

Redefining productivity in a flexible working world

by AMANDA WALLIS

Lockdown was a crash-course in flexible working for many of us. In a matter of days, thousands of New Zealanders were forced to pull together a slapdash attempt at a home office with limited resources (and sometimes questionable ergonomic support).

We learned how to juggle team meetings, emails, and business-as-usual from the dining room table. And, we adapted when it came to balancing the tightrope between work (projects, emails, online meetings...) and home (kids, exercise, more online meetings...). Possible back pain aside, what can we take away from our time in our lockdown home offices when it comes to flexible working, productivity, and energy management?

DOES FLEXIBLE WORKING WORK?

[A recent study by the University of Otago](#) found that the majority of New Zealanders reported being equally or more productive while working from home during lockdown (73%), and nine out of ten (89%) wanted to continue to work from home after the lockdown in some capacity. Other research conducted in this area paints a similarly rosy picture. Flexible working is associated with higher [job satisfaction](#), [wellbeing](#), and [productivity](#), among numerous other benefits.

WHAT NEXT FOR FLEXIBLE WORKING?

Why then, do we continue to define productivity by hours in the office, rather than what we do with the time we have? One way of maximising productivity while working flexibly comes with focusing on energy management rather than time management. Instead of chunking your tasks by regular workday hours (i.e. Task A in the morning, Task B in the afternoon), for example, consider how you might design your day around when and how you work best? Plus, continue conversations with your team about what helps and what hinders productivity?

HOW TO MANAGE ENERGY NOT TIME

The idea of managing energy rather than time isn't a new one. Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz highlighted the importance of energy management in their seminal paper, "[The Making of a Corporate Athlete](#)". More recently, Flip Brown, author of "[Balanced effectiveness at work: How to enjoy the fruits of your labor without driving yourself nuts](#)", recommends tracking energy levels at regular times during a workday to help set your own schedule for doing your best work. Ideally, we want to schedule our more difficult or complex work for times when our energy levels are higher and the more routine or less demanding tasks for lower energy times.

How do we go about figuring this out? A strategy that has originated from mindfulness research is to pay attention during the day to tasks you find energy-enhancing versus tasks you find energy-depleting. It can be useful to record this on a piece of paper or spreadsheet. Once you know which tasks fall into which category, you can plan which times of day to tackle them. For example, you might schedule energising tasks for times of the day your energy levels tend to drop, perhaps after lunch or later in the day. It can also be helpful to plan recovery time before or after tasks that are energy-depleting for you. See our [previous posts](#) for recovery ideas.

Managing our focus of attention is also a key strategy for managing energy. Choosing where to focus our attention is critical and this means reducing activities that interrupt attention:

- When concentrating on a piece of work, turn off email or limit access to it (e.g. check only at specific points in the day).
- Manage the work environment to control distractions related to open-plan working (e.g. go to a quiet room regularly).
- Avoid the urge to multi-task.

It is also possible to develop better concentration and focus skills. Mindfulness or meditation practice is one effective way to do this. Check out [these ideas](#) for simple mindfulness exercises you can try at work.

We encourage you to take the time to reflect on how you work best. Working from home may not be for everyone; if you work best in the office, that's great. Try to be in tune with the factors that improve your performance, and tailor your working day around that, as far as is possible in terms of the work you do and the people you work with. For some people, that might mean tweaking the script for the 'normal' work hours in favour of a routine that is more in tune with your energy levels (e.g. working earlier or later in the day), while also suiting your team.

Most importantly, take the benefits from what you learned as you worked from home during the lockdown. If you, or your team, were equally or more productive during this time and found that it benefited your wellbeing, consider how to integrate flexible working and energy management into your workplace moving forward. Share ideas with colleagues and, if you are leading teams, facilitate conversations and experiments with your team members to support them to work effectively *and* flexibly.

