



January 2025

Beyond the office- versus-remote debate:

Why we lack focus at work and **what to do about it**



Revisiting the Economist Impact report on lost focus

In 2023, Dropbox sponsored the Economist Impact report "[In search of lost focus](#)," which surveyed more than a thousand knowledge workers about their jobs.

The report revealed a staggering \$1.4 trillion economic impact due to lost focus in the workplace. This significant loss underscores how critical it is for businesses to rethink their approach to focus, impact, and productivity to achieve better business outcomes, beginning with the work models they adopt.

Key findings from original report



42% of respondents rarely spend more than an hour on productive work without being interrupted.



Knowledge workers **lose 553 hours of productive time** annually.



Lost focus costs an **average of \$21,000 per year** for employees.

When it comes to focus and productivity, how do the work models stack up?

We revisited the original Economist Impact study and conducted a follow-up analysis to better understand differences in focus across various work models. Analyzing this data alongside insights from Dropbox's employee surveys has deepened our understanding of how various work models affect focus and productivity.

Methodology and data sources

This report draws from three primary sources of data:

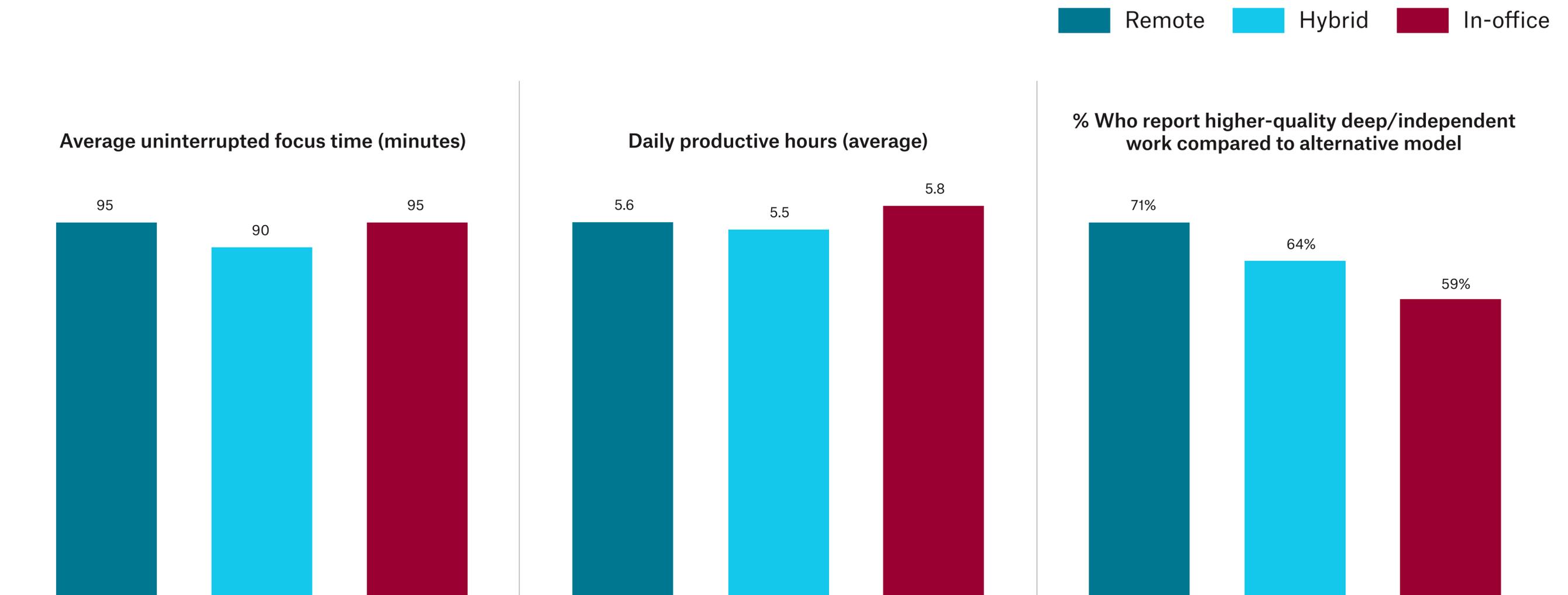
- 1** The original Economist Impact report, published in 2023, which surveyed over 1,000 knowledge workers across various industries and roles
- 2** A new analysis of the raw data from the Economist Impact study, which provides deeper insights into focus across different work models
- 3** Dropbox's internal survey data, which offers a unique perspective on how Dropbox employees experience focus and productivity in a Virtual First work environment

Workspace doesn't equate to headspace

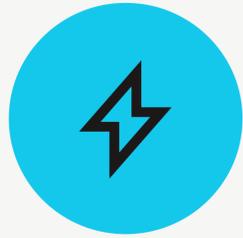
The most crucial finding from our deeper analysis of working models from the Economist Impact data is this:

There is no clear "winner" among work models when it comes to focused work.

Every approach—whether remote, hybrid, or in-office—has its own inherent distractions that make it difficult for knowledge workers to focus and stay productive.



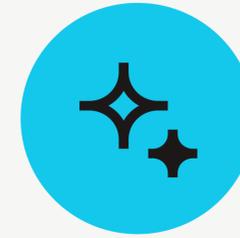
Our deep dive into the Economist Impact study data also revealed that:



Knowledge workers can focus for **90–95 minutes** without distraction, and this average focus time is consistent across all work models.



There is no difference in the average productive work hours: knowledge workers spend between **5.5 and 6 hours** a day completing productive work.

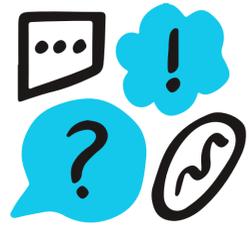


Despite no difference in the amount of productive time, more remote and hybrid workers report that the **quality of this time is better when working remotely** versus in-office.



Each scenario encompasses a mix of benefits and challenges for staying focused and getting things done.

Similarities between working models



Common distractions (answering emails, browsing social media, incoming chat messages, etc.)



Ability to be creative and innovative throughout the work day



Breaks are important for focus (going for a walk, eating/drinking, exercise, chatting with coworkers, etc.)

But there are important differences to keep in mind...



In-office workers

- Say their relationships are better than when working remotely or in a hybrid model
- Less likely to say work-life balance is better than when working remotely
- Report lower-quality deep work
- Most common office distraction is interruptions from colleagues



Hybrid workers

- Share many benefits with remote workers
- Report higher-quality deep work than in-office workers, though slightly less than remote workers
- More likely to feel disconnected from colleagues when working from home compared to fully remote workers
- More distracted by household chores and demands



Remote workers

- Report higher-quality deep work and more independence than in-office workers
- Enjoy greater flexibility and better work-life balance
- Common remote distractions include household chores and demands from others at home
- Less likely to say their team relationships are better compared to working fully in-office

How Virtual First bridges the focus gap

Dropbox's Virtual First model combines the best of remote work and in-person experiences. Building on these insights, Dropbox is refining its approach to enhance focus and tackle common challenges.

Our latest findings highlight a key challenge in today's work environment: balancing deep focus with team collaboration.

Dropbox's [Virtual First](#) model offers a solution.

88%

of Dropbox employees feel successful working in the Virtual First model.

87%

feel they're making a bigger impact working in Virtual First compared to other models—up from 67% last year.

How we make Virtual First work

Virtual First doesn't fit cleanly into one of the traditional work models; it's a reimagined way of working that prioritizes flexibility, productivity and intentional in-person gathering throughout the year. Here's how it works:



Core collaboration hours

All employees have a designated four-hour window during which they are expected to be available for real-time collaboration. This strategic scheduling creates protected time for both synchronized teamwork and deep, independent focus work.



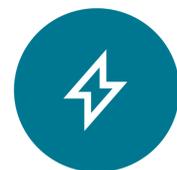
Asynchronous by default

We operate with an “async by default” mindset, where we reserve meetings for discussion, debate, and decision-making only. This enables us to reduce unnecessary meetings and handle all other work in our deep focus hours.



Intentional in-person collaboration

Though we primarily operate virtually, we recognize the unique value of face-to-face interaction. We intentionally bring teams together through regular offsites and events to build relationships, spark innovation, and tackle complex challenges collaboratively.



Flexibility and freedom

We embrace non-linear workdays, enabling team members to structure their work hours around their peak productivity periods and personal commitments while maintaining accountability through core collaboration hours.

How Virtual First drives positive outcomes for employees

90%

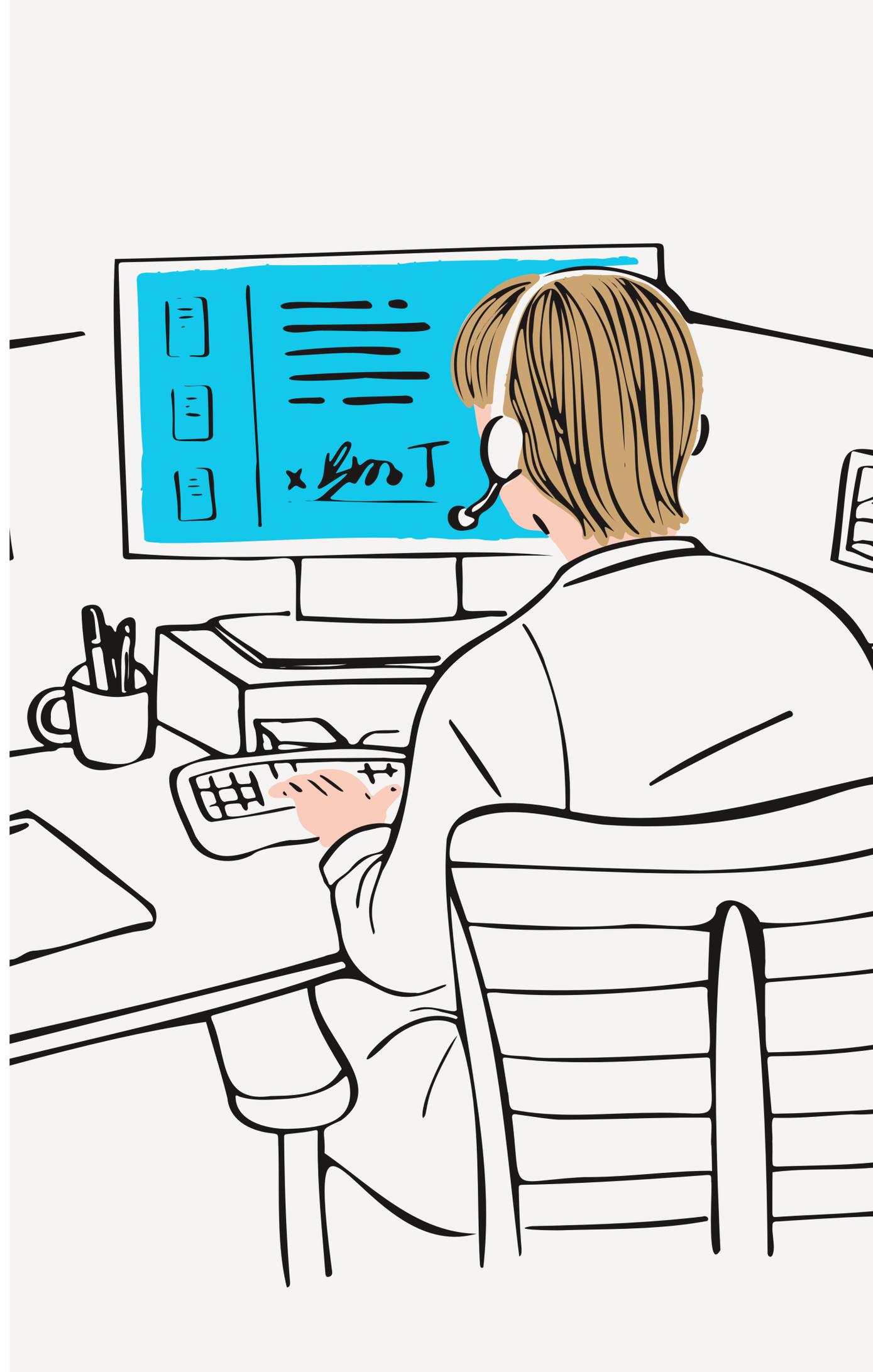
feel favorably about their **flexibility**.

87%

feel favorably about **collaboration**.

78%

feel favorably about their **productivity**.





Dropbox has transformed into a lab for distributed work, where we're experimenting and learning to solve the biggest challenges of remote collaboration from the inside out.

Based on our research and experience with Virtual First, we've identified several key strategies for optimizing focus across different work models.

Strategies for optimizing focus in a distributed environment

1. Empower managers to protect their own focus time

Managers lose more time to distractions than other employees, according to the Economist Impact study. Here's how you can help managers reduce those distractions:



Encourage “Focus Blocks”

Schedule and protect time for concentrated work and encourage reports to do the same.



Prioritize 1:1s

Dedicate chunks of time to address the distractions and blockers of reports in real time.



Top-down focus

Demonstrate focus habits and respect others' heads-down time to build a pro-focus culture.



Create playbooks

Develop documentation and resources explaining how managers can protect their focus.

2. Leverage AI and automation

AI unlocks new possibilities for solving some of the biggest challenges knowledge workers face today—like minimizing distractions, streamlining workflows, and mitigating information overload. At Dropbox, we use different tools to support focus, including:



Dropbox Dash

A universal search tool that helps employees quickly find the information they need across various platforms.



Reclaim.ai

An intelligent scheduling and task management app designed to optimize productivity and time management for individuals and teams.



Learn more about how to boost your productivity and focus time as a manager with our [Virtual First Toolkit on Teamwork](#).



Learn more about how to best leverage your collaboration tools with our [Virtual First Toolkit practice on building better tool habits](#).

3. Implement effective meeting hygiene

Meetings are often cited as a major source of distraction. Here are some practices we've implemented to make meetings more focused and productive:

-  Use the 3d's framework (decisions, debates, discussions) to determine if a meeting is necessary.
-  Set clear agendas and objectives for more effective meetings.
-  Encourage asynchronous updates to reduce unnecessary meetings.
-  Assign pre-meeting reading to ensure participants come prepared.
-  End meetings with wrap-up routines, like recording action items and assigning owners.



Learn more about running effective meetings with our [Virtual First Communication Kit](#).

4. Promote workplace norms for recharging focus

Remote, hybrid, and in-office workers need to recharge and regain focus throughout the day by taking breaks. Here are helpful habits we've been integrating into Dropbox's culture:

-  Encourage "meet & moves" to combine meetings with physical activity.
-  Promote taking breaks throughout the day to recharge.
-  Build better tool habits to reduce distractions and context switching.
-  Support a healthy work-from-home experience for remote and hybrid workers.



Learn more about how to recharge focus with our [Virtual First Well-Being Kit](#).

Making modern work your own: How you can build your own winning work model

Rather than getting caught up in the ongoing debate between in-office, remote, or hybrid work, the key is recognizing that no single model works for every organization. The solution is building a flexible work environment with a shared framework that fosters collaboration and meets your organization's unique needs.

That's what Virtual First is about: combining intentionality, flexibility, and the right balance between focus and collaboration, whether virtual or in-person.

As work continues to evolve, the organizations that thrive will be those that experiment, adapt, and embrace change. Whether you operate remotely, in-office, or with a mix of both, success comes from continuously refining your approach based on feedback and your team's needs.

By embracing your version of Virtual First, you can position your organization at the forefront of the modern workplace—driving innovation and long-term success.

