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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Training, coach and software in one

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Tijdexperts

from mission to desk

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PART

A world full of distractions

1

A world of distractions and information

An ordinary Tuesday

Let me take you through an ordinary Tuesday. Not a special day. Just a Tuesday, like the fifty-two you get every year.

It is 6.12 am. Mark's alarm goes off. Mark runs an installation company. Eighty people, 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. A notification from the bank. The news. A video someone sent him. He scrolls. His wife is still asleep.

Mark is already at work. At twelve minutes past six. In bed.

Twenty kilometres away, Kevin is sitting at the kitchen table. Kevin is a project manager at Mark's company. A hard worker, the kind of person you want on your team. His coffee goes cold while he goes through his email. A client wants an engineer a day early. A supplier says the materials will be late. 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. Because today, today he is finally going to work on the new direction for the company. He has been carrying it around for months. He knows it matters. He knows the company has to run differently three years from now.

Half past eight: first meeting. Ten o'clock: second meeting. In between? Emails. Teams messages. Texts. Someone popping their head round the door. A client on the phone. 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 you know what? He has. He has worked incredibly hard. Just not on what mattered.

And Kevin? By the end of that day Kevin has 412 emails in his inbox. He has cleared dozens, honestly, but more came in than went out. In the evening he sits on the sofa. TV on. His kids next to him. And he 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? Were you still in bed? Exactly.

This is not a story about two people who can't plan. Mark is smart. Kevin is good at his job. This is the story of almost everyone who works today. And in this book I am going to 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 for a moment. Thirty years back.

Work had a beginning and an end. You arrived at the office in the morning and the post was on your desk. 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. Got an answer within a week? Very good, very proper. Now you get a second email after an hour, asking whether you have seen the first one.

On holiday? Then you were on holiday. Nobody expected anything from you. And at five o'clock the door closed and the work simply 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. And you know what that meant? You had time. Time to think before you reacted. Time to let something sink in.

I am not saying it was better back then. Really, I'm not. But it was a lot quieter in our heads.

What changed

And then it went fast. Very fast.

Email had existed since the seventies, but in the nineties it arrived in every office. Then the internet arrived in every home. In 2004 came Facebook. In 2007 Steve Jobs pulled the first iPhone out of his pocket. And within a few years everyone was holding a computer that never switched off. Then came WhatsApp, Instagram, LinkedIn, Teams, Slack and TikTok.

And don't get me wrong: every step made our lives easier. Faster contact. Looking everything up instantly. Working from anywhere. Texting your kids from work. I'm a fan. I really don't want to go back to the fax machine. Although it did have one big advantage: it stayed at the office. Not next to your bed.

But without anyone noticing, something fundamental changed. Not all at once, but gradually. Work came home with us. The door never closed again. And that flow of information? It wasn't a stream anymore. It became a river. A river that never stops, that keeps flowing at night and simply carries on at the weekend.

And the strange thing is: nobody ever chose this. There was never a meeting where we all decided: from now on, we are always available. It just happened. Step by step. App by app.

The river

So how big is that river? I am going to 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 153 messages in Teams. Every day.

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.

Every two minutes. Try writing a strategic plan in that.

And it doesn't stop at five o'clock. 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. The workday that never really starts and never really ends.

Think back to Mark, at twelve past six, in bed. Mark is not the exception. Mark is the average.

Built to hold on to you

And I haven't even mentioned social media yet. Apps built with one goal: to hold your attention. For as long as possible.

Because do you know how those apps make money? Not from you. 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. That isn't quite right. Dopamine makes you want something. It is released mostly when you expect a reward. Not when you get it, but when it might be coming. Maybe.

And that “maybe” is exactly the trick. It is the same trick 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 the little red dots. Those numbers on your apps. They are not there for you. They are there to lure you into the app. And likes? Our brain is built to want to know what the group thinks of us. Your life used to depend on it. Now it depends on how many thumbs your holiday photo gets.

And then endless scrolling. It was invented in 2006 by Aza Raskin. A page used to have an end. Then you had to choose: do I click on or do I stop? Raskin took that moment away. He later came to regret it. He estimated himself that endless scrolling wastes around 200,000 human lifetimes of time every day. Every day.

So when you are on the sofa in the evening wondering why you keep picking up that phone, the answer is simple. Because that is exactly what it was made for. You are not weak. You are playing against a team that does this full time.

A brain from another age

The problem is: our brain was not built for this at all.

Our brain comes from a world where a sound meant something. A snapping branch. Something moving in the grass. Pay attention, maybe danger. Every notification on your phone still presses that old alarm button. Just a quick look. Just a quick reply. Just checking whether there’s anything. We can hardly help it.

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

What did she find? 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.

And 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. More than twenty minutes!

Do the maths with me. An interruption every two minutes. Twenty minutes to get back. That sum never works out. Never. If you work like that, you never get to real work. You only react.

And then there is Sophie Leroy, an American researcher. In 2009 she 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 email you half answered. And you can measure it: 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.

And now 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. Better filtering, faster switching, anything.

You know what they found? Nothing. The heavy multitaskers did worse on every test. They were more easily distracted by things that didn't matter, they were worse at keeping information organised, and they were even worse at switching between tasks. Exactly what they thought they were good at. Nass put it beautifully himself: they are suckers for irrelevancy. Everything distracts them.

Multitasking doesn't exist. You switch. And every switch costs you something.

Busy is the new normal

And now comes the strange part. We have come to see this as normal.

Ask someone at a birthday party how they are doing. What do you hear? Busy. Busy, busy, busy. And we say it almost proudly. Being busy has become a kind of status symbol. Answering quickly looks committed. Always being available looks indispensable. Sending an email at eleven at night looks dedicated.

But being busy is something very different from making progress. Mark and Kevin both work incredibly hard. Long days. They care about the company. And yet at the end of the week they both have the same feeling: what really mattered has been left undone again.

And I want to be very clear about one thing. It is not their fault. It is not about their effort. It is not about character or 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

And you know what? The next wave is already at the door. In fact, it's already inside. AI.

AI can write, summarise, plan, calculate and answer. Faster than we ever will. And that is exactly why it is so exciting. Because AI is an amplifier. It 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, more noise. Chaos simply becomes faster chaos.

But 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, reports. Work I would sooner or later have paid an accountant for, or lost my evenings to. It saves me thousands of euros every year. And more importantly: it saves me time. Time I now put into the work I am good at and that gives me energy.

That is the difference. AI can bury you under even more distractions. Or AI can free you from everything you don't really need to do.

Which one it becomes depends on the way you work. The software simply does what you ask.

I will come back to this in detail later in this book. Because 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.

Because 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. One of my favourites.

In 2017, researchers at the University of Texas invited almost eight hundred people to take a test. Simple tasks, but you had to concentrate to get them right. Remembering sums, 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 group had to put it in their bag or pocket. And the third group had to leave it in another room. Everyone had to put their phone on silent. Some even had to switch it off completely.

What do you think happened?

The people whose phone was in another room scored best. The people with their phone on the table scored worst. Even when it was face down. No notification came in, 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. And that takes capacity. Capacity you no longer have for your work.

I'll be honest: other researchers have repeated this experiment, and it didn't always work. So we don't yet know exactly how big the effect is. But what comes back in study after study is simple: what you see, you pick up. And every time you pick it up, you are gone for a moment.

And the strangest part of that first study? The participants didn't notice a thing. They thought they were completely focused. Exactly what you are thinking 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. Next to every keyboard there is one. 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

You know what the most wonderful thing about our brain is? It always wants to know what is going on. That is what saved us as a species. Those who paid attention survived.

And you know what the most difficult thing about our brain is? Exactly the same thing.

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

The problem is that our head never switches off. We are on standby all day long. 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 and your head is still with that email. You are in the shower and 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.

That is no longer a choice. That is 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.

Do you notice it? You are in a meeting and feel the urge. 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 isn't rest. It is just more stimuli.

And then the comparing. On LinkedIn everyone has just won an award. On Instagram everyone is on holiday. And you are sitting with your 412 emails. You know perfectly well it is a shop window. But your head compares anyway. And that creates unrest you take with you to work.

The treacherous part is that every moment on its own seems harmless. Just a quick look. But a hundred quick looks are no longer quick. That is 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. On the sofa before the news started. Boring moments. And precisely in those boring moments something important happened: your head tidied up. It processed the day. It made connections. That is where your best ideas came from.

You know the feeling? That your best ideas come while cycling or in the shower? That's no coincidence. 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.

But those moments are gone. We fill every second of boredom. In the queue, in the lift, on the toilet. A quick scroll. And in doing so we take away exactly the time our head needs to recharge and tidy up.

And then the night

And that brings us to the place where it may hit hardest. 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 is a screen. The first thing we see in the morning is a screen. Mark, at twelve past six. Remember?

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.

And I'll be honest: scientists don't fully agree yet about the blue light from your screen. Some studies say that light is less harmful than we thought. But that is not the point. The point 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.

And people who sleep badly work worse the next day. They are more irritable. They make more mistakes. And they 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

Let's add it all up.

You are interrupted every two minutes. You need more than twenty minutes to get back. With every switch you carry leftover attention with you. There is a phone next to you that keeps pulling you away. And you slept worse than your body needs.

What kind of work do you deliver then?

You can answer emails just fine. You can react just fine. What you can no longer do is think deeply. Really get to the bottom of a difficult problem. Come up with a strategy. Write something that actually says something. Be creative. Exactly the work you were once hired for. Exactly the work that makes the difference for your organisation.

Together we have become a kind of reaction machine. Very fast, very efficient, and no longer really working on anything.

How it feels

And maybe this is the most important part. Because 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. That means things like: I feel empty at the end of the working day. I feel emotionally drained by my work. I dread starting again.

And the American researchers at Gallup asked too. How many Dutch employees had a lot of stress yesterday? Thirty percent. Almost one in three. Yesterday.

These are not figures about other people. These are your colleagues. Maybe the quiet one in the team who always gets everything right. Maybe it’s you.

In the next chapter we zoom in on the work itself. Because 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. She has just got a free hour in her calendar. A whole hour! 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?" 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. It wasn't quite understood. Four people have replied to it, all with reply all. Someone has added a question that has nothing to do with it. And now they want to "quickly align live". At 2.40 pm Sanne is in an impromptu call with five people. At 3.25 pm it is wrapped up. It has been decided to schedule another meeting about it tomorrow.

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

Sound 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, 275 interruptions. But here is what I haven't told you yet: most of those emails are not even really read. Microsoft saw that most are looked at for less than a minute. Scanned. A quick look 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. 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 so you get a ping-pong match that nobody wins.

And it keeps getting faster. An answer within a week used to be perfectly fine. Then it became within a day. Now it is within an hour, and for a text message within five minutes. 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: about 40 percent say technology lets them do more work in the same time.

Great, right? Only, and here it comes: it did not 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. 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. You have to do everything, but you get to decide nothing. Try staying calm under that.

The infinite workday

Remember Microsoft calling it the infinite workday? Just look at 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.

And the funny thing is: 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, what do you think on Monday morning? Exactly. 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 simply moved it forward a day. Congratulations.

Information is not knowledge

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

But more information doesn't make us smarter. It often makes us slower. Because anyone who can know everything thinks they have to know everything before making a decision. So there is another report. And 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. They react to the email at the top, the colleague who calls the loudest, the client who is the angriest. And the important work, the work without a deadline today, gets pushed back. To tomorrow. To next week. To after the summer.

Mark was going to work on the new direction. Sanne was going to finish the planning. Both of them know it matters. Neither of them gets round to it.

And that has consequences. For the people, for the teams and for the organisation. That is what we will look at now. And I'm warning you in advance: it is not a cheerful part of the book. But it is the part after which 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. 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. It matters. For a nine-year-old girl this is world news.

Sanne nods. She says “hmm” and “really?” at the right moments. But her phone is next to her plate, and it has just buzzed. She looks. It’s Mark. “Could you give me a quick call at 8 tomorrow about the planning?” Of course she can. Only now, at the kitchen table, she is already working on that planning. In her head, she 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. Sanne is a fantastic mother. She is also a fantastic team leader. And that is exactly the problem. She is trying to be both at the same time, every moment of the day. And nobody can do that.

I bet everyone reading this knows a moment like that. Someone who loves you says: you're not really here. 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, you are sharp. Fine. Then it drops again and you recover.

But what if that rest never comes? If there is a new stimulus every two minutes? If you are still checking your email on the sofa at night and sleeping badly? Then that system stays switched on. All day. All week. For months.

And that goes well for a while. Until it doesn't.

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

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

The numbers behind the people

I am going to give you a few numbers now, and I want you to think of people with each one. Because behind every percentage are colleagues, neighbours and friends.

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

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

Let that sink in. Look around your own team. Count to five. One of them is probably walking around with this.

And when it goes wrong, it goes badly wrong. Mental health problems, overstrain and burnout are the most common reason for sick leave after flu and colds. But where you are back at work a week after the flu, sick leave for mental health problems lasts 67 days on average. More than two months. Overstrain and burnout are now also the occupational disease that employees report most often.

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

It is not the weak people

There is a stubborn misunderstanding about burnout. That it happens to weak people. People who can't take a knock.

The opposite is true. It is often precisely the people who care most about their work. The committed people. The people who always say yes. Who still answer that email in the evening because they don't want to keep the client waiting. Who finish that report at the weekend because the team is counting on it. The best people, really.

TNO saw it too: mental exhaustion from work is highest among employees at the highest job levels. The more responsibility, the more pulls at you.

Kevin is one of those people. Kevin never says no. Kevin would say yes to a meeting about why he never says no. Kevin is always available. Kevin is the guy everyone calls when something is on fire. And Kevin is exactly the guy who, two years from now, will be sitting at home on the sofa unable to open his email without his heart starting to pound.

What we lose at home

And then there is a consequence nobody keeps figures on. What it does to the people at home.

The partner who has been hearing for years: it will get quieter after this busy period. (Spoiler: it never gets quieter. There is just another busy period.) The children who learn that dad or mum is there, but not really. The friends you see less and less, because you need the weekend to recover from the week.

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

The good news

I couldn't let this chapter end like that. Because here is the good news: it can be different. You don't have to work harder for it, and you don't need a breathing course either. You simply start working differently. Together, as an organisation.

But first we need to look a little 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)

5

The consequences for the team

The meeting about the meeting

Thursday morning, nine o'clock. Sanne's weekly team meeting. Eight people round the table, three online. Seven items on the agenda. Everyone has their laptop open. Officially to take notes. In reality to keep up with email, because that doesn't stop just because you are in a meeting.

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

Agreed: we will schedule an extra meeting to discuss the remaining items. Nobody sees the irony. Or everyone sees it, but nobody has time to say anything about it.

I have seen this in so many organisations that I almost have to laugh. Almost. Because when you do the maths, it stops being funny. Eight people, one hour, every week. That is more than four hundred hours a year. For one meeting. Whose main outcome is that there needs to be another meeting.

Everyone busy, nobody getting anywhere

When one person is constantly interrupted, that is annoying. When a whole team is constantly interrupted, something else happens. People start interrupting each other. Because you disturb me, so I quickly send you a message too. And you forward it to her. And she copies in half the department, just to be safe.

And so a team becomes a kind of pinball machine. Balls shooting in all directions, lights flashing, lots of noise. And if you look closely, the ball keeps dropping down.

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

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 at all, because everyone thought someone else had already picked it up.

Duplicate work. Two people working on the same thing without knowing it. Someone creating a document that already exists, but that nobody can find.

Noise. Emails nobody understands the point of. Messages going back and forth four times before it is clear what the question actually was.

The manager caught in the middle

And who is right in the middle of all this? The manager. Sanne.

From above come the goals, the plans, the changes. From below come the questions, the problems, the complaints. And Sanne stands in between. She spends all day passing things on, translating, firefighting and smoothing things over. She has become a kind of human router. And just like a real router: when it freezes, everything goes down.

This is not just my impression. Gallup, the research firm that has been measuring for years how engaged people are with their work, saw it happen worldwide. Manager engagement has dropped by nine percentage points since 2022. In 2025 alone it fell from 27 to 22 percent. Gallup even calls the falling engagement of managers the main cause of falling engagement in organisations.

It makes sense when you think about it. A manager who has no room to think can't give their team direction either. They can only react. And a team without direction does whatever shouts loudest.

Engagement

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

I want to pause on that. Because it doesn't mean the rest are lazy. It means most people do their job, but they are not really in it. They come in, they do what needs doing, they go home. They are willing.

They just no longer see what they are doing it for. What their work contributes to the bigger picture.

And that touches on something I see again and again. People are happy to work hard. People are happy to go the extra mile. But then they do need to know what for.

The hidden costs of a busy team

Something else you see in a busy team: people help each other less. They are perfectly nice. They just don't have time. There is no room anymore for that chat over coffee. For the new colleague who doesn't quite know the ropes yet. For that question you need to think about for a moment.

And that is exactly where the glue of a team is. In those small things. A team that no longer has time for each other is no longer a team. It is 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 becomes concrete in euros. Feel free to grab a calculator. Actually, never mind. I'll 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

Last January. Mark stands in front of his whole company in the canteen. Eighty people, sandwiches, a projector that finally works on the third attempt. He presents the plan for the new year. Grow to a hundred employees. A new branch for sustainable installations. Better customer satisfaction. There is applause. Someone shouts “wow!” There is cake.

Fast forward to December. Mark looks at the figures. They are not bad, it has been a decent year. But little has come of that plan. The new branch never really got off the ground. There was no time for it. Everyone was busy. With the work of every day.

That plan? It is in a drawer. Or rather, in a folder on the server called “Annual plan FINAL v3 new”. And if you ask an engineer about it, he doesn’t even know it exists. He does remember there was cake.

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

What sick leave costs

Let's start with the most visible part: people who drop out.

TNO calculated that employees in the Netherlands were absent for 14.3 million days in a year due to psychosocial workload. That is the posh term for: workload, stress, conflict and emotionally demanding work. Of those 14.3 million days, 10.3 million were due to excessive workload alone.

10.3 million days. A number so big 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 for every employee who drops out. Per person. Got three people at home for a while with stress complaints? That is 45,000 euros gone, just like that. And I haven't even mentioned the work that piles up, the colleagues who have to pick it up and who then come under more pressure themselves.

Because that is how it works. If Kevin drops out, Sanne takes over his projects. And who is the next to drop out? Exactly.

What people leaving costs

And then there are the people who don't drop out, but leave. Who stand at your desk one day and say: I've found something else. With a bit of luck they add that it isn't because of you. That is usually not entirely true.

HR specialists estimate that replacing an employee costs 20 to 50 percent of an annual salary. Recruitment, selection, onboarding. And the months in which the new colleague isn't up to speed yet. For

specialists and managers it is often much higher. And that doesn't even include all the knowledge that walks out of the door with the person leaving. It wasn't in a system. It was in their head.

And in a tight labour market, that replacement isn't easy to find either. So the chair stays empty. And who does the work then? Right. The people who are still there.

The sum nobody does

But now comes the most important part. Because you can still see sick leave and staff turnover. They are on a list at HR. The biggest cost isn't on any list. It is the time lost by the people who simply come to work every day.

Let me show you with Mark's company. 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, emails nobody needed to send. One hour. I think it is more, but fine.

Eighty people times one hour times 220 working days. That is 17,600 hours a year. Calculate with 45 euros an hour, including all employer costs. That brings you to 792,000 euros.

Almost eight hundred thousand euros. Per year. At a company of eighty people. On time that simply evaporates.

€792,000

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

That is not money you see disappearing. No invoice arrives. Nobody calls you about it. It just leaks away. A little every day. And when you tell a managing director, he first looks at you as if you are mad. Then he gets out his calculator. And then it 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'll wait. Don't panic. Actually, do panic a little. That is what this chapter is for.

On a global scale

And if you think this is a Dutch problem: Gallup estimates that low employee engagement cost the world economy around 10 trillion dollars in lost productivity in 2025. That is 9 percent of everything the world earns together.

Nine percent. Of the entire world economy. Because people don't know what they are doing it for, or don't have time to do what really matters.

Missed opportunities

And then the last one. Perhaps the most expensive. What you don't do.

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

Those costs aren't written down anywhere. You can't measure them. But they decide whether your organisation still exists five years from

now. Because while you are busy with today's work, your competitor may be working on tomorrow's.

Where does it go wrong?

It is December and Mark is at his desk. He looks at the annual plan. He looks at the figures. And he doesn't get it. He has good people. Everyone works hard. So does he, harder than ever.

And yet the company is standing still. Busy, but standing 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. And I'm warning you: the answer is not that your people need to work harder. The answer is not a better email app either. The answer goes much deeper. It is right at the top. With the mission.

SOURCES

- TNO, work stress factsheet 2025: days of sick leave due to workload
- TNO and RIVM, work stress brochure 2025: costs per employee
- Cost of replacing an employee
- Gallup, State of the Global Workplace 2026: 10 trillion dollars

3

PART

The causes

7

No mission, only goals

The question nobody can answer

When I walk into an organisation, I often ask one simple question. To the managing director, to the team leader, to the employee at the coffee machine. Why does this company exist?

You would think that is an easy question. It isn't.

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

And you know what? That is not 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. Dashboards full of green and red dots. Nothing wrong with that. 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. You just don't know where to. So everyone drives very fast. All in different directions.

Look at what happens on an ordinary working day. Fifty things come at you. They all seem important. The client's email, your colleague's request, the report for the board, 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 us closer to why we are here? And half of them drop off by themselves.

If you don't know the mission, you have no filter. Then everything is equally important. And when everything is equally important, nothing is important. Then 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. "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 on a wall where half the letters had already fallen off. Nobody had noticed.

A real mission is different. A real mission says why you exist, for whom, and what would go wrong in the world if you were no longer there tomorrow. Everyone in the organisation can retell a real

mission in their own words. From the managing director to the new intern.

And a real mission helps you choose. Every day. With every email. With every request. With every meeting you wonder whether you really need to attend.

Why so many organisations skip this step

So why do so many organisations still start with goals instead of the mission?

Because goals are easy. You can measure them. You can put them in a spreadsheet. You can attach a bonus to them. A mission is harder. You have to think about it. You have to agree on it together. And that takes time. And time, as we have already seen, is exactly what nobody has.

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

It is like building a house and skipping the foundations because you can't see them anyway. 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, we are just working hard.

That is perfectly fine. In fact, that is true for lots of companies. But they too have a reason to exist. They too have clients who choose

them for a reason. They too have people who get up every morning to work there. And that is exactly where it starts. Not with a thick strategy document, but with that one question. Why do we exist?

If you answer that question well, the rest follows almost 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?”

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

That was where the problem started. And, as you will see later, where the solution started too.

8

The gap between management and employees

Chinese whispers

Remember that game from when you were a kid? Chinese whispers. 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: "Pete's grandma bought a red bike." At the end: "Pete has a cat in the bike shed."

Everyone laughs. Fun game.

Less fun when it is your company strategy.

Because that is how it goes in lots of organisations. The board comes up with a plan. It is presented to the management team. The managers translate it for their department. The team leaders translate it for their team. And by the time it reaches the employee, there is little left of what it once was. Or worse: 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 happen in rooms with nice views, on away days with flip charts and lots of yellow sticky notes. People speak in words like spearheads, focus areas and strategic pillars.

In the second world, people work. That is where the client comes with a question. Where the supplier is late. Where the invoice has to go out and the engineer has to be at the address on time. People speak in words like: who is picking this up, where is that file and why isn't the printer working again. I have never heard an engineer say: let me just check whether this leak falls within our strategic pillars.

And between those two worlds there is a gap. A deep gap. Because 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 has been decided in the first world. Let alone what it means for their work today.

This is where the time disappears

I am going to tell you something I have seen more and more clearly over the years. The biggest time leak in an organisation is not in the inbox. It is not in the meetings. It is here. In this gap.

Because what happens when an employee doesn't know what the organisation wants to achieve? He makes his own choices. Logical choices, based on his own work. But those choices don't always fit

what the organisation needs. So he works hard, but on the wrong things. Or on the right things, but in the wrong order.

And what happens when management doesn't know what is happening on the shop floor? It makes plans that can't be carried out. Or that don't take into account that people are already up to their necks in work. So another project is added on top. And another. And nobody says: stop, this no longer fits.

The result: everyone works hard, everyone is busy, and the organisation barely moves forward. It is like sitting in a rowing boat with eighty people and everyone rowing in a different direction. You make an enormous number of waves. You just don't go anywhere.

Why the gap exists

Nobody wants that gap. No managing director says: let my people stay nicely in the dark. No employee says: I don't care what the board wants.

The gap exists because there is no bridge. No way to translate the plan from the top into the work of every day. There is an annual plan, and there is a to-do list. But in between? Nothing. Hope. And a quarterly presentation with cake.

So everyone does their best to build that bridge themselves. The managing director sends an inspiring email. The team leader discusses it in the meeting. The employee nods. And then everyone gets back to work as always. Because today's work simply has to get done.

What happens when the bridge is there

Now let me get you dreaming for a moment. Imagine that every employee in your organisation knows every morning what to work on today. They can see for themselves how their work fits into the bigger picture. How that one quote, that one phone call, that one piece of work contributes to where the organisation wants to go.

Imagine that management can see exactly where work is getting stuck. Without having to check up on everyone. Without everyone having to fill in a weekly report nobody reads.

Imagine that January's plan has actually worked out by December. Everyone simply worked on the right things.

That is not a dream. That is what happens when you close the gap. And that is what the last part of this book is about. Because 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.

But first we need to discuss three more causes. And the next one is something many organisations get wrong with the best of intentions.

9

A goal imposed on everyone

Ingrid and the form

Meet Ingrid. Ingrid is the office manager at Mark's company. She has worked there 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. Everyone got that form. It was 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 stared at it for two evenings.

Because what was she supposed to write? Her job is making sure everything runs. That the diary is right. That the post goes out. That clients who call are helped in a friendly way. That is not a goal. That is work. Important work. Work that has to go well again every single day.

In the end she just wrote something down. "Digitise the archive." Nobody had asked for it. It wasn't in any plan. But something had to be there. And ever since, she has felt guilty every time she looks at it,

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

Congratulations. With the best of 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. You want everyone to feel connected to the strategy. You don't want anyone left behind. So everyone gets a goal. Goals for the board, goals for the managers, goals for the teams, goals for every employee. Goals all the way down to the desk.

And for some people that works. The sales manager who has to open up a new market. The project manager who has to roll out a new system. They have a real strategic goal. Something that moves the organisation forward.

But lots of people don't. And that is perfectly fine. In fact, it is healthy. An organisation isn't only made of change. An organisation is mostly made of work that has to keep running every day. The invoice, the planning, the client on the phone, the engineer repairing the boiler. If that doesn't go well, your beautiful strategy is worth nothing.

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. Something that sounds good on paper, but contributes to nothing. Digitise the archive.

Two: they don't have time for it. Because their actual work just carries on. So the goal stays untouched. And that feels like failure.

Three: they start to think their actual work is worth less. Because apparently it doesn't count. Only the goal counts. While that daily work is precisely the most important thing they do.

And so you turn good, committed people into people who feel guilty. With the best of intentions. It is a bit like giving your cat a jumper because you are cold. Kindly meant, but the cat isn't keen.

Start with the work

The solution is actually very simple. Don't start with the goal. Start with the work.

Ask Ingrid: what is your work? What has to go well every day? What would go wrong if you weren't there for a month? Then you get an answer. A clear, honest answer. And it turns out Ingrid does three things that keep the whole company standing.

That is what it is about. That is what she has to do well every day. And if she has a strategic goal on top of that, great. But that is an extra, not an obligation. And if she doesn't have one, she is worth no less. She is exactly what the company needs.

Later in this book I will show you how to go about this. 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

I am going to tell you a story you will probably recognise. A company notices that the workload is high. People complain about email. So HR organises a workshop. “Get a grip on your inbox.” A cheerful trainer comes along with a presentation. There are tips. Turn off your notifications. Check your email three times a day. Use folders. Everyone is enthusiastic. Everyone is going to do it.

It is 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 only check my email three times a day now. “Yes, but this one was important.” By Wednesday the notifications are back on. By Friday everything is back to how it was. Except the folders. They are still there. There’s just no email in them.

The problem with quick fixes

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

The inbox isn’t a cause. The inbox is a symptom. Your inbox fills up because everyone sends everything to everyone. Everyone sends

everything to everyone because nobody knows who is responsible for what. Nobody knows who is responsible for what because the organisation has no clear line from top to bottom. And that line isn't there because nobody ever started with the mission.

See it? You can fix the inbox all you like, but if the rest of the chain isn't right, it simply fills up again. It is mopping the floor with the tap running. With a very expensive mop.

And that is how it goes with everything. A rule for meetings: no longer than half an hour. Fine, but if nobody knows what the meeting is for, you simply get twice as many half-hour meetings. A new app for tasks. Lovely, but if nobody knows which tasks are important, you get a beautiful app full of unimportant tasks. In colours.

Theory without practice

And there is something else. Even when a training is good, it fades. Anyone who has ever been on a course knows this. You come home full of good intentions. Two weeks later you can't remember what you learned. A month later you can't even remember you went on a course. Somewhere in a drawer there is a folder of handouts.

That isn't your fault. That is just how our memory works. What you don't apply disappears. And in a world with 275 interruptions a day, applying it simply doesn't happen. The old habit always beats the new intention. That is not a lack of willpower. That is simply how people work.

That is why I don't believe in one-off trainings. Theory has to go hand in hand 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 is so important. You don't solve wasted time with one part. Not with an inbox course, not with a meeting rule and not with 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 is called what it is called.

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 has gone round. "From today, everyone can use AI! This is going to save us so much time!" With three exclamation marks. People talk about it at the coffee machine.

Kevin tries it straight away. He has Copilot write an email to a supplier. Ten seconds and done. Wow. He has it summarise his inbox. Fantastic. He has it write up yesterday's meeting. Incredible.

A month later. Kevin doesn't have 412 emails in his inbox. He has 530.

Because what happened? Everyone in the company got the same superpower. Suddenly everyone could write an email in ten seconds. So everyone wrote more emails. Longer ones too, because AI is rather fond of full sentences. Every meeting suddenly got a three-page summary, automatically sent to all participants. And Kevin? 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 pressing send.

An amplifier

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

If there is a good way of working underneath, AI amplifies it. You do the right things faster. If there is chaos underneath, AI amplifies the chaos. You do the wrong things faster. Chaos becomes faster chaos.

We have seen this before. Remember 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 were reached everywhere. Why would it be any different with AI?

And you can see it. Gallup saw employee engagement fall for the second year in a row in 2025, while organisations were investing heavily in AI at the same time. All that money, all those possibilities. And 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. I use it 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. Many organisations use it to create even more work. That is a world of difference.

The problem isn't the AI. The problem is that we unleash AI on an organisation without direction. And AI has no more of a compass

than Kevin does. If you ask AI to write an email, it writes an email. It doesn't ask: does this email actually need to be sent? Does this contribute to where we want to go? Could we just not do this?

Those are questions you have to ask. And you can only ask them if you know where you want to go. If you know the mission. If you know what your work is and what really matters.

The two roads

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

The first road: you use AI for the way you work now. More emails, more reports, more minutes. Everything faster. And two years from now everyone is even busier than today. With even more distractions, even more information and even less time to think.

The second road: you first get your way of working right. You know why you exist, you know where you want to go, everyone knows what their work is. And then you use AI to remove everything that doesn't contribute to that. The admin. The searching. The minutes nobody reads. The work that was never really needed.

On the first road, AI becomes yet another distraction. On the second road, it becomes the biggest time saving your organisation has ever had.

And the beauty of it is: you choose.

Where we are now

We have reached the end of the difficult part of this book. I have shown you how the world changed. What all those distractions do to us. What it costs, for people, for teams and for organisations. And where it actually goes wrong.

No mission, only goals. A gap between management and the shop floor. Goals imposed on people who can't do anything with them. Quick fixes that solve only one piece. And now AI, which amplifies everything, including the chaos.

If you have made it this far, you may be feeling a bit gloomy. That is perfectly fine. It means you get it.

Because now comes the good part. Now 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)

4

PART

The solution, from mission to desk

12

The mission

Back to the beginning

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

Because here is something I have learned over all these years: you usually don’t have to invent an organisation’s mission. It is already there. It is in the story of why it all began. In the reason clients choose you. In what your people are proud of when they tell someone at a party where they work. You just have to find it again. And write it down. In plain, human language.

Three questions

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

The first: why do we exist? Not what do we do, but why. Mark installs heating systems. That is what he does. But why? Because people

have a right to a tradesman who shows up and does what he says. That is different.

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

The third: what would go wrong if we 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. "We show up." Three words. 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. The core values. And here too: no words that are on every wall. Not "customer focused, reliable, innovative". That says about as much as "tasty" on a menu.

Good core values are choices. They 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. The moment a client asks whether the engineer can come tomorrow, you know what to say if it isn't possible.

The mission as a filter

And now comes the best part. As soon as the mission is there, everyone gets a filter. A filter for the fifty things that come at you every day.

Does this contribute to why we exist? Yes? Then it is important. No? Then it can wait, or maybe it doesn't need doing at all.

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

The mission is the beginning of everything. That is why in Tijdexperts it sits right at the top of the organisation's timeline. Everyone sees it, every day, right 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. So after the mission comes the point on the horizon. Where will we be in ten years if we truly live up to our mission?

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

And then you work backwards. Where do we need to be in three to five years to reach that point? And what does that mean for this year?

Few goals, real goals

This is where it often goes wrong. Because an organisation that has just found its mission gets enthusiastic. And then there are twelve annual goals. Two for every department, and a few extra for the board.

Don't. Really, don't. The word priority once meant: the most important thing. One thing. These days we have twelve. Per week.

Twelve goals means no goals. Because nobody can work on twelve things at once, and then we are back at the beginning: everything is important, so nothing is important. My advice: a few annual goals for the whole organisation. Three is nice. Better two you achieve than six you half do.

And you have to be able to measure an annual goal. Not “improve customer satisfaction”. But “95 percent of appointments on time”. Then everyone knows where they stand. And on 31 December you know whether you made it. Or whether you are ordering cake again to celebrate something that didn’t work.

On top of that, you choose one key number. The one number you want to see every week, because it shows whether you are on track. And you can 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 long. Too long to really keep track. So you cut the year into quarters. 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. Three months is practically tomorrow. And a quarter is long enough to really achieve something.

And every quarter you look back together. What worked? What didn’t? What did we learn? And what do we do next quarter? That way the strategy isn’t a document presented in January and rediscovered in December. It becomes a rhythm. Something alive.

The timeline

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

And the best part: everyone in the organisation sees it. Not just the board. The engineer, the planner, Ingrid. Everyone sees where we are going and where we are now.

Remember that game of Chinese whispers from chapter 8? This is the end of that game. Nobody has to whisper anything on anymore. It is just there. For everyone. Every day.

And for companies that don't have a strategy at all yet? They can simply start here. Step by step. You don't need to hire a strategy consultant for a year-long programme. You start with the mission, and the rest follows.

14

Your work

Ingrid gets a different question

Remember Ingrid, with her form and the archive she was never going to digitise? This year Ingrid got a different question.

Not: what is your goal? But: what is your work?

Ingrid didn't need two evenings to think about it. She wrote it down in five minutes. 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 beautifully that fits with "We show up". Ingrid doesn't need a strategic goal to contribute to the mission. 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. Your work. Three parts at most. Because here too: if you write down twelve, you no longer know what really matters.

Three things. What has to go well every day? What do you take care of? What would go wrong if you weren't there for a month?

Only then come the strategic goals. And those are optional. Do you have a role in which you contribute to an annual goal or a milestone this quarter? Then you record it. Don't you? That is perfectly fine. Then you work on your work. And that is exactly what the organisation needs from you.

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

The coach shows what counts

The great 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.

Simple. Every morning, before you open your email, you see what really matters in your work today. And that changes the way you look at your inbox. That email from the supplier about the new catalogue? Doesn't contribute to your work. Can wait. Probably until

next year's catalogue. That client who has already called twice? That is exactly your work. Do it first.

I want to make one thing clear here: that coach is not an AI telling you what to do. It is your own work, written down by you, that you see again every day. You decide. The coach helps you remember.

Why this works so well

When you ask people about their work instead of their goals, something happens. They feel seen. The work they do every day, the work that is never in an annual plan, suddenly counts.

And that is not 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. They feel less guilty about what is left undone, because they know the important things are getting done. And at the end of the day they go home feeling they have achieved something. They weren't just busy. They actually got something done.

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?”

A fair question. And one I hear in almost every organisation. Because people are afraid. Afraid that a system like this becomes a means of control. That the boss watches every task. That soon there will be a list of who ticked off the least.

And that fear is justified. I have seen systems that do exactly that. Systems where every employee has to share their goals, report their progress, and management can see everything. You know what happens then? People write down goals they are sure to achieve. They report whatever looks good. And the whole system becomes a performance. With lots of green ticks and very little truth.

Trust instead of control

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

What everyone does see is the direction. The mission, the annual goals, the milestones. Where we are going together. But how you contribute to that in your own work? That is up to you.

When I explained this to Mark, he gave me a rather doubtful look at first. "But then how do I know if it's working?"

From the results, Mark. From the milestones being reached. From the clients who are happy. From the people who no longer check their email at nine in the evening. 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. Because when people know nobody is watching, they become honest. With themselves. They write down what they really want to achieve. They dare to admit that something isn't working. They use the system for themselves, instead of for their boss.

And people who use the system for themselves keep using it. Even after three months. 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 about it. 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 sticks to it.

16

The week and the day

From quarter to Monday morning

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

This is the moment of truth. Because 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 a quarter of an hour for yourself. You look at the quarter's milestones. You look at your work. And you ask yourself one question: what needs to happen this week for me to go home happy on Friday?

Those become your goals for the week. Just a few. Three is a nice number again. It almost looks as if I have a preference for the number three. I do.

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. And 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

And then the day. Remember Gloria Mark, with her more than twenty minutes to get back after an interruption? And Sophie Leroy, with her attention residue? You can do something with that.

If every interruption costs you that much, you have 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 while your head is still fresh. Phone in another room. Yes, really in another room. No, your pocket doesn’t count as another room. You remember what happened in that experiment from chapter 2.

And your email? You do that in blocks too. A few times a day. Not all day long, with one eye on your screen and one eye on your work. Because then you have two half eyes, and you can’t see anything clearly with those.

Sophie Leroy later discovered something else 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. It helps your head let go of the task more easily, and you get back into it faster when you return.

These are not complicated tricks. It is simply working in a way that fits how your head is wired.

Be the boss of your phone

Remember that workshop from chapter 10? Notifications off, and by Wednesday they were back on. 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: do I really need to know this right away? For almost everything the answer is no. Only keep what comes from people who need you.

Turn off the little red dots. You know now what they are for.

Create a focus mode that switches on during your blocks for real work. And one for the night.

Clean up your home screen. Everything that eats your time goes to the last screen, in a folder. The more steps it takes, the less often you do it on autopilot.

Take your email off your phone, or at least switch it off outside working hours. You don't need to know at ten in the evening what is waiting for you tomorrow.

Your phone sleeps outside your bedroom. Buy an alarm clock. They still exist. Really.

And swap, don't just scrap. If you only take something away, you create a gap, and that gap fills up with scrolling again. Decide in advance what you will do with that time instead.

And do it as a team. Agree that phones don't lie on the table in meetings. Agree that a message after six can wait until tomorrow. Mark started with himself. Because when the managing director stops messaging at eleven at night, the rest dare to stop too.

Everything out of your head

And then there is one more thing that makes everything easier. Get everything out of your head.

Do you know why you suddenly think of that forgotten task in the shower? Because your head spends all day trying to remember everything. Every promise, every appointment, every "I'll get back to you". Your head is a bad to-do list. It 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, everything you promise. And for each thing you decide straight away: what is it, does it belong to my work or my goals, and what is the next step? That keeps your head free for what it is good at: thinking. Not remembering.

Friday

And every week you wrap up. On Friday you look back. Did you achieve your goals for the week? What didn't work, and why not? What are you taking into next week?

That takes a quarter of an hour. And it 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. That 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. Working every day on what really matters.

17

Email, meetings and AI as the solution

The inbox is not a to-do list

Let's talk about email first. Because that is where it all began, with Kevin at the kitchen table and his 412 emails.

The biggest mistake people make with their email is using their inbox as a to-do list. Everything stays in it. Read, unread, half read. And every time you open your inbox, you see it all again. Everything shouts 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 an intake tray. A place where things come in, not where they stay. Every email you open gets a decision. Takes a few minutes? Do it now. Belongs to someone else? Forward it. Work for later? It goes on your list, with a next step. Information? Archive. Nothing? Delete.

And 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. I think he had it framed.

Meetings with a reason

Then the meetings. Remember Sanne's Thursday meeting, whose outcome was that there needed to be 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? Then it could have been an email. Or nothing at all.

And when you do meet, everyone knows beforehand why. What needs to be decided here? 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 short minutes. Nobody misses the meeting. Really, nobody. One of the four even asked whether the other meetings could work like that too.

AI as the solution

And then AI. The part I am perhaps most excited about.

In chapter 11 you saw the first road. AI unleashed on chaos, and Kevin with 530 emails. Now the second road. 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 have AI go through your inbox and ask: which of these emails are about my work or my goals? What can go? What can someone else pick up? Then AI becomes a filter instead of a tap that is turned on even harder. But that only works if you know what your work is and what your goals are. Without a method, AI doesn't know either.

And then the most important thing: you use AI to cut work. So you have less to do.

Let me give you my own example once more, because it shows so well what is possible. My bookkeeping is done by AI. Receipts, invoices, entries, the weekly check. Work I used to spend hours on, or would have had to pay an accountant for. 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 that lens. What work is done every week that isn't really human work? Writing up minutes. Retyping data from one system into another. Answering standard questions from clients. Formatting quotes. Updating the planning. I bet you will find hours a week in every department.

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

That is the difference between AI as a distraction and AI as a solution. And that difference lies in the method underneath.

SOURCES

- University of Washington Bothell on Sophie Leroy's research into interruptions

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. Mark's alarm goes off. His phone is in the kitchen, on the charger. That is where it has been every night for a few months now. The first thing Mark sees is not his email. It is the ceiling. And then his wife, who asks whether he slept well. Yes, actually, he did.

Twenty kilometres away, Kevin is at the kitchen table. With coffee. Hot coffee. He reads the paper. He opens his email at eight, at the office. And when he does, 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. At the top: "We show up." 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 sustainable branch plan. The plan that stayed in a drawer last year. It

is almost finished. In March the first engineer starts the training course.

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

And Sanne? At quarter past six Sanne is at the table with her children. Her phone is in her bag, in the hallway. Her daughter is talking about school. Sanne is listening. Really listening.

What changed

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

What changed? Everyone started working on the right things. The plan from the top reached every desk. People dared to say no to what didn't matter. And because of that, they had time left over. Time for the work that matters, and time 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 simply 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 belong to you. The week and the day. The inbox, meetings and AI.

And now that you have read it all, you may be thinking: great, I am going to do that. And I hope you will.

But you also know what happens to good intentions. You remember what happened with the inbox course in chapter 10. Theory without practice fades. Reading a book is one thing. Doing it every day, even on that busy Monday morning when the boss calls, is something else entirely.

That is why I built Tijdexperts. A way of working. Training, coach and software in one.

The training takes you step by step through everything you have read in this book. Online, at your own pace, whenever it suits you. 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. And with the Tijdscan you measure where you stand. On direction, on calm and on 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 close with an invitation.

Go to tijdexperts.nl and try the free version. See how it works. Feel what it is like to start with yourself. It costs you nothing and it takes very little time. And I promise you: the time it costs you, you will quickly get back.

And are you a managing director, owner, HR manager or team leader? Then 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 just part of that. What could your organisation do with it?

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

I started this book with an ordinary Tuesday. A day on which 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