

To: Software Department
From: Jeff Miller, Director of Technology
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Tapping Into Flow State

We have a big job to do...

We are a small team, and have a lot on our plate. More ideas - and more work - is dumped on our lap every day. We will have to work hard to accomplish our goals this year! Our potential future as Hawk Integration, where we could be working for various customers, is prompting some bigger thoughts as well. Can we be profitable working for other customers? Can we consistently provide our customers with an attractive product that they want to buy? Can we provide solid customer support for our customers?

I am confident that the answer to all of these questions is a resounding YES. We spend every day addressing new challenges. Some of our solutions are quite revolutionary - nobody does exactly what we do. We have proven that we can accomplish some pretty amazing things!

Can we produce amazing and revolutionary software? Absolutely! Can we produce this software quickly and efficiently? Yes, but it won't be easy. Our job as software developers is hard! There are so many other companies out there making custom software. If we want to be the best, we need to work hard to stand out. And that starts with us individually, and how we approach our work every day.

Distractions are everywhere...

I've been learning a lot recently about the relationships between focused work and productivity. Some of this comes from reading books, some of it comes from experience. Through this, I am noticing some areas where we as a team are really missing the mark in productivity, compared to what we could be doing. Not because we aren't working hard. Not because we don't care. Not because we lack a sense of urgency. But because we are allowing distractions to interrupt us and draw our attention away from our most important tasks.

Instant messaging, emails, shared offices - these are just a few of the things that take our attention away from what we are working on, even momentarily, and can often lead to misplaced priorities. Someone calls you about a small issue, and the next thing you know you've been working on fixing it for over two hours. Meanwhile, the task you were working on - the task that is actually much higher priority - is delayed by another day. The process is repeated over and over every day, and we end up delivering key features weeks late.

Momentary interruptions, even just a few seconds to read a text message, are very time-consuming when you consider how much momentum you lose on a focused task. Some of us don't experience a loss of momentum when replying to text messages or checking email. This is not a good sign!

There is no such thing as true multitasking - there is only the appearance of multitasking. What we like to call multitasking is actually working in a state of constant distraction, with our minds being pulled in a lot of different directions at once. If you are constantly distracted, you won't notice a loss of time when something new (like a text message) interrupts you, because your mind wasn't 100% on the task at hand to begin with. Momentum is not lost, because there wasn't much momentum to begin with.

If you are truly focused on something, any distraction makes your "train of thought" come to a screeching halt. By the time you deal with the distraction and resume your work, it takes real time and mental energy to get back up to speed. On the flip side, if we can eliminate distractions, we can really get a lot done!

Focus = Productivity

We are most productive when we have long stretches (3+ hours) of uninterrupted time to work on a single task. This helps us shift into a mental mode of high productivity, sometimes referred to as "flow state". While some of you may feel that it's impossible to have regular periods of uninterrupted time here at PWI, I am here to assure you that it is, and it's much easier than you may think. Once you experience truly uninterrupted time, you will quickly learn which distractions are important and which can be pushed off, or even eliminated. And I feel confident in saying that most of the things that interrupt us don't matter as much as we may think they do in the moment.

Don't get me wrong - some of us already do a great job with this! But I think there's room for improvement from each of us (myself included!). If we each work to get better at this, I think that we can increase our team output by as much as 50%, maybe more! More output equals higher profits, higher job satisfaction, higher pay, and real growth as a company.

Side benefit: long stretches of uninterrupted time also have the benefit of enabling us to learn difficult new skills quickly. Learning new skills (such as a new programming language) involves a physical reconfiguration of your brain. Long stretches of uninterrupted learning and practice significantly speeds up this reconfiguration process. For more information, check out [Deep Work](#) by Cal Newport.

How can we get better?

So how can we improve? How can we incorporate regular sessions of “deep work” or “flow state” into our work schedule? How can we eliminate distractions in shared offices, especially when we need to constantly monitor our systems and respond quickly to issues?

We know that it’s not possible to remove every distraction. But I believe we can easily make real progress on this as a team without a whole lot of extra effort. In fact, if we are able to focus and be more efficient at our tasks, I think our jobs will actually get easier!

Improving focus starts with how we approach work as a team. I would like to suggest that we only need three things in order to see some real improvements:

1. Ruthlessly cutting out distractions
2. Setting clear and challenging goals
3. Strong personal and team habits that support items 1 and 2

The good news is that we already have some of these! The great news is that I don’t think it will take a lot of energy to improve them by a large margin. This doesn’t mean it will be easy, but I know that I work with an awesome team that excels at doing hard things.

Below are some changes I would like us to make that I believe will help to improve these three areas. Are they the best solution? Maybe not. But I think that they will be a great starting point.

As we start to implement them, I want each of you to be on the lookout for ways to improve. In recently sending out a job offer, I was struck by one of the expectations listed in our employee agreement:

“We ask that you share your genius ideas, and ultimately “deliver smart solutions” to make the customer happy and the company profitable.”

I am looking forward to hearing your thoughts on these as we start to implement them.

Ruthlessly cutting out distractions:

As I mentioned, large blocks of uninterrupted focus time are a critical part of maximizing our productivity. We’ve already tried to do something like this with our “do not disturb” times throughout the week. The gains seen from these times have been significant, and we want more!

In order to maximize our chances of being able to focus, we need to remove distractions and clutter. Below are some habits I would like us to cultivate that will help us to maximize our ability to focus on work.

Team Habit #1 : Morning focus time

Consider all hours between the morning stand-up and lunch as “focus time”. During focus time, do everything you can to eliminate distractions. Focus time will replace our current “do not disturb” times.

During this time, observe the following:

1. Don't check your emails
 - Pro tip: "Out of sight, out of mind." - Closing your email browser tab, putting it in a collapsed "tab group", or putting it on a separate virtual desktop effectively puts your inbox out of sight so you aren't tempted to check it.
2. Put your personal cell phone on "do not disturb"
 - Android has a very cool "flip to shh" feature that you can take advantage of.
 - Since we will be doing this regularly, I don't advise putting your desk phone on "do not disturb" during this time. Instead, let's try to reduce the number of times we interrupt each other (see point 4).
3. Avoid communicating via Telegram unless necessary
 - Side note: I consider responding to Friday lunch polls as a necessary activity 😊, but let's avoid excessive chatter that distracts others.
4. Save your questions, code reviews, and emails for the afternoon
 - If you get stuck, switch to a different task.
 - If you are working on an urgent task and need help, go directly to the person that can help you the best.
 - Note: In 99% of cases, an "urgent" task can wait for a few hours...
5. Avoid scheduling meetings during this time
 - Note: this is why we have changed the time for the automations team's daily stand-ups.

Team Habit #2: "On Call" schedule

We currently don't have a clear definition of who is supposed to respond to high-priority notifications like automations errors or new helpdesk tickets. A big part of good software is a helpdesk team who is constantly ready to address issues.

In order to make sure we are actively monitoring our software while still enabling focus time, I would like to have a well-defined "on call" schedule for both of our teams. Whoever is on call will be responsible for triaging these notifications (assessing urgency and creating YouTrack tasks as needed). Having a dedicated person on call will enable the rest of the team to ignore/mute these important notifications, trusting that issues will be dealt with appropriately.

Blue-level department leaders will be responsible for maintaining the on-call schedule.

Personal Habit #1: Eliminate unnecessary notifications

Notifications quickly distract us. Eliminate as many unnecessary notifications as possible during the day.

1. Disable ALL email notifications for your work email, both on your PC and your mobile phone. If it's urgent, people will generally call you. If someone asks you why you didn't see their email, just say "I don't check my emails very often - please call me if you need something right away."
2. Consider setting all Telegram notifications to only vibrate your phone unless it is urgent (ex. Helpdesk or automations issues)
3. Social media apps should never be demanding your attention during working hours. Consider using "focus mode" on your phone (available for both Android and iOS), or disabling notifications entirely for those apps.
4. Religiously unsubscribe from any emails you don't need. Every email in your work inbox should contain something useful. If you consistently get emails that you don't use or respond to, unsubscribe from them.
 - a. Note: default settings for YouTrack email notifications are quite excessive. You can modify these settings so you aren't alerted about certain changes. To change your settings, click your profile in the top right corner, and then go to *Profile > Notifications*.

Personal Habit #2: Keep your workspace clean

A full email inbox, a cluttered desk, lots of browser tabs open at once - these things can all draw your attention away from what you're trying to work on. The saying "out of sight, out of mind" is a golden truth. Keeping these areas clean can greatly improve your chances of staying focused on the work at hand.

Clutter inevitably builds up. It takes effort to keep these areas clean. Take time regularly to:

1. **Clear out your email inbox:** Your inbox should contain two kinds of emails (a) unread emails, and (b) emails that you need to take action on today. Strive to get to inbox zero by the end of each day.
 - a. If an email doesn't prompt any action from you, read it and archive it.
 - b. If you need to reply to the email, but don't plan to do it right away, use Gmail's "snooze" feature to get it out of your inbox.
 - c. Use the two-minute rule. If an email prompts an action that takes less than 2 minutes to complete, do it right away. If it will take longer, delegate it to a different time.
 - d. Don't let your email become your to-do list. Transfer tasks to another system like YouTrack or Google Tasks.
2. **Clear your computer screens:** You do your best at a focused task when your computer screens display only the information you need, and nothing else. Take regular breaks to review and close unnecessary windows/tabs. If you like to keep some specific tabs open

all the time for easy access (ex your email), consider putting it in a collapsed tab group or on a separate virtual desktop.

3. **Clear your desk:** Items on your desk can be equally distracting. Got a paper that indicates a change you need to make? Take a minute to scan it and create a task so you can throw the paper away. If you do have things on your desk that require attention, but you don't want to address them now, put them somewhere where they are out of your immediate line of sight.

Don't stop here! If you see some other clutter in your life (lots of phone notifications, etc.) that regularly demands attention, clean it up!

Setting clear and challenging goals:

In his book *Atomic Habits*, author James Clear talks about the **Goldilocks Rule**. He describes it like this: "...humans experience peak motivation when working on tasks that are right on the edge of their current abilities. Not too hard. Not too easy. Just right." Tasks that are very mundane or extremely difficult quickly become tedious, and cause us to lose satisfaction in our work. When we work on tasks that just start to stretch our abilities, we maximize our potential to engage deeply and enter "flow state."

When goals are not clearly defined, it's really difficult to get our priorities straight. Without clear objectives, tasks that pop up can easily appear more urgent than they are. Although genuine emergencies do require our immediate attention, having well-defined goals will help us to distinguish these from less critical tasks. These lower priority tasks can often be addressed in a few hours or days, rather than immediately.

We saw a clear jump in productivity when we switched from a waterfall workflow to an agile workflow with regular sprint planning. Let's supercharge that by incorporating tasks that are engaging.

Team Habit #3: Intentional sprint planning and review

In order to maximize the Goldilocks Rule, it's important for us to be very intentional about our sprint planning and review. During each sprint planning session, I would like us to take the following steps:

1. Spend some time reviewing the past sprint, including discussing what went good and what went bad. Discuss whether or not you felt engaged by the sprint tasks.
2. Intentionally choose a mixture of easy and challenging tasks. This may mean re-prioritizing some tasks along the way to provide a good balance for each team member.

Team Habit #4: Intentional stand-up meetings

In order to keep our goals front-and-center, I would like us to be very intentional about discussing them during our daily stand-up meetings. During each stand-up meeting, answer the following questions:

1. What did you work on yesterday?
2. What will you work on today?
3. What do you think you may get stuck on?

To provide thoughtful answers to questions 2 and 3, take some time to review your sprint tasks first thing when you arrive at the office each morning.

Personal Habit #3: Protect your priorities

Protecting your priorities means to think carefully before you switch tasks. Ask yourself if the thing you're about to work on is actually more important than your other tasks. Just because someone barges into your office with a problem, or submits a helpdesk ticket does not mean you have to fix it right away. Don't be rude, but ask questions like "Is it OK if I don't get to this until next week?", or "When do you need this to be fixed?".

Recap

I believe that we can supercharge our team's productivity by making a few simple but intentional changes to how we approach our work. These changes will be reinforced by the following habits:

- Team Habits
 1. Morning focus time
 2. "On Call" schedule
 3. Intentional sprint planning and review
 4. Intentional stand-up meetings
- Personal Habits
 1. Eliminate unnecessary notifications
 2. Keep your workspace clean
 3. Protect your priorities

What if I don't do these things?

If you don't feel that the team habits are helpful, please speak up! Let's have a discussion about what could be better, and make changes that promote progress.

If you don't implement the personal habits, you might find yourself growing at a different pace from the rest of the team. While it won't jeopardize your job, it's important to consider whether you want to grow with the team, or let the team grow around you.

Final thoughts

Team, I am super excited about the potential we have! We have a killer team. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise! These changes are not just about boosting our productivity - they're about improving our entire work experience. I believe in our ability to adapt and thrive, and I look forward to seeing how each of you will contribute to our journey. Let's tackle these challenges with enthusiasm and a commitment to excellence, confident that together, we can achieve extraordinary things.