

7 ways to support employees experiencing digital overwhelm

The startup world has largely bought into the idea that in order to be successful, teams need to work long hours, be constantly productive, and be "always on". This mindset can lead to digital overwhelm and burnout among team members, ultimately hindering rather than enhancing performance.

As entrepreneurs, it's essential to recognise the difference between human vs. computer pace of working. Here are seven ways startups can provide vital support to employees experiencing digital overload.

1. Normalise taking breaks

Computers can be productive 24/7, but humans cannot. Taking breaks is vital not just for wellbeing but also for clarity of thought and decision-making. When your phone is running out of battery, what do you do – try to squeeze more energy out of it, or plug it into the socket? Breaks between online meetings, lunch breaks away from the screen, walks in nature, and proper sleep aren't a luxury but rather a mandatory science-proven way for the body and brain to recharge. Set a personal example as a manager or founder of regular breaks to

build a healthier culture. Important: breaks should not involve any technology, so that your brain can take proper rest.

2. Give them a sense of completion

One of the key factors that make our psyche feel overwhelmed is when we cannot reach completion. The Zeigarnik effect says that we remember unfinished or interrupted tasks better than finished ones. It means that the more pending tasks your employees have, the more stressed they will feel. In the digital world, our work is never finished because there is always one more email to send or answer, and work easily stretches into the weekend.

Help your employees create “completion” milestones to track their progress and set up accountability structures to ensure they are following through with their plans. For example, for someone working in sales, it could mean calling only 50 potential clients per day; for others, it means that no emails should be checked or sent after a particular hour.

Any kind of company ritual, however silly, like locking laptops in the chest of drawers and walking around it three times, or ringing a bell to mark the start and end of the workday, will help set up this much-needed boundary.

3. Prioritise “Deep Work”

Employees in startups often complain that they don’t have time for everything. In reality, they may have plenty of time, but their attention is highly fragmented as they keep switching between hundreds of tasks. If your employees have mailboxes, Slacks, or other chats open all the time (or switch between multiple tabs), they cannot really go into “deep work” mode. Just knowing that an email is sitting unanswered in your mailbox lowers your IQ by 10 points. “Deep work” means working on one task only in the most focused way for a few hours, without switching to anything else. Educate employees on the importance of “focused time” and encourage them to block out several hours per day/week to work on their own projects without being distracted by external messages or live colleagues.

Be very clear about what's urgent

In the digital world, everything is urgent. Notifications, emails, Slack/WhatsApp messages trigger our brains with the “do something about it” message. In the startup world, where employees often have multiple responsibilities and circumstances change fast, this sense of urgency can be exacerbated even further. The faster the pace of work, the more clarity a manager needs to provide around what's urgent and needs full attention, and what can wait.

5. Plan one's work using natural rhythms

Our attention is cyclical and reaches its peak twice a day (according to Gloria Mark, around 11 am, and shortly after lunch). It also has its “valleys”, when we aren't productive (the biggest one starts from 3-4 pm). Teach employees to plan their workday according to their attentional rhythms, scheduling the most focus-consuming tasks for the peak attention times.

6. Fewer, shorter meetings

Back-to-back meetings are one of the two main sources of digital overload, along with emails. Statistically, the longer the meeting and the more participants it has, the more likely attendees are to multitask during it and pretend they are listening. Make meetings shorter, invite fewer people, and incorporate at least a 15-minute mandatory break between them.

7. Use a coaching approach

Have regular conversations with employees around their working patterns and how to use them to their advantage. Rather than telling them what to do, make them reflect on their attention cycles, on how they rest, on what helps them stay focused or triggers distractions, on why they may feel anxious about missing something online. You may even go as far as doing together with them some “slowing down” exercises like mindfulness, deep breathing, etc., to help bring their brain into the “here and now” and have more clarity.

It might be tempting to go “full speed” in a startup. However, if you drive your

car at full speed all the time, you will likely burn the tires, overheat the engine, and reduce the lifespan of its important details. Encouraging your employees to find and use their human rhythms to work in the digital world will produce a much more sustainable result and allow you to drive much further, together.

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