4 Pathways to Productivity: A Guide for Business Leaders

Executive Summary

It's 8 am on Monday morning. Your calendar is filled with back-to-back meetings, your inbox overflowing with requests. Meanwhile, your team messaging platform is pinging off the hook. You're juggling it all while trying to focus on the new major initiative. It makes you question:

What does productivity mean to you as a business leader? To your team? To your organization at large?

For a framework to answer these questions, we interviewed **Carrie Skowronski, CEO at Leadology,** and **Christina Janzer, Senior Vice President of Research & Analytics at Slack,** on defining, measuring, and achieving productivity. Their research and experience-based insights offer a roadmap for leaders eager to transform organizational productivity and build higher-performing, happier teams.

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Defining productivity

Productivity is a crucial measure of business performance and success—but often an ambiguous term that means something different to every team and team member. Alignment on the definition of productivity and how it should be measured begins at the top, with clear expectations and goals laid out by leadership.

For Carrie at Leadology, quality of work is a driving factor for productivity:

"Productivity is not only about crushing to-do lists—but, more importantly, creating high-quality work that meets team objectives and advances organizational goals."

Carrie Skowronski

For Christina at Slack, a team can only accomplish meaningful work if they know what they're working towards and how to get there:

"Productivity is how effectively a team works together to create meaningful results. But everyone has to be in agreement about how they're going to do this—which requires transparency and consistent communication across your organization and at the departmental level."

Christina Janzer

The two agree this can look different across teams within an organization. For example, a research team's focus might be delivering a certain number of reports every quarter. For a sales team, it's meeting or beating a quota for deals closed.

By providing a clear definition of what productivity specifically means to your team, employees are empowered to:

– Build better products

– Meet more sales goals

– Complete tasks faster

– Use fewer resources

– Mitigate risk more effectively

– Find opportunities to cut costs

– Further develop skills and knowledge

Clear communications about what productivity means creates ripples through an organization, translating to better mental wellness, job satisfaction, and engagement. Research even shows that employee mental wellness is directly related to creativity and innovation at work.[1] In other words:

Productive teams aren't just keeping up or getting the bare minimum done. They're go-getters, innovators, and groundbreakers—with the bandwidth and mental capacity to go above and beyond, think proactively about new solutions, and turbocharge the growth of your organization.

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1 Bloomberg Law, "Workplace Mental Wellness Leads to Innovation and Productivity."

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Common obstacles business leaders face when trying to optimize productivity

Regardless of your industry, measuring productivity at the organizational level is challenging. It also comes with a lot of pressure:

"71% of business leaders reported feeling overwhelming pressure from company management to squeeze more productivity out of their teams."

Slack State of Work survey

Without alignment about what outcomes you want productivity to drive, business leaders risk focusing on inputs like total emails sent, hours worked, or time online—rather than tracking outputs of truly meaningful work.

"60% of executives reported tracking activity metrics [including number of hours worked, emails sent, etc]."

Slack State of Work survey

By exclusively focusing on inputs, business leaders lose sense of the work that materially advances organizational goals, mistaking "being busy" with "impactful productivity."

Other common productivity roadblocks that leaders can fall victim to include:

- **Taking on too much:** Rather than relying on their team's expertise and delegating tasks effectively, leaders may overload themselves with work that they feel only they are equipped to complete.
- **Lack of clear communication:** While C-suite execs and other stakeholders may have a clear understanding of organizational goals, it's important to disseminate information about what needs to be achieved down through management layers onto every employee.
- **Lack of motivation:** Beyond clarity on what, everyone also needs to understand the why. Carrie notes that Millenials and Gen Z, in particular, have no tolerance for ambiguity. Conversations about the why are critical to their productivity.
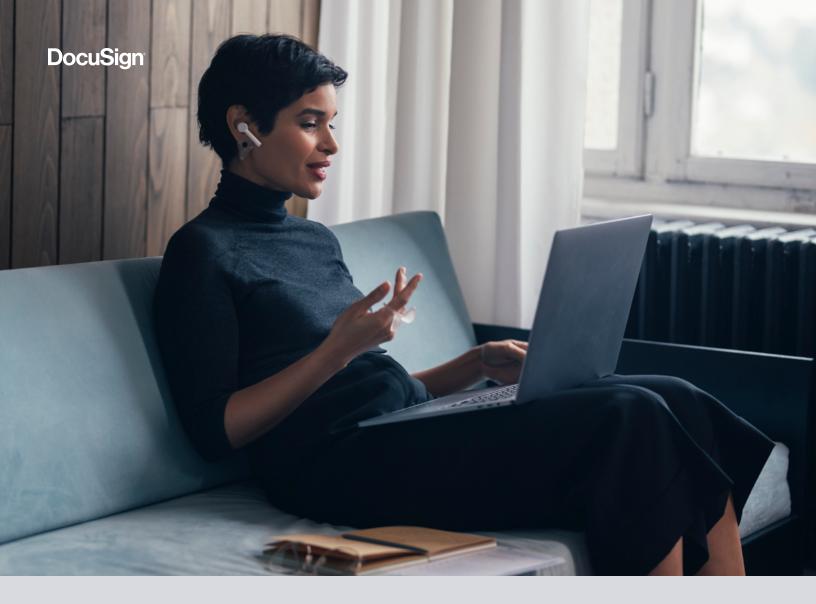
Clouded by performative tasks, employees are pulled away from the most meaningful and strategic work they were hired to do.

"70% of change efforts fail because of lack of communication."

McKinsey

"Employees spend 32% of their time on performative work, rather than high-quality tasks that further business objectives."

Slack State of Work survey

4 Proven Pathways to Productivity

Productive teams aren't born overnight. In fact, they are often a work in progress: consistently reevaluating their goals, communicating across teams, and finding opportunities to streamline processes and innovate.

Here, we explore four key opportunities to optimize productivity as an organization—based on the research and in-the-field experience from Carrie and Christina.

1/ Introduce a framework for tracking outputs

As noted earlier, building productive teams begins with clearly defined objectives. Organizations need to consider three central questions: What goals do we want to accomplish? How are we going to achieve them? When is our time frame? With the big picture in place, you can get more granular about department and employee-specific goals.

"Productivity looks different depending on the team, time of year, and goals of your greater organization."

Christina Janzer

Both Carrie and Christina recognize that one size does not fit all when it comes to measuring productivity. And they are in resounding agreement that outputs are the better way to evaluate productivity. They recommend several options for tracking outputs. In other words, companies don't have to limit themselves to just one method as some are internal-facing and others external:

– Leverage models like Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) or Salesforce's Vision, Values, Methods, Obstacles, and Measures (V2MOMs), which offer strategic planning and goal-setting frameworks to help employees stay focused on shared objectives.

– Use collaboration and project management tools or HR software to capture notes from 1:1s and gain insight into what employees are accomplishing.

– Track client feedback to gauge their satisfaction with products and services.

– Evaluate Net Promoter Scores (NPS).

– Conduct employee surveys to gauge a team's understanding of org goals, job satisfaction, and engagement.

– Create a strategic recognition program that recognizes the important work teams are doing. Don't just focus on what went right—acknowledge projects that failed fast, how teams pivoted, and the major lessons learned as a result.

2/ Engage with employees and strengthen relationships

Engaged employees are more productive—period. **Transparency** and **two-way conversations** between company leaders and employees are foundational to a thriving company culture.

"One third of employees say staying aligned on company goals is a big hurdle for productivity."

Slack State of Work survey

If people aren't motivated by the work they're doing and why they're doing it, their productivity plummets—alongside job satisfaction, engagement, and retention. Research from Gallup shows that:

– **49%** of employees report that three months before they left their job, their managers weren't engaging in conversations about job satisfaction

– **36%** of employees say their manager could have done something to prevent them from quitting

– Turnover costs **$22B a year**[2]

For business leaders, sharing information on developments within the company, how strategy is shifting, and more is key. In practical terms it means including your people in the conversation, giving them space to contribute ideas, demonstrating feedback leads to results, and supporting their personal growth and talent development.[3]

"When there is trust, the work accelerates. This begins with meaningful conversations—asking employees for their feedback and really listening when they give it. Without this engagement, employees are unsatisfied and more likely to quit."

Carrie Skowronski

2 Gallup, "The Secret Weapon to Enhance Your Culture."
3 DocuSign, "Do the Work of Your Life: Inside the Talent Development Team at DocuSign."

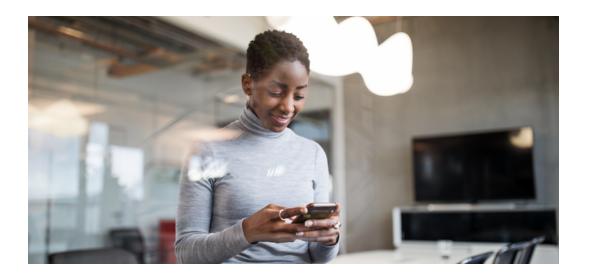It can be as simple as asking your employees on a regular basis how they feel about the work they're doing:

– What's going well?

– What needs improvement?

– Is there anything blocking you from doing your best?

"We all want to feel a sense of purpose and contribution. It's on leaders to help their people leverage their strengths and expertise while also motivating them to reach their full potential."

Christina Janzer

Other opportunities for leaders to enhance communication and build trust among teams include:

– Training managers to have future-focused convos with team members. Discuss roles and expectations frequently so employees are clear on what is expected of them both in terms of outputs and behavior.

– Holding regular weekly touchbases to give employees a voice. Encourage people to share two things that are going well and two opportunities for improvement.

– Creating an environment of psychological safety. In doing so, employees feel empowered to be authentic about what they need to do their jobs better.

3/ Be more intentional about meetings

Between the steady flurry of emails, messaging platforms, and meetings, teams are inundated with distractions. And these distractions are costly—studies show that U.S. businesses lose $37 billion a year to unnecessary meetings.[4]

With so much on the line, business leaders need to reconsider why they're holding meetings and how much value they actually have.

The solution to this roadblock can be as simple as asking, for example, "Does this need to be a live meeting with 20 people or can people be updated via a channel with an asynchronous meeting?"

This intentionality gives employees back time for meaningful work, and eliminates unnecessary obstacles to productivity that break their focus during the work day.

"43% of meetings could be eliminated with no adverse consequences."

Slack research

For this reason, some companies have implemented "Deep Focus" time where employees are encouraged to silence their notifications from email and other platforms to really dive into their projects.

While there are times during the day when they are expected to be available to offer feedback and collaborate with their team, "Deep Focus" time, as the name implies, is theirs to concentrate. Most importantly, this "Deep Focus" time should align with the outcomes and outputs your company has prioritized.

4 Jell, "Meeting Cost: The Financial Value of Productive Meetings."

4/ Invest in AI, automation, and integration

"Those who use automations at work estimate saving an average of 3.6 hours a week—or roughly one full work month a year."

Slack research

You hire the best of the best for their skills, creativity, proactive attitude, and more. However, many employees spend the majority of their work day on repetitive, performative tasks and unnecessary busy work—rather than the meaningful work they were handpicked to do.

Part of the problem here is that many organizations aren't using the tools available to them effectively—and as a result they're leaning on their people instead. In a DocuSign survey of sales, HR, legal and procurement professionals, **over 90% of these teams** felt that their existing software wasn't being used to full capacity; the top reason being a lack of integration with other tools and systems.

Investing in automation, AI, and integrations can unlock productivity and minimize repetitive tasks, freeing up your staff to focus on what matters most to your business.

"Employees who have adopted AI at work are 90% more likely to report high productivity—and yet only 27% of companies are actively investing in AI to drive results."

Slack research

Not only are employees able to focus on the work assigned to them in their role, but they're also freed up to propose new solutions and think outside of the box:

"Eliminating tedious tasks via automation and AI enables employees to lean into learning and growth when they have the time. When you take tedious, mundane tasks off someone's plate, they can get more creative. They can innovate further."

Carrie Skowronski

Biggest benefits of using automations

62%	**44%**	**36%**
Achieve more with less time and fewer resources	Drive more business impact	Create a better work-life balance

Source: Slack

Often companies struggle with whether automation initiatives should come from the departments themselves or from their IT team. Christina at Slack recommends a hybrid solution.

Empower employees to explore what automation tools on the market can resolve their pain points, considering they are the people closest to these challenges. IT personnel may not be close enough to identify the best tool, but they may be able to assist with contracts and implementation. What's more, as you introduce and try out new automation and AI, you understand its benefits and can gauge its impact.

Christina adds, "Incentivize individual contributors to suggest ways we can all be more productive. How we work together is everyone's job."

A more productive future awaits

The key to clearing a pathway for productivity? Removing the obstacles in your team's way so they can make more profound contributions. As Carrie, who has spent over 30 years in people development notes, "Leaders need to ruthlessly prioritize the most important tasks, not be a bottleneck of indecision, and stop piling on all the little things."

"Helping people work in their zone of genius is one of the best ways to boost productivity. Setting them up to do things with ease, enjoyment, and excellence is critical. In fact, those people are 6x more engaged and up to 20% more productive."

Carrie Skowronski

[Source](#)

This requires a commitment from all levels of management to:

– Identify employee pain points and challenges for getting work done

– Explore new tools and put resources behind org-wide education and utilization

– Recognize that the pathway to productivity will be filled with trial and error

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"The businesses that find the most success and get ahead are committed to investing in innovative tech, experimenting with new solutions, and keeping an open mind as an organization. The most successful teams know how to work together—and recognize it's the biggest asset they have as a company."

Christina Janzer

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