, they've gone into overdrive. The key message here is: Our basic drives are stealing our valuable free time. Our drive for excellence can easily tip into perfectionism. Not sure if you're a perfectionist? Then answer the following questions: Have you ever been told you're too focused on details? Do you try really hard, even on unimportant tasks? If you responded "yes" to either of the above, then you may have fallen victim to perfectionism – that well-known time thief. You likely spend more time working on tasks than other people. You try to ensure your work is the best it can be. This may all sound admirable, but problems arise when you approach every task like this. After all, time is finite – and so is excellence. Think about approaching tasks like handing out golden coins from a small purse. Every time you strive for 100 percent excellence, that costs you a coin. You can choose who receives your coins, but eventually your money will run out. So save it for the people who truly deserve it. Now let's look at our other drive: the desire for information. This can lead to information overload – and when it does, it also becomes a time thief. Do you just have to click on a notification as soon as it pops up on your screen? Do you find yourself relentlessly checking your inbox for new emails – or sharing data and facts with lots of other people, just in case they want to know? You might just be overloading yourself with information. We live in a world where information is, perhaps, too abundant. If you were to read today's copy of the New York Times, you would get more information than a person in the 1600s received in an entire year! Indeed, there is far more information available now than our brains have evolved to deal with. The key to stepping back from information overload is to accept that you're never going to feel like you know enough, no matter how much information you absorb. Once you get over one learning bump, another will appear in the distance. And that's OK.

Our thirst for digital communication is disrupting our relationships – and our work.

Most of us spend our working lives immersed in digital communication. We used to have one-on-one meetings; now we communicate mostly via email or, more recently, Zoom. But what is this switch doing for our breathing space? Sadly, not a lot of good. Evidence suggests that new technologies are sucking up our attention – making our relationships, and our productivity, suffer. Just consider the impact of smartphones on our relationships. Studies have shown that simply leaving your smartphone on the table while talking to someone makes that person like you less. Smartphones haven't been

great for productivity, either. Researchers have found that having our smartphones close to us actually reduces our brainpower. Leaving that phone in the next room will actually make you more effective! The key message here is: Our thirst for digital communication is disrupting our relationships – and our work. In theory, it should be easy to just put our devices away for a while. But we all know that it's anything but. Why is that? Why are we so addicted to scrolling through our social media or checking our emails? A lot of it has to do with the way our brains are wired. Just like a gambling addict who can't resist putting another coin in the slot machine, whenever we "pull-to-refresh," we receive lots of new content. When this happens, we get a hit of dopamine – the brain's feel-good chemical. The gambler gets the same high when she hits the jackpot. When it comes to checking our emails, we don't just get the gambler's thrill of seeing what will pop up next; we also get to procrastinate. We distract ourselves from doing the harder, more complex tasks. In other words, constantly checking our emails lets us feel as if we're working, when really we're avoiding doing the things that will actually help us progress. How can you overcome your addiction to email? One way is to adopt what's called the email diet. This is where you only check your emails at the times of the day when you would normally eat or have a snack. For instance, you could check your inbox at 9:00 a.m., midday, 3:00 p.m., and 6:00 p.m. Think of your need for email in the same way as you think about food – that is, you need some, but not too much.

Choose your medium of communication carefully.

Language is among the most powerful tools at our disposal. We use language to express our dreams and define our goals. When we have a disagreement, the way we use language can either heal the rift or deepen the divide. A simple but often forgotten truth is that we can all improve our communication skills by simply thinking before we speak. Here's one of the most powerful ways to put this truth into practice: before you say something, pause and think about how you're going to say it. In the workplace, especially, that entails considering the right medium of communication to use. The key message here is: Choose your medium of communication carefully. 2D communication is quick and shallow. It involves things like emails, text messages, or instant messages. 2D is great for simple yes/no questions – perhaps you need someone to quickly sign off on something. But problems arise when you try to use 2D mediums for more complex conversations. This is because 2D, with its use of the written word, has trouble conveying nuance and emotion. That's where 3D mediums come in. 3D involves some kind of voice-to-voice interaction, such as in-person meetings, telephone calls, or even Zoom. With its scope for nonverbal communication, like tone of voice and body language, 3D allows for much richer conversations. While we're on the subject of communication, it's important to consider how you interact with coworkers – especially if there's a sticky topic at hand. Before you reach out to them, put yourself in their shoes; ask yourself how they see you and what they want out of the situation. And when you actually begin that conversation, start by saying something appreciative – this establishes a respectful foundation. Then, move on to talking about what you've experienced, how you feel about it, and what you would prefer to have happen in the future. Expressing yourself in this clear, logical way will pave the road to productive, rational interactions.

Not all meetings are created equal.

What do meetings mean to you? Many of us used to see them as time thieves that took over our schedules and stopped us from doing real work. This mindset changed with COVID-19. Faced with the prospect of indefinite separation from our coworkers, we've started to crave the connection that face-to-face meetings bring. We miss the intimacy that comes from sharing our thoughts and ideas around a table. The pandemic has shown that we shouldn't aim to cancel meetings once and for all. If we did that, we'd lose valuable opportunities for creativity and group problem-solving. Instead, the goal should be to reevaluate our approach to meetings. We need to make sure they take up the right amount of time in our working lives. No less – but also no more. This way, they won't creep into our breathing space. The key message here is: Not all meetings are created equal. How do you determine the correct amount of time to allocate for meetings? Well, one way is to ask yourself two crucial questions the next time a meeting invite arrives in your email inbox. First, ask whether you have a unique contribution to make to this meeting. Do you have a vital idea you'd like to share? Or perhaps if you're not there, your team will miss out on important information and make a wrong decision. If this is the case, then go ahead and accept the invitation. The second question to ask is whether you would benefit from going to this meeting. Perhaps you want to interact with an important senior leader who's attending; you think she might help you climb the career ladder. Or maybe you need to talk with other colleagues before you can move forward with a project you're working on. If so, then head to the meeting. But if the answer to both of those questions is no, then don't feel guilty about clicking the decline button. When you decline a meeting invite, you can still find a way to get involved. You could send another member of your team in your place, for instance. This will ensure that you receive any necessary updates – and it can be a good way to reward or develop a subordinate who may not have had the opportunity to attend these kinds of meetings before.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: Everyone else might be wearing their busyness like a badge of honor – but that doesn't mean you have to! True success doesn't arise from cramming your schedule full of tasks and meetings; it comes from being creative, productive, and spending your time on the right things. What are the right things? Well, if you take a minute to think about it, you'll probably realize you already know the answer. Actionable advice: Redefine your idea of urgency. In the modern workplace, it can feel like every task is urgent. The author calls this hallucinated urgency. When you treat every decision, request, or email as if it's time-sensitive, you risk getting into the habit of acting without thinking. The next time you rush to action the moment something hits your inbox, take a pause. Ask yourself, Do I really have to do this right now, or can I take some breathing space?