

# Could Company “Productivity Policies” That Regulate Your Email and Meetings Make You Happier At Work?

By Vivek Wadhwa and Alex Salkever

One of the signature trends of technology in the Internet Age has been the reversal of technology adoption flows. In the past, the copy machine, the fax, the mobile phone (before smartphones) and the personal computer all started as work tools and then moved into the consumer realm. With the Internet, and with smartphones, that trend reversed. Unexpectedly, consumer tools such as chat, e-mail and social networks were brought into the workplace—not by IT managers, but by employees trying to increase their productivity. This path had been greased by the demands of workers to use their own smartphones (and, to a lesser degree, laptops and tablets) to conduct work business such as making phone calls and sending e-mails.

Subsequently, the slot machine in our pockets was tossed into the workplace, with unsurprising results. Our work tools began to more closely resemble our consumer products. The Chat tool, ‘Slack,’ uses numerous techniques that encourage workers to pay attention to it as much as possible and to consume as much as possible. The company’s tagline, after all, is “Where Work Happens.” Translation? Don’t leave Slack; you will miss something and fail at your job. Urging us to turn on desktop notifications, e-mail notifications when someone mentions our name and shortcuts that allow us to post Graphic Interchange Formats (GIFs) in the chat channel, the product designers of Slack have clearly read Nir Eyal’s book, *Hooked*.

Slack is one of many services engaging businesses and work teams using

approaches similar to those of consumer product designers. In fact, most providers of work technologies, from human resources systems to document-sharing systems and systems managing customer relationships, now emphasize some sort of interruptive notifications system to alert us to a new message or some other event. The result is a blizzard of notifications and intense pressures to keep many of those notification systems on because ignoring a notification is likely to mean ignoring something that somebody considers important.

This new reality of notification insanity obstructs our concentration not only as individuals, but also, when we are together—in the flesh, or in a virtual conference. In a study of 1,200 office employees in 2015, videoconferencing company, Highfive, found that, on average, 4.73 messages, texts or e-mails are sent by each person during a normal in-person meeting. Seventy-three percent of Millennial respondents acknowledged checking their phones during conference calls and 45 percent acknowledged checking them during in-person meetings. Ironically, 47 percent of respondents’ biggest problems with meetings was that co-workers were not paying attention.

## The Silent Start and Other Ways to Rethink Work

Slowing down interruptions and encouraging more deep work is exceptionally difficult when a multitask ethos is ingrained. To combat multitasking during meetings and to try to keep meetings meaningful, Amazon

mandates that attendees spend the first part of a meeting reading a printed agenda and additional information that sets the table for the meeting. Jeff Bezos, CEO, calls it “the silent start.” This is very good meeting hygiene and, according to Bezos, a wonderful way to spark innovation and interesting ideas.

It is really up to organizational leaders, such as Bezos, to give workers and their organizations a safe space in which to be creative and productive and to fulfill their potential. We advocate that every company create a cohesive productivity policy. Some companies are already performing in-depth reviews on employee productivity and practices, meeting structures, meeting attendance, how quickly e-mails are answered and how documents are shared—all the minutiae that make up the bulk of our working day and that can easily create “employment hell.”

The policy—or we can call it a performance enhancement plan (PEP) if you need an HR-friendly buzzword—could signify both management’s willingness to allow employees to design their work experiences and the willingness of employees to take ownership for the creation of a healthy environment that promotes productivity, balance, flow and, consequently, work satisfaction.

For example, what if your company had a policy to actively discourage employees from checking and responding to e-mails every five minutes and, instead, set up the e-mail servers to batch-receive e-mail messages on the hour or the half-hour? (This is entirely possible and almost trivial to implement.) What if companies had a warning system baked into calendars to alert employees that they are allocating more than 20 percent of their time to meetings and highlighting transmission and reception of messages on weekends or e-mail threads that extend beyond five round trips? What if the system alerted users who overuse “reply all” in environments that don’t generally need it?

We could, in principle, build a work-satisfaction index—a single number that rates an employee’s state of work fulfillment and a manager’s adherence to these kinds of policies. Using the same

tools that increasingly track productivity and monitor what employees do, we could easily make visible the unhealthy practices that lead to so much work frustration and discontentment.

Some companies have ad hoc versions of systems that work by giving employees maximum freedom. Netflix, for example, tells employees to take as much vacation as they want to and as much family leave as they want to and even to show up at the office when they want to; its only requirement is for employees to be top performers. Best Buy for a while had a “meetings entirely optional policy” as part of its Results Oriented Work Program. That policy was discontinued in 2013, but many employees and managers felt that it worked extremely well by allowing people to design their work engagements and minimize imposition of time-wasting distractions. The core message of all this should be, “Design the work environment you need, and we will back you up and let you deliver. Just be sure to deliver.”

Building such a culture of freedom takes a particularly strong stomach, for CEOs, managers and employees. It necessitates that all of us take personal responsibility to banish “fear of missing out” (FOMO), to avoid interruptions and to silence our inner technology demons. So far, we collectively have remained unsure whether such drastic approaches could work over the long haul because the broader pressures to be always “on” amid job uncertainty are so great.

As employees, we should always ask what the realistic expectations are for our roles and the culture of the company. If that culture goes against our notion of designed freedom of choice and flow, then we should vote with our feet and find work somewhere else. As leaders, executives must begin paying more than lip service to notions of holistic approaches to employee and organizational health.

For the most part, in a white-collar environment, productivity, engagement and workplace satisfaction are closely related. Productivity is a measure of the output achieved per hour of input. Note that this is a ratio

of one to the other, not an absolute. Numerous studies have shown that beyond a certain point, working excessive hours yields rapidly diminishing returns. True, that balance may shift, for instance when we are under looming project deadlines. But, as when we’ve crammed for exams at university, we need a break afterward:

time to recharge our energy and our well-being. This, too, must be baked into the work environment. **N**

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