



Communication seems like a good thing until you have too much of it. | Zac Freeland/Vox

# The productivity pit: how Slack is ruining work

Job software like Teams, Slack, and Workplace were supposed to make us more productive. They haven't.

By **Rani Molla** | @ranimolla | May 1, 2019, 5:00am EDT

*Several people are typing.*

If you've spent any time with Slack, you've likely seen this message float below the text field of your company's communications software.

It can mean a few things: A vibrant discussion is taking place in which you and your colleagues are excitedly collaborating around a central topic. Important news is



unfurling as everyone tries to get the last word in first, and chaos envelops the very system meant to keep you organized.

“Slack is where work happens,” reads the company’s website copy. “Imagine what you’ll accomplish together.”

But an increasing emphasis on new technology to moderate our workdays isn’t necessarily making our work better or making us more productive. If wielded poorly, it can even make it worse.

Slack is one of numerous types of workplace software that companies are using to facilitate collaboration and communication in an increasingly digital world. Teams comes as part of Microsoft’s pervasive Office offerings like Word and Excel. Google’s G Suite includes Gmail, Hangouts Chat and Meet, and Calendar as well as its cloud-based document-sharing programs. And Facebook has entered the game, too, with Workplace, an attempt to get its 2.7 billion users to employ its products in more productive ways than sharing conspiracy theories. The list goes on.

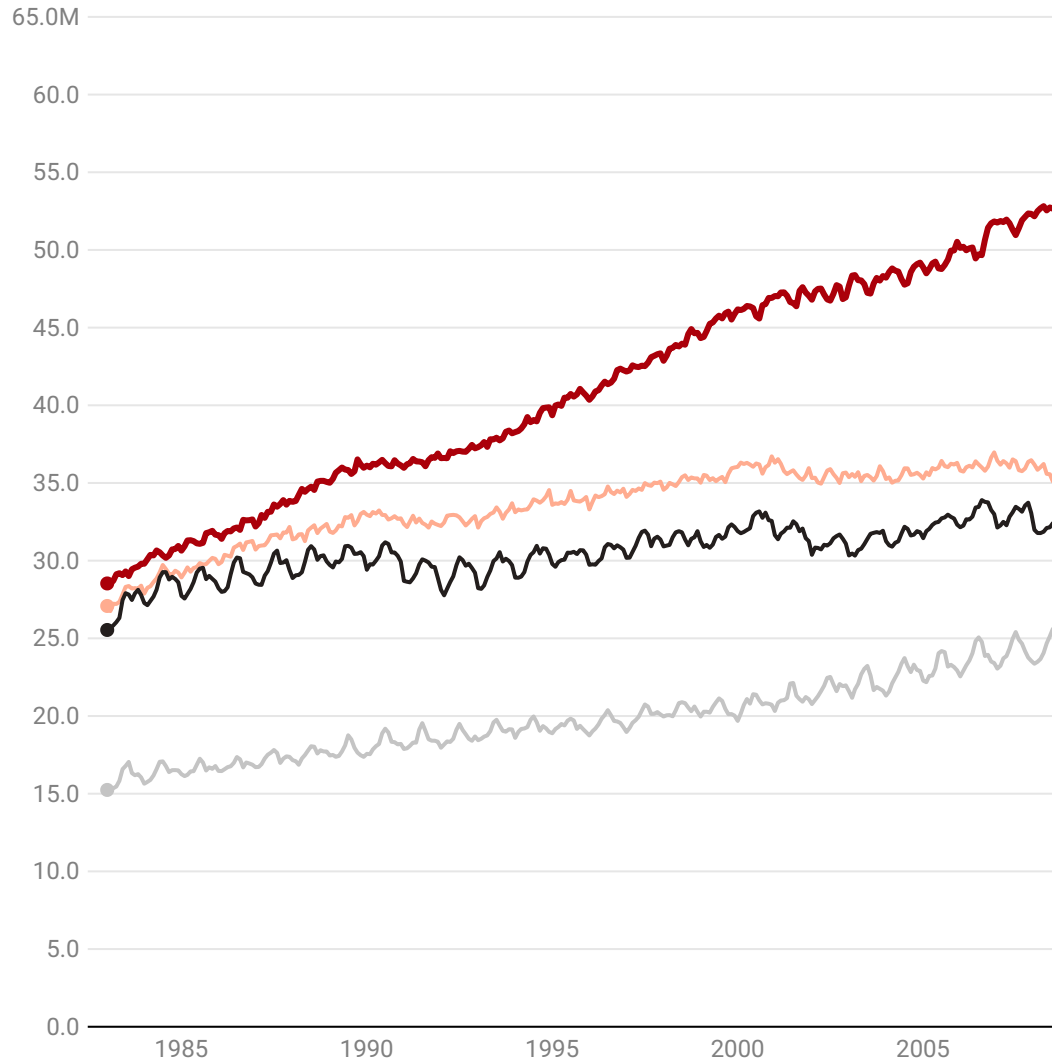
These services charge on a monthly, per-user basis and offer everything from video conferencing to workflow structuring to spaces for digital water-cooler gossip. (Recode and Vox use Slack for story planning and news sharing as well as for posting pictures of our children and pets.)

This type of workplace software is part of what’s currently a \$3.5 billion global “team collaborative applications” market, according to research firm IDC, forecast to grow nearly 70 percent in the next three years.

These services are necessary for keeping companies running smoothly, as work increasingly moves remote and global and as “knowledge work” — professional, managerial, or technical occupations like a computer programmer or scientist or data journalist — proliferates.

# The rise of US knowledge worker employment

— Non-routine Cognitive: Management & Professional    — Non-routine Manual: Service Industry  
— Routine Cognitive: Sales & Office  
— Routine Manual: Production, Transportation & Material Moving; Installation, Maintenance & Rep



*Not seasonally adjusted*

Source: [Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis](#)

**recode** BY **Vox**

Consulting firm McKinsey said back in 2012 that workplace communications technologies have the potential to increase employee productivity by up to 25 percent.

“The average interaction worker spends an estimated 28 percent of the workweek managing email and nearly 20 percent looking for internal information or tracking down colleagues who can help with specific tasks,” according to the study. McKinsey figured people would be able to more easily and quickly accomplish these task using new workplace software.

Much like the ubiquitous open-floor plan, this type of software is meant to get different parts of a company working together, to break down hierarchies, to spark chance interactions and innovations.

In practice it can be hell.

The addition of yet another communications tool can result in a surfeit of information.

On average, employees at large companies are each sending more than 200 Slack messages per week, according to Time Is Ltd., a productivity-analytics company that taps into workplace programs — including Slack, calendar apps, and the Office Suite — in order to give companies recommendations on how to be more productive. Power users sending out more than 1,000 messages per day are “not an exception.”

Keeping up with these conversations can seem like a full-time job. After a while, the software goes from helping you work to making it impossible to get work done.

**“We’re just moving email to another place and it’s less searchable.” —Sarah Peck, founder and executive director of Startup Pregnant**

Also, workplace software doesn’t seem to have supplanted the very thing it was supposed to fix: email.

Most people use both.

“Productivity software should be something you use less than the thing you used before,” Sarah Lacy, founder of tech site Pando and Chairman Mom (a members-only community for working women) told Recode. That hasn’t been the case.

People now have the problem of too many emails, too many meetings, and too many messages. For them, workplace chat software has become just one more demand on their time.

“There’s definitely a sweet spot,” Matt Galligan, CEO and co-founder of crypto financial services firm Interchange, who’s written about his experience with Slack on Medium, told Recode. “As with any new tool, we have to learn how to responsibly use it.

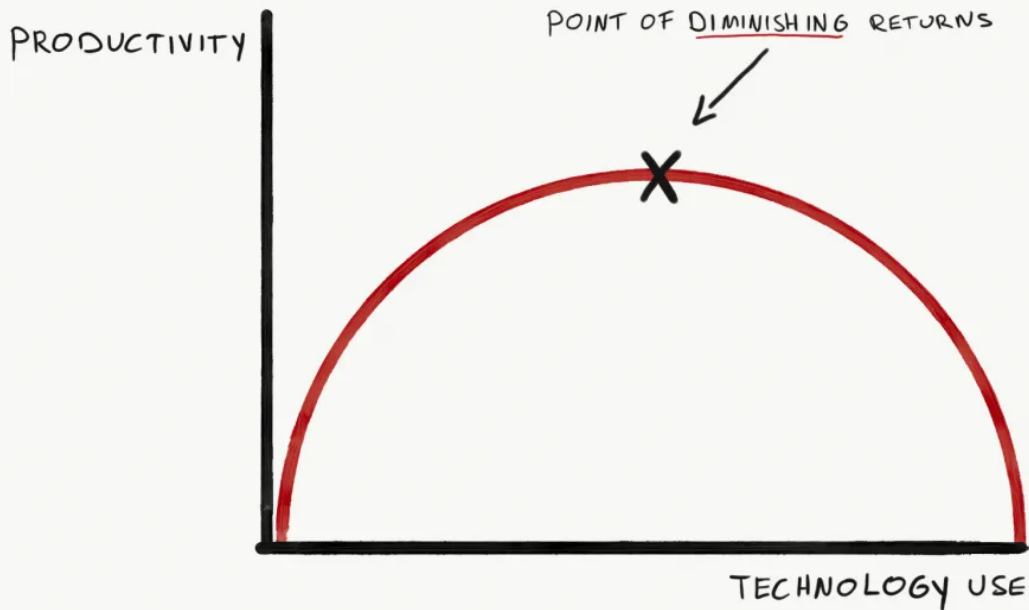
“I’m sure email was an extremely productive tool in the beginning. Only over time did it get to be misused,” he added.

Email eventually suffered from its own abundance, where inboxes brimmed with all types of requests for your attention, much of it spam. Threads became too long and complicated to parse. People replied-all.

Ironically, for some, email has now become the place for well-thought-out communications while workplace software has been inundated by thoughtless meme and emoji sharing.

“My personal belief is we haven’t yet invented a tool that would be ideal for corporate communications in large teams,” Time Is Ltd. co-founder and CEO Jan Rezab told Recode.

We again find ourselves in search of a middle ground. Or as productivity blogger Darius Foroux illustrated, we have to know where to draw the line with our technology usage before our productivity suffers diminishing returns.



DARIUS FOROUX

Courtesy of Darius Foroux

“If we don’t think critically about how we use the tools, we’re going to be the same exact people in a new place. We won’t be more or less efficient if we don’t think critically about our choices around how we behave with the tool,” Sarah Peck, founder and executive director of Startup Pregnant, an online community where people ask questions about motherhood and entrepreneurship, said. “We’re just moving email to another place and it’s less searchable.”

## The problem

Communication seems like a good thing until you have too much of it. Because it’s so easy to talk to our colleagues using workplace software, many of us are typing too much. And not all these missives are helpful.



“Applied to Slack, its greatest strength: amazing ease-of-use, is also its weakness: making it far too easy for everyone to default to using Slack for communicating, even for all the myriad things that don’t make sense to use Slack to communicate,” software programmer Alicia Liu wrote last year in a [Medium post](#).

## **It would be physically impossible for any employee at a big company to read all their Slack messages and channels**

“By lowering the barrier to initiate communication, the hidden side effect is that Slack has the quiet capacity to exponentially increase communication overhead. Resulting in much more voluminous, lower quality communication.”

In other words, talk is cheap and we’re spending like crazy.

There are more Slack channels than there are employees at each of the 10 large companies — 500 workers and up — with which Time Is Ltd. is currently working. The firm estimates that it would be physically impossible for any employee at these companies to read all their Slack messages and channels.

And every wasted minute of an employee’s time is wasted money.

Remote workers are under particular strain to prove that they are working. For people not in an office, messaging colleagues or posting information becomes a way of demonstrating that they are doing their jobs.

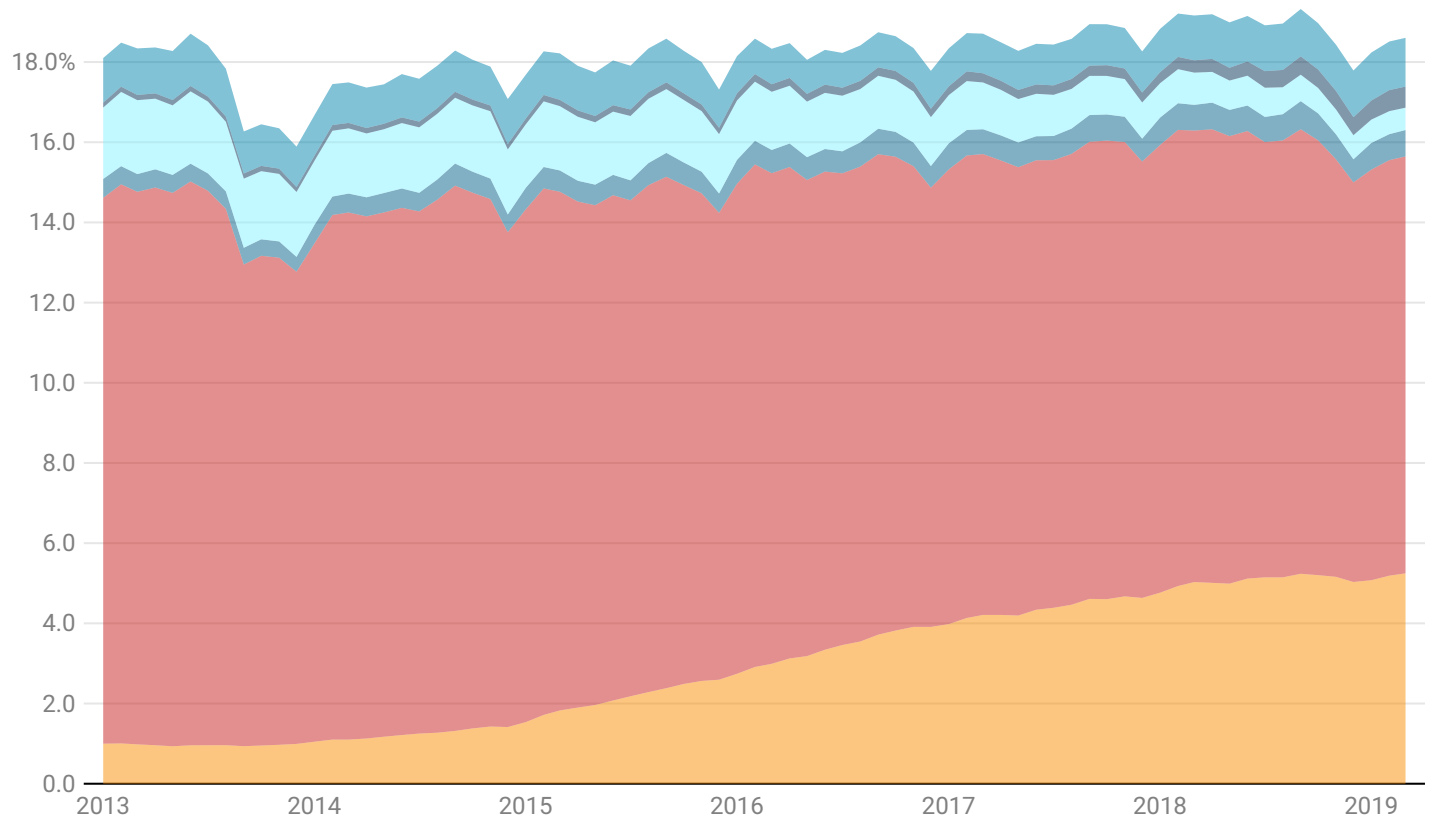
“They feel a lot of pressure to show they’re working and at their desk,” Lacy said. This can lead to a lot of performative work on the chat platforms that are integral for working remotely in the first place.

Indeed, chat has gone from being a minuscule part of the workday to the second-most-common computer activity behind email, according to data from RescueTime, which runs in the background of users’ computers and phones to give them reports on how

Since Slack launched in 2013 — followed by Workplace in 2016, Teams in 2017 and Hangouts Chat and Meet in 2018 — time spent in email has declined but it still represents the biggest digital time suck and 10 percent of the time people spend actively on screens at work.

## Share of computer time spent in communications apps at work

Out of the 5.5 hours people on average spend actively focused on screens during the workday.



Source: RescueTime

**recode** BY **Vox**

Chat messaging apps — Slack, Teams, Workplace — now represent about half of that, according to RescueTime. The percentage is out of the total 5.5 hours a day on average people spend actively on their computers at work.

(RescueTime only measures app and website usage when the app is in the foreground and the device is in use. That means it doesn't count time spent on apps/websites open in a different tab or if the screen has gone dark.)

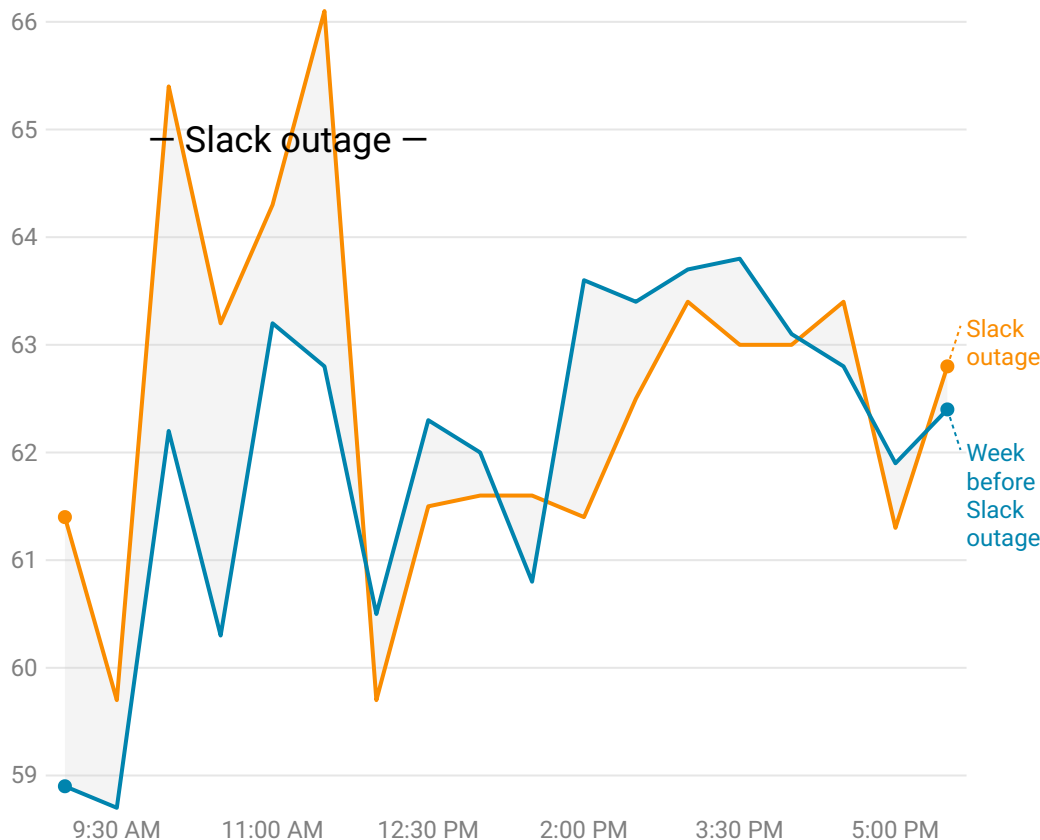
Notably, the total amount of time we spend communicating is roughly the same as it was six years ago. That means the addition of workplace chat apps hasn't actually lessened



That's not good for productivity.

When Slack was down for a few hours on June 27, 2018, people using RescueTime software behaved more productively than they had the same time a week earlier. (RescueTime measures productivity based on time spent in an app or on a website and how productive, on average, its more than 12,000 users consider those apps to be.)

## Productivity rating during a Slack outage



Measures the relative productivity of the apps RescueTime users used during the June 27, 2018 Slack outage compared with the Wednesday before.

Source: [RescueTime](#)

**recode** BY **Vox**

Workplace chat apps are considered “distracting” by RescueTime users. Twitter and other social media, for example, are considered “very distracting” platforms. Generally, people spending time on those consider themselves to be less productive than if they are working in a business program like Excel spreadsheet or Google Docs — or other “very productive” ones.

A higher score means you're more likely to be productive.

It's important to note that workplace software is far from the only time-wasting culprit. It's just one of the many ways people are inundated with digital noise that splinters our attention. Top of mind are our omnipresent smartphones that bring our social and work lives with us wherever we go.

Still, workplace software is adding to the problem. And it's not as easily dismissed as other habits, ones on which our livelihoods don't rely.

"People can quit social media," Foroux, who also runs industrial software automation company Vartex, said. "It's more difficult to say, 'I quit Slack.'"

And the rampant conversations on these workday platforms inevitably lead to misunderstandings as well as distractions from low-quality chatter, like emoji, memes, or messages for the sake of messaging.

## **"People can quit social media. It's more difficult to say, 'I quit Slack.'" –Darius Foroux, productivity blogger**

In a survey conducted by the Economist's business arm, respondents "overwhelmingly indicated that poor communications at work can lead to stressful work environments, stalled careers, missed performance goals, and lost sales." It also leads to millions of dollars worth of lost productivity each year at big companies and makes workers hate their jobs.

"Faster isn't good or bad, better or worse. Faster is just faster. If you're sending a lot of stupid messages faster, that's not great," Peck said. "We conflate the tool and ability to do something with importance and reason to do something."

Peck estimates that the "level of specificity about communications is operating about 10 percent of optimal."

Even good communication can have deleterious effects on our ability to get work done.

After being interrupted, it takes about 25 minutes to get back to the task you were working on, according to a Microsoft study. It can take even longer to get to a “flow state,” alternatively called “deep work.” These terms refer to the concentrated frame of mind you’re in when immersed in a task and time just seems to fly. It’s also when you do your best work.

Cal Newport, author of *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*, has recommended attempting this type of work in 90-minute blocks.

If you’re getting on average 45 Slack messages in an eight-hour workday, according to the Time Is Ltd. data, it’s impossible to have that much extended time for concentration. Every time you get a ping on Teams or Hangouts or Slack, it can feel as though someone were coming up to your desk and interrupting you. Add in the emails, calls, and meetings you have on any given day and your productivity is toast.

“Where there are so many channels and people involved, it gets cluttered,” Foroux told Recode. “If our brains are too cluttered and we’re processing too much information, our productivity and focus decreases.”

The madcap pace and haphazard environment that workplace software creates can feel like just one more mess.

“[W]hen I encounter a typical knowledge economy office, with its hive mind buzz of constant unstructured conversation, I don’t see a super-connected, fast-moving and agile organization,” Newport wrote in a blog about why more communication isn’t better. “I instead see a poorly designed distributed system.”

Over time, workplace distractions can metastasize. Many of us try to recoup time by multitasking. But multitasking doesn’t work. Instead of doing one thing well, you’re actually just switching between activities and doing them all poorly.

On average, information workers spend three minutes on any single task before being interrupted or switching to another, according to a Microsoft study shared with Recode that used wearable sensors and computer tracking software. Multitaskers can

And not getting enough done during the day pushes work into your own time. That interrupts your work-life balance, which is fundamental for worker health and productivity.

“It becomes a problem as soon as we take it out of the workspace,” Foroux said. Unfortunately, we know workplace software doesn’t stay at work: Smartphone-based apps make it so that workplace messages can reach you at home and you can video conference even while at the beach on vacation.

“Back in the day, AIM was the thing. You had an away message. You were literally away from your device,” Galligan said. “Now you can’t. You’re 100 percent on at all times.”

Our minds aren’t meant for this type of behavior.

“We don’t perceive the difference between a leopard and a scary Slack message,” Galligan said. “You get enough of that into somebody and it becomes mentally problematic.”

“Hustle is great and all, but you show me any athlete who puts in nothing but effort — not rest and proper nutrition — and I’ll show you someone who flames out quickly,” Galligan said. This is a tough line to spout, especially in Silicon Valley, where overwork and all-nighters are romanticized.

It’s not even necessarily the messaging itself that’s the problem, but that we pick up our phones at all.

“It starts off as a Slack message, but continues with social media and reading the news,” Foroux said. “The purpose of sending messages or communicating is to do our jobs more effectively; what happens after is a negative side effect.”

For many, work communication becomes its own kind of social media — and brings with it the same issues. It’s natural to become friends with the people you work with, but that can turn Slack into a chatroom that really has nothing to do with work.

“We didn’t know internal work chats would turn into social media networks,” Foroux

workplace software the same way we use social media, it has the same type of negative behaviors.”

It’s telling that even social media companies, whose business models rely on time spent on their platforms to generate ad dollars, have recognized the destructiveness of their products and have offered ways for people to curb their usage.

Work’s social aspects can feel less controllable.

In all, these frequent technology distractions have been linked to shorter attention spans, lowered IQ, and increased levels of anxiety and depression. The result is an overall decline in the quality of our work.

### The software fix

Workplace software companies are well aware that some of the elements of their design and behaviors on their platforms aren’t productive, and they are actively working on fixes. If they don’t, the knowledge workforce is going to look for the next new best thing.

By software design standards, Slack, Teams, G Suite, and Workplace are really easy to use. Anyone can send a message to anyone else using workplace software. Simply type in their name, enter a message, and send! Voila!

Counterintuitively, workplace software could use a little more friction — or at least a way to make users think twice about sending a communiqué.

The problem is, sending a message is much easier than figuring out how to get fewer messages or finding and enabling the software’s various options that could make you more productive.

Microsoft is rolling out templates later this year so people can easily optimize their Teams app to best suit particular industries, like marketing. And Slack, for instance, offers numerous ways to manage your notifications, mute conversations, and tell your coworkers you’re busy. Occasionally, it nudges you to better optimize your settings, but it could certainly be more forceful.

“What a technology should do is tell us how to behave with a very strong opinion,” Peck told Recode.

But another problem is that all of these companies actually want you to use their platforms more, not less. Workplace software companies seem to think that more time on their platforms — and less time switching to others’ — is a solution. They accomplish this by integrating other common workplace tools like Office or Google Drive within their platforms.

Information workers switch windows on average 373 times per day or around every 40 seconds while completing their tasks, according to a Microsoft study.

The idea is that if you’re able to do more of your tasks under one roof, you’ll waste less time clicking in and out of different programs. But if the platforms themselves are riddled with distractions, these efforts are moot.

To be more useful, workplace software will have to get much better at getting us the info we need — surfacing conversations on the same topic that may have happened months ago or helping you find the appropriate channels for your specific needs, for example — without us having to find it.

“We’ve made such great strides in search, when you know you’re looking for certain things,” Michael Chui, a partner at McKinsey’s research arm and author of its 2012 report, told Recode. “The more difficult thing to do is to proactively have machines tell us, ‘Here’s the information you need now.’”

“If we don’t have good systems that take this large amount of communications that gets generated through enterprise social tools, we can become overwhelmed by them,” Chui said.

**Information workers switch windows on average 373 times per day or around every 40 seconds while completing their**



Like Candy Crush, elements of workplace software can be addictive.

“The designers of these tools designed them to capture your attention,” Chui said. “It takes attention away from other things we’d like to do in our most thoughtful, reflective idea of how we want to spend time.”

There’s a reason you’re checking your work app at night and it’s not because you love your job. It’s because the communications and digital affirmations from your coworkers feel good.

“Our brains were not wired for this. This is candy,” Galligan said. “We should eat vegetables.”

But sometimes the problem isn’t that of software at all, but rather something much trickier: company culture.

### The hardwired culture fix

Company culture is harder to fix than software.

That’s especially the case in Silicon Valley, which suffers from worshiping the cult of the young male programmer. This childless archetype codes all night, drinks Soylent at his desk, and beats impossible deadlines.

This person doesn’t exist, for the most part.

Instead, workers vary widely and have complicated lives that don’t necessarily revolve around work. Nor should they. A happy, well-adjusted worker is less likely to burn out and leave. The quality of their work is also better.

“There’s great power in the ability to ping anyone at any time,” Galligan said. “There has to be a lot of respect for a lot of people.”

Some suggest that respect could be instituted as part of company guidelines, creating instructions around how and when those programs are to be used.

with all types of different content.”

The policy would have to be bolstered by regular trainings and updates, according to Foroux. At the very least there needs to be an introduction process before setting workers free on workplace software.

“I think the critical problem of Slack itself is on-boarding at pretty big companies,” Rezab said. “[U]sually they have no idea on what’s going on and how to do this. This results in them using it as an instant messaging platform.”

## **“It’s not about setting rules, it’s about what management is modeling, what it’s rewarding.” –Sarah Lacy, Chairman Mom founder and CEO**

Implementing training could require a whole new position, one where a person creates a rule book of how to act and then moderates behavior on workplace software. The person could be charged with deleting unused channels, setting up optimized settings, or reminding others of when work hours are for different teams.

Ideally, it would lessen the overall number of messages sent and would instill a more structured workflow to those that are sent.

“Yes, we can set rules, but like all rules, not everybody is going to follow them,” Foroux said. “It’s difficult to police. It’s new technology, and everybody is learning how to deal with it.”

Others suggest using a journalism proverb as guidance: Show, don’t tell. That puts a heavy emphasis on how leadership behaves since they set the tone for the whole company.

Part of the problem, Lacy said, is a misplaced emphasis on sheer hours of work. “I think companies need to get away from grading people based on who works the most. That

“It’s not about setting rules, it’s about what management is modeling, what it’s rewarding,” she said. “People take cues from CEOs, what they say and don’t. Most employees see what work gets rewarded and follow.”

To wit: My boss gave me edits on this very piece at about 11 pm one night. That was fine by me. Thanks to the research for this article, I’ve turned off Slack notifications after regular work hours and didn’t find out until the following morning. More importantly, there wasn’t the *expectation* that I’d be checking my messages or working at night. He was able to work on his time — though maybe he needs an intervention — and I on mine.

## Personal solutions

To some extent, how we ultimately choose to use workplace software is a personal decision. Obviously, your job and your bosses are important, but we might be underestimating our own role in making our work lives better or worse.

“We don’t have a technology problem, we have a boundary problem,” Peck said. “It doesn’t matter if it’s email or a text message, we really suck at boundaries and suck even more at communicating them.”

We have to figure out what those boundaries are, define them, and stick to them.

“My strategy is personal accountability: taking personal responsibility of my own job performance and looking at my personal effectiveness,” Foroux told Recode. “I’m constantly asking if my actions contribute to my overall goals at my job. Talking to coworkers an hour a day on Slack is not bringing me closer to my goals.”

First, however, you have to recognize the problem and then you have to actively fix it. As Galligan said, “It’s still on you if you open the app and start engaging again.”

---

*Recode and Vox have joined forces to uncover and explain how our digital world is changing — and changing us. [Subscribe to Recode podcasts](#) to hear Kara Swisher and Peter Kafka lead the tough conversations the technology industry needs today.*

## Will you support Vox's explanatory journalism?

Millions turn to Vox to understand what's happening in the news. Our mission has never been more vital than it is in this moment: to empower through understanding. Financial contributions from our readers are a critical part of supporting our resource-intensive work and help us keep our journalism free for all. Please consider making a contribution to Vox today to help us keep our work free for all.

FUTURE PERFECT

**22 predictions we made in January, and the 13 we got right**

RECODE

**Big Tech's employees are one of the biggest checks on its power**

RECODE

**The space station race**

**[View all stories in Recode](#)**