

Autonomy for Accountability



The best way for organizations to encourage higher productivity and more innovation is by promoting more absorbed focus. To a remarkable degree, however, leaders unwittingly collaborate with their employees to fracture their focus and distract their attention. In most organizations, the expectation of instantaneous responsiveness pushes everyone into reactive mode, making it difficult to stick to any agenda. In the race to do more, bigger, faster, what gets sacrificed are

boundaries, stopping points, and finish lines. We rarely have the opportunity to become fully absorbed in a task. Organizations settle for our continuous partial attention—to their detriment and to ours.

Given the powerful cultural currents driving distraction, it's essential for organizations to adopt countervailing policies and practices that encourage more absorbed focus. One of the first opportunities is helping employees manage information overload more effectively. That requires not just creating very explicit organizational policies regarding e-mail, but also leaders willing to model new behaviors. At Sony Pictures, for example, the senior executive team wrestled with alternatives before deciding to set an 8-A.M.-to-8-P.M. limit on the times during which they would be expected to respond to internal e-mail. Outside those hours, they are free not to respond. If there is an urgent reason to reach a colleague, the agreement is that you pick up the phone and call the person. Not every executive has followed the policy, but a significant number have adopted it with good success.

"The expectations have really changed," says David Hendlar, SPE's CFO. "There is less activity around e-mail after hours and more understanding if you don't respond immediately. I slip every now and then, but mostly I have stuck to the eight-to-eight rule. I'm no longer on my BlackBerry when I'm with my wife and kids, and they really appreciate it. That drives more energy while I'm working. I'm not drained or distracted by thinking 'Oh, I should be spending time with my family.' "

We've worked with a number of companies to institute an organizational ritual banning e-mailing altogether during meetings. It was common at Dannon, as it is at many companies in which we've worked, for executives to bring their laptops to meetings and use the time to catch up on e-mail. The rationale was always some variation on, "We can manage more than one thing at the same time and in that way we're more efficient." But the result bordered on the bizarre: no one truly listened to what anyone else was saying. "When we banned e-mail, it totally changed the character of the meetings," explains Juan Carlos Dalto, who was Dannon's CEO at the time. "Suddenly the focus of our meetings was on the real important discussions and people really concentrated on straight talk and productive debates. For the first time, it became a forum in which we had real stra-

tegic discussions with broad participation, and we were able to make important decisions based on everyone's input."

In many companies, meetings themselves are a source of distraction from higher-value work that people feel they could otherwise be doing. "Two principal types of mental activity dominate here," says Sony Europe's HR vice president, Roy White. "There's e-mail mode, where you sit at your desk for long hours bashing away at the keyboard, and there's meeting mode, where you typically sit long past your attention span. Neither mode optimizes people's ability to be productive or creative." Much as with e-mail, the ease with which meetings can be arranged online has prompted their proliferation. It's not uncommon for people to be scheduled in meetings back-to-back all day long, with no real time in between any of them. Many of our clients say they spend more time in meetings than anywhere else. Few companies have ritualized meeting practices and the consequence is that their meetings often lack a rigorous agenda or a clearly defined goal. It's no wonder that people in meetings find themselves itching to return to the e-mails piling up in their inboxes.

A number of our clients have begun scheduling meetings not on the half hour or the hour but on the quarter hour, for fifteen minutes or forty-five minutes. Odd as that sounds, it's one way to send a signal that meetings will start and end on time. It's also a way to shift people's thinking about how long a meeting ought to be. Our ultimate goal is to get leaders to intentionally question whether any given meeting is truly necessary and then to ask how long it really needs to be.

As an experiment, David Pope, now a senior leader at Wells Fargo, decided to cut every meeting to half of its previous length. Sure enough, he discovered that just as much was accomplished, and he suddenly had an extra hour or two a day freed up for other activities. More often than not, we've found that the shorter the meeting and the clearer the goal is, the more focused the level of attention and the better the outcome. The other value of short meetings, especially ones that don't end on the hour, is that they often leave participants time to reflect on and metabolize what they've just discussed and to get some renewal before the next obligation. Conversely, when meetings are scheduled to run longer than ninety minutes, it's important to

schedule true recovery breaks, or people's attention will almost certainly wander.

FOCUSING IN A ROOM FULL OF PEOPLE

Our immediate work environment plainly influences our capacity to focus. Frank Lloyd Wright was one of the early advocates of open-plan design, not just for private homes but also for corporate offices. Wright's aim was to liberate people from living and working in small boxy spaces. Henry Ford and the efficiency expert Frederick Winslow Taylor took up the idea for just the opposite reason: to save money by squeezing as many people as possible into a small space. In recent years, the move to democratizing the workplace has emboldened a new wave of advocates for open-plan design. The laudable goals include fostering better communication, more face-to-face interaction, more responsiveness to issues as they arise and less hierarchy. Senior executives at companies such as Gillette, ING Direct, and Zappos all sit in open-space environments. The costs, however, are considerable and often underappreciated. An open plan nearly guarantees a high level of distractibility and fractured focus. Nearly all of the research suggests that the costs of working in such offices far outweigh the benefits. In a comprehensive study conducted in 2009 and titled "Why Your Office Could Be Making You Sick," the researcher Vinesh Oommen found that the consequences of open-plan offices include higher levels of stress, higher blood pressure, and more susceptibility to illness, as well as more interpersonal conflict, higher turnover, lower satisfaction and diminished productivity. The key contributing factors are the higher level of noise, the increased frequency of interruptions, and the costs to privacy. It's much harder to focus in an absorbed way when the people around you are typing, shuffling papers, and talking to one another and on the phone.

In a second study, conducted by the Center for the Built Environment at the University of California, Berkeley, more than 23,000 occupants in fourteen buildings were surveyed. Those in separate offices were dramatically more satisfied with noise levels and privacy than those in open spaces or in cubicles with partitions. Surprisingly,

the Berkeley study found that those in cubicles had more complaints than those in fully open environments. Cubicles were introduced in the 1950s as an attempt to create more privacy and personal space in the wake of complaints by employees working in open space. It turns out that it's often more difficult to have a private conversation in a cubicle than in an open environment, where it's easy to check visually to see if anyone else is listening. People working in a fully open workplace also seem to have lower expectations about privacy and are more compelled to adapt. Conversely, they enjoy more of the social benefits that arise from being in an open space than do those confined to cubicles.

In practice, most of us crave both privacy and connection. Because cubicles allow for neither, they may represent the worst of all worlds. The best workplace, we believe, is one that provides a range of environments that serve people's varying needs. The quiet and privacy of a separate office plainly facilitates the most absorbed focus. For brainstorming in groups, a more comfortable, informal environment encourages relaxed, open-ended thinking. A fully open environment works better for those doing less intellectually demanding tasks and also for work in which ongoing collaboration is a high priority.

"Many of our people work in an environment which is virtually indistinguishable from a busy train station in terms of interruptions and distractions," says Andreas Ditter, former vice president, Sony Audio Europe, and now managing director, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment Germany. "One of my solutions is that I've started using walking meetings as a way to get out of the office, change channels and gain focus. It really works effectively, because it accomplishes two things at the same time: an opportunity to have an exchange of ideas and a chance to move and renew."

In the UK, Sarah Henbrey, Sony Europe's director of organizational development, began wearing sound-proofing headphones in the office after going through our training. "It's incredible what a difference such a small thing can make," she says. "In the past you'd either feel guilty about putting on headphones and shutting people out, or you'd worry they thought you were vegging out to music. Now people have a common language and understanding about distractions, so wearing earphones is just a way of saying you're focused on something." At the same time, we helped Sony create a space called

“The Village Green” at its European headquarters in Basingstoke. Modeled on a traditional English village green, the space has been designed like a park—in this case with AstroTurf rather than grass—and it’s become a meeting ground that helps get people out of their offices.

Among all of the companies at which we’ve worked, Google may have the best mix of spaces at its headquarters in Mountain View, California. The campus includes some two dozen buildings, and people travel between them by walking, but also by using bicycles that the company makes freely available. The buildings contain an assortment of private offices, cubicles, and open environments. Throughout the campus, there are also more than a dozen small cafés, in which coffee and snacks are available and where employees go to meet or hang out. Google’s main restaurants have open bench seating, encouraging people to sit together and intermingle. There are also rooms explicitly set aside for brainstorming, often filled with gadgets, toys, and knickknacks that encourage people to play and explore, and to get out of their ordinary linear ways of thinking.

BREAKING OUT OF THE BOX

What does it take to ensure that organizations support the second kind of absorbed attention—R-mode lower-right-quadrant thinking—which serves innovation, strategy, and long-term planning? The simple answer is intentionality. Setting aside separate spaces for creative thinking, for example, makes a statement about the priority it has been accorded in the organization. The more visually appealing and the less linear the space, the more conducive it is to R-mode thinking. But unless leaders make an explicit commitment to setting aside regular time for such thinking, it’s unlikely to occur with any regularity. One ritual we encourage leaders to adopt is scheduling time for reflection, for team brainstorming, and for strategy sessions. This is the sort of work the author Stephen Covey so aptly termed “important but not urgent.”

The risk is that people experience such meetings as so secondary to urgent challenges and everyday business that they ultimately get abandoned. For Derry Newman, the CEO of Solarcentury, which builds and provides solar technology across Europe, the solution has

been to intentionally balance right- and left-hemisphere thinking in his organization's initiatives.

"We have many people here who see immediately how to progress a piece of thinking or a new idea," Newman told us. "But then they see another idea and another, and very rapidly we fall into initiative fatigue. Before we did this work, we had become great at starting things, but not at seeing them through." Newman drew on our sprinter/marathon metaphor to balance longer-term innovative thinking with more immediately pressing work.

"We started to establish more boundaries," Newman explains. "For example, we've broken our longer-term project plans into shorter sprints. I've asked our managers to think in terms of three-week sprints. It's had a powerful effect. We can maintain high levels of mental focus for three weeks now, knowing we will have a chance to recover and renew before we take on the next three-week sprint. During the recovery periods, we have time to step back and look at where we are and where we're going. It feels less overwhelming, and it builds people's confidence. They can now get their arms around smaller chunks of high-challenge work without losing sight of the big picture. It's brought a significant degree of calmness and focus to the way we work. We've also brought in forty-five percent more business with the same number of people since we started working this way."

The other key to innovation is a culture that prizes learning and truly invests in it. There are now "chief learning officers" in many large companies, but time allotted to employees for their development typically remains scarce. Because most learning doesn't generate an immediate payoff, everything but technical training tends to be viewed as nonessential and lower priority. The opposite may be true. Arie de Geus, a former head of planning at Royal Dutch Shell, conducted a study of companies that have lasted the longest. "The ability to learn faster than competitors," he argued, "may be the only sustainable competitive advantage."

The obvious bias in most organizational learning is to the left hemisphere—observable facts and information that can be understood and absorbed as quickly as possible. "Can you give us the basics in a half day?" we're often asked about our own work, as if providing a list of suggestions and a raft of data would be sufficient. It's difficult to convince most leaders that meaningful change is possible only if

they're willing to give their people the time to reflect on, discuss, and metabolize new ideas and to experiment with new practices. The prospect of devoting several days to building new capacities, much less an entire week, is increasingly unthinkable to most senior leaders we've met. Some organizations do run three- and four-day executive retreats once a year, bringing together experts from various fields to give short presentations. We call these "big bang" experiences. They can be powerful in the moment, but they usually have a short half-life, and it's rare that employees are offered any sort of follow-up.

We've been most successful in organizations when we've had the opportunity to work with people over an extended period of time, regularly refreshing, revisiting, extending, and deepening the principles and practices we teach. That shouldn't be any surprise. After all, we're asking people to change behaviors they've practiced, reinforced, and habitualized over many years.

Anders Ericsson and others have demonstrated that people can systematically improve their skills, but only through deliberate practice. That means focused repetition at regular intervals over extended periods, accompanied by regular feedback. Coaching, for example, can be effective in organizations for the same reason it is in sports. It supports people's learning, holds them accountable to their commitments, and provides them with specific, ongoing feedback in the areas in which they're trying to improve. Any organization that fails to build a robust learning program for its employees—not just to increase their skills but also to develop them as human beings—ought to expect that its people won't get better at their jobs over time and may well get worse.

WE ARE NOT YOUR CHILDREN

The last key to helping people focus their attention more effectively may be the most counterintuitive. It involves giving them more autonomy in the way they work—and then holding them more accountable for the value they deliver. Instead, the all-too-common dynamic in today's workplace is parent-child. Most employers tell employees when to come to work, when to leave, and how they're expected to work when they're at the office. Treated like children, many employees

unconsciously adopt the role to which they've been consigned. Feeling disempowered and vulnerable, they lose the will and confidence to take real initiative or to think independently. Doing what they're expected to do often becomes more important than doing what makes most sense, what's most efficient, or even what might create the highest value. The real measure of people's effectiveness in an organization ought to be based on the value they create, not the number of hours they work. That requires a relationship between consenting adults, grounded in trust, fueled by mutual responsibility, and regulated by periodic accountability.

Most leaders and managers we work with set clear expectations about the hours they expect their employees to work. Very few organizations take responsibility for defining in clear and specific terms what success looks like for any given job outside sales. The result is that employees are often uncertain what exactly is expected of them. Too often, they default to working long hours on numerous tasks, trying to cover all the bases without necessarily doing anything that truly adds value.

Creating clear goals and deliverables is what makes it possible to truly hold people accountable. That's not easy for complex jobs which include responsibility for managing people and processes, or doing creative and strategic thinking. But it can be done, we've found, even in the least measurable roles. At Sony Pictures, for example, we worked with two senior movie executives to help them define precisely what they expected from each of their employees who had a role in finding and developing scripts. Subjective and unpredictable as that process is, the leaders we worked with were able to calculate with reasonable specificity how many pitches and submissions it typically requires to find one script worth buying and how many scripts must be developed on average to get one worth producing. With that information in mind, it was possible to say to their executives, with far more precision, "This is what we expect you to deliver in your role."

Once you've arrived at the metrics for a given job, the number of hours people put in, or how they choose to do their job, should become secondary. As Hew Evans, Sony UK's HR director, puts it, "If your manager knows what you're doing all the time, you're not doing your job and neither is he." To put this thinking into wider practice, we've introduced a simple exercise at a number of companies. First, we

work with managers to help them define the deliverables for each of their direct reports. Then, in a single two- to three-hour session, we take employees—everyone from senior executives to administrative assistants—through a process of defining their ideal work schedule. What, we ask them, would allow them to be most productive and most satisfied, on and off the job?

Would a given person prefer, for example, to start earlier in the day and end earlier, or perhaps to work in the morning, take time off at midafternoon to be with their children returning from school, and then resume working in the evening? Would another person be more efficient by working at home several days a week and avoiding a two- or three-hour round-trip commute? Might still another employee prefer to work longer days, in two- or three-hour stretches, taking time off between them to work out, have lunch with a friend, run an errand, or take a midafternoon nap, in order to be able to work more effectively in the early evening?

At IBM, for example, a thousand software developers working in different time zones have been given the flexibility to decide when they work. Many of the developers have also chosen to split their workdays into smaller chunks, taking time off intermittently through their days to deal with other aspects of their lives. The time it takes to update a given product's software has been reduced from eighteen to twenty-four months five years ago to four to six months today. As Patty Dudek, an IBM vice president, puts it, "If we want top talent to work on something and we give them all the flexibility they need to balance their lives, they're then more than willing to step up to the challenge when we need them to drop everything."

The ideal work schedule looks different for each of us, given the vast differences in people's temperaments and life circumstances. Obviously, there may be times, in a team environment, when collaboration and even sacrifice are necessary to achieve a shared goal. With that in mind, the second step in our process is for managers to meet individually with each of their direct reports to discuss their proposed schedules. When managers come to these discussions with a feeling of trust, our experience is that most individual preferences can be accommodated.

At Chubb Insurance, for example, a group of employees was given the opportunity to choose the work hours that best suited them.

Some 400 have participated so far, and in the Chicago office nearly 75 percent of the employees—120 out of 163—work nonstandard schedules they've created. The productivity gains have been striking: an increase from 82 percent to 91 percent in customers contacted within twenty-four hours and from 90 percent to 100 percent in timely benefit payments to claimants. "It's making people more responsible and accountable for what they do," says John Finnegan, Chubb's CEO. "The test is that they can do it better than they've done it before."

We've taken autonomy a step further in our own small company. We don't ask anyone to answer e-mail after hours or on the weekends. If there is an urgent need to reach someone, we'll call, but that is rare. Except for the handful of employees whose presence is required to keep our offices open and running, we set no specific hours. Even for the employees who do work fixed hours, we leave them free to find ways to cover for one another, so they can take time off during the day if they choose to do so. We have no sick days or vacation policy. Instead, we assumed that our people are committed to getting their work done and that they'll take a vacation when they need it. We invest almost no time or energy in monitoring how our employees get their work done—and they do.

Best Buy is the only large company we're aware of that has instituted a broad-based program which gives employees the level of autonomy we've been describing. Results Oriented Work Environment (ROWE) was launched at Best Buy's headquarters in 2001 and is now offered to all of the approximately 3,000 corporate employees at its Minneapolis headquarters. The program's creators, Cali Ressler and Jody Thompson, share many of our assumptions. "The employer's job is to create very clear goals and expectations for what needs to get done on a daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly basis," they explain. "The simplest definition of a Results Only Work Environment [is that] each person is free to do whatever they want, whenever they want, as long as the work gets done. Everything else—when they come in, how much time they spend in their cube, how long their lunch lasts—is no longer [the employer's] concern. The point here is to always redirect focus back to the work."

Two outside researchers studied the impact of the ROWE program on approximately 325 employees at Best Buy and compared them to an equal number of employees who remained in a traditional work

environment. After six months, significant numbers of those in the ROWE group reported that they had more time to take care of all aspects of their life, experienced fewer work interruptions, and were getting more sleep than they had previously. Interestingly, the most dramatic changes occurred in turnover. Among three separate ROWE groups totaling 377 employees, the number who left the company decreased by 90 percent, 52 percent, and 75 percent, respectively, between 2005 and 2007. Because Best Buy estimates the average cost of turnover per employee at \$102,000, Ressler and Thompson estimate the total cost savings to the company to be approximately \$6.7 million. They've now instituted a second pilot among 137 employees at a division of Gap and experienced similar results.

Ultimately, of course, the issue that matters most is not how many employees leave but how well those who stay perform. Perhaps no factor influences productivity more directly than people's capacity for absorbed attention. In a world rife with potential distractions, it's in the self-interest of organizations and their leaders to help their people stay focused on the priorities that have the potential to create the greatest value. When employees are given the opportunity to design workdays that better suit their needs, common sense tells us—and a growing body of evidence demonstrates—that they perform at significantly higher levels.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN ACTION STEPS

- The ability to focus on one thing at a time increases productivity and promotes innovation. What one new policy or modification of an existing one would support those you lead in focusing better on one task at a time? For example, consider creating one e-mail-free day a week, or even a half day, during which people are encouraged to focus on projects that require high concentration.
- Our immediate work environment directly influences our capacity to focus. Identify one change you could make to the physical environment that would improve other people's capacity for absorbed attention—or your own. If people share an open space, could they wear earphones when they're working on a challenging project? Could you let colleagues know when you don't want to be interrupted? If you're a leader, could you create a quiet room for anyone's use—akin to a quiet car in a train?
- In the absence of intentionality, the urgent will nearly always overwhelm the important but nonurgent. Create a separate, relaxing, informal space at work that is exclusively devoted to creative thinking and brainstorming. Then schedule a regular time—once a week or once every two weeks—in which you bring together colleagues to brainstorm new ideas, discuss longer-term projects or set strategy.