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6 Strategies to Overcome Productivity Challenges Wherever You're Working

It's your job to drive results that have a significant impact on important business outcomes and achievements. You want to add value and make an impact, but it's hard to know whether you're working on the right things at the right times, which is especially challenging when you're working remotely. Add to that an avalanche of email, multiple chat apps, endless meetings, impossible-to-find information, mundane data entry, and version-control nightmares, and it's a wonder you can get anything done at all.

Work is dynamic — details change, priorities shift, even where you work can be upended — so you need a way to work that can keep up as your needs and requirements evolve. You need a way to work that makes it easy to collaborate, without frustrating silos, so you have the information you need to drive results. You need a way to work that frees you from manual re-work so you can use your time effectively and drive results. You need a way to work that doesn't drag you down, but helps you achieve everything you set out to do.

Here's a look at six aspects of work that are likely slowing you down and keeping you from delivering your best — and how you can rise above the chaos, focus on what matters most, and achieve more.

86%
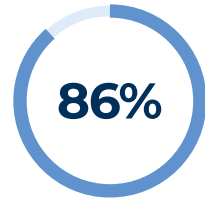
"86% of employees and executives blame workplace failures on ineffective communication and collaboration." [2]

– Gyben, Alessandra. *The Importance of Organizational Alignment and How to Achieve It*. 2019.

1.

You're well connected, but can't seem to be effective

Despite — or perhaps because of — status meetings, long email chains, and multiple chat apps, coordinating and collaborating within and across teams to work quickly and effectively with others can be a challenge. This can become even more difficult when working with teams outside of your organization or with remote teams.

When you're not on the same page with your team, it's nearly impossible to be effective. One survey found that 97% of employees and executives believe that alignment within a team impacts the outcome of a task or project, and 86% blame workplace failures on ineffective communication and a lack of collaboration.[1]

The COVID-19 pandemic has further illuminated the shortcomings of technology within the enterprise with stitched solutions implemented as a quick fix in a rapidly-changing world. Your days are still filled with meetings — only now they're virtual — and they rarely lead to any actual work getting done.

1, 2. *The Importance of Organizational Alignment and How to Achieve It*. Gyben, Alessandra. 2019.

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But as your organization navigates the post-COVID-19 business world, a 451 Research report warns you'll need to "...be careful not to double down on work practices that many employees didn't favor before the crisis — 25% of nonmanagerial employees prior to the current circumstances wanted more time focusing on their own work, not in conversation with others; 33% wanted less time in email and messaging apps."[3]

This dynamic world requires dynamic solutions that keep up with shifting situations and needs, and in the end solve problems that have been challenging workers for years.

The fix: Share, collaborate, and connect effectively from anywhere

Don't let misalignment with your team and other stakeholders lead to project failures. You need a way to collaborate that goes beyond email, chat, and even video conferencing — and enables you to work together in order to deliver — fast.

To share, collaborate, and connect effectively — both within and outside of your company — look for an enterprise platform that is accessible to everyone and serves as a single source of truth for all.

Enable frictionless sharing with a platform that allows free and open collaboration. Don't let licensing limit you — find a platform that lets you share with anyone.

Safely share information inside and outside of your organization with a platform that lets you decide whether or not people can view or contribute information. Give everyone access to the information they need — and no more.

Connect from anywhere with a platform that offers robust mobile applications so you and your team can share, collaborate, and contribute from wherever you're working.

When you give all of the people you're working with a clear view into the work you're trying to achieve, they become more informed, engaged, and accountable. What's more, you can move faster when everyone stays connected with each other — and with the latest critical information you need to keep going.

Take care not to double down on work practices that weren't working pre-COVID-19, like meeting marathons and email overload.

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3. *Coronavirus quick fixes aren't scalable; business leaders must rethink work itself. Marsh, Chris. 2020.*

2.

Email is increasing, but isn't a productivity tool

Do you feel like your work is constantly interrupted by email — even as you rely on it to keep things moving forward? Due to tools that are difficult to use and offer limited access, and a different chat app for every team, most people still primarily use email to try get work done across teams, organizations, and with external partners, vendors, and customers.

And as more people work from home due to COVID-19, the reliance on email as a standard communication tool has skyrocketed. Yet, even before COVID-19, according to Forrester Research, 77% of us use email to communicate internally and 76% use it to share information with external partners.[4]

You know how this goes. Your inbox becomes a task list. Documents are stored in email attachments for reference. Projects are managed through email, with teams sending spreadsheets back and forth in an attempt to track progress. Merely trying to move work forward means you spend a significant amount of time in email. In fact, Forrester Research found that employees spend 13% of their time creating emails, documents, and presentations and 11% reading them.[5]

And it's no wonder you feel like you can't keep up. A report from The Radicati Group estimates that, on average, 126 emails are sent and received per person per day.[7] This huge volume of messages makes it hard to sort, search, or find relevant communications over time, let alone keep track of the version of important files or keep information secure.

Finally, the interruption-driven activities inherent in email reduce the amount of time spent on actual task activity to a mere 18%, according to Forrester Research[8] – which pencils out to only one day a week that you're actually able to focus on the tasks that drive your work forward.

13% of employees' time is spent creating emails, documents, and presentations.[6]

– The Forrester Wave™ Enterprise Collaborative Work Management, Q4 2016.

The fix: Stay focused on what matters, not on your email inbox

Getting out of your email inbox can help you stay more organized and stop feeling like communicating with others is just a waste of time. To reduce the frustration you feel when relying on email, look for a platform that lets you collaborate in real time with your team and across teams — and connects conversations directly to the work you're currently undertaking.

4, 5, 6, 8. *The Forrester Wave™: Enterprise Collaborative Work Management,* Q4 2016.

7.   *The Radicati Group, Inc. Email Statistics Report* 2015-2019.

Reduce endless email threads with a platform that captures conversations in context and automatically associates comments, instant messages — and even the errant email — with a commonly shared workspace that everyone who needs to can access.

Cut down on the time you spend composing and sending follow-up and reminder emails with a platform that enables you to automate requests for information, approvals, reminders, and notifications. Look for a platform that integrates with other collaboration apps you use as well, such as Facebook, Slack, or Microsoft Teams, so you can focus messages around project-specific channels or chats.

Moving your work onto a platform that lets you work more effectively with your team keeps email from being an overwhelming catchall for managing your work. This enables you to focus on the work that matters and achieve better outcomes, rather than spending so much time chasing down email threads. You'll be able to work more effectively, by staying connected with your colleagues and the most current information, without the headaches that come from email overload.

On average, 126 emails are sent and received per person per day.[9]

– The Radicati Group, Inc. Email Statistics Report 2015-2019
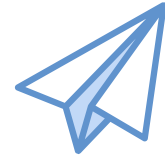
3.

You can't find the information you need to succeed

Not being able to find the information you need to complete the next stage of your project is frustrating at best. At worst, it puts projects at risk, causes you to miss deadlines, and keeps you from achieving your goals.

When technology and processes across your organization aren't standardized or integrated, systems don't work together, and the right information becomes impossible to track down. In today's dynamic world, information changes rapidly, often in disparate channels — spread across email, chat, slide decks, docs, and spreadsheets — that are disconnected and isolated from the work that needs to be done. This often leads to data that's inaccessible and out of date.

In fact, it's estimated that we spend 36% of the workday looking for and consolidating information.[10] And 44% of the time, we still can't find the information we need to get the job done. This results in decisions made and actions taken based on inaccurate

9. *The Radicati Group, Inc. Email Statistics Report* 2015-2019.
10. *Unlocking the Hidden Value of Information*, IDC, 2014.

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or insufficient information, which could range from mistakenly referencing a previous version of the spreadsheet your team is working from, missing key details from an email chain you weren't included on, or outdated data from a slide deck, to not being able to find any information at all. When caught in time, this inaccurate information might just lead to rework; however, if undetected such inaccuracies can be disastrous for projects and initiatives.

In addition to wasting time and leading to rework (or worse), all this searching for information makes us far less productive. The American Psychological Association estimates that up to 40% of our productive time can be wasted shifting between tasks.[11] So every time you have to stop what you're doing to look for the right information, you lose momentum on your work due to switching costs.

The fix: Stay informed and engaged with a dynamic single source of truth

Consolidating information into one platform that serves as your single source of truth enables even the fastest-moving teams to stay connected with each other across multiple locations, and have access to the latest, critical information.

Having all the information you need in one place can also save you a significant amount of time in the long run. You could save up to three hours a day when information is centralized where everyone can find it. And by working in one platform without switching between apps and tasks you could save an additional three hours each day.[12] Not only that, but you'll have all of the latest information — even in rapidly changing environments.

To create a space where you and everyone on your team can find the correct information they need to move their projects forward, look for a platform that lets you consolidate information — and integrate with other enterprise systems and applications you use.

Reduce the time spent searching for attachments in email with a centralized platform to work collectively and share documents, presentations, videos, and more. Look for a platform that integrates with content creation systems such as Google Drive and Microsoft Office 365.

Save up to three hours each day with a collaborative work management platform.[13]

– How Much Time Are You Wasting on Siloed Information?

11. Multitasking: Switching Costs, American Psychological Association, 2006.
12. Unlocking the Hidden Value of Information, IDC, 2014.
13. How Much Time Are You Wasting on Siloed Information?

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Get everyone on the same page with centralized information hubs that enable teams to stay in sync and save time looking for information. Find a platform that makes it easy for you to build out customized resources with templates and widgets — and without help from I.T.

Stop switching between multiple apps by pulling all of your tasks, to-dos, comments and communication, and data in a single workspace that integrates with your favorite enterprise apps, including Box, Tableau, DocuSign, and Dropbox.

With a single platform where you can find everything you need to get work done and centralize information where everyone can find it, you no longer have to waste your valuable time looking for the information you need to do your job. This will also help you stay on the same page with your team and maximize your effectiveness, no matter where you're working from.

4.

You waste your most productive time on low-value, repetitive tasks

Today, you have less time than ever to spend time on mundane tasks — especially when there are so many new ideas to go after that could make a difference. Yet it's easy to waste time on low-value, manual, and repetitive tasks — such as data entry, sending out reminders to your team, or asking for status updates — that have to get done to ensure the success of your work.

According to the Smartsheet Report: Automation in the Workplace, 40% of workers report that an entire quarter of their work week is spent on manual, repetitive tasks.[15] That's ten hours every week spent on work that needs to be done, but doesn't necessarily help you add value to your organization. Instead, these tasks make you less efficient — and less effective — by taking valuable time away from the work that really matters.

Repetitive, mundane tasks such as manual data entry aren't just a waste of time. Human error is rampant in manual data collection and data entry, and can erode the integrity of your data. In fact, researchers have found that the overwhelming majority of spreadsheets — a whopping 90% — contain errors that can range from minor to severe.[16]

40% of workers report that an entire quarter of their work week is spent on manual, repetitive tasks.[19]

– Smartsheet Report: Automation in the Workplace, 2017

40%
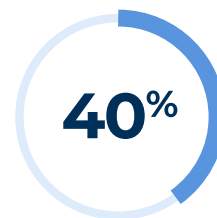
14. *How Much Time Are You Wasting on Siloed Information?*
15. *Smartsheet Report: Automation in the Workplace, 2017*
16. *The American Statistician, Data Organization in Spreadsheets, 2018*

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Not to mention the challenges you face when you're working from home, evidenced by the immediate shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. At home, you're balancing distractions and unprecedented stress, leading to limited availability and attention, which can also increase risk for error. And it's exponentially harder to focus on high value work and carve out time for deep focus when you're home and battling repeated requests for your time from your family.

The fix: Automate repetitive tasks so you can focus on your most important work

Automating manual, repetitive tasks and processes can have a huge impact on your day-to-day work. In fact, 86% of workers say automation makes employees more efficient and productive.[17] And 59% of workers surveyed estimate that they could save six or more hours a week with automation.[18]

To take full advantage of automation, look for a platform with powerful automation capabilities that eliminate manual processes, cut down on manual errors, and streamline workflows.

Eliminate human error and manual data entry by automatically gathering data through easy-to-build, customizable forms that make it easy to collect, organize, and act on data.

Boost effectiveness by building automated workflows to automatically request status updates, approvals, and other information.

Automate reminders of deadlines and key milestones to keep your team on track.

Get started right away with a no-code solution, so you can automate your work without being a coder, or needing help from I.T.

When you automate low-value, time-consuming tasks, you free up time for your most important work. You'll be able to quickly focus on the most important parts of your work, spend your time on higher-value deliverables that have a bigger impact on the business, and give yourself the space for creative thinking that leads to more innovation. Not to mention, you'll have more time to focus on the more interesting and rewarding aspects of your job, which can give you a sense of fulfillment.

The majority of workers estimate they could save six or more hours a week with automation.[20]

– Smartsheet Report: Automation in the Workplace, 2017

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5.

You lose precious work time building decks and reports "about" your work

Sharing accurate and timely data with your organization is critical to making the best possible decisions and taking the best course of action. After all, that data is often what informs your strategy and work.

But the administrative burden of reporting often means that by the time the data presented, it is already out of date. Once data is formatted as a spreadsheet and pulled into a slide deck to be sent out, it may be weeks or even months old. This can lead to a lack of visibility into the status and progress of projects, and decisions based on inaccurate information.

Creating reports and slide decks to convey information can be time-consuming, which takes away from the time you should be spending on your work itself. Time is wasted building decks and reports to talk about your work — and it's not always in the name of providing accurate data. An estimated 87% of our time spent building slide decks is spent on design — not on data.[21] And more than a third of us spend 10% of our time formatting slide decks.[22]

Often status meetings worsen, rather than help this reporting tax. Workers spend an average of 8.6 hours a week preparing for and attending status meetings.[23] This means more than a day of your work week is wasted just updating everyone else on the work you're doing. That's valuable time you could be spending actually doing the work.

The fix: Reclaim your workday with real-time visibility

Connected dashboards and reports can help save you time and give you real-time visibility into what you need to know to be successful. From pulling key metrics to updating project status, you can spend less time reporting on work — and more time doing the work. Plus, you could save up to one day a week when you eliminate the need for status meetings.

Workers spend an average of 8.6 hours a week preparing for and attending status meetings.[24]

– 17 Percent of Employees Would Rather Watch Paint Dry Than Attend Meetings. Zetlin, Minda. Inc.com

21, 22. *Presentations: How Much Do They Really Cost Your Business? Gusarov, Sergey.*

23, 24. *17 Percent of Employees Would Rather Watch Paint Dry Than Attend Meetings. Zetlin, Minda. Inc.com*

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To reduce your reporting tax and gain real-time visibility into project status as well as key metrics and performance indicators, look for a platform that lets you pull live data into your reports and dashboards.

To keep data up-to-date, find a platform that enables you to easily build custom dashboards with pre-built widgets or building blocks, so you can create what you need without help from IT.

Reduce your reporting tax with roll-up reports and live dashboards that automatically pull in real-time information into formats that are easy to view — and make it easy to spot trends.

Make status meetings matter. Cut down on the time spent updating each other on your current project status with a platform that lets you easily track and manage the status of tasks and projects — and automatically request status updates from fellow collaborators and other stakeholders.

With the right data at the right time, you can quickly identify trouble spots, react quickly to changes, and keep work moving forward. And when your teammates and leadership teams have limited availability when working remotely alongside their families, you give them the added benefit of fewer meetings and less time required to prepare for those meetings. With dashboards and reports, you give everyone insight into the work you're doing and everything you're achieving without bogging them down.

6.

You lack the tools or technical skills to "make it happen"

One of the most frustrating things that can happen at work is having a great idea that you can't turn into a reality because you don't have the right tools or technical skills to make it happen. Only one-third of employees are very satisfied with the mix of tools used to get their work done, according to 451 Research.[25] Many also struggle to leverage tools that often still don't integrate well, making it difficult to create useful and repeatable workflows to move work forward.[26]

Add to this overextended IT teams who seem to automatically say no because they can't imagine when they would find the time to build a custom solution or a custom integration for your specific project. And in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, you don't have time to learn to build it yourself, and your great ideas can't wait until IT works through their backlog to get to your request.

Only one-third of employees are very satisfied with the tools they have to get their work done.[27]

– Productivity Software Messaging Converges Around New Types of Digital Workspaces. 451 Research.

25, 26, 27. *Productivity Software Messaging Converges Around New Types of Digital Workspaces*. *451 Research.*

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Even before the COVID-19 crisis, addressing the digital transformation needs of the enterprise was increasing in importance. Another report from 451 Research indicates that "...businesses have been focusing on removing the pervasive friction across the siloed tools, information and data, and unactionable conversations and meetings that pervade almost every employee's typical day-to-day experience and can make execution against corporate strategies highly challenging."[28] If this crisis has proven anything, it's that this challenge needs to be addressed sooner rather than later.

The fix: Create solutions that meet your unique needs — and adapt as things change

IT doesn't want to be a blocker to your achievement. They want you to have the tools and solutions you need to do great things. Your IT team would love a platform that offers an intuitive UI, widget-driven dashboards, and configurable reports — one that lets you and your team customize your own workflows and solutions without the need for their technical support. But they also need to keep employees safe and maintain compliance, so they need a platform that meets their security standards.

To find a platform that will work for you right away, look for a no-code platform that empowers any user to easily design a solution that meets their unique needs — and adapts as needs evolve.

Easily run surveys and seamlessly capture other data with a platform that lets you easily create your own customized forms with simple building blocks.

Connect to real-time data on a platform that gives you the tools you need to quickly and easily create custom dashboards and reports.

Create your own automated workflows with a platform that offers easy-to-follow, step-by-step walkthroughs of how to build out powerful automations that work for you — whether you're automating reminders, notifications, or update and approval requests.

Get up to speed and working quickly with pre-built templates and solutions that you can roll out for your team or business unit — without help from IT.

There's no limit to what you can achieve with a platform that gives you the building blocks and ready-made solutions to drive your work forward.
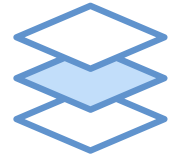
Look for a no-code platform that empowers any user to design their own solution.

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28. Coronavirus quick fixes aren't scalable; business leaders must rethink work itself. Marsh, Chris. 2020.

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Achieve more with a platform that lets you work your way

As your role develops within your organization, you'll want a flexible platform that evolves with your organization and the business landscape. But most importantly, you'll want a flexible platform that adapts with you, keeping up with your work and your ambitions. Ideally, you no longer need to juggle too many chat apps, sort through emails to find important files or conversations, yawn through unnecessary status meetings, burn out from manual data entry, or wonder if the document you're working from is the most recent version.

With the right platform, you can focus on the work that engages, fulfills, and motivates you to innovate — wherever that may be. Once you get back the time you lose to these costly processes, you can improve work-life balance (and take a real lunch break), and make it easier for leaders within your company to recognize the great work you do every day.

Smartsheet is the work execution platform that gives you the building blocks to drive achievement, no matter the scale of your ambition. Our flexible, no-code platform empowers any user to easily design a solution that meets their unique needs. Learn more at smartsheet.com.

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