



MTR ACTIVITY: A NEW OPERATING SYSTEM FOR WORK IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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There's more to "our best work" than meets the eye. Much more.

If you happen to spot me while I'm in the midst of some of my most important work, here's what you'd see: Me, gazing out my office window at the chattering birds in my yard. Or taking a leisurely stroll past my neighbors' front stoops. Or maybe sitting quietly by myself, staring into space.

Here's what you won't see: brow-furrowing, shoulder-hunching, emailing, or back-to-back Zoom calls.

In other words, you won't see what we typically think of when we visualize "work." That's the thing: When I'm sitting on my stoop, I'm doing work that doesn't look like work.

Now, if you bristle instinctively at the idea of "best work" being materially the same as "daydreaming" or "wasting time," I get that. I was also skeptical that any true work could be done outside of my conscious thinking. Like a lot of people, I used to assume that I was procrastinating when I stepped away from the desk. (Granted, sometimes, I was procrastinating.) But time and again, when I did return to my desk after my "procrastination" was done, I ended up creating some of my best work. To be sure, I could get things done—and did so just fine—without these little sessions of wandering, pondering, and pausing. But the projects or ideas that arose *after* some time away from my desk were just... *better*.

Better in the sense that the work felt right, felt more fulfilling, and felt directly tapped into what I, as a human, want my working experience to be, to mean, and to do in the context of my whole life.

In short, I was flourishing.

What if our most productive selves are ... when we give ourselves the space and time to move, think, and rest?

Work done with these increments of stepping away was helping me to flourish personally, and as a significant by-product, my business was expanding. My client base was growing, and so was my team.

I wondered: What if we moved away from our dated model of productivity focused on time increments and tangible outputs, on efficiency measured in speed only, and on a micromanagement leadership style?

What if our most productive selves are *not* when we are on Zoom, or churning through email, or at the whiteboard... but when we give ourselves the space and time to move, think, and rest? I call this *MTR* (pronounced “motor”) activity.

What if when we move, think, and rest, we're not really procrastinating, putting off for tomorrow what we should be doing today?

What if we're just approaching challenges from a different and uniquely human angle?

Move, think, rest: So simple. So needed. Then why don't we do it more regularly and more intentionally?

ORGANIZATIONS ARE ORGANISMS

My call to action that you move, think, and rest is not just relegated to individuals. Mine is an entreaty to all organizations, from the tiniest mom-and-pop shop to the largest global corporation. Organizations are organisms, consisting of humans who are imperfect, inconsistent, and non-predictive. In a world where basic tasks are being taken over by automation, AI, and robotics, the organizations that can amplify what makes their employees uniquely human will be the ones that will attract and retain the best human talent.

Going forward, integrating more movement, thought, and rest into the workday will be one of the single most effective drivers companies can do to improve their business return on investment (ROI), increase their creative capacity, and innovate consistently. Evidence of MTR activity will be the greatest predictor of a company's success because it activates its more implicit and intangible assets: its people, their creativity and well-being, and their connection to others.

I am admittedly selfishly motivated as I cajole more people to move, think, and rest. As a creativity strategist, my work is about helping businesses connect the dots between creativity and business impact. It turns out that MTR activity is a driver of the two most fundamental elements of creativity as described in my previous book, *The Creativity Leap*: wonder and rigor. In that book, I explained that creativity is our ability to toggle between wonder and rigor to solve problems, produce novel value, and generate meaning. What better way to escape into wonder than a serotonin-induced walk in the woods (movement), spending some time with a good novel (thought), or indulging in some sweet do-nothing moment (rest)? And what better way to get rooted into rigor than the discipline of exercise (movement), the healthy intellectual debate with a colleague (thought), or the commitment to taking ten-minute breaks every couple of hours (rest)?

As I sat with this question, it became clear to me. Now, more than ever, a shift away from old productivity models makes sense for three primary reasons: unprecedented burnout, ubiquitous technology, and hybrid work.

Because we have the technology to replace basic tasks, we have the opportunity to rethink work. What, after all, is the point and purpose of productivity? For me, at the end of the day, it's got to be about flourishing (which is not the same as *thriving*, by the way—I'll explain in the next section). More and more people are demonstrating that they agree with me by embracing flexible work models, taking sabbaticals, and choosing their health and well-being over the 24-7 hustle culture. The old model of productivity saw ROI only through the lens of shareholder value. The new model of productivity I am proposing, what I'm calling *cultivation*, factors in shareholder value as well as stakeholder value, and that liminal space where the most important work that we don't see happens. What it results in is true flourishing for the organization and for the individual.

CULTIVATION, FLOURISHING, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF LIMINAL SPACES

What if our most productive selves are when we step away from our desks and engage in activity that sparks different synapses in our brains?

Clearly, my walks, my daydreams, and even my naps weren't just procrastination, because they resulted in real, tangible contributions. It was work—just not the kind of work we're used to seeing.

As it turns out, the most important and essential work we do as humans is invisible. I call them the sexy bits of productivity. Now, traditionally, productivity hasn't been particularly sexy. But if we are committed to flourishing, to bringing the entirety of our human potential to our work, it is time to make productivity sexy—to make it alluring, juicy, and fun. Enter the MTR framework.

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MTR activity allows your imagination to reign, to spark the synapses that synthesize your best ideas. By redesigning work through the lenses of the uniquely human activities of movement, thought, and rest, we create and strengthen channels of communication between the neurons located throughout the frontal lobes, temporal lobes, and limbic system, the ones that spark generative thinking.

When you are learning a new yoga pose, engaging in meaningful conversation, or taking a break from a tough challenge that has you stumped, the neurotransmitters responsible for generative thinking are still firing. The sexy, juicy bits of work are being done in the moment, for the sheer joy of the process—sometimes with guardrails, but never with benchmarks. There is nothing to achieve, nothing to complete, yet everything to reap. Not simply because MTR activity often yields our most exciting, innovative, get-up-and-start-now ideas but also because MTR activity is the source of work that fulfills us.

It is time to put productivity to bed. How might we do that? By tapping into what makes us uniquely human—and leaving the unsexy parts to AI and robots. To drive this point home, I offer up the metaphor of cultivation.

When we move from a strictly quantitative productivity mindset to one of cultivation, our focus shifts from what we can make to what we might yield. Think of the produce section in your local supermarket. There, it's clear that the fruits and vegetables are what's made through farmers' labor. But what's yielded is much greater than that: the foundation for healthy individuals and communities, a sense of security, and perhaps even a feeling of abundance.

My provocation to you is to move away from a mindset of “How might I be more productive at work?” toward “How might I cultivate more meaning and value in my role?”

My promise is that in doing so, you, your team, and your organization will make quantum leaps, personally, professionally, and in terms of business outcomes.

The integration of movement, thought, and rest is the key to cultivating meaning and value in your role, and it is much juicier and much more alluring and fun than crossing off items on your to-do list. It will also have a much profounder impact on all the different aspects of your life and your organization’s business outcomes. In essence, it leads to flourishing.

In 2021, Adam Grant, noted organizational psychologist and bestselling author, wrote an op-ed in *The New York Times* about the pandemic phenomenon of “languishing.” It served as a cri de coeur for a world that felt just... blah. Suddenly, everyone was talking about languishing and thriving because we finally had language for what we were feeling and what we wanted. Languishing wasn’t quite burnout and it wasn’t quite clinical depression, but it was there, omnipresent, a boogeyman to our collective well-being. And everybody wanted to thrive.

Naturally, I found myself as swept up in the emerging discourse as the rest of the lockdown-weary world. At the same time, I sensed something bigger at work. The diagnose-and-treat model of languishing/thriving seemed too simplistic. I wanted—I want us all—to flourish.

This nuance, I realized, was what was missing from the conversation.

The word *flourish* comes from the same root as *floral* and *flower*. In the noun version, there's a connotation of ornateness, decoration, and aesthetic beyond mere utility. In contrast, much of the discourse on flourishing simply uses the word as a synonym for *growth* or *thriving*. But that's not entirely accurate.

When we flourish, we're not merely zooming ever upward toward a fixed point. We are acting like a flower—blooming and blossoming in bold, colorful, exciting new directions at times, and retreating into bud form at other times. Flourishing isn't just about mental and emotional health, nor is it just about getting back to a respectable level of productivity. Flourishing includes when we feel fully ourselves and fully engaged in our work. Yes, we're productive when we flourish, but productivity is a mere by-product of a bigger, more expansive state of well-being.

Flourishing can be practiced and accessed through MTR activity. In the world of design thinking, we advise teams to devise design principles, which are essentially guardrails that will be the lighthouses to whatever product, service, or experience they are trying to create. Similarly, think of MTR activity as a design principle. These are guardrails to help you and your team design great ways to work that incorporate MTR activities and lead to flourishing.

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MTR activity may involve discipline and rigor to build into our routines (especially if we're addicted to multitasking and busyness), but it doesn't take any strenuous effort or ironclad willpower. It can be wondrous and improvisational, but it's not so loosey-goosey as to be meaningless. It's creative work that you don't need to be a "creative type" to do. MTR doesn't require us to let go of control entirely. We're not taking our hands off the wheel here; we're just not gripping it so hard. In other words, we're not forsaking the rules; we're just allowing ourselves space and breathing room within constraints.

It is the integrative nature of MTR activity that helps us and ultimately our organizations to flourish. There are hundreds of books out there focused solely on one of these three dimensions—movement, thought, or rest—with regard to the world of work. Here, I'm promoting an integrative approach that considers all three, while also holistically factoring in the impact on the individual, the team, and the organization. It is not enough to just exercise but neglect your rest. It's also not enough to engage in deep meditation and reflection but neglect your body's need to move. The three dimensions—move, think, and rest—are interdependent. In addition, MTR activity is not sequential; it is situational, relational, and iterative. That's the way MTR works because that's the way humans work.

All three dimensions, when intentionally focused upon, deliver the new operating system we need for work in the twenty-first century. 🧠



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Known as the “creativity whisperer to the C-Suite,” **Natalie Nixon, Ph.D.** helps corporate leaders achieve transformative business results by applying wonder and rigor to their work. In 2021, her firm, [Figure 8 Thinking](#), was named one of the top 20 women-led innovation firms by Core 77. As a popular and increasingly in-demand keynote speaker, Natalie’s accessible advice on creativity, and the future of work and innovation has landed her on the “Top 50 Keynote Speakers In The World” list for 2022 by Real Leaders.

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