

## Transcription - Working Smarter Revisited

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Welcome back, I'm Kim Baillie, he's Jamie Wadley and this is Inside Exec. I nearly said the wrong name, but she'll be happy that we still talk about her even though she's not here. This week we're going to revisit one of the topics that we talked about in our first year of podcasting, in 2015, and this one is about working smarter and I want to just go through what we talked about at that stage and whether those areas are still important in terms of working smarter, whether we've got better tools available to us now to work smarter, or whether we just work smarter because we're 10 years further down our experience and so we know what works and what doesn't work for us as individuals.

For a long time the catch cry in management was to work smarter and not harder and I wonder whether, just in that very start of the conversation, whether that is the case, whether we feel like we are working harder because the economic situation is different now to what it was 10 years ago, whether the makeup of teams within our organisations means that we feel like we're working harder, do we spend more time at work or on work whether we're away from the working environment or not? I guess in 2015 we hadn't, for the most part in most industries, hadn't really experienced remote working to the extent that we did from 2020 onwards and so do we feel that we are working harder to prove to ourselves and to our organisations that we're working as well as we could or are we working not less hard but are we working smarter by using the tools that we've got now in the new age of working, or does it just feel like we're working harder because we don't have the travel time, we don't have the very strict differentiation between a workplace and a home or office environment. So let us hear from Jamie. Do you think you're working harder these days?

I think I probably work as hard as I always have but obviously the elephant in the room, everyone will be saying, is of course artificial intelligence and I think it does empower us with the ability to work smarter but it's not there to replace. It's really there to augment and yeah there's a lot of talk about our knowledge workers will be completely replaced by AI. That might come but for the moment what we've got is a very powerful suite of tools that can take a bit of the busyness out of our work days by, you know, finding processes or things that we do over and over that are mechanical almost in their nature, and perhaps replace that with an AI or a more accurately, an artificially intelligent agent that we've set up that does those things for us. It can handle at the moment, I think, low value tasks without any problem but at the moment it still has to have a human in the loop. So whilst it does give us extra things we need to do, it frees us up to work on the higher level stuff, I think, the stuff that is uniquely human to a degree and to use the smart tools to help maybe keep our inboxes clear of stuff we don't need to know about to help us identify the most important things and to help us move the needle. I think we're in power now more than we've ever been and the tools if used correctly are a definite bonus that's firmly planted, so at the beginning of 2026.

I think what I found interesting there is that you used the word "busyness" because one of the other things we talked about in that early podcast was the difference between disruptions and interruptions and that both of them could make us look busy and feel busy without actually having any tangible results. So we looked at disruption being where something came through the work arena that meant that you had to stop what we were doing and do something else

whether it was needed to be done immediately or whether it was a change in direction so that was disrupting the workflow. Whereas interruptions we looked at as we were working on something and Fulyana always has the email on in the background, so she hears the email and she sees the subject line, she thinks oh I just better looked at that, it looks interesting or that looks like it needs my attention. So she was interrupting herself, is the way she put it. Are we still failing in that area by feeling that we are busy with both disruptions and interruptions changing the way that they work?

For me, definitely disruptions still happen. I still find that there's a change to something I need to do and so I'll have to stop what I'm doing and go down a different path and that becomes that prioritisation of important and urgent, or urgent but not important, but the distractions, interruptions, I see butterfly interruptions!

I find I can manage better with the tools that are available these days, so I'm a bit more disciplined about when I read emails, what I read in the emails, whether I drill down into them or whether I just do them at a certain period of the day as Fulyana talked about in that early broadcast. She does her emails first in the morning and those of us who interact with her regularly know that that's the case and so she doesn't let herself be interrupted the rest of the day by email.

I must admit hearing that, if I can try to dumb it down, for me an interruption is something that someone else does to me and a distraction is something I do to me. I'm very guilty of that and like Google, back in the early days, was a distraction because you go to one website then next, the next, the next. It's just as easy now with the AI and it's easy to think you're working but a lot of the truths that were true back then are still true now. You know, we can't confuse activity with progress and I think if we keep, you know, what our goals are at the forefront of what we're doing, there's always going to be distractions, it's the nature of what we do. Once again if I go back to the tools like AI, you know it's Fulyana, bless her heart, yes I can see how she would do the keep an eye on the inbox, but really these days courtesy of Gemini in my Gmail account I've just cleaned up 48,000 email messages that I haven't read over the last couple of years. If I am getting a series of emails on a subject I'm working on or something I'm interested in working on, I'll get Gemini to summarize that so I only get the salient points, get a condensed down to a one or two minute read, rather than have to weigh through emails and go yes, no, wasted time, that's good, I better make notes about, and have it augment what I'm doing. Once again it's not about the AI replacing, it's about us using it the right way so we become more superhuman than we have been in the past.

I like that you talk about goals because one of the other things that we discussed at that point in time was how you manage yourself in terms of the goals or the targets that you set for the day or the week. Fulyana talked about she likes to get up in the morning and put down three things that she's going to do in the day and that's her targets for the day, whereas for me, I'm more on a weekly basis because it's a bit more fluid. If I don't get something done one day I'll do it the next or if I have time I'll pick up something from a later in the week and finish that off and be able to mark that off. So are we still in a mindset or framework where we need to set those targets for ourselves, given that now we've got so many more tools available to us as you've said? Do we need to be that structured in terms of the things that we need to get done in a day or just about thinking about, I've got these activities, I'll just keep working through them?

I like the idea of having that sort of structure and I say that from someone who has no structure because I'm hopeless at it and I tend to put, I don't know, do I do weekly, do I do daily, do I do ad hoc? Probably the latter is more the truth and I'll write down something that's more at a 30,000 feet 10,000 meter level, where I'm looking down I guess and say this is what I want the finished result to be and then I start to wade down into it and individual tasks manifest themselves almost and and I give myself a list as I go. It's a building process, I guess, and I use, obviously, the tools to help me plan these things but I definitely don't structure it very well and that's just the way I roll. It's a irritation for many people I work with to see the way I work like that, but it's how I get things done.

As for three things in a day, I think that's a great idea and I try to make a point of recognising three important things I've done during the day because it makes me feel like I've done something rather than have a whole lot of activity and feel as I've done nothing. So I think it's good for that reason alone, but I do very much believe in if I do have a few things to do is finding the thing that I want to do the least and do it first and that makes the rest of the day seem pretty easy. Once again these are old truths we're talking about but we're just using a new set of tools to do it with. I think the smartest businesses these days will combine human driven purpose with AI driven efficiency in whatever form that takes. They're interesting times and that's a Chinese curse as we all know.

It's been, this exercise of looking back at what we talked about in 2015 when we first started things, that we thought and the listening audience thought were important issues or things they wanted to know more about, and ten years is a long time but it's not a long time in business sense, and to hear and to see the things that are foundation management tools continue on, it may be the different approach, different tools, as we've talked about, there's still things that we need to do as humans in the equation. When you talked about the goals, the things you like to do is write down at the end of the day, are the things that you've done whereas we, Fulyana and I, both talked about the beginning of the day or the start of the week. In that sense I have seen more recently some research saying, suggesting that if you're going to do, if you've got a team working for you, you're going to do the goals or the targets for the team, to do them on a Friday afternoon so that everyone knows what's going to happen next week, rather than do them on the Monday morning because if you do them Friday afternoon they can come in first thing, they can hit the ground running on the Monday morning, whereas if they know it's a Monday morning meeting it comes off the back of the weekend, when they might have had a good or a bad time and they're not energized, they think I'm going to sit in a meeting for an hour and decide what we're going to do this week. So if that's a change that I have seen talked about more recently, not something that we would have considered in the past and certainly I think Monday, morning meetings or Monday lunchtime meetings were all the norm for a long time. That sort of flows on to do your own planning, night before, start of the day, I know you don't do so much planning but I do, but it's not in a traditional sense

I guess I don't mind the idea of priming people for the following week but I think you get to a point where people are looking forward to grabbing the weekend and taking a bit of time out and you give them what they're doing next week and then disruptions do happen to us and Monday morning is disruption day if there is any day that is, and it's often hard to get the the wheels turning on the things that you planned the week before. So I think it's good to know

what you might or would accomplish but the nature of business is dynamic and the nature of work is dynamic and there's often going to be things that are going to derail or sort of distract us from doing the things we want to, doing things we need to do. That's my day normally. I would like to get this done, I'd like to get that done, but this cropped up, this is clear and present danger and this is urgent and important and it will get done before the things I had planned to do.

So should we then suggest to those who have got teams and who do feel a need for that process of the weekly meeting, is Wednesday the day? Break with tradition and say well we'll have a Wednesday when we can look back, we can look forward?

I think, and you know I'm marketer, with marketing I always say well I'm not the expert, the people who spend their money are. The way you harness that is by doing what was traditionally called A/B testing where you had two options and you tried this and tried that and you're seeing which worked the best. I think with the Wednesday, I like the idea of it straight away, but I think you just need to see how it goes. So you have people react and respond to it, whether it doesn't make any difference or whether it makes a negative impact, I think you'd have to try and see how it works because no two teams are the same, no two managers are created the same. Sure we all try to do the things as we've read in the books and learned at the courses but there's a dynamic nature to human beings that you need to see what formula works best for the people you work in.

Nicely leading to, very good segue, about in 2015 we talked about because we were very keen on the total quality management of processes, so if we're looking at that change to the team meeting, the time, as a process or task that happens and we look at processes in general, should we talk then about it being an ongoing quality you know, continuous improvement, of type approach? If you saw that something didn't work or you wanted a new process then you wrote it at the time. In talking to the guests that we've had over that period of 10 years, there's been a gradual shift to having a team that comes together once or twice every six months and reviews everything. So rather than and you get the input from all the different places, people who work with it all the time certainly you have that representation, but you have people from other areas, other brains to input but they come together, they're paid for their time. In the past it was just an added task that you had to do, that this group was paid extra for the time that they come together they look at the process, that is their focus, that is the reason they're together. They look at the processes across the board and they suggest or they trial alternatives or make changes that they feel need to be made.

I guess those measures you have performance that you're talking about, there used to be what we call a kpi and kpi has become metrics and metrics have become analytics. So there's these easy ways for us to be able to see the other changes making a difference by the whole slew of different metrics. Again I think it boils down to I've got to try it, I've got to see if it works. If we find it works do more of it, if it doesn't work think of something else.

One of the the big topics that Fulyana talked about at that stage was email and the tendency for those who thought everyone should know about something to copy them into emails. So she was getting copies of emails that weren't really relevant to her but she was copied in because the person sending it thought that it was important for her to be kept up to date with the information. There would be 30 or 40 people on the email list and some of them really she

felt had no idea why they were getting a copy of the email or what they had to do with it. Has that changed do you think? Has it changed with the new tools that we have?

I think emails, regardless of how much more efficient we are with them, don't usually write themselves and people are still people, so I think there's a definite possibility that that could be exactly the same or worse, but maybe we can handle it better by, as I mentioned before, maybe summarizing emails from a certain person who is usually one who, I was going to say waste time but that might be a bit harsh, someone who sends a lot of messages to get a point across. Perhaps what we need to do is, rather than read every message, is get someone else by way of the artificial intelligence, read them and tell us what we really need to know based on what it knows about what we're doing and that would be a more efficient way to handle it. But is the problem still there? I would have to say yes. As long as it's human beings at the other end of the phone or the other end of an email, that will be the case but there are definitely a lot more tools around than there were 10 years ago for us to make use of. We still have to discipline ourselves to use them the right way and as I say, the distraction is something that we impose on ourselves and interruption is something that will come by way of an email from somewhere else. We have to have a process that handles that and processes with the tools we have. I feel like a parrot because I'm saying AI more than I am saying anything else but it has the potential to be able to turn those processes into something we don't have to spend a whole lot of time on and it can be something, as you say, we're rather than us look at the email two- three times a day, we can have it do exactly the same thing but we don't need to look at the email so much as get a brief that comes from our personal agent to tell us what we need to know. It is a minimizing of that distraction.

There's also, I think, on the other side of that the opportunity for us to be bombarded with more information because of the uptake of technology that we've had in that 10 years so. Even things like this, we're using Zoom, we can have a whiteboard where we can write down ideas and that gets summarized and sent to us apart from what might be the transcript of the meeting itself, so it's that conglomeration of information that comes out and knowing what we need to look at and how we need to look at it, where we keep it, whether we keep it or not, whether we summarize it for ourselves, or whether someone or something else is going to summarize it, I think is probably one of the challenges that we face now in terms of working smarter because I think it is, in fact, harder to work smarter these days because there's too much to choose from, too many tools to choose from, too many ways that you can refine the information. 10 years ago we were looking at it's up to me to work smarter, these days I think it's still up to me to work smarter but it's up to me also to distill the information or the tools that are going to help me to work smarter. How do I measure whether I'm working smarter or not?

The only real measure of that is if we are moving the needle. As we talked about with goals, are we closer to achieving those goals more quickly, more effectively, more economically, than we would be otherwise and because we do have so many tools? They can be a distraction in themselves. So it's not about using every new thing that floats along, it's about finding some core tools or processes or the combination of the two that amplifies our impact and really that's what we're after. There will be different sorts of distractions now than there would have been 10 years ago but it's still up to us to try to put those distractions in their place and not have them cause major disruption to what we're trying to achieve. I think the same problems are still there. We might be able to address them faster and better now than

we would and rather than have a PA do some of these things for us the PA's task might be replaced by judicious use of technology to help us with that in more efficient 24/7 sort of ways.

I guess that for me it comes back down to knowing what working smarter means to you individually or to your team or to your organisation and if you've identified that or you can identify that and the tools that you need or the way that you need to make that happen, should be how it will be clearer. That might be falling back on old things we talked about previously and I'll put a link to that particular podcast and the transcription so that you can read that in conjunction with hearing what we've got to say now 10 years later, but it's about resources and about knowing what it means to you to work smarter, whether you think you're actually working harder than you had in the past and what working harder means. Whether working harder is not just a time value but an in-depth value, so do you need to work harder? You might need to be taking on more information, taking on more tools, taking on more education, because then you feel like you're contributing more but it is that necessarily working smarter?

I think you're right. The resource we're trying to manage is us and, you know, to me working smarter is being able to use the resources. The two main resources we have at our disposal are our time and our energy but working smarter is being more intentional about how we use those resources regardless of the tools we use, and that will be the same now as it would have been back then and probably will be to some degree in the future.

We might end the discussion on that note. As I said, I'll put the the link to the original podcast and the transcription on the website but for now I think we've covered how we work and whether we work smarter and harder in 2026.

Another butterfly has gone past - I'm going to get out.

I'm Kim Baillie, he's Jamie Wadley and this is Inside Exec.