

The way we work isn't working. How do we fix it?

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The hope was once that computers would help people to work smarter and more efficiently. With the advent of the network society, some 10 years ago, it was also believed that people's options would increase and thereby empower them.



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In addition, knowledge and innovations would circulate much faster within a network society and thus realise its potential. In essence, technology would reduce, or even eliminate, the friction between issues and solutions. Also, by collaborating effectively together, one would think that people could achieve new heights whilst eliminating old and existing management structures. This would mean they would no longer be restricted by layers of management, hierarchy or bureaucracy.

But things have turned out very differently; people are certainly not working smarter or more efficiently. On the contrary, rather than working less, tech has actually contributed to us working more and without the correspondingly higher productivity.

This is especially problematic when one considers that an increasing percentage of the employed labour force is engaged day in, day out with knowledge work. And despite clearly comprehending what is exactly meant by knowledge work or how one can do that work in a way that's smart.

Knowledge workers

Knowledge workers have become slaves to their computers, rather than their computer being a user-friendly, efficient tool that's at their service. For working with screens, we have developed a kind of Stockholm syndrome. The computer claims our attention, focus and the cognitive part of our brain; and all the while we are drowning in information.

Let's assume the definition of 'knowledge worker' is someone that spends at least 4-5 hours a day in front of a computer. Microsoft says that an average knowledge worker spends 240 hours a year — or 6 working weeks — just retrieving information. The mindboggling truth is that organisations have spent decades investing in ever newer information

technology, and yet knowledge workers' access to easily accessible information is worse than ever.

Instead of providing the expected bridge between people and ideas, IT has turned out to be a growing obstacle to it.



Recognise the era of knowledge workers

Martijn Aslander 3 May 2018



70s office mentality

We have forgotten the I in IT, the focus is too much on the technology and too little on what knowledge workers need in terms of information. It should be easy to find, organise, filter, share, produce, store and publish — and not in minutes but seconds.

This is because we have housed our online information capital in an office environment, still largely based on what existed in the 1970s. For example, the folders, subfolders and documents in Office 365. In many organisations, people have no information awareness, no vision about information.

Instead of being organised smartly, information is still presented in a largely document-centric way. Most probably, we could have solved the corona crisis far earlier had everyone been able to immediately find the right information.

Another problem is that top management in most organisations have no idea about the many possibilities that technology offers. They have outsourced thinking about IT decisions to a single chief technology officer or chief data officer. Not only management teams, but board members, HR professionals and other stake holders all conveniently assume that everything to do with technology is the domain of the IT department.

While in practice, the IT department is mainly concerned with security, ensuring backups and replacing hardware and software. That's far too limited. And in many organisations, the familiar complaints about 'our IT legacy systems' fall on deaf ears. In short, technology is not on the conscious radar of top management.

This is a major concern, as they are the people responsible for budgets and decisions regarding technology choices.

Continuously interrupted

A second factor is that knowledge workers are increasingly harassed by emails, notifications and other pop-up messages that continually break their concentration. So they feel increasingly busy, while at the same time being less and less able to get to the core of their job - the particular analytical work for which they were originally hired.

Cal Newport rightly makes a plea in his book *Liberated!* for giving space to 'deep work' - concentrated work for which you need time and rest, so that creativity and original thinking can flourish. But we rarely get that time due to the many distractions. And this comes at the cost of our productivity, creativity and ultimately, our health.



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Though we increasingly work in self-managing teams and other horizontal work structures, many employees are used to looking to their boss, and to listening to the messages and signals coming from the group to which they belong. They are governed by old mechanisms: a message from the community, especially from your boss, is difficult to ignore.

Mails and other messages must be quickly checked 'between tasks', seriously disrupting one's concentration. The more frequently you check your mail, the more others control your working life. All that checking uses up a lot of storage capacity in our prefrontal cortex, meaning we're less able to focus on the deep tasks in our work.

The more often you are disturbed as a knowledge worker by questions and comments, the more likely it is you'll no longer be able to do your actual work at all. The brain must be regularly rested: a stressed-out chicken lays no eggs.

Lack of digital fitness

A third aspect is how the employees themselves function: most of them lack 'digital fitness', a concept that we can break down into five pillars.

1. **Digital awareness:** the impact of the network- and information society, where technology plays an important role, is enormous, and brings with it new rules. Digital awareness is about what this requires of us as people and organisations in terms of knowledge levels, attitude and behaviour. And how we should organise things differently where necessary.
2. **Digital hygiene:** in effect an extension of social hygiene. Employees should agree, preferably at team level, what digital tools they should use, when and how. As well as how to clean up their digital clutter, prevent digital scams, best organise backups or handle passwords.
3. **Digital skills:** an estimated 90% of computer users need to brush up on their digital skills. This will save a lot of time and so increase effectiveness, sparing people a lot of digital stress and freeing up hundreds of hours a year.
4. **Personal knowledge management:** the latest generations of digital tools let employees 'capture' their knowledge much faster and share it more effectively with colleagues. An application like Notion, an online whiteboard like Miro, or note-apps like Evernote and Roam Research are all tools that help you 'liquify' your knowledge.
5. **Personal growth through technology:** most knowledge workers want to continue developing themselves, preferably through lifelong learning. This contributes to and enhances their sustainable employability, and technology can really help here.

The relative importance of the various pillars varies per knowledge worker, depending on their position, role and responsibilities. So, while for a programmer, digital skills will outweigh digital awareness, the opposite is true for their CEO.

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Farren Roper 5 Mar 2018





Improving digital fitness

For example, by letting employees develop effective agreements at team level, about when they can best use which digital tools for what purposes and in what ways — preferably agreed unanimously. And check regularly whether new, better digital tools have come onto the market.

Have detailed discussions about this within the team each month and draw up a digital work manifesto. In addition, given the increasing speed of change, it's a good idea not to set anything in stone but to go for temporary solutions that are easy to adapt and improve. In that respect, we can learn from programmers, who refer to the open development phase of their programmes as being in a 'permanent beta state'.

Wrong or limited use of our digital tools, combined with the proliferation of mails, notifications and other distractions, has overloaded our brains. But people don't dare to raise this issue within organisations, so that the focus and budget goes to the wrong approach to dealing with the fallout.

It's high time we broke this taboo because in practice, information and communication flows increasingly falter and have far-reaching consequences. Knowledge workers that suffer from work stress are more likely to have a burnout, and look forward less and less to opening their laptops at the start of a working day.

We suffer from an overload of information that is inadequately filtered. Over the long term, this is dangerous and expensive: knowledge workers will temporarily or permanently disengage.

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