

The Evidence-Based Case for Time Blocking Your Work Schedule

The Research and Reasoning

Most of us with jobs have 8-hour working days. Other than how much time you spend working, the QUALITY of the time you spend working also plays a massive impact in your productive output. While it's obvious that you can get done more by working longer, it's less commonly known that you can change HOW you work to further get more done. Sometimes, you can get more done working FEWER hours with a greater quality work style than working your usual hours with a lower quality work style.

In today's digital age, it's common to have your working time pelted with meetings, texts, phone calls, notifications from IM software like Slack and Google Chat, and intermittent respite from idly checking the latest posts on your social media when bored. Many of these are low-value tasks that can be done very quickly but that are done quite often throughout the day. Even though they feel like they can be done very quickly, the reality of how much time they consume paints a different picture.

According to research, the average employee [wastes](#) up to **41%** of their time at work on low-value tasks. **53%** of employees [waste](#) at least **one hour every day** dealing with distractions.

Some interesting statistics on the amount of time lost to some common distractions:

- The average worker [spends](#) over **1 hour** of their work day reading news sites.
- Social media [takes up](#) **44 minutes** of the average worker's day.
- A study [revealed](#) that workers waste an average of **56 minutes per day**, or nearly **five hours a week**, using their mobile devices for non-work activities. Thirty percent said they spend most of their time checking personal email, and 28% admitted to perusing social networks. Checking out sports or entertainment sites, playing mobile games and doing some online shopping are the other things workers said they use their mobile devices for at work.
- When software company Adobe surveyed over 1,000 American workers for its annual email usage study, they [found](#) that people on average spend **3.1 hours** per day sending and checking their emails and Slack alone, amounting to 15.5 hours per week - or around **20 FULL WEEKS** of the year.

Another study found that a typical employee only has [11 minutes between distractions](#). Other studies show that office workers [are interrupted](#) about seven times an hour, which adds up to 56 interruptions a day, 80% of which are considered trivial.

With all these interruptions and distractions, we end up taking far longer to get work done and waste time that could be spent on more meaningful tasks.

While many of us are used to this form of work, where we will abruptly pause our work to attend to another activity (e.g. responding to a message that popped up from our colleague) and then return to our work, it's actually an inefficient way of working. There's a word for this style of working: "multi-tasking". At some workplaces, multi-tasking is even prized as a core competency.

Research has found that multi-tasking reduces our productive output while working, for two reasons. When we multitask, we

- 1) Take longer to get work done
- 2) Do poorer-quality work

A study [found](#) that if you're multi-tasking, you could squander up to **40 percent** of your **productivity**. Another study [found](#) that constant interruptions can **increase error rates** by around **12%**.

As for the monetary costs of these consequences: according to the company RescueTime, communication tools [cost](#) companies an average of around **\$28,000 PER EMPLOYEE, PER YEAR**.

The opposite of multi-tasking would look like this:

- Having a set time blocked for each work-related task (e.g. programming code, making a deal with a client, strategizing) you do
- Batching miscellaneous, smaller, quick tasks (e.g. checking messages, errands, taking breaks) into their own big block of time

During these "time-blocks", you focus whole-heartedly on whatever task you've set out for yourself at that time. If you're programming, you're programming. If you're chatting with a co-worker at lunch, you're chatting. If you're at a meeting, you're paying attention to what's being said and participating. You don't let any other task or thought breach the focus you have for that task. If you're programming, you're not thinking about the argument with your co-worker or responding to a colleague that pinged you.

When you reduce the distractions that commonly sway your attention while working, then you're able to get a lot more done.

According to research from the [University of Southern California](#), multitasking actually leads to a **decrease in productivity** because it takes your brain extra time to switch mental gears between tasks.

While multi-tasking, each time you switch from one task to another, you divert your attention from your current task (Task A) to the other task (Task B). When you get back to Task A, it still takes some extra time before you can fully remember what it was you were thinking about before you were interrupted (“So what was I doing here...? Oh, yeah, I remember now!”). Add up these interruptions over time, and it adds up to a lot of **wasted time** spent where you’re getting your bearings for what you were thinking about regarding Task A.

In addition, a study conducted at George Mason University has [found](#) that interruptions don’t just take up time — they also **degrade the overall quality** of people’s work. Because you’re less-focused after switching from Task B to Task A, the quality of the work you do on Task A immediately after diminishes for some time until you become fully-focused again. That’s why it’s best to reduce these task-switches as much as possible.

Contrast this with if you have uninterrupted periods of blocked work time.

- 1.5 hours to attend to Task A (e.g. coding).
- Followed by 0.5 hours to attend to Task B (e.g. a team meeting).
- Followed by 2.5 hours of resuming Task A.
- Followed by 0.5 hours to attend to Task C (e.g. catching up on emails/texts)

The amount of time spent focusing onto a different task is a lot less now, and the number of instances where you have diminished focus while working on a task is also a lot less.

Research supports this:

- Research done by Georgetown Computer Science professor Cal Newport [shows](#) that the **very best students** often **study LESS** than the group of students right below them on the GPA rankings. He interviewed around 50 ultra-high-scoring college undergraduates from some of the country’s most competitive schools. The best students went out of their way to maximize their concentration—greatly reducing the time required to prepare for tests or write papers, without diminishing the quality of their results.
- According to a study that [tested](#) people who were constantly interrupted vs those who weren’t: “No participant scored higher when interrupted compared to the no-interruption condition, in either experiment. Nearly everyone who was

interrupted did worse. In fact, **96 percent** of the participants **performed worse**, and 4 percent stayed the same.”

- A study conducted on engineering managers by Clockwise [found](#) that:
 - **90%** of participants said they're **more productive** when they have more Focus Time
 - **80%** of participants said Focus Time helps them **finish projects faster**
 - **76%** of participants said Focus Time helps their company bring in **more revenue**

This is why it helps to have long, uninterrupted periods of work where you're only focusing on one task at a time. Ways to achieve this while working in 1.5-2 hour time blocks are by reducing the following distractions:

External Distractions

- Turn off notifications for email, phone, Google Chat, Slack, or other IM that pop up and divert your attention as you're working
- Many people get diverted away from their main work because of meetings. Have meetings only after you've worked for a good period of time on your main task (if possible). Treat meetings as their own respective block of time, and ensure they don't cut into your main work.
- Have your own workspace or workstation away from other people where you can remain alone while working. For some, this may be easier to do at home. For others, the actual office may be easier.

Internal Distractions

- Don't think about another task while working on your current task
- Don't think about events in the past or future while working on your current task

For removing internal distractions, mindfulness is key. It's less about external distractions (e.g. a chatty colleague, a ping from a coworker), and more about what's going on in your own mind.

For instance, some people may feel tempted to check if they got any texts while working. Others might feel tempted to think about an incident that may've occurred recently in their lives (e.g. they had an argument with their boss that morning and are upset). And yet some others might feel tempted to think about a future incident that might be occurring (e.g. their boss is going to be mad at them if they don't get their assignment turned in on time). These distractions do nothing to help you work.

For internal distractions like these, it helps to [meditate](#), which can help you become more mindful in the present.

Removing internal distractions also has to do with not getting distracted with petty, unproductive tasks. If the task you're working on is not adding value or upping the quality of your work and/or life, eliminate it. Be very clear on WHY you're engaging in a task, and whether it's really helping you or not. Are you doing something because it's actually the smartest and most effective thing to do, or A) because you just want to feel like you're doing what everybody else is doing, or B) it's making you feel like you're getting work done?

NOTE: for tasks that are much smaller and perhaps unrelated to your main work tasks, it helps to batch them into their own big task. For example, at the end of each 1.5 hour work block, you can allocate 5-10 minutes to catching up on messages, stretching, taking breaks, or chatting with a colleague. As these tasks are less important, it's best to combine them in one time block than have them interspersed amongst your main work blocks and derail the quality of the work you do.

Combine the power of reducing both external AND internal distractions, and you can achieve the highest quality productive output to your fullest. Some who aren't already doing this will achieve far more in less time than what they usually spend working. They will also find that the quality of their work will also increase than what it would be otherwise.

The concept of setting lengthy time blocks for each main task you do can also be extended into your personal life. Some people will frequently check messages that pop up on their phone while eating dinner or spending time with their family. Research shows that, on average, Americans [check](#) their phones 262 times per day—or once every 5.5 minutes.

Rather than do these things during a time that should be spent learning about how one's loved ones' day went, focusing on their concerns, and spending quality time, they can be done right afterwards in their own dedicated time block.

The result = greater time spent with family, and more quality time.

Real-Life Case Studies From Influential Individuals

Across history and the world, several notable figures have recognized the power of eliminating distractions from their work, to great effect:

Bill Gates, Chairman and Founder of Microsoft, would [take](#) off one week, two times a year, and escape by himself to a secret clapboard cabin somewhere in a cedar forest in the Pacific Northwest.

It was what he called his “Think Week.”

Gates would arrive by helicopter or seaplane, and spend the week reading papers written by Microsoft employees pitching new innovations or potential investments. He read as many papers as possible, sometimes doing so 18 hours a day, staying up until the wee hours of the morning.

According to Gates: “I would literally take boxes out to a beach place and sit there for a week reading them day and night and scribbling on them to put it entirely online.

Famed psychologist **Carl Jung** wrote his books in a tower with no electricity to minimize distraction.

Mark Twain wrote much of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer in a shed in New York so far from his family they blew a horn at mealtimes.

Theoretical Physicist **Peter Higgs**, the namesake of the Higgs boson particle, has [never](#) sent an email, surfed the internet, or used a cellphone. He was so out of touch that journalists couldn’t contact him to tell him he’d won a Nobel Prize.

Several other writers have utilized working in isolation to optimize their focus on their projects, such as **Henry David Thoreau**, **George Orwell**, **J.K. Rowling**, and **Ian Fleming** (author of the James Bond novels).

Other influential people who utilize/utilized time-blocking for greater focused work are:

- [Benjamin Franklin](#), polymath and a Founding Father of the United States
- **Jack Dorsey**, CEO of Twitter and Square, is [known](#) to block entire days thematically. He described his schedule as:
 - “On Monday, at both companies, I focus on management and running the company...Tuesday is focused on product. Wednesday is focused on marketing and communications and growth. Thursday is focused on developers and partnerships. Friday is focused on the company and the

culture and recruiting. Saturday I take off, I hike. Sunday is reflection, feedback, strategy, and getting ready for the week.”

- [Marc Andreessen](#), Silicon Valley investor and co-founder of the Andreessen Horowitz firm
- **Cal Newport**, Computer Science professor at Georgetown University
 - Cal further writes about the impact of harnessing deep, focused work in your work ethic in his book, [“Deep Work”](#).
- [Elon Musk](#), CEO of Tesla Motors and SpaceX
- [Adam Grant](#), Organizational Psychology professor at UPenn, UPenn’s youngest professor to earn tenure

Real-Life Case Studies From Influential Companies

Many top-performing companies have recognized that interruptions to work — especially in the form of meetings — often derail team members’ focus and productivity. Many workers seem to agree with this sentiment: in a survey [conducted](#) by Microsoft among 38,000 workers in 200 countries, people spend 5.6 hours each week in meetings and 69% of survey participants considered meetings as “not productive.”

Here’s what some companies have done to ensure their team members stay focused:

[Facebook](#) and [Asana](#) (which was founded by a Facebook co-founder) both have a company-wide policy of no meetings on Wednesdays.

Pinterest realized the impact of letting their team members have ample time to focus on their main work, and [implemented](#) the Three-Day-No-Meeting-Schedule.

Moveline, an online moving company, [has](#) a “Maker’s Day” on Tuesdays, when the product team isn’t available for meetings. Instead, they focus on one big problem they’re trying to solve.

At mobile team communication platform **Talko**, they [have](#) Do Not Disturb days and endorse a policy of scheduling meetings adjacent to one another.

Jackrabbit Mobile, an Austin-based mobile design & development agency, has [adopted](#) two no-meetings days a week—Tuesday and Friday.

Personal Examples

While in my sophomore year in college, I realized that not only was I able to study better and complete assignments quickly and more effectively by removing distractions — I also enjoyed them more and gave them the needed love and attention desired.

Some distractions I removed while working:

- Putting my phone on silent
- Sitting in a quiet, secluded area where there weren't many people (or, if there were, there was nobody around who I actually knew)
- Closing all my email and social media pages

It helped to time-block so that I would only check my notifications, emails, and other messages after working on my main tasks for a lengthy-enough period of time (e.g. 1.5-2 hours). After checking messages and taking a short 10-minute break, I would resume work for another 1.5-2 hours. Doing my work this way allowed me to get my tasks done a lot more quickly than if I were constantly attending to notifications and other distractions that popped up as I was working.

I started meditating sometime around my junior year of college, and I found that being mindful also further allowed me to remove any internal distractions that would be privy to pulling me away from my main task. Each time I practice meditation, it gets easier to stay on task.

I now continue to practice this style of work as much as possible now that I'm actually working in a company, and it helps me to remain focused on whatever it is I'm seeking to accomplish at the moment. As an added plus, it also just helps keep me sane.

How and why do renowned figures — like Bill Gates, Elon Musk, and Adam Grant — make sure to timeblock their schedules so as to minimize distractions and interruptions? What do esteemed companies like Facebook and Pinterest do to build off on this? How does time-blocking your work schedule grow you as an individual -- and even teams at organizations? What does the research show?

In the latest article of "Always Be Growing", I cover the case for reducing distractions and optimizing focus during work using time-blocking -- backed with evidence from research, thriving global icons, successful companies, and my own personal life.

<https://adidgoyal.com/always-be-growing-blog/f/the-evidence-based-case-for-removing-distractions-while-working>

