Building productive remote teams

Using motivation to become more productive

Tips to improve your productivity

Scheduling breaks to increase the productivity of remote employees

Why focus is the key to productivity

Increasing productivity

go1

Chapter 1: Using motivation to become more productive

With a significant increase in the number of people working from home, it is now more crucial than ever that employees understand how to make the most of their time. Most importantly, leaders need to communicate this without applying unnecessary pressure.

When employees feel motivated to work, they will inherently become more productive. The good news is, it is possible to create both a desire to achieve goals and immersion in a task. In this article, we explore what your team can do to improve their motivation to boost productivity.

Finding your flow

While it may seem like a random occurrence, we can create moments of complete immersion and motivation. In the 1970s, psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihályi referred to this experience as 'flow state.' Csíkszentmihályi defines 'flow state' as an "optimal state of consciousness where we feel our best and perform our best."

He adds that the experience involves "being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away—time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost."

In a __McKinsey study__, executives reported being five times more productive when in flow. However, most of us spend around five percent of our working life in this state. According to the study, if leaders could increase this number to twenty percent, overall __productivity would double__.

How to boost motivation and reach 'flow state'

So how do we get into a flow state and boost productivity? Here are our top tips to help your employees get in the zone:

1. **Keep procrastination in check**

When left unchecked, <u>procrastination</u> can become a chronic problem. When we don't feel like completing a task, we are unable to see the impact of avoiding it long term, or how failing to do the work will stop us from reaching our goals. This thought pattern can create a negative downward spiral, which becomes difficult to reset.

When you don't enjoy a particular task and find yourself putting it off, it can be helpful to find a way to motivate yourself to do it extrinsically. To do this, start by building in a reward for completing the task, or a section of it. The reward then becomes the motivation, and you have created an incentive for getting the work done. Getting started is often the hardest part.

2. Challenge yourself

Csíkszentmihályi explains that "flow also happens when a person's skills are fully involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable, so it acts as a magnet for learning new skills and increasing challenges. If challenges are too low, one gets back to flow by increasing them. If challenges are too great, one can return to the flow state by learning new skills."

There are some tasks we are not interested in doing. Some are too easy and some too challenging. The most common problem is that they just aren't that interesting, or they have become repetitive.

If this applies to a task you are trying to complete, think about how you could make it more challenging. Find out if there is something additional you could be doing, or set yourself a personal goal within the task. If the task is too difficult, you could break it down into more manageable steps or ask for further clarification.

3. Become more self aware

If you do find yourself drifting into a distracted state, it can be helpful to work on self-awareness. If you can identify the moment you start getting lost in thought, you have a far better chance of rescuing yourself when you need to return to the task at hand.

Distraction could also signal that it's time for a break. Continuing to work when your brain needs a rest is about the most unproductive thing you can do. Even if you take five minutes away from your desk to walk around, this can quickly replenish your energy and ability to focus.

Meditation can also help with awareness. The fundamental aim of the practice is to notice when you are getting distracted, and this can help you to know when you are no longer engaged in your work.

4. Understand your strengths and weaknesses

If you already know what you are good at, you can use this information to reach flow. For example, if you are completing a writing task and you find writing fairly easy, you'll need to find a way to challenge yourself to become fully immersed in the task. There is always something you can work on. Find out what you need to do to improve, and focus on that.

Equally, if you know the areas you struggle with, you can decide whether it is easier to delegate the task and more efficient to avoid it altogether. Alternatively, you could break the task down into smaller parts to become more engaged with it.

5. Make tasks manageable

Thinking about the enormity of a task before starting it can also trigger procrastination and anxiety. These thoughts are the enemy of flow. To avoid overthinking, break the task down into smaller chunks.

For example, if you have to write a report, aim to write the first 100 words and then have a short break. It might also be helpful to plan out the task first, with headings and bullet points to guide you through each step.

Chapter 2: Tips to improve your productivity

If you feel like you're always rushing through the day and trying to get a million things done at once, it may be time to look at practical ways of improving your productivity. Taking charge of your work day, getting on top of your to-do lists and feeling confident in your productivity skills will:

• Improve your work efficiency and performance

• Help you achieve more in a shorter time frame

• Reduce stress and build your self-confidence

• Allow you to have more time to do what you like

Here are some ways you can become a more productive version of yourself.

Schedule time to manage your emails

When we talk about productivity, it soon becomes clear that it's a really personal thing. This is particularly apparent in the way we manage our inboxes.

While some people stick fastidiously to checking their emails first thing every morning, others swear by leaving their inbox well alone until at least 10am, allowing them to focus their full attention on completing other tasks.

Regardless of what time of day you decide is right for you, one of the best things you can do to improve your productivity is to schedule proper time each day to go through your inbox. Constantly checking emails, or responding to every little notification from your inbox, results in a lot of wasted time and energy and disruption to your workflow.

Choose set times during the day to process your inbox and stick to it – for example, you may decide to read and respond to emails every morning, noon and night. Don't be tempted to keep flicking over to your inbox to see if anything new has come in. With your new schedule you'll have ample time to read and action new mail.

Touch things only once

By committing to handling things once, and once only, you'll be able to focus on dealing with things as they arise, particularly little things that only take a moment. These can easily be forgotten, and start adding up when you put them all together. Taking the time to do things in the moment will actually save you time in the long run, as well as a lot of added stress.

You can start practicing this way of thinking by paying bills as they arrive, replying to emails when you read them or simply putting something back in its place straight away. Doing this means it'll be done, dusted and out of your head – allowing you to focus on new tasks at hand.

Get yourself a notebook

Richard Branson is known to be a big fan of the humble notebook, carrying a notebook with him wherever he goes and claiming he'd never have got where he is today without this habit.

Using a notebook to get things out of your head and onto the page is very effective for stress management, allowing you to keep on top of your daily to-do list and jot down your ideas throughout the day.

Whatever you write in your notebook, it's sure to be a lot better for your brain and creativity than staring at a screen and hitting refresh on social media.

Curb your social media

The <u>average office worker is only productive for about 3 hours a day</u>. That's just three hours of productive work, out of the general eight-hour work day. This tells us that a lot of time is spent being distracted by other things.

Take a look at your own day and evaluate how you spend, or waste, your time. If checking social media has become a problem for your concentration or work deliverables, consider taking a break from it or at least putting some strong strategies in place to manage it.

Take advantage of apps

It's important to find productivity strategies that make sense to you, while fitting in with your personality and lifestyle. Look for apps and websites that offer ways to boost your productivity as soon as you start using them. There are also apps that can help you kick bad habits and change old behavioural patterns.

Chapter 3: Scheduling breaks to increase the productivity of remote employees

Employers looking for ways to increase the productivity of remote employees may find that encouraging them to take regular breaks could be an effective solution. Studies have shown that scheduled breaks can have a significant improvement on the physical and mental health of employees, as well as their level of work output.

Why schedule breaks for employees?

Taking a break not only boosts physical well-being but can also improve emotional and mental health. As most of us are aware, job-related stress can take a heavy toll on productivity. Even just taking a five-minute break each hour can help employees return to work feeling more refreshed, relaxed, and rejuvenated.

Improved health

Overworked employees are much more likely to become ill. Even missing one day of work can create serious delays, which is why it's important to support a healthy team. Allowing and even encouraging employees to take breaks on a regular basis can create a more positive and productive work environment.

The long-term physical and mental health benefits in the workplace cannot be denied. While some employees will willingly take breaks, others will push themselves until they are exhausted. For this reason, employers might wish to consider instituting a policy of required scheduled breaks.

Rejuvenated mental health

It's entirely possible for employees to work too hard. This is particularly true for remote employees who can set their own schedule. The issue with this is that continual stimulation can have a negative effect on the brain.

Taking a break for even a few minutes can help employees feel more revitalised and come back to work with renewed sharpness and clarity. Physical movement can also help get oxygen and blood flowing to the brain, which allows employees to work to their full ability.

Encouraging a positive work environment

Regardless of the type of business you run, the work environment can affect the overall productivity of your company. Scheduling regular breaks shows employees that they are appreciated and valued.

This type of policy will ensure employees know they a part of an organisation that cares about them, their health, and their happiness. When employees are happy at work, they naturally tend to be more productive.

Improved communication

Many employees are shy about asking for breaks even when they need them. As a result, they often work up to and past the point of exhaustion.

By scheduling regular breaks, employers can remove some of the burden on employees who might be nervous about speaking up when they need rest. When people feel more comfortable about communicating, your team will naturally function better.

How often should you schedule breaks for employees?

According to experts, the longest employees should work before taking a break is 90 minutes. In an ideal situation, employees should work for one hour or less before taking a short break.

With that said, the way you choose to schedule breaks for employees may be determined by your workflow patterns and corporate culture.

A popular strategy is to work for 50 minutes and then take a 10-minute break. This method works well for employees who have longer attention spans.

Getting the most from breaks

Managers can recommend employees do any of the following;

• Take a short walk
• Exercise at home, such as yoga or stretching
• Snack on healthy foods
• Meditate

While employers are not completely responsible for the productivity of remote employees, making the effort to encourage them to take regular breaks can help employees feel more comfortable about stepping away for a few minutes. That alone can aid in boosting employee morale and productivity.

Chapter 4: Why focus is the key to productivity in the attention economy

One of the best ways to improve productivity sustainably is to improve focus on the task at hand. Mastering attention can quickly improve both the quality and quantity of work produced.

Why is focus a problem?

In the modern workplace, the ability to hold attention on a task is becoming increasingly challenging. Author, Mark Manson, explains that we now live in an 'attention economy.' With endless knowledge now available at the click of a button, our attention is of high value to advertisers, companies, and organisations.

While technology connects us to friends, family, and colleagues across the world, instant messaging is also making it difficult to remain focused.

Unlike a computer, the brain is incapable of running too many complex tasks at once. It is impossible to chat to your colleagues and focus on work at the same time. Mental overload at work can also seriously affect productivity, wellbeing, and safety.

Deep work

26th president of the United States, Teddy Roosevelt, is said to have worked at the same time in the same place every day. He would work ignoring all other distractions that came his way. Although he would only spend a quarter of the average day working, he completed all of the tasks he needed to by using his time effectively.

In the 2016 book, *Deep Work: Rules For Focused Success in a Distracted World*, Georgetown professor and author, Cal Newport, explores Roosevelt's 'deep work' ethic. He defines 'deep work' as: "*Professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit. These efforts create new value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate.*"

Granted, Roosevelt lived in a world where fewer distractions were competing for his attention, but with discipline, it is possible to train your mind.

Top tips for maintaining focus when working remotely

1. Improve the process, not the outcome

When trying to improve productivity, many people focus on the outcome rather than the process.

For example, you might set yourself the goal of responding to more emails in a certain amount of time.

While this strategy creates a sense of urgency, it is outcome-based and, therefore, limited. Perhaps you are wasting time sifting through fifty junk emails every time you check your inbox. This part of the process needs to be streamlined if you are to see real results.

Focusing on the task at hand can make it easier to improve your processes, save time, and get more done with less.

2. Be aware of what distracts you

Everyone is distracted by different things. It might be your thoughts, notifications, or other people. You will know straight away what takes you away from your work. Finding a way to block out and manage these temptations isn't easy, but the rewards will speak for themselves.

Research also shows that every time your phone goes off, the distraction takes you away from **the task**. If possible, set aside specific times during the day to respond to emails and messages.

3. Prioritise

Write a to-do list, but only for the day ahead. An endless list without any consideration for the time you have will not be useful.

Try writing out what you aim to do for the day, and mark your top three priorities. If you manage to complete everything, you will have a greater sense of accomplishment, so make it achievable. Using a traditional to-do list can lead to procrastination and make you feel as though there is a vast, unmanageable mountain of work to do.

4. Use the Pomodoro technique to track your progress

This is a **time management strategy** developed by Francesco Cirillo in the late 1980s. The idea is to tackle a piece of work you need to get done in 25-minute intervals, followed by a short break.

Why does it work? It fires up our reward circuits. If we promise ourselves a reward (or break) at the end of completing a section of work, we are extrinsically motivated to complete the task. This approach can help with getting started, particularly with tasks you are not intrinsically motivated to do.

5. Meditate

The brain is plastic, meaning that at any point in life, we can teach it new things or learn healthier habits. Focus is a skill that we all can develop, and meditation is a fantastic way to practice it.

Meditation involves training the mind to focus on the breath, and **this focus can translate to your daily life** long after you stop practicing. You will also be able to catch yourself when you are thinking about how cute your dog is or what you ate for breakfast, instead of writing up the report due at the end of the day.

Chapter 5: Increasing productivity without working yourself into the ground

You may think that productivity equates to ploughing through your action items at full speed each and every day, but this is not actually the case. The reality is that you need to properly manage your mental resources in order to remain productive and to <u>avoid the possibility of burning out</u>.

Below are some strategies that will assist you in remaining more productive each day:

Use mind mapping techniques

A common challenge associated with a lengthy to-do list is getting bogged down and not knowing where to start. You may also not know how to prioritise the tasks or effectively manage your time. A mind map is a visual representation of primary activities as well as associated activities that are linked to your primary areas of interest.

By visualising your to-do list and seeing how different tasks are interconnected, you can make better decisions about how to manage your time and be as productive as possible. Essentially, you are creating a clear mental structure where they may otherwise be chaos. A smart idea is to create a mind map at the end of each day so that you can get right to work the following morning.

Mind mapping is so effective that you can even use it for project management and team collaboration. For example, in a team meeting, you can break out the action items covered into a mind map. This gives your team the ability to visualise each person's or department's role.

Employ the right technology

While some people equate technology to distractions, technology can also improve your productivity level in different ways. Social media notifications and personal email messages can be distractions that cause you to squander hours each day. However, some technology could help you to <u>boost productivity</u> through automation, enhanced scheduling, digitisation and more.

A smart idea is to identify the areas of your day that are most demanding of your time. Research technological solutions, such as for paying bills or managing your scheduling. Using too many

productivity tools may actually waste time, so only **use the tools** that are most relevant to your current needs and activities.

Find the balance

When working remotely, it is tempting to work longer hours in the hope of increasing your productivity. However by finding smarter ways to work and even taking time for mental health breaks, you can easily bolster your work output. From mind mapping and using productivity or automation tools to remaining hyper-focused through the use of short, planned breaks, you can see an improvement in your productivity without having to extend your work hours.

Go1 helps millions of people in thousands of organisations engage in learning that is relevant, effective and inspiring.

go1.com