

## To increase work efficiency create 'zones' for yourself

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Statistics show that more than 30 percent of most Americans work more than 40 hours a week. We are working longer hours, but the real question is: Are we getting done what really matters?

For many office workers the answer is "no." The first step is identifying the priorities, and the second step is having the right environment to focus.

Most of us perform our daily tasks at our desk near the computer. Often this is not the best place to do certain activities or priority tasks that take more concentration and less distraction. Activities such as strategic thinking, reading, writing and development often require a different environment to assist in changing the mindset to help perform those tasks more quickly and efficiently.

Here are suggestions to create various work "zones" in your office.

### **Active-communication zone**

Most of us are located in the "active-communication" zone every day. This zone is usually at your desk where your computer and phone are placed. This is the area where we check e-mail, manage day-to-day tasks, and conduct central communications via e-mail and phone. It is a busy environment where we are accustomed to multitasking and providing immediate response. This location is often in an officewide "open" setting and conducive to employee interruptions.

Although a necessary and primary zone for most workers, this is not the best zone or environment to accomplish certain tasks that require more thoughtful attention and less external distraction.

### **Reading zone**

Did you know there is more information in a daily New York Times than the average 18th century man knew in a lifetime? We are in an information age, and most workers receive a large amount of data that merely needs to be read. Although workers have great intentions to read those e-newsletters, magazines and journals, it often doesn't become priority because other tasks supersede reading, especially when one is positioned in the active-communications zone.

Trying to read in the active-communication zone is generally not effective, and reading will always be pushed aside for more immediate and quick actions. If reading is an essential component to your job and business, consider finding an environment that is quiet, free from

interruptions and distractions and away from the active-communication zone. Some workers enjoy reading in a coffee shop, conference room, commuting to and from work, at home or at a separate location within the office such as a side table, sofa or chair. To read effectively and absorb the necessary information consider finding a reading zone area.

### **Thinking zone**

Most decisions are made easily, but some important decisions require more thought and consideration before we can make them. These decisions take time and deliberation to consider the best options. Trying to make these important decisions in the active-communication zone often is not the best practice. It can be difficult to concentrate, and e-mails and interruptions become a distraction. Important decision making is usually done effectively in quiet spaces and in times of solitude. This thinking zone could be created during the commute to or from work, during a break, on a quick walk around the office building or neighborhood or even during physical exercise. Instead of forcing a key decision to be made in your active-communication zone, plan your day to consider those decisions during a thinking zone time period. Not only will the decision process take less time, the thinking zone can also improve decision making.

### **Development zone**

In our knowledge-based economy most workers have reports, budgets and written deliverables that are required for the job. These written deliverables require concentrated thinking, as do reading and decision making, but they also require workers to be near their computers. Often workers get started on these written deliverables and become waylaid from the task because e-mail and communication activities are immediately reactive.

A recent Vanderbilt University study found that a person who writes a report while checking e-mail will take one-and-half times longer than if the tasks were done sequentially. To be more efficient in written tasks consider taking your computer to another location such as a coffee shop, conference room or home. If that isn't an option then log out of e-mail and database programs and set your phone to voicemail to limit the immediate reactive temptation. Creating this development zone will maximize time and improve quality of work.

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