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How to Give Busy People the Time to Innovate

by [Eric Athas](#) October 8, 2024

Summary

Most companies are full of really busy people, which makes it hard to slow down and focus on trying new things. At the same time, stopping everything to focus on innovation can leave day-to-day tasks neglected. So, how can leaders make sure workers are able to balance operational necessities with innovation? Four strategies can help: 1) Clearing the “process debt” that’s blocking innovation time; 2) Subtracting something old before you add something new; 3) Putting innovation at the top of the list; and 4) Separate invention and optimization.

There are many ways a leader can rally workers around innovation, from launching experiments to rolling out initiatives to running hackathons. But any one of these efforts must contend with the reality of the modern-day workplace — everyone is *really* busy.

Workers are inundated with communication, with [some people reporting](#) that they spend nearly nine hours a week on email and 7.5 hours a week in meetings. People are [working more hours](#), and for some, busyness has become a [status symbol](#).

These factors may be killing a culture of innovation.

For starters, if employees are overwhelmed with email, meetings, and assignments, how on earth can they be expected to carve out enough time to invent or learn? One [survey found](#) that workers who lack sufficient time to complete their work are more than three times more likely to struggle with innovation.

Overloaded workers will also be less likely to dream up the kind of creative ideas that you’d need in an innovative culture. When employees are constantly heads down, they miss out on “aha” moments, which [studies show](#) come easier when your mind isn’t intently focused on a task. Less time for breaks means less time for [creative thinking](#) and [idea-provoking strolls](#). And research shows that stress that comes along with overwork [can negatively affect](#) the brain’s ability for creativity.

These challenges are front and center in my role as a deputy editor at *The New York Times*. The team I work on, Newsroom Development and Support, is responsible for helping editors and reporters learn new tools and skills they can use to tell stories. We know how hard it is for people to adopt new ideas when their schedules are jam-packed. And even if people can spare a few minutes to learn something new, they may be preoccupied with the torrent of to-dos.

At the same time, the demands of daily work aren’t going to magically disappear. Running a thriving daily operation is vital to a business. How can leaders make sure workers are able to balance operational necessities with innovation?

With the help of colleagues throughout my career, I’ve tested different solutions to this problem. But I was eager for more ideas. I recently reached out to executives outside the media industry who

are considered innovators in their fields and who appeared to be striking this balance. How are they doing it? And what can others learn from their tactics? What follows are lessons they shared, along with some tips from my own experience.

Clear “Process Debt” That’s Blocking Innovation Time

You know those work tasks that take longer than they should because of some rule or procedure that has outlived its purpose?

When those add up, your workplace can become saddled with *process debt*. Any [process you implement](#) today — meetings that languish on the calendar, over-the-top communication protocols, or onerous data entry — will cost workers time that could be used for innovation.

Arvind KC, the chief people and systems officer at the online gaming platform Roblox, said that process debt can stand in the way of creative workers trying to do their jobs. “When you hire really smart people who want to be creative and innovative, you don’t have to work on routines to help them be innovative, because that’s their default state. You have to work on the routines that *prevent* them from being in that default state,” said KC. “The moment you remove those and give them space, they’re going to be creative, they’re going to be innovative.”

Any workplace is bound to build up process debt. What can you do about it?

At Roblox, leaders depend on “Bureaucracy Busters,” an internal tool where any of the company’s more than 2,000 workers can post about burdensome processes and coworkers can upvote the ones they support. For example, an employee could post about a software approval process that required sign-off from four managers, eating into precious innovation time. If the post gets enough upvotes, Roblox leaders would determine whether they should eliminate the process (which KC told me is almost always the case).

Capital One has a similar internal site called “Clearing the Way,” said Melanie Frank, a managing vice president of cyber engineering at the bank. Frank said the tool, which is also powered by upvoting, helps leaders identify time-wasting processes.

If you want to get time back for innovation, process debt is a good place to start. An open system, like the tools developed by Roblox and Capital One, will help identify and sweep up busy work that may be blocking innovation work. But you don’t necessarily need a fancy tool to do it. You could accomplish something similar by sending around an online form every quarter, providing a generic email where workers can submit ideas — or simply by asking people for ideas directly. Importantly, tools like these also send a strong signal to workers that they don’t need to suffer under a crush of communication overload, bureaucratic protocol, and other process debt.

Before You Add Something New, Subtract Something Old

At Capital One, Frank said she grapples with a cycle that comes with encouraging innovation — workers generate new ideas, then those ideas become projects, but the more projects they start, the less time they have for generating new ideas.

“We’re just exponentially generating more ideas than we can complete,” said Frank.

What Frank is describing is something known as *initiative overload*, which happens when the [number of projects accumulates](#) to the point where they become insurmountable. Frank learned that if you wish to continue launching new things — tools, initiatives, or products — you must remove old ones. She said she often reminds her team that it's OK to pass on a new project or remove unnecessary parts of their work.

At *The Times*, my team tries to be conscious about the new things we bring to already-busy journalists. If we're implementing a significant new tool or workflow, we look for ways to take something away to balance things out. A couple of years ago, for example, we rolled out a new feature that would require editors to write alternative text with every photo, making it possible for blind and low-vision readers to enjoy visual journalism using screen-reading technology. In preparation for this new work, we identified an old task we could remove from the list of things editors must complete for each story.

But it's not always so easy to stop doing something in a workplace. Leidy Klotz, a professor at the University of Virginia and author of the book, *Subtract: The Untapped Science of Less*, has studied subtraction as a method for improvement. Klotz's [research](#) with his coauthors has shown that humans are more inclined to add than they are to subtract. Adding is more noticeable, he told me. It's rewarded and there's clear evidence of it. And bosses sometimes [chase shiny new objects](#). Subtraction, on the other hand, is invisible.

"It's just a fundamental disadvantage that subtracting has, but it's not insurmountable," said Klotz. He noted that a culture of subtraction can help make more space for innovation. A leader's job is to intentionally make subtraction visible to remind employees that there's sometimes value in removing something.

Among his ideas:

- Assign someone in meetings to remind the group to consider subtraction as an option.
- Create a rule: Before you add anything new, take something away.
- Openly celebrate when a team stops doing something, just like you celebrate the launch of something new.

Put Innovation at the Top of the List

If you don't want innovation to lose out against competing priorities, you have to put it at the top of the list — and ensure your employees know it's there.

That's what Carter Busse did at the automation company Workato, which employs about 1,000 people. As the firm's chief information officer, Busse's primary responsibility is to keep systems online, ensure information is secure, and other essential responsibilities of an IT department. But in the age of AI, Busse said his team was ready to infuse more creativity into its operational duties.

So, Busse made "innovate and lead" his team's top goal for this year. "That just completely changed the mindset of my team, because it came from me," said Busse. "I was measuring them on being innovative and being creative."

By making innovation a priority, workers were pushed to think about how to apply creative thinking into their daily work, said Busse. For example, members of his team are finding more ways to use AI to automate and streamline inefficient processes at the company.

Busse said top-down direction is critical for getting workers to incorporate innovation into their work. But you also need to give them dedicated space to step back from their day-to-day functions and cook up ideas. To that end, every quarter Busse's team does a two-week innovation sprint and a hackathon, during which they're required to set aside projects and shift to inventive work.

During one recent hackathon that included the entire organization, a member of Busse's team developed an automation system for the company's bank transactions. The AI-powered automation saved Workato's finance team from having to enter the data manually, a process that used to take an entire week each month to complete.

Separate Invention and Optimization

One way to solve for the collision of daily work and innovation is to separate the two. That's the approach used by Marco Zappacosta, the co-founder and CEO of Thumbtack, a home improvement platform. Zappacosta explained how he thinks about work in two distinct categories often used in the startup world: zero-to-one work and one-to-10 work. Both are vital, Zappacosta said, but very different.

One-to-10 work is about optimization — improving the business, growing the number of customers, and keeping them happy. Zappacosta described this as “operational excellence.” It requires staff to have clear goals that are accountable to data.

Zero-to-one work, on the other hand, is about invention. This is when you're bringing something new to market. To do zero-to-one work right, Zappacosta said, you have to set the growth ambitions aside and have a team start with a hypothesis, not a numerical goal.

This became clear to Zappacosta a few years ago as his team embarked on a major expansion of its business. At the time, Thumbtack was primarily a marketplace where users could hire professionals whenever something broke. But customer research was signaling that homeowners also wanted help with regular home maintenance *before* something broke. Zappacosta said this insight presented an opportunity for Thumbtack to grow from being a reactive solution to a proactive one, too.

To get there, Thumbtack would need to make changes to its product. Initially, Zappacosta and other Thumbtack leaders gave their teams a set of numerical goals and set them off to build something that would hit those targets. They did, but the resulting product was merely an iteration of the existing platform, not the creative reinvention they were hoping for.

The Thumbtack leaders reset the project and pivoted to a new strategy. This time, instead of data, the team was given a written hypothesis about what customers needed. And instead of a numerical goal, they were asked to build a prototype by a certain date.

This new way forward was liberating for the team, said Zappacosta. It took them away from optimizing the existing product and allowed them to dream up something novel that spoke directly

to customer needs. “It drove the team to be much more creative, and much more ambitious in how they went about solving for the user,” he said.

The separation of operational work and invention work can also apply to *when* you launch innovative projects. Imagine it’s crunch time for a project you’re working on. How would you respond if a manager asked you to brainstorm about an experimental product line? Or asked you to learn a new tool? I’m guessing you’d balk at the notion, and instead focus on your pressing deadlines.

Workers have seasons of peak busyness, when the daily operation clamors for their attention — the one-to-ten work. These aren’t the optimal moments to step in and push employees to think differently. Instead, prioritize innovation during the less intense stretches of the year.

When my team is planning projects with journalists, we’re careful to avoid the most hectic periods — elections, trials, cultural events. This way, we’re not competing with top priorities and journalists have more cognitive space to think creatively. That said, in the journalism business, much of our schedule is unpredictable. In an instant, any reporter or editor could be thrown into a fast-moving news story. When this happens, we know to revisit the new project another time.

Another way to separate out the invention work is to do it in small increments. It would be unrealistic for my team to ask journalists to step away from their jobs for weeks or even days. But we can do it for small 30- or 45-minute bursts here and there. When we do, it’s more practical for them to break away and learn something new.

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I’ve been leading change in newsrooms for more than a decade, and the question I explored in this piece — how to balance busyness and innovation — has only become trickier. As Frank noted, experimentation begets projects, and projects require time and attention. That time and attention becomes more limited, making it harder to experiment. On top of that, the tasks of each day build up — in my line of work, it’s not like the pace of news has slowed down one bit.

But I think that is the point. The modern workplace will never reach innovation finality. The daily responsibilities will never die down. So, you must actively tend to the balance, listen to the people doing the work, and adjust as needed as you roll out new initiatives.



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