

How To Thrive At Work: 10 Strategies Based On Brain Science

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Brain science can help you thrive at work
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We know more today about how the brain works than ever before, and in addition to being extraordinarily interesting, our knowledge can help us have better work experiences every day.

You can use brain science to inform how you think, how you work and where you work. Being intentional about all of these can help you love what you do and be even more effective.

How You Think And Communicate

Go deep. In his book, *The Shallows*, Nicholas Carr demonstrates how our internet usage has rewired our brains. We think superficially, skimming, glancing and scanning rather than reading or processing more deeply. Cal Newport, in his book *Deep Work*, advocates for focusing, contemplating and concentrating. His contention is this distraction-free thinking has become increasingly rare and is a skill we must learn (or relearn). In fact, empathy—so critical to our humanity—is impossible without deeply considering others' situations. And the ability to solve problems and develop ideas cannot happen effectively without depth of thought.

Tell stories. While communicating facts tends to engage limited portions of the brain, hearing a story engages multiple parts of the brain. One [study](#) in particular, using an MRI found participants had greater understanding and retention of concepts based on the engagement of multiple parts of the brain. Other [researchers](#), including Dr. Paul Zak, have demonstrated hearing stories that include conflicts and meaningful characters tend to engage us emotionally. The resulting release of oxytocin leads us to trust the messages and morals the story is trying to convey.

How You Work

In addition to how you think and communicate, you should also consider how you typically work.

Take breaks. Many people avoid taking breaks in the name of efficiency—working through lunch and avoiding the breakroom except to re-caffeinate for the next meeting. In fact, breaks are important to help the brain recharge, particularly breaks away from the office according to a [study](#) in the *Scandinavian Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*. Another [study](#) in the *Academy of Management* shows it's also impactful when you have your own choice of what to do during your lunch break. Rather than the obligatory “working lunch,” having the ability to choose your activity helps you recover energy.

Get moving. Our brains are also wired for physical movement. [Research](#) by Oregon Health and Science University found quick bursts of exercise can boost memory and learning. Take a walk, stretch or get away from your desk for a round of jumping jacks. (If suddenly rising from your desk for rowdy activity might be career-limiting in your company, find a private space for this one.)

Socialize. Our brains are most rejuvenated and ready for the next task when we take time to socialize. One [study](#) demonstrated nurses who took breaks to socialize with colleagues had reduced stress and were less likely to leave their jobs. Another [study](#) in South Korea showed taking breaks with a social focus tended to reduce negative emotions during the work day.

Where You Work

In addition to how you're thinking and how you're working, give thought to where you're

getting things done. There are some interesting findings which point to key characteristics here as well:

Find green spaces. A large amount of research suggests the importance of nature for our brains to function optimally. One of the most recent studies was by the University of Washington which pointed to enhanced cognitive function and mental health when people were exposed to nature. In fact, another study found microbreaks—quick moments away from a task—looking at a roof planted with greenery helped improve performance in a task requiring attention and accuracy.

Find a protected view. The theory of prospect and refuge was originally developed by Jay Appleton. It suggests the best places for our brains, based on evolutionary psychology, are those where we feel safe and protected, and places where we have a long view. Essentially, they are places where we are protected from someone coming up behind us, and at the same time we have a view of what might be coming toward us. In your work café, you are most likely to choose the booth on the perimeter rather than the table in the middle of the space. In addition, you'll be more comfortable at a work station on the edge of the corridor rather than the one where people can walk by and look at your computer screen.

Seek privacy. Privacy is also critical—from visual or acoustical privacy (you can't be seen or heard) to territorial privacy (you have your own claim to space) and information privacy (your content or conversation are confidential). According to researcher Wenli Wang, people need privacy no matter what their background.

Go toward the light (but not too much blue light). One of the most requested office features is access to natural light. In addition to the natural human desire for light and views, natural light has been proven to have positive effects on health, stress and productivity. Adding to what we already know about full-spectrum natural light, ongoing research shows blue light—that light at the beginning of the light spectrum which comes over the horizon at daybreak—tends to suppress melatonin and tell the brain to “turn on.” This has implications for sleep and circadian rhythms. Studies are increasingly pointing to the negative impacts of too much blue light exposure—the kind emitted from devices—leading to everything from depression and disrupted sleep to obesity. For better sleep and health, reduce exposure to blue light, especially at night.

Seek highs and lows. Another interesting study found ceiling height affected how people performed in certain types of tasks. Participants under high ceilings excelled at abstract thinking and those in low ceiling areas did better with focused, analytical and detailed work. Rather than working in the same place for all kinds of work, select the place where ceiling height—and everything else—are aligned for the work you want to accomplish.

With so much research about our brains and how they function, we can't help but be brilliantly effective. All it takes is some deep thought and storytelling in addition to ensuring we're taking breaks, moving and socializing. We would also do well to find prospect, refuge, privacy, nature and natural light. In the end, it's about matching our thinking and our work with the places and situations that will help us accomplish them best.