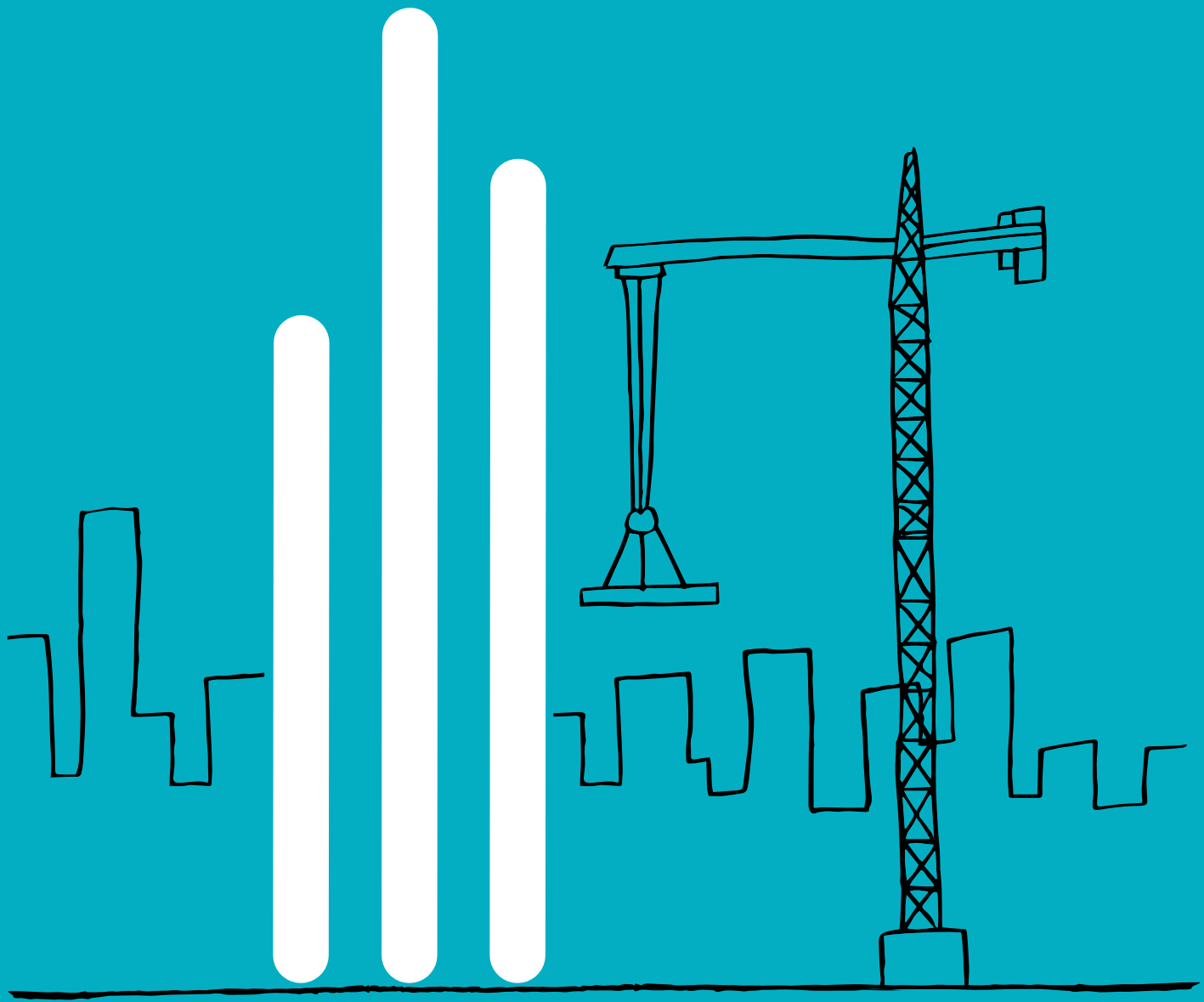
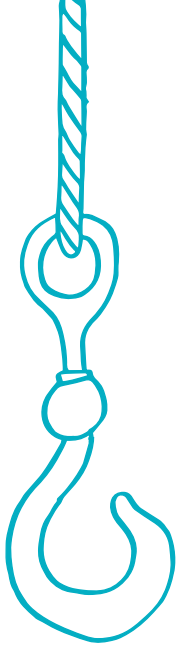


How We Operate

5 collaboration trends that are impacting COOs and their organizations.

KARBON



How We Operate

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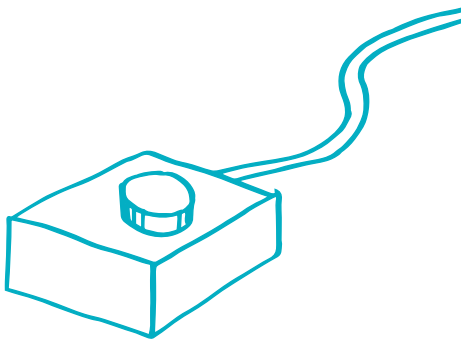
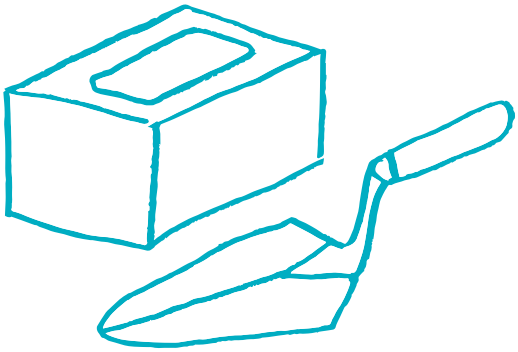




Introduction.

COOs, operations, and why collaboration matters.

Few roles are as ambiguous as that of the Chief Operating Officer (COO). The job varies greatly between industries and companies, and as the saying goes—the only real consensus on what a COO does is that there is no consensus.

Perhaps because there is no clear playbook for you to follow, you find yourself needing to be across *everything*.

You're constantly fixing things, breaking down functional and geographical silos, and identifying ways to drive efficiencies and transfer knowledge more effectively. Hiring, selling, marketing, managing, strategizing, mentoring, listening—not to mention all the jobs that fall under no other person or department—at different times you've done it all.

As opposed to the CEO, your job is primarily internal facing. Which is why perhaps no other factor is as critical to your success as effective collaboration. It is your job to be involved with almost every function and serve as the integrator between different activities across the business. You need to work with your CEO, your immediate team, other managers, departments, and be on top of staff across the organization.

So while the role of COO is an amorphous one, it is incredibly vital to the health and future success of your business. And to do it well, you need an understanding of the state of workplace collaboration today, and the trends that are impacting what it looks like tomorrow.

The mega-trend shaping workplace collaboration for good

Not so long ago, the 'workplace' consisted of colleagues you saw face-to-face and spoke with in-person most days. Phone calls were about as remote as things got.

Haven't things changed.

Face-to-face communication has been replaced. First with email, then increasing internet speeds, the rise of smart devices, and a plethora of new communication mediums including instant messenger, video calls and in-app notifications.

What worked well enough years ago is likely not the best solution today. Communication is faster, systems are more powerful and the traditional office is giving way to dispersed, cross-functional teams. Few roles have been impacted by this disruption more than the COO.

The idea of collaboration in the workplace is hardly new—but as technologies have evolved, the way in which collaboration happens has evolved too. And every industry has felt this shift.

Somewhere along the road, 9-to-5 turned into 24/7. We now find ourselves living and working in an *always-on economy*. And this, is the mega-trend that is shaping everything.

We have seen an explosion of SaaS applications of every type and in every crevice of our world. When you combine this with the proliferation of smart devices, every employee is now more connected than ever to their work environment and colleagues. At every hour of the day.

In some way, this always-on economy drives the five key trends revealed in this report. This is shaping how people interact, communicate, get things done together, and how COOs and operations teams fit amongst all of it

Each of these trends prompt clear actions—critical takeaways that you can take on board and implement to ensure your organization runs more effectively and efficiently. Because if you can foresee the direction we are heading in today and react, you will succeed tomorrow—innovative business collaboration techniques improve productivity across teams by **20 to 30%**.

These trends are based on hundreds of conversations with other COOs, executives and workers, research from numerous reviewed sources, and input and real-life anecdotes from many of the experts you will see quoted in here.

So, let's explore what is next in the way your business collaborates, how this will impact your day-to-day as a COO, and most importantly, what you should do about it.

Distributed work, not remote work.

To settle the debate of remote work and its effectiveness, a reframing is needed.

Remote work is not new. It's been on a steady rise over the past number of years, to the point where **more than one third** of the global workforce are located away from the office at least one day a week. Yet, many businesses only offer this option reluctantly, or still remain sternly opposed it. The number one objection is that the same level of collaboration is just not possible compared to in-person. It's time to dispel that myth, and the solution lies in how it is framed. It's not remote work—it's distributed work.

What it's about.

If we were ranking the top trends that have shaped the last century, globalization would be near the top. This shrinking of our borders has resulted in an expansion of the workplace—both in terms of where work is delivered, and where work can be performed.

For many, a 'remote worker' evokes visions of a solo contributor—headphones on, typing away at their keyboard, disconnected from where the majority of work being done is carried out. But drop into almost any high-output office filled with knowledge workers, and things don't look all that different.

Even in the most innovative companies, people don't huddle around a whiteboard all day spitting out ideas and brainstorming the next big move that will change the game for them. Rather, rows of employers sit with eyes on the screen, most with headphones on disconnecting them from what's physically around them. The majority of internal communication is carried out over email or instant messaging.

Yet these same workplaces that run almost exclusively on electronic communication still expect the majority of employees to co-locate in the same building every day. This is despite rising house prices and living expenses in the large metropolitan cities, not to mention the increased cost to run a physical office and infrastructure that is struggling to keep up as populations rise. The work commute that consumes residents of large cities appears to be a terrible waste of time to those who see geographic placement as entirely by choice rather than necessity.

Yes, collaboration is still vital, but today, critical knowledge is written down rather than passed orally. Effective online collaboration—and the tools that enable this have become more important than co-location is.

Even in companies that do not provide remote work options, this fact stands.

Expectations of employees continue to evolve. The younger generations expect that their commitment to work is co-joined with their lifestyle. Intercontinental travel with partners or colleagues is just as common as conferences or sales trips of days gone by. The merging, rather than the balance, of work and life has progressed dramatically over the last decade.

Even the most traditionally-minded employer is being forced to adapt. The fact is, almost every workplace is distributed in some way.

The workplaces that succeed tomorrow will enable effective collaboration equally amongst staff who sit next to one another, and those who sit on opposite sides of the globe. They will also be workplaces that are in a position to harness the talents of people all over the world, not just those within a physical commute.

As it is in any major shift, the way change is framed is pivotal. And for the remote workforce to stop being thought of as a novelty, it needs to make way for the distributed workforce.

> **As more companies tap into the talent of a distributed, global workforce, they will need to employ the obvious, improved technology. A distributed workforce will also put pressure on leaders to ensure that business and customer goals are extremely clear, making prioritization and communication even more important facets of leadership than they are today.**

Kira Wampler — CEO, Art.com

What's next and what you can do about it.

Today, **60% of companies** offer their employees telecommuting opportunities. If your team does not have the flexibility to work away from the office, even some of the time, that needs to change. **Research consistently finds** that flexible work-from-home opportunities play a major role in an employee's decision to take or leave a job.

Distributed working doesn't simply mean looking internationally for your next employee (although it does mean that you won't be constrained by geographical borders when searching for talent).

Nor does it mean working independently—it should still involve teams working closely together (perhaps not in the physical sense). Being able to **collaborate with your distributed workforce** is vital to ensuring effective productivity.

But something that distributed work does require: deliberate operational and cultural change. And there is no person better-equipped to instill this change than the COO.

You should be more purposeful in how and when you communicate with distributed team members, and tailor this to suit the individual. A 30-minute check-in with each person every day is not necessary, but connecting regularly through video meetings, phone calls, instant messaging will help enable trust and accountability.

To succeed, a distributed workplace needs to develop habits that will shape the way you work as a team. These should include less asynchronous communication, shorter and fewer meetings, greater visibility within and outside the company (everything should be public by default), more recorded materials and fewer interruptions.

Company culture is about the actions you take, the trust and values you share, and how your treat one another. Proximity isn't necessary to make this strong.

With advancements in technology, it's never been easier to communicate and collaborate with your team from anywhere at any time. Just remember that they are distributed, not remote.

> **The most successful companies I've been a part of were excellent at working across multiple locations and hubs, engaged a broader set of talent than you can find in any one city, and worked hard to be closer to customers around the world. To do this well, take time to articulate a team mission and shared values—not just at the company level, at the team level—travel regularly, invest in team building, and always use video.**

Karen Peacock — COO, Intercom

Collaborative intelligence.

To realize the potential of new technologies, COOs and machines must work together.

There is still a lot of unknown and for some, unease, around new technologies that have surfaced over the past decade or more. Automation, artificial intelligence, machine learning, robotics, big data analytics, blockchain and other innovations can stir a range of different reactions. Whatever your view, the potential impact on your industry cannot be underestimated. And the businesses that benefit most in the short term will be those who adapt, innovate, and realize that workplace collaboration must extend beyond the human race. Who better to lead the charge than the COO?

What it's about.

Bring up a new technology in conversation and you will usually provoke one of three responses.

Some dismiss it as a buzzword—unimportant, a passing fad, something that will fade into obscurity.

For others, it strikes fear—that jobs will be replaced, humans are at risk, even that it is our **biggest existential threat**.

While some respond in excitement—about how the world can be revolutionized, our lives made incredibly easier, the sheer potential for what might be possible.

None of these responses are unfounded, however, the undeniable fact is that right before us, we are seeing these new technologies transform entire industries. They are shifting the required skills for workers in those industries, the tasks that they carry out, and their entire job.

Our prediction, in the short to mid-term at least, is that this technology will continue to radically alter how work gets done and who does it. Its largest impact, however, will be how it complements and enhances what humans are capable of, not replacing them.

Humans and machines need to collaborate, because what comes naturally to one does not come naturally to the other. People for example, excel at skills that machines have not mastered such as leadership, teamwork, creativity, and social skills. Machines on the other hand, are far more advanced at speed, scalability, and quantitative analysis.

Business requires both kinds of capabilities, and those who are benefitting the most from new technologies have realized this. Companies who invest in human and machine collaboration are able to create outcomes that are **two to six times better** than those that focus on machine or human alone.

BMW for example, found that teams consisting of humans and robots working together were about **85% more productive** than their old assembly line process, where they worked on separate sides of the factory.

Meanwhile, Qantas expects to **save $40 million a year** thanks to a flight planning program built in collaboration with the Australian Centre for Field Robotics. The program takes into account wind patterns, varying altitudes, flight speeds and flight paths that would never occur to a human dispatcher to present the most efficient route. People still do the coordinating, but machines will equip them information to make better decisions.

But perhaps nowhere is the power of combining humans and machines more impactful than in health—where surgeons are using **state-of-the-art augmented reality glasses** to collaborate with each other and save lives from across the world.

If you need any more convincing, just point your eyes at the most powerful technology vendors. Apple, Google, Amazon, Microsoft are all investing billions each year as they vie for dominance in this space.

> **Humans can solve a much more diverse set of problems than AI is able to. Their collaboration can scale our capabilities as a society. We can point AI to the mundane and repetitive tasks that require little decision-making and creativity, while freeing ourselves up to focus on the "human" component of each task.**
>
> Vinay Seth Mohta — CEO, Manifold

What's next and what you can do about it.

The impact of new technologies is already being felt today, but how quickly and widespread these developments are adopted is unknown.

Commonly, the COO leads the strategic business planning and transformation function, even if that's not what it's called in your business. Think of yourself as the transformation champion—you are in charge of driving investments that will transform your business.

To take full advantage and realize what is possible, you must understand how machines can enhance the work your team are carrying out, how they can enhance machines, and how your current operational processes can be redesigned to support this collaborative intelligence.

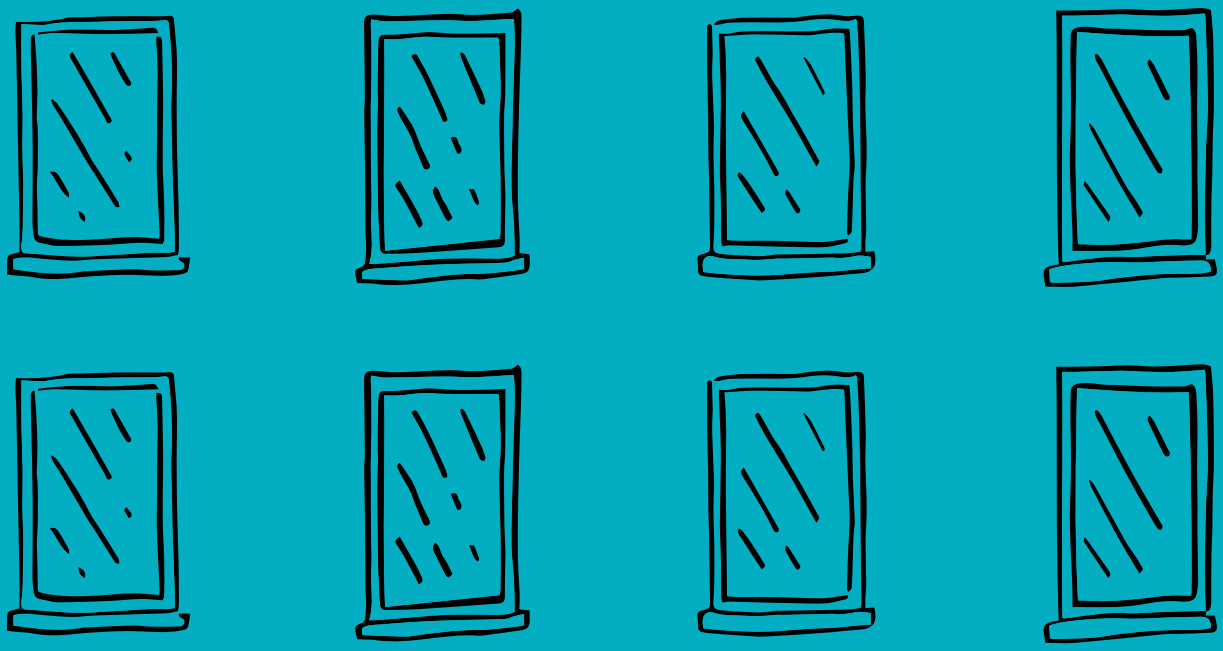
For the most powerful gains, look beyond making existing processes more efficient, and try to reimagine your processes completely. How might they look if you were starting from scratch with all of today's new technology at your disposal? Those who have the most success will not only be thinking about efficiency, but about innovation and imagination.

When reimagining a new business model, consider the different roles required from humans and machines. Your people will be needed to train machines to perform tasks, explain task outcomes, and sustain responsible use. Machines on the other hand, can help humans expand their abilities by amplifying their cognitive strengths, automate interaction with others to free humans up for higher-value tasks, and extend their physical capabilities.

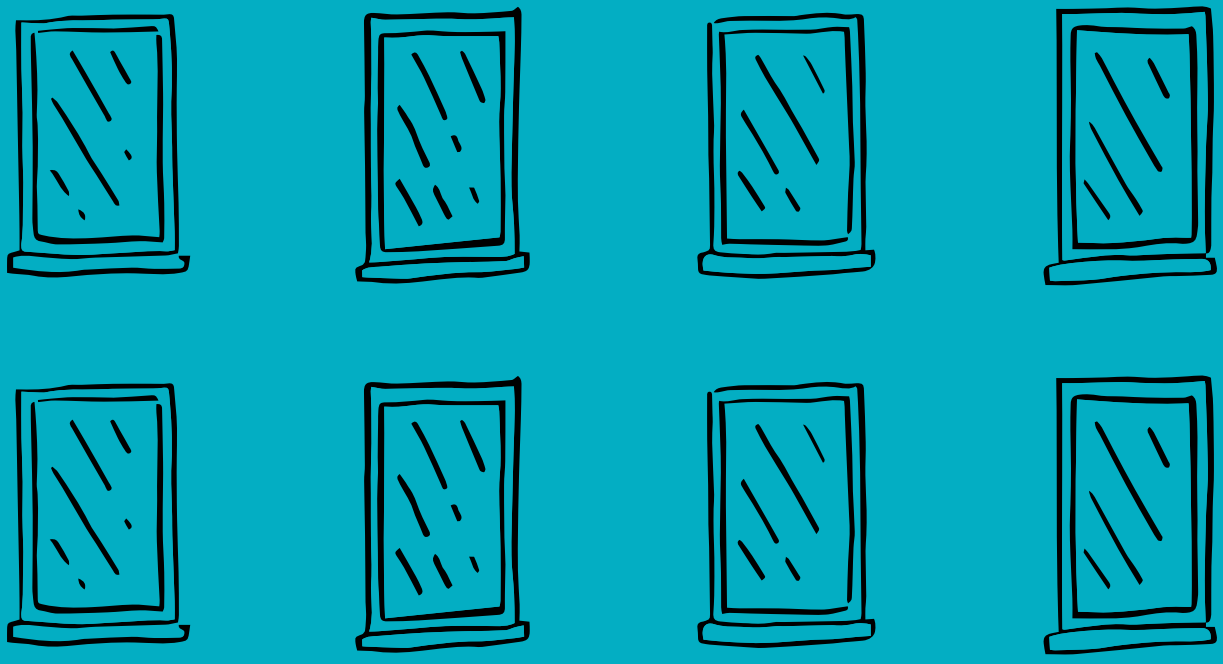
The reimagining of a business process requires developing employees with new skills to work effectively at the human-machine interface—**fusion skills**. These are newly defined abilities such as rehumanizing time, responsible normalizing and judgment integration that enable effective work and improved outcomes when humans and machines interact.

In truth, no one knows how far technology will take us. But for the most powerful gains, we believe that people and machines must work closely together, through collaborative intelligence, to complement each other's strengths.

Those organizations that use new technologies to replace workers through automation will not realize their full potential. Instead, the winners of tomorrow will be those who embrace collaborative intelligence, reimagine their processes, transform their operations, and significantly enhance the work and life or their employees and customers.



The average business is now using a staggering 129 apps—an increase of 68% over the last four years.



Time to think in the always-on world.

It's time to rise above the chaos, gain back control and find calmness.

The workplace has become a sea of high-volume communication, constant notifications, meetings, interruptions, and clattering noises from dozens of systems demanding attention at once. You and your staff are forced to navigate through a constant stream of consciousness without knowing where to look or how to find the information they need. The rise of this volume of information has led to a steep decline in high-value thinking and deep work being conducted by intelligent people. We have reached a tipping point—now is the time to take back control.

What it's about.

We now live in an always-on economy.

As technology has developed, so too has the number of systems being used to run a business, volume of information and speed at which it is all moving. The average business **is now using** a staggering 129 apps—an increase of 68% over the last four years.

Yet with all these new technologies—including a rapidly increasing adoption of automation—why do we seem to be working harder and longer than ever? And why aren't we getting more done?

The core issue is that finding a block of time to dedicate to a task, to a problem, to thinking—to the work itself!—is become rarer and rarer. The typical workday is now sliced into fleeting moments or work, separated by constant virtual distractions.

Ask yourself: Do you get far more done if you stay back late at night? Open the computer on a weekend? Work on a flight where you're free from wifi?

Some of the most-used business applications developed in the last 10 years are primarily designed to distract you—deliberately architected to steal attention. They have adopted the same patterns and techniques first implemented by consumer products to sell advertising. While some of the biggest offenders—such as instant messaging tools—have certainly made communication and collaboration easier, the way these products are being designed and the way teams have grown to use them is having a worrying effect on productivity, deep thought, and meaningful work.

And the blame doesn't lie solely with the systems used for work. In everyone's pocket sits a device that is fighting this same battle for attention. The average iPhone user unlocks their device to look at a notification, scroll through their social media feed, or send a text more than **80 times a day**—that's 5 times each waking hour.

Cal Newport is credited with coining the term: deep work, defining it as "professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limits."

There is no denying that today, in the always-on world, performing deep work is more challenging than it has ever been.

But it's a challenge that must be fought for. Because only if you switch the noise off and distance yourself from these distractions, will you take back control and have the opportunity for meaningful thinking, new heights of quality, and much more of it.

> **I really believe in taking regular time to unwind and let my mind think without the stress of deadlines, email, and distractions. I end up being more productive, can solve problems more easily, am more creative and innovative, and have a higher level of focus.**

Sabrina Parsons — CEO, Palo Alto Software

What's next and what you can do about it.

Companies are waking up to the negative impact that the always-on economy is having on their output. We predict that this backlash, or *techlash*, will grow considerably, and app developers will start to take note.

But ultimately, the responsibility of creating a distraction-free environment where meaningful work can be conducted rests on the employer. As COO, you are in the perfect position to lead the switch.

There are moves you can make today to enable calmness, peace of mind and focus—replacing the digital chaos that everyone has grown accustomed to. You need to think of time as the finite resource that it is and fiercely protect it for every member of your team.

Is the constant drip-feed of updates in message channels to entire teams really necessary? Perhaps a single summary email that brings everyone up-to-speed at the end of the day or week would be a better way to do things.

Time management methods such as the **Pomodoro technique** can be used to encourage a dedicated focus on one task at a time, reducing the impact interruptions can have on focus and flow. The **Edrolo OS** is a time-prioritization system that acknowledges the increasing difficulty of sustaining long stretches of unbroken, focused work that hard problems need. It seeks to address the underlying issues around technology and the desire to multi-task and seek dopamine-inducing notifications.

Every team member should be encouraged to reduce or even eliminate entirely all notifications on their phones, computers and other devices except for what is absolutely necessary. Even a small distraction in the top right of your screen will distract you from a state of deep work. **Moment** is an app for your phone that trains you to kill the distraction of your phone. While you're at it, evidence shows that **turning a phone to grayscale** will reduce device addiction that many are now genuinely faced with (even if they don't like to admit it).

Encourage your team to switch everything off regularly—particularly when they really need to focus. Relieve people from the need to be chained to everything else that's going on at all times—respect their need to focus on the work that you hired them to do.

Our devices are not the only culprit here. Another big contributor to distractions and breaking up of the workday is meetings. Assess the number your team has. Are they all really necessary? A regular team standup or status meeting might seem like a great idea, but even if it only lasts 15 minutes with 10 people, that's an aggregated 2.5 hours of time spent.

While these are some quick tweaks you can make today, substantial long-lasting change requires a genuine cultural shift. This is something you need to take seriously and dedicate ongoing effort to.

Email is not dead.

It's here to stay, but how we use it needs to change.

The proliferation of instant messaging tools led many to declare that the death of email was here. But as the most popular of these tools, Slack, nears its fifth birthday, email is still stronger than ever. The reality is that the use of email is only increasing, and workplaces around the world are relying on this communication channel more than ever.

What it's about.

Each day, more than 281 billion emails are sent around the world. And things aren't going to change. It is predicted that those 281 billion emails will grow to 333 billion by 2022.

Slack and other instant messaging tools addressed a huge issue for businesses of all types, where they relied on internal email for discussion with colleagues around the world, or even from desk to desk. But these tools have not reduced the overall volume of email—because they are not a solution for all communication.

Almost certainly, email is still the most common way you send and receive information with clients. 94% of workers say they recommend email as the best way for others to contact them.

And this isn't the only reason that the use of email shows no signs of waning. Instant messaging, group chat—call it what you like—has had its fair share of critics with well-founded claims that the always-on nature hurts productivity, increases stress, and is like being in an all-day meeting with random participants and no agenda.

But this does not mean that email, and the way it is commonly used, is OK as it is.

The first example of email was sent at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1965. Fundamentally at least, not all that much has changed since then. Messages get sent from one person to another, or a group of others. It is siloed in the inbox that the email was addressed to because that is how it is designed—to communicate one-on-one, like a letter or a phone call.

So, now is the time to consider: are the fundamentals of email still suitable for the environment in today's modern workplace?

Most business rely on collaboration of varying degrees—multiple people or teams, working together to deliver a project, to serve a client, or to solve an issue. And typically, email serves as the center of the conversation amongst all of this. It is the initiator of the document, client information, job, task, or discussion piece.

However something so essential to the final outcome is still siloed, hidden or out of reach from many. Copies of emails can be made available against the contact record in systems such as CRMs. But they are just that—a copy. There to look at, but not to contribute to.

Attempts to solve the lack of visibility with CCing or forwarding only contribute to the other big problem with email—the time required to manage it. The average worker spends 28% of their week on email—more than 11 hours. People everywhere are battling to get overflowing inboxes under control, spending far too much time doing it, and missing critical correspondence in the process.

If email is really here to stay—which it is—then the way we use it and the tools that power it, need to evolve.

> **"One of the biggest challenges companies are facing is focus—the ability to cut through the myriad of communications that distract leaders from focusing on what's most important to drive the business forward. We spend more team reading and responding to a thousand things, versus having the discipline to focus on game-changing ideas that matter most to customers."**
>
> Rick Jensen — SVP, People and Places, Intuit

What's next and what you can do about it.

In most businesses, email is the primary source of communication and workflow management, yet few are integrating it into their actual workflow.

In contrast, seamless collaboration in nearly everything else has been made possible over the last 5-10 years. Modern solutions allow teams to work successfully together on everything from documents to tasks, workflow and client relationships. Email has seemingly been neglected. But this is starting to change.

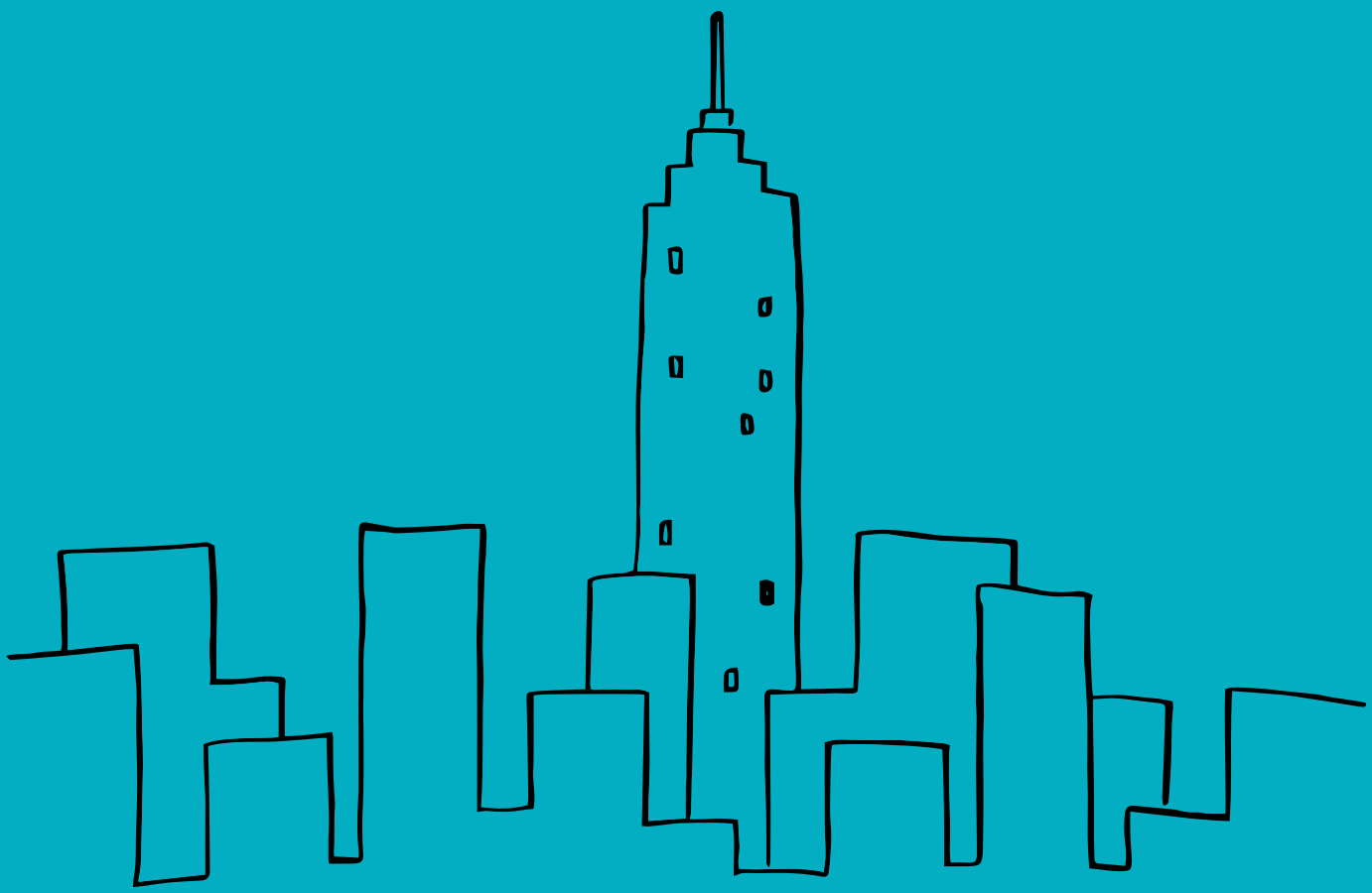
The solution lies in workstream collaboration—an emerging category of systems specifically designed to improve team coordination, performance, communications, and productivity. **Gartner predicts** the market for this fast-growing technology will be worth almost $5 billion by 2021, and by 2022, 70% of teams will primarily rely on workstream collaboration tools to get their work done. The good news is that **some are already integrating with email**.

COOs play a key role in planning and executing a modern enterprise architecture that can enhance existing operations. **Research shows** that executives should pursue the greater gains that can come by embedding collaboration into specific processes, using new technologies to encourage collaborative behaviour. And many are already doing so, with **73% of companies** experimenting with collaboration tools to improve performance.

The modern enterprise needs a wholly integrated system, where email is intrinsic into the workflow that is established with colleagues, customers, or stakeholders. Because email is the starting point of the majority of your team's output, it needs to be integrated into your workflow for them to be most effective—available to collaborate on and contribute to, by anyone who has something to offer.

Email has so many advantages and its use is showing no signs of diminishing. But the fundamental issues associated with it dramatically affect productivity, efficiency and effectiveness in the workplace. For the first time, workstream collaboration tools gives us reason to believe that this is finally changing.

Many of the most successful consumer applications developed in the last 10 years have been primarily about consumption, designed to steal your attention.



Workplace well-being.

Awareness of mental wellness will continue to rise, and the workplace must play its part.

There is an increasing awareness of the importance of mental well-being of employees in the workplace. As we grow more aware, we are seeing a decline in mental health across the globe. The way we communicate in the workplace and the technology that enables this communication, deserves a lot of the blame.

What it's about.

Many of the most successful consumer applications developed in the last 10 years have been primarily about consumption, designed to steal your attention. Strategies that prey on basic human needs of acceptance and inclusion have led to the rise of the likes of Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat and more—both in downloads and usage.

More recently, we have seen these same strategies leak into enterprise applications. Business products have adopted these same patterns, obsessions with notifications and gamification. Every application now competes for your attention in a systemic and impactful way—to the point where a **distraction-free smartphone** is now a thing.

A dangerous desire for eyeballs is now seen in the apps we use each day at work, and this has happened without sufficient consideration of the negative effects on the mental well-being of the workforce.

We are now dealing with a constant stream of consciousness throughout our lives. Leaving work on a Friday with the prospect of an uninterrupted weekend and the peace of mind that activities are under control has disintegrated to a far-flung dream. It is no surprise that a worrying **decline in mental health** is being felt, and it is partly a hangover from the always-on economy.

The blame does not sit entirely with the tools that are used. Many teams are working longer hours, dealing with increasing expectations from clients and managers, struggling to focus on what's important, spending time on the wrong things, and missing deadlines. And as professional and personal life increasingly blend into one, stress and anxiety at work is spilling into the home.

By 2030, mental health is expected to have become the largest single healthcare burden, costing **$6 trillion globally**. The awareness of mental well-being, and the factors that can affect it, will only continue to rise, and everyone, and everything, must play a role in reversing the trend. The costs of ignoring it are too high.

> **A decade ago, topics like anxiety, addiction, resilience and mindfulness were taboo at work and in life. Today, employees actively seek out companies that support their mental well-being, from the physical environment, to the tools and resources they provide, to the way managers and leaders genuinely show care. Investing here is not just good for people—it's good for business.**
>
> Henry Albrecht — CEO, Limeade

What's next and what you can do about it.

As a COO, you need to adapt to the environment in which you find yourself. And if that environment is one with unhappy staff, it is your role to turn things around.

There is **increasing evidence** that workplaces can play an important and active role in maintaining the mental health and well-being of their workers. And this should be seen as a top priority. Not only are happy staff good for culture and morale—a mentally healthy workplace is a sustainable workplace.

Workplaces such as these have **enhanced** productivity, performance and client satisfaction, decreased turnover, absenteeism and risk of burnout, and happier staff over long periods of time. The top talent—those spoilt for choice when selecting an employer—want to work for sustainable employers.

One of the most important and obvious roles a workplace can play—yet one that few are doing much about—is re-addressing the work-life balance that has been lost in an always-on, digital-first society.

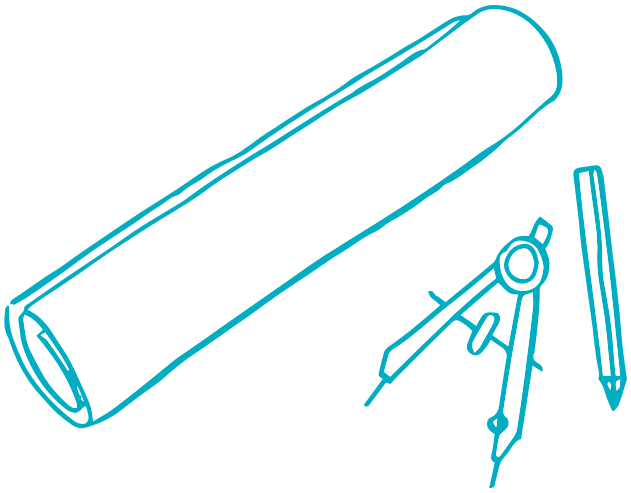
Implement a 7-to-7 rule, where communication is discouraged (or even forbidden unless it's an absolute emergency) before 7am and after 7pm.

An **expectation of immediate response** has become the new normal in so many businesses, with many employees **saying they feel pressure** to respond right away on instant messaging tools. Yet in almost all situations, a response is not really needed immediately. Next time you communicate with a team member, don't expect anything right away, just get back to work. And encourage others to do the same. Responses can wait until people are free and ready.

These expectations need to be changed across your organization. Something that can help is setting a goal for all digital communications to be dealt with within 24 hours (or whatever works). This requirement removes the feeling that people should respond to everything immediately all the time. If something is urgent, then it should be escalated to a phone call.

You must also remember the influence you have as a senior executive. Staff will be reluctant to take holidays, switch off on weekends, or leave the office at a reasonable hour if their COO is doing the opposite.

The tools that we use—specifically, those who are building them—must play their role too. There is a need for more considered, contextual, collaborative platforms for knowledge workers to work with colleagues in sustainable, distraction-free ways. Workplace technology needs to shift its focus from eyeballs to output.



You decide what comes next.

Today's workplace has changed significantly in the past decade and these developments have all changed what it means to be a COO. Technology advancements mean that real-time communication across borders, distributed teams, instant delivery to customers, automation and machine learning are all part of a regular day for countless workers around the globe.

But at the same time we are facing constant distractions, an inability to perform deep work, rising stress and declining mental health.

What you decide to do about all of this will have an enormous impact not only on the performance of your business and your own role, but on the lives of each person on your team. More so than any other executive, you are well-placed to take on these challenges, cement your position as a senior leader, and make some changes for the better.

For the ambitious COO, these trends provide significant opportunities. Opting for a calm work environment, to do more with less, and productivity is a choice. Make it yours.

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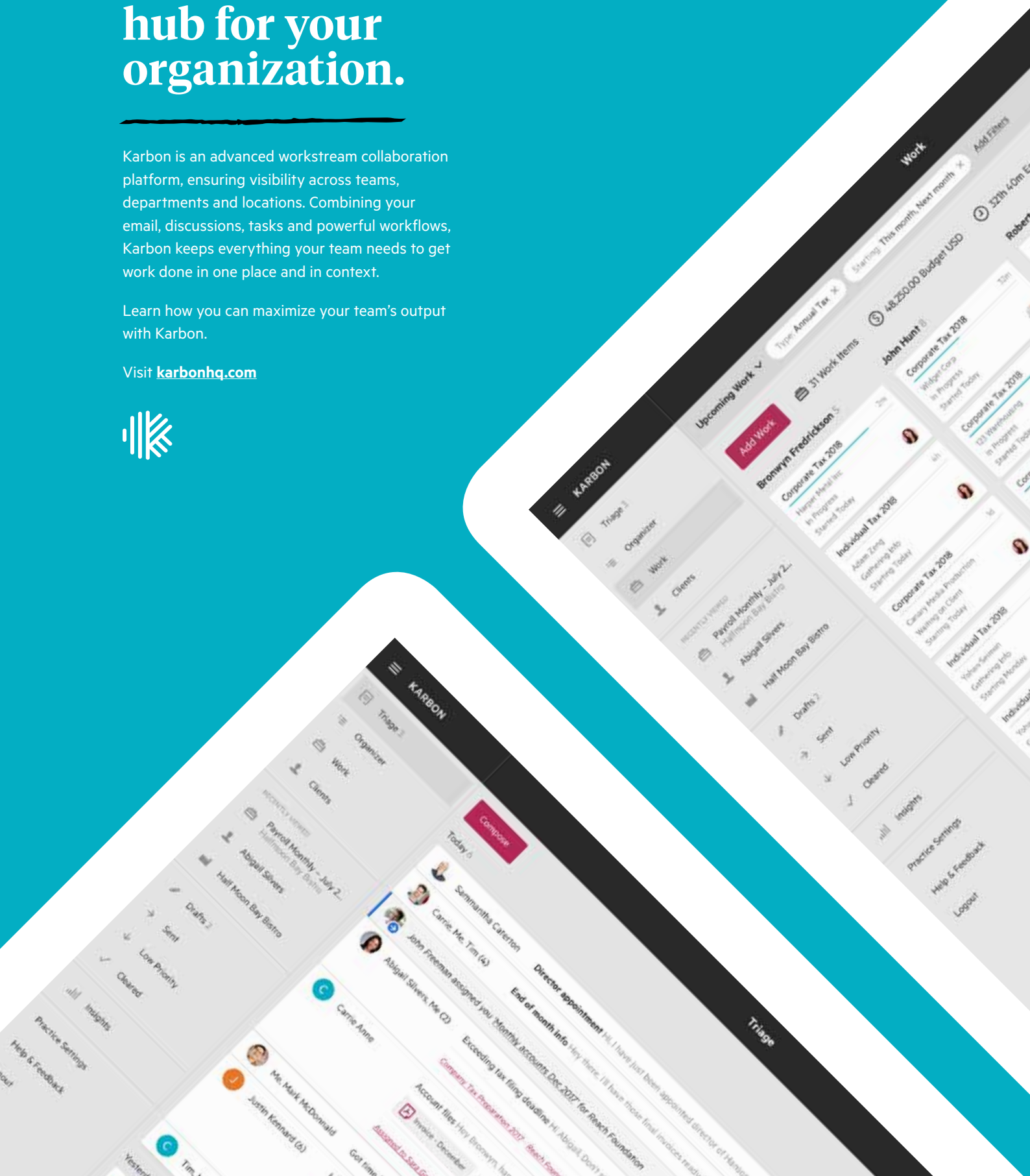
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