ROY POST

412

Tijdexperts

from mission to desk

> **Three problems**
> **before half past six.**
> **And none of them are yours.**

Why you are busy all day and still get nowhere

You read your email on Sunday evening so you won't be stressed on Monday.

Congratulations. Now you have it on Sunday already.

You get 117 emails a day. You are interrupted every two minutes. And at the end of the week, the most important thing has been left undone again.

Roy Post takes you through everything that goes wrong in the modern working day. With research, recognisable stories and plenty of humour. Then he shows how it can be different: from the mission of your organisation to the desk of every employee.

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ROY POST

Tijdexperts

from mission to desk

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1

PART

A world full of distractions

1

A world of distractions and information

An ordinary Tuesday

Let me take you through an ordinary Tuesday, one of the fifty-two you get every year.

It is 6.12 am and Mark's alarm goes off. Mark runs an installation company with eighty people and good clients, a business he has built over fifteen years. Before his eyes are properly open, his phone is already in his hand. Seven new emails. The management team group chat has been going all night, because someone couldn't sleep and had an idea. There is also a notification from the bank, the news and a video someone sent him. He scrolls while his wife is still asleep.

At twelve minutes past six, Mark is lying in bed and already at work.

Twenty kilometres away, Kevin is sitting at the kitchen table. Kevin is a project manager at Mark's company, a hard worker and the kind of person you want on your team. His coffee goes cold while he works through his email. A client wants an engineer a day early, a supplier says the materials will be late and a colleague asks if he can "give him a quick call". It isn't even half past six, and Kevin already has three problems on his plate that aren't even his.

At eight o’clock Mark walks into the office with a plan. Today he is finally going to work on the new direction for the company, something he has been carrying around for months. He knows it matters and that the company has to run differently three years from now.

His first meeting is at half past eight and the second at ten. In between come emails, Teams messages and texts, someone pops their head round the door and a client calls. At half past twelve he eats a sandwich behind his laptop. At four o’clock he looks up and thinks: where did the day go?

At the end of the afternoon he drives home feeling he has worked incredibly hard, and that is true. He just hasn’t worked on what mattered.

By the end of that day Kevin has 412 emails in his inbox. He has honestly cleared dozens, but more came in than went out. In the evening he sits on the sofa with the TV on and his kids next to him, and scrolls through his email one more time, just so he won’t be behind tomorrow.

Let’s be honest for a moment: what time did you first look at your phone this morning? And were you still in bed?

Mark and Kevin can both plan perfectly well. Mark is smart and Kevin is good at his job. Their story is the story of almost everyone who works today. In this book I will show you how it got this way, what it costs us and, above all, how it can be different.

How it used to be

Come with me to thirty years ago, when work still had a beginning and an end. You arrived at the office in the morning and the post was lying on your desk in a little pile. You opened the envelopes one by one, read them and put them on the right pile. The phone rang a few times a day. Anyone who wanted to reach you called or wrote a letter, and an answer within a week was perfectly proper. Now you get a second email after an hour, asking whether you have seen the first one.

When you were on holiday, nobody expected anything from you. At five o'clock the door closed and the work stayed at the office. It didn't come home in your pocket and it didn't sleep next to your bed.

Information was scarce. If you wanted to know something, you picked up a book, called a colleague or waited for tomorrow's paper. That gave you time to think before you reacted and to let something sink in.

I am not saying it was better back then, but it was a lot quieter in our heads.

What changed

Then suddenly it all went very fast.

Email had existed since the seventies, but in the nineties it arrived in every office. Then the internet arrived in every home. Facebook came in 2004, and in 2007 Steve Jobs pulled the first iPhone out of his pocket. Within a few years everyone was holding a computer that

never switched off, followed by WhatsApp, Instagram, LinkedIn, Teams, Slack and TikTok.

Don't get me wrong, every step made our lives easier. We have faster contact, can look anything up instantly, work from anywhere and text our kids from work. I'm a fan and really don't want to go back to the fax machine. Although it did have one big advantage: it stayed at the office, and not next to your bed.

Without anyone noticing, though, something fundamental changed, gradually rather than all at once. Work came home with us and the door never closed again. The flow of information grew from a stream into a river that never stops, keeps flowing at night and simply carries on at the weekend.

The strange thing is that nobody ever chose this. There was never a meeting where we all decided to be available from now on. It happened step by step, app by app.

The river

So how big is that river? I will give you a few numbers, and I want you to let them sink in.

Microsoft can see exactly what happens in Outlook and Teams, for millions of users worldwide. In 2025 they put it all together. The average employee receives 117 emails a day, plus another 153 messages in Teams.

During working hours, that same employee is interrupted around 275 times by an email, a message or a meeting. That is once every two minutes on average.

275 interruptions per working day. Once every two minutes on average.

Try writing a strategic plan at that pace.

It doesn't stop at five o'clock either. Forty percent of the people online at six in the morning are already in their email. Meetings after eight in the evening rose by 16 percent in a single year. Microsoft itself calls it the infinite workday: a workday that never really starts and never really ends.

Think back to Mark, at twelve past six, in bed. He isn't the exception, he is exactly the average.

Built to hold on to you

I haven't even mentioned social media yet, apps built to hold your attention for as long as possible.

Those apps make their money from your attention. The longer you look, the more ads they sell. Your time is their product.

The smartest people in the world work on this, with the biggest budgets in the world, and they know exactly how your brain works.

Take dopamine. People often say it gives you a happy feeling, but that isn't quite right. Dopamine makes you want something. It is released mostly when you expect a reward, so at the moment it might be coming.

That "might" is exactly the trick, the same one a slot machine uses. You never know what you will get: sometimes a nice message,

sometimes a like, sometimes nothing. Precisely because it is unpredictable, you keep pulling. Refreshing a feed is simply pulling the lever, except there is no sign saying “please gamble responsibly”.

Then there are the little red dots, those numbers on your apps. They are there to lure you into the app, not to help you. And likes work because our brain wants to know what the group thinks of us. Your life used to depend on that, and now it depends on how many thumbs your holiday photo gets.

Then there is endless scrolling, invented in 2006 by Aza Raskin. A page used to have an end, and you had to choose whether to click on or stop. Raskin took that moment away and later came to regret it. He estimated himself that endless scrolling wastes around 200,000 human lifetimes of time every day.

So when you are on the sofa in the evening wondering why you keep picking up that phone, it is because that is what it was made for. It has very little to do with weakness. You are playing against a team that does this full time.

A brain from another age

Our brain was not built for any of this.

It comes from a world where a sound meant something, like a snapping branch or something moving in the grass. You had to pay attention, because it could be danger. Every notification on your phone still presses that old alarm button, so you take a quick look, send a quick reply and check whether there’s anything. We can hardly help it.

Gloria Mark, a professor at the University of California, Irvine, has been studying this for over twenty years. She follows people while they work, first with a stopwatch and a notepad and later with software that measures exactly what happens on their screens.

Twenty years ago, people stayed with one thing on their screen for about two and a half minutes on average before their attention drifted. Now it is less than a minute.

It gets worse, because once you have been interrupted, you are not simply back. In her research it took more than twenty minutes on average before someone was really back on the task they had been working on.

Do the maths with me. You are interrupted every two minutes and need twenty minutes to get back. That sum never works out. If you work like that, you never get to real work and only react.

Then there is Sophie Leroy, an American researcher who in 2009 discovered something she called attention residue. When you jump from task A to task B, part of your head stays stuck on task A. You are already in the next meeting, but you are still thinking about that half-answered email. You can measure it, because you perform worse on task B.

So every time you quickly check your email while writing that plan, you bring a piece of that email back with you. Do that all day and you walk around with a head full of half thoughts.

You may be thinking: Roy, I'm just good at multitasking. I hear that a lot. Everyone thinks so, just like everyone thinks they are a better driver than average. I have bad news about that.

In 2009, researchers at Stanford University ran an experiment. Professor Clifford Nass and his team wanted to know what heavy multitaskers are actually so good at. They were convinced these people excelled at something, such as better filtering or faster switching.

They found nothing. The heavy multitaskers did worse on every test. They were more easily distracted by things that didn't matter, were worse at keeping information organised and were even worse at switching between tasks, the very thing they thought they were good at. Nass put it beautifully himself: they are suckers for irrelevancy.

What we call multitasking is really switching, and every switch costs you something.

Busy is the new normal

The strange part is that we have come to see this as normal.

Ask someone at a birthday party how they are doing and you hear: busy, busy, busy. We say it almost proudly, because being busy has become a kind of status symbol. Answering quickly looks committed, always being available looks indispensable and sending an email at eleven at night looks dedicated.

Being busy is something very different from making progress. Mark and Kevin both work incredibly hard, put in long days and care about the company. Yet at the end of the week they both have the same feeling: what really mattered has been left undone again.

I want to be very clear here: that is not down to them, their effort, their character or their discipline. It is the logical result of a world that has completely changed in thirty years, while the way we work

has stayed almost the same. We still work as if the post is lying on our desk, only now a new letter arrives every two minutes.

The next wave

The next wave is already at the door, and really it is already inside: AI.

AI can write, summarise, plan, calculate and answer, faster than we ever will. That is what makes it so exciting. AI is an amplifier and speeds up whatever is already there.

Use AI without a method and you only get more: more emails, because they now take ten seconds to write, more reports, more messages and more noise. Chaos simply becomes faster chaos.

Use AI smartly and something wonderful happens. You get rid of whole chunks of work that were never really needed.

Let me give you an example from my own life. My bookkeeping is done by AI: receipts, invoices, entries and reports. Sooner or later I would have paid an accountant for that, or lost my evenings to it. It saves me thousands of euros every year, and more importantly, it saves me time. I now put that time into the work I am good at and that gives me energy.

So AI can bury you under even more distractions, or free you from everything you don’t really need to do. Which one it becomes depends on the way you work, because the software simply does what you ask.

I will come back to this in detail later in this book. First I want to show you what all these distractions do to us: to our heads, our

bodies, our teams and the organisations where we want to do our best work every day.

Only when you see how big the problem is will you understand why a new diary, an inbox course or a handy app is not going to solve it.

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2

What it does to us

The phone experiment

I want to start with an experiment that is one of my favourites.

In 2017, researchers at the University of Texas invited almost eight hundred people to take a test. The tasks were simple, but you had to concentrate to get them right: remembering sums and recognising patterns, the kind of work your head needs to be fully present for.

Before they started, participants got one instruction about their phone. The first group had to put it face down on the table, the second in their bag or pocket and the third in another room. Everyone had to put their phone on silent, and some even had to switch it off completely.

The people whose phone was in another room scored best and the people with their phone on the table scored worst, even when it was face down. No notification came in and nothing went off. It was just lying there.

The researcher, Adrian Ward, called it brain drain. Your conscious mind isn't busy with your phone at all, but part of your head is busy the whole time not picking it up. That takes capacity you no longer have for your work.

To be fair, other researchers have repeated this experiment and it didn't always work, so we don't yet know exactly how big the effect is. What does come back in study after study is that you pick up what you see, and that every time you pick it up, you are gone for a moment.

The strangest part of that first study is that the participants didn't notice a thing. They thought they were completely focused, just as you probably think now, with your phone lying next to this book.

Take a look around your own organisation. In every meeting there are phones on the table and there is one next to every keyboard. We have come to see it as normal, but every phone on the table is a small leak in the concentration of the person sitting next to it.

Always on

The most wonderful thing about our brain is that it always wants to know what is going on. That is what saved us as a species, because those who paid attention survived. The most difficult thing about our brain is exactly the same.

Every notification is a small promise. Maybe it's something nice, maybe something important, maybe the client you are waiting for. You only know once you look, so you look, again and again. That doesn't make you weak, it is just how we are wired.

The problem is that our head never switches off. We are on standby all day, and a device that is always on standby slowly drains its battery, even when you are not using it.

You notice it in small things. You read a page of a book and by the end you don't know what you have read. You sit at the table with

your kids while your head is still with that email. In the shower you suddenly remember a task you forgot. Your body is somewhere, but your head is everywhere.

Just a quick look

Tomorrow, notice how often you pick up your phone without knowing why. It is in your hand, you open an app and you no longer know what you were looking for. Your hand got there before your head did.

At that point you are no longer choosing, it has become a habit. And a habit you can't stop when you want to comes suspiciously close to what we call addiction when it comes to other things.

You feel the urge in a meeting. You wait three seconds at the coffee machine and it is already out of your pocket. You pick it up in your break to recover, and after fifteen minutes of scrolling you are more tired than before, because scrolling gives you more stimuli instead of rest.

Then there is the comparing. On LinkedIn everyone has just won an award and on Instagram everyone is on holiday, while you are sitting with your 412 emails. You know perfectly well it is a shop window, but your head compares anyway, and you take that unrest with you to work.

The treacherous part is that every moment on its own seems harmless. It is only a quick look. But a hundred quick looks leave you with a day chopped into pieces.

Rest no longer exists

In the past you automatically had moments of nothing: waiting for the bus, queueing at the supermarket, sitting on the sofa before the news started. They were boring moments, and precisely then something important happened. Your head tidied up, processed the day and made connections. That is where your best ideas came from.

You probably know the feeling that your best ideas come while cycling or in the shower. That's no coincidence, because those are the last places where there is no screen in front of your face. Although I suspect Silicon Valley is already working hard on that.

Those moments have disappeared, because we fill every second of boredom with a quick scroll, in the queue, in the lift and on the toilet. In doing so we take away exactly the time our head needs to recharge and tidy up.

And then the night

The place where it may hit hardest is the bedroom.

Research by Dutch broadcaster Hart van Nederland shows that 72 percent of Dutch people sleep with their phone next to the bed. The last thing we see at night and the first thing we see in the morning is a screen. Just think of Mark at twelve past six.

In Norway, researchers looked at more than 45,000 students. The more time they spent with a screen in bed, the worse they slept. Every hour of screen time in bed cost around 24 minutes of sleep on average. A Finnish study measured it even more precisely, with a

smart ring on the finger. People who used their phone in bed took longer to fall asleep, lay awake longer at night and had a more restless heart rate.

Scientists don't fully agree yet about the blue light from your screen, and some studies say that light is less harmful than we thought. The bigger problem is what is on that screen: that email from your client at ten at night, that message in the group chat, that news story. Your head switches back on just when it should be switching off.

People who sleep badly work worse the next day, are more irritable and make more mistakes. They also reach for their phone sooner, because they are tired and want a little distraction. And so the circle keeps itself going.

What it does to the quality of our work

If we add it all up, it looks like this. You are interrupted every two minutes and need more than twenty minutes to get back. With every switch you carry leftover attention with you. Next to you is a phone that keeps pulling you away, and you slept worse than your body needs.

What kind of work can you still deliver?

Answering emails and reacting go just fine. Thinking deeply no longer works, and so neither does really getting to the bottom of a difficult problem, coming up with a strategy, writing something that actually says something or being creative. That is exactly the work you were once hired for and that makes the difference for your organisation.

Together we have become reaction machines, very fast and very efficient, but no longer really working on anything.

How it feels

Maybe this is the most important part. You can read all those studies, but in the end it is about how it feels.

Every year, the Dutch research institutes TNO and CBS ask employees in the Netherlands how they are doing. In 2025, 24 percent of women said they were mentally exhausted by their work. Ten years earlier it was 14 percent. For men it went from 13 to 18 percent.

Mentally exhausted means things like: I feel empty at the end of the working day, I feel emotionally drained by my work, I dread starting again.

The American researchers at Gallup asked too. Thirty percent of Dutch employees had a lot of stress yesterday, almost one in three.

Those are your colleagues. Maybe it is the quiet one in the team who always gets everything right, or maybe it is you.

In the next chapter we zoom in on the work itself. If the world around us is already this full of distractions, what happens when your work piles even more on top?

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3

High workload and ever faster flows of information

The email that became a meeting

It is Tuesday afternoon, half past two. Sanne is a team leader at Mark's company and has just got a whole free hour in her calendar. She blocked it two weeks ago, with the title "DO NOT DISTURB" in capitals, because she has to finish the planning for the new quarter.

At 2.32 pm her Teams goes off: "Got a sec?" You know how that ends. In office language, a sec is a unit of time ranging from five minutes to the rest of your afternoon.

It turns out to be about an email she sent this morning that wasn't quite understood. Four people have replied, all with reply all, and someone has added a question that has nothing to do with it. Now they want to "quickly align live". At 2.40 pm Sanne is in an impromptu call with five people, and at 3.25 pm it is wrapped up with the decision to schedule another meeting about it tomorrow.

The DO NOT DISTURB block is over and the planning is not finished.

If this sounds familiar, you are in good company. According to Microsoft, 57 percent of all meetings are impromptu calls without a

calendar invite. So more than half of our meetings aren't planned anywhere, they just happen to us.

More, faster, always

You already saw the numbers in chapter 1: 117 emails a day, 153 chat messages and 275 interruptions. What I haven't told you yet is that most of those emails are not even really read. Microsoft saw that they are usually looked at for less than a minute. A quick scan to see if anything is on fire, and on to the next.

Think about that for a moment. Someone put time into writing that email, and the recipient looks at it for forty seconds and still doesn't really know what to do with it. So he sends an email back with a question, and you get a ping-pong match that nobody wins.

It also keeps getting faster. An answer within a week used to be perfectly fine, then it became within a day, and now it is within an hour, or five minutes for a text message. If you don't answer quickly, you get a second message: "Did you see my email?" Yes, I saw it, I was just busy working.

Why technology didn't make it easier

There is something very strange going on here. All that technology was meant to make our work easier, and it did. TNO asked Dutch employees and about 40 percent say technology lets them do more work in the same time.

That sounds great, except it didn't lead to a lower workload. We can do more, so we do more, and whoever does more gets even more.

It’s like buying a bigger cupboard because your cupboard is full. A year later the new cupboard is full too, and you still don’t know where your keys are.

TNO also measures the workload itself. Of all employees, 32 percent experience high job demands and 42 percent experience little autonomy, so little freedom to decide for themselves how and when they do their work.

Put those two side by side: a lot you have to do and little you can decide yourself. That is exactly the combination that causes stress. Try staying calm under that.

The infinite workday

Microsoft called it the infinite workday, and you see that most clearly in the evening. Meetings after eight at night rose by 16 percent in a year. Some of the people who work at weekends are already in their email before noon on Saturday and Sunday.

The funny thing is that nobody said you have to. There is no rule saying you must read your email on Sunday. But when the boss sends an email on Sunday evening, you still think on Monday morning that you had better have read it.

I once spoke to someone who said: I read my email on Sunday evening, so I don’t have so much stress on Monday. I totally get it, but that just means you have Monday’s stress on Sunday evening. You have moved it forward a day. Congratulations.

Information is not knowledge

We have also never had so much information. Every report, every figure and every opinion can be found. Every organisation has thousands of documents on a server that nobody can find their way around anymore.

More information doesn't make us smarter, though, and often makes us slower. Anyone who can know everything thinks they have to know everything before making a decision. So there is another report, another meeting and another round of consultations.

Information is like water. You need it to live, but if you try to drink from a fire hose, you drown.

What happens then

Put it all together. More is coming in than ever, it has to be done faster than ever, work never stops and we have little grip on how we organise it.

Then something happens that I see in almost every organisation: people switch to survival mode. They do whatever shouts loudest and react to the email at the top, the colleague who calls the loudest and the client who is the angriest. The important work, which has no deadline today, gets pushed back to tomorrow, to next week, to after the summer.

Mark was going to work on the new direction and Sanne was going to finish the planning. They both know it matters, and neither of them gets round to it.

That has consequences for the people, the teams and the organisation, and that is what we will look at now. I'm warning you in advance that it is not a cheerful part of the book. But after this part you will never again say it's not that bad.

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2

PART

The consequences

4

The consequences for people

Sanne at the kitchen table

It is Wednesday evening, quarter past six. Sanne is at the table with her two children and they are eating macaroni, the only meal everyone in this house agrees on. Her daughter is telling her about a fight in the playground, something about a skipping rope and a broken friendship. For a nine-year-old girl, this is world news.

Sanne nods and says “hm” and “really?” at the right moments. But her phone is next to her plate and has just buzzed. She looks. It is Mark: “Can you give me a quick call at 8 tomorrow about the planning?” Of course she can. Only now, at the kitchen table, her head is already in tomorrow.

Her daughter stops talking. “Mum, you’re not listening.”

Ouch.

I am not telling this story to call Sanne a bad mother. She is a wonderful mother and also a wonderful team leader, and that is exactly the problem. She is trying to be both at every moment of the day, and nobody can manage that.

I bet everyone reading this knows a moment like that, when someone who loves you says you are not really there, and you know they are right.

The body keeps the score

Our body is made for short bursts of stress: a danger, a sprint and then rest again. Your heart rate goes up, your muscles tense and you are sharp. Then it settles down again and you recover.

What happens when that rest never comes? When there is a new stimulus every two minutes, you still check your email on the sofa at night and you sleep badly? Then that system stays switched on, all day, all week and for months on end.

That goes well for a while, until one day it doesn't.

It starts small. You sleep a bit worse, get irritated more quickly, have a headache on Friday afternoon and fall ill in the first days of your holiday. Your body has waited until you finally had some rest and then presents the bill. Very considerate of your body, but you would rather have done something else with your week in Spain.

Then it gets bigger. You forget things and can no longer concentrate. You lie awake at night while your head keeps churning, and you don't feel like doing anything anymore, not even the things you used to enjoy.

How your body is built: tension, then recovery



How we work now: the next trigger arrives before recovery



time →

Our body copes well with tension, as long as rest follows. Without that rest the system stays switched on.

The numbers behind the people

I will give you a few numbers now, and I want you to think of people with each one. Behind every percentage there are colleagues, neighbours and friends.

TNO has been measuring for years how many employees have burnout symptoms. In 2014 it was 14 percent and in 2024 it was 20 percent, one in five employees. In the Netherlands that is about 1.7 million people.

1 in 5 employees has burnout symptoms. Look around your team. Count to five.

Look around your own team and count to five. There is a good chance one of them is walking around with this.

When it goes wrong, it goes badly wrong. Mental health problems, being overstressed and burnout are the most common reasons for sick leave after flu and colds. With flu you are back at work after a week, but sick leave for mental health problems lasts 67 days on average, more than two months. Being overstressed and burnout are now also the occupational illness employees report most often.

Perhaps the most painful part is that despite years of attention to workload, nobody has managed to turn this trend around. We have been talking about it for ten years and have weeks, campaigns, fruit baskets and mindfulness apps for it, and the line just keeps going up.

When it really goes wrong

Those 67 days are an average across all mental health complaints, so they include someone who is off for a few weeks with stress. For a real burnout the figure is a lot higher. Occupational health services see that people who drop out because of stress are not fully able to work for 252 days on average, and for a burnout that rises to about ten months. That is almost a year out of someone's life, and that is only the average.

Anyone who has seen it up close knows that a burnout is something very different from being very tired. Many people say they could no longer read a book because they lost the thread after two sentences, that a shopping list was already too much and that the noise in the supermarket overwhelmed them. Their body had been running on the brakes for years and one day simply stopped cooperating.

Recovery is slow, with small steps and a lot of patience. Even when someone is back at work, it often takes months before the energy really returns. Meanwhile, in the Netherlands the employer keeps paying wages for up to two years of sickness, while the work still has to be done.

That is why I say it so firmly: preventing a burnout is far cheaper and far more humane than curing one. You do that through the way you work every day, long before anyone needs a wellbeing programme.

10 months on average not fully able to work after a burnout.

It is not the weak people

There is a persistent misunderstanding that burnout mostly happens to weak people, people who can't take a knock.

It is often the people who care most about their work. The committed people who always say yes, who answer that email at night because they don't want to keep the client waiting and finish that report at the weekend because the team is counting on it. Really, they are your best people.

TNO saw it too: mental exhaustion from work is highest among employees at the highest job level. The more responsibility you have, the more things pull at you.

Kevin is one of those people. He never says no, and would even say yes to a meeting about why he never says no. He is always available and everyone calls him when something is on fire. Kevin is exactly

the man who will be sitting on the sofa at home two years from now, unable to open his email without his heart starting to pound.

What we lose at home

There is another consequence nobody keeps a number for: what it does to the people at home.

Your partner has been hearing for years that things will calm down after this busy period. (Spoiler: things never calm down, there is just another busy period.) Your kids learn that dad or mum is there, but not really. You see your friends less and less, because you need the weekend to recover from the week.

I will just say it as it is: your children won't remember later how quickly you answered your email. They will remember whether you listened when they told you about the skipping rope.

The good news

I can't end this chapter like this, because there is good news too: it can be different. You don't have to work harder for it, and you don't need a breathing course either. You start working differently, together, as an organisation.

First we will look a bit further, because what happens to people also happens to teams, and that is where it gets really interesting.

SOURCES

- TNO and CBS, burnout symptoms from 14 to 20 percent (NEA)
- TNO, work stress factsheet 2025: 1.7 million employees with burnout symptoms
- TNO and CBS, sick leave due to mental health problems and job level (NEA 2025)
- ArboNed and HumanCapitalCare: length of absence for stress and burnout

5

The consequences for the team

The meeting about the meeting

It is Thursday morning, nine o'clock, time for Sanne's weekly team meeting. There are eight people round the table and three online, with seven items on the agenda. Everyone has their laptop open, officially to take notes but really to keep up with email, because that doesn't stop just because you are in a meeting.

Item one takes forty minutes and is about something that could really have been sorted out between two people. The other six look at their screens in the meantime. Item two is postponed, because the colleague who was supposed to explain it is still in another meeting. By item three, time is up.

They agree to schedule an extra meeting to discuss the rest of the items. Nobody sees the irony, or everyone sees it but has no time to say anything about it.

I have seen this in so many organisations that I almost have to laugh. Once you do the maths, though, it stops being funny. Eight people, one hour, every week: that is more than four hundred hours a year

for one meeting, which mainly results in the need for another meeting.

Everyone busy, nobody getting anywhere

When one person keeps getting interrupted, that is annoying. When a whole team keeps getting interrupted, people start interrupting each other. I get disturbed by you, so I send you a quick message too. You forward it to her, and she copies half the department, just to be safe.

That turns a team into a pinball machine, with balls flying in every direction, flashing lights and a lot of noise. If you look closely, you see the ball keeps dropping down again.

Think back to Sophie Leroy and her attention residue, and to Clifford Nass, who discovered that multitaskers are worse at everything. Now picture a team where everyone switches all day long. Everyone walks around with scraps of attention from the previous task and nobody is really with the work at hand. Then you get exactly what you see in many teams.

You get mistakes: a quote with the wrong amount, an engineer driving to the wrong address, a client getting the same answer twice from two different colleagues, or from nobody, because everyone thought someone else had picked it up.

You get duplicate work, with two people working on the same thing without knowing it, or someone making a document that already exists but that nobody can find.

And you get noise: emails where nobody understands what is meant and messages that go back and forth four times before it is clear what the question actually was.

The manager caught in the middle

Right in the middle sits the manager, in this case Sanne.

From above come the goals, the plans and the changes, and from below come the questions, the problems and the complaints. Sanne stands in between and spends all day passing things on, translating, putting out fires and calming people down. She has become a kind of human router, and just like a real router, when it freezes everything goes down.

That is more than a feeling of mine. Gallup, the research firm that has been measuring for years how engaged people are with their work, saw it happening worldwide. Manager engagement has fallen by nine percentage points since 2022, and in 2025 alone it went from 27 to 22 percent. Gallup even calls the falling engagement of managers the main cause of falling engagement in organisations.

If you think about it, that makes sense. A manager who has no room to think can't give their team direction either, and can only react. A team without direction starts doing whatever shouts loudest.

Engagement

So how engaged are ordinary employees? Europe has had the lowest engagement in the world for years. In 2025 only 12 percent of European employees were truly engaged with their work. The Netherlands does slightly better, but here too it is stuck at around 16 percent.

I want to pause on that, because it doesn't mean the rest are lazy. Most people do their job without really being in it. They come in, do

what needs doing and go home. They are willing, they just no longer see what they are doing it for and what their work contributes to the bigger picture.

That touches on something I see again and again. People are happy to work hard and go the extra mile, as long as they know what for.

The hidden costs of a busy team

In a busy team you also see people helping each other less. They are perfectly nice, they just don't have the time. There is no room left for a chat at the coffee machine, for the new colleague who doesn't quite know the ropes yet or for a question you need to think about for a moment.

Those small things are exactly what holds a team together. A team that no longer has time for each other is really a group of people who happen to be on the same mailing list.

In the next chapter we look at the biggest picture, the organisation, and that is where it gets concrete in euros. Feel free to grab a calculator. Or don't bother, I will do the maths for you.

SOURCES

- Gallup, State of the Global Workplace 2026: manager engagement
- Gallup, Europe and engagement in 2025
- Gallup, engagement in the Netherlands (2025 report)

6

The consequences for the organisation

The plan in the drawer

It is January last year. Mark stands in the canteen in front of his whole company: eighty people, sandwiches and a projector that finally works on the third attempt. He presents the plan for the new year. They will grow to a hundred employees, start a new branch for sustainable installations and make their clients happier. There is applause, someone shouts “wow!” and there is cake.

Fast forward to December. Mark looks at the figures and they aren’t bad, it has been a fine year. Only very little has come of the plan. The new branch never really got off the ground, because there was no time for it. Everyone was busy with the work of every day.

The plan is in a drawer, or rather in a folder on the server called “Annual plan FINAL v3 new”. If you ask an engineer about it, he doesn’t even know it exists. He does still remember there was cake.

I see this in so many organisations. The plans are usually fine. The problem is that the plan never reaches the desks of the people who have to carry it out, and in the end that is what this whole book is about. First I want to show you what it costs.

What sick leave costs

We will start with the most visible part: people dropping out.

TNO calculated that employees in the Netherlands took 14.3 million days of sick leave in one year due to psychosocial workload. That is the formal term for workload, stress, conflict and emotionally demanding work. Of those 14.3 million days, 10.3 million were due to excessive workload alone.

A number like 10.3 million days is so big that it no longer means anything, so let me put it differently. For an employer, stress-related sick leave costs almost 15,000 euros on average per employee who drops out. If three people are at home for a while with stress symptoms, you have quickly lost 45,000 euros. And that doesn't include the work that is left undone and the colleagues who have to pick it up and get more pressure themselves as a result.

Because that is how it works. If Kevin drops out, Sanne takes over his projects, and you can guess who is next.

What people leaving costs

Then there are the people who don't drop out, but leave. One day they are standing at your desk saying they have found something else. With a bit of luck they tell you it isn't because of you, which usually isn't entirely true.

HR specialists estimate that replacing an employee costs 20 to 50 percent of an annual salary, for recruitment, selection, onboarding and the months in which the new colleague is not yet up to speed. For specialists and managers it is often much higher. That doesn't

even count the knowledge that walks out of the door with the person who leaves, because it wasn't in a system but in their head.

In a tight labour market, that replacement isn't easy to find either. The chair stays empty, and the work ends up with the people who are still there.

The sum nobody does

Now comes the most important part. Sick leave and staff turnover are still visible, because they are on a list at HR. The biggest cost is on no list at all: the time lost by the people who simply come to work every day.

Let me show you with Mark's company of eighty employees. Let's be very cautious and say everyone loses one hour a day to unnecessary interruptions, meetings without a purpose, searching for information and emails nobody needed to send. I think it is more, but fine.

Eighty people times one hour times 220 working days is 17,600 hours a year. At 45 euros an hour, including all employer costs, you end up at 792,000 euros.

That is almost eight hundred thousand euros a year, at a company of eighty people, in time that simply evaporates.

€792,000

in lost time per year, at a company of 80 people where everyone loses one hour a day.

You don’t see that money disappear. No invoice arrives and nobody calls you about it. It leaks away a little every day. When you tell a managing director, he first looks at you as if you are mad. Then he picks up his calculator, and the room goes quiet.

Feel free to do it for your own organisation: number of employees times one hour times 220 days times your hourly rate. I will wait. And if you get a fright, that is exactly what this chapter is for.

On a global scale

In case you think this is a Dutch problem: Gallup estimates that low employee engagement cost the global economy around 10 trillion dollars in lost productivity in 2025. That is 9 percent of everything the world earns together, because people don’t know what they are doing it for or have no time for what really matters.

Missed opportunities

Finally, perhaps the most expensive item of all: what you don’t do.

Mark’s new branch that never got off the ground. An employee’s idea there was never time for. The client who went to the competition because nobody called him back in time. The innovation everyone talked about, but nobody got round to.

Those costs aren’t written down anywhere and you can’t measure them, but they do decide whether your organisation will still exist in five years. While you are busy with today’s work, your competitor may well be busy with tomorrow’s.

Where does it go wrong?

In December Mark sits at his desk looking at the annual plan and the figures. He doesn't get it. He has good people, everyone works hard and so does he, harder than ever. Yet the company is standing still, busy but still.

He asks himself the question I am going to answer in this book: where does it actually go wrong?

In the next part we look at the causes. I can already tell you that the answer is not that your people need to work harder, and not that you need a better email app either. The answer lies much deeper, right at the top, with the mission.

SOURCES

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- Cost of replacing an employee
- Gallup, State of the Global Workplace 2026: 10 trillion dollars

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PART

The causes

7

No mission, only goals

The question nobody can answer

When I walk into an organisation, I often ask the managing director, the team leader and the employee at the coffee machine one simple question: why does this company exist?

You would think that is an easy question, but it turns out not to be.

The managing director usually starts talking about revenue: “We want to grow by 10 percent this year.” That is a goal, and not yet a reason. The team leader talks about his department: “We make sure projects are finished on time.” That is a task. And the employee at the coffee machine looks at me as if I have just asked him for the capital of Mongolia. “Er. To make money?”

That isn’t his fault. Nobody ever told him, or it was told once at an away day in 2019 and never again.

Goals without a why

Almost every organisation has goals: revenue goals, growth goals, customer satisfaction goals and dashboards full of green and red dots. There is nothing wrong with that, because goals are necessary.

But a goal without a why is like a sat nav where you enter a speed, but no destination. You know how fast to drive, but not where to. So everyone drives very fast, each in a different direction.

Look at what happens on an ordinary working day. Fifty things come at you that all seem important: the client's email, your colleague's request, the report for the board and the idea you had yourself. How do you choose?

If you know the mission, it isn't that hard. You ask yourself which of these things brings you closer to the reason you are here, and half of them fall away by themselves.

If you don't know the mission, you have no filter and everything is equally important. When everything is equally important, you do whatever shouts loudest, and you are back with Kevin, with 412 emails and three problems before half past six that aren't even his.

The mission as a compass

Let me say this straight away: by mission I don't mean one of those sentences on the wall at reception, like "We strive for excellent service with care for people and planet." That sentence is on the wall at a thousand companies, it means nothing and nobody remembers it. I once saw one where half the letters had already fallen off the wall, and nobody had noticed.

A real mission says why you exist, for whom, and what would go wrong in the world if you weren't there tomorrow. Everyone in the organisation can retell it in their own words, from the managing director to the new intern.

A real mission also helps you choose every day: with every email, every request and every meeting where you wonder whether you really need to be there.

Why so many organisations skip this step

So why do so many organisations still start with the goals rather than the mission?

Goals are easy. You can measure them, put them in a spreadsheet and hang a bonus on them. A mission takes thinking and agreeing together, and that takes time. As we have already seen, time is exactly what nobody has.

So we skip it and go straight to the goals. Then we are surprised that people aren't motivated, that departments work past each other and that the best plans end up in a drawer.

It is like building a house and skipping the foundations because you can't see them anyway. It looks fine, until the first little storm.

And companies without a strategy?

I can hear you thinking: Roy, we don't have a strategy at all. We are a small business with thirty people and we are just working hard.

That is absolutely fine, and it applies to a great many companies. They too have a reason to exist, clients who choose them for a reason and people who get up every morning to work there. That is where it starts, with that one question of why you exist, and you don't need a thick strategy document for that.

If you answer that question well, the rest almost follows by itself. Later in this book I will show you how.

Mark and the question

When I asked Mark that question, there was a long silence. Then he said: “I started because I felt installers always kept people waiting. I wanted to be the company that does show up. That does what it says.”

I asked: “Do your people know that?”

It went quiet again. “I don’t think so,” he said. “To be honest, I had forgotten it a bit myself.”

That was where the problem began, and as you will see later, it was also where the solution began.

8

The gap between management and employees

Chinese whispers

You probably remember Chinese whispers from when you were a kid. Someone whispers a sentence in their neighbour's ear, who whispers it on, and so on. At the end of the line, the last person says out loud what they heard. At the start it was: "Pete's grandma bought a red bike." At the end: "Pete has a cat in the bike shed."

Everyone laughs, because it is a fun game. It gets a lot less fun when it is your company strategy.

That is how it goes in a great many organisations. The board comes up with a plan and presents it to the management team. The managers translate it for their department and the team leaders for their team. By the time it reaches the employee, little is left of what it once was, or nothing arrives at all.

Two worlds

In almost every organisation there are two worlds. In the first world people think about the future, about direction, growth, opportunities and threats. Meetings there take place in rooms with lovely views and at away days with flip charts and lots of sticky notes, and people talk about spearheads, focus areas and strategic pillars.

In the second world people work. That is where the client comes with a question, the supplier is late, the invoice has to go out and the engineer has to be at the address on time. People there talk about who is picking this up, where that file is and why the printer isn't working again. I have never heard an engineer say he is just checking whether this leak falls within the strategic pillars.

Between those two worlds is a deep gap. The people in the first world don't know exactly what the work in the second world looks like, and the people in the second world have no idea what was decided in the first, let alone what it means for their work today.

This is where the time disappears

Something I have come to see more and more clearly over the years is that the biggest time leak in an organisation sits in that gap, not in the inbox or in meetings.

An employee who doesn't know what the organisation wants to achieve makes his own choices. They are logical choices from the point of view of his own work, but they don't always fit what the organisation needs. So he works hard, but on the wrong things, or on the right things in the wrong order.

A management team that doesn't know what is happening on the shop floor makes plans that can't be carried out, or that don't take into account people who are already up to their necks in work. A new project is added on top, and another, and nobody says it doesn't fit anymore.

The result is that everyone works hard and is busy, while the organisation hardly moves forward. It is like sitting in a rowing boat with eighty people, all rowing in a different direction. You make an enormous amount of waves, but you don't move from the spot.

Why the gap exists

Nobody wants that gap. No managing director wants to keep his people in the dark, and no employee thinks it doesn't matter what the board wants.

The gap exists because there is no bridge, no way to translate the plan at the top into the work of every day. There is an annual plan and there is a to-do list, and in between there is nothing, apart from hope and a quarterly presentation with cake.

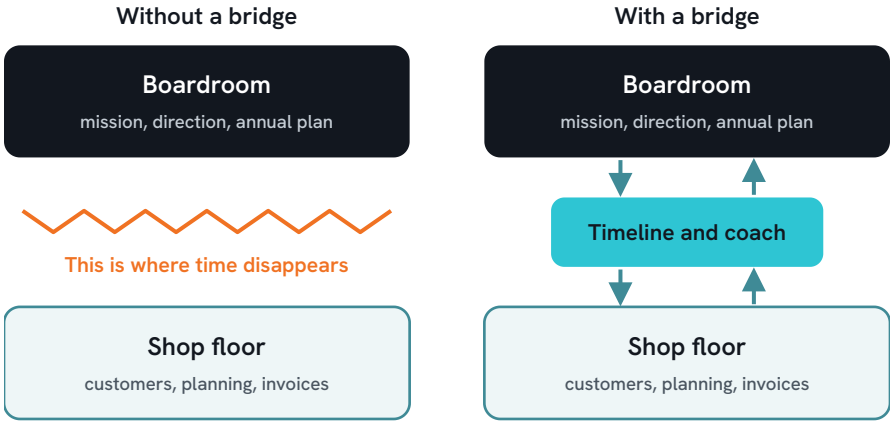
So everyone tries to build that bridge themselves. The managing director sends an inspiring email, the team leader discusses it in the meeting and the employee nods. Then everyone goes back to work as usual, because today's work simply has to get done.

Why the link in between matters most

You might think the solution lies at the top, with a better strategy, or at the bottom, with employees who plan better. I see it differently. A strategy is only worth something when it lands with the people who do the work, and an employee can only make good choices when he knows where things are heading. They need each other, and the value lies in the connection.

That connection works in two directions. From the top down, the engineer, the planner and Ingrid see every day where the company wants to go. From the bottom up, management sees whether the milestones are being met and where work gets stuck, without having to check what everyone is doing.

That is why so many tools fail to solve the problem. A strategy programme helps the board and a time management course helps the employee, but neither of them builds the bridge in between. That is exactly what I built Tijdexperts for.



The plan lives in the boardroom, the work on the shop floor. Without a bridge, time disappears in between.

What happens when the bridge is there

Now let me make you dream for a moment. Imagine that every employee in your organisation knows every morning what to work on today. He can see for himself how his work fits into the bigger picture, and how that one quote, that one phone call or that one piece of work contributes to where the organisation wants to go.

Management can see exactly where work gets stuck, without having to check on everyone and without everyone filling in a weekly report that nobody reads.

And in December the plan from January turns out to have actually worked, because everyone simply worked on the right things.

That is what happens when you close the gap, and that is what the last part of this book is about. Over the years I have seen that this is exactly where the difference is made, in the connection between the boardroom and the shop floor.

First we need to discuss three more causes. The next one is something many organisations get wrong with the very best intentions.

9

A goal imposed on everyone

Ingrid and the form

Meet Ingrid. She has been the office manager at Mark's company for seventeen years. She knows where every file is, which client you shouldn't call before ten and how to get the coffee machine working again when it makes that one beep. When Ingrid is on holiday for a week, the whole company notices, usually by Tuesday.

Last year Ingrid got a form, like everyone else, as part of the new approach. At the top it said: "What is your personal goal for this year, and how does it contribute to the strategy?"

Ingrid spent two evenings staring at it.

She didn't know what to fill in. Her job is making sure everything runs: that the calendar is right, that the post goes out and that clients who call are helped in a friendly way. That is important work that has to go well again every day, but you can hardly call it a goal.

In the end she just wrote something down: "Digitise the archive." Nobody had asked for it and it wasn't in any plan, but something had to be there. Since then she feels guilty every time she looks at it,

because she hasn't started yet. There was no time, because she was busy with her work.

Congratulations. With the very best intentions, we have given Ingrid, the glue of the company, a guilty conscience.

Why we give everyone a goal

I understand where it comes from. You want everyone to take part, to feel connected to the strategy and for nobody to be left behind. So everyone gets a goal: the board, the managers, the teams and every employee, right down to the desk.

For some people that works, like the sales manager who has to open up a new market or the project leader who has to introduce a new system. They have a real strategic goal that moves the organisation forward.

A great many people don't have one, and that is absolutely fine, even healthy. An organisation mostly consists of work that has to run every day: the invoice, the planning, the client on the phone and the engineer fixing the boiler. If that doesn't go well, your lovely strategy is no use at all.

What an imposed goal does

When you give someone a goal that doesn't fit their work, three things happen.

One: they make something up that sounds good on paper but contributes nothing, like digitising the archive.

Two: they have no time for it, because their real work just carries on. The goal stays untouched, and that feels like failure.

Three: they start to think their real work is worth less, because apparently only the goal counts. Yet that daily work is the most important thing they do.

That is how, with the best intentions, you turn good, committed people into people who feel guilty. It is a bit like giving your cat a jumper because you are cold. Well meant, but the cat isn't keen.

Start with the work

The solution is actually very simple: start with the work, not with the goal.

Ask Ingrid what her work is, what has to go well every day and what would go wrong if she were away for a month. You get a clear, honest answer, and it turns out Ingrid does three things that keep the whole company standing.

That is what it is about, and that is what she has to do well every day. If she also has a strategic goal, that is a nice extra, but not an obligation. If she doesn't, she is not worth any less. She is exactly what the company needs.

Later in this book I will show you how to approach this, and how to make sure everyone in the organisation works every day on what really matters, with or without a strategic goal.

10

Quick fixes for one part

The inbox course

You will probably recognise this story. A company notices that the workload is high and people complain about email, so HR organises a workshop: “Get a grip on your inbox”. A cheerful trainer comes along with a presentation full of tips. Turn off your notifications, check your email three times a day and use folders. Everyone is enthusiastic and everyone is going to do it.

On the Monday after the workshop, Kevin turns off his notifications. At ten o’clock Mark calls: “Didn’t you see my email?” No, Mark, I check my email three times a day now. “Yes, but this one was important.” By Wednesday the notifications are back on and by Friday everything is back to normal. Only the folders are still there, but there are no emails in them.

The problem with quick fixes

I have nothing against workshops or tips, but they don’t work if you only fix one piece.

The inbox is a symptom, not a cause. Your inbox fills up because everyone sends everything to everyone. They do that because

nobody knows who is responsible for what, and nobody knows that because the organisation has no clear line from top to bottom. That line is missing because nobody ever started with the mission.

So you can fix the inbox all you like, but if the rest of the chain isn't right, it just fills up again. It is mopping the floor with the tap still running, using a very expensive mop.

It is the same with everything. A rule that meetings can last no longer than half an hour is fine, but if nobody knows what the meeting is for, you simply get twice as many half-hour meetings. A new task app is nice, but if nobody knows which tasks are important, you get a beautiful app full of unimportant tasks. In colours.

Theory without practice

Even a good training fades. Anyone who has ever been on a course knows the feeling. You come home full of good intentions, two weeks later you no longer remember what you learned and a month later you don't even remember going on the course. Somewhere in a drawer there is still a folder of handouts.

That isn't your fault, it is simply how our memory works. What you don't apply disappears, and in a world with 275 interruptions a day, applying it just doesn't happen. The old habit always beats the new intention, because that is how people work, however much willpower they have.

That is why I don't believe in one-off trainings. Theory has to go together with practice every day. You need something that helps you keep doing the new thing, even on that busy Monday morning when Mark calls.

The whole

I will say it once more, because it matters so much. You don’t solve time wasting with one part, like an inbox course, a meeting rule or a new app. You solve it by tackling the whole system, from the mission at the top to the employee’s desk and everything in between.

That is why this book has the title it has.

11

AI without a method

Kevin discovers Copilot

It is a Monday morning in spring. Mark's company has bought Copilot, AI right inside Outlook and Teams. An enthusiastic email goes round: "From today, everyone can use AI! This is going to save us so much time!" With three exclamation marks. Everyone is talking about it at the coffee machine.

Kevin tries it straight away. He has Copilot write an email to a supplier, and it is done in ten seconds. He has it summarise his inbox and write up yesterday's meeting, and he is seriously impressed.

A month later Kevin doesn't have 412 emails in his inbox, but 530.

Everyone in the company got the same superpower and could suddenly write an email in ten seconds. So everyone wrote more emails, and longer ones too, because AI is rather fond of full sentences. Every meeting automatically got a three-page summary sent to all participants. Kevin now has AI summarise all the emails that were written by AI. Somewhere in a data centre two computers are talking to each other, and Kevin sits in between to press send.

An amplifier

I said it in chapter 1: AI is an amplifier and speeds up whatever is already there.

If there is a good way of working underneath, AI helps you do the right things faster. If there is chaos underneath, you do the wrong things faster and chaos becomes faster chaos.

We have seen this before. According to TNO, many people say technology helps them do more work in the same time, but that didn't lead to a lower workload. Email made communication faster, and we got more communication. Smartphones made us reachable everywhere, and we got reached everywhere. I don't see why AI would be any different.

You can already see it. Gallup saw employee engagement fall for the second year in a row in 2025, while organisations were investing heavily in AI. Despite all that money and all those possibilities, people don't feel any better for it.

The problem isn't the AI

Don't get me wrong, I am a huge fan of AI and use it myself every day. My bookkeeping is done by it, and that saves me thousands of euros a year. I wouldn't want to be without it.

I use it to cut work, while many organisations use it to create even more work. That is a world of difference.

The problem is that we let AI loose on an organisation without direction, and AI has no more of a compass than Kevin does. When

you ask AI to write an email, it writes an email. It doesn't ask itself whether that email should be sent at all, whether it contributes to where you want to go, or whether it could simply be left unsent.

You have to ask those questions, and you can only do that if you know where you want to go: if you know the mission, what your work is and what really matters.

The two roads

Every organisation is now at a fork in the road, and I think this may be the most important choice of this decade.

On the first road you use AI in the way you work now. You get more emails, more reports and more summaries, and everything goes faster. Two years from now everyone is even busier than today, with even more distractions, even more information and even less time to think.

On the second road you first straighten out the way you work. You know why you exist and where you want to go, and everyone knows what their work is. Then you use AI to remove everything that doesn't contribute to that: the admin, the searching, the summaries nobody reads and the work that was never really needed.

On the first road AI becomes yet another distraction, on the second the biggest time gain your organisation has ever had. And the nice thing is that you choose.

Where we are now

That brings us to the end of the difficult part of this book. I have shown you how the world changed, what all these distractions do to us, what it costs people, teams and organisations, and where it really goes wrong.

There is no mission, only goals. There is a gap between management and the shop floor. People get goals imposed on them that they can't do anything with, quick fixes only solve one piece, and now there is AI, which amplifies everything, including the chaos.

If you feel a bit gloomy now, that is perfectly fine, because it means you get it.

Now comes the good part, where we are going to solve it, from mission to desk.

SOURCES

- Gallup: engagement falls despite investment in AI
- TNO and CBS, technology and workload (NEA 2025)

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The solution, from mission to desk

12

The mission

Back to the beginning

You will remember what Mark said when I asked him why his company exists: “I wanted to be the company that does show up. That does what it says.” And that he had forgotten it a bit himself.

That one story is where we started. The thick strategy document and the away day in the countryside could stay in the cupboard.

Over all those years I have learned that you usually don’t have to invent an organisation’s mission, because it is already there. It is in the story of why it all began, in the reason clients choose you and in what your people are proud of when they tell someone at a birthday party where they work. You just have to find it again and write it down in plain language.

Three questions

I work with three questions. They are simple, but not easy.

The first is why you exist. I don’t mean what you do. Mark installs heating systems, that is what he does. He does it because people deserve a tradesman who shows up and does what he says, and that is something quite different.

The second is who you do it for: who would miss you if you weren't there tomorrow? For Mark that is not only his clients, but also his engineers, who want to be proud of their work.

The third is what would go wrong if you weren't there. If you have no answer to that, you have a problem. If you do have that answer, you have found your mission.

In the end Mark came up with one sentence of three words: "We show up." Everyone in the company could remember it, and more importantly, everyone immediately understood what it meant for their own work. The planner understood that you shouldn't make an appointment you can't keep. The engineer understood that being on time is not a detail. And Ingrid understood that a client who calls shouldn't be transferred three times.

> **We show up.**
>
> MARK'S MISSION, IN THREE WORDS.

Core values you can actually use

Next to the mission, you set down how you want to work together, your core values. Here too you don't want words that are on every wall, like "customer focused, reliable, innovative". They say about as much as "tasty" on a menu.

Good core values are choices that help you decide when things get difficult. At Mark's company one of the core values became: "Better an honest no than an empty yes." That is something you can work

with. When a client asks whether the engineer can come tomorrow and it isn't possible, you know what to say.

The mission as a filter

Now comes the best part. Once the mission is there, everyone has a filter for the fifty things that come at them every day.

If something contributes to the reason you exist, it is important. If it doesn't, it can wait, or maybe it doesn't need doing at all.

That sounds too simple to work, but I have seen it happen time and again. People suddenly dare to say no to a meeting. Teams stop a project because it doesn't really contribute to anything. Managing directors realise that half their calendar is full of things that have nothing to do with the mission.

Everything starts with the mission. That is why in Tijdexperts it sits right at the top of the organisation's timeline, so everyone sees it every day, exactly where they work.

13

Annual goals and quarters

From mission to direction

A mission says why you exist, but you also need to know where you are going. That is why the point on the horizon comes after the mission: where will you be in ten years if you truly live up to your mission?

For Mark it became: the installation company in the region you never have to wait for. That point on the horizon is big enough to go for and clear enough to know when you have got there.

Then you work backwards. Where do you need to be in three to five years to reach that point, and what does that mean for this year?

Why the mission comes first and the goals after

You may wonder why that order matters so much. Couldn't you just start with the goals and fill in the mission later?

You could, only then something happens that I see everywhere. A goal without a mission becomes a number you work towards for the sake of the number. As soon as people are judged on a number alone, they will hit the number, even when that is bad for the customer or for the company. The engineer who is judged on volume does his jobs faster and more sloppily. The salesperson with a

revenue target also sells to the customer who has no real use for it. The number is right, while the company heads in the wrong direction.

With the mission above it, that changes. A goal then becomes a step towards the reason you exist. At Mark's company everyone knows that 95 percent of appointments on time is how the company shows that it turns up. That is also why a planner knows what to do when the number and the customer clash: he chooses the mission.

The mission gives the why, the goals give the what and the when. In that order they keep each other in balance.

Few goals, real goals

This is where it often goes wrong. An organisation that has just found its mission gets enthusiastic and comes up with twelve annual goals: two for every department and a few extra for the board.

Really, don't do that. The word priority once meant the most important thing, so just one. These days we have twelve of them, every week.

With twelve goals you really have no goals, because nobody can work on twelve things at once. Then you are back at the start, where everything is equally important and so nothing is. My advice is a few annual goals for the whole organisation. Three is good, and better two you achieve than six you half do.

An annual goal also has to be measurable. You can't measure "improve customer satisfaction", but you can measure "95 percent of appointments on time". Then everyone knows where they stand, and on 31 December you know whether it worked, or whether you have to order cake again to celebrate something that didn't.

On top of that, you choose one key number, the number you want to see every week because it shows whether you are on track. You can also give the year a theme, a few words everyone remembers. Mark's year got the theme: "Every appointment counts."

The quarter as a rhythm

A year is too long to really keep an overview. That is why you cut the year into quarters, with a few milestones per quarter. What needs to be in place three months from now to be on track for the annual goal?

That works for two reasons. A quarter is short enough to feel urgent, because three months is almost tomorrow. And it is long enough to really achieve something.

Every quarter you look back together. What worked and what didn't, what did you learn and what will you do next quarter? That way the strategy becomes a living rhythm, instead of a document that is presented in January and rediscovered in December.

The timeline

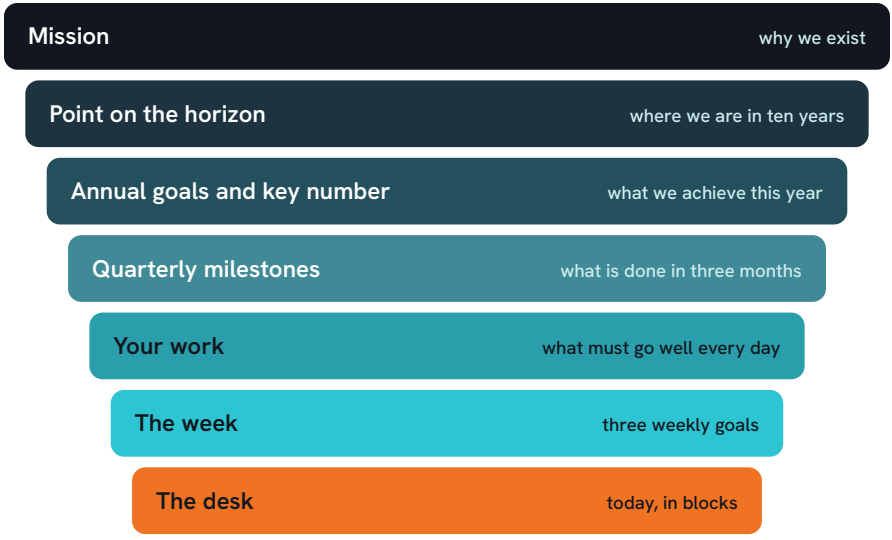
In Tijdexperts all of this comes together in the organisation's timeline. At the top are the mission and the core values, below them the point on the horizon, and then the goals for the coming years, the annual goals, the key number, the theme and this quarter's milestones.

The nice thing is that everyone in the organisation sees it, not just the board but also the engineer, the planner and Ingrid. Everyone can

see where you are going and where you are now.

That puts an end to the game of Chinese whispers from chapter 8. Nobody has to whisper anything on anymore, because it is simply there, every day, for everyone.

Companies that don't have a strategy yet can start with this step by step. You don't need to hire a strategy consultant for a year-long project. You start with the mission, and the rest follows.



Each layer makes the one above it more concrete, from the reason you exist to what you do at your desk today.

14

Your work

Ingrid gets a different question

You will remember Ingrid, with her form and the archive she was never going to digitise. This year she got a different question. Nobody asked about her goal. We asked: what is your work?

Ingrid didn't need two evenings to think about that. Within five minutes she had written down three things. Making sure the diaries are right and nobody is double-booked. Making sure every client who calls is helped in one conversation or gets a call-back appointment. Making sure the admin is done every Friday.

Look how well that fits with "We show up". Ingrid doesn't need a strategic goal to contribute to the mission, because her work is the mission, every single day.

When she had written it down, she said something I will never forget: "This is the first time in seventeen years that anyone has asked what I actually do."

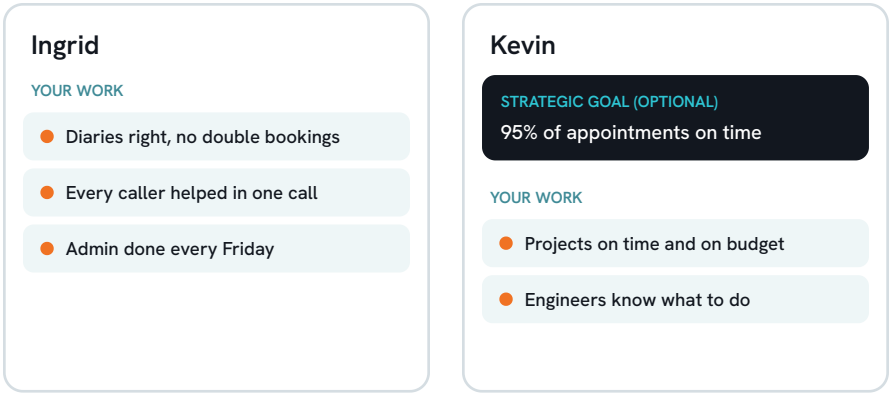
First the work, then the goals

That is the order in Tijdexperts. Every employee first describes their own daily work, under the heading your work, in no more than three parts. Here too, if you write down twelve, you no longer know what really matters.

It comes down to three questions: what has to go well every day, what do you take care of, and what would go wrong if you were away for a month?

Only then come the strategic goals, and they are optional. If you have a role in which you contribute to an annual goal or a milestone this quarter, you record that. If you don’t, that is absolutely fine and you work on your work, which is exactly what the organisation needs from you.

Kevin does have a strategic goal. He leads the project to set up the planning so that 95 percent of appointments are on time, and that is the annual goal. So Kevin has both, his work and his contribution to the goal. Ingrid only has her work, and they are both equally important.



Ingrid has only her work, Kevin also has a strategic goal. Both are equally important.

The coach shows what counts

The nice thing is that this doesn't disappear into a drawer. In the Tijdexperts app there is a coach that shows you every day what matters. If you have strategic goals, they are at the top with your work below. If you don't, you see your work.

So every morning, before you open your email, you see what really matters in your work today. That changes the way you look at your inbox. That email from the supplier about the new catalogue doesn't contribute to your work and can wait, probably until next year's catalogue. The client who has already called twice is exactly your work, so you deal with that first.

I want to be clear here: that coach is not an AI telling you what to do. Every day you see your own work again, the way you wrote it down yourself. You decide, and the coach helps you remember.

Why this works so well

When you ask people about their work instead of their goals, they feel seen. The work they do every day, which never appears in an annual plan, suddenly counts.

That is more than a soft extra. People who know what they are there for and feel seen in their work make different choices. They say no more often to things that don’t matter, and they feel less guilty about what is left undone, because they know the important things are getting done. At the end of the day they go home feeling they have really achieved something, and haven’t just been busy.

15

Work goals stay private

The fear of the system

When Mark told his people they were going to work with Tijdexperts, a hand went up. It was Kevin. “Does this mean you will be able to see what I am doing all day?”

That is a fair question, and I hear it in almost every organisation. People are afraid that a system like this becomes a means of control, that the boss looks over their shoulder at every task and that there will soon be a list of who has ticked off the least.

That fear is justified, because I have seen systems that do exactly that. Every employee has to share their goals and report their progress, and management can see everything. Then people start writing down goals they are sure to reach and reporting what looks good. The whole system becomes a performance, with lots of green ticks and very little truth.

Trust instead of control

In Tijdexperts we deliberately do it differently. An employee's personal work goals belong to that employee. They are not in the organisation's timeline and are not shared with anyone. If you want to discuss them with your manager, you simply do that together, at the table.

What everyone does see is the direction: the mission, the annual goals and the milestones, so where you are going together. How you contribute to that in your own work is up to you.

When I explained this to Mark, he looked a bit doubtful at first. "But how will I know if it's working?"

You will see it in the results, Mark: in the milestones that are reached, in happy clients and in people who no longer check their email at nine at night. You don't need to see how someone does their work to see that it is going well.

Why this makes the difference

I see this as one of the greatest strengths of the method. When people know nobody is watching, they become honest with themselves. They write down what they really want to achieve, dare to admit when something isn't working and use the system for themselves instead of for their boss.

People who use the system for themselves keep using it, even after three months and even when the novelty has worn off.

For the first few weeks Kevin waited to see how it would go. Then he wrote down a work goal he would never have put on a form for his boss: “Two hours every morning without email or phone, for the planning.” Six months later he told me it works four mornings out of five. The planning is done on time, he is home by six, and his children have a dad who listens at the kitchen table.

He chose it himself, and that is exactly why he keeps it up.

16

The week and the day

From quarter to Monday morning

We now have the mission, the point on the horizon, the annual goals and this quarter's milestones, and everyone knows what their work is. Then it is Monday morning, eight o'clock, and Mark is back at his desk with 64 new emails.

This is the moment of truth. Everything we have done so far is worthless if it doesn't land here, on Monday morning, on the desk.

The week starts with choosing

The most important habit I teach organisations may well be the simplest: start your week by choosing.

Your email and that first meeting can wait. First you take fifteen minutes for yourself, look at the quarter's milestones and at your work, and ask yourself one question: what has to happen this week for me to go home satisfied on Friday?

Those become your goals for the week, and you only have a few of them. Three is a good number again. It almost looks as if I have a soft spot for the number three, and that is true.

That first Monday, Mark chose three goals for the week. One: go through the new appointment rule with the planners. Two: spend two hours on the plan for the sustainable branch. Three: personally tell every field engineer what “We show up” means for him.

Only then did he open his email. When he went through the 64 emails, he suddenly knew exactly which ones mattered, because he knew what his week was about.

The day in blocks

Then the day. Think back to Gloria Mark, with the more than twenty minutes you need to get back after an interruption, and to Sophie Leroy with her attention residue. You can do something with that.

If every interruption costs you that much, you need to bundle the interruptions. You plan time for the work that really matters, a block of an hour and a half, preferably in the morning when your head is still fresh. Your phone goes in another room, and really in another room, because your pocket doesn’t count. You remember what happened in the experiment from chapter 2.

You do your email in blocks too, a few times a day, and not all day long with one eye on your screen and one eye on your work. That leaves you with two half eyes, and you can’t see anything sharply with those.

Sophie Leroy later discovered something else that is lovely. If you do get interrupted, it helps to quickly write down where you were and what your next step is, a kind of breadcrumb trail for your own brain. Your head then lets go of the task more easily, and you get back into it faster when you return.

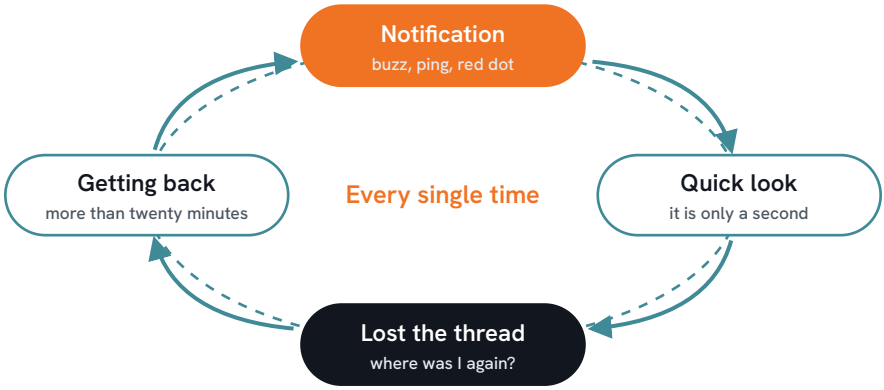
These aren't complicated tricks. You are simply working in a way that fits how your head works.

Why those notifications really have to go

Many people think a notification does no harm as long as you don't respond to it. You see the message, you don't look and you keep working. That turns out to be wrong.

Researchers at Florida State University had students do a task that required them to keep their attention focused. Without the students knowing, the researchers called or texted their own phones during the task. Nobody picked up their phone, they only heard or felt that something had come in. Even so, they made clearly more mistakes afterwards, about as many as people who were actually calling or texting.

The explanation is simple. As soon as your phone buzzes, your mind runs off with it: who was that, what do they want and is it important? Your eyes are still on your work, while your thoughts are already with your phone. Every notification costs you attention, even when you ignore it, and that is why switching it off is so much better than ignoring it.



A notification doesn't cost you a second. It costs you the whole way back to your work.

Be the boss of your phone

Think back to that workshop from chapter 10, after which the notifications were back on by Wednesday. That went wrong because there was nothing underneath. Kevin didn't know what really mattered, and neither did Mark. Now they do, and suddenly these steps do work.

Go through your apps one by one and ask yourself whether you really need to know this straight away. For almost everything the answer is no. Only leave on what comes from people who need you.

Turn off the red dots, because you now know what they are for.

Set up a focus mode that switches on during your blocks for real work, and one for the night.

Tidy up your home screen and put everything that eats your time in a folder on the last screen. The more steps it takes, the less often you do it on autopilot.

Take email off your phone, or at least turn it off outside working hours. You don’t need to know at ten at night what is waiting for you tomorrow.

Let your phone sleep outside your bedroom and buy an alarm clock. They really do still exist.

Swap instead of cutting. If you only take something away, a gap appears that fills up with scrolling again, so decide in advance what you will do with that time instead.

Do it as a team as well. Agree that phones don’t go on the table in meetings and that a message after six can wait until tomorrow. Mark started with himself, because when the managing director stops texting at eleven at night, the rest dare to stop too.

Everything out of your head

There is one more thing that makes everything easier: get everything out of your head.

You suddenly think of that forgotten task in the shower because your head spends all day trying to remember everything, every promise, every appointment and every “I’ll get back to you”. Your head is a bad to-do list that reminds you of things at the wrong moment, at three in the morning for example.

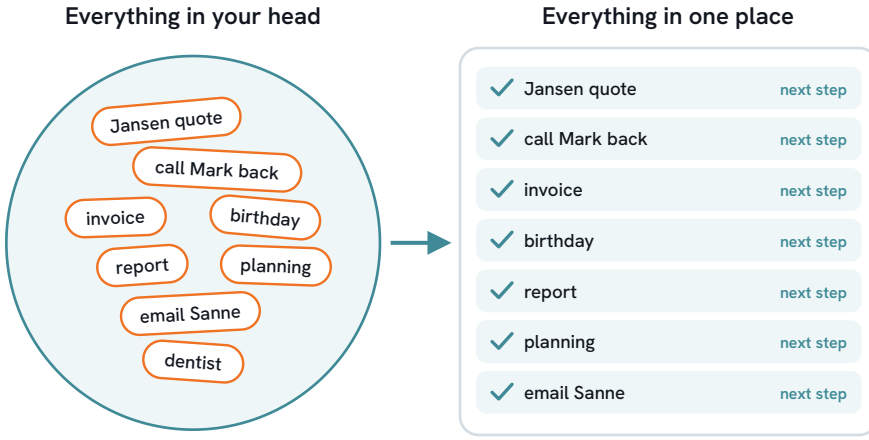
In the method we put everything in one place: everything that comes at you, everything you think of and everything you promise. For each thing you decide straight away what it is, whether it belongs to your work or your goals and what the next step is. That keeps your head free for what it is good at, which is thinking rather than remembering.

Why overview gives peace of mind

There is a nice explanation for why this works so well. In the 1920s the psychologist Bluma Zeigarnik noticed that waiters in a Berlin restaurant remembered every open order perfectly, and forgot it as soon as the bill was paid. In her experiments she found that our brain keeps repeating unfinished tasks. This is called the Zeigarnik effect, and it explains why you think about that quote at three in the morning.

Years later, the researchers E.J. Masicampo and Roy Baumeister did something clever with it. They had people think about an unfinished goal, such as an exam they still had to study for. Those thoughts kept coming back and distracted people during another task. When part of the group made a concrete plan, with when, where and how, the effect disappeared. They had done nothing yet, and still their mind let go of the task.

So you don’t need to have finished your work to get peace of mind. You only need to know that it has a place and what the next step is, and that is exactly what overview gives you.



Your head is good at thinking and bad at remembering. Give everything a place and a next step, and your head lets go.

Friday

You close every week. On Friday you look back: did you reach your goals for the week, what didn't work and why, and what do you take with you to next week?

That takes fifteen minutes and gives you something worth its weight in gold: a weekend in which your head is no longer at the office, because you know everything has a place and nothing has been forgotten.

The Tijdscan, the measurement in Tijdexperts, contains a statement I am very proud of: "Every day I work on what really matters for my work and my goals." That is what it is all about.

SOURCES

- Stothart, Mitchum and Yehnert (2015), the attentional cost of a notification
- Masicampo and Baumeister (2011), a plan lets your mind release unfinished tasks

17

Email, meetings and AI as the solution

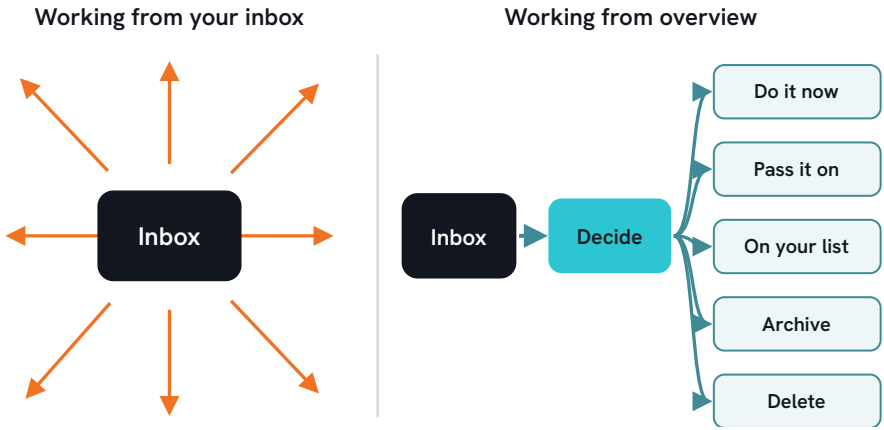
The inbox is not a to-do list

We will start with email, because that is where it all began, with Kevin at the kitchen table and his 412 emails.

The biggest mistake people make with email is using their inbox as a to-do list. Everything stays in there, read, unread and half read, and every time you open your inbox, everything is shouting for attention again. It is like walking through your whole house every morning to see what still needs tidying, and then tidying nothing.

In the method your inbox becomes a place where things come in, not where they stay. Every email you open gets a decision. If it takes a couple of minutes, you do it straight away. If it belongs to someone else, you forward it. If it is work for later, it goes on your list with a next step. Information goes to the archive, and the rest you delete.

If you keep that up for a few weeks, something magical happens: your inbox empties. You get just as much email as before, but nothing gets stuck in it anymore. After three weeks Kevin had an empty inbox for the first time in five years. He took a screenshot of it, and I think he had it framed.



From your inbox, the sender decides what you do. From overview, every email gets one decision.

Why you don’t work from your inbox

There is a deeper reason behind this. Your inbox is really the to-do list that other people write for you. Anyone with your email address can add something to it, at any moment of the day, without asking whether it fits. When you work from your inbox, they decide what you do today, and your own work keeps getting pushed back a little.

On top of that, your inbox knows no order other than time. The newest email sits at the top, even when it is about Friday’s lunch, and your customer’s most important question sinks under twenty new messages. You work in order of arrival, and that order has nothing to do with what really matters.

It also costs you peace of mind. Researchers at the University of British Columbia had 124 adults check their email only three times a day for one week, with notifications off, and as often as they liked in another week. In the week with three times a day they felt clearly

less stressed. Most participants found it hard to stick to, which mainly shows how strong the habit is.

That is why in the method you start your day with your work and your weekly goals, and only then go to your inbox, at fixed moments. Your email then becomes something you process, rather than the place where you live all day.

Meetings with a reason

Then meetings. You will remember Sanne's Thursday meeting, which resulted in the need for another meeting.

In an organisation full of time experts, every meeting has a reason: it moves a milestone forward or it helps someone with their work. If it doesn't, it could have been an email, or nothing at all.

When you do meet, everyone knows in advance why, what needs to be decided and who really needs to be there. Sanne has cut her Thursday meeting from an hour to half an hour, with four people instead of eight. The other four get a short summary and nobody misses the meeting. One of the four even asked whether the same could be done for the other meetings.

AI as the solution

Then AI, the subject I may be most enthusiastic about.

In chapter 11 you saw the first road, with AI let loose on chaos and Kevin with 530 emails. Now the second road, with AI used in an organisation that knows where it wants to go.

Then you decide what AI does with your email, instead of your email deciding your day. You let AI go through your inbox and ask which emails are about your work or your goals, what can go and what someone else can pick up. That way AI becomes a filter instead of a tap turned on even harder. It only works if you know what your work and your goals are, because without a method AI doesn't know either.

Most important of all is that you use AI to cut work, so that you have less to do.

I will give you my own example once more, because it shows so well what is possible. My bookkeeping is done by AI: receipts, invoices, entries and the weekly check. I used to spend hours on that, or I would have had to pay an accountant for it. It saves me thousands of euros a year, and I now put that time into work I am good at and that gives me energy.

Look at your own organisation through those glasses. What work is done every week that isn't really work for people? Think of writing up minutes, retyping data from one system into another, answering standard client questions, formatting quotes and updating the planning. I bet you will find hours a week in every department.

If you let AI do that work, you get real time back. And if you know where you want to go, you also know exactly what you will do with that time. You won't send extra emails, but finally work on that plan for the sustainable branch. Or you go home at six, which is fine too.

The difference between AI as a distraction and AI as a solution lies in the method underneath.

SOURCES

- University of Washington Bothell on Sophie Leroy's research into interruptions
- Kushlev and Dunn (2015), checking email less often reduces stress

18

An organisation full of time experts

Another ordinary Tuesday

Let me take you through an ordinary Tuesday one last time, a year later.

It is 6.45 am and Mark's alarm goes off. His phone is charging in the kitchen, where it has been every night for a few months now. The first thing Mark sees is the ceiling, and then his wife, who asks whether he slept well. Actually, yes.

Twenty kilometres away, Kevin is at the kitchen table with hot coffee and the paper. He opens his email at eight at the office, and then he knows exactly what he is looking for. Sometimes he still has three problems before nine, but at least now they are his own problems. Progress.

At eight o'clock Mark walks into the office. The timeline is on the screen in the canteen, with "We show up" at the top and below it this week's key number: 94 percent of appointments on time. One more percent and they will hit the annual goal.

This morning Mark has a block of an hour and a half for the plan for the sustainable branch, the plan that stayed in the drawer last year. It is almost finished, and in March the first engineer goes on a course.

Ingrid sits at her desk and smiles. She got her admin done on Friday, the diaries are right and yesterday a client called to say he had never been helped so quickly. She posted it in the group chat and it got seventeen thumbs up.

Sanne sits at the table with her children at quarter past six. Her phone is in her bag in the hall. Her daughter is telling her about school, and Sanne is really listening.

What changed

I want to be honest: this didn't happen by itself. There were weeks when everyone fell back into old habits, and there were people who wanted nothing to do with it at first. One engineer insisted for three months that "all that mission stuff" wasn't for him. Until he noticed he no longer got angry clients on the phone because he was late. Then suddenly he quite liked it.

What changed is that everyone started working on the right things. The plan from the top reached every desk and people dared to say no to what didn't matter. That left them with time for the work that matters, and for life outside work.

That is what I mean by an organisation full of time experts: an organisation full of people who know where they are running to, and who sometimes just walk.

Why it has to be a way of working

I have shown you a lot in this book: the mission, the point on the horizon, the annual goals and quarters, your work, work goals that are yours, the week and the day, the inbox, meetings and AI.

Maybe you are now thinking: great, I am going to do that. I hope so too.

But you also know what happens to good intentions, like the inbox course in chapter 10. Theory without practice fades. Reading a book is one thing, but doing it every day, even on that busy Monday morning when the managing director calls, is something else entirely.

That is why I built Tijdexperts, a way of working with training, coach and software in one.

The training takes you step by step, online and at your own pace, through everything you have read in this book. The timeline shows the whole organisation where you are going together, from mission to milestone. The coach shows every employee every day what their work is and what matters today. With the Tijdscan you measure where you stand on direction, calm and results, at the start and again later, so you can see what changes.

It doesn’t replace anything you already have. You simply keep your Outlook, your Teams and your planning. Tijdexperts adds what wasn’t there yet: the bridge between the plan and the desk.

Start today

I will end with an invitation. Go to tijdexperts.nl and try the free version. See how it works and feel what it is like to start with yourself. It costs you nothing and little time, and I promise you will get that time back quickly.

If you are a managing director, owner, HR manager or team leader, think back to the sum from chapter 6: number of employees times one hour a day times 220 working days times your hourly rate. Imagine winning back even part of that. What could your organisation do with it?

Request it via tijdexperts.nl and we will look together at how your organisation can become an organisation full of time experts.

I started this book with an ordinary Tuesday, when everyone worked incredibly hard and nobody got anywhere. I hope your Tuesdays will soon look different: calmer, more focused and with hot coffee.

From mission to desk.

Roy

A confession

This book was written in 75 minutes. From the first idea to the last chapter.

I did it together with AI. The method, the stories and the humour are mine and come from years of working with organisations. AI did the typing. Exactly as I describe in chapter 11: AI is an amplifier. If there is a good way of working underneath, things suddenly go very fast.

Imagine what that would do to your working week.

Done with busy, busy, busy?

Try Tijdexperts for free. Training, coach and software in one: from the mission of your organisation to the desk of every employee.

tijdexperts.nl