



A Self-Management
Guide to
**WORKING
FROM
ANYWHERE**



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What have you learned about yourself since COVID-19 began?

That was the opening ice-breaker question before Align's recent [remote quarterly planning session](#). The question allowed our team to open up about the struggles of staying focused in our new environments and the strategies we've used to [stay productive during the disruption](#).

With recreation options closed, children home from school, and abundant health worries, few of us have managed to maintain a consistent schedule day-in and day-out.

For most of us, the workday routine became a cobble of habits we developed, consciously or not, and ways to get work done even when everything around us is chaos. We have some good days and some bad. We're making efforts to try new strategies and improve our ability to live happy and productive lives.

Whether you're on the brink of burnout or holding steady, a new quarter offers an opportunity to reassess how well your habits and schedule are performing. Let's look at the top strategies we've seen for staying productive and sane in the "new normal".

MANAGING YOUR ROUTINE WHILE WORKING FROM ANYWHERE

Let's face it. At some point since March 2020, all of us have felt overwhelmed.

Staying focused and productive while overwhelmed is an uphill battle. On days when everything seems to be working against you, prioritizing the basics becomes the best way to fight the emotional exhaustion that comes from being overwhelmed for too long — burn out.

After one particularly grueling tax season, [Ernst and Young hired Tony Schwartz](#), author and CEO of The Energy Project, to help their team reduce turnover. After months of late nights spent working against deadlines, burned-out employees were eager to bolt to jobs where they wouldn't feel forced to choose work over personal life and well-being. Over half of a 40 person team turned over in the busy season prior to Tony's arrival.

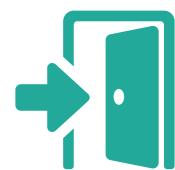
The course Ernst and Young implemented was built around 5 simple renewal techniques:



Get at least 7 hours of sleep
and set a bed time



Break
every 90 minutes



Leave your desk
for lunch



Get off digital devices
at a [defined time](#) every day



Do the most important thing first
in the morning for at least 60 min
each day, no interruptions

With these practices in place, only one person on the team, down from twenty the year prior, turned-over at the end of the season, and employees on average left the office 90 minutes earlier.

With the economy in flux and mounting responsibilities at home, many of us face challenges much like EY accountants did during tax season, feeling unable to ever step away. The proven solution involved techniques focused on our "Timeboxing", the practice of allocating specific time to work, self-care, and personal duties, with an emphasis on restoring our mental capacity.

Getting the Most Important Thing Done

We love the metaphor of Rocks and Sand to describe this prioritization. Your most important work items and critical renewal practices serve as the Rocks. If all the other responsibilities we face in the day are Sand, we see that only by putting the Rocks in first and then the Sand, can we avoid overflow. An overflowing jar is a recipe for burnout, as we sacrifice more to accomplish what needs to get done.



At Align, our CEO enjoys waking up early to exercise, check emails, and complete his most important tasks before the rest of his family wakes up. Others with young children set aside time after they've gone to bed to complete the day's most critical work..

As these different schedules show keeping up with strict time boxing can be especially challenging with the chaos and distractions of working during COVID-19. While finding an uninterrupted hour first thing on your schedule may not be possible, blocking an hour at some point for your most important work each day is critical for maintaining productivity. We've found that writing down and sharing this [top priority every day](#) helps build accountability and improves the likelihood that you get it done.

For employees at PWC, the best time for this focused work was first thing in the morning. As each of us adapts to our own conditions, we can all timebox our most productive hour for our most important work in accordance with our needs.

Deciding What Matters

Once we begin structuring our time for productivity, we need to structure our work so we make progress on what matters.

David Allen, the author of [Getting Things Done](#), has won countless followers with his method for breaking down what's stressing us out into actionable items. Getting started follows five main steps:

- 1 Capture everything.** Using whatever tool you'd like, write down every responsibility you have as it comes up. To-dos, ideas, recurring tasks, and everything else should be recorded immediately in the most convenient way.
- 2 Clarify your to-dos.** Break down responsibilities into actionable steps with deadlines. As Allen explains, defining this upfront means less time figuring out what tasks meant when it comes time to do them. Structuring to-dos in a [SMART](#) way can help you stay on target.

- 3 Organize and prioritize your action items.** Creating categories for your to-dos and assigning a priority to them will structure your work. In this step, you ensure deadlines are set and you'll easily be able to determine what needs to be done first.
- 4 Reflect on your list.** Frequently reviewing your to-dos ensure that you've structured items clearly and effectively. This is an opportunity to determine whether you've structured work in alignment with your purpose, goals, and projects.
- 5 Get to work.** If you've effectively organized and prioritized your to-dos you'll know what needs to be done and when. You've brought structure to chaos and are ready to jump in.

While the Getting Things Done methodology has sprung a variety of practices and tools, these basic steps are critical to any system for structuring to-dos. When you have time to focus on productive work, you'll know what needs to be done.



Avoiding Distraction

As we work to maintain our productivity without sacrificing our sanity, we may find ourselves distracted. In a study conducted by [Blind](#), 53% of respondents said productivity levels have been impacted due to changes in mental health while working from home.

In his 2019 book [Indistractable: How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life](#), author and [guest contributor to this blog](#), Nir Eyal breaks down the causes of distraction and how to address them in our lives.

For Nir, distraction occurs when our to-dos are not in line with our values. "Instead of starting with what we are going to do," says

Nir in *Indistractable*, "we should begin with why we're going to do it. And to do that we must begin with our values. Values are like a compass which points us towards the direction that we want to go." If our objectives are not in alignment with the direction we want to head, we are more likely to get off track.

To remedy this, Nir recommends reflecting on the question, "When in my [schedule](#) did I do what I said I would do and when did I get distracted?" Tasks we got distracted on were likely not structured in line with our values.

“Does your calendar reflect your values?” Nir wants us to ask. “To be the person you want to be you have to make time to live your values.”

From Surviving to Thriving

Beyond productivity hacks, structuring your routine around your values and goals ensures you make progress towards what matters even when emergencies and distractions arise.

The coronavirus outbreak threw routines into disarray and forced us all to reevaluate how we prioritize and structure our time. As we struggle to balance our work, relationships, and mental and physical well-being, we also have an opportunity to build [habits](#) that will help us achieve our long-term vision.

Figuring out what the most important things are and when we can get them done is the first step towards better living our values. If we can successfully manage this, there will be a silver lining to the chaos.

NIR EYAL ON HOW SLACK'S COMPANY CULTURE DESTROYED DISTRACTION

Editors Note: The follow up to his first bestseller, 'Hooked' (Silicon Valley's handbook for making habit-forming technology), "Indistractable" lays out the key to getting the best out of technology, without letting it get the best of you. Distraction at work, Nir says, is really a symptom of the dysfunctional company culture around you.



By Nir Eyal

"Work hard and go home."

That's not a slogan you'd expect from a company whose product has enabled work to spill into every area of its 10 million users' lives. As the creator of one of the most popular group chat apps, Slack is in a unique position to understand its product's uses and misuses as well as how a company's culture can destroy distraction.

One fast track to a distraction-filled workplace is an “always-on work culture,” which can be described, in part, by the Cycle of Responsiveness. It goes something like this:

- 1** A company’s culture sets the expectation that “People here are always connected.”
- 2** This reduces the perceived control employees have over their time, creating distracting psychological tension.
- 3** They think, “To get ahead, I need to be always available.”
- 4** This then furthers the expectations that employees should be available at all times.

The leadership at Slack understands that having parents answer emails at their children’s soccer games isn’t the best way to maximize productivity or morale. They understand the cost of extreme accessibility and have taken significant steps to make sure the company doesn’t set harmful expectations about accessibility.

The three strategies Slack uses to destroy distractions also counter the Cycle of Responsiveness. The fact that Slack is able to achieve this is proof that technology isn’t solely at fault for the unproductive expectations about availability. Any company can use their playbook in order to create a culture that gives employees a sense of control over their time.

Lead by Example

Bill Macaitis, who served as Slack’s chief revenue officer and chief marketing officer, has the following to say about his personal use of Slack: “I’m a big productivity guy ... You need to have uninterrupted work time ... This is why—whether I’m dealing with Slack or email—I always block off time to go in and check messages and then return to uninterrupted work.” Macaitis’ personal productivity gain from his habits may be less important than the signal that’s sent to the rest of the organization. I’m not always available, and you don’t need to be either.

Amir Shevat, Slack’s former director of developer relations, describes how this type of behavior has seeped into the company’s culture, “It’s not polite to send direct messages after hours or during weekends.” He sets a powerful example by giving coworkers his undivided attention while in meetings. “When I give someone my time, I’m focused 100 percent and never open a phone during a meeting. That is super important to me.” This

type of commitment makes it more likely that the rest of the organization will respect the time they spend meeting with coworkers throughout the day. By showing that he's okay with being fully present with one person at a time he sets the precedent that others don't need to try to be in multiple places or meetings at once.

Precommitment Pacts

Precommitment Pacts can help us overcome our impulsivity by removing future choices. The most famous example of this may be Ulysses in *The Odyssey*. In order to hear the Sirens' song without crashing his ship, Ulysses has his crew tie him to the mast of his ship. He's then unable to act on the impulses created by the Siren's call. Our daily struggle with distraction may not feel quite as dramatic, but the consequences can be catastrophic for our productivity.

There are three types of precommitment pacts. Effort pacts prevent distraction by making unwanted behaviors more difficult to do. Price pacts prevent distractions by making unwanted behaviors more costly to do. And Identity pacts prevent distractions by making unwanted behaviors clash with our sense of self. Each gets its own chapter in my book *Indistractable: How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life*. Slack has a powerful effort pact built-in as a feature and its expected that employees use it heavily.

I'm referring to the widely underused "Do Not Disturb" feature. Using this feature when you want to focus on focused work, family time, or anything else, guarantees you won't find distractions from your group chat. Shevat told me that if an employee tries to send a message when they shouldn't, "you will get hit by the Do Not Disturb feature. If it's after hours, it turns on automatically so you don't get direct messages until you get back to work."

This simple feature combined with a culture that respects it is a potent combination for increasing productivity.



Psychological Safety

This may not seem obvious, but a company culture that creates psychological safety is one that destroys distractions. Distractions start as internal triggers, emotions or impulses that demand relief. These internal triggers will be addressed by employees—whether they choose a healthy or unhealthy way of addressing them largely depends on the company's culture. Research has found that fostering psychological safety can help employees positively handle many of these issues. One way to do this is to make sure employees feel they can express their concerns (that they'd likely otherwise keep to themselves) while being heard by leadership.

Slack has achieved this at a huge scale using its own product. Just as the company has chat channels for “pet photos” and “Star Wars,” they have channels for Slack culture and executive AMA's. They even have a channel called “#beef-tweets” where the comments, according to Shevat, “can get very prickly.”

“People will post all sorts of suggestions and are encouraged to do so,” says Shevat. It's important that employees feel they can air concerns, but it's equally important they feel these concerns are heard. The leadership at Slack has found a simple, ingenious, solution to what could be a monumental challenge: emojis. “Management lets people know they've read their feedback with an eyes emoji. Other times, if something is handled or fixed, someone will respond with a checkmark.”

While not every concern should be handled in a group chat, the ability to air concerns freely creates a sense of psychological safety that can help reduce the chance of psychological strain found in toxic work environments. Not every company's culture includes a Slack channel for “#beef-tweets,” but employees need something similar.

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Slack's commitment to making its employees indistractable shows up in its Glassdoor.com scores, where it has an anonymous review of 4.8 out of 5 stars, with 95 percent of employees saying they'd recommend the company to a friend, and 99 percent approval of the CEO. How can you use their playbook?

How can you set an example that increases psychological safety and kills the unhealthy Cycle of Responsiveness? What precommitment pacts can you support your team in using? Are your employees able to air concerns openly and feel heard?

MANAGING YOUR GOALS WHILE WORKING FROM ANYWHERE

Few events in human history have derailed as many goals as the outbreak of COVID-19 did.

Maybe you dreamed of seeing your child cross the graduation stage or walk down the aisle. Maybe it was the European vacation you've always dreamed of. Maybe it was attending a yearly festival or sporting event.

Suddenly, the cancellations and social isolation the coronavirus outbreak mandated made it all impossible.

For those who worked for years to make these dreams come true, the disruption was devastating. Having taken care of everything under your control, overcoming adversity along the way, only to have global events cancel your dream is a crushing scenario.

This disappointment and devastation felt by anyone with personal goals canceled by COVID-19 mirrors the feelings of many business leaders looking back on the last quarter's goals. Plans for growth and hiring were largely put on hold as industries adjusted to changing conditions.

As we examine the wreckage of our personal and professional goals, we may find ourselves uncertain of what lies ahead and unwilling to make new goals for the future.

If we shy away from creating new goals, however, we risk becoming apathetic about our situations. Rather than holding off on reimagining our goals, current uncertainty calls for new, more adaptive ways of planning our goals.

This flexible thinking focused equally on our ability to live every day to its fullest and our larger goals can bring us success both in our personal and professional lives.

Joining Everyday Success with Long-Term Vision

While not everyone requires goals for motivation, goals are quite necessary for creating direction and purpose in our lives. As Lewis Carol's Cheshire Cat told Alice, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there."

Decisions about how we spend our time and structure our days are impossible without some knowledge of what we are working towards. Our ability to find meaning and create energy every day relies on this sense of direction.

The challenge with planning goals in the age of COVID-19 is the looming uncertainty that threatens to make mincemeat of our dreams. Planning beyond a weekly or even monthly horizon seems futile. This doesn't mean dreaming of a post-COVID world is futile. When coronavirus subsides (and it will), those individuals who found reason to persist and improve despite uncertainty will be stronger and more prepared for the world ahead.

The key is connecting your everyday actions with a set of flexible long-term goals. If your goal is to retire in 15 years, your financial behavior today must still follow a set of spending and saving habits. While some investments may sour due to economic impacts, a belief in the ultimate outcome will still inform your actions today.

Creating plans for achieving your goals that are flexible to changing circumstances creates resiliency. If your goal is health or fitness related, local restrictions may derail your plan to go to the gym or work with a personal trainer. If your plan focused however on a daily exercise goal, you may be able to adapt with in-home workouts or virtual training.

What emerges is two basic planning habits. The first is the ability to make progress on your goals each and every day, regardless of circumstance. The second is to look forward and make plans that adapt to obstacles before they derail your progress.

Just because the world six months to a year from now is highly unpredictable does not mean that you can't plan progress to your goals and bring purpose to every day.

Habits for Life

These transformed ways of developing and executing goals may be new for many individuals and businesses. The time and energy spent on adapting these habits will pay massive dividends in the long run.

If you're looking for help with getting started, we recommend our [guide to goal planning and guide to getting things done during COVID-19](#).

While the shock of the effects of COVID-19 may be demoralizing, there is cause for optimism. As we make progress every day to our ultimate goals, we drive positive change in ourselves and those around us. With the right planning mindset, anything is achievable.



MANAGING YOUR CAREER WHILE WORKING FROM ANYWHERE

Everyone gets managed. Even CEOs have to answer to their board or shareholders.

At stake in the manager-reporter relationship is the ability to advance your career, gain recognition and raises, and find meaning in your job.

“Managing Up” is the practice of making your relationship with your manager work for you. The difference between “managing up” well and doing it poorly is the difference between feeling motivated and engaged at work and feeling like a cog in the machinery. “Managing Up” helps maintain motivation, by ensuring your work is recognized and you stay on track towards your long-term career goals.

We’ve written extensively about the hallmarks of productive management: goal measurement, frequent communication, and tapping into purpose. All of these practices equally apply to “managing up” – the art of aligning your boss’s goals with your own to exceed expectations.

“Managing Up”, like managing a team, requires the ability to understand barriers to success and work proactively to avoid them. At its heart, “Managing Up” is about building the cooperation and mutual respect necessary for collective, rather than individual, achievement.

Let’s break down 5 keys to effective “managing up” that can help you earn recognition, get promoted, and feel more valued.

Communicate early and often

Communication is the most important factor for gaining recognition. If you do not have consistent, regular check-ins with your manager to review progress, there is no way to know where you stand. Frequent, well-structured 1-on-1s give you an opportunity to share updates, address blockers, and ask questions. Especially when working on remote teams, communicating progress helps your manager support you and provide course correction early if needed.

Know your boss’s priorities and goals

With good communication comes greater knowledge. Knowing your manager’s goals and the goals of your organization is critical for understanding what success in your role means. You’re more likely to gain recognition for your efforts when your work helps your boss and your organization achieve more.

When your personal goals align with your manager's and organization's goals, you don't have to worry about whether you're focusing on the right things. Understanding your team's strategy to focus your work, helps build a stronger relationship with your manager and colleagues. You're more likely to be recognized for your work and earn promotion when your co-workers see that your work is powering everyone's success and not just your own.

Transparently Track Progress

Managers value accountability in their reports. Being able to trust that their teams are making progress on what matters most frees up mental energy and time. Successfully "managing up" means building that trust with transparency into progress on your goals. As part of consistent 1-on-1s, discussing progress on your personal goals, priorities, or OKRs, helps establish your accountability. You'll gain recognition when you're ahead on goals and be able to solicit assistance if you fall behind. Avoiding discussing your progress puts you at risk of negative results when performance review time rolls around.

Anticipate needs and avoid surprises

An essential component of "managing up" is anticipating the needs of your manager and organization. Prior to any communication with your manager, ask yourself "What information does my manager need to know for us both to be successful?" Understanding both of your goals as well as where you stand helps paint a clear picture of what's worth highlighting. In addition to taking this burden off your manager, anticipating their needs allows you to drive the discussion and highlight your best work.

"Managing Up" doesn't mean kissing up and avoiding bad news, rather it means working to proactively address underperformance before it develops into a surprise crisis. If you anticipate missing a target, communicating why and what you're going to do about it before it happens helps avoid trying to reactively explain in a performance review.

Get Vulnerable with your Manager

At the root of Patrick Lencioni's 5 Dysfunctions of a Team is the absence of trust and fear of conflict. Healthy relationships, whether with colleagues, managers, or friends, derive from an authentic, non-judgmental connection. As social Researcher Brene Brown says, "I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship."

Just as understanding your manager's goals is important for "managing up", so too is building a relationship where your manager understands your personal and career aspirations. Teamwork allows us to achieve more together by channeling individual excellence into collective success. When your manager understands what motivates you, they can better help you achieve your goals.

In an era of widespread distrust and uncertainty, establishing this connection with your manager is critical for your well-being. As we work to balance our work and our home lives, a trusting, cooperative relationship with our managers is key to our work goals stay in harmony with everything else in our lives.



OTHER RESOURCES

Articles

[Remote Strategic and Adaptive Planning: Separate But Together](#)

[Staying Motivated with Goal Planning in the Age of Coronavirus](#)

[9 Tips for Productive and Efficient Zoom and Microsoft Teams Virtual Meetings](#)

[Managing a More Efficient, Happier Team with Align](#)

[5 Best Practices for Managing Huddles with a Remote Team](#)

Downloads

[Virtual Backgrounds](#)

Fun

[Listen to Align's Work From Home Playlist While You Work From Home](#)

[15 Teambuilding Ideas](#)

Webinars

[Daily Dose May 1st with Hugh Gyton on Maintaining Productive Focus while Remote](#)

[Daily Dose for May 6th with Arnie Malham on Creating a Culture of Learning in Your Remote Team](#)

[Daily Dose 5/5 with Shawn Johal on Building a Resilient Remote Team](#)

[Daily Dose May 1st with Hugh Gyton on Maintaining Productive Focus while Remote](#)

[Daily Dose 5/11 with Andy Clayton on Emotional Resiliency for Leaders During Disruption](#)

[Daily Dose 5/15 with Neale Lewis on Creating a Culture of Recognition on Your Remote Team](#)

[Daily Dose 5/28 with Jennifer Faught on Keeping Your Remote Team Focused and Motivated](#)

[Webinar Recap: "A Leader's Guide to Building a High-Performing Culture of Accountability in Today's New World" with Hayley Erner](#)