

# BRAINPOWER WASTE: CHALLENGES OF REMOTE WORKING



by Julie Savage-Fournier | JSF Optimization

In the last year, there has been a rising concern about Zoom fatigue and the remote-working burn-out. However, these issues are not the result of a lockdown, the pandemic simply added a layer of stress that made visible the fragility of our well-being at work.

For decades, we have known that maintenance is an important part of keeping machines productive. Yet we know very little about keeping our brains in working condition, even when it has become the main working tools for so many.

Most articles and advice will focus on the individual's responsibility for resting, adopting a healthy lifestyle or meditation. This is not where I want to go today. Why? Because the design of workplaces and processes can overburden the workers' brain, very often with things that are easy to change. The responsibility of mental hygiene does not lie solely on the individuals.

In this article, you will learn about some simple ways to reduce brainpower waste and how they can contribute to both productivity and well-being in your organization. You will see many lean principles

can be repurposed to design mental-friendly workplaces and are easy to work into your continuous improvement routines.

## Reduce Memory Load: From To-do Lists to Triggers

Memory is the inventory waste of our mental processes. The warehouse is the equivalent of the "event memory" that is also called "long-term memory," and the work in progress (WIP) is represented by the "working memory."

The issue with "working memory" is it must refresh every 10 to 60 seconds and it uses the resources of the frontoparietal cortex. In plain language: it uses the part of your brain that needs the most energy to run, and it competes with other tasks like "problem solving," "understanding what you read" and "learning." Whenever we rely on the short-term memory for something, we reduce our capacity to perform these other tasks. If you are familiar with production planning, the short-term memory is the low-value-added task that uses your expensive bottleneck machine and limits your overall productivity. If your brain were a factory, you would try everything to get this task running somewhere else.



*To alleviate the strain on memory, many will use to-do lists.*

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They can be scribbled on any piece of paper or staged beautifully in a bullet journal. The interest of the list is whatever you write on paper will get out of your memory load and free up space for value-added thinking.

It's a very efficient strategy if you remember to look at your list.

To get the list to the next level, triggers can be scheduled. A trigger is a list with a timeline and a notification. It can be set up in a calendar application, on a Kanban board or as part of a routine. The key for a good trigger is to make sure it contains all the information required to perform the task.

When setting up an assembly workstation, we put all the parts within arm's reach. The same come true for mental work. If we have all the information collected in the same place when the work needs to be done, everything is more efficient. It can be done using hashtags, email rules, labels (they replace the "bin on the desk" method).

*“The key is not having to remember where the pieces of the puzzle are spread. Sorting and filing has not disappeared because the clutter has gone virtually.”*



## Control Attention: Balance Collaboration Time and Focus Time

Attention is another part of the brain spending a lot of energy. The average adult human can pay attention to around seven items at once. And by items, we mean the most elementary form of information, like a single word, a letter, or a number.

While many people believe they can multi-task, they are really switching their attention back and forth between tasks. Every switch is depleting our brain's energy. Changing context takes both time and resources. It is not an issue when we are functioning under our normal capacities. When the workload increases or fatigue starts to creep up, this ability to juggle multiple balls at once drops suddenly.

Stress, adapting to change or anxiety will reduce our attention. Then every distracting input further reduces the capacity to pay attention to what is important.

Remote workers told me their boss expects them to answer emails within 10 minutes of receiving them. The thing is, having emails, Teams, Slack and all those other notifications popping up all the time is impacting productivity much more than workplace chat.

The sudden change to remote working has added stress in the work

life, and significantly increased the number of interruptions and task-switching in a day. These two factors combined are detrimental to our capacity to focus on anything.

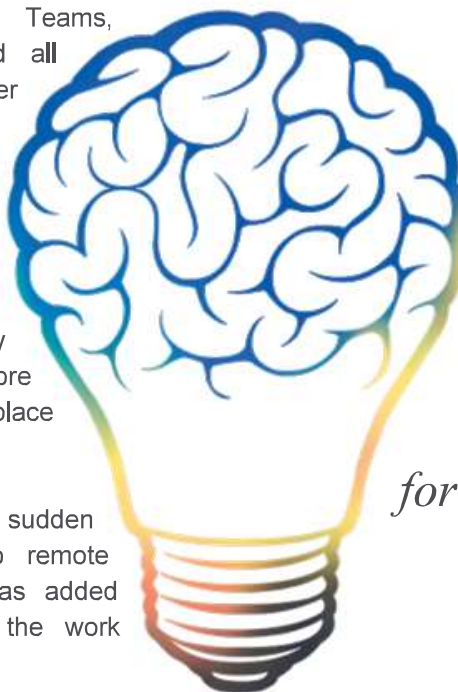
When in a traditional workplace, if someone has to walk to come talk to you, they will weigh the effort of walking against the value of what they have to say. They will also see when someone is already talking to you, you look focused on a task or you are in a meeting.

In remote working, these efforts and visual cues do not exist. The quantity of information and communications we receive has increased. The value has not.

Notifications, pop-ups and emails are like people gathering in your office talking on top of another. They are competing for your limited attention. How many tasks can be accomplished with dozens of people asking questions on different topics all at once? Can you answer them all while continuing to work?

*“In any work environment, it is important to set times for collaborative work and time for focused work.”*

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Because of the visual cues, it can be implemented on an individual basis while working on-site. Closing a door, going to a meeting room, putting on headphones can protect someone's concentration. When remote working, these times must be more formal.

They can be part of a routine collective schedule or the team can agree on signals to show when they are available or not. As an on-site manager, I had a routine to share my time between being on the gembu with my team and office work. This discipline is even more important remotely for the team to schedule their collaboration and their focus times.

The flexibility of remote work can be leveraged as collaboration time is synchronous work (everyone must be available at the same time) while focus time is asynchronous (it can be performed when most convenient for each individual).

#### **Rest and recharge: it does not mean doing nothing**

This flexibility, however, comes at a cost. For some, there is no more boundaries between work time and rest time.

“ *A Gallup study has shown remote workers clock in more hours. It may look like a good thing for productivity, but we know more motion does not mean more value.*

Working longer prevents employees from replenishing their energy. Maintenance is critical to keep machinery productive, and the same goes when humans are creating value. Keeping people in working order is part of the job. It means making sure that human needs are met, be them emotional, spiritual, or physical.

Promoting a good life hygiene, rather than rewarding competition and clocked hours, boost productivity. Resting will restore creativity, improve the ability to solve problems, increase the quality of communications.

“ *Remote workers are deprived from the social interactions of the workplace, they need time to get these interactions elsewhere.*

It is a basic human need to connect with others, as well as to exercise or to eat well. The gain of commute time should be used on filling these needs, not on clocking more unproductive hours.

Even when teams have everything at home to check that last detail or work the extra half hour to finish the report, leaders should have the discipline to refrain from asking this. Keeping a clear boundary between work and home is even more critical when both take place in the same space. ■

