

Excerpt with Chapter 1: The "Human" Part of Human Capital

WORK --- WITHOUT --- WALLS

An Executive's Guide to
Attention Management, Productivity,
and the Future of Work



MAURA NEVEL THOMAS

Also by Maura Nevel Thomas

*Personal Productivity Secrets: Do What You Never Thought Possible with
Your Time and Attention...and Regain Control of Your Life!*

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and the Future of Work**

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*This book is dedicated to
the CEOs and leaders with whom I've worked throughout the life
of my business, and specifically in my speaking for Vistage International.
I appreciate the Chairs who have invited me into their groups,
and the staff at Vistage headquarters who coordinate the engagements.
These clients have been invaluable to me in shaping and refining
the contents of this book.*

*It is also dedicated to my husband, Shawn,
whose endless support, patience, love, and partnership
make every part of my life easier and more enjoyable.*

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Introduction

CORPORATE America has been experiencing a shift. In some ways it seems like the business environment is changing quickly, but in reality this shift has been gradual. In fact, Peter Drucker, widely recognized as the founder of modern management, predicted this shift as early as the 1950s, but the realization of his predictions has taken decades to manifest. The shift is both endlessly discussed and almost completely ignored. The shift to which I'm referring is the shift from industrial work to knowledge work.

In the Industrial Age, work happened within the walls of a factory. Today, knowledge work is the product of our brains. Increasingly, that work has left the confines of an office. Companies have moved to cubicle environments and open floor plans. Often the work is done outside the company walls entirely because technology advancements allow knowledge workers to do their work anywhere, at any time. Traditional work relationships are changing, with freelance and contract workers making up over 40 percent¹ of the workforce, and more work happening outside the office than ever before. In addition to the loss of so many physical walls, the metaphorical walls between work time and personal time—and between work spaces and personal spaces—are “crumbling.”

While technologists have been capitalizing on this shift for years, individuals are struggling to adapt their lives at work, and corporations are struggling to adapt their policies and practices, to this shift. The phrase I use to sum up the

issues and challenges inherent in this shift to knowledge work is “Work Without Walls.” While the phrase “knowledge work” is common vernacular, the implications for workers and the impact on company culture is a problem vexing companies of all sizes throughout the United States.

What Is Knowledge Work?

Knowledge work, for the purposes of this book, is defined as work for which “thinking” is the raw material. The products of knowledge work are communications, information, and complex decisions. In technology development, much thought has been given to automating processes and imposing structure to create more efficiency in knowledge work, and larger companies are slowly beginning to exhibit some changes, making news for their nonconformity. However, little attention has been given in smaller companies to adapt to this monumental change, or to help individuals navigate the new realities of work, the new tools available to them, and the increasingly blurred lines between “business and personal” and “work and downtime.”

Although “institutional” productivity is important, the worker as a human being is a critical piece of the equation. If “thinking” is a raw material of knowledge work, then the biases in which that thinking is framed are relevant. These biases are formed by how individual knowledge workers feel about their tasks and their jobs overall and by how well the tool they use to produce the thinking—their brain—is performing. These two things mean that the workers’ personal well-being should be attended to. In fact, studies show² that a key skill among high-performing executives is the ability to cultivate successful relationships, where leaders are seen as genuinely caring about the well-being of their colleagues.

However, there is a particular kind of company that seems to operate with the assumption that workers are disposable and a grueling work environment where people regularly cry at their desks are requirements to stay competitive and increase profits.³ If this is the type of company you’re running, then this book—which is based on the belief that healthy, happy, and productive employees are better for individuals, companies, and society at large—is not for you.

Types of Knowledge Work

There is an argument to be made that there are different types of knowledge work, and I would agree. For example, there is knowledge work for which the primary outputs are specifically the product of thinking. Writers, designers, and other creative types; senior executives in charge of ideas and strategy; and software developers are some examples of this type of knowledge worker. A broader definition of knowledge work includes more task-oriented positions, such as administrative staff. These roles still have more in common with knowledge work than manufacturing or other industrial work, so when I refer to knowledge workers, I'm including office workers in general.

Symptoms of the Shift to Knowledge Work

There are many symptoms and challenges inherent in this shift, including:

- The unique needs of knowledge work with regard to optimal functioning of our brains, such as downtime, nutrition, and overall well-being, and the attitudes and perspectives of the workers.
- The increasing importance of attention, simultaneous with the rise of endless distractions.
- The proliferation of communication and the nature of urgency that surrounds it.
- The growing importance of downtime.
- The office environment, such as open offices, privacy, noise, and collaboration.
- The rise of work outside offices, raising issues related to both the logistics of telecommuting and the expansion of work hours.
- Quantification and measurement of knowledge work.

- Corporate culture as it relates to the support or the detriment of all of these issues.

Because we are still in the midst of the shift and don't yet have the benefit of hindsight, there is still much contradictory information. Pick up one business magazine and you'll read that telecommuting is the wave of the future. But then you'll see another article that argues that telecommuting is terrible for workers. Open-office floor plans have been both lauded as the "silver bullet" for optimal knowledge work (innovation) and derided as the worst business concept in decades. The issues are confusing, and without an understanding of each of the challenges identified in the preceding list, leaders are at risk of leaving to chance corporate culture, employee engagement, and ultimately, productivity.

The New Rules of Work

There are new realities of our work without walls that compound this confusion. Contrary to popular belief, the following are *not* characteristics of a productive knowledge worker:

- Being available for work 24/7/365
- Maximum face time in the office
- Working on vacation
- Multitasking
- "I can sleep when I'm dead" attitude
- Busyness as a "badge of honor"

In the world of work without walls, "work-life balance" not only exists but also is critical. A result of today's work environment is that too many workers are exhausted. Exhausted workers mean exhausted companies, exhausted families, exhausted communities, and an exhausted world. The bottom line for busy professionals struggling to regain control over their lives, and for the companies that employ them, is that EXHAUSTION IS OPTIONAL, and it's not conducive to quality outcomes for knowledge work.

I believe that the way we look at work needs an overhaul. What it means to be productive is subjective and situational, but the ideas

in this book are founded on my belief, from more than two decades of experience, that the individual productivity of a knowledge worker is based on the extent to which that person makes progress on his or her *significant* results in any given time frame. The productivity of a knowledge worker in the context of the larger organization must take a person's level of engagement and happiness into account. If a worker meets deadlines, produces superior results for the organization, and achieves objectives, but hates her job, is she productive? This situation is not sustainable and would likely lead to burnout, disengagement, or a departure, any of which would ultimately lower the overall productivity of the organization.

Goals of This Book

The purpose of my work is to teach busy, driven knowledge workers to regain control of their lives and work so that they can live a life of choice, and joyfully and enthusiastically offer their unique gifts (their significant results) to the world every day. It's those gifts that will power the world into a successful future and that will allow us to realize the promise of our individual and collective potential. This book is my latest effort in support of that purpose.

My goal in the following pages is to help leaders by taking an in-depth look at the new world of work without walls and at the specific issues that are reshaping the modern workplace. With each, I'll help you sort out the latest research and give recommendations based on my experience in the productivity industry. You'll come away with new understanding and fresh ideas that will make a real difference in your company.

In every trend addressed in this book, distraction is a common theme. The problem of distraction has many layers: the distraction itself, the response to the distraction, and the individual's habits as they relate to the distraction. These nuances have been lost in the majority of the studies and articles related to these issues, but each component of distraction has its own causes and consequences, and needs to be addressed individually and thoroughly for a complete picture of knowledge worker productivity and how to improve it.

A great companion to this book at the individual level is my first book, *Personal Productivity Secrets: Do what you never thought possible with your time and attention...and regain control of your life!*

I'd love to know how you put the information in this book to use.
You can connect with me through any of the following channels:

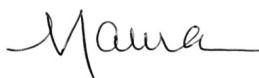
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Thanks for reading!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Maura".

MAURA THOMAS

Speaker, Trainer, Author

Founder, RegainYourTime.com

Features of This Book

THE following features and icons are used in this book to draw your attention to some of the most important and useful information and some of the most valuable tips, insights, and advice that can help you unlock the productivity at your organization.

Sidebars

Sidebars Look Like This

Sidebars provide additional information about topics related to the nearby text.

Callout Text

Callout text, example shown below, is used to emphasize text.

Callout text looks like this. The callout emphasizes important text.

Margin Notes

Margin notes like this one will highlight some important piece of information, elaborate more fully on a point, or direct you to other relevant information.

←
Margin notes look like this.

Highlighted Text

Highlighted text adds emphasis to important information.

Each chapter includes a comprehensive “Institutional Changes” section which contains my recommendations for changes at the corporate level to address the issues raised in that chapter.

Action Items

Also included is an “Action Items” section designed to provide very specific steps that you can take.

Takeaways You Can Tweet

Also at the end of each chapter is a section called “Takeaways You Can Tweet” that contains a short summary of many of the important points in the chapter. These tips each contain fewer than 140 characters, so that they are easy to digest, but also so that you can conveniently share the information with your followers on Twitter or on other social media outlets. I'd love to know if you are finding the information worthy of sharing, so please include #workwithoutwalls and/or my username, @mnthomas, or otherwise tag me if you have room.

Chapter 1

THE “HUMAN” PART OF HUMAN CAPITAL

Knowledge-worker productivity requires that the knowledge worker is both seen and treated as an “asset” rather than a “cost.” It requires that knowledge workers want to work for the organization in preference to all other opportunities.⁴

—**PETER F. DRUCKER**

AN underappreciated difference between knowledge workers and manufacturing workers is that their brains are the primary tool of their trade, and thinking is the primary raw material. The race for talent is increasingly a competitive one. “Skilled labor” is a media buzzword that encapsulates the situation, and “burnout” is a catch-all term for the results of neglecting this situation. No recruiters or hiring managers ask interviewees about how many emails they can answer in a day, how many hours they routinely work, or among how many things can they divide their attention. They ask about their critical-thinking skills, knowledge, and experience. These qualities give a company a competitive advantage, and the “productivity” of the individual is

the extent to which a person can bring these characteristics to his or her job. Yet companies are ignoring major components of nurturing and growing this advantage. Efficiency and productivity require making the best use of the resources available. In the knowledge economy, the most important individual and corporate resources are neither time nor money, but body and mind.

There are several factors that have a daily and cumulative effect on staff well-being and performance, but these factors are typically left out of corporate engagement and wellness programs.

Corporate engagement initiatives are generally focused on outcomes such as collaboration, worker expectations, buy-in of the mission and vision, and commitment. Corporate wellness initiatives are typically focused on things like weight, blood pressure and cholesterol management, and smoking cessation. Although these programs are useful, they leave a gap in addressing productivity needs; one that could be viewed as “holistic well-being,” of which attention management is a core tenet. See Figure 1.1

MAXIMIZING KNOWLEDGE WORK

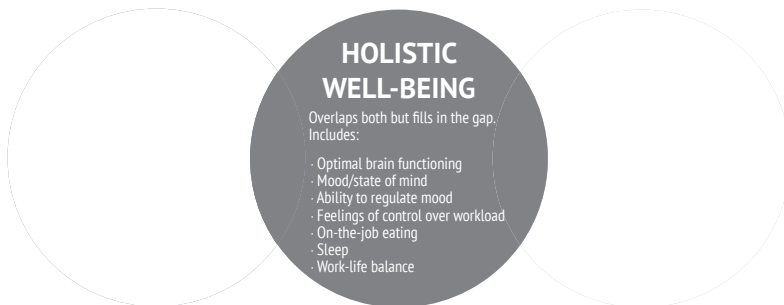


Figure 1.1. *Holistic Well-Being.*

Consider that 94 percent of leaders surveyed reported that the three states of mind that drive the greatest levels of effectiveness and performance are calm, happy, and energized.⁵ Also, a study done in

conjunction with the *Harvard Business Review* found that positive feelings about work correlated with higher engagement and higher profitability.⁶

In order to produce their best at work, knowledge workers are faced with a holistic well-being challenge to aid in feeling calm, happy, and energized. Work-life balance is a

critical component. This mental state is affected by many factors, and making small changes in the organization with this goal in mind can have a positive impact and avoid employee burnout. The company policies and practices that affect these issues typically come about without intention. Fortunately, this is a situation that is not difficult to correct.

Corporate wellness programs and engagement initiatives are great, but they still leave a gap in maximizing brain performance of knowledge workers. Not only does knowledge workers’ physical fitness affect their ability to bring their best to their work, but also their mental state and mental fitness do as well.

Closing the Gap of Holistic Well-Being

You can’t extend the day beyond twenty-four hours, but you can affect energy levels to improve outcomes in the same amount of time. As best-selling author and organizational psychologist Dr. Travis Bradberry writes, “Highly successful people don’t skip meals, sleep, or breaks in the pursuit of more, more, more. Instead, they view food as fuel, sleep as recovery, and breaks as opportunities to recharge in order to get even more done.”⁷ If corporate wellness programs focus on physical wellness, and corporate engagement programs focus on the employees’ relationship to their organization, the missing piece for knowledge worker productivity is every individual’s relationship with their brain (the physical functioning of the tangible organ) and their mind (the intangible outputs of brain functioning including feelings, thoughts, imagination, beliefs, and attitudes). Factors that directly affect the brain and mind include

- ▶ **Nutrition:** Including in-office eating and its effects on energy
- ▶ **Sleep:** Both quality and quantity

- **Control:** Perceived control over the details of work
- **State of mind and mindfulness:** The ability to manage one's state of mind.

Really, all the other subjects addressed in this book still indirectly affect the outputs of the brain and mind. As a leader, you can influence each of these factors.

Nutrition: Feed Employees' Success

Proper nutrition begins at home, but leadership can have a significant impact on performance factors during work hours for on-site employees. In addition to being damaging to health long term, energy roller coasters (usually caused by blood sugar highs and crashes) throughout the day are distracting and impact performance. You know that your team members are hardly at their best when fighting off the drowsy, foggy feeling associated with the crash after a sugar high. And science backs you up: studies show that people with better blood-sugar regulation perform better on cognitive tests than those with poor glucose regulation.⁸

Morning meetings often include foods high in carbohydrates and refined sugar that cause blood sugar to spike and then crash during the morning hours. Swapping bagels and pastries for egg sandwiches, breakfast tacos, or yogurt parfaits (protein-rich and low-glycemic foods) can help prevent wild swings in blood glucose. This is not only true for morning meetings but also for afternoon snacks as well. Healthy snacks offered in the break room can pay big dividends in supporting your team's energy management throughout the day. These can include baby carrots, hummus, whole wheat crackers, apple slices with peanut or other nut butter for dipping, cheese cubes or spreads, or all-natural nut bars. Invest in a filtered water source for the office, and consider stocking the fridge with flavored water drinks and natural, unsweetened teas instead of sodas, because water promotes proper hydration (another component of nutrition) and doesn't affect blood sugar. These suggestions are also useful to keep in mind for company conferences, off-site meetings, retreats, or any type of catered event.

Sleep: More Rest, More Productivity

Sleep deprivation is so widespread in the United States that the CDC considers it to be a public health problem,⁹ and its effects on performance, including impaired judgment, problem-solving, and plan execution, are well documented.¹⁰ When your employees feel tied to their devices—whether because they feel it’s necessary to get ahead or because they don’t know how to manage distractions—they might be having problems getting a good night’s sleep. In a survey done by *Harvard Business Review* based on my article about late-night emails (excerpted from this book), 55 percent of respondents said that late-night emailing affects their sleep and makes them less productive the next day.¹¹

More on this
in Chapter 2.

One way to combat the productivity drain caused by sleep deprivation is to get on board with napping at work. Everyone experiences natural fluctuations in energy throughout the day, and often a short, ten- to twenty-minute nap can be a great solution to improve performance for hours. Napping has been shown to increase alertness, improve learning and memory, increase creativity, boost productivity, improve mood, and decrease stress.¹²

Many successful companies have taken this information to heart by offering nap rooms (HubSpot, Zappos, Nike) and “energy pods” (Google, Huffington Post/AOL).¹³ If you’re a leader, encouraging your team members to enjoy a little shut-eye when they can, will lead to more productivity than pushing them to fill every minute with activity. Spread the word that napping is acceptable (and encouraged!) and that it’s a lot more effective than the sugar- or caffeine-loading habits that are ingrained in so many office cultures.

Control: Workflow Management and Mastering Distractions

When workers feel overwhelmed, buried by email, and in a state of always having way more to do than they can ever get done, feelings of exhaustion—and often futility—interfere with their enjoyment of their job. According to the American Institute of Stress, workers who

perceive they are subjected to high demands but have little control are at increased risk for cardiovascular disease.¹⁴ These feelings of stress and overload are also a recipe for staying trapped in reactive mode, because humans are motivated by achievement, and every little email message checked or instant message responded to creates a brief but appealing sense of accomplishment, like a tiny task that is mentally (or physically) ticked off a list.

Compounding the problem is that most workers don't have the skills to manage the complexity of their lives and work. Multiple digital distractions compete with multitasking tendencies and other human distractions for employees' increasingly taxed attention in the fast-paced knowledge workplace. Productivity is lower if employees are unable to control their attention because the constant barrage of communication and information offered by their technology too easily distracts them. Attention management is the antidote to distraction, and yet most business leaders still hold antiquated ideas of "time management" that were created in the days before handheld computers and omnipresent Internet connections. Consequently, corporate training is also framed in this outdated philosophy.

The solution to the problem of your team members feeling overwhelmed and exhausted is to give them workflow-management skills that include attention management. This is covered from a leadership perspective in chapter 2, and it's also the subject of my first book, *Personal Productivity Secrets: Do what you never thought possible with your time and attention...and regain control of your life!*

State of Mind and Mindfulness: A Pause Is Powerful

A fourth component of this holistic well-being challenge is state of mind and mindfulness, which are the result of a long and complex set of variables in addition to sleep, nutrition, and workflow management. Performance is affected by not only an individual's state of mind, but also by their ability to recognize and modify their state of mind.

Alexander Caillet, an organizational psychologist on the Georgetown University faculty, conducted research along with two colleagues on how state of mind affects performance. They found that "leaders with lower

states of mind, defined as frustrated, disappointed and tired, are aware of these limitations, but get trapped into repeating patterns.”¹⁵ In addition to biology, he offered two other suggestions for changing mental state: physiology and recognize/reframe/refocus. In an interview for WNY’s *Money Talking*, he says:

“The ability to stop, the ability to take a pause or to take a break, or to engage in breathing are actually ways that we can immediately shift into a quieter and clearer state of mind . . . calling out an emotion has the effect of reducing its intensity. Refocus your attention to another project. Reframe the situation by breaking it down into smaller parts that can be addressed independently.”¹⁶

Both of these are components of mindfulness, defined by *Psychology Today* as a state of attention to the present, where thoughts and feelings are observed objectively.¹⁷ Practicing mindfulness is a powerful way to learn to control and regulate one’s emotions, thought patterns, and behaviors. Once relegated to the fringes of culture, mindfulness is now widely recognized as a necessary business skill for knowledge workers and twenty-first century leaders.

Peter Drucker brought up the idea of mindfulness in business decades ago. He taught that deep self-knowledge was a foundational skill for leaders, and he wrote an entire book (*Managing Oneself*, Harvard Business Press, 2008) about his belief that managing yourself is necessary before you can successfully manage others.

Mindfulness in business was first embraced by Peter Drucker, and it is now in practice at Fortune 100 companies.

Drucker was ahead of his time. Recent research has shown that mindfulness can change your brain in positive ways,¹⁸ and yet executives who intentionally and strategically incorporate mindfulness into their business strategy, such as Rupert Murdoch, Oprah Winfrey, and Arianna Huffington, are still in the minority. While not yet common, mindfulness in business has, in fact, gone mainstream, with companies as diverse as Google, Aetna, General Mills, and Target all having built

extensive programs to foster mindful practices among their workers.¹⁹ Consider including training and education on mindfulness in your corporate development initiatives.

Another way to change state of mind is through exercise. Exercise not only optimizes brain function, but it also affects mood, anxiety, outlook, and attention. While important to mention in this context, I won't expound on that here because this is something typically addressed in wellness programs.

Be a Role Model

Making changes to the snacks in the office kitchen and adding some spots to rest don't require a radical corporate overhaul to implement. However, none of these will be as useful as they could be without leadership buy-in and modeling of the desired behaviors. The culture of an organization is set from the top. Be intentional about behavior outcomes you want to see, and then model those behaviors yourself, like reaching for water instead of sugary drinks, choosing protein-based meals for your catered meetings, and making use of the new nap room. Leading by example sets the stage for effective change, and will be a theme repeated throughout this book.

Work-Life Balance Is Crucial

Work-life balance is a very popular topic in the media, and I've been dismayed to see a trend in statements that "work-life balance doesn't exist." It's also been suggested that "work-life balance" has become "work-life blending." Perhaps these statements are the result of experts being contrarian for attention, but I reject the notion that balance is unachievable. Not only is it possible, but also it's necessary for productive and high-quality knowledge work.

Of course, the first question that must be addressed is, "What is meant by *balance*?" I define a *balanced* life as one that includes activities that nurture not only professional desires and personal pursuits but also

that puts an intentional focus on all aspects of well-being, contentment, and satisfaction, such as healthy introspection and analysis, strong social ties, hobbies, personal growth, and financial sustainability. The fact is that you can’t adequately pursue any of these areas if you spend the majority of your time working.

If balance is defined this way, it’s not hard to assess. Of course, it’s up to you to decide whether your life is in balance, but if you routinely work while doing recreational activities, even after putting in a full workday or a full workweek, then I would say your balance is off. Technology is useful when it allows you to *replace* in-office time by keeping tabs on work while you are somewhere else, such as a doctor’s office or your home. However, if your devices prolong your work time by promoting a situation where you are always somehow engaged in work, that’s when the technology becomes detrimental to balance.

Juggling Work and Personal Responsibilities

You might think that your Internet-connected smartphone creates a situation where you can both work *and* attend your child’s school play or soccer game, but I suggest that is simply a convenient narrative. At best, you’re making a halfway effort at both your work and your attention to your child, and at worst, being there without being present might be worse than not being there at all. Your children know when they have your attention versus when they don’t. And consider this regarding the struggle for presence amid technology between parents and children: If your children have to compete with your technology for your attention, and they lose, perhaps *their* single-minded focus on technology is simply their consolation prize.

When technology lengthens your workday—for example, when you come home from a full day at work, have dinner with your family, put your kids to bed, and then get back on your laptop—the time you spend working after hours is time that could be spent cultivating other interests and pursuits that would make your life more balanced. For example, you

could be having a video chat with a friend, playing a game, or tackling a household or creative project with a family member, engaging in a hobby, reading, or even just relaxing in front of the television with a favorite person or a pet. (Another option is to go to bed earlier.) Any one of these activities creates opportunities for brain processes that will be beneficial to your work when you do go back to it. Games, hobbies, and other creative activities stimulate creative thinking, encourage single-tasking, clear your mind, and improve your confidence.²⁰ Cuddling up to another person, and even stroking a pet, releases brain-boosting endorphins that reduce stress and contribute to a feeling of well-being.²¹ Laughter, like you might experience on a call with a favorite person, has similar effects.

This perspective—that technology lengthens your workday to your detriment—can be difficult to maintain in high-pressure work environments. In Silicon Valley, it's often referred to as “martyr capitalism,” and is characterized by the unspoken rule of “killing it,” where “if you're not sleeping under your desk, you're not committed.”²² However, as a leader, it's your job to be firm in the face of this pressure, recognizing that although it may seem like working long hours will help you get ahead, there is no research that proves that productivity increases with more than forty hours of work per week; in fact, there is ample evidence that it doesn't.²³ So if you experience any guilt about engaging in other activities instead of working, remember that often the best thing you can do *for* your work is not work!

Assessing Your Own Work-Life Balance

Insufficient attention to the holistic well-being considerations in the prior section of this chapter can provide a red flag that your work-life balance is off. Additionally, further indication may be if some or all of the following statements are true for you:

- You never take vacation, or you work when you're on vacation.
- You're never away from email for more than six or eight hours at a time.

- You are generally available to anyone regardless of the day or time.
- You never shut off your phone, or put it in “Do Not Disturb” mode.
- You have no hobbies, or you can’t remember the last time you engaged in your hobby.
- You usually feel exhausted for no particular reason.
- You’re always intending to exercise, but you never seem to be able to work it into your schedule.
- You go to work when you’re sick.
- You have very few close relationships beyond your immediate family.
- Your partner or child is often annoyed by your relationship with your device.

Burnout: When Well-Being Is Ignored

In addition to the personal and day-to-day organizational costs of not attending to the human side of human capital (namely the well-being of yourself and your staff), the long-term effect is burnout, which can strike any employee and is always disappointing, but it is particularly calamitous to the organization when it happens to a key employee. Burnout is more intense than stress, and often the results are more dire. According to psychiatrist Dr. Harry Levinson, the symptoms of burnout include chronic fatigue, anger at those making demands, self-criticism for putting up with the demands, cynicism, negativity, irritability, a sense of being besieged, and hair-trigger display of emotions.²⁴ Burnout often leads to extreme situations like hospitalization, drug or alcohol abuse, and divorce.

The potential for burnout is one reason to pay attention to long work hours and lack of balance in your employees. Other causes that leadership can affect include job monotony, the perception of little or no control over work, and the attempt to be everything to everyone.

Institutional Changes: Programs to Make Your Employees' Lives Easier

Attending to the issues discussed in this chapter is part of being a good leader of knowledge workers. Supporting the well-being of your team is not only good for business; it's also the right thing to do. As Clayton Christensen says in his blockbuster essay for the *Harvard Business Review*:

Management is the most noble of professions if it's practiced well. No other occupation offers as many ways to help others learn and grow, take responsibility and be recognized for achievement, and contribute to the success of a team.²⁵

In addition to getting intentional about the issues discussed earlier, there are also corporate initiatives that you can implement to instill the value of caring for employees' well-being, individually and as corporate assets, into the day-to-day operations of the organization. The following list addresses several, and you will find additional suggestions and recommendations in every chapter of this book:

1. **New training:** It's time to update traditional training agendas! Workflow-management training from the perspective of attention management, rather than time management, is a necessary addition to corporate development initiatives for knowledge workers. Mindfulness training is a powerful complement to work-life-management training.
2. **Support staff:** Gone are the days when all executives had a personal secretary, but I think it's time to revisit the lessons of those days. The reason they're gone may be the assumption that technology exists that can handle the administrative tasks once done by executive assistants, office managers, and other clerical staff, but the truth is that the job of finding and learning that technology is often a barrier to using it, and there is still much that technology can't do.

Work-life-management training is addressed in chapter 2.

The purpose of support staff is to offload lower-skill and non-specialty tasks to lower-paid employees, so that higher-paid staff can spend

more time adding value (the unique and highly specialized skills and talents for which they were hired) commensurate with their salary. In addition to the benefits of lightening the load for your executives and other specialized staff, the math makes sense.

Support Staff Improves Your Bottom Line

For example, let’s say you have four sales executives, each bringing in \$200,000 per year in revenue. If you could offload some of their administrative tasks such that they increased their revenue just 5 percent annually, you could offset the cost of a full-time administrative person for at least \$30,000 per year plus benefits. Any amount of improvement over that 5 percent gain goes directly to the bottom line, and studies indicate that the odds are in your favor.²⁶

There’s a second benefit that is hard to quantify but easy to understand in this distraction-rich business environment. According to Melba Duncan writing in the *Harvard Business Review*, “A good assistant can filter the distractions that can turn a manager into a reactive type who spends all day answering email instead of a leader who proactively sets the organization’s agenda.”²⁷

While business has moved away from this support-staff model, other industries, such as the medical field, have embraced it. It’s unlikely you’ll find a licensed medical doctor, who makes six figures annually, taking blood or administering flu shots that a technician can be paid to do for much less. The most productive people know that the most important questions are “Can someone else do this for me?” and “How else could this get done?”

What Can Your Team Delegate?

The self-assessment from *Harvard Business Review*, found at <https://hbr.org/web/2013/08/assessment/make-time-for-work-that-matters>,

can help your team quickly identify tasks that can be outsourced. Another exercise is to have your executives start a list of "items to delegate." After a week or two, the length of that list can be a good indicator of the need for support staff or a good foundation for a discussion about it.

3. **Outsourced assistance:** If increasing headcount with administrative staff is not feasible for your organization, consider an outsourced model. Facilitate employees' ability to take advantage of the "access economy" (also known as platform business models), which are companies that provide "tasks as a service."²⁸ Some examples are businesses that provide errand-running, personal administration, household chores, meal delivery or meal planning service, and home repair and maintenance services. (Appendix A contains a partial but extensive list of these businesses.)

Support your employees in taking advantage of these services that make their lives easier by creating corporate relationships, negotiating discounts, offering gift cards, and even including a stipend in compensation packages. In addition to national companies, you can also facilitate relationships with local businesses, such as by becoming a pick-up/drop-off location for dry cleaning services and grocery-delivery services, and/or maintain a list of vetted babysitters and handyman providers. These services are not only useful in supporting your staff's personal lives, but also in many cases they can be used as an alternative to hiring administrative support staff. For example, if your sales team doesn't have an administrator, offering a stipend to hire a virtual assistant for travel booking, expense report filing, appointment setting, and other administrative tasks can make life easier for your sales staff, and it can remove some of the monotony from their work and free them to spend more time on the work they enjoy.

4. **Corporate mentoring programs:** For new hires, high-potential employees, and anyone who could benefit from some professional

guidance, a corporate mentoring program could be the perfect solution. Mentoring can assist with work-life balance challenges, employee engagement, and knowledge transfer and succession planning, among other things. The program can be formal or informal, but it should be voluntary on the part of both the mentor and the mentee. The Forrester Report “Drive Employee Talent Development Through Business Mentoring Programs” includes these other factors for a successful program: ²⁹

- Structured with organized mentor/mentee profiles
- Includes training on mentoring best practices and instruction on using mentoring software
- Requires a commitment from the mentoring pair to work together for a period of time, usually up to a year
- Can include some mentors working with more than one employee and mentors may also be mentees themselves
- Permits mentor/mentee partnerships that exist across lines of business and even across geographies

Mentoring has even more benefits for companies with remote staff, because it can help keep them engaged and retained.

Adjusting your training plans, taking another look at administrative support, and implementing formal or informal corporate mentoring programs are only changes that can be made at the leadership level. But they will all help convey the message that you care about your employees as individuals. This is the sign of a good leader and can go a long way toward improving the culture at your organization.

Conclusion

Intentional and formalized consideration of employees’ physical, mental, and emotional wellness, and particularly filling the gap of “holistic well-being” left by engagement and wellness programs, are important factors of success for leaders of knowledge workers. Leaders, too, are knowledge workers, and have the same needs. The complete formula

includes small, day-to-day changes in operations, leadership commitment and modeling, plus larger, strategic and institutional initiatives. But even small steps in the right direction can offer significant payoff to organizations. You can help, whether you have the authority at your organization to institute all the changes, some of the changes, or even if you just voice suggestions or model the behaviors in an effort to influence others. Studies show that what leaders say is far less important than what they do.³⁰



Action Items

These are specific steps that will help you put the information in this chapter to use immediately. Most can be implemented relatively quickly and easily and can pay big returns:

1. **Assess your office kitchen:** Do you offer snacks? If not, consider adding some healthy options to your supply order. If you do, ensure they are foods that power optimal brain functioning and will keep your team energized throughout the day.
2. **Support napping at work:** Encourage employees to take short naps to recharge. If possible, set aside a quiet space for napping by investing in an “energy pod” or a couch in a room that has some extra space. Purchase a room divider if you can’t dedicate a whole room. Purchasing an inexpensive white noise machine with a timer/alarm would be an added bonus.
3. **Update your training agenda:** Training in mindfulness and attention management will improve your team’s mental well-being.
4. **Add support staff or provide a stipend for outsourced solutions:** When your knowledge workers can delegate routine and administrative tasks, they have more time for the work that’s most satisfying to them—and valuable to you.
5. **Support personal outsourcing:** Start by asking your employees about their favorite dry cleaner and become a pick-up/drop-off location. Assemble a team to propose other innovative ideas to

make it easy for your team members to take advantage of services that help them take personal tasks like meal planning and home maintenance off their plates.

6. Include work-life balance as a mentoring topic: If you already have a mentoring program in place or you are starting a new program, make work-life balance one of the topics covered.



Takeaways You Can Tweet

Here are important points of the chapter summarized so that they are easy to digest, but also so that you can conveniently share the information with your followers on Twitter or on other social media outlets. Follow and participate in the conversation online using *#workwithoutwalls*, and/or my handle, *@mnthomas*.

- ❑ In a knowledge economy, brainpower is the most valuable resource. So improving productivity means maximizing yours.
- ❑ The three mental states that drive performance are calm, happy, and energized. <https://hbr.org/2014/12/how-your-state-of-mind-affects-your-performance>
- ❑ Engagement and wellness programs are great, but they leave a hole with regard to optimal mental states that drive performance.
- ❑ Cutting sugar and carbs and providing energy-sustaining food at meetings and in break room will boost your team’s productivity.
- ❑ When you encourage napping at work, you encourage productivity.
- ❑ We crave control over work, but traditional time management training doesn’t teach it. New work requires new rules.
- ❑ Learning mindfulness offers an optimal state of mind for productivity, plus increases work satisfaction and performance.

- ❑ Our brains need work-life balance for improved creativity, motivation, and productivity.
- ❑ You might be surprised to see how much you can add to your bottom line by hiring support for your team.
- ❑ Making it easy for your team to use services that let them outsource chores and tasks will increase their productivity.
- ❑ Implement a mentoring program at your company and make work-life balance a focus.

Endnotes

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"I am amazed at the changes in my life since taking your training and reading your book! I work less, I feel more in control, my stress has gone down, I sleep better, and I'm getting better results. It's changed not only my work life, but my personal life as well. My team is reporting similar results. Thank you so much!"

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"Maura's training was a game-changer for our organization!"

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“Maura delivered a fantastic presentation! Her humor and enthusiasm kept us engaged and excited to learn all her strategies for productivity. We left the training feeling inspired, enlightened, and motivated . . . It’s important to mention that Maura was also a pleasure to work with and eager to understand our business so that she could really connect on a deeper level with our employees. Thank you Maura!”

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Maura can deliver content ranging from one hour to two full days. She is diligent about qualifying every client and customizing the content and the length to achieve your specific objectives.

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