



Time to Think

How to become the planners of our working lives
by choosing our time to think

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Making working life work better

This is about putting a stake in the ground about how to make work, work better for planners.

It carries on a journey started in 2019 when the APG developed the *Right to Disconnect*. This important initiative was created to tackle the ingrained long hour culture and protect the mental health of planners.

It carries on when early in the pandemic, the APG sent out a survey to see how planners were faring. In it, we found many people finding it worse than before, working longer hours and experiencing burnout.

It carries on when in November last year, we sent out another survey to find out how the world of hybrid working was working, and if things had got any better. Sadly, they hadn't. If anything, hybrid working had added an extra layer of complexity.

What both surveys revealed is a bigger problem than long working hours. It is a loss of time to think.

And this is something we need to be very concerned about. For without time to think, the quality of work suffers, so the agency suffers.

And planners start falling out of love with their jobs and looking for something different.

Planning in the matrix

The effect of the pandemic has changed the way planners work. There have been lots of positives, but for many planners the impact on work has been for the worse.



Rather than having deep time to think or to switch off, we find ourselves in a conveyor belt of micro meetings day after day. Precious thinking time is being squeezed into smaller and smaller units – or often having to be done after hours.

As a planner in our November survey put it:

“We are makers who need long blocks of time to iterate and think/rethink creative ideas. Yet, we use 'manager's time' - small block meetings that fragment the day.”

With this comes a shift from presentism in the office to presentism online. Along with the constant stream of meetings, there's low level pressure to always be on and connected, even after hours.

This itself creates ongoing low-level stress. Planners are finding it harder and harder to switch off. They are finding it harder and harder to get into flow and think creatively.

It's become a daily grind. We are, to quote another planner in our summer survey, *“constantly plugged into the matrix.”*

The importance of time to think

John Cleese talks about creative thinking needing two modes. The first is the 'open mode' where you can be playful and curious, without the pressure of deadlines. The second is the more purposeful 'closed mode' where you need to be productive and just get the thing done.

It is clear from our November survey, that times when planners feel they are in 'open mode' are different. It can be morning or night, away from our desks or a room at the office, when we are on a walk, in the shower or any other time.

What is consistent though, is that to get into 'open mode' you need the time and freedom to do so.

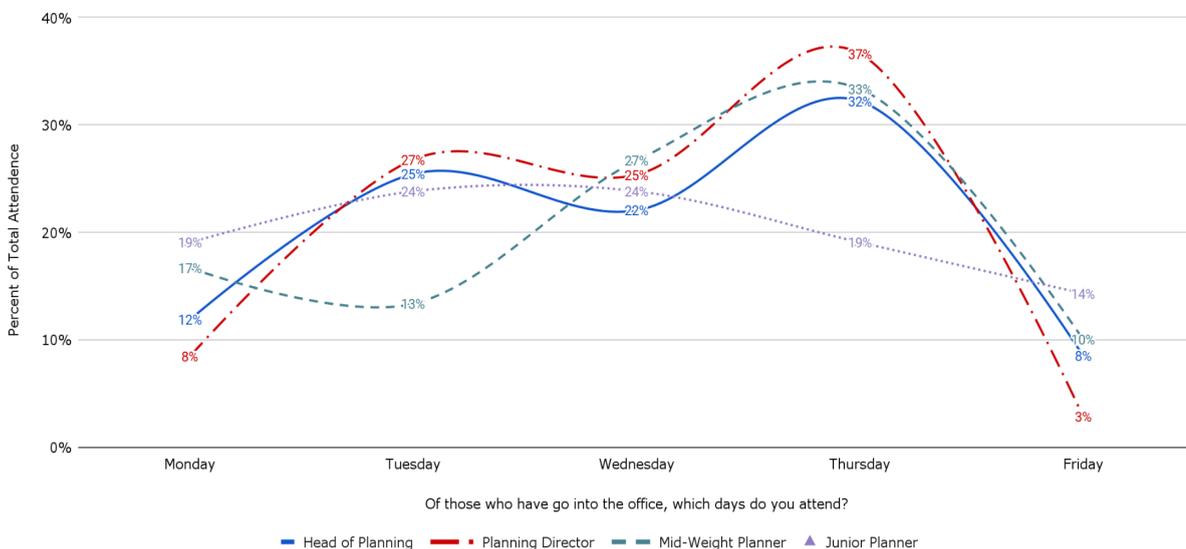


The challenge with our new ways of working is that we are forced to work always in 'closed mode' – forever productive, forever getting things done. But without the opportunity to go into 'open mode'.

We lack what Cleese calls the 'space/time oasis' – the freedom to find the right space and time to open our minds to the possibilities.

The individual balancing act

Our November survey highlighted most importantly, that there is no 'one' way to balance open and closed or hybrid, office and home working. What works for one person, doesn't work for another, as the data show no significant quantitative relationship between hours worked and experience, job title or days in the office. On face value, the only thing that can be quickly summarised is that almost all of us avoid the office on Fridays.



However, the relationship between pre and post pandemic workload and office arrangements does highlight several segments of strategists, amongst the 56% who have maintained or reduced their working hours, who have found an individual balance that works for



them.

		Office Attendance			
		Non-Attendee	Light (1 Day / Week)	Medium (2-3 Days / Week)	Heavy (4+ Days a Week)
Working Hour Change During Covid	More Hours	Working Harder At Home 20.6%		Making Up For Office Time 24.6%	
	No Change	New Place, Same Routine 18.25%		Nothing Has Changed 26.2%	
	Fewer Hours	Covid Realigners 10.3%			-

The qualitative statements amongst ‘New Place, Same Routine’, ‘Nothing Has Changed’ and ‘Covid Realigners’ describing their situations overwhelmingly reference ‘flexibility’ and ‘boundaries’. The decision to go into the office or stay at home was an individual one for those that saw no change in hours, with home, hybrid or office being a way to decide how to maintain their pre-Covid working boundaries and lives. Alternatively, those working more hours frequently reported that their place of work (either in home or office) was a place of constant pressure to be available - with presenteeism evolving to be fully hybrid.

Who’s making it work for them?

However, most interestingly out of the data, are the ‘Covid Realigners’ - those who have rebelled against the cultural narrative of pandemic burnout and report working less. This group challenges assumptions we hold about pandemic burnout, seniority and time management (most are mid-level) and office or home working (as many fully work from home as go in 2 days a week). This segment frequently reported agencies that acknowledged individual needs and ways of working, resulting in the ability to balance life and work more idiosyncratically and create opportunities for deep thought.



Frequently, this group has spoken about the ability to focus on quality of the working day as much as quantity of hours - a view point seemingly enabled by a give and take relationship with their agency and co-workers.

So, what can we do about it?

As Michael commented in his opening letter as APG chair "

"... I think planners have emerged from these two years of horrific uncertainty and disruption with our reputation enhanced. Without wishing to blow our collective trumpet too hard, think about what's asked of our agile minds"

The value of our 'agile minds' is indeed cause for celebration. How wonderful to be part of an industry that, despite adversity, is flourishing.

What we've learned from the 'Covid Realigners' though is that they have turned their agile minds to arguably the most important brief: "how can they be the most effective planner, whilst also living a full and fulfilling whole life?"

Rather than being carried by the tides of inertia and unspoken expectation, they have consciously diagnosed the situation and created their own workable strategy.

And this is our key learning from the survey:

We need to become the planners of our own working lives.



So, with that in mind we have outlined three steps:

1. Define priorities.

As David Ogilvy famously said, "Strategy is sacrifice". Strategy isn't about adding stuff that's not needed. It's about taking stuff away, stripping it back and providing simple and powerful clarity.

So, we must consciously step off the conveyor belt of recurring zoom meetings and status reports and invest time in understanding what our priorities for the year ahead should be.

Try asking yourself - What is the story of your year going to be? Where can you add the most value for your client, agency and for yourself? And, crucially what could you step away from?

Take time to look back to audit what stood out and made a difference in your last year? And, what – in hindsight - didn't add much at all! This will help to contextualise the scale and shape of the challenge for you.

As with any 'objective setting' make sure that your priorities are clear, realistic, and achievable.

If you are a manager of other planners, this is even more important. After all, it takes a certain level of seniority to be able to call the shots on your time. You need to prioritise where your team spend their energy and time, so they are spending it on the projects that matter, be it for their clients, the agency or importantly, their own personal development.



2. Create permission

What we do is a team sport; our working lives are irrevocably intertwined with those around us.

So, to achieve these priorities we need to work with our whole planning departments to understand as a collective what is important, and what isn't.

What we stand for and against as a team.

What our strategy for collective success is.

This conversation can't stop there though. We look to each other for confidence in the choices that we're making in life and choices in work are no different. We need to maintain that culture of permission that we have defined in this session. If you're senior, you need to be leading and modelling positive behaviours. Maybe you don't get it right first time, but if you're open about it, you can optimise it.

It's also important that as individuals we give ourselves the psychological permission to switch off. The physical separation of work and home previously provided us with a fairly universal demarcation to the day.

Creating new post-work rituals for the 'hybrid world' will help create psychological separation for yourself and in time become your own personal 'habit triggers' to switch mode.

Replace your old walk home for a walk round the block.



Make that post-work drink a post-work phone call to a mate.

Create a habit that helps you step out of 'work mode'.

3. Use new processes.

Over the last two years there has been an explosion of different technological solutions and services to help us manage our working lives.

One of the things that united many of our 'Creative Realigners' is that they had used tech to support their working schedules.

Here are some of the tips that people shared in our survey. Try them out for yourself and see which help you and your team to maintain the culture you've created.

- i. **Keep track:** As with any objectives, it's important that you revisit them and monitor how you feeling you're performing against them. Go lo-fi, embrace your stationary habit and start 'bullet journaling', use an app or just pin them on your desktop with **ToDo**.
- ii. **Respect the diary:** 'Heads Down' time is just as important as 'Heads Together' but too often it's only the latter that makes its way into our calendars. Schedule focus time or time to walk the dog and treat it with the same respect that a client meeting would be treated.
- iii. **Leave loudly:** This is easier when it means standing up and putting your coat on. But



technology can facilitate the same concept even when we're remote. Set an automatic response, include working hours in your profile and put your OOO status to appear at the end of the day. Take control by removing any ambiguity around what others can expect from you and model the behaviour for others.

iv. **Remove distraction:** it's so easy to get distracted and it's not always others that are distracting us. Social media/ news websites/ online shopping is all a click away from breaking our flow. Browser plug-ins like StayFocused allow you to limit time on specific websites.

The big gains for making this work

Change is hard. However, fighting for better change brings planning three big gains.

The first big gain is the quality of the strategic work. By empowering planners to own their time, they have the time to stretch their thinking and come up with better, more insightful and more lateral strategic solutions. And in a time of increasing crowdedness and distrust around advertising, this is essential.

The second big gain is retention. By giving planners more time to flex their brains, we can make them once again love their careers and stop the planning leaky bucket. We can stop them from thinking that there are better options, whether in consultancies, in tech companies or different careers altogether.

And the third big gain is diversity. By making planning a career where people can be masters of their time and location, we can bring in a broader and more diverse group of thinkers beyond the immediate vicinity of the London office. And this is something that again is essential for the future health of our industry.



Continuing the conversation

One thing we found in all our research into this topic is that one size doesn't fit all. And this will never be the case. We also know that with things still in flux, ways of working will keep changing.

What matters though is that we start and continue the conversation.

And in these times of change, we keep true to what matters: using the strategic art of sacrifice, is having the power to choose our time to think.

