



Better Digital Teams

Part 1 - Working environment





Introduction

Digital professionals are often seen as getting a sweet deal in terms of their working environment, but the opposite is often true. A good working environment is often treated as a perk, when it's actually core to getting the best results out of digital professionals, whether they be developers, designers, or writers.

It's hard to believe at first, but spending around £1,000 per-person and instituting a few working guidelines could double the output of your digital team, with the following additional benefits:

- Improved rates of personal development, so your team get better more quickly.
- Reduced communication overheads, making work happen faster, with fewer mistakes.
- Improved employee efficiency, allowing you to pay your team more, further improving retention and drawing in top talent.
- Fewer bugs and errors, giving your customers a better product experience and reducing rework.

What's more, these improvements compound. So a 10% year on year improvement in team productivity and working practices adds up to huge change over the long term. It's hard to overstate the impact this can have.

In this article, we're giving you two lists to get the best out of your digital product development team; a list of **maximisers** to do more of, and a list of **minimisers** to do less of. First, however, we need to run through a couple of key concepts key to understanding why normal workplaces don't quite cut it for digital workers.



Key Concepts

Makers, not managers

Crucial to understanding why the needs of digital professionals are different is the concept of a “Maker’s schedule”. Maker’s schedules are characterised by long periods of work on drawn out solo tasks, typically requiring high levels of concentration to do well, and a degree of technical expertise to do at all. This is in contrast to a Manager’s schedule, which is characterised by shorter chunks of time, hopping between several different problems in the course of a day and spending a lot of time in direct collaboration with other people.

Neither are inherently bad, but a Manager’s schedule is dominant in most businesses, and a conflict often arises when a Maker is forced to accommodate a Manager’s schedule. The points in this article will help to directly address this, giving you a set of guidelines that respects the needs of your Makers in order to get the best out of them.

Context switching

Linked to the Maker’s and Manager’s schedules is the concept of context switching. As the name suggests, context switching occurs when you move from one task to another in a separate context.

This is routine for most things we do in life, and is part of what the Manager’s schedule is all about. However, for tasks that require a lot of concentration context switching is costly. A digital professional can take up to 20 minutes to get back into their task after being interrupted, wrecking their flow, reducing their productivity and increasing mistakes.

Therefore, constant context switching is incompatible with a Maker’s schedule, because the work involved in a Maker’s schedule requires time, concentration, and expertise to do well.



Key Concepts (cont)

Context switching is often discussed with software developers, but it's something we've all experienced. If you've ever tried to follow a sat nav at a busy junction, only to have someone try to talk to you at the same time, you've experienced the daily reality of many digital professionals.

With these concepts in mind, here are your **Maximisers** and **Minimisers** to focus on for a happier and more productive digital team.



Maximisers

Maximise these for a happier, more productive digital team

Comfort

Furniture

For chairs, this means good quality ergonomic desk chairs with working raising and lowering mechanisms. These typically cost a few hundred pounds, but that's fine - A good chair facilitates focus.

For desks, a lot of space is key. Remember that there may be multiple monitors, a keyboard and mouse, notepads and maybe even a separate laptop on the desk all at once. Don't force a person to work in unnatural positions and at uncomfortable angles. Give them the space they need to do their work comfortably.

Standing desks are worth considering too; many digital professionals are finding they prefer to work standing up for reasons of comfort and alertness over long periods of time. Standing desks have also been shown to promote good posture, and reduce the risk of some cancers over the long term.

Temperature

It's easy to feel cold if your work doesn't require much movement. Apart from being uncomfortable, if your hands get cold, typing quickly and accurately becomes impossible, directly affecting performance.

Unfortunately, people are comfortable at different temperatures. In order to keep everyone happy, you'll need to find an average temperature your team are ok with, bump it up a degree or two, and then provide **quiet** desk fans for those who prefer things a little cooler. Don't just suggest people wear warmer clothes in a cold room, this doesn't fix cold hands.



Maximisers (cont)

Dress code

Allow your digital professionals to work in what they're most comfortable in. There's absolutely nothing to gain by dressing up to stare at a monitor all day. Working in a shirt and tie is not comfortable, and it does not help digital professionals do better work.

Headphones

Music can greatly enhance your ability to focus, and even improve intelligence. By allowing your digital professionals to use headphones in the office, you're helping them to avoid context switching and do better work.

Convenience

Equipment

For designers and developers, invest in large monitors with decent colour replication, and good quality mice and keyboards for all. Consider monitor size too, large monitors allow more to be on-screen at once, meaning less time is spent moving between different applications. Good quality mice and keyboards make it harder to make a typo or erroneous clicks.

There will be other peripherals beyond monitors, mice and keyboards that your digital professionals will benefit from. They will almost certainly have a good idea what their ideal working environment looks like, so it's often easiest and most effective to provide a "setup budget" and allow them to choose what equipment they need to do their best work.



Maximisers (cont)

Internet access

Fast and stable Internet access is key for digital professionals. Video calls, large downloads and constant page refreshing are all frequent in their working day, and without a good Internet connection these all take longer, or make work impossible.

Remember, your wifi will not work well all the time, so provide your team with a physical wired connection as a fallback. Wifi is slower, less reliable, and hard to debug when it breaks.

System access

Your digital professionals will need access to all sorts of systems to do their job effectively, many of these will have the potential to significantly impact trading if they break. There's a natural tendency to restrict access with these sorts of things; resist it where you can.

Give access to the databases, code, infrastructure, network resources, and online accounts your team need for their work. For less frequently required resources, limit access where necessary, but make sure it's easy to get access in a secure way when needed.

Many organisations fall into the trap of restricting access in the name of security, but do a terrible job on the security and a great job on making it difficult to get work done.

Maximisers (cont)

Flexibility

Working hours

It's common for those on a Maker's schedule to do their best work outside of the traditional 9-5. Some prefer starting and finishing early, some prefer starting their day in the evening, and others prefer splitting up their day around other activities.

It needn't be difficult to accommodate flexible working hours, and doing so can attract talented staff, and even force adoption of other good habits:

- Asynchronous communication (emails, messages) rather than interruption
- Removing blockers before assigning work
- Communicating updates to coworkers
- Preparedness for people working in different timezones
- Availability of resource in case of downtime/critical bugs

For flexible hours to work effectively, it's **important that your team communicate well ahead of time**, so important meetings aren't missed, and work isn't accidentally done twice by two different people.

Problem resolution

If a member of your digital product team has a sick pet, a child is being bullied at school, or even had a terrible night of sleep, insist they take the time they need to resolve the issue before returning to work. Unless they're able to fully concentrate on their work, their output will be slow at best, and faulty at worst. It's better to have them in top form 4 days of a week, than worrying about an unresolved issue in their home life for 5 days.



Maximisers (cont)

Unscheduled breaks

Maker's schedule work can be mentally exhausting. Sometimes, 3 hours of intense morning concentration requires an early lunch for recovery. Sometimes a tough whiteboarding session is best followed by a 15 minute stroll to process and reflect. Trust that your team are working with you because they want to do good work, and let them decide how best to do that.



Minimisers

Minimise these for a happier, more productive digital team

Sound

Background noise

A lot of Maker's schedule professionals struggle to get the focus they need to do effective work with noise in their environment. Provide a quiet space for your digital professionals away from the office hubbub to aid focus, and minimise distraction.

Desk meetings

Keep meetings away from desks so that people who are trying to concentrate can focus on their work. It's hard not to listen in on a conversation happening a couple of feet from you, and it's easy to get dragged in unnecessarily when you sense you could help out.

Phones

Keep phones on silent, and preferably away completely. The pops and clicks from app notifications are a huge source of context switching.

Our brains are hard-wired to find notifications hard to ignore, as checking them provides us with a small burst of dopamine - the brain chemical responsible for addiction. It gets worse still, notification sounds often can cause other people check their own phones too, distracting more than just the recipient.

Minimisers (cont)

Visuals

Peripheral vision

For a digital professional deep in a focussed task, movement in their peripheral vision can be very distracting. Consider putting up privacy screens around desks to help people stay on their work. You don't need use full cubicles, but removing a few distractions from the immediate field of view can make a big difference when people are in constant movement all around.

Computer notifications

In most modern operating systems, new emails, instant messages, calendar events, Tweets, and Facebook posts all generate distracting pop-in notifications. As with phone notifications, these release irresistible dopamine in our bodies, reinforcing context-switching behaviour for something that's almost never important.

Turn these notifications off, and instead encourage checking of emails and instant messages at natural breaks in work. If something is *truly* urgent, then it's worth physically interrupting someone for.

Minimisers (cont)

Interruptions

Physical interruptions

Avoid interrupting digital professionals, as it's a greedy form of communication that forces a context switch. Instead, stop and consider whether there's someone else who is more appropriate to ask. If not, use a communication method appropriate to how quickly you need an answer:

- Immediately (rare) - physical interrupt
- Within a few hours - instant message
- Within a couple of days - email

This isn't intended to put people off limits. It's supposed to encourage choosing a communication method that's most appropriate to the situation at hand, rather than defaulting to interruption because it's convenient.

Remove information bottlenecks

If you do find yourself repeatedly having to interrupt a member of your digital team for answers to important questions, consider that they might have become an information bottleneck. Work on adjusting processes so that you're able to get the information you need without prompting them, or without them at all.

This commonly surfaces when communicating the progress of work. Instead of asking for progress updates, make sure your digital product team are using a ticketing system and, crucially, keeping it up to date with their progress. Then, if you ever need to see the progress of something you needn't ask after it, just check the ticketing system.

Minimisers (cont)

Headphones (again)

As well as assisting concentration, headphones discourage interruptions. People will often choose a less distracting form of communication such as an instant message or email instead of interrupting someone with headphones on.

People often contest this, claiming they “need” to be able to ask their digital professionals things at a moment’s notice - this is rarely true. A conversation is more convenient for the person doing the interruption because it gets them what they want quickly, but it does this at the expense of the person being interrupted, who is forced into a context switch against their will.

Summary

These are a set of guidelines, not rules. It's very tempting to go overboard with these and turn a fun working environment into a soulless grind. Real life doesn't work like that; distractions do occur, people do chat, and urgent problems do arise all the time. This article is about understanding how to help digital professionals work effectively, and taming the chaos.

It's also easy to assume digital teams should live in a privileged club of casual-clothed, headphone-wearing slackers. A lot of these guidelines have benefit to offer to anyone trying to do some focussed work, so give them a try if they resonate.

Armed with this knowledge, talk to your digital team and see what they think might work best for them. Try implementing a few tips slowly to see what sticks. Don't be afraid to tweak as you go, and watch your productivity improvements compound with time.



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We foster long-term relationships, working directly with our clients teams to guide their digital transformation.

We also publish our methods in a series of free articles and resources online, because we believe every business needs to fully embrace digital technology now to thrive in the future.

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