ECONOMIST IMPACT

In search of lost focus

Productivity in the post-pandemic world

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Contents

3 **Executive summary**

5 **Introduction: Adapting to the new normal**

6 **Chapter 1: The economic benefits of focus**

7 The changing geography of work

8 **Chapter 2: A hive of distractions in a new working world**

8 Lost focus in the US: then and now

10 Flexibility and productivity at home

11 Gender differences in work habits

11 The global picture: messages, emails, meetings and more

13 Contending with social media and collaborative platforms

13 The view from the top

15 **Chapter 3: Seeking focus—and finding it**

15 Making the most of artificial intelligence and automation

16 A toolkit of solutions

18 **Conclusion: The high stakes of lost focus**

19 **Appendix I: Economic model methodology**

21 **Appendix II: Survey**

Executive summary

In today's hyper-connected world that is brimming with competing priorities, focus often feels like a rare, precious commodity. Yet at the same time, as the knowledge-driven economy continues to grow, the importance of deep, focused work has never been greater.

To explore the extent to which knowledge workers,[1] businesses and the broader economy optimize focus for the sake of productivity, Economist Impact has conducted a research program, sponsored by Dropbox. It builds upon a prior Economist Impact survey of US respondents, conducted in 2020, with a new survey spanning ten countries.[2] This is supplemented by an economic model and expert interviews that analyze the cost of lost focus.

This report summarizes our primary insights to guide strategies for knowledge workers, businesses and nations in mitigating the impact of lost focus:

- American companies collectively leave nearly half a trillion dollars (US$468bn) on the table[3] by failing to leverage the productivity of their employees, who are regularly beset by time-sucking distractions from deep, focused work.
- Hazards to focus differ by work environment. On-site workers cite face-to-face interruptions as their worst distraction, while remote workers single out household chores and demands from others sharing their space. Regardless of location, all workers wrestle with disruptions from meetings, emails and chat messages.

[1] Defined as a full-time employee whose work relies heavily on digital tools and consists primarily of non-repetitive, intellectual labor and problem solving, as opposed to physical labor. Skilled-task workers, researchers, educators, analysts, managers, IT staff, executives and professionals are all examples of knowledge workers.
[2] In Search of Lost Focus: The engine of distributed work. 2020. The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited; this study was based on a survey conducted among 600 knowledge workers in the US in April and May 2020. The post-pandemic data was drawn from a survey conducted across ten countries in the first quarter of 2023. https://blog.dropbox.com/topics/work-culture/economist-intelligence-unit-distributed-work-study
[3] Economic costs reflect data and analysis in five major knowledge sectors: manufacturing, retail trade, information, educational services, and professional, scientific, and technical services.

- Distractions afflict managers more often than those lower down the corporate ladder, with frequent unproductive meetings a significant contributor. Fully addressing these distractions could result in potential business savings of US$37,000 per manager, compared with US$21,000 for general staff per year.
- Artificial intelligence and automation tools are largely viewed as a boon for workers' focus rather than as the threat to jobs that the media makes them out to be; four in five survey respondents say these tools have improved their productivity.
- No one-size-fits-all solution to the focus quandary exists. Companies need to respond to the needs of individual workers while remaining conscious of cultural differences in how best to optimize productivity. Some strategies companies could employ include:

1. **Ensuring effective environments and infrastructure for workers to thrive**, including spaces in office settings that allow for focused work and tools for people to work successfully remotely.
2. **Giving workers the flexibility to choose where they can work best**. The more agency that workers have over their schedule and environment, the better outcomes they tend to see for focus, work quality and well-being.
3. **Combating the biggest distractions with targeted workplace strategies.** Dedicated focus time, scheduled meeting-free periods or workshops on focus skills can help workers overcome constant interruptions.

Introduction: Adapting to the new normal

Knowledge workers are one of the main drivers of economic growth across the world. From lawyers to programmers to writers, their roles all require periods of deep, focused work. And, when done right, these periods of sustained focus can maximize creativity and innovation.

It follows that the loss of focus, or unproductive periods, leads to missed opportunities for producing valuable work. This extends beyond individual workers. At a company level, deep focus is essential for producing valuable insights that can lead to improved products, services or processes—and thus higher profits. Lost focus can also affect economies as a whole, as lower productivity hinders a country's potential for growth.

Companies have long attempted to address office-based distractions that could potentially impact knowledge workers' concentration. Now, following the covid-19 pandemic, employees and companies have had to adapt to new ways of working, including from home and other non-office settings. The next few years will define the longer-term contours of this "new normal" and its impact on people, firms and countries alike as they seek ways to create environments that foster efficiency and strike a balance between productivity and well-being.

Although these arrangements may contain new distractions, they also provide opportunities to find the kind of focus that workers lacked in the pre-covid era. For example, the rapid adoption of automation tools and virtual platforms has opened the door to new disruptions. However, at the same time, they have revolutionized the speed and effectiveness of business communications. New strategies to enhance focus are especially important for those in managerial roles, who often have crowded daily schedules and difficulty finding time.

In this study, Economist Impact analyzes the broader costs of lost focus—both in terms of time and money—across ten countries,[4] including the US. A central pillar of this research seeks to understand how focus in the workplace has changed over the past three years, building on our prior US study in 2020.

[4] In Search of Lost Focus: The engine of distributed work. 2020. The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited; this study was based on a survey conducted among 600 knowledge workers in the US in April and May 2020. The post-pandemic data was drawn from a survey conducted across ten countries in the first quarter of 2023. https://blog.dropbox.com/topics/work-culture/economist-intelligence-unit-distributed-work-study

Chapter 1: The economic benefits of focus

People often notice the benefits of focus only in hindsight, for instance while reflecting on work that was produced while in a 'state of flow'. Equally hard to tally are the hidden costs incurred by lapses in focus. In a new attempt to put a dollar value on this cost, Economist Impact modeling shows that in the US, **firms across five major sectors could gain US$468bn each year from optimizing knowledge workers' time—including periods of focus—to maximize their productivity**.[5] This estimate is up by US$77bn from our 2020 report.[6] Put another way, the potential annual gain is now equivalent to 28.7% of knowledge workers' salaries, up from 28.3%.

Knowledge workers are responsible for driving many of the advances of modern life, from cancer drugs to Pulitzer Prize-winning novels to ChatGPT. These products and services drive growth in the wider economy in myriad ways. **The potential upside of optimizing knowledge workers' time is therefore significant for all economies (see figure 1); in the US, economic gains could reach nearly US$1.4trn**. Across the ten economies in our study, the contribution of knowledge workers could increase by an average of 40%, as measured in terms of their gross value added (GVA).[7] This ranges from a potential increase of 34% in Japan to a potential increase of 44% in Australia.

Although the potential dollar values that can be added to each country's overall economic output are driven mainly by their size, the relative differences can also be attributed to variations in the knowledge worker labor market, industry patterns, work environments, cultural norms and experiences with distractions—all factors that influence our model.

[5] Unless otherwise specified, survey findings and economic modeling output cited in this report refer to the averages/totals across ten countries and five sectors studied.
[6] Note: Economic modeling in the 2020 report reflected economic conditions from 2018 (supplemented by insights from our 2020 survey). Economic modeling in the 2023 report reflects economic conditions from 2022 (supplemented by our 2023 survey).
[7] Gross value added (GVA) is the contribution made to an economy by individuals and industries in a sector or region. It is calculated as the value of goods and services produced minus the cost of inputs in the production process.

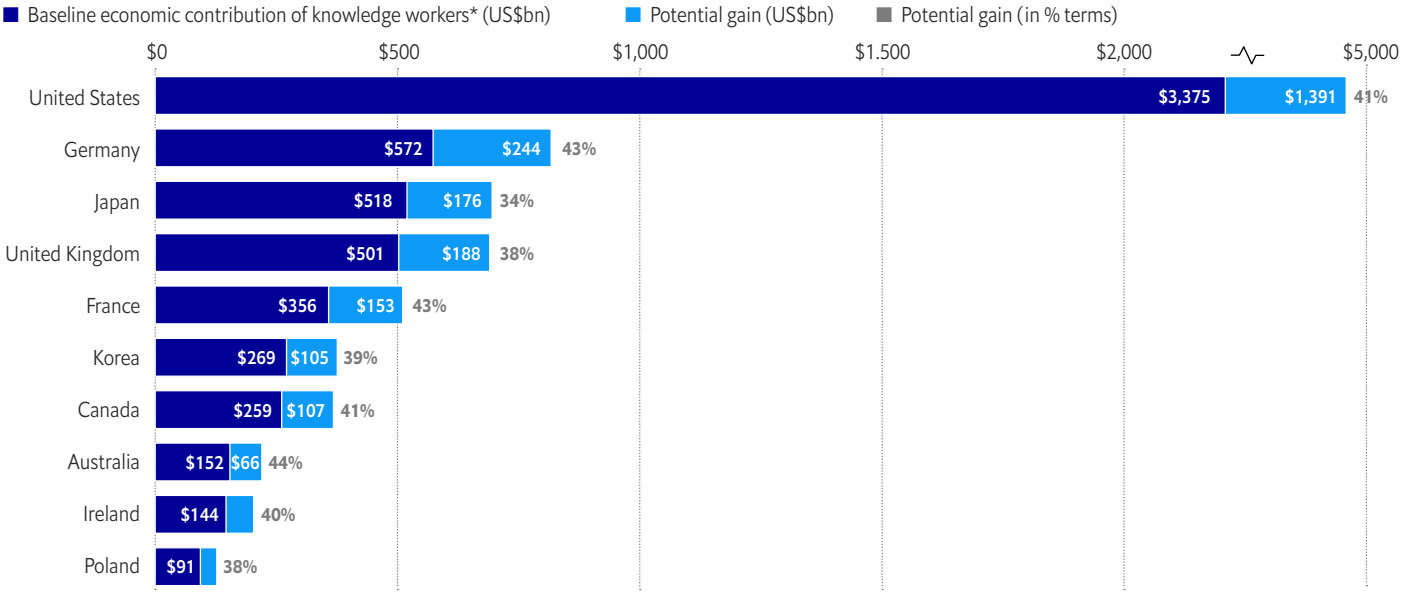
For example, US knowledge workers are paid significantly higher wages than all other countries, helping to explain its dominant position. Meanwhile, Europe as a whole boasts higher productivity, as measured by GDP generated per hour, than most of the world.[8] This may be partly related to the relatively shorter working hours Europeans enjoy (long workdays tend to be negatively correlated with productivity).[9] Across our sample, workers in Korea and the US record some of the highest annual working hours globally.[10] Finally, when it comes to the most common types of workplace distractions, national differences also abound; these will be explored further in chapter 2.

The changing geography of work

Differing levels of acceptance of remote or hybrid work could account for some of these national differences in focus and working habits. Australia, North America and Western Europe (except perhaps France) have remained relatively enthusiastic about hybrid work even as the covid-19 pandemic has receded.[11,12] Japan, on the other hand, has maintained its traditionally office-bound culture.[13,14]

The shift toward remote and hybrid work has not only affected work habits within countries, but also the global work landscape. Cevat Giray Aksoy, associate director of research at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, notes that companies that embrace remote work can dramatically expand their hiring pool, potentially bringing economic development to places that would have struggled to attract entire offices. "Working from home has the potential of lifting up less-developed regions within a country by enabling the hiring of individuals who either already live in those regions or prefer to live there," he says.

Figure 1. Potential gains to knowledge workers' annual economic contribution (as a result of optimizing focus time)[15]



*Note: Gross value added is used to measure the economic contribution of knowledge workers. This refers to the total value of goods and services produced minus expenses.
*Note: analysis covers knowledge workers in five major sectors: manufacturing, retail trade, information, educational services, and professional, scientific, and technical services.
Source: Economist Impact

[8] https://data.oecd.org/lprdty/gdp-per-hour-worked.htm
[9] https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/teams-become-more-productive-when-their-hours-are-shorter
[10] https://data.oecd.org/emp/hours-worked.htm
[11] https://www.theceomagazine.com/business/innovation-technology/remote-work-countries/
[12] https://jobgether.com/blog/the-top-countries-hiring-the-most-remote-workers
[13] https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220511-the-countries-resisting-remote-work
[14] https://japan-dev.com/blog/remote-work-in-japan
[15] Correction: the data points in this figure have been revised from the original version and were last updated December 2023 for all countries except the US.

Chapter 2: A hive of distractions in a new working world

How has the remote-work revolution changed how we are distracted? Overall, US knowledge workers are just as distracted as they were in the early stages of the pandemic. The amount of focus time the typical knowledge worker loses to distractions while attempting to work has stayed flat in the US, rising from 581 to 582 hours per year. However, with **flexible work becoming more common and employees adapting their work patterns in response, the most common causes of lost focus are evolving**.

Lost focus in the US: then and now

We conducted the first iteration of this study in the US just as office workers were decamping home *en masse* following the outbreak of covid-19. Worries about overloaded bandwidth and inadequate home infrastructure proliferated. But what's changed for workers since that time? At the onset of the pandemic, the most common distraction for remote knowledge workers in the US was the temptation to relax due to distractions such as TV, media and food. Our 2023 study reaffirms that social and other media are still a common source of distraction (see figure 2). However, as US workers adapt to remote work, managing demands from household members has emerged as the new leading challenge in maintaining focus (reported as a top concern by 39% of knowledge workers, up from 22% in 2020).

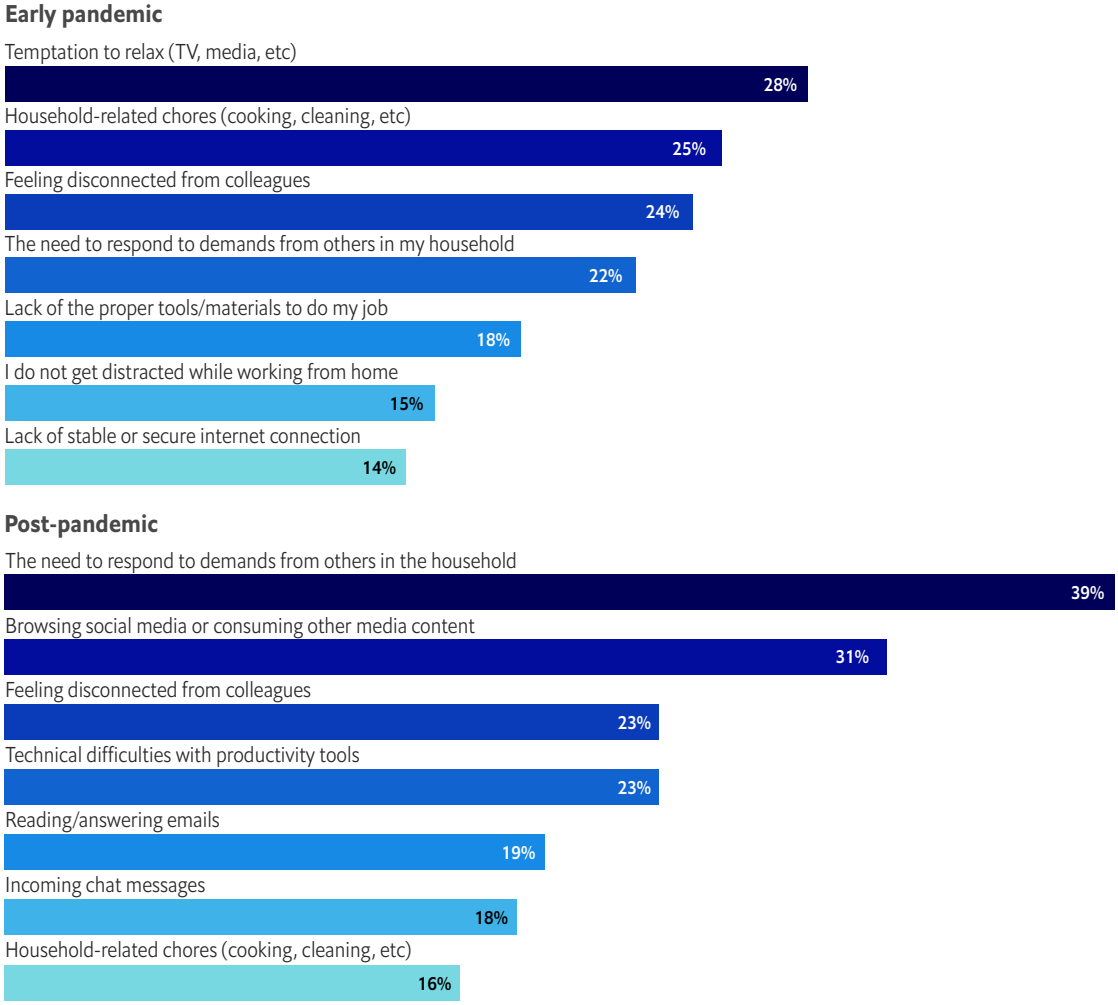
Our model backs this rise in distraction from personal activities. The average US knowledge worker is now losing 151 hours of focus time per year to personal activities (social media, shopping, household demands, etc), up from 132 hours in our 2020 report—the largest increase across all types of distractions.[16] Perhaps, surprisingly, this is not purely a consequence of remote work: even on-site workers are spending more time on personal activities.

[16] Note: These estimates only reflect losses of focus time (not the total time spent on personal activities), in recognition that regular breaks for personal activities have some beneficial effects on productivity.

On a positive note, other causes of lost focus have decreased since our 2020 report. According to our model, workers are spending less time on unproductive emails, which dropped from 99 to 75 hours per year.[17] Time spent in unproductive meetings has also seen a slight decline, from 82 to 78 hours per year. Although the average daily time in meetings has risen from 1.5 to 1.7 hours (probably owing to the ease of gathering virtually), the share of these meetings that US workers consider unproductive has dropped from 27% to 21%.

Another key shift revolves around the pace of work: specifically, the *frequency* of interruptions throughout the workday has risen—and not only because of widespread personal distractions. The average number of meetings, for example, has increased from 1.6 to 1.9 per day. This may not seem significant, but it often takes workers some time to refocus on productive tasks after each interruption, so it all adds up. In the US, knowledge workers spend an average of 127 hours per year regaining focus after being interrupted by meetings and emails, up from 118 hours in our 2020 study.

Figure 2. Top distractions reported by US knowledge workers when working from home



*Note: respondents could choose up to three options.
Source: Economist Impact

[17] By contrast, productive time lost to chat messages remained steady at about 150 hours.

Flexibility and productivity at home

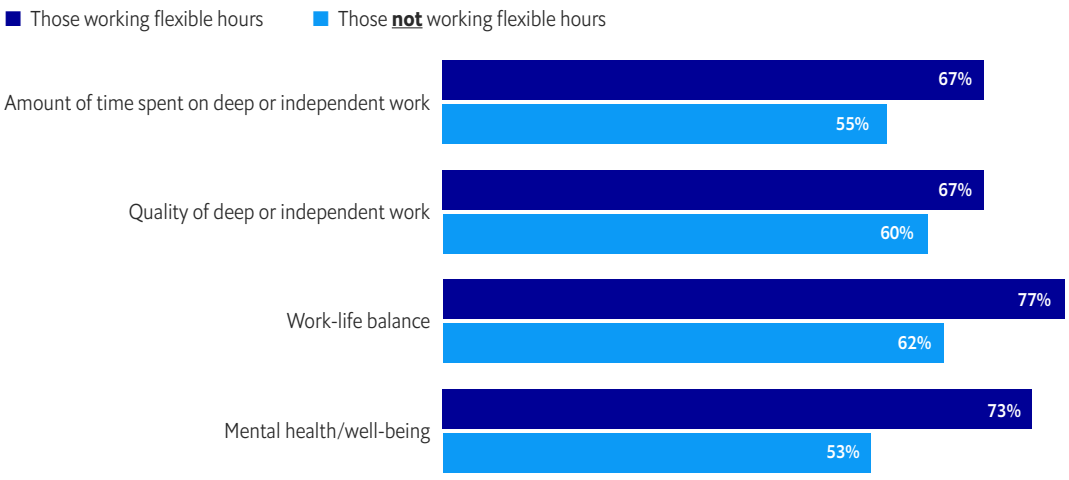
On-site and remote workers each grapple with unique challenges when it comes to staying focused. For those on-site in the US today, face-to-face interruptions represent the biggest distraction, cited as a major issue by 36% of respondents—unchanged since 2020. This persistent concern is understandable given the pressure to be as productive as possible during a finite period at work.

Major distractions for remote workers, on the other hand, often revolve around managing chores and demands from household members (see figure 2). As typical ways of working continue to evolve, these workers have faced the need to adapt their strategies for staying focused and productive. One such adaptation appears to be a preference for flexible hours.

Flexibility is now a major priority for knowledge workers globally, with two-thirds of them saying they work flexible hours while at home. This often means interspersing more breaks into the workday. For example, remote workers are more likely to focus on productive work in shorter increments (blocks of 1-3 hours) compared with on-site workers. However, shorter blocks—and more frequent breaks—do not necessarily mean less focus. On the contrary, regular downtime can enhance one's ability to focus. For example, remote workers who work flexible hours are more likely to say that remote work has improved their overall focus, quality of work and well-being (see figure 3).

Peter Bacevice, vice president of research and development at Pangeam, and research associate at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, believes that "flexibility and choice about where and when to work play a significant role in knowledge workers' ability to thrive", which he defines as "the joint experience of vitality and learning at work". Under Mr Bacevice's criteria, thriving is more strongly connected to a sense of purpose and investment in the future of one's company than simply feeling happy or content while working. Other research supports this, showing 16% better overall job performance and increased productivity among individuals who say they thrive at work.[18]

Figure 3. Share of remote/hybrid workers who say that working remotely has improved their performance or experience (across four major areas)



*Note: sample size includes respondents from all ten countries.
Source: Economist Impact

[18] https://news.umich.edu/being-happy-at-work-is-nice-but-thriving-is-betterand-more-productive/

"Flexibility and choice about where and when to work play a significant role in knowledge workers' ability to thrive."

Peter Bacevice, vice president of research and design at workplace analytics firm Pangeam

Gender differences in work habits

Globally, men appear to be somewhat more likely to engage in remote or hybrid work than women: 61% vs 51%, respectively. This may be driven by a variety of reasons, including the fact that certain knowledge sectors such as technology (which is still predominantly male) are more likely to be remote or hybrid compared with knowledge sectors such as education, where women make up most of the workforce. In addition, a larger proportion of men occupy senior or higher positions in companies (59% versus women's 44%), and other research has shown that individuals in more senior positions are less likely to go into the office as often as general staff.[19]

Family dynamics may also play a role in where women choose to work and how productive they feel: research has shown that men tend to do fewer family-related tasks when both they and their female partner are working from home.[20] Women also tend to have stronger views about how their working location influences productivity: regardless of where they are working, women in our study are more likely than men to say that their quality of deep or independent work is "significantly" better in that location.

The global picture: messages, emails, meetings and more

Everyone deals with unproductive chat messages—ones that workers perceive as distracting or irrelevant to the tasks they are engaged in. Such conversations typically consume 40 minutes per day, or about 50% of the total time that workers are engaged with chat messages.[21,22] Although it may seem small, these 40 minutes are scattered throughout the day, repeatedly cutting into workers' focus time. **Across most countries, unproductive messages tend to be the biggest driver of lost focus**, ranging from 129 hours lost annually per person in Japan to 180 hours in France (see figure 4). On average, this lost time nearly US$18,000[23] per worker annually (in GVA terms[24]).

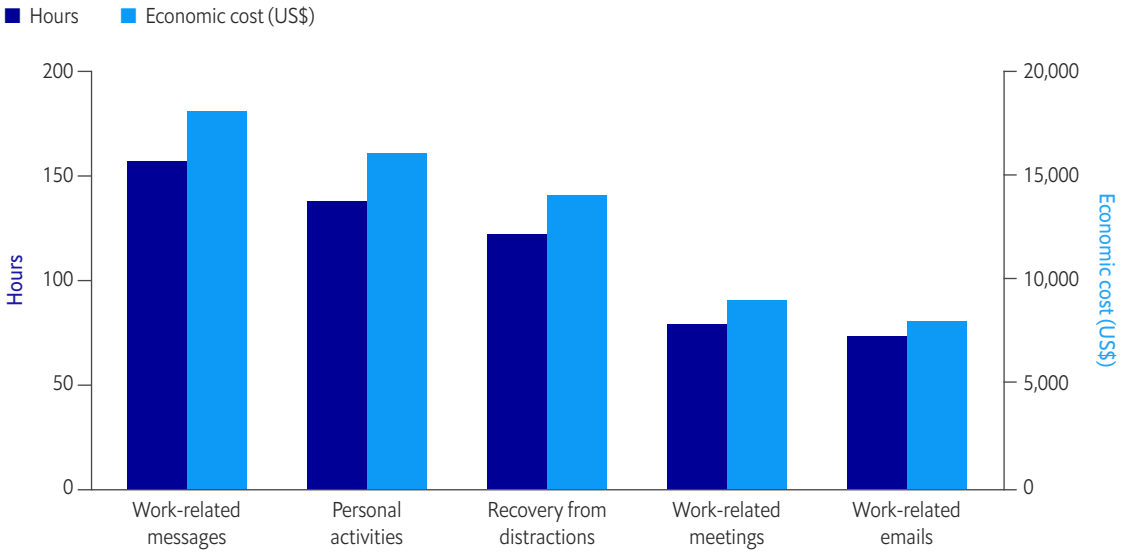
[19] https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220602-the-double-standard-of-the-return-to-office
[20] https://www.forbes.com/sites/adigaskell/2023/02/25/the-gender-divide-when-working-from-home/?sh=154240aa5a56
[21] https://nulab.com/learn/collaboration/work-chat-distractions-do-work-instant-messengers-make-us-more-or-less-productive/
[22] Based on existing literature and the economic model developed by Economist Impact
[23] Correction: this data point was revised from the original version and was last updated December 2023.
[24] GVA (gross value added) is typically used to measure the contribution of different parts of the economy. It refers to total economic value generated, minus expenses.

Conversely, emails (the unproductive kind) constitute a relatively small time loss for workers globally. Approximately 20% of time spent on emails is considered unproductive, or about 18 minutes per day. This translates to an annual loss of approximately 72 hours per worker: Australian workers lose 82 hours yearly on unproductive emails, while their Japanese counterparts lose 62 hours. Reversing this productivity loss could boost economies by an average of around US$8,500[25] per worker annually.

Unproductive meetings are also on the minor end of the distraction spectrum. Globally, survey respondents label a quarter of their total meeting time as unproductive (or about 20 minutes per day on average). Over the course of a year, this adds up to a loss of 79 hours due to unproductive meetings, equivalent to more than US$9,000[26] per worker annually. Irish workers record the least amount of unproductive meeting time, losing just 68 hours per worker each year, while Korean workers lose the most, at 95 hours. The impact of unproductive meetings also varies depending on where the knowledge worker is based. Among on-site workers, meetings are cited as the fourth-worst source of distraction, but they fall to eighth place for remote or hybrid workers.

The time spent regaining focus after interruptions also adds up, especially with how fragmented the modern workday has become. Our global survey found that 42% of knowledge workers said they typically do not spend more than an hour on productive work without interruption. Research increasingly demonstrates the drawbacks associated with multitasking,[27] drawbacks which extend beyond the time lost directly during interruptions to include the additional time needed to regain focus and re-engage. Across our global sample, the average worker spends 122 hours per year recovering focus after engaging in emails or meetings—ranging from 112 hours in Korea to 131 in Australia and the UK—equivalent to more than US$14,000.[28]

Figure 4: Annual hours of lost focus per knowledge worker (left axis) and equivalent economic cost per person (right axis), attributed to five major causes of lost focus[29]



*Note: Estimates reflect aggregated results across the ten sample countries.
*Note: Economic cost is measured in terms of gross value added. This refers to the total value of goods and services produced minus expenses.
Source: Economist Impact

[25] Correction: this data point was revised from the original version and was last updated December 2023.
[26] Correction: this data point was revised from the original version and was last updated December 2023.
[27] https://neuroscience.stanford.edu/news/why-multitasking-does-more-harm-good
[28] Correction: this data point was revised from the original version and was last updated December 2023.
[29] Correction: the data points for economic cost have been revised from the original version and were last updated December 2023.

Contending with social media and collaborative platforms

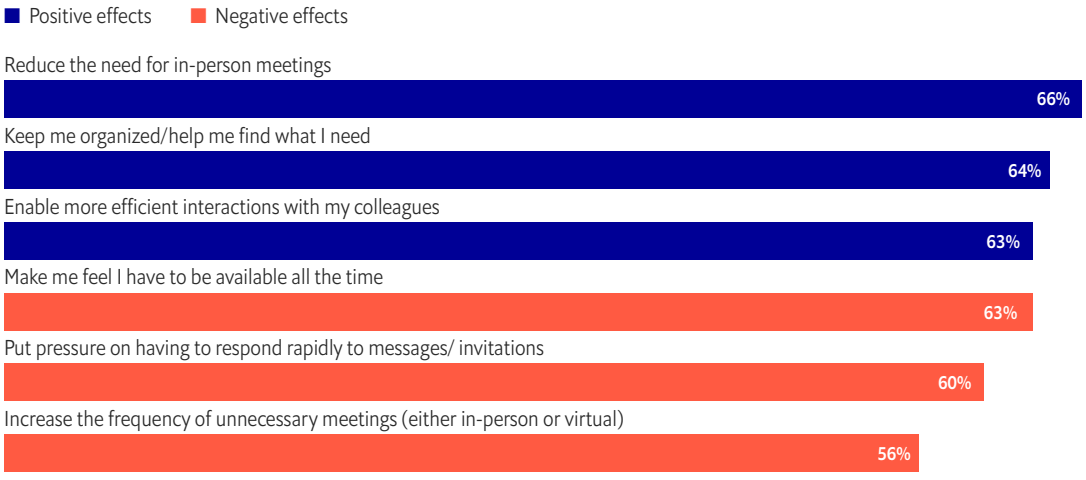
Social media has been omnipresent in developed countries for over a decade, and the pandemic boosted its presence further: about 45% of respondents globally agree that social media is more of a distraction now than in pre-covid times, with the share rising to 53% among Gen Z and Millennials. Social media, however, is also serving as a means of communication between colleagues. People are turning to social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram and Facebook not only as a commercial platform and to find information,[30] but also to communicate and share work-related know-how.[31,32] While this can be a positive development, it may also amplify workers' feelings of needing to be available all the time.

Digital platforms are likewise driving collaboration across once-unthinkable distances. While the upside to such connectivity is clear, the drawbacks also take their toll. Two-thirds of respondents in our survey say that remote collaboration tools[33] have reduced the need for in-person meetings; only slightly fewer said they fostered better organization and enabled more efficient interaction with colleagues. Yet, a large majority of respondents reported that the increased use of remote collaboration pressures them to respond rapidly to incoming messages and be available all the time (see figure 5).

The view from the top

Managers are vital for team productivity, handling resources, supporting employees and achieving results. However, these responsibilities can require frequent multitasking, a major threat to focus. **Results from our global model reveal that managers lose focus more frequently than other positions**—683 hours per year per person, compared to 553 hours for general staff. This costs organizations about US$37,000 per manager, a relatively steeper toll than the US$21,000 for general staff.

Figure 5. Share of global knowledge workers that agree with the following statements about remote collaboration tools



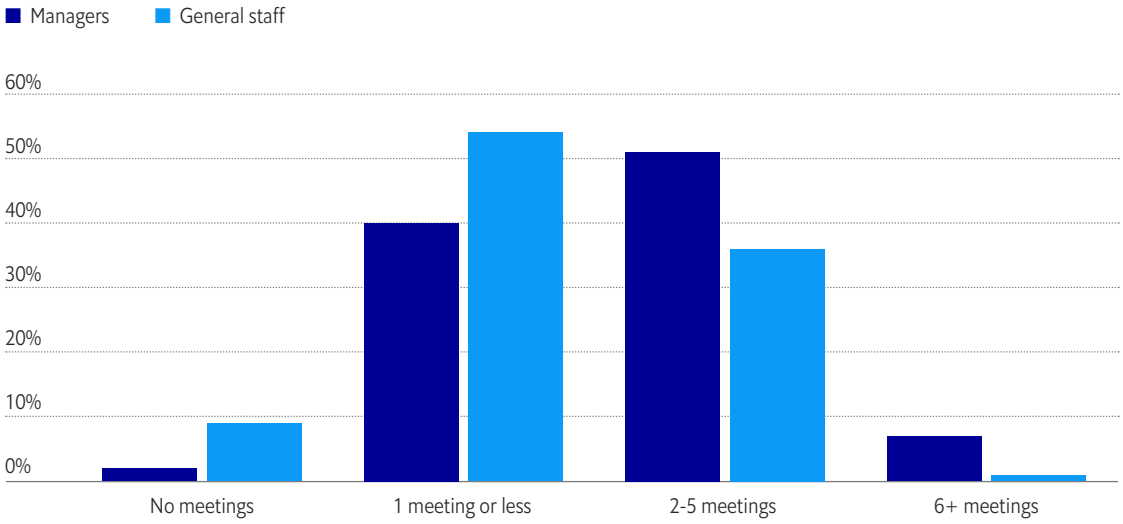
Source: Economist Impact

[30] https://www.meltwater.com/en/global-digital-trends?utm_source=web&utm_medium=press&utm_campaign=press-web-kepios-report-pr-012623&utm_content=guide
[31] https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s43546-022-00335-x
[32] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326029422_Impact_of_social_media_on_e-commerce
[33] Remote collaboration tools refer to the software and platforms that enable workers in teams to work from different locations. These include video calls, instant messaging, document-sharing platforms, etc.

Unproductive meetings are a major cause of managers' distractions: not only do they attend more meetings per day (see figure 6), but they also consider 27% of them to be unproductive, compared with just 21% for general staff.

Those in managerial roles spend large amounts of time switching between various administrative tasks, which they label a top distraction more frequently than general staff. This switching back and forth appears to be less severe in remote or hybrid environments though: 25% of office-bound managers call administrative tasks a top distraction versus only 18% of their remote or hybrid peers. Evidence suggests that the collaborative nature of in-person work environments might lead bosses to assign a higher number of administrative tasks to managers present in the office compared with those working from home.[34]

Figure 6. Number of meetings in a typical workday (share of workers by seniority level)



*Note: sample includes respondents from all ten countries.
Source: Economist Impact

[34] https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-021-01196-4

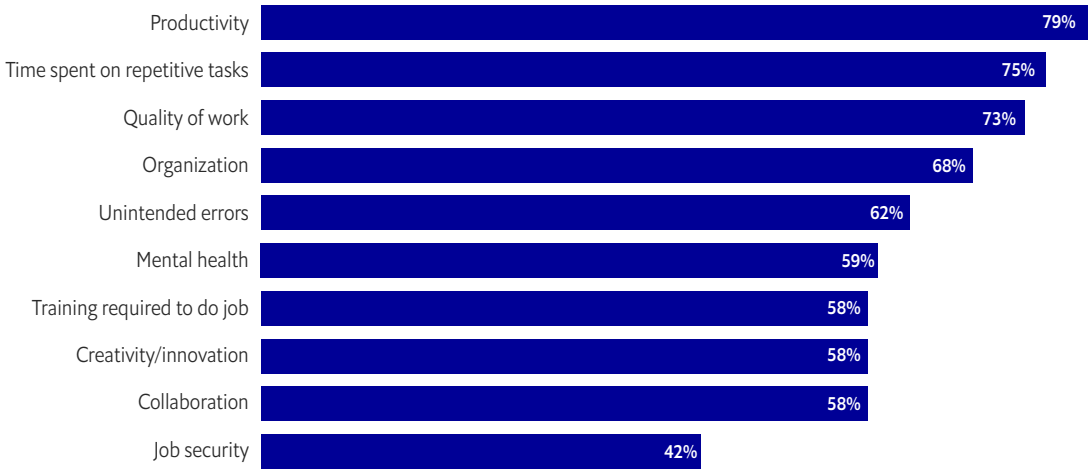
Chapter 3: Seeking focus—and finding it

The complex nature of individual focus complicates the task of finding solutions. Despite the myriad changes the pandemic wrought to the working world, guideposts from our initial study—including the importance of leadership that models a culture of focus and productivity, combined with "a deliberate and minimalist communication approach"[35]—still offer lessons for today. New tools and strategies can also help firms adapt.

Making the most of artificial intelligence and automation

The futuristic implications of artificial intelligence (AI) generate headlines on a daily basis, but AI's more prosaic applications are helping boost productivity among knowledge workers, according to four in five survey respondents (see figure 7). Automation tools have also improved other areas, such as quality of work and mental health.

Figure 7. Share of automation tool users who say these technologies have improved various aspects of their job



Source: Economist Impact

[35] In Search of Lost Focus: The engine of distributed work. 2020. The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited. https://blog.dropbox.com/topics/work-culture/economist-intelligence-unit-distributed-work-study

Knowledge workers reach for automation tools frequently to help with their work, with almost two-thirds using them at least once a week. By a sizable margin, knowledge workers said they would prefer to use AI-related tools to automate repetitive tasks (41% selected this as one of their top choices). Using AI to summarize and organize information were also popular preferences for about 30% of knowledge workers (see figure 7).[36] Emma Walsh, founder and CEO of Parents At Work, a work-life well-being advisory firm, emphasizes that **AI helps people "get things done, so they can spend more time thinking about complex problems or the customer services they deliver."**

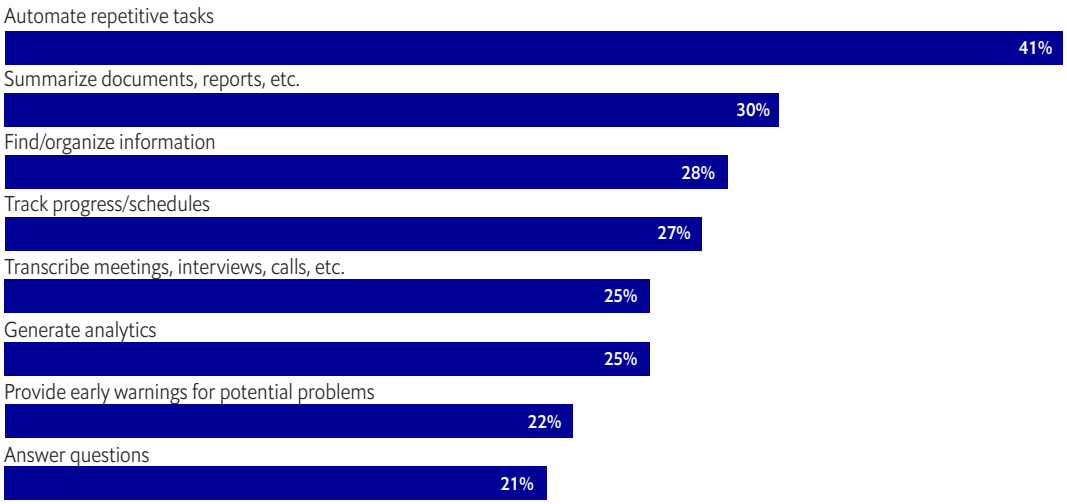
Regardless of seniority, workers generally report similar positive effects from automation tools. But in some key areas, managers see stronger benefits that can make their jobs more productive. A greater share of managers and directors (27%) and C-suite executives (36%) believe these tools have yielded "significant" improvements in staying organized, compared with general staff (23%). The story is similar when it comes to mental health, with managers and executives reporting stronger benefits. Overall, our survey suggests that managers and general staff might value AI for slightly different reasons. Managers may prefer to use it as a way to organize information (eg, generate analytics, conduct research, transcribe calls), while general staff may prefer it for creative tasks like producing written text, slides and charts.

Human resources consultant Josh Bersin calls AI "one of the biggest transformational technologies we have in the workplace" and believes that the rapid growth of AI means that individuals will not only improve productivity but leaders will gain tremendous insights into organizational performance, skills and more. Pointing to their faith in an AI-powered future, survey respondents are relatively sanguine about the job-replacing potential of AI, despite the rapidly improving capabilities of such tools. Of those who rely on AI and automation, 86% said that such tools had either improved or not affected their sense of job security, a sentiment that held consistent across workers of all ages.

A toolkit of solutions

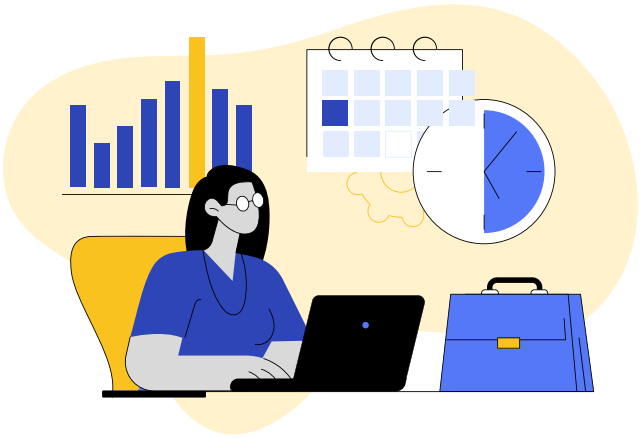
As companies continue to fine-tune their policies regarding remote vs hybrid vs on-site work, experts we spoke with agree that considering workers'

Figure 8. How knowledge workers would most prefer to use AI-related tools (% of respondents)



*Note: respondents could choose up to four options for this question. Only the 8 most popular responses are included in the figure.
Source: Economist Impact

[36] Respondents could select up to four options where they believed AI could assist them.



The more agency that workers have over their schedule and environment, the better outcomes they see for focus, work quality and well-being.

preferences is key. Mr Bacevice sums up the sentiment: "Not everyone wants to work exclusively from the same place all the time, but people do want the choice to decide whether they work from home, the office or a combination of both. They want to have the option available to them."

Giving workers the flexibility to choose where and how they work best can offer a simple way for them to increase their productivity. Our research suggests that workers often self-select into the work environment where they feel most productive. In fact, the more agency that workers have over their schedule and environment, the better outcomes they see for focus, work quality and well-being.

That said, businesses and industries should tailor their flexible work strategies to align with the nature of the job and the needs of the organization as a whole. For instance, technology companies might be inclined to embrace remote work, as this can facilitate the deep focus needed for intensive programming.[37] Conversely, in sectors like education, on-site policies will likely prevail, driven by the potential disadvantages associated with remote learning for students.[38]

Dedicated organizational strategies to deal with the drivers of lost focus are still relatively uncommon across organizations. Constant interruptions, whether face-to-face or via chat messages, are one of the biggest distractions in the modern workplace; however, organizational strategies such as meeting-free periods or dedicated focus time are not yet common. Fewer than 30% of knowledge workers said their organization promotes those strategies, and fewer than 20% have access to workshops that teach better focus skills.

Irrespective of where their workers are, businesses should concentrate on providing an enabling infrastructure environment for them to thrive. Collaborative workspaces for in-person brainstorming as well as quiet spaces for deep concentration are now *de rigueur* in modern offices as prerequisites for productivity.[39] And for employees working remotely, Ms Walsh stresses the "necessary infrastructure" and equipment that companies should provide to ensure they can focus effectively, such as quality chairs, desks and monitors.

Organizations should address loss of focus in a holistic way, recognizing that there are many strategies to enhance productivity and well-being. Strategies may differ by country and culture. For example, in Australia, Germany, Ireland, Japan and Poland, mandated breaks during the day are the most common way for knowledge workers to disconnect. Providing opportunities to give honest feedback to managers is another strategy, one that is valued relatively frequently across Australian, Canadian, British and American companies. In South Korea, respondents highlight the adoption of technological tools aimed at streamlining administrative tasks. The diversity of these tactics, among many others, highlights the need for nimble and holistic approaches in driving focus and productivity.

[37] https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2023/03/01/remote-and-flexible-hybrid-work-setups-are-optimal-for-the-tech-industry-and-companies-should-embrace-them/
[38] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9769479/
[39] https://hbr.org/2022/01/design-an-office-that-people-want-to-come-back-to

Conclusion: The high stakes of lost focus

The covid-19 pandemic sparked a sea change in how knowledge work gets done. While many now question the utility of offices in conducting deep, focused work, maximizing productivity depends on achieving the best combination of collaboration and solitude. Amid a changing landscape of distractions, there's no question that focus remains under threat.

This need not always be the case: companies have a panoply of solutions at their disposal to help their employees produce the insights, innovations and creations that drive profit. This effort, however, requires constant adaptation. As technology—including AI and automation tools—advances apace, a combination of holistic and targeted approaches will be needed to make sure it delivers the promised benefits to workers and employers alike.

Yet technology alone is not sufficient. Mental well-being, effective communication and a feeling of vitality at work all contribute to one's ability to focus and, consequently, deliver one's best. The pandemic may have reshaped the geography of work more rapidly than any single event in decades, but it took place against a backdrop of disruptive tides that show no sign of ebbing.

Companies that embrace change, respond to workers' needs and pivot quickly will benefit. Those that insist on inflexibility will suffer. The quest for focus is as old as work itself; what is new is how that journey plays out in the modern workplace, and what is at stake for individuals, businesses and entire economies.

Appendix I: Economic model methodology

Economist Impact has developed an impact model[40] to estimate the economic costs of loss of focus in the workplace across ten different countries.[41] The model incorporates a series of inputs including:

- A literature review of existing studies on productivity and focus, used to update and verify key assumptions for the economic model.
- A survey of knowledge workers in each country, used to understand the scope of distractions and lost focus.
- Macroeconomic data collected from official government bodies, used in estimating the economic cost of distractions.

For knowledge workers across five industries of focus—information (ie, media, technology), professional services, education, manufacturing, and retail (including consumer packaged goods)—the model quantifies:

- The average time lost in a year to distractions from key sources, including work-related meetings, work-related emails, work-related messages and other personal distractions.
- The total annual economic cost of time lost, reported in terms of salary payments, gross value added, output and firm profit.

For the purposes of this analysis, a "knowledge worker" is defined as a full-time employee whose work relies heavily on digital tools and consists primarily of non-repetitive, intellectual labor and problem solving as opposed to physical labor. Skilled-task workers, researchers, educators, analysts, managers, IT staff, executives and professionals are all examples of knowledge workers.

The model contains two core assumptions for determining the unproductive share of time related to various activities:

1. **Recovery time:** the time taken for knowledge workers to return to core activities following a distraction from different sources, including emails and meetings. The baseline assumptions in the model are based on findings from literature.
2. **Assumptions on the share of time spent on activities considered unproductive:** the model allows for certain activities

[40] This version of the model is based on the economic model developed in 2020 by Economist Impact. The 2020 model was replicated for the rest of the countries in the sample.
[41] The countries included in the analysis are Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Korea, Poland, the United Kingdom and the United States.

considered to be a distraction to nonetheless enable a degree of productive work. As such, only a proportion of the time spent on these activities is treated as unproductive.

a. For meetings, the unproductive share of time is drawn from survey findings and averages 27% for non-general staff and 21% for general staff across industries.

b. For work-related emails, messages and personal activities, assumptions have been derived based on findings from literature, equivalent to 20%, 50% and 50%, respectively.

In addition to these core assumptions, others are used in the model to understand the total time workers are typically engaged in various activities. These have been derived from survey findings and are used in conjunction with the above assumptions to estimate the total time lost to distractions in the workplace. They include:

- **Assumptions on time spent on different activities:** this captures the total time spent on different activities during a working day (both productive and unproductive), reported by workers in the survey. These activities include meetings, emails, messages and personal activities. Any remaining time during an eight-hour working day is assumed to be spent on core activities.
- **Assumptions on the frequency of activities:** this captures the number of times different activities are performed during a working day, including meetings and emails.

In some cases, these assumptions are specific to different sectors and/or different levels of seniority (including general staff and non-general staff).

The overall methodology is largely identical to that of our 2020 report. In both cases, the following limitations apply:

- Self-reported time spent on core and non-core tasks is survey-based and may therefore vary.
- The analysis focuses only on distractions emanating from the key sources enumerated above. While these likely capture the major drivers of distraction and loss of focus, there are other potential sources that can affect focus and engagement at work that are difficult to quantify.
- Economic impacts are assumed to be linear in strength (in other words, we assume each additional hour of productive work generates the same economic contribution as the previous hour).
- Productivity (value generated per worker) is assumed to be similar across organizations of different sizes, given that data are only available at the industry level.
- Micro-level synergies are not fully accounted for. For example, some distractions (such as meetings viewed as unproductive) might nonetheless convey some beneficial effects for productivity and focus later. We account for some of these synergies, but it is not possible to capture them all.

Appendix II: Survey

The following survey questions were asked to knowledge workers across ten countries. The question structure varies (eg, multiple choice, rank choice, select any that apply, etc). Detailed answer options for each question are not shown.

QD1.	In which country do you live? Select one.
QD2.	What is your organization's primary industry? Select one.
QD3.	How many employees work for your organization globally? Select one.
QD4.	Which of the following best describes your title? Select one.
QD5.	What is your main functional role? Select one.
QD6.	By this definition, would you consider yourself to be a knowledge worker? Select one.
QD7.	In what year were you born? Select one.
QD8.	Which best represents your gender? Select one.

Q1.	On a typical workday, how many hours a day do you spend at work (including working remotely)? Select one.
Q2.	On a typical workday, what overall percentage of your working hours do you devote to productive work? Select one.
Q3.	What are your primary and secondary working locations? Select one. (Primary location)
Q4.	What are your primary and secondary working locations? Select one. (Secondary location)
Q5.	Which of the following most accurately describes your current working arrangement? Select one.

Q6A.	How would you compare the following aspects of your experience with remote/hybrid work to fully in-person work? Select one for each row.
Q6B.	How would you compare the following aspects of your experience with fully in-person work to remote/hybrid work? Select one for each row.
Q7.	On a typical workday, what is the average length of time you typically spend focused on any given piece of productive work without any break or distraction? Select one.
Q8.	Do you regularly employ any automation tools in your work? Select one.
Q9.	How has your use of automation tools impacted the following aspects of your work? Please select one in each row.
Q10.	As AI-related tools become more common, how would you most prefer to use these tools for work? Select up to 4.
Q11.	Which types of breaks or activities help you most to recharge/regain focus during the workday? Select up to 3.
Q12.	Which of the following most distracts you from engaging in productive work when you are working in the office? Select up to 3.
Q13.	Which of the following most distracts you from engaging in productive work when you are working from home? Select up to 3.
Q14.	On a typical workday, how many work-related meetings (including virtual ones) do you attend? Select one.
Q15.	On a typical workday, how many hours per day do you spend doing the following activities? Select one in each row.
Q16.	On a typical workday, what share, if any, of the time you spend in meetings (including virtual ones) would you consider a waste of time? Select one.
Q17.	On a typical workday, how often do you do the following, on average? Select one in each row.
Q18.	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements with regards to remote collaboration tools at work? Select one in each row.
Q19.	To the best of your knowledge, does your organization have any of the following policies or programs in place? Select all that apply.
Q20.	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Select one in each row.

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