

ALWAYS ON:

How Burnout Clashes with Creativity & Productivity

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Executive Summary

Burnout is on the rise, putting creativity and productivity at risk. The design industry thrives on deep, focused work, but the systems we have in place don't support that. Instead, we're constantly distracted and disorganized. The "always on" culture of today is working against the very conditions creatives need to produce great design.

A decrease in attention spans, multitasking, and pressure to be available whenever called upon weighs on a graphic designer's mental health, productivity, and quality of work. Focus, flow states, and deep work are the solutions to beating burnout and creating to their fullest potential in today's landscape.

By employing these strategies, designers can reduce rates of burnout, be more productive, and create better work. They can do all of this with more joy as these strategies aren't just a better way to work, they're a better way to live.

Through industry data, actionable strategies, and real case studies, explore how our current system can be rebuilt into one that encourages deep creative thinking.

Key Recommendations:

- **Limit Distractions:** reduce shallow work, distractions that pull you away, and task switching.
- **Manage your time:** Set boundaries and take breaks when you need them to maximize your productivity.
- **Improve Project Management:** Implement systems that are organized and are proven to produce real results by reducing designer's cognitive load and stay inspired for longer.
- **Keep Flow Flowing:** Create environments that encourage focus and creativity and work on projects that align with your strengths

When designers are supported by systems that encourage them to produce the best work they possibly can, they thrive. They produce more, create better, and feel better. When we create systems that stop our burnout and don't feed the fire, everyone benefits.

Introduction

The field of design is one that requires lots of creativity, focus, and passion, but something is putting a strain on those needs. Graphic designers are experiencing high levels of burnout, distractions, and are expected to be working on a million tasks at a time. In an industry that demands deep work, long periods of creativity, and time to reflect, today's world seems to be being pulled in the opposite direction. A world full of constant switching, shallow work, and never-ending distractions is not one that fosters a sustainable work environment.

Burnout isn't just something that designers experience personally; the problem is overarching, greatly affecting productivity in the workplace. 54% of graphic designers will leave the field or switch careers within two years, according to Colorlib. Major causes trend toward exhaustion, creative block, loss of passion, and unsustainable workloads. As our attention spans decline, designers are expected to keep up the work, creating more, creating it quickly, and all with less time to breathe.

Always being "on" is taking its toll, coupled with the cost of constant distractions: it's a recipe for disaster with designers' heads on the chopping block. To tackle this challenge that creatives are facing, we must embrace focus, flow, and deep work. Implementing and incorporating these solutions into our working life is how they can reclaim their creativity and productivity.

Focus: Directed attention onto one task without interruption.

Flow: A fulfilling state where you lose all sense of self and time, where you can work on a task you enjoy for hours and not even realize it.

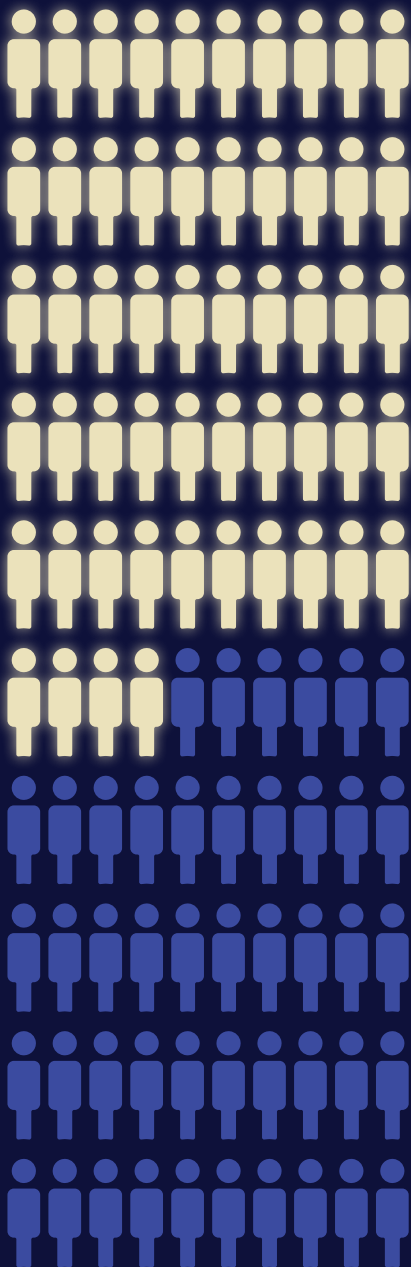
Deep Work: Undistracted focus where it is easier to work on challenging and creative tasks.

Decreased attention spans and burnout threaten the mental health of graphic designers and lower their ability to do their job effectively. Learning how to unlock your flow state and harness deep work is key to regaining passion and productivity.

In this white paper, we will explore burnout and how it harms our ability to focus, ways flow and deep work can solve the problem, and how it can be implemented, and the benefits that come with designers who are not burnt out.

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59%

of full-time
creators feel
burnt out

The Problem

*Burnout costs us quality of work,
productivity, and creativity*

Today, there's an expectation for designers to be "always on." You always have to be checking your email or hopping on last-minute revisions. There are notifications constantly going through our phones. Each email received after the workday has ended fights to pull you back in. It whispers in your ear, beckoning you to make that one quick revision.

For those of us working from home, the line between work and life can get blurred easily. There is hardly any separation. At any moment, you can just walk to your office, open your computer, and check the status of your project. Many people working from home don't have set hours, making it easier to be sucked back in.

We're facing constant pressure to work. Take on more clients, take on more projects. All at the expense of our mental health. So many designers and creators have a work 24/7 mentality and are never truly off the clock.

According to the State of the Creator Economy 2024 Report, 59% of full-time creators felt burnt out in 2024. In 2023, 63% of Generation Z creators reported feelings of burnout. 63% of creators said they planned to spend more of their time working in 2024, with only 9% planning to work less.

"where all of the things I usually love doing — making videos, writing, talking to my audience — feel like a chore or even a burden audience — feel like a chore or even a burden"

— Charli Marie, Designer, YouTuber, Podcaster, Blogger

"the burnout would hit me like a depressive tidal wave. I'd disappear off the face of the earth for weeks at a time—buried beneath takeout boxes while bingeing *The Office* for the sixteenth time"

— Rob Hardy, Blogger and Creator of *The Forest*.

Distraction-Ridden Environments

Technology today is created to draw you in so you spend as much time in front of your phone as possible. Johann Hari, in the book *Stolen Focus*, says they "were deliberately designed by the smartest people in the world to maximally grab and maximally hold our attention." That's part of the reason our attention span is dying. There are so many things working against you, pulling you away from the important things you're doing.

When we think of multitasking, we think we're being doubly productive by working on multiple tasks at once. In reality, that isn't the case. Switching is a more appropriate name for this behavior because of what's really happening. Your brain is switching from one task to another instead of doing both simultaneously. While it doesn't take long to switch tasks, the time that it does take adds up quickly. According to the American Psychological Association, "even brief mental blocks created by shifting between tasks can cost as much as 40 percent of someone's productive time." When your brain switches it has to re-remember and refocus on what it was doing, slowing you down and causing you to miss details you had moments before.

This shortened attention span and switching lead to shallow work, not deep work. As a result, the quality of work takes a dip. A designer's full vision can't come to fruition if they're working shallowly. They can more easily miss details and rush their projects because they've wasted so much time being distracted.

Poor Project Management

There's a very high demand for designs to get a lot of projects done in a very short turnaround time. With these high-stress environments, poor communication and project management, and lots of distractions. It's easy to see with all these factors working against you, how details, both big and small, could be overlooked.

Some of the disadvantages that could come with poor project management may include:

- Missed project details
- Missed deadlines
- Lowered quality of work
- Reduced creative problem-solving

The Effect on Individuals and Companies

This issue is impacting everyone from the individual to the entire company. Understanding the impacts can put into perspective how crucial a problem it is to solve.



The Solution

The systems we have in place do not foster creativity or flow; they kill it. The solution isn't about working "harder" (that's what got us in this mess in the first place), it's about working *differently*. It's key to create an environment that fosters sustained attention, mental rest, and creative immersion. That's where focus, flow, and deep work come in, as proven solutions to create the environment designers need to thrive.

Why Each Concept Works

Focus: The Productivity Foundation

Focus occurs when you're directing your attention to one task at a time. When you're focusing, you're not constantly switching between tasks, monotasking, not multitasking. When you're focused, you're avoiding distractions and anything that could reach out and pull you away.

As a designer, focus is immensely important to keep your creative juices flowing. That's why it's important to have strategies to resist distractions like carving out time in your day specifically for checking notifications.

A problem that can be solved with focus:

You're constantly interrupted throughout the workday, leading you to make no meaningful progress. By taking steps to limit distractions, you can better focus and gain uninterrupted time to create higher-quality work.

Flow: Where Great Design Happens

A flow state, meaning having deep focus. It happens when you're doing something that you're truly passionate about. You lose all sense of yourself and all sense of time. Everything else melts away, and you can do one thing for hours on end without feeling like you have. It leaves you with a sense of satisfaction and happiness.

Flow is like an anti-burnout. Instead of draining you, it recharges and reinvigorates you. It often leads to some of people's happiest moments and allows them to produce their best work. People tend to report higher job satisfaction, lower stress, and higher levels of creativity when they work in flow states.

A problem that can be solved with flow:

You're burnt out from being overworked and working shallowly. Making an effort to find your flow state and get into it can recharge your battery. The work you're doing stops being a chore and becomes something you're really passionate about and look forward to.

Deep Work: Where Ideas Can Come to Life

Deep work, a term coined by Cal Newport, is a time carved out for deep, uninterrupted concentration that lets you be very productive, learn/work on difficult things more easily, and "create quality work quickly," according to Asana. Working deeply allows you to work on demanding tasks without interruption and with the immense focus those tasks demand.

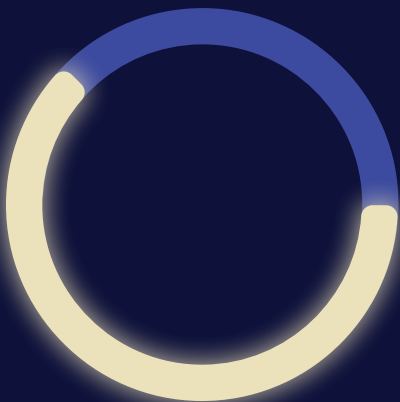
According to Asana's Anatomy of Work Report, 62% of the workday is lost to mundane and repetitive tasks, and there is constant switching from around 10 apps on average. We're slowed down by unorganized systems, creating more distractions and taking away from the environment needed for deep work. Newport suggests that we should create distraction-free environments for ourselves to achieve deep work. With 3.6 hours of unnecessary meetings a week, it can be difficult to find time for deep work. Even when that isn't possible for a day, he says to shoot for around an hour to an hour and a half of uninterrupted time to focus. It can make all the difference.

A problem that can be solved by deep work:

You feel like all your creativity has been drained, and you're overwhelmed by the amount of work you have and the constant demands. Deep work needs distraction-free environments, reducing overload by focusing deeply on single tasks at a time, and freeing up time for you to find your flow and regain creativity.

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Case Study: The UK's Four Day Workweek Pilot

Many of us are guilty of working till the point of exhaustion, where we just can't do it anymore. It makes sense that the more you work, the more you get done. But what if I told you that it's actually counterintuitive and working less actually makes you more productive?

A study based in the UK that piloted the four-day work week for 61 companies and 2,900 workers tested the theory that maybe, less work really is better. The experiment lasted from June to December 2022. The companies could reduce the workweek in any way they chose as long as the reduction was significant enough to be impactful. There was also zero reduction in pay for the amount of time now being spent out of the office.

The results speak for themselves: "of the 61 companies that participated, 56 are continuing with the four-day week (92%), with 18 confirming the policy is a permanent change."

Employees reported being less stressed (39%) and burnt out (71%), with all-around improvements to mental and physical health. Participants are having a healthier work-life balance and are better able to focus on their home life and social commitments.

A 35% increase in revenue was reported when compared to revenue at similar times in previous years. During the experiment, the number of staff leaving dropped 57%.

"15% of employees said that no amount of money would induce them to accept a five-day schedule over the four-day work week."

This study and others like it prove how crucial a break is. This gives people time to decompress and come back to work refreshed and ready to work. According to Eric™ at Medium and the fresh eye approach, "distancing oneself from a problem (or a piece of creative work) allows for greater objectivity and critical thinking." When people take a break, it allows them to see the picture and find solutions they never would have had before if they didn't have a moment to step back. The longer you step back, the more time you have to mull over possible solutions. It gives people the opportunity to create better quality work with lots of thought and care put into it.

**"The further one
steps back, the
more they can see
the forest for the
trees"**

— Eric™, *How Stepping Back
Can Propel Your Art Forward:
The Fresh Eye Approach*, Medium

Implementation

Now that we know a possible solution to beating burnout, we can't just say, "Alright, go do it." There needs to be a solid plan of action, strategies that designers, creators, and companies can put to work. Everyone is different, and not one strategy is going to work for everyone. Implement strategies that you think might work for you, and try others if they don't. There is no one right way to win this battle. You stand a better chance of beating burnout with actionable strategies than just putting a one-size-fits-all band-aid on the problem.

Fostering Focus

To promote focus in your work, you need to start with a comfortable environment that lets YOU focus. For some people, this may mean music (in headphones if you're in a group setting), and for others it might mean complete silence. Whatever you have found lets you focus, is the environment you want to emulate. Decluttering your workspace can help limit "distractions that can break the flow of work or cause mental fatigue," says Zeka Graphic. Even the furniture in the office can have an impact, with ergonomic chairs reducing strain on designers physically.

An important aspect of creating an environment that fosters focus is keeping it distraction-free. Aim to limit notifications or things that could pull your attention away. Turn off your notifications or limit them with features like "Do not Disturb." Block out time for checking emails or other notifications so you're not constantly switching from task to task. Try placing your phone in another room or a drawer so you're not tempted to pick it up, out of sight, out of mind.

Take breaks. If something isn't working, come back to it later. Take a break from the task by looking at something else, going for a walk, or having lunch. As mentioned in the previous section, taking breaks allows you to work through problems. "When your mind wanders, it starts to make new connections," says Johann Hari in his book *Stolen Focus*, "which often produces solutions to your problems." By not allowing your mind time to wander, you can be stuck on a task for much longer than needed, causing frustration that is not conducive to focus or productivity.

Practicing time and project management helps create time for focus and limits distractions. Time blocking is a popular strategy. Carving out time in your day to do certain tasks can create focused, uninterrupted time to accomplish what you want to. Using strategies like project management systems can eliminate the need to go searching through project details and millions of different apps to get what you need. Systems like Asana, ClickUp, or Trello centralize your information and get rid of the need for constant switching while making sure you don't miss something important.

Unlocking Flow States

Getting into a flow state isn't always easy. Knowing what kind of things can bring on a flow state is a step to getting you there.

- **Setting clear goals.** Whatever it is that you are doing “should be bound by rules, with a clear, precise goal,” says Thomas Cox at Hunting the Muse. It helps you “more easily sink into a flow state and achieve it.”
- **Doing something meaningful** that plays to your strengths. Working on interesting projects you feel confident in and excited to complete.
- **Pushing yourself.** Working on something that isn't too hard or easy but challenges you just enough.
- **Work on one task at a time.** According to Thomas Cox, “The spotlight of your attention should shine only on that one task” and not invite in unrelated distractions.

These factors of flow can help you achieve a flow state and reach the point where all time slips away, and you can stay focused on one task for hours.

Achieving Deep Work

Achieving deep work is all about knowing yourself or knowing your employees. You create a system that works best for you in order to reach that state of deep focus. Like with flow, knowing your strengths and the strengths of those around you can help delegate tasks to those who will be best at achieving the intended outcome.

Creating clear boundaries and routines can contribute to getting you into deep work. "Routines make it possible to make fewer decisions and to do less balancing," thus depleting you less and letting you work more deeply, says Robin Weiruch. It limits distractions, creating an environment where you can focus and stay uninterrupted. Routines help you get used to working a certain way and prep you to be ready to work deeply.

Tackling Challenges

Something will always come up, and there will always be distractions. Saying that we can eliminate them all and perfectly focus all the time is unrealistic. Know it's alright that distractions happen, the world is working against focus anyway. Develop strategies you can use that can pull you back in and get your focus back.

Not every task is flow-worthy. Not everything will push you or interest you in the way a task needs to to get you in a flow state. This is why having an environment that invites focus is so important, so when you do tasks that aren't as exciting, you're already set up for success and have the best possible chance at still being productive.

Cost-Benefit Analysis

A barrier to implementing these strategies may be the cost. While it may seem counterproductive to spend money on focus, something that can, in theory, be done for free. It's about setting creatives up for success that you're really paying for. You're giving them the tools to thrive and produce the best work possible, creating a better long-term benefit.

Costs

A recurring cost would be a project management tool such as Asana, Clickup, Trello, etc. These are typically subscription-based systems that start around \$10 a month and can increase based on a company's needs. Good news for small teams and solo freelancers, a lot of these systems have free options that can meet their needs.

A one-time cost would go towards creating an environment that invites focus. This can include purchasing new ergonomic chairs for the office or lighting that's more likely to encourage work. While in the short term it would be costly, depending on the number of chairs needed, it would be very helpful in encouraging flow.

A possible cost could be hiring additional workers to help relieve the workload of other designers. While it's another person on the payroll, having another person, especially with a certain speciality, would allow designers to play to their strengths as opposed to focusing on tasks they may not feel as strong in. It reduces burnout by lightening the load on a single designer so they aren't stretched thin.

There could be a small, short-term drop with the learning curve as people get used to new systems and ways of working. It may not work like clockwork right off the bat. As everyone gets used to new routines and boundaries, the improvements will shine through.

55%

of workers at collaborative organizations report revenue growth over the past 3 years



Benefits

Reduced rates of burnout mean lower employee turnover, which can turn costly very quickly. Employers have to pay severance, pay to recruit someone new, which can add up to 30-50% of an annual salary for an entry-level job and over 150% for higher positions, according to an article by Melissa Lobo at Creative Group. Once hired, it can take new employees 1-2 years before reaching their peak productivity.

Implementing strategies can help you make more money. According to Asana's Anatomy of Work Report, "55% of workers at collaborative organizations report revenue growth over the past three years," with only 28% of workers at other organizations reporting growth.

Implementing these strategies can improve mental health. According to Stolen Focus, and a similar experiment about reducing the work week, employee engagement went up 30-40% and stress levels fell by 15%. People were relieved to have more time to themselves, which they could use for much-needed "me time" and family time. They came back to work refreshed and ready to work.

Why other approaches don't work

Something that just doesn't work are productivity 'hacks.' "Tips that are shared as 'hacks' are often based on the idea that there's a quick fix for our productivity problems. But the truth is, there is no quick fix," says the Positively Living podcast with Lisa Zawronty. They're often one size fits all and only act as a bandage on a problem that requires stitches.

A hack that works for someone else isn't guaranteed to work for everybody and every situation. They do not address specific problems, and while helpful in the short term, in the long term, they won't scratch the same itch that focus, flow, and deep work do.

Other solutions that don't work that we mentioned before are multitasking and working longer hours. Multitasking is just a myth; while you might be feeling more productive in the moment, in reality, it reduces your productivity and quality of work. Working longer hours, while in theory may be better because you're "doing more," it leads to burnout and employee turnover.

Turning off

The culture of always being on, constant task switching, and poor project planning is causing creatives to experience burnout at an unprecedented rate. Creativity and productivity are being hurt by a lack of systems supporting the needs of designers.

The design industry needs to shift. We need to get away from shallow work. What we need is flow, focus, and deep work. They're necessary for creatives to keep doing what they do best.

Final Recommendations:

Foster flow for improved mental health and creativity

- Flow states increase job satisfaction and happiness.
- They produce higher quality results when creating in a flow state.

Deep work and focus are essential for productivity.

- Shallow work, while on the surface may seem productive, is where the real results happen.
- Limiting distractions, creating environments that let focus blossom, and carving out time for deep work are key to quality results.

Burnout is bad for business.

- Creative block, productivity loss, and high turnover all stem from poor systems and overloaded workers.
- Limiting burnout in any way you can is integral to a well-functioning office. Improving systems is worth the investment.

Remember, everyone is human, so don't treat them like machines. Start experimenting with focus, flow, and deep work strategies. You won't regret it when you see how mental health, higher quality outcomes, and productivity flourish and burnout fizzles out.

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