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No Pane, No Gain: The Benefits of Windowed Working

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Paul McDonald • Oct. 21, 2020



Times have certainly changed from working traditional 9-to-5 hours — and were changing even before the pandemic hit. Many of us have been accustomed to taking work home for years, using cloud services to log in remotely and swiping through our phones to check business emails on the go.

Modern technology makes it easy to work away from the office. The challenge is finding a daily routine that strikes a sustainable work-life balance. This issue is more pressing in the age of COVID-19. Shelter-in-place orders and the ongoing risk of infection have caused many firms to temporarily shutter offices and [adopt remote working](#). Professionals have found themselves juggling all kinds of responsibilities, from home-schooling kids to caring for sick or vulnerable relatives.

One way to meet these challenges is to reorganize your workweek. And for many accountants, that means windowed work.

What is windowed work?

Windowed work means breaking up your business day into two or three separate time slots, or windows. Traditionally, this hasn't been possible. When people have a long commute to the office, it's not practical to work multiple daily shifts.

But when you're working from home, this pattern makes more sense. Someone with commitments like childcare can benefit enormously from breaking their day into discrete windows. For example:

- Morning window: 7-10 a.m.
- Midday window: 12-3 p.m.
- Evening window: 6-8 p.m.

This kind of flexibility allows you to focus on work when you're at your most productive and least distracted. It also enables you to dedicate parts of your day to personal commitments.

Windowed work has taken off recently, with [79% of employers now offering flexible daily scheduling](#), according to a recent survey from global staffing firm Robert Half. And the results are positive: 73% of employees said windowed work has improved their productivity.

Windowed work is a great deal for employers and employees alike, if managed correctly. Here are a few areas to consider when switching to more flexible scheduling.

Know your best hours

Everyone has their own daily rhythms. Often, this is defined by external factors. For instance, if your kids are home learning over Zoom, school hours may create frequent distractions.

You also have your own internal rhythms. There are certain times of day when you're naturally more focused, creative and productive. If you leverage these power hours, you'll be at your best when working.

Plan around essential times

Service continuity is the biggest challenge in windowed work. Clients expect you to be there during office hours to answer calls and respond to emails. Work with your manager and colleagues to ensure someone is always available to cover for you during office hours.

A related challenge is that many of the people you need to reach out to still work 9-to-5. You need to contact clients, tax authorities, service providers and other third parties with urgent queries, and that's difficult outside of working hours. The best approach is to schedule time-critical work for office hours so you can get answers when you need them.

Talk about expectations

What does your new windowed schedule mean for you, your team and your boss? If your first window ends at 9 a.m., is that a hard deadline, or can you work until 9:15? Can those reports wait until your evening window, or does someone need them sooner?

Good communication is the not-so-secret sauce of windowed work. Speak with your supervisor about guidelines, including their expectations for your productivity within each window. Next, talk to your colleagues to help make sure everyone's schedules sync up.

You should also be upfront with regular clients about your new work routine. It could reflect poorly on you and your firm if a client hears about your new hours for the first time from an email autoreply directing them to a colleague. When discussing your new schedule with clients, emphasize how it will be good for them, too. For example, if you work an evening window, you'll now be able to answer queries that come after hours the same day rather than the following morning.

Have a focus for each window

Windows can include short, focused bursts of productivity if you plan them correctly. The best approach is to group tasks as much as possible so each window concentrates on one or two types of things. A typical schedule might look like this:

- Early-morning window: client reports
- Daytime window — first half: phone calls and emails
- Daytime window — second half: meetings and strategy
- Evening window: analysis and planning

If you know what you're going to focus on in each window, you don't have to spend time prioritizing. Instead, you can get straight to work.

Plan ahead for busy times

Every practice faces schedule-busting events. Whether it's **tax season**, month-end close or meeting a client deadline, there are times when you simply have to keep going until the work is done.

These are what you might call known unknowns — you can't create a precise schedule for them, but you know they're coming. As such, you can build a certain degree of flexibility into your windowed schedule. Be clear about what each window means to you. For example, you may need to stop work at precisely 3 p.m. to focus on your kids. But perhaps you can extend your evening window to allow for some overflow.

The future is windowed

Work practices have long been evolving, but it's clear that the pandemic has created new challenges and opportunities for employers and workers.

Business leaders are trying to do more with less, and this will remain the case so long as the economic outlook is uncertain. Employees, meanwhile, are increasingly focused on maintaining a good work-life balance. This is especially true of Generation Z and younger millennials, where only 22% said they prefer working 9-to-5.

Windowed work isn't a cure-all, but it offers benefits for both sides. Employers get the maximum productivity from each team member, while team members have

greater flexibility to juggle responsibilities. If handled right, it's a win-win for everyone.

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