



The WorkLab Guide

How to Regain Work-Life Balance in the Age of Hybrid

Create a flexible culture where people don't have to be "always on." Here's how to help your employees reclaim their time and focus on the tasks that matter most.

Illustration by David Sparshott

This guide explores how to reclaim time for your team and regain work-life balance.

The people who went home to work in 2020 aren't the same people who are coming back to the office today. At the same time, the risk of a human energy crisis—a burnout epidemic—looms.

- Since February 2020, the average Microsoft Teams user saw a 252 percent increase in their weekly meeting time, and the number of weekly meetings has increased by 153 percent, according to the [2022 Work Trend Index](#).

As new patterns like the [triple peak workday](#) emerge, leaders need to continue fostering healthy flexibility while avoiding an “always on” mindset.

- Research by [Glint](#) found that people with an uneven work-life balance are more than twice as likely to show signs of burnout than those at the other end of the spectrum.

Here's how you can help people reset that balance and bring their best self to work every day.

5 Essential Steps for Leaders

1. Create New Behavioral Norms

Building a flexible work culture requires experimentation and a growth mindset. But you can take these steps to signal that people can work flexibly without feeling the need to work around the clock.

Record Teams meetings whenever possible

Encourage organizers to [press the record button](#) at the top of each meeting—provided attendees have given permission—so anyone who is not there has confidence that they can catch up later.

- For more guidance on asynchronous collaboration, check out [this WorkLab Guide](#).

Create the expectation that non-urgent messages can wait

Make it clear to leaders, managers, and employees that it's okay to not check email and chat outside of core business hours.

- When people do want to send after-hours emails, encourage them to set features like [delay-send in Outlook](#) or Delay delivery in Microsoft Viva.

Protect focus time

Encourage employees to carve out calendar time for focused work or meeting-free blocks. Viva Insights can help [book focus time](#) based on preferences.

- Create the norm that people should look to schedule around those time blocks when possible.

Signpost

Whenever possible, communicate availability and expectations.

- Add a note to your signature—in Outlook and Teams—with your standard working hours.
- Let people know up front if a message is not urgent and a reply is not expected.

Experiment with meeting-free days

A [2022 MIT Sloan Management study](#) showed that when companies introduced one meeting-free day per week, productivity rose 35 percent. Two meeting-free days per week saw a productivity increase of 71 percent.

- Multiple meeting-free days per week may not be realistic for every organization, but it could be worthwhile for teams to experiment with, say, meeting-free Fridays.

Have continuous conversations with your team

Seek out differing points of view. Building empathy is critical, as is truly gaining an understanding of what your employees want and need.

2. Model Balanced Behavior—and Use Timeboxing

It's particularly important for leaders and managers to model the culture that the company tries to foster.

- One example: Jared Spataro, a corporate vice president at Microsoft, [models the schedule management practice of timeboxing](#) to reinforce the idea that his team isn't just *allowed* to balance work with wellbeing—they're accountable to do so.
- Microsoft has developed a management framework built on the idea of creating open and trusting environments where people feel supported, and where embodying those values is key for all leaders.
 - You can watch a video seminar outlining the principles of the “Model, Coach, Care” framework [here](#).

3. Empower Managers to Experiment

In flexible work models, managers are the key to reconciling individual employees' needs with broader organizational priorities. But they often feel stuck.

- In the [2022 Work Trend Index](#), 74 percent of managers surveyed said they don't have the influence or resources they need to make changes on behalf of their teams.

- To embrace the learn-it-all mindset required to help people reset work-life balance, managers must be allowed to experiment with their teams.

4. Give People the Power to Prioritize

Prioritization is one of the best ways employees can get their calendars under control.

- Refocusing on the work that matters most—and saying no to the less important stuff—starts with ensuring that individuals and teams understand:
 - The broader business goals
 - How *their* work ladders up to those goals

Key stat: McKinsey found that only 15 percent of frontline managers and frontline employees feel a sense of purpose in their work.

Adopting a goal-setting framework like [Objectives and Key Results \(OKRs\)](#) can help individuals and teams understand the objectives of the broader organization. (You can read more about it in the book [OKRs for All: Making Objectives and Key Results Work for Your Entire Organization](#), by Microsoft Viva Goals leader Vetri Vellore.)

Smarter Goal-setting with OKRs

Avoid top-down directives: Think of OKRs as a way of helping people figure out what they can contribute—which not only empowers employees but unleashes innovation.

- Leaders should offer guidance but give managers and individuals the power to contribute and shape their goals.

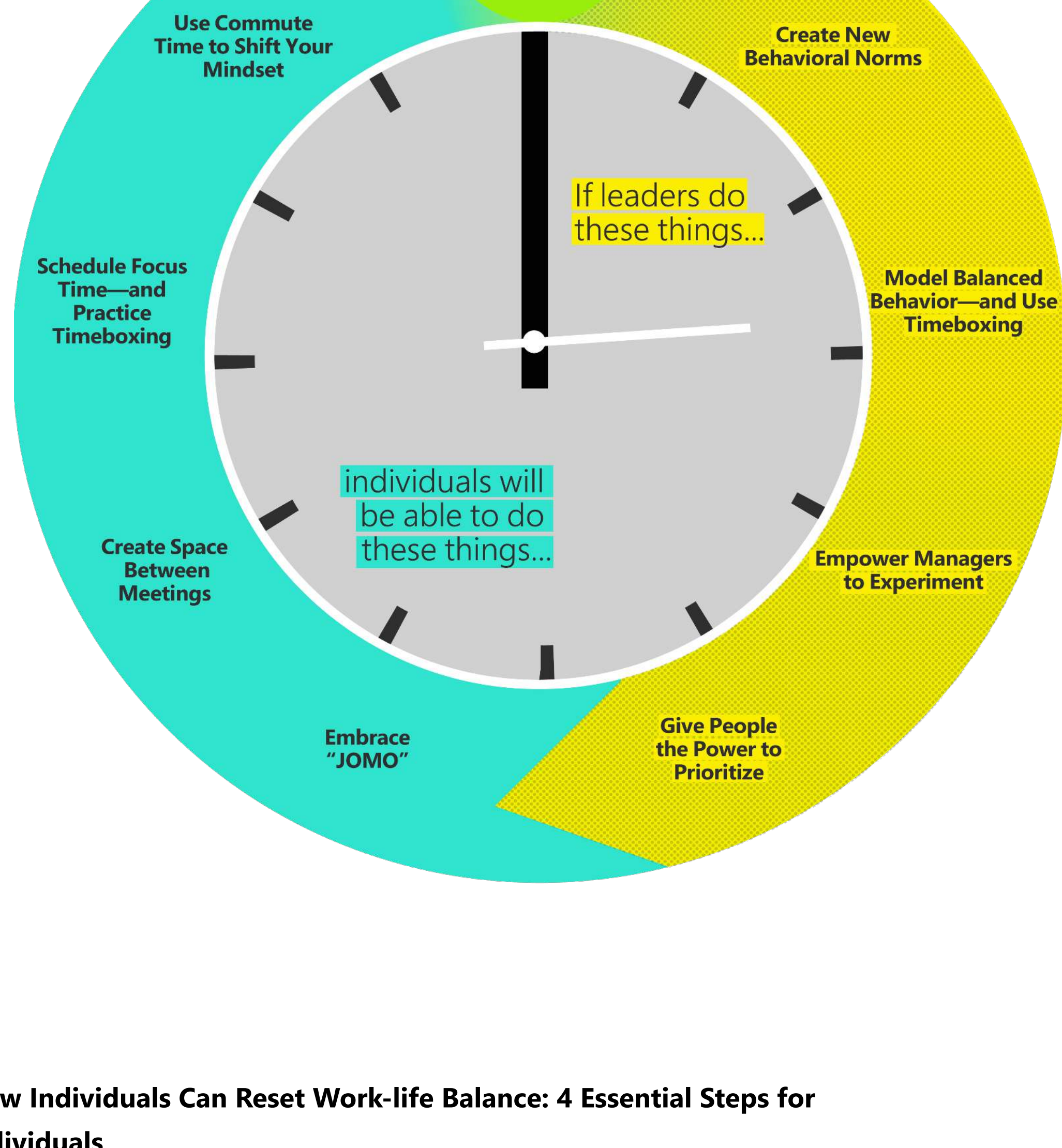
5. Codify the New Norms and Best Practices—and Revisit Them as You Learn More

Individual employees need to set boundaries. But leaders and managers need to create a system of guardrails to support individuals in their time management decisions, and to help everyone understand what's expected of them.

- Codifying new norms and practices using team agreements, OKRs, and other resources is a great way to build that alignment. But in a learn-it-all culture, change is ongoing.
- Leaders need to set the expectation that norms and best practices will evolve as we all learn more about how to make flexible work *work*.

How Everyone Can Take Control of Their Time

If leaders take a few key steps, and then codify those norms, individuals will be able to reclaim their time in several essential ways.



1. Embrace JOMO—The Joy of Missing Out

When we reflexively attend every meeting, we put our most important work at risk.

- Perform a self-audit: Are you spending less time than you should on your top priorities? You may find that you need to be more intentional about where you're directing your attention.

Seven Ways to Juice Your JOMO

1. Try declining a meeting where your attendance is optional, and catch up later with the recording and transcript.
2. Resist the urge to check in on work during lunch breaks and downtime.
3. Try turning off notifications or switching to Focus Mode while working on a Word doc.
4. Monitor whether you're spending time on projects that don't require your attention [in order to distract yourself](#) from more daunting tasks.
5. Close social media apps and tabs while working, and designate specific time blocks to update or check posts.
6. Check your inbox at set times of the day instead of looking at every new message.
7. Have each of your team members go through these steps as well.

2. Create Space Between Meetings

In a traditional office environment, the time you spent walking between back-to-back meetings gave you a moment to decompress and recharge—even if you didn't really see it as such at the time.

The problem: In hybrid and remote environments, these momentary pauses have been eliminated.

These techniques can help:

Build in 5-minute Pauses

To reclaim a brief period of transition, set a default to [begin online meetings five minutes after the half-hour or hour mark](#)—the virtual equivalent of the time spent walking between conference rooms.

Think Outside of the Blocks

Feel free to plan meetings that last 10 or 15 or 20 minutes, rather than defaulting to half-hour blocks.

- *New Corner Office: How the Most Successful People Work from Home* [puts it](#): “People generally ask for 30 or 60 minutes for a meeting, but those are not divinely decreed amounts of time.”

Take Smart Mini-Breaks

A five-minute stroll, a meditation session, a cat nap, or even jotting a few things down in a gratitude journal can help you hit refresh on your brain.

- For more ideas on how to make the most of your next break, [download this checklist](#) of science-backed techniques.

3. Schedule Focus Time

We underestimate just how powerful focus time can be. Some things, like creative or cognitively demanding tasks, require full concentration and limited interruptions.

What you can do: Block off chunks of time in your calendar for focused work so colleagues can see when you're busy and know when not to bother you with email requests or meetings.

- It takes time to recover focus following any interruption, so use Viva and other tools to schedule and protect periods of focused work. You'll reduce distractions and reclaim your most productive hours.
- Likewise, schedule time to decompress after stressful tasks to limit burnout.

4. Use Commute Time to Shift Your Mindset

As people ease back into their daily commute, they're discovering that it can be a blessing as well as a chore. It gives you some time to shift into and out of a work mindset, which can help create a sense of balance between your career and your personal life.

The hybrid “commute”: When you work where you live and live where you work, creating that balance means intentionally building on- and off-ramps into your day.

- Microsoft researchers who set out to [quantify the productivity benefits of commute time](#) found that six in 10 people felt they were more productive when a digital assistant helped them ease into and out of work mode.
- On average, productivity increased between 12 and 15 percent. As the world shifts to hybrid, tools such as [Virtual Commute](#)—which asks you to wrap up your day and set your mindset for the next—can help Teams users ease into and out of the workday.

Takeaway

Your team's time is precious—and so is their mental health and wellbeing. Helping people reset their work-life balance is a critical new leadership skill in flexible work. Keep experimenting, and you'll discover critical ways to help individuals and organizations thrive for years to come.

A note on the WorkLab Guides

Hybrid work is a work in progress—and no one has all the answers. At Microsoft, we take a learn-it-all approach, looking to the data and research where we can, talking to our customers, and learning from our own employees as well. We've informed these guides with as much data and research as possible. But there's still much to learn—and we're committed to share new insights and discoveries as we go.

5 Steps to Start Timeboxing Right Now

1. Accept that it's impossible to do everything you want to.
2. Divide your life into three to five areas you want to spend your time on (for example, family, community, healthy/wellbeing, sleep, and work).
3. Write down how many minutes a week you are willing to give each area, then plot them out on a weekly schedule.
4. Stick to that schedule. Rigorously.
5. Know when to make exceptions, but don't let those exceptions become the norm.

Reading list: Guidance for empowering hybrid managers

1. [In Hybrid Work, Managers Keep Teams Together](#)
2. [5 Questions on the Minds of Hybrid Managers](#)
3. [Hybrid Workplace Flexibility Guide](#)
4. [Key Questions Managers Should Ask When Crafting Team Agreements](#)