

# Productivity Culture Has an Empathy Problem<sup>1</sup>

Consider who has the luxury of delegating



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[Jun 3](#) · 5 min read



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**A** few months ago, the day before I was supposed to interview a productivity expert for a story, I realized he had never confirmed the time. I fired off an email and then spent a couple stressful hours waiting for him to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://forge.medium.com/productivity-culture-has-an-empathy-problem-c7636ce3080c>

reply, scrambling to move around my calendar and reschedule other interviews so I could stay flexible for this one.

The next day, minutes before our interview, he finally emailed me back, telling me he could do it now, if I had time. I scrambled to move things around to accommodate him.

After we hung up, I remembered a piece of advice I'd read in this expert's book: If you want to get stuff done, you have to stop bothering yourself with mundane tasks, like [constantly checking email](#) — or, apparently, giving a writer the courtesy of confirming an interview.

It seemed like reasonable advice when I read it. But now, on the receiving end of it, I was less on board. Because my interviewee hadn't taken a minute to confirm a time, my own productivity suffered.

It also occurred to me, however, that I have done the exact same thing to other people. I always feel a little guilty when someone emails me to “circle back” about something I should have responded to already. Sure, I'm busy, but so are they. So is just about everyone.

We all have conflicting priorities, and we're probably all guilty of prioritizing our own productivity at the expense of someone else's. If you didn't, you'd never finish anything. As the author Greg McKeown argues in his book *Essentialism*, by making more time for what's “essential” in your life, you're necessarily going to disappoint other people.

The advice is valid. But productivity culture is [so fixated on the self](#) — on your own focus, your own output, your own goals — that it rarely acknowledges how to navigate those efforts within any sort of community. It assumes that we all live in a world where every task is easily delegatable. It glosses over the fact that most of the time, someone else is paying the price for your productivity — and that the people who do tend to be the most marginalized.

“Whenever ‘delegate stuff you don't want to do' comes up, no one even bothers to think about who the work would be delegated to,”

says *Wired* editor Alan Henry, also a former editor at *Lifehacker* and the *New York Times*' Smarter Living section. “Unless you actively try to

reject some of the social conditioning that comes with gender, race, and sexuality, it's all too easy to just step aside and let the shit roll downhill, as it were.”

In a recent *New York Times* piece, Henry [wrote](#) that his experience as a productivity journalist and a person of color forced him to “reckon with the notion that so much popular productivity advice... is accessible only to people who have the option to use it in the first place.”

“These tips and techniques assume an equal workplace, where everyone is treated fairly and equally and based solely on the merit of their work,” he tells me. “Unfortunately, we all know that in the real world that’s not how most offices operate.”

Indeed, in the real world, the same productivity strategies can play out dramatically differently, depending on who’s using them. “When you block off a whole day on your calendar as ‘deep work time, no meetings please,’ a white male worker, for example, may be seen as smart and productive, because it’s more likely that in majority white and male workplaces, he’ll be judged on his work,” Henry explains. “His black female colleague, however, comes with the social baggage of being seen as an ‘angry black woman’ or a ‘sassy black woman,’ so the exact same technique may be interpreted as laziness, or even worse, hostility, and an unwillingness to be a ‘team player.’”

And productivity culture, with its unwavering focus on the self, is set up to perpetuate a willful blindness to the inequities it creates. Will Storr, a journalist and author of the book [Selfie: How We Became So Self-Obsessed and What It's Doing to Us](#), argues that our obsession with productivity and self-improvement has created a culture of perfectionism that’s often odds with empathy and compassion — toward both others and ourselves.

“There’s so much out there that makes us feel not good enough,” Storr says. To compensate, “we’re driven to this toxic, perfectionist state of mind,” blocking out our awareness of others’ needs in the pursuit of working better, smarter, faster.

Of course, the end goal of so much productivity advice isn’t to get to a place where you can do less, but to have the freedom to do the kind of work that truly fulfills you. But the single-minded focus on reducing the time spent on

shallow, menial tasks devalues not only that work but also the people who end up picking it up. “Productivity culture lionizes the flexibility of gig work and creative work,” Henry says, “claiming the ‘housework’ can go to someone you can pay a few bucks to do on your behalf so you’re free to do the big-brain stuff that you’re ‘born to do.’”

In workplaces, this type of “office housework” [often falls on women and people of color](#), which makes it harder for those groups to make the case for a promotion or raise — the workers with the privilege to “get stuff done” have more leverage when it comes to negotiating a salary increase, for instance. When we talk about the systematic barriers that reinforce the wage gap, productivity culture may be a prime example.

This isn’t to say we shouldn’t all strive to do more of the work we feel we’re meant to do. But we should think about our productivity more inclusively: Assuming that the point of optimizing your life is to be happier and more fulfilled, productivity won’t help you get there as much as [human connection will](#).

But sometimes: Just do the thing. Answer the email. Confirm the appointment. Show up on time. That’s empathetic productivity.

That approach will make your workplace [more productive](#), and it will make you [more effective at your job](#). Part of being productive should be understanding the role we play in a larger system — and recognizing that we’re not the only ones doing the work truly essential to our lives.

1.6K claps



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