

Making Space to Focus at Work



Focus work is any task that requires sustained attention and mental effort to complete—from reading highly detailed reports or text in a foreign language to absorbing new concepts in a group training session. When people can get their focus work done with ease, their work is better, they feel valued, they're more engaged, and they're happier.

The best person to decide what's needed for focus work to be successful is the person performing the work—there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution. At times, we need to focus alone and, at other times, we need to focus together. Creating a culture that supports and understands the varied forms of focus work, and creating spaces in the workplace that allow employees to proactively manage distractions, interference, and interruptions help create a workplace that meets employees' focus work needs.

Research in Haworth's Human Performance Lab shows that when visual and auditory distractions and interference occur, focus work performance declines, on average, between:

3%

(easier focus work disrupted by interference) and

23%

(deliberate focus work disrupted by distractions)

Source: [Haworth White Paper, Why We Can't Focus at Work, 2019](#)

What is Focus?

Also called “flow,” focus happens when we are able to devote our attention to a single task and become fully absorbed in that activity.

Why We Get Distracted

Our brains are like prediction engines. In order to help us navigate the world, our brains continuously gather and assess information about ourselves, our immediate environments, and our place in them via our senses—and much of this information-gathering happens outside of our control and under our awareness. When the information our senses are gathering fits neatly into what our brains predicted we would experience, we pay less attention to the outside world, and it becomes easier to achieve states like focus and flow.

When, however, something unpredicted occurs, our brains are designed to bring that information to our conscious awareness—and our attention is captured. This is a feature, not a bug. Unpredicted information like a fire alarm or ambulance siren can be a good reason for us to shift attention from the task at hand. Unfortunately, our brains can’t distinguish between emergencies like this and irrelevant distractions without bringing the information to our conscious awareness. In the modern open-concept office, where a lack of barriers has made auditory and visual distractions abundant, it is no wonder that one of employees’ top complaints is an inability to complete focus work.

3 Culprits That Sabotage Focus Work



Distractions

When unexpected off-task information captures our attention.

Just because it’s unexpected, doesn’t mean it’s not beneficial to the person—even if it affects task performance.



Interference

When off-task information gets confused with task information

Unhelpful to the task, but might prompt switching to a new, more important task.



Interruptions

When a distraction or interference pulls us off a task entirely to start a new task.

Oftentimes, these are also useful and necessary.

How We Work Best

Humans work best in deliberate bursts. This is true for focus work activities like intense teaming, and it is also true for individual deep work. Why? Because our attention and mental resources are finite.

Just like physical muscles that get tired after a certain number of repetitive motions, our brains need to take a break to recharge after expending a certain amount of energy on controlling and sustaining our attention.

Since we must take breaks from our focus work anyway, it’s best to allow these breaks to flow from the needs of the work at hand and the choices of the people involved.

By allowing people to continue to focus on a single task until they reach completion or come to a natural break, we enable them to make the best use of their time and mental resources, and we avoid the well-documented costs of fragmented work and frequent task-switching.

Well-designed workplaces therefore are ones that offer choices to employees who spend the day engaging in a variety of activities, from individualized problem-solving to intense teaming to moments of restoration and connecting with colleagues. A holistic approach can boost employee satisfaction and productivity by incorporating variety, choice, control, legibility, and recharging for well-being. By offering employees legible environments that communicate where interruptions and distractions are welcome and where they are not, and the flexibility to make choices about where, when, and how to work, employers absolutely can help people escape distractions and improve focus.

A few seconds to a full minute is how long it takes on average person to re-engage with a task after a distraction.

Solutions

Culture

Cultivate a culture that supports the need for productive focus work:

- Enhance predictability through social norms that insulate focus work areas from distractions, interference, and interruptions
- Set and share agendas for meetings to ensure group focus work remains on-task
- Allow employees to block calendars and selectively mute technology to better manage their time and attention
- Continually hone collective understanding of team and individual workstyles

Built Environment

Create flexible and legible spaces that allow employees to proactively manage auditory and visual distractions:

- Insulate focus work areas from distractions through floorplate and adjacency features (active zones separated from quiet zones)
- Create visual barriers (high-backed furniture, living walls, storage solutions)
- Create auditory barriers (sound-absorbing carpet and ceiling tiles, sound-blocking walls, electronic sound masking, niche spaces such as privacy booths)

Giving People Control Over Their Workspaces

In returning to the workplace on a more regular basis, many workers feel stressed about the possibility of losing the choices and autonomy they had while working from home. Research suggests one of the best ways to increase resilience to stressors in the workplace is to give people more control over their work environment.

This control can be built into the physical workplace through:

- Adjustable lighting, furniture, privacy screens, and climate control settings
- Legible environments that make the possibilities clear
- Offering a range of options, such as high-privacy and low-privacy spaces
- User-friendly processes for making adjustments

Want to learn more?

For more information on creating spaces that appropriately insulate focus work for both individuals and teams, please contact your local Haworth sales representative.