Context to the nugget

Ashley speaks about how the current context around COVID has really made it that much harder for us to switch off. People are feeling more and more overwhelmed despite having more time at their disposal given commute has been taken out of the equation.

Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Let's move to what's here now Ashley, Covid. You have eluded to it the context of working from home and having sometime between meetings and spending time with family. Talk to us a little bit about what are some of the things that you are seeing through these months?

Ashley Whillans (AW): Yeah, so, when I first started off my research on this question, people… and sometimes people ask me well, is that road just time rich right now as we are not commuting, we are not traveling for business, and we should all have more time than ever before, right? But they are asking that more and more like a rhetorical question as a point of sarcasm if you will because what we are seeing in our data and I think what has been all of our lived experience is that people feel more stressed and busier now than they did pre-pandemic, which is of course interesting again speaking of the psychological nature of time poverty. We do not have a commute yet Jeff Polzer, Raffaella Sadun and other colleagues have shown using Microsoft analytics data so behind the scenes meetings data and Microsoft teams that people are sending more email, they are having more meetings; their work day has been extended by about an hour. So, we are substituting our commute for meetings and work and what I am seeing in my survey data is mirroring these more objective metrics, what we see is that employees, remote workers all over the world in 88 countries that we have been surveying since March report greater distraction, more time spent is unproductive as opposed to productive work. They are feeling more pressed for time, they feel more torn between the demands of work and life. Obviously it is so much of both work and life are happening in the same space, we are expected to engage in both our parenting responsibilities and our workplace responsibilities simultaneously As one consultant I was recently talking to said to me, my time has so much more demands on it than it did before and that resonated with me and it bears out in the data is that before we used to be able to compartmentalize, we used to be able to go travel to a client site for four days of the week and be completely immersed in that and not be expected to cook dinner, to spend time with our partner, to take care of our kids or home school them, to not also have to do other things for our firms. And now we are expected to be doing everything all at once. We are now an employee at the same time as a parent, at the same time as a manager, at the same time as doing community events in our firm; many of our meetings are back-to-back, we are losing these breaks, boundaries and transitions that have gone missing in work from home. And so, I think there is going to be a push forward now to really not be in crisis mode

anymore when it comes to remote work and instead try to be proactive in setting breaks, boundaries and transitions that make the remote work environment sustainable for all employees. Because we are also observing very unsurprisingly that… and that we have been hearing a lot about in the media is that working mothers are doing way more chores than working fathers, they are also reporting engaging in less leisure time than working dads. The silver lining is that people are saying they are spending more time with friends and family and they want even more of it. So, there will be increased demand and likely increased need for remote work options in the future. However, I think a lot more work is needed to really try to understand what the cadence of a work day should look like in a completely forced experiment in working from home.

DJ: And maybe just trying to make it a little more tactical Ashley, in terms of what people can do to, sort of, you know, you are right, we are wearing all these multiple hats at the same point in time plus there's no recovery time if I may use that term, right? Sometimes, if you had a half-an hour commute to work, sometimes going back and forth gave you time to decompress a little bit and come back. One of the CEOs I was speaking to said that at 6 o'clock I just shut my computer, go for a walk around my block and come back home as if I would come back from office and to me that's made a big difference. And I found that at some level silly but I found that interesting because we all need… it was his way of saying it's my attempt at trying to compartmentalize my day. So, given your conversations and your research, any interesting tactical things that people are doing that's worth mentioning?

AW: So, this virtual commute is something that we initiated and Microsoft has since rolled out to their offices. So, put a holder in your calendar between 8:00 and 9:00 a.m. in the day, call it your virtual commute, go for a walk like the CEO, spend time with your family, read a book do anything but work and don't schedule meetings into that time. Similarly, schedule an activity at the end of the work day that you are really looking forward to cooking a meal with your family, your favourite TV show and it should be something positive, put it in your calendar, look forward to it and use it as a transition. We were sort of half joking, but this is a good… might be become more important going forward. Separate, have a physically separated office, that's where you go to work and then you do not work in other places in your house. So, this is a New York Times article featured my work and said well, do not work on your party laptop or party on your work laptop and although it's sort of silly, I think it's also true. One thing that we also are advocating for is starting meetings late and ending early. And so, this allows employees to have more time to transition because in the Zoom environment you can go back to back to back all day whereas in the co-located environment you would walk from office to office, you would get a bit of that refresh in the middle of the day. So, not only creating clear demarcation between the beginning and the end of the day but also throughout the day building in these small breaks, because this is when employees are likely to engage in spontaneous so-called water cooler conversation that we have noticed has also gone missing in the work from home environment. So, really being diligent about setting breaks throughout the day by starting meetings late and ending early also seems to be really important. I would also say from a leader perspective you want to be really encouraging employees to take their vacation time, teams are burning hot, there's a lot of stress in many organizations for a variety of different reasons, employees are taking their paid vacation less than they were pre-pandemic in part because the opportunity cost they are like oh, what else am I going to do, it's not like I am going to go on a nice beach somewhere, but I think that we actually all need vacation more than ever because of how stressful this year has been for so many people around the globe. So, really strongly encouraging teams to take time off to give extra days here and there and to really unplug I think will be critical in the next couple of months at the very least.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: 3 things struck me here.

1)   Is that in the last few months, we have had to pack in all the dimensions of our life at home (Stew Friedman speaks about the notion of Self, Work, Home and Community). We have had to deal with all 4 from our homes. He says that more than Work life balance, let us try and focus on harmony across the domains. He also speaks about the notion of Psychological Spill over where you focus on how you transition from one domain to another. For instance, if you have just had a fight with your spouse or your kids, do you have time to gather yourself before you get to work or do you take that stress with you to the next meeting. A lot of the conversation around leadership has also shifted from Doing to being in these times. What is your To Be list in addition to your To Do list? It is worth thinking about that

2)   A tactical tip I have heard in this context is that you try and convert your 30 min meetings into a 25 min meeting and convert your one hour meetings into 50 min meetings. So that you have breathing time in your calendar. Earlier you would walk from one part of the building to another. You need to schedule these breathing spaces to gather yourself

3)   Finally, given that this Pandemic isn't over and it is likely to last several months, it is worth thinking about the pace at which you are running. How sustainable is it? I see several people still in the firefighting mode that is possibly not sustainable over the long term; when I was training for half marathons, one of the first things my trainer told me was to understand my body and figure out what is the natural pace at which I could run. Anything beyond that, my body would start breaking down soon. It's worth reflecting on what that pace is for each one of us.

Thank you!

End of nugget transcription

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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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