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In Search of Lost Focus

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About this report

Focused attention is one of the key components of a knowledge-driven economy. It is essential for creativity, problem solving and productivity. But people's concentration is increasingly disturbed by distractions ranging from real-time digital communications to noise and interruptions.

Amid the upheaval wrought by the covid-19 pandemic, the role of focus in the modern working world has taken on renewed importance. Long stretches of focused concentration are essential to produce valuable work and tackle knotty problems.

While individuals differ, studies indicate that between 60 and 90 minutes is an optimal focus period, after which fatigue begins to set in.

Yet the reality for many is a working day spliced into countless time fragments that produce stress, increase errors and lower productivity.

"Interruptions diminish high-quality execution by breaking momentum, thus resulting in the need for distressful do-overs," says Edward Brown, author of *The Time Bandit Solution*.

Gloria Mark of the University of California, Irvine, argues that distraction and multitasking consume cognitive energy. "Every time a person switches tasks, they make a cognitive shift which depletes their mental resources."

Although distractions are a common complaint in today's fast-paced, turbulent

and collaborative working environment, they remain under-analysed and under-quantified.

To address this deficit, The Economist Intelligence Unit has undertaken a research programme,¹ sponsored by Dropbox, analyzing the macroeconomic cost of lost focus, the level at which knowledge workers feel they can focus, what tactics they use to do so and what helps or hinders them. The report draws upon a bespoke Economist Intelligence Unit model which incorporates findings from our survey of 600 knowledge workers conducted in April and May 2020. At the outset of the program we conducted a series of expert interviews to help shape the research and would like to thank the following individuals for their time and insights:

- **Megan Jones Bell**, chief strategy and science officer, Headspace
- **Edward Brown**, president, co-founder and chairman, Cohen Brown Management Group
- **Darius Foroux**, author, speaker and entrepreneur
- **Gloria Mark**, professor, Department of Informatics, University of California, Irvine
- **Chris Marsh**, principal research analyst, 451Research
- **Cal Newport**, provost's distinguished associate professor, Department of Computer Science, Georgetown University
- **Jan Rezab**, CEO and founder, Time is Ltd
- **Linda Stone**, writer, speaker and consultant

1. The Economist Intelligence Unit model estimates the cost of lost focus in the workplace by incorporating a series of inputs including advisory interviews, a literature review of existing studies of focus, Economist Intelligence Unit survey data to understand working patterns and sources of distraction and government data to calculate economic costs. Time lost to distractions is estimated by occupation and aggregated up to the industry and macroeconomy levels. This allows the analysis to capture nuances and differences in working patterns across occupations. The figures capture the total annual economic cost of time lost, reported in terms of salary payments, gross value added, output and firm profits. The US-based survey polled 600 knowledge workers, from C-suite and director level to middle management and general staff, across six sectors (consumer goods and retail; education; manufacturing; media, entertainment and publishing; professional services; and technology). For full modeling methodology and survey results, please see the appendix at the end of this report.

Key economic findings

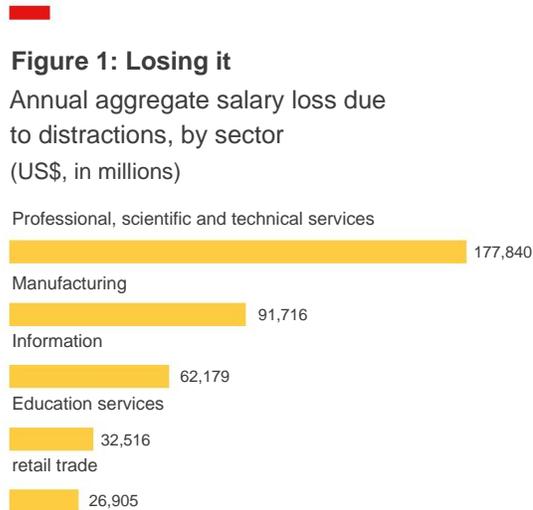
- Loss of focus due to distractions translates to an estimated annual salary cost of US\$34,448 per person in lost productivity, or US\$391bn for US companies in the sectors analysed, equivalent to 28% of baseline salary payments.

» The hardest-hit industry in absolute terms is professional, scientific and technical services, which loses US\$178bn in annual salary costs.

- On average 581 hours are lost due to distractions per person annually, equivalent to 28% of total working hours.

» The greatest loss of focused time is in the information services industry where an average of 634 hours are lost per person annually at an estimated salary cost of US\$62bn, equivalent to 32% of current salary payments in the industry.

- By making efforts to improve employee productivity by improving focus, companies in the assessed sectors stand to gain as much as US\$1.2trn in untapped employee output.²



Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit



2. Based on gross value added (calculated from employee salaries and benefits and business profits).

Key survey findings

Lengthy periods of deep focus are not common, chiefly due to face-to-face interruptions (while in the office) and regular email checking.

Only 53% of respondents spend more than one hour on a task over the course of a typical work day and a third spend between 30 minutes and one hour on a task. The top two reported distractions are face-to-face interruptions from colleagues about work-related tasks and checking, reading and responding to work-related emails—a problem for both remote and office-bound workers.

You've got mail

Workers check their email particularly frequently; 18% of respondents check their inbox every few minutes and 70% check it at least once an hour.

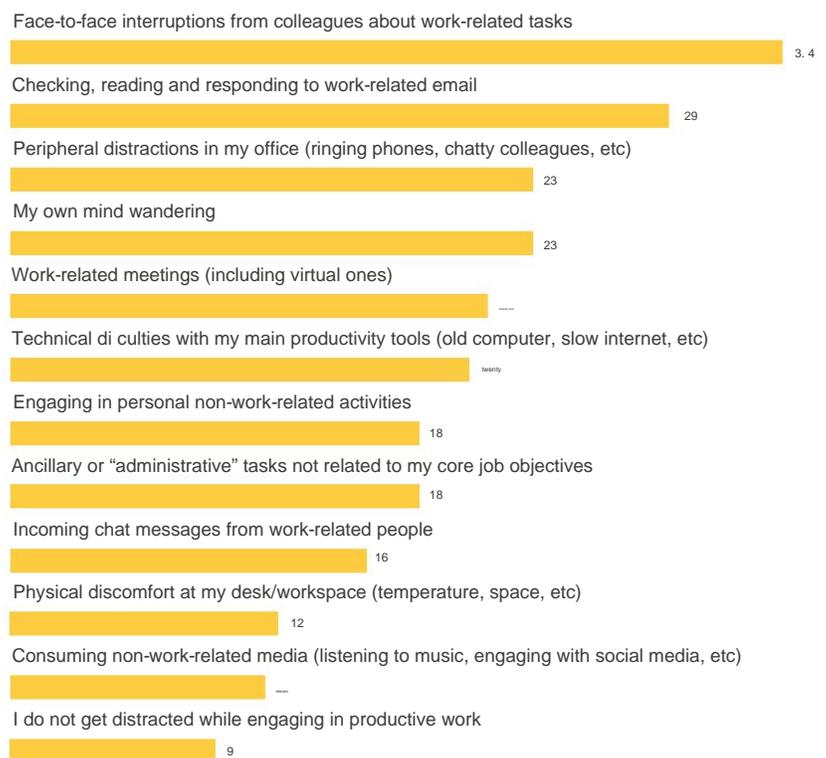
“People initially saw email as a more efficient way to do what they were already doing with voice memos. Instead, email caused a much larger shift than anticipated,” says Cal Newport of Georgetown University. “Knowledge work is now, almost uniformly, via email. Anyone can reach anyone at any time for anything.”

Overall, however, our survey did not find that workers spend the majority of their day managing emails—while 71% of respondents spend over an hour a day on it, only 18% spend more than three hours. The problem is frequency: 18% check their email every few minutes and 70% check it at least

once an hour, resulting in a regular interruption of deeper periods of focus. Academic studies have shown that, when released from email for sustained periods, workers show better focus, lower stress and higher wellbeing.^{3,4}

Figure 2: Beehives of activity

Biggest sources of workplace distraction (% of survey respondents)

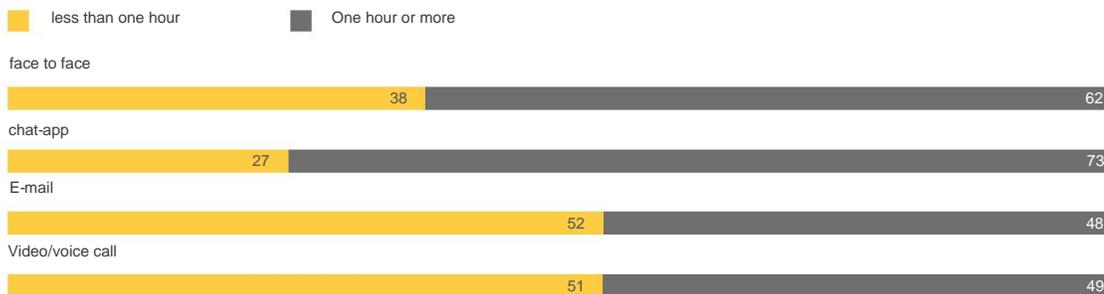


Note: Figures do not add up to 100% because more than one option could be selected
Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit

3. Gloria J Mark, Stephen Volda and Armand V Cardello, “A Pace Not Dictated by Electrons”: [An Empirical Study of Work Without Email](#), Association for Computing Machinery, 2012.
4. Kostadin Kushlev and Elizabeth W Dunn, “Checking email less frequently reduces stress,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 43, 2015, pages 220-228.

Figure 3: Lost in the zone

Average length of unbroken time spent focusing on a specific task compared with main method of workplace communication (% of survey respondents)



Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit

Meetings and social media: Not such a drag

Half (46%) of survey respondents report spending no more than one hour per day attending work-related meetings and only 21% find them the dominant source of distraction. Managers and senior executives, squeezed between the needs of the C-suite and those of the workforce, are most affected: meetings are among the top distractions for 29% of director-level respondents and 25% of managers compared with 18% of general staff and 15% of C-suite members.

Respondents in the technology industry have a dimmer view of meetings overall and report being more heavily distracted by them.

This may reflect the distinct nature of work in the tech sector which often requires long stints of focus while writing and reviewing code.

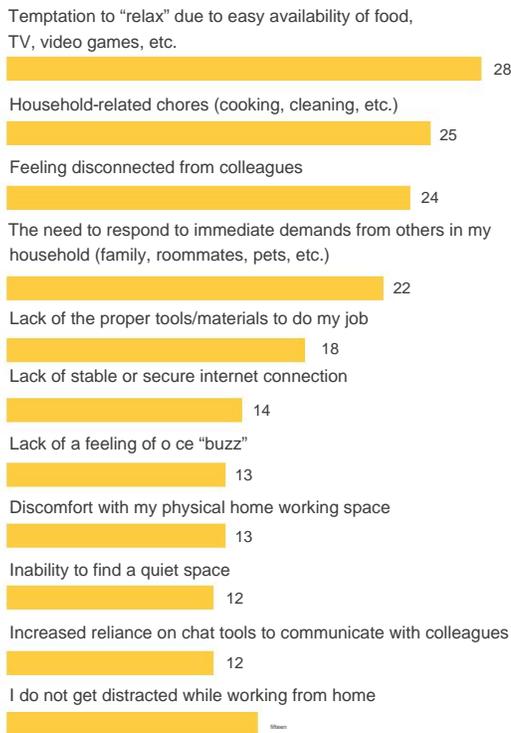
Media (including music and social media) is a dominant source of distraction for more tech workers than those in other industries (20% vs. 11% across the sample as a whole).



The dynamic shifts in a work-from-home (WFH) context with 28% identifying the temptation to relax (by eating, watching TV or playing video games, for instance) as the dominant distraction. Feeling disconnected from colleagues when working remotely also ranked highly as an impediment to engaging in productive tasks. This is particularly relevant in light of covid-19 as companies who may not previously have had a WFH set-up deal with the challenges of physically-distanced working, including loss of team cohesion and a potential decrease in innovation. These and other aspects of WFH are the subject of a separate, related Economist Intelligence Unit study.

Figure 4: Homework headaches

Chief sources of distraction while WFH (% of survey respondents)



Note: Figures do not add up to 100% because more than one option could be selected

Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit

Tactics, methods and responsibilities

The majority of respondents believe the individual is ultimately responsible for managing their focus.

A large majority agree (76%, including 38% who agree strongly) that the onus for focus falls on the individual while a reasonable share admits that

mind-wandering is among their main distractions rather than any external factor. Taking regular breaks is by far the most popular method of improving focus. This tactic is supported by productivity literature showing that rest breaks increase attention, vigor, creativity and decision making, especially if they include exercise.^{5,6} Tech workers are more likely to employ diverse tactics to enhance focus including putting on headphones, disabling phone, email, or desktop chat notifications and reserving time for "no meeting" blocks.

Despite the emphasis on personal responsibility, the survey reveals that several causes of distraction are implicitly organizational.

- Gerhard Blasche, Barbara Szabo, Michaela Wagner Menghin et al., "[Comparison of rest break interventions during a mentally demanding task](#)", *Stress Health*, Vol. 24, No.4, 2018, pages 629–638.
- Alex Soojung-Kim Pang, *Rest: Why You Get More Done When You Work Less*, New York, 2016.
- Libby Sander, "[A new study should be the final nail for open-plan offices](#)", *The Conversation*, July 18th 2018.
- Jungsoo Kim, Richard de Dear, "[Workspace satisfaction: The privacy-communication trade-off in open-plan offices](#)", *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, Vol. 36, 2013, pages 18-26.

Organizations are implicitly responsible for some distractions impeding staff focus.

Despite the emphasis on personal responsibility, the survey reveals that several causes of distraction are implicitly organizational. Forty percent of respondents have a private office but the majority either sit in a fixed desk in an open-plan office, “hot desk”, or sit in a shared office within a larger office setting. Open-plan office environments make economic sense but can be highly distracting to some workers—face-to-face interruption is the biggest source of distraction cited in our survey. Such offices may also, paradoxically, increase use of email as workers attempt to minimize loss of focus due to personal interactions.^{7,8}

A quarter of respondents put on headphones to enhance focus, indicating that ambient noise or physical interruption might be impinging on concentration. Peripheral noise (ringing phones, chatty colleagues) is the third leading source of distraction according to those surveyed. Even with the stress and anxiety caused by the covid-19 pandemic, 36% feel either much more or somewhat more focused working from home as opposed to their office, compared with 28% who feel less focused. Given that most people's home environments are not set up to be workspaces, this casts a negative light on corporate offices that are theoretically designed to support productivity.

Few organizations are actively trying to protect and promote worker focus.

Companies are not doing enough to proactively build a culture of focus. Only 15% of respondents say their firm has classes, workshops or internal messaging promoting focus or discouraging multitasking. Only 10% say their firms advocate “focus time” to discourage or prevent the checking of digital communications and only 20% have technology tools, such as automated scheduling, to reduce time spent on administrative tasks that could be sources of distraction. Few respondents take advantage of the many low-hanging fixes to the distraction problem: only 18% disable mobile notifications as a focus-enhancement strategy, for instance, and only 12% do the same with their email inbox.

Companies would do well to encourage these sorts of simple, cost-free behaviours.



Hierarchical inequalities also require attention. Some workers struggle more with lack of focus due to entrenched structures and expectations of their organisation. The ability to protect and nurture focus is strongly correlated to a person's autonomy and ability to manage their time, communication methods and location of work. Our survey reveals that C-suite members are more likely to say they are very focused, and management/director-level respondents are more likely to block off time as a way to enhance focus. General staffers are less likely to feel very focused and less likely to have agency over individual tasks and time while operations staff tend to experience fewer lengthy periods of focus.

There are broader socio-economic factors at play here as well. "Lower-level employees are more likely to be impacted by [other wellbeing obstacles] like air quality, access to transit, food and childcare," says Megan Jones Bell of Headspace, a mindfulness-services platform. Organizations should also be aware of an often unappreciated tier, middle managers, who are beset with pressures from above and below. "Managers are the air-traffic controllers in the organisation. They have to switch context all the time, which is overwhelming," says Jan Rezab of Time is Ltd, a firm that makes productivity-analytics software.



Conclusion: Cultivating a culture of focus

As the economy becomes more knowledge intensive and automation drives up the value of human creativity, focus will become increasingly essential to productivity. While there is no single blueprint for how individuals achieve optimal focus, our survey, economic model and expert interview program provides central themes and best practices for executives, managers and individuals to protect this valuable asset.

- **Communication is essential.** in an era characterized by collaboration and agility, work must be structured and organized to allow periods of protected focus. Our survey shows that email and in-person interruptions are dominant distractions, yet this in itself indicates the crucial role of communication in modern work. Rather than shunning communication, high performers adopt a deliberate and minimalist approach. Those describing themselves as very focused tend to spend longer on discrete tasks, check email less often and are less likely to use email as their main mode of communication. Companies can also embed norms like “asynchronous communication” where messages are sent without the expectation of a rapid response.⁹ This gives people control over their time and reduces the tendency to check messages out of a sense of duty to colleagues. Workers can also “batch” communications into intensive bouts rather than drip-feeding them throughout the day. Chat apps are preferable to email for some of those polled—perhaps tellingly, tech workers at the vanguard of productivity tactics are more likely to use them.

- **Lead from the top.** Staff follow the example of their seniors. “It is up to leaders to model [appropriate] behaviours, to encourage employees to take breaks that are restorative and to help them return to work more focused than when they left,” argues Ms Jones Bell. It is not enough for companies to simply tell workers to spend less time on their email; they need to re-think workflows in a deeper way. “If your company depends on unstructured, ad-hoc communication, telling people to check email less is not going to work,” says Mr Newport.
- As companies plan their post-pandemic work strategies they should attend to the ways in which the old status quo was anti-focus. Although individuals feel personally responsible for focus, our survey shows they are at the mercy of their environment. Open-plan offices and ambient noise are obstacles which could be alleviated by re-thinking workplace layout or adopting more hybrid arrangements to reduce the number of workers crowded into offices (a particularly salient point in the covid-19 era). Even in a fully remote context, digital tools can be better optimized to promote focus. Companies could also do more to support staff, be it through classes and workshops on focus and the pitfalls of excessive multitasking or more active efforts to encourage breaks, rest and other proven focus-restoring tactics. Businesses should also be sensitive to ways in which organizational hierarchies might affect focus, with lower-ranked workers and middle managers facing greater impediments than executives and leaders.

9. Amir Salihefendić, [“When it comes to team communication, faster isn't always better”](#), Quartz, May 8th 2020.

Appendix I: Economic model methodology

The Economist Intelligence Unit has developed an impact model to estimate the economic costs of loss of focus in the workplace. The model incorporates a series of inputs including:

- Advisory interviews with high-level executives and experts to refine the concept of focus
- A literature review of existing studies on the loss of focus to establish key assumptions for the economic model
- A survey of executives and workers to uncover what focus means in the real world and to understand working patterns and sources of distraction across industries and occupations
- Data collected from various government sources to estimate the economic cost of distractions based on baseline macroeconomic data

For knowledge workers in the US across six industries of focus—media, technology, professional services, education, manufacturing and consumer packaged goods/retail—the model quantifies:

- The average time lost in a year to distractions from various sources
- The total annual economic cost of time lost, reported in terms of salary payments, gross value added, output and firm profit

For the purposes of this analysis, a “knowledge worker” is defined as a full-time employee whose work relies heavily on digital tools and consists primarily of non-repetitive, intellectual labor and problem solving as opposed to physical labour. Skilled-task workers, researchers, educators, analysts, managers, IT staff, executives and professionals are all examples of knowledge workers.

The model contains two core assumptions:

- **Recovery time:** The time taken for knowledge workers to return to core activities following a distraction from different sources, including emails and meetings. The baseline assumptions in the model are based on findings from the literature.
- **Assumptions on the share of time on activities considered unproductive:** The model allows for certain activities considered to be a distraction to nonetheless enable a degree of productive work. As such, only a proportion of the time spent on these activities is treated as unproductive. For meetings, the unproductive share of time is drawn from survey findings. For work-related emails, messages and personal activities, assumptions have been derived based on findings from literature.

In addition to these core assumptions, others are used in the model. These have been derived from survey findings and are used to estimate the total time lost to distractions in the workplace. They include:

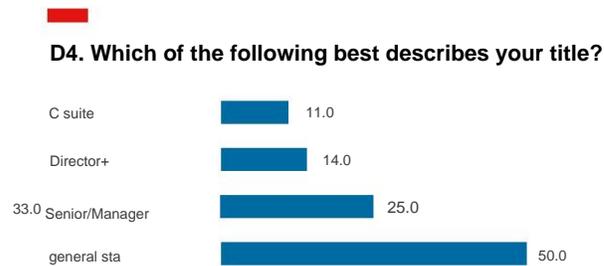
- **Assumptions on time spent on different activities:** This captures the total time spent on different activities during a working day (both productive and unproductive), including meetings, emails, messages and personal activities. Any remaining time during an eight-hour working day is assumed to be spent on core activities.
- **Assumptions on the frequency of activities:** This captures the number of times different activities are performed during a working day, including meetings and emails.

In some cases, these assumptions are specific to different sectors and/or different levels of seniority (including general staff and non-general staff).

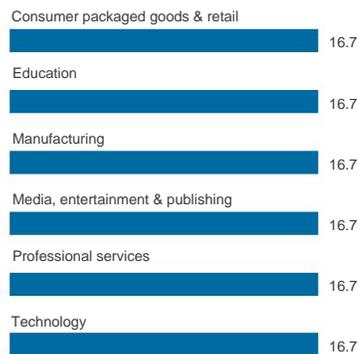
Appendix II: Survey results

All figures represent % of respondents

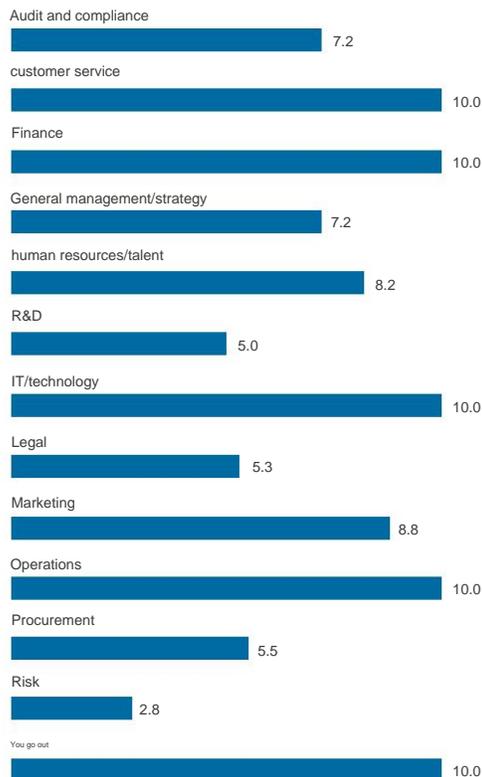
Figures may not add up to 100% in some cases due to rounding or because more than one option could be selected



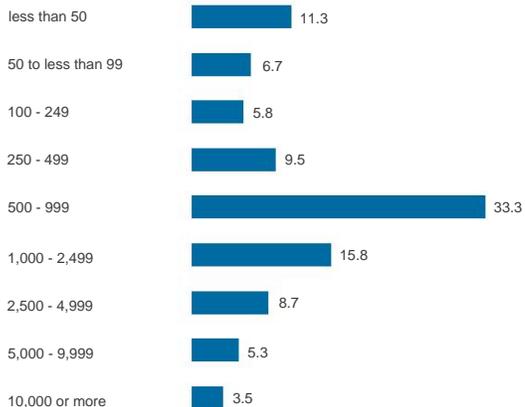
D2. What is your organization's primary industry?



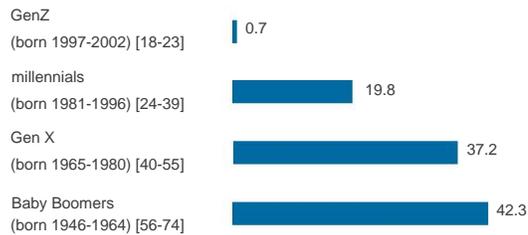
D5. What is your main functional role?



D3. How many employees work for your organization globally?

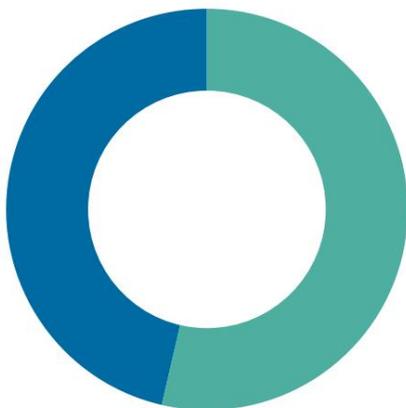


D6. In what year were you born?

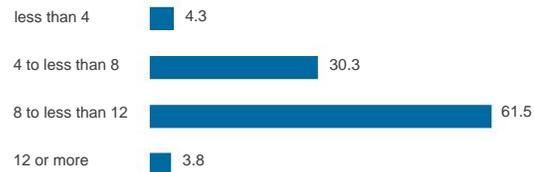


D7. Respondent gender

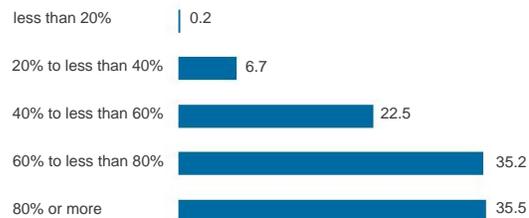
Male 53.8 Female 46.2



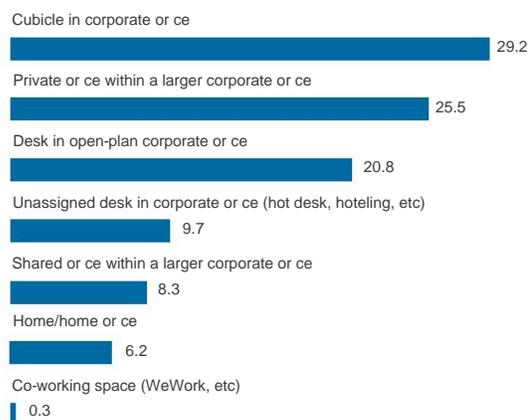
Q1. On a typical workday, how many hours a day do you spend at work (including working remotely)?



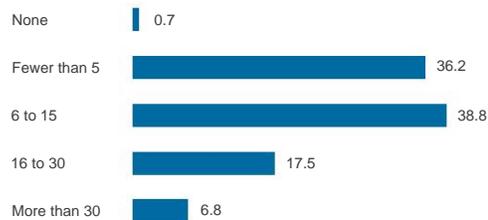
Q2. On a typical workday, what overall percentage of your working hours do you devote to productive work?



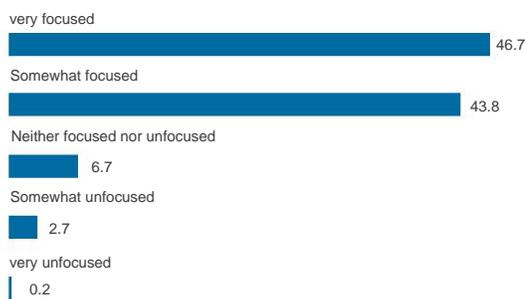
Q3. What is your primary venue for work?



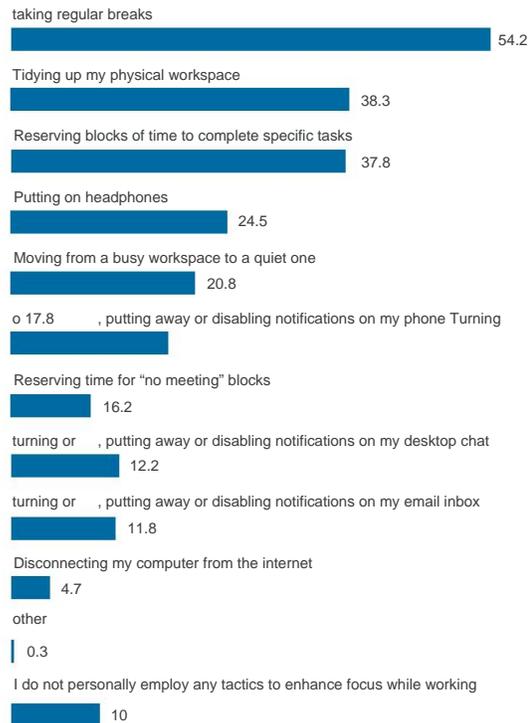
Q4. On a typical workday, how many people do you need to interact with (both in-person and virtually) in order to do your primary job?



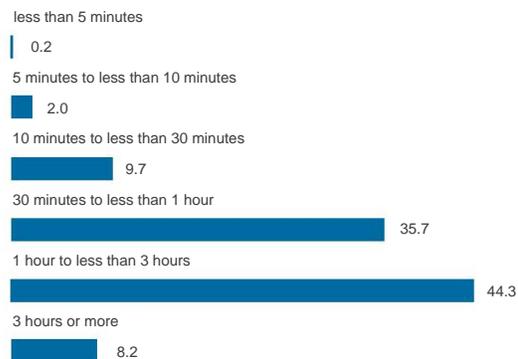
Q5. How focused do you typically feel while working?



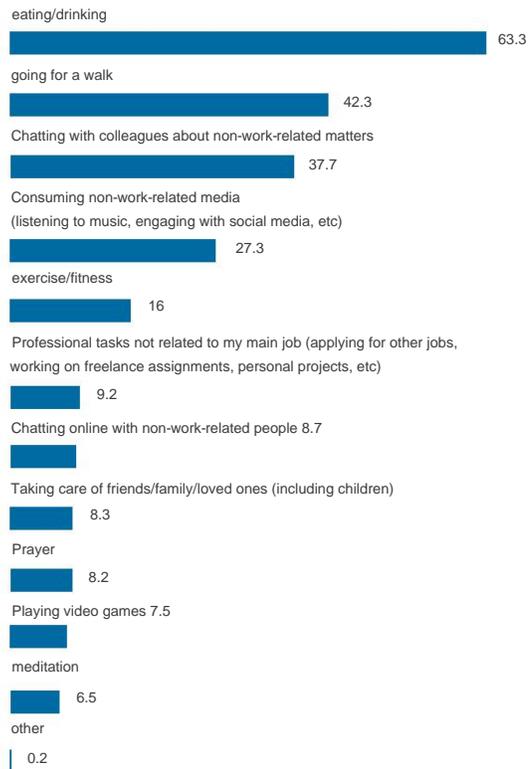
Q6. Which of the following tactics do you personally employ to enhance focus while working?



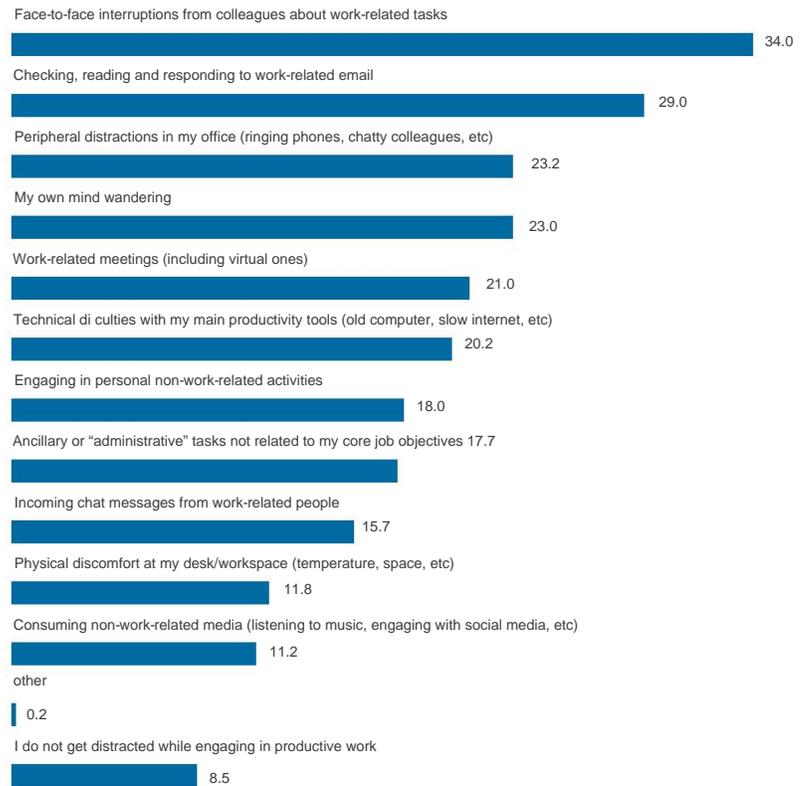
Q7. On a typical workday, what is the average length of time you typically spend focused on any given piece of work without any break or distraction?



Q8. What are the main activities you do during the workday to take breaks from work?



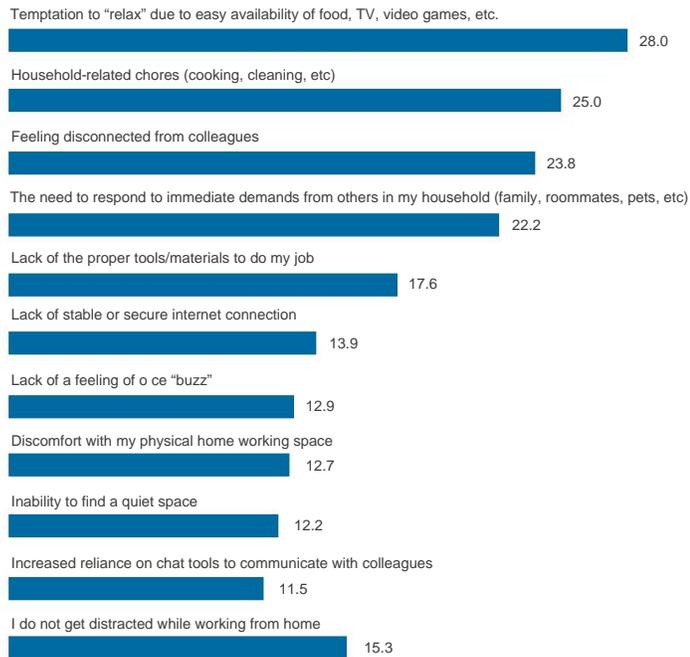
Q10. Which of the following most distracts you from engaging in productive work?



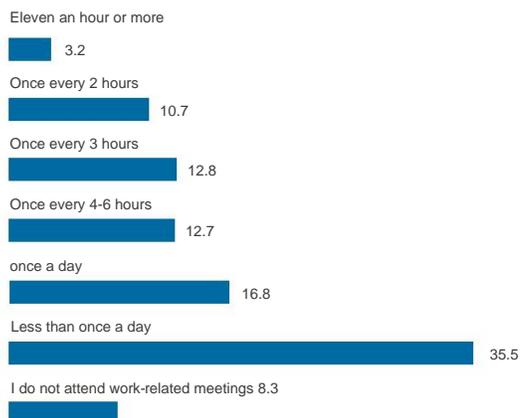
Q9. If you typically work from home, or have been working from home more recently due to the Covid-19 outbreak, do you feel more or less focused than when you work in an office environment?



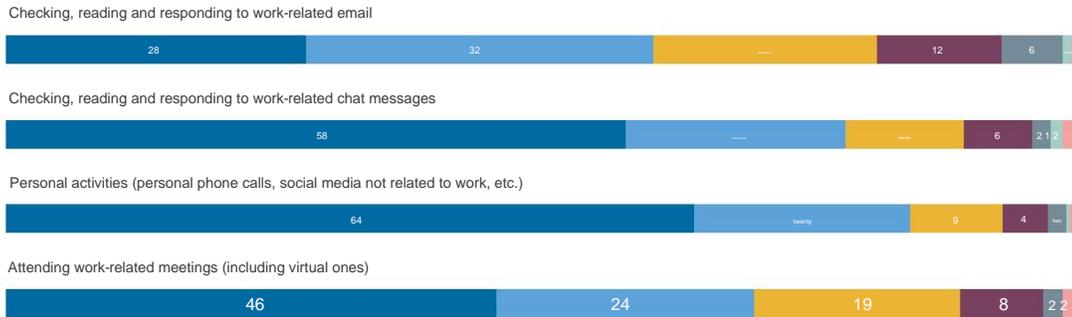
Q11. Which of the following most distracts you from engaging in productive work specifically in a work-from-home context?



Q12. On a typical workday, how often do you attend work-related meetings (including virtual ones)?

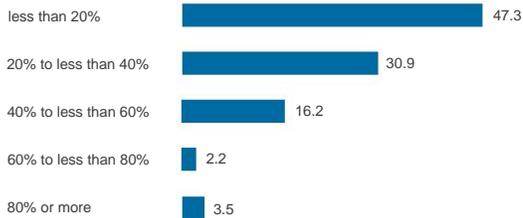


Q13. On a typical workday, how many hours per day do you spend doing the following activities?

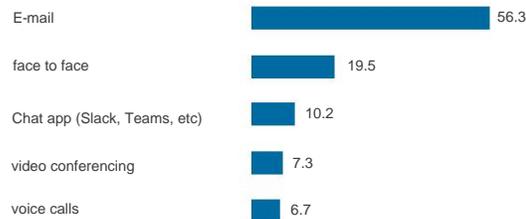


Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

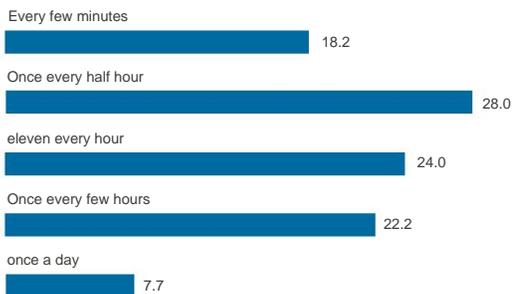
Q14. On a typical workday, what share of the time you spend in meetings (including virtual ones) would you consider unnecessary (because the meeting is too long, you are not required to attend the meeting, etc)?



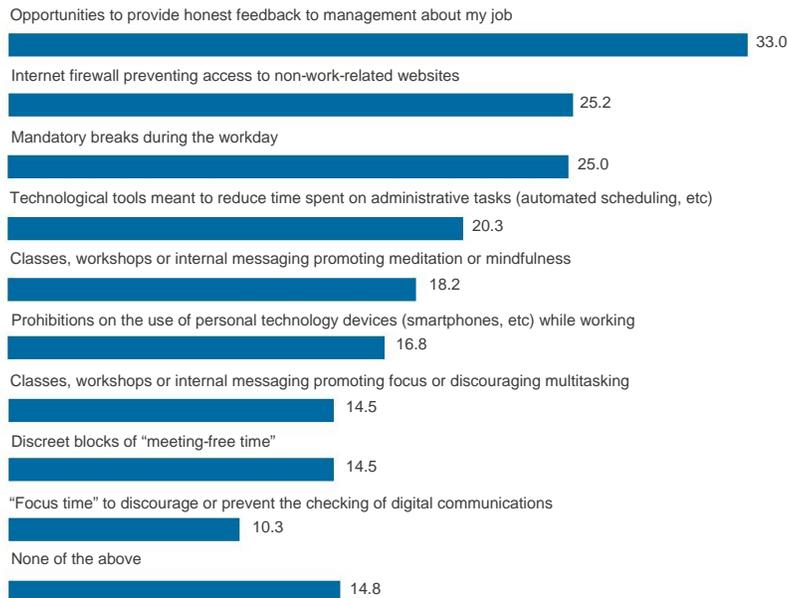
Q16. What is the primary method that people in your organization use to communicate for work purposes?



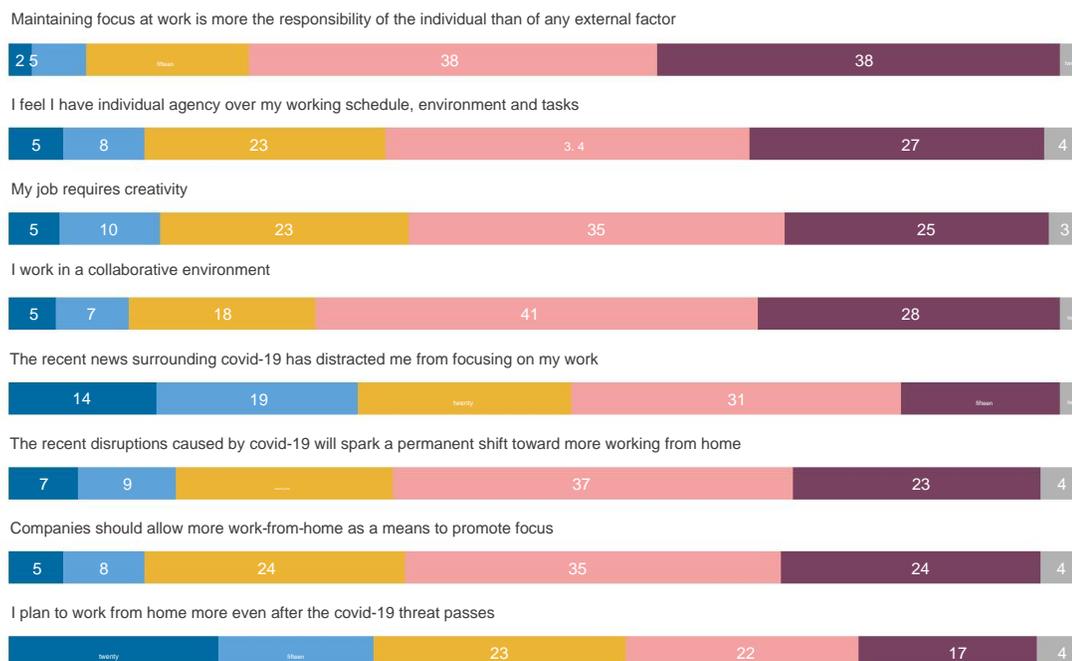
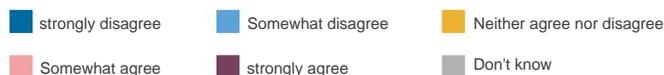
Q15. On a typical workday, how often do you read and respond to emails on average?



Q17. To the best of your knowledge, does your organization have any of the following policies or programs in place?



Q18. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?



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