

Jason Fried: Why work doesn't happen at work

0:16 So I'm going to talk about work;

0:17 specifically, why people can't seem to get work done at work,

0:21 which is a problem we all kind of have.

0:24 But let's sort of start at the beginning.

0:26 So, we have companies and non-profits and charities

0:29 and all these groups that have employees or volunteers of some
sort.

0:35 And they expect these people who work for them

0:39 to do great work --

0:40 I would hope, at least.

0:42 At least good work, hopefully, at least it's good work --

0:44 hopefully great work.

0:46 And so what they typically do is they decide

0:48 that all these people need to come together in one place to do
that work.

0:52 So a company, or a charity, or an organization of any kind,

0:55 unless you're working in Africa, if you're really lucky to do that --

0:59 most people have to go to an office every day.

1:01 And so these companies,

1:03 they build offices.

1:05 They go out and they buy a building, or they rent a building,

1:08 or they lease some space,

1:10 and they fill this space with stuff.

1:13 They fill it with tables, or desks,

1:16 chairs, computer equipment,

1:19 software, Internet access,

1:22 maybe a fridge, maybe a few other things,

1:25 and they expect their employees, or their volunteers,

1:28 to come to that location every day to do great work.

1:30 It seems like it's perfectly reasonable to ask that.

1:33 However, if you actually talk to people

1:36 and even question yourself, and you ask yourself,

1:38 where do you really want to go when you really need to get something done?

1:42 You'll find out that people don't say what businesses think they would say.

1:46 If you ask people the question:

1:47 Where do you need to go when you need to get something done?

1:50 Typically, you get three different kinds of answers.

1:52 One is kind of a place or a location or a room.

1:55 Another one is a moving object,

1:57 and a third is a time.

1:59 So here are some examples.

2:01 I've been asking people this question for about 10 years:

2:04 "Where do you go when you really need to get something done?"

2:07 I'll hear things like, the porch, the deck, the kitchen.

2:11 I'll hear things like an extra room in the house,

2:14 the basement,

2:15 the coffee shop, the library.

2:18 And then you'll hear things like the train,

2:21 a plane, a car -- so, the commute.

2:24 And then you'll hear people say,

2:26 "Well, it doesn't really matter where I am,

2:28 as long as it's early in the morning or late at night or on the weekends."

2:32 You almost never hear someone say, "The office."

2:35 But businesses are spending all this money on this place called the office,

2:38 and they're making people go to it all the time,

2:40 yet people don't do work in the office.

2:43 What is that about?

2:44(Laughter)

2:45 Why is that? Why is that happening?

2:49 And what you find out is,

2:50 if you dig a little bit deeper, you find out that people --

2:54 this is what happens:

2:55 People go to work,

2:57 and they're basically trading in their work day

2:59 for a series of "work moments" -- that's what happens at the office.

3:03 You don't have a work day anymore. You have work moments.

3:06 It's like the front door of the office is like a Cuisinart,

3:08 and you walk in and your day is shredded to bits,

3:11 because you have 15 minutes here, 30 minutes there,

3:13 and something else happens, you're pulled off your work,

3:16 then you have 20 minutes, then it's lunch, then you have something else to do ...

3:20 Then you've got 15 minutes, and someone pulls you aside and asks you a question,

3:24 and before you know it, it's 5 p.m.,

3:26 and you look back on the day,

3:28 and you realize that you didn't get anything done.

3:31 We've all been through this.

3:32 We probably went through it yesterday or the day before, or the day before that.

3:36 You look back on your day,

3:37 and you're like, "I got nothing done today.

3:39 I was at work. I sat at my desk. I used my expensive computer.

3:44 I used the software they told me to use.

3:46 I went to these meetings I was asked to go to.

3:49 I did these conference calls. I did all this stuff.

3:51 But I didn't actually do anything.

3:54 I just did tasks.

3:55 I didn't actually get meaningful work done."

3:58 And what you find is that, especially with creative people --

4:01 designers, programmers, writers, engineers, thinkers --

4:07 that people really need long stretches of uninterrupted time

4:11 to get something done.

4:12 You cannot ask somebody to be creative in 15 minutes

4:15 and really think about a problem.

4:17 You might have a quick idea,

4:19 but to be in deep thought about a problem and really consider a
problem carefully,

4:22 you need long stretches of uninterrupted time.

4:25 And even though the work day is typically eight hours,

4:28 how many people here have ever had eight hours to themselves at the office?

4:32 How about seven hours?

4:33 Six? Five? Four?

4:36 When's the last time you had three hours to yourself at the office?

4:39 Two hours? One, maybe?

4:41 Very, very few people actually have

4:43 long stretches of uninterrupted time at an office.

4:46 And this is why people choose to do work at home,

4:49 or they might go to the office,

4:51 but they might go to the office really early in the day,

4:54 or late at night when no one's around,

4:55 or they stick around after everyone's left,

4:58 or go in on the weekends,

4:59 or they get work done on the plane, in the car or in the train,

5:02 because there are no distractions.

5:04 Now there are different kinds of distractions,

5:06 but not the really bad distractions, which I'll talk about in a minute.

5:10 And this whole phenomenon of having short bursts of time to get things done

5:14 reminds me of another thing that doesn't work when you're interrupted,

5:18 and that is sleep.

5:20 I think that sleep and work are very closely related --

5:23 not because you can work while you're sleeping and sleep while you're working.

5:26 That's not really what I mean.

5:28 I'm talking specifically about the fact that sleep and work are phase-based,

5:34 or stage-based, events.

5:36 Sleep is about sleep phases, or stages -- some people call them different things.

5:42 There are five of them, and in order to get to the really deep ones,

5:46 the meaningful ones, you have to go through the early ones.

5:49 If you're interrupted while you're going through the early ones --

5:52 if someone bumps you in bed, or there's a sound, or whatever happens --

5:56 you don't just pick up where you left off.

5:58 If you're interrupted and woken up,

6:00 you have to start again.

6:02 So you have to go back a few phases and start again.

6:05 And what ends up happening -- you might have days like this

6:08 where you wake up at eight or seven in the morning, or whenever you get up,

6:11 and you're like, "I didn't sleep very well.

6:13 I did the sleep thing -- I went to bed, I laid down,

6:16 but I didn't really sleep."

6:18 People say you go "to" sleep,

6:21 but you don't go to sleep, you go towards sleep; it takes a while.

6:24 You've got to go through phases and stuff,
6:26 and if you're interrupted, you don't sleep well.
6:28 So does anyone here expect someone to sleep well
6:31 if they're interrupted all night?
6:32 I don't think anyone would say yes.
6:34 Why do we expect people to work well
6:36 if they're being interrupted all day at the office?
6:39 How can we possibly expect people to do their job
6:41 if they go to the office and are interrupted?
6:43 That doesn't really seem like it makes a lot of sense, to me.
6:46 So what are the interruptions that happen at the office but not at
other places?
6:50 Because in other places, you can have interruptions like the TV,
6:54 or you could go for a walk, or there's a fridge downstairs,
6:58 or you've got your own couch, or whatever you want to do.
7:01 If you talk to certain managers, they'll tell you
7:04 that they don't want their employees to work at home
7:06 because of these distractions.

7:08 They'll sometimes also say,

7:11 "If I can't see the person, how do I know they're working?"

7:14 which is ridiculous, but that's one of the excuses that managers give.

7:17 And I'm one of these managers. I understand. I know how this goes.

7:21 We all have to improve on this sort of thing.

7:24 But oftentimes they'll cite distractions:

7:26 "I can't let someone work at home.

7:27 They'll watch TV, or do this other thing."

7:29 It turns out those aren't the things that are distracting,

7:32 Because those are voluntary distractions.

7:34 You decide when you want to be distracted by the TV,

7:36 when you want to turn something on,

7:38 or when you want to go downstairs or go for a walk.

7:41 At the office,

7:42 most of the interruptions and distractions

7:44 that really cause people not to get work done are involuntary.

7:47 So let's go through a couple of those.

7:50 Now, managers and bosses will often have you think

7:53 that the real distractions at work

7:55 are things like Facebook and Twitter

7:58 and YouTube and other websites,

8:01 and in fact, they'll go so far as to actually ban these sites at work.

8:05 Some of you may work at places where you can't get to certain sites.

8:09 I mean, is this China? What the hell is going on here?

8:11 You can't go to a website at work, and that's the problem?

8:14 That's why people aren't getting work done,

8:16 because they're on Facebook and Twitter?

8:18 That's kind of ridiculous. It's a total decoy.

8:21 Today's Facebook and Twitter and YouTube,

8:24 these things are just modern-day smoke breaks.

8:27 No one cared about letting people take a smoke break for 15 minutes 10 years ago,

8:31 so why does anyone care if someone goes to Facebook

8:33 or Twitter or YouTube here and there?

8:36 Those aren't the real problems in the office.

8:38 The real problems are what I like to call the M&Ms,

8:42 the Managers and the Meetings.

8:44 Those are the real problems in the modern office today.

8:48 And this is why things don't get done at work,

8:50 it's because of the M&Ms.

8:52 Now what's interesting is,

8:54 if you listen to all the places that people talk about doing work,

8:57 like at home, in the car, on a plane, late at night, or early in the morning,

9:01 you don't find managers and meetings.

9:03 You find a lot of other distractions, but not managers and meetings.

9:07 So these are the things that you don't find elsewhere,

9:10 but you do find at the office.

9:12 And managers are basically people whose job it is to interrupt people.

9:16 That's pretty much what managers are for. They're for interrupting people.

9:19 They don't really do the work, so they make sure everyone else is doing work,

9:23 which is an interruption.

9:25 We have lots of managers in the world now, and a lot of people in the world,

9:28 and a lot of interruptions by these managers.

9:30 They have to check in: "Hey, how's it going?"

9:32 Show me what's up." This sort of thing.

9:34 They keep interrupting you at the wrong time,

9:37 while you're actually trying to do something they're paying you to do,

9:40 they tend to interrupt you.

9:41 That's kind of bad.

9:43 But what's even worse is the thing that managers do most of all,

9:46 which is call meetings.

9:47 And meetings are just toxic,

9:50 terrible, poisonous things

9:53 during the day at work.

9:55(Laughter)

9:56 We all know this to be true,

9:58 and you would never see a spontaneous meeting called by employees.

10:01 It doesn't work that way.

10:02 The manager calls the meeting

10:04 so the employees can all come together,

10:06 and it's an incredibly disruptive thing to do to people --

10:09 to say, "Hey look,

10:10 we're going to bring 10 people together right now and have a meeting.

10:13 I don't care what you're doing,

10:15 you've got to stop doing it, so you can have this meeting."

10:18 I mean, what are the chances that all 10 people are ready to stop?

10:21 What if they're thinking about something important, or doing important work?

10:25 All of a sudden you tell them they have to stop doing that to do something else.

10:29 So they go into a meeting room, they get together,

10:32 and they talk about stuff that doesn't really matter, usually.

10:35 Because meetings aren't work.

10:37 Meetings are places to go to talk about things

10:39 you're supposed to be doing later.

10:41 But meetings also procreate.

10:43 So one meeting tends to lead to another meeting,

10:45 which leads to another meeting.

10:46 There's often too many people in the meetings,

10:49 and they're very, very expensive to the organization.

10:51 Companies often think of a one-hour meeting as a one-hour meeting,

10:55 but that's not true, unless there's only one person.

10:57 If there are 10 people, it's a 10-hour meeting, not a one-hour meeting.

11:01 It's 10 hours of productivity taken from the rest of the organization

11:04 to have this one-hour meeting, which probably should have been handled

11:07 by two or three people talking for a few minutes.

11:10 But instead, there's a long scheduled meeting,

11:12 because meetings are scheduled the way software works,

11:15 which is in increments of 15 minutes, or 30 minutes, or an hour.

11:18 You don't schedule an eight-hour meeting with Outlook; you can't.

11:22 You can go 15 minutes or 30 minutes or 45 minutes or an hour.

11:25 And so we tend to fill these times up

11:27 when things should go really quickly.

11:29 So meetings and managers are two major problems in businesses today,

11:33 especially at offices.

11:34 These things don't exist outside of the office.

11:37 So I have some suggestions to remedy the situation.

11:42 What can managers do --

11:44 enlightened managers, hopefully --

11:46 what can they do to make the office a better place for people to work,

11:49 so it's not the last resort, but it's the first resort,

11:52 so that people start to say,

11:53 "When I really want to get stuff done, I go to the office."

11:56 Because the offices are well-equipped;

11:58 everything is there for them to do the work.

12:00 But they don't want to go there right now, so how do we change that?

12:04 I have three suggestions to share with you.

12:06 I have about three minutes, so that'll fit perfectly.

12:09 We've all heard of the Casual Friday thing.

12:11 I don't know if people still do that.

12:13 But how about "No-talk Thursdays?"

12:15(Laughter)

12:17 Pick one Thursday once a month,

12:20 and cut it in half, just the afternoon -- I'll make it easy for you.

12:23 So just the afternoon, one Thursday.

12:25 First Thursday of the month, just the afternoon,

12:27 nobody in the office can talk to each other.

12:30 Just silence, that's it.

12:31 And what you'll find

12:33 is that a tremendous amount of work gets done

12:35 when no one talks to each other.

12:37 This is when people actually get stuff done,

12:39 is when no one's bothering them or interrupting them.

12:41 Giving someone four hours of uninterrupted time

12:44 is the best gift you can give anybody at work.

12:47 It's better than a computer,

12:48 better than a new monitor, better than new software,

12:51 or whatever people typically use.

12:53 Giving them four hours of quiet time at the office

12:55 is going to be incredibly valuable.

12:57 If you try that, I think you'll agree, and hopefully you can do it more often.

13:01 So maybe it's every other week,

13:03 or every week, once a week,

13:05 afternoons no one can talk to each other.

13:07 That's something that you'll find will really, really work.

13:10 Another thing you can try,

13:12 is switching from active communication and collaboration,

13:16 which is like face-to-face stuff -- tapping people on the shoulder,

13:19 saying hi to them, having meetings,

13:21 and replace that with more passive models of communication,

13:24 using things like email and instant messaging,

13:26 or collaboration products, things like that.

13:29 Now some people might say email is really distracting,

13:32 I.M. is really distracting, and these other things are really distracting,

13:36 but they're distracting at a time of your own choice and your own choosing.

13:40 You can quit the email app; you can't quit your boss.

13:42 You can quit I.M.;

13:44 you can't hide your manager.

13:46 You can put these things away,

13:48 and then you can be interrupted on your own schedule, at your own time,

13:51 when you're available, when you're ready to go again.

13:54 Because work, like sleep, happens in phases.

13:56 So you'll be going up, doing some work,

13:58 and then you'll come down from that work,

14:00 and then maybe it's time to check that email or I.M.

14:02 There are very, very few things that are that urgent,

14:05 that need to happen, that need to be answered right this second.

14:08 So if you're a manager,

14:09 start encouraging people to use more things like I.M. and email

14:12 and other things that someone can put away

14:14 and then get back to you on their own schedule.

14:16 And the last suggestion I have is that,

14:20 if you do have a meeting coming up,

14:22 if you have the power, just cancel it.

14:25 Just cancel that next meeting.

14:27(Laughter)

14:28 Today's Friday, usually people have meetings on Monday.

14:31 Just don't have it.

14:32 I don't mean move it;

14:33 I mean just erase it from memory, it's gone.

14:36 And you'll find out that everything will be just fine.

14:39 All these discussions and decisions you thought you had to
make

14:42 at this one time at 9 a.m. on Monday,

14:43 just forget about them, and things will be fine.

14:46 People will have a more open morning, they can actually think.

14:49 You'll find out all these things you thought you had to do,

14:52 you don't actually have to do.

14:53 So those are just three quick suggestions I wanted to give you guys to think about.

14:57 I hope that some of these ideas were at least provocative enough

15:00 for managers and bosses and business owners

15:02 and organizers and people who are in charge of other people,

15:05 to think about laying off a little bit,

15:07 and giving people more time to get work done.

15:09 I think it'll all pay off in the end.

15:11 So, thanks for listening.

15:13 (Applause)