



Productivity:

What does it mean
for us today?

WHITEPAPER



Introduction

Organisations, and the people within them, have adapted and flexed – often at very short notice – in the last 15 months and have created a new ‘business as usual’ in response to the pandemic. The resilience of employees has shone, as they continue to perform their roles in different circumstances, with new systems, amended processes and additional pressures.


So, it is the perfect time, as people look afresh at their changed working lives and think about what happens next, to evaluate exactly how we work and judge success, and ask the question – is there a better way of doing this? One that perhaps means we can take forward a lot of what we have learnt over the last year so we can prioritise wellbeing, make technology work hard for us (rather than the other way round), ensure people reach their potential and ultimately end up achieving more.

Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft, thinks so:

“Over the past year, no area has undergone more rapid transformation than the way we work. Employee expectations are changing, and we will need to define productivity much more broadly — inclusive of collaboration, learning, and wellbeing to drive career advancement for every worker.”

We discovered - from [Asana's Anatomy of Work Index](#) - that 60 per cent of a person's time at work is spent on work about work, and not on skilled tasks. And this results in employees missing over one-quarter of their deadlines each week. All of these hours add up to huge amounts of time lost – talking about what we're supposed to be doing, creating information around it, having meetings that don't need to happen and constantly being distracted by system notifications. The time is ripe for change.

How do we build new working models that are more productive – and more enjoyable? The answer lies in looking at a number of different things, including how we find, manage and nurture our people – and how well we support their wellbeing within a culture of inclusivity. We have to decide on the best physical environment for employees (understanding that this will not be the same for everyone) and how we maximise the use of our office spaces when people are allowed to come back together. It is vital that we also take a close look at the technology we use and ensure that we are giving people tools they need that will help them to become more efficient. In our most recent [Annual Trends Survey](#), we found that 77 per cent of respondents said one of the legacies of the pandemic will be an acceleration to a digital-first mindset. Let's make optimal use of the digital solutions that have enabled this new way of working.



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Bringing our authentic selves to work

The past 15 months have very clearly demonstrated our common humanity, and the importance of kindness and empathy. Work became more human as people dealt with the anxieties of living through a pandemic and the practical challenges it brought such as remote working and home schooling. We got to see each other's families and homes on video calls and it added a new dimension to our working relationships.

Co-workers were more willing to reveal vulnerabilities lying beneath polished business personas. According to Microsoft's [2021 Work Trend Index: Annual Report](#), 17 per cent of respondents had cried with a co-worker during difficult moments. This was even higher for industries especially affected by the pandemic such as education (20 per cent) and healthcare (23 per cent). The same study found that these open communications with colleagues helped to create a working environment where people felt more comfortable showing their true selves. Compared to a year earlier, 39 per cent said they were more likely to be their authentic selves at work.

Those who interacted more closely with other members of their team reported stronger working relationships (up 12 per cent), better overall wellbeing (up 9 per cent) and higher productivity (up 23 per cent).

It is clear to see that when we can open up and be comfortable at work, it has benefits for our happiness, the relationships we forge and how well we do our jobs.

Conversely, the opposite is also true, as expressed by one of our Account Managers, Anthony Smith-Wells, in a recent conversation with [Computer Weekly](#). He talks about when he had previously felt unable to express his true self fully at work:

“In the end I started to feel very isolated: my confidence took a dive and my work productivity wasn't far behind it.”

Human-centred leadership

Good managers have long recognised the importance of understanding the individual needs and strengths of their people. They speak with them on a regular basis using a number of different channels, they listen hard and they make appropriate changes. These leaders look to ensure their team are engaged, motivated and supported, knowing this is key if they want to keep them productive – or keep them, full-stop.

Work has inevitably felt more isolated for many people during the pandemic. We have had to do without the impromptu conversations in the office where we get to find out how each other are doing and learn what is going on. We haven't benefited from face-to-face interactions offering shared creativity and problem-solving. Managers are having to maintain connections with their teams without informal and in-person interaction, so they have needed new skills and technology to make sure these relationships remain strong.

It has been particularly hard on people just starting their careers, who haven't experienced in-person onboarding, networking and training. It is important not to underestimate the impact workplace networks can have on productivity. Managers need to double-down on support for employees who are early in their careers, ensuring their ideas are heard, fostering a culture of inclusion, helping them to grow their networks and make connections so they can establish their role in the organisation and thrive.

Businesses have a vested interest in looking after their people – especially now. The number of people quitting their jobs is rising.

Economists are referring to '[the great resignation](#)' where surveys show anywhere from 25 per cent to upwards of 40 per cent of workers are thinking about leaving their jobs.

Many are disconnected or stressed at work because of the pandemic restrictions and feel the need to prioritise their wellbeing. Perhaps they are reviewing their work/life balance, wanting a hybrid working option going forward that isn't on offer with their current employer or maybe even considering a complete career change.

It seems employees are willing to vote with their feet to get the sort of working life they need. A significant exodus presents a potential crisis for businesses that are fighting to get back on their feet after multiple lockdowns. If organisations want to retain a talented and diverse workforce, they need to listen to their people so they can offer in response the kind of flexible working solutions their employees desire.

Are your employees engaged – or ‘just there’?

Your employees may or may not be leaving, but are they actively contributing and immersing themselves in their roles? According to Gallup’s [State of American Workplace report](#), 16 per cent of employees are actively disengaged, 33 per cent are actively engaged and 51 per cent are ‘just there’. This means that a huge 67 per cent of people said they were not actively engaged in performing better. And according to the report, if organisations improve engagement they can become up to 17 per cent more productive. So, what can you do?

Excellent internal communications are essential for creating better engagement, a greater sense of belonging and more team spirit – and can help improve overall feeling about the workplace, employer and colleagues. However, it involves using channels that support listening as well as ‘talking’. Depending on the stage of their lives and individual circumstances, employees will all have different needs. Leaders need to gauge the requirements and be flexible enough to create new models of work that will cater for everyone.

Here are four ways to help re-engage with disconnected workers:

1. Give people personalised benefits

There are some benefits that will be valued across the board, such as additional holiday given for every year worked. However, it might be appropriate to create a range of employee-focused benefits for different demographic groups, allowing a pick ‘n’ mix approach that lets employees choose what is right for them at any given time. Specific perks, such as longer than standard maternity and paternity leave, may help retain people who are planning to start a family, but even these may be more widely appreciated.

Employees will also recognise the positive approach in the company culture, as one that cares about its staff as human beings, with lives and concerns beyond the workplace.

2. Offer flexibility

Businesses that take a flexible approach about when and where their employees can work will reap the benefits in retaining high quality people. Some employees will have missed the daily routine of the workplace and will like coming into a well-designed and ‘buzzy’ office building. For them, being part of a dynamic and stimulating work environment is all part of learning, networking and pursuing a career, and they relish socialising after hours. While others will cherish the opportunity to work from home, at least part of the time, enjoying the quiet space, avoiding the stress, cost and environmental impact of a taxing commute and using the time for the better work/life balance they achieved during lockdown.

It is important in this new hybrid world of work that employers make sure those who have opted to continue to work from home have the tools and support they need. In our [2020/21 Annual Trends Survey](#) 46 per cent of respondents told us that the most important attribute of a leader was giving their people the digital tools to do their job. People who continue to work from home, when some of their colleagues are back in the office, need to feel confident that their achievements and productivity are being noticed and that they will be rewarded with career progression on a par with office-based colleagues.

Many employees say they want the best of both worlds going forwards. According to Microsoft's [2021 Work Trend Index: Annual Report](#), 73 per cent of workers surveyed want flexible/remote work options to continue, while at the same time 67 per cent are craving more in-person time with their teams. To make this possible, 66 per cent of business decision makers are redesigning their physical spaces to better accommodate hybrid work environments – we will look more at this a little later.

At Advanced we had some employees successfully working remotely before the pandemic, and with the proven effectiveness of home working over the last 15 months (plus a reduced number of sick days) it makes complete sense to offer a hybrid model for the future. It's not a 'one-size-fits-all' solution, some people will want to work remotely for almost all the time and others will use our offices on a more regular basis. Using powerful digital tools to help us work collaboratively, wherever people are based, we measure productivity in terms of work quality, not being seen to be busy in the office. Being adaptable is sustainable in the long-term and offering employee-focused work patterns will help to attract and retain diverse talent.

By providing flexible working and the tools people need to do this successfully, organisations are able to hire from a wider talent pool; and employees can extend their career options and possibilities while still being able to prioritise their wellbeing and family needs. James Hallahan, Director of IT & Digital Technology at Hays UK & Ireland sums it up: "Professionals are drawn to working for organisations which are ahead of the curve when it comes to technology. Employers who provide the technology to staff planning to work remotely on a full-time basis will stand out as an employer of choice."

3. Encourage positive change

A company's brand matters – for employees as well as customers and shareholders. These days, issues around the environment, sustainability and governance (ESG) need to be a genuine reflection of an organisation's commitment to these principles. People want to work for a brand they can be proud of and which they see representing their own values.

Transparency in supply chain, recycling and sustainability practices, along with support for relevant good causes, will help with re-engaging employees who are seeking a more meaningful connection with their employer and more passion and motivation for how they spend their days.

4. Celebrate cultural differences

When people see others like themselves in senior roles, it supports expectations for their own career progression and enables them to see a future for themselves within the organisation. Gender pay gap reporting is already mandatory, but some organisations are taking this further and exploring the diversity pay gap to reveal patterns about where women, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ people, black and other ethnic minorities are represented at different levels. Understanding current structures is the first step in implementing new and creative ways to drive positive change. Engaging with the workforce as part of this investigation offers reassurance to everybody that the organisation is serious about establishing meaningful diversity and inclusion and can help to shape policies that really matter to their own employees.



Supporting wellbeing in the workplace

It seems hardly surprising that people's wellbeing has become a key focus during the pandemic. The threat of Covid-19, the accompanying anxieties, juggle of responsibilities and huge lifestyle changes have had an impact. The CIPD's 2021 [Health and Wellbeing at Work Survey Report](#) found that more than 80 per cent of organisations were concerned about the impact of Covid-19 on employees' mental health. According to Microsoft's [2021 Work Trend Index: Annual Report](#), 54 per cent of employees feel overworked and 39 per cent feel exhausted. And Asana's [Anatomy of Work Index](#) found that 71 per cent of workers they spoke to experienced burnout in 2020.

Employers need to provide a holistic framework of support for their people's physical and mental wellbeing. They may want to consider 'wellness days' on top of holiday and sick leave, or invest in increased access to counselling, therapy, occupational health services or employee assistance programmes.

Managers need to be able to have sensitive conversations with their people so that help can be provided when needed. Encouraging good health and wellbeing is fundamental to employee engagement and performance.

Why multi-tasking is not the answer

It used to be that multi-taskers were lauded as eminently capable and highly efficient. It was something many aspired to. But thinking on this is changing, as the benefits of focus, clarity and simplicity become clear.

Multi-tasking may seem like a good way to get lots of things done quickly, but research shows that our brains aren't very good at handling a number of things at once. What you are doing is quickly shifting your attention from one thing to another, switching your focus, getting distracted and slowing your thinking down, impairing your cognitive ability. This phenomenon is called 'attention residue'.

Some researchers, such as [Meyer, Evans and Rubenstein](#), suggest that multi-tasking actually reduces productivity by up to 40 per cent. And Stanford University researcher, Clifford Nass, found [heavy multi-taskers fared worse](#) at distinguishing relevant information from irrelevant details.

It seems that 98 per cent of the population don't multi-task very well. Trying to create an email while listening to a conference call and keeping an eye on the dog means that your mind is moving back and forth all the time. This isn't efficient, because every time we do it our brain has to refocus on what it needs to do next.

Multi-tasking is also pretty stressful – it usually feels quite frantic and overwhelming. So, how can businesses help their people to overcome the need for multi-tasking?

1. Actively assess whether each meeting is necessary or something you are just doing as a default. Could the topic be better handled via email or a Team channel. Is there a need to bring people together to discuss this issue? By reducing the number of meetings you are giving employees more flexibility in structuring their day and freeing up more time to do focused work and reduce 'meeting fatigue'.
2. Cultivate a culture where people are allowed to put aside 'focus time'. Chunks of time, preferably at least two hours long, where people can get deeper into important and complex tasks. According to [Clockwise](#): 'It's in those periods that most workers get the majority of their real work done'.
3. Ensure breaks are encouraged, it is too easy to stay seated at a desk for hours. As Dr Donohue founder of The Digital Wellness Centre states: "You need to make a quiet space in your day to allow your brain to distil the constant flow of information. We all have ideas; the key is giving our brains some time and space to form them."
4. Provide your people with technology that helps to simplify their lives, carries out repetitive tasks for them and enables them to be more productive. Avoid overwhelming them with inefficient software that is distracting or requires time-consuming shifting from one solution to another – more on this later.

Staying productive in the new hybrid world of work

As organisations prepare for a return to the office, important decisions are being made. Will it be a rush to try and reclaim 'normal' and revert to pre-pandemic routines? Or will your business emulate the likes of Google and offer permanent remote working? Many are forging a middle path of hybrid working, taking the best from what remote working can offer and also including some time in the office but perhaps in a more collaborative and team-centred way to make the most of the face-to-face contact people have been missing.

The smart organisations will be surveying their employees, asking how they want to work, what is important to them, what will aid their productivity and help support their needs. Individual flexibility is key wherever possible as everyone's circumstances will differ. Where is it best for people to do focused work? What about when they want to be collaborative? There are big risks in not asking these questions - some people will take this opportunity to find an employer who will.

Danny Harmer, Chief People Officer at Aviva, told the [BBC](#) in its recent survey that 95 per cent of Aviva's workers said they would like to be able to spend some of their time working flexibly and remotely in different locations. But she said the company had to be mindful that many staff appreciate being in an office, such as those who live alone or do not have a suitable place to work. Recruitment firm Adecco commented:

“Rather than having pre-set rules, we are encouraging our leaders to engage with colleagues to implement strategies that work for their business.”

Thanks to digital technology, we no longer rely on our workplaces to ensure connection and to build social capital, but physical space will still be important. We are social animals and sometimes it really helps to get together, bounce ideas off one another, experience each other's energy and increase motivation. Moving forward, office spaces need to accommodate this.

In Matthew Syed's book 'The Power of Diverse Thinking' he discusses an experiment conducted by Craig Knight and Alex Haslam. They placed some people in standardised workplaces (called 'lean') and others in a workplace ('enriched') that had prints on the walls and plants on the desks. In this enriched group, performance improved by 15 per cent. When they then took a third group and let them personalise their working space ('empowered'), productivity soared by 30 per cent. Haslam comments: "Not only does office design determine whether people's backs ache, it has the potential to affect how much they accomplish, how much initiative they take and their overall professional satisfaction... By paying more attention to employees' needs, they can boost wellbeing and productivity at minimal cost." People prefer humanised spaces, are empowered by choice and do well when they can express themselves - all important things to remember when reinventing our working environments.

Of course, key to a successful return to the office space is ensuring that everyone feels comfortable and safe. Some people may be anxious about going back, and employers need to build trust that they will take care of their employees' mental and physical wellbeing. Social distancing, relevant signage and PPE may continue to play a part in this, and businesses can use workflows around things such as vaccine status, desk booking or self-isolation procedures. As staff take the first tentative steps back into the office, practical considerations need to have been fully resolved to ensure they will be able to embrace the return to these physical spaces and maximise the opportunities they present.



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BBC recent survey

Ensuring technology is on our side

Technology is designed to make our lives easier. And in our new 'remote culture' we have an even greater reliance on it as we all spend more time online. However, there are many instances when it brings obstacles, complications and countless distractions. According to [Clockwise](#), 53 per cent of employees waste at least one hour every day dealing with distractions.

Technology can be a time thief when tools deployed to make a difference leave employees in a constant state of ineffective multi-tasking as more and more apps are layered on top of each other. Asana's [Anatomy of Work Index](#) states:

"Amid the race to stay connected across tools, workers switch between 10 apps 25 times per day – fragmenting communication and reducing efficiency."

We don't want the 'virtual tail' wagging the living daylight out of the dog and showing no sign of slowing up. We should be running the technology, not the other way round.

Technology used right creates enormous possibility. After all, where would organisations have been without digital technology for the last 15 months? From finance to healthcare, education to legal practice, the ability to work remotely has meant that we have been able to provide and use services while still practising social distance.



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[Clockwise](#)

In our 2020/21 [Annual Trends Survey](#), 59 per cent of respondents said Cloud software and technology was a spending priority in the next year. Digital transformation has accelerated - we have seen five years of Cloud adoption squeezed into a few months as businesses have moved away from the limits of legacy on-premise solutions. This has enabled them to deliver effective communication channels, real-time information and streamlined online processes – engaging and empowering employees, wherever they are working. It has had positive effects on collaboration, communication and productivity. There's no going back.

As well as enabling vital remote working, technology has increasingly driven productivity by delivering the benefits of automation. Eliminating many manual or monotonous tasks, it has also reduced the risk of errors. The more automated a business becomes, the more time is freed up to focus on responding to the needs of its people, its customers and their changing priorities. Employees have increased space to focus on value-add activities and undertake work that is interesting and rewarding. They also have more opportunity to upskill and learn new things - which will ultimately shape the workforce of the future.

An example of this in action is the software that GPs can now use with Artificial Intelligence (AI) capabilities to process clinical correspondence in primary care. The AI automatically reads patient letters and only shows them to GPs when there is a need for further action.

It means that GPs can spend more time on what they've spent years training to do – consulting with patients and providing the best possible care.

Business systems must keep up with the pace of change, be highly configurable and flexible. They should be delivered within open platforms and be fully interoperable with partners and competitors' systems through APIs. It is important they are naturally user-centric and allow for a personalised user experience that works for each individual. For example, applets that are relevant to an employee's role or the systems they use frequently should be on a personalised virtual desk.

They should also be designed so users can maximise the value from the system, exploiting all the functionality. At Advanced we use analytics tools that monitor our user journeys within our applications so we can intervene and prompt customers to make more productive use of the software and its features.

Too often teams can get bogged down in the complexities of complicated technology and processes, or distracted by unnecessary notifications and prompts. It is important to remove barriers and blockers that stop employees from making a difference every day. Introduce single sign-ons and give teams the tools they need for the jobs they do - in a simple and personalised way.

Free up your employees to focus on key goals and to create possibilities. Get people back to doing what delivers real value to your business and its customers.

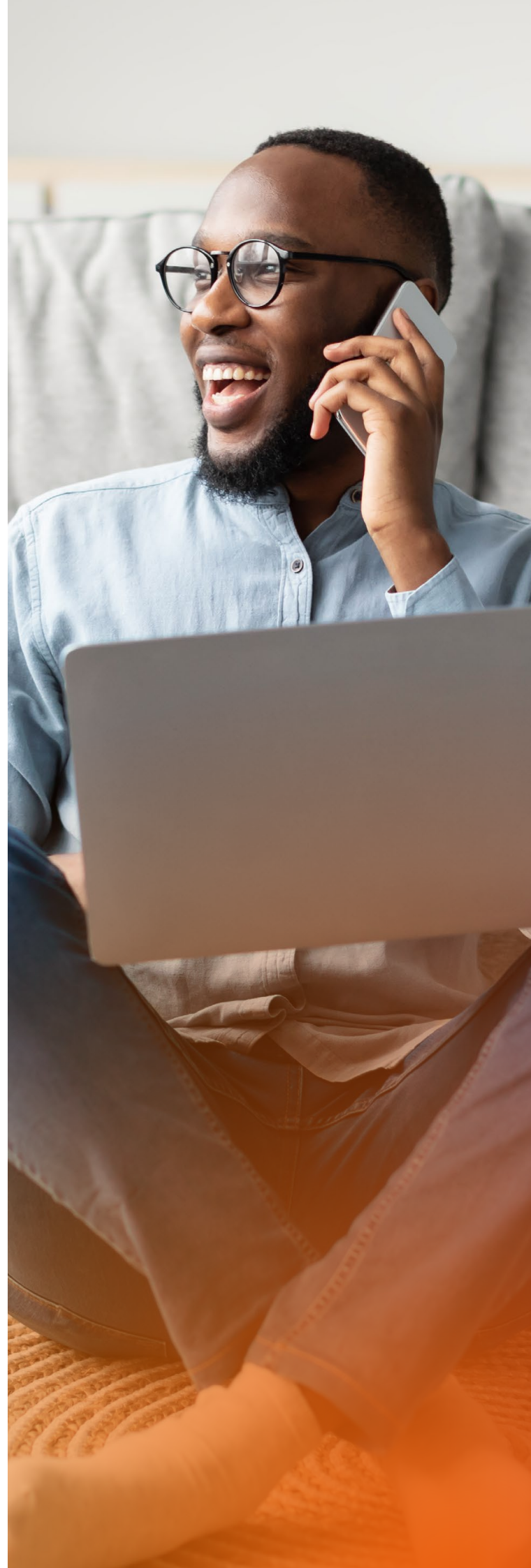
The power of doing less

According to ADP Research Institute's [People at Work 2021: A Global Workforce View](#) workload has been increasing. Fears around job security have compelled 76 per cent of workers to take on extra tasks or assume a heavier workload during the pandemic. Unpaid overtime has soared to 9.2 hours per week on average.

Maximising productivity is key. But the way we do this is changing. Let's focus on how we can optimise 'the power of doing less' so that we can, in fact, achieve more.

Less multi-tasking, fewer meetings and trips to the office, no unnecessary distractions and demands, plus the removal of inefficient systems and menial tasks.

This will give us the space we all need to thrive so that there can be more creativity, greater fulfilment, increased wellbeing – and many big ideas!



Doing less, empowers possibility

Technology is designed to make our lives easier, right? But it can bring countless distractions and obstacles, meaning we're in a constant state of ineffective multi-tasking. At Advanced, our vision is to wake up the world to the power of doing less. Because doing less, empowers possibility.

[Find out more](#)



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