

It Doesn't Have to be Crazy at Work

Jason Fried, David Heinemeier Hansson

First

It's crazy at work

But the thing is, there's not more work to be done all of a sudden. The problem is that there's hardly any uninterrupted, dedicated time to do it. People are working more but getting less done. It doesn't add up - until you account for the majority of time being wasted on things that don't matter.

Out of the 60, 70, 80 hours a week many people are expected to pour into work, how many of those hours are really spent on the work itself? And how many are tossed away in meetings, lost to distraction, and withered away by inefficient business practices? The bulk of them.

The modern workplace is sick. Chaos should not be the natural state at work. Anxiety isn't a prerequisite for progress. Sitting in meetings all day isn't required for success. These are all perversions of work - side effects of broken models and follow-the-lemming-off-the-cliff worst practices. Step aside and let the suckers jump.

Your company is a product

Yes, the things you make are products (or services), but your company is the thing that makes those things. That's why your company should be your best product.

Everything in this book revolves around that idea. That, like product development, progress is achieved through iteration. If you want to make a product better, you have to keep tweaking, revising, and iterating. The same thing is true with a company.

Curb Your Ambition

Happy Pacifists

Mark Twain nailed it: "Comparison is the death of joy." We're with Mark.

Defend Your Time

8's enough, 40's plenty

Those 40 hour weeks are made of 8-hour days. And 8 hours is actually a long time. It takes about 8 hours to fly direct from Chicago to London. Ever been on a transatlantic flight like that? It's a long flight! You think it's almost over, but you check the time and there's still 3 hours left.

Every day your workday is like flying from Chicago to London. But what does the flight feel longer than your time in the office? It's because the flight is uninterrupted, continuous time. It feels long because it *is* long!

Your time in the office feels shorter because it's sliced up into a dozen smaller bits. Most people don't actually have 8 hours a day to work, they have a couple of hours. The rest of the day is stolen from them by meetings, conference calls, and other distractions. So while you may be at the office for 8 hours, it feels more like just a few.

Protectionism

They guard so many things, but all too often they fail to protect what's both most vulnerable and most precious: their employees' time and attention.

Companies spend their employees' time and attention as if there were an infinite supply of both. As if they cost nothing. Yet employees' time and attention are among the scarcest resources we have.

At Basecamp, we see it as our top responsibility to protect our employees' time and attention. You can't expect people to do great work if they don't have a full day's attention to devote to it. Partial attention is barely attention at all.

The outwork myth

What's worse is when management holds up certain people as having a great "work ethic" because they're always around, always available, always working. That's a terrible example of a work ethic and a great example of someone who's overworked.

A great work ethic isn't about working whenever you're called upon. It's about doing what you say you're going to do, putting in a fair day's work, respecting the work, respecting the customer, respecting coworkers, not wasting time, not creating unnecessary work for other people, and not being a bottleneck. Work ethic is about being a fundamentally good person that others can count on and enjoy working with.

Work doesn't happen at work

Ask people where they go when they really need to get something done. One answer you'll rarely hear: the office.

That's right. When you really need to get work done you rarely go into the office. Or, if you must, it's early in the morning, late at night, or on the weekends. All the times when no one else is around. At that point it's not even "the office" - it's just a quiet space where you won't be bothered.

Office hours

Imagine the day of an expert who frequently gets interrupted by everyone else's questions. They may be fielding none, a handful, or a dozen questions in a single day, who knows. What's worse, they don't know when these questions might come up. You can't plan your own day if everyone else is using it up randomly.

So we borrowed an idea from academia: office hours. All subject-matter experts at Basecamp now publish office hours. For some that means an open afternoon every Tuesday. For others it might be one hour a day. It's up to each expert to decide their availability.

But what if you have a question on Monday and someone's office hours aren't until Thursday? You wait, that's what you do. You work on something else until Thursday, or you figure it out for yourself before Thursday. Just like you would if you had to wait to talk to your professor.

This might seem inefficient at first glance. Bureaucratic, even. But we've seen otherwise. Office hours have been a big hit at Basecamp.

Feed Your Culture

The owner's word weighs a ton

An owner unknowingly scattering people's attention is a common cause of the question "Why's everyone working so much but nothing's getting done?"

It takes great restraint as the leader of an organization not to keep lobbing ideas at everyone else. Every such idea is a pebble that's going to cause ripples when it hits the surface. Throw enough pebbles in the pond and the overall picture becomes as clear as mud.

Evading responsibility with a "But it's just a suggestion" isn't going to calm the waters. Only knowing the weight of the owner's word will.

Library rules

While closed, private individual offices are one reasonable solution, if everyone doesn't get one you'll be breeding bitterness. But there's good news: You don't have to give up on the open-plan office per se, but you do need to give up on the typical open-office mindset.

That's what we did with our Chicago office at Basecamp. Rather than thinking of it as an office, we think of it as a library. In fact, we call our guiding principle: Library Rules.

Walk into a library anywhere in the world and you'll notice the same thing: it's quiet and calm. Everyone knows how to behave in a library. In fact, few things transcend cultures like library behavior. It's a place where people go to read, think, study, focus, and work. And the hushed, respectful environment reflects that.

Isn't that what an office should be? People who visit our office for the first time are startled by the silence and serenity. It doesn't look, sound, or behave like a traditional office. That's because it's really a library for work rather than an office for distraction.

In our office, if someone's at their desk, we assume they're deep in thought and focused on their work. That means we don't walk up to them and interrupt them. It also means conversations should be kept to a whisper so as not to disturb anyone who could possibly hear you. Quiet runs the show.

To account for the need for the occasional full-volume collaboration, we've designated a handful of small rooms in the center of the office where people can go to if they need to work on something together (or make a private call).

A few simple choices, a shift in mindset, and a culture respect for everyone's time, attention, focus, and work are all that's necessary to make Library Rules your rules. People already instinctively know Library Rules, they just need to practice them at the office, too.

Skeptical? Make the first Thursday of the month Library Rules day at the office. We bet your employees will beg for more.

Dissect Your Process

Commitment, not consensus

Last thing: What's especially important in disagree-and-commit situations is that the final decision should be explained clearly to everyone involved. It's not just decide and go, it's decide, explain, and go.

Narrow as you go

It's almost impossible to work on something and not be tempted to chase all the exciting new what-if and we-could-also ideas that come up. There's always one more thing it could do, one more improvement it should have. But if you actually want to make progress, you have to narrow as you go.

After the initial dust settles, the work required to finish a project should be dwindling over time, not expanding. The deadline should be comfortably approaching, not scarily arriving. Remember: Deadlines, not dreadlines.

Have less to do

Management scholar Peter Drucker nailed it decades ago when he said "There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all." Bam!