How To: Foster Flow (Instead of Distraction) In Your Workplace

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: HR Risk and Employment Practices

When was the last time a work task occupied your full attention? When you looked up and found that an hour or more had passed? This elusive state of being immersed in something, feeling creative and productive, is called “flow.” It’s difficult to find in today’s workplaces, with constant interruptions from various devices and other humans in your office, at home, or online. But you can cultivate flow and create an environment that helps your employees find flow, too. Here’s what you need to know about flow and how to create it.

Set the conditions so you can single-task.

You can’t remain in flow for any length of time with interruptions. Set expectations and boundaries for how team members can take part in focused work. Let employees know when it’s OK to log off messaging apps and email for focused work, and when it’s not. Share the work of positive psychologist Mihály Csikszentmihályi, who pioneered the concept of flow. Explain why it’s helpful to take advantage of focused work. Managers, demonstrate the concept: block time on your calendar for focused work, let employees know when and why you’ll be unavailable, and share later how you spent your focused work time. This can be the green light employees need to log off of email and messaging apps and dive into something.

Choose the right task.

If you hate running payroll reports with the fire of a thousand suns, your mind will find distractions when you do it, whether you turn off your phone or not. For focused work, choose a task you typically enjoy, and one that’s important to your job. Choose something that’s challenging, but not impossible. If the task is too far outside your skill level or comfort zone, you could get stuck. Make a date on your calendar for focused work, and let your anticipation for it build.

Choose the right time and place.

Moving from the typical location where you most often work signals your body that something different is happening. That can help trigger a flow state. Maybe all you can do is move from your couch to a chair, or to a different chair in your office. That’s fine. The important thing is to relocate your body for focused work, and move back to your usual spot when you step back into your routine. If you do your best work before 10 am, don’t schedule focused work at 3 pm. If you work in the office and clients come in and out all day on Wednesdays, don’t schedule focused work then.

Focus.

Once you’ve set the conditions for focused work, made space, and minimized distractions…you have to focus! If your mind wanders or you grow restless, just bring your attention back to the task at hand. Do this as many times as it takes. If you’ve practiced meditation, it’s like that—but if you haven’t meditated, the underlying principle is simple: A great session doesn’t mean your mind never wanders, it means you bring your attention

back to the subject again and again. No one will grade you!

Repeat.

For many of us, seeking flow can feel intimidating or scary. We spend much of our lives on autopilot, dashing off immediate responses. Sometimes it’s uncomfortable to let one thing take up space in our mind and go where it leads us. But when you reach flow, even for a few minutes, it can feel exhilarating, and produce creative, new ideas and outcomes that are hard to achieve any other way. If you find pursuing flow difficult or disorienting at first, keep trying. Celebrate the weeks when flow comes freely, and learn what you can from the weeks when it doesn’t. The more you pursue flow, the more it will pursue you.

Resources

- Nine Steps to Achieving Flow in Your Work – Greater Good Magazine
- 6 Tips to Harness the Power of Flow State at Work – Asana