

Is Focus the Secret to Mental Health?

By FCCS Consulting Network Affiliate, Curt Steinhorst



Business leaders are growing increasingly concerned about their employees' mental well-being, offering benefits and perks to encourage the almost mythical goal of work-life balance. It turns out that the very attribute that delivers increased productivity in the workplace also supports mental well being: focus, the ability to pay full attention to one thing at a time to the task's completion.

Being able to focus on what matters is actually enjoyable. Getting into a state of uninterrupted, challenging work makes time disappear. We enter that positive state of "flow" in which we are fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus and full engagement. We receive more complete satisfaction that the job at hand is being done well, without the distraction of thinking about everything else that needs doing. Focus turns off the constant bombardment of life demands, reducing stress and the feeling of overwhelmedness. Focused periods of quality work can be as enjoyable and satisfying as leisure.

Focus has never mattered more than right now. People are feeling more and more like they can't stay on top of their work and studies indicate that more than 40% of employees are looking to change jobs as we move out of the pandemic. More than 60% of Americans are reporting job burnout. It turns out, there's no way for us to feel good at work if we don't feel good about the work we're doing—if we aren't allowed the time and space to complete quality work or we don't know how it connects to the big picture of our employer. If we're constantly interrupted, thinking about what we're not getting to, being at work becomes a cause of stress.

Recent research indicates that work-related stress is rising, as we try to adjust to constant uncertainty about the future and navigate new hybrid work patterns. Companies can do a lot to alleviate anxiety by protecting their teams' attention and creating "attention habitats" that enhance the team's ability to focus and do quality work. Companies can empower employees to schedule uninterrupted work periods when they're allowed to ignore emails, IMs and phone calls; encourage uncluttered desks, allow refreshing walks. Teams can create an "Attention Alliance" that establishes a workflow that helps them individually and collectively reduce distractions, interruptions and unnecessary meetings that drain productivity and vitality. Leaders can clearly communicate why the work matters and how it helps to accomplish a greater purpose and organization-wide goals.

There are many ways an organization can encourage focus, and there are proven strategies individuals can use to strengthen their ability to give undivided attention to what matters. Consider applying some of your training budget to focus development for all your employees.

The primary goal for focus initiatives at most companies is increased productivity, and improved focus certainly does deliver this result, as well as increased innovation and resiliency. But the most valuable benefit of strengthened focus may well be the long-term emotional well-being it promotes.