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It is no secret that many employees face work environments that are not very engaging. [A 2016 poll by the Gallup Organization](#) shows that only 13% of employees worldwide are engaged at work. And when it comes to enhancing employees' engagement (i.e., energy, enthusiasm, and focus), much of the popular narrative has focused on organizational factors such as job design, leadership, or culture. But these factors are often outside of an employee's control. As a result, beyond trying to find the

right fit professionally, the overall picture seems to suggest that employees are at the mercy of their organizations and bosses when it comes to how engaged they will be at work.

In a research [article](#) in *The Journal of Applied Psychology*, we and our colleagues (Andrew Brodsky at The University of Texas at Austin, Subrahmaniam Tangirala at the University of Maryland, and Sanford DeVoe at the University of California Los Angeles) investigated how employees can take back more control over their work engagement through better self-management. We found that increasing your engagement and productivity at work could be as simple as making a plan for the day. But these positive effects depended on what *type* of plan employees used and how many interruptions or disruptions they faced in their day-to-day work.

We investigated two types of daily planning and how they influence employee engagement in dynamic work environments. The first type is commonly known as time-management planning, which involves making to-do lists, prioritizing and scheduling tasks, and ultimately managing one's time. Despite its popularity and acclaimed benefits, little research has actually investigated this type of planning in real work contexts.

The second type of planning is referred to as “contingent planning,” in which people consider the possible disruptions or interruptions they may face in their work day and devise a plan to address them if they occur. Contingent planning is less commonly used than time-management planning because individuals frequently make plans that overestimate how much they will get done and underestimate (or fail altogether) to account for how their work will be disrupted.

In theory, both types of planning should enhance employee engagement because they involve setting more specific goals for the day, which should help employees focus their time and attention, as well increase their sense of progress as they more clearly see the accomplishment of their tasks (see “[The Power of Small Wins](#)” by Teresa Amabile).

However, we expected that the benefits of time-management planning would become reduced and thwarted under high levels of interruptions, because employees would become upset and feel as though they were not making progress on their planned to-do lists. In contrast, we proposed that contingent planning would be helpful on days where employees faced many interruptions, as it would help them adapt seamlessly without being bogged down or frustrated by all the interruptions and distractions.

Our findings

We tracked 187 employees from a diverse set of industries in an experience-sampling study where we captured their behaviors and experiences over two full work weeks. We found that employees' use of time-management planning had strong positive effects on their daily engagement and daily productivity. In addition, we found that these strong effects mostly occurred when employees faced limited interruptions. Daily time management was significantly less beneficial when employees had days filled with many interruptions. In fact, on days where interruptions were very high (about 20%

of the time in our sample), daily time management was completely ineffective at improving engagement and productivity.

As for daily contingent planning, this type of planning also helped employees enhance their engagement and productivity. Interestingly, these positive effects remained, regardless of how many interruptions employees faced in their workdays. In other words, daily contingent planning seemed to provide benefits even when employees faced interruptions in their days. This means that while the benefits of time-management planning are less effective when interruptions occur, contingent planning continued to be beneficial regardless of the level of interruptions employees faced.

Putting your daily plans to work

Our research uncovered that a large percentage of employees' daily planning (about 30%) differs across work days, which means most people do not consistently employ planning each day. In addition, if employees use time management on a particular day, then they do not necessarily use contingent planning (and vice versa). Furthermore, about 40% of the time, employees will face a different amount of interruptions across their workdays.

As a result, our findings suggest that employees need to better understand these two critical types of planning and when to utilize them in their day-to-day work lives. To help, we wanted to provide a step-by-step guide:

1. Before you start your work day (e.g., the night before or morning of), set aside a few minutes to plan your upcoming day.
2. Consider what type of day you anticipate and whether you expect to be interrupted and how frequently. What can you do to create boundaries around your time and have fewer interruptions? Based on past experience, how much do you think you will actually be interrupted?
3. If you anticipate few to no interruptions, then engage in time-management planning by setting an ambitious to-do list in which you prioritize your tasks and allocate your time and energy to them based on their priority (see also "[You May Hate Planning, But You Should Do It Anyway](#)"). For example, plan to accomplish difficult or creative tasks when you have the most time or energy. Plan more mundane tasks for when you require less mental energy. Such planning, when you have limited interruptions, helps fuel greater engagement and focus and allows you to get more done.
4. If you expect to be interrupted frequently, then engage in contingent planning where you outline a realistic number of tasks you can complete that day while also taking time to consider how you might be interrupted, and what you will do if such interruptions occur (see also "[What to Do When You're Feeling Distracted at Work](#)"). This planning can help you better adapt to interruptions by allowing you to stay engaged and focused and to not get frustrated or dragged down by unanticipated disruptions or delays.

Based on current technological trends, employees will continue to be increasingly bombarded with interruptions and information. Which means your engagement at work will be constantly under attack from disruptions and distractions that prevent you from making progress on meaningful work.

However, you can take back greater control of your engagement. And it starts with some simple tweaks to your daily plans.

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