Deep Work Playbook

Uplevel

For an engineer, the closest thing to bliss is being left alone with a hard problem and time to solve it without distractions. We define Deep Work as uninterrupted time blocks of two or more hours during a normal workday, and it's a critical resource that needs to be understood and protected.

Why focus on Deep Work?

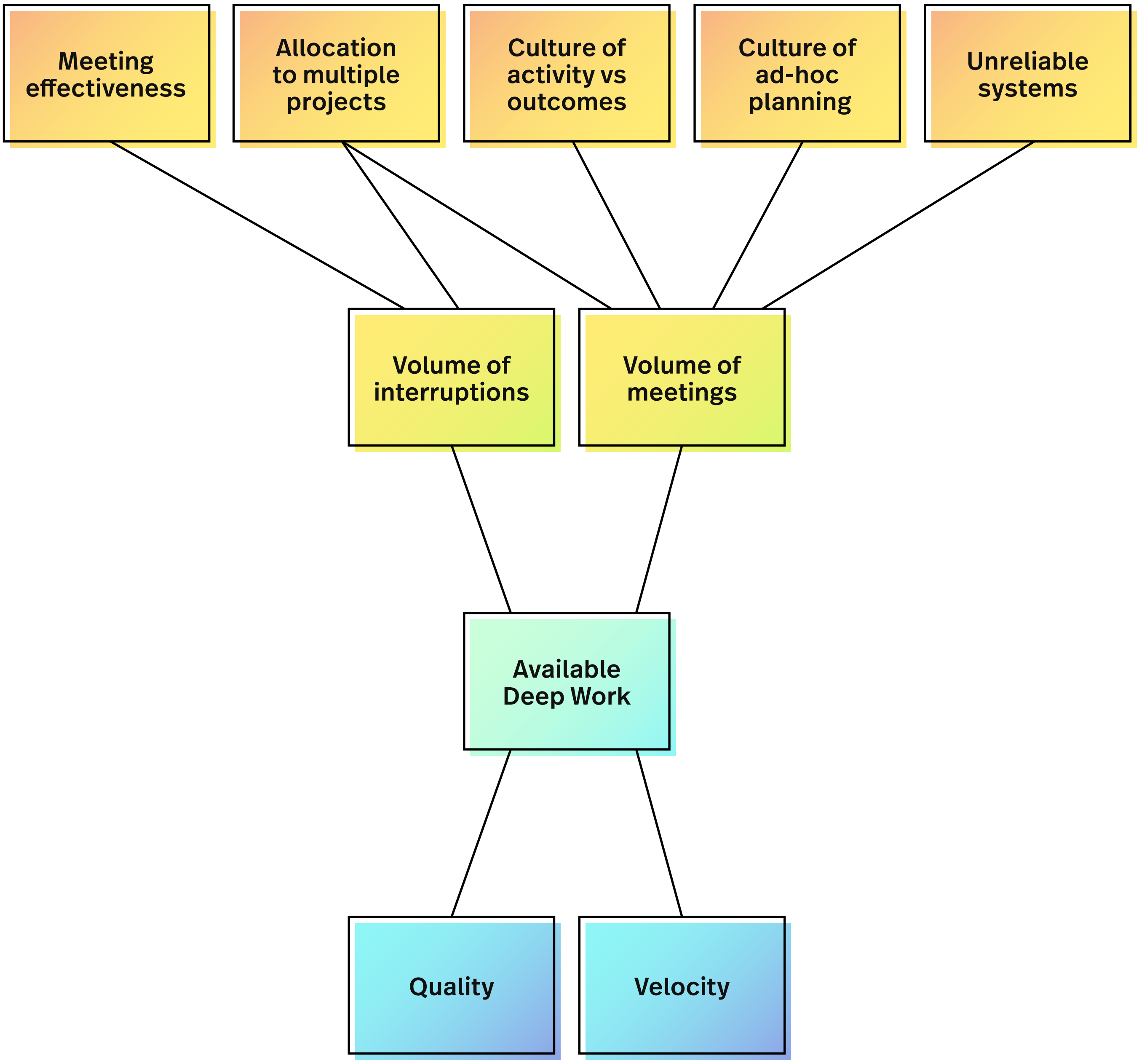
More Deep Work leads to higher velocity.
The fastest way through a backlog is having enough space to complete tasks from start to finish. Each interruption or context switch to a different topic adds time to get back into the flow.

More focus time means a larger impact.
Some problems are just hard and can't be solved without deep focus and time to explore the solution. Easy tasks can be tackled in the gaps between meetings, but larger pieces of work need more focused attention.

Low Deep Work problems are fixable.
Asking a team to "do more" isn't helpful, but ensuring teams have time to do the work is empowering. Setting the right expectations and habits can make a significant difference in the amount of Deep Work time available to a team.

Low Deep Work is a symptom of unclear expectations and a lack of support.
A culture of ineffective meetings, lingering decisions, or frequent "fires" and distractions can leave little or no time for intentional work. Use low Deep Work as a warning that the process and expectations aren't in place to enable smooth development cycles.

It's a common problem.
In a survey of 3,000 engineers, 50% of respondents reported "not enough time to do work" on a regular basis – 20% feel that daily.



Meeting effectiveness

Allocation to multiple projects

Culture of activity vs outcomes

Culture of ad-hoc planning

Unreliable systems

Volume of interruptions

Volume of meetings

Available Deep Work

Quality

Velocity

How does Uplevel measure Deep Work?

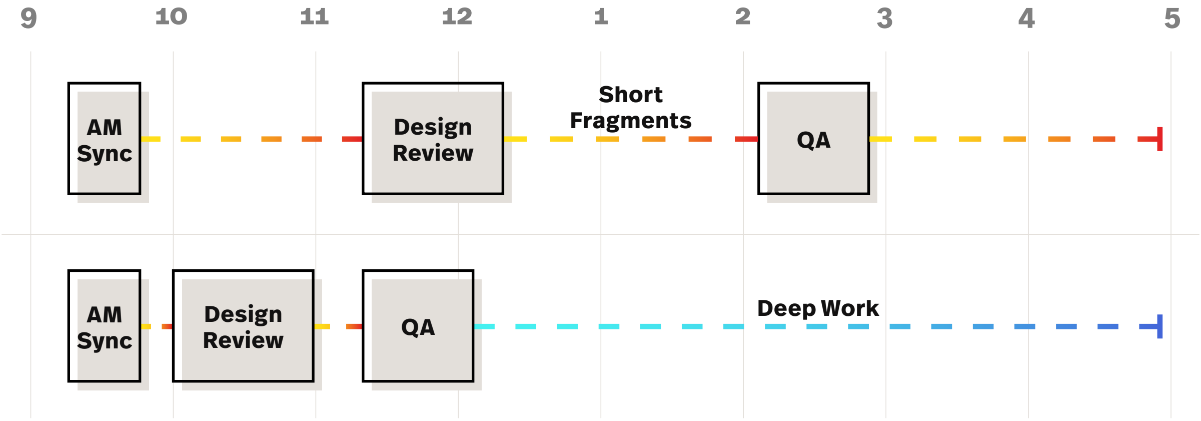
The estimated Deep Work time available in a day is based on details from your calendar, chat tools, and work sources. This isn't about "watching the keystrokes happen" but rather looking at the overall day to see if there was time available for focused work.

- Deep Work is counted as two or more hours of meeting-free, uninterrupted time to truly focus on work (e.g., time you've added to your calendar without inviting anyone to a meeting or a free block of time between meetings).

  Why two-hour blocks? Two hours felt like the bare minimum to get into a state of focused work, and it aligned with recommendations we were seeing in the one- to three-hour range. Most of us only have about four Deep Work hours in us each day.

- Time spent responding to messages on Slack or Teams during that time is deducted from the estimate because context switching takes away from the focus value of Deep Work.

- Updating a Jira ticket or opening a pull request while in a Deep Work block pulls you out of your flow, so we'd count a few minutes of that time as a short fragment rather than Deep Work.



Tips for improving your team's Deep Work time

Meetings are getting in the way

More writing, fewer meetings

Better meetings mean fewer meetings. Be clear who is required and who is optional, and create a habit of sharing an agenda beforehand – and outcomes or followups after. Adding this written communication to the meeting helps keep things on track and allows people to participate (or not) as appropriate, while allowing them to stay in the loop.

Be respectful when scheduling meetings

Schedule new meetings back to back with other meeting blocks. This keeps people in "meeting mode" and preserves the other hours of the day for more focused work. Schedule 25 or 50 minutes to give people a chance to start their next meeting prepared and on time.

Poor time management habits

Ritualize it

Many engineering teams have routine meetings, such as daily stand-ups, planning meetings, and retros. Scheduling regular protected Deep Work time can (and should) follow suit, whether it occurs every day at 10 a.m. or during the same afternoons every week.

Make Deep Work a team sport

Making Deep Work a group activity is way more powerful. The social pressure is real and can also make it fun. And if everyone on the team is in Deep Work mode, you reduce the risk of getting interrupted by others and losing your flow.

Too many interruptions

Make it visible

Let coworkers know you're in Deep Work mode by setting up a cue that says, "Let me focus!" One powerful and easy signal to use is muting your messaging notifications – some tools (e.g., Slack) will let other users know that you are in DND mode. Close your email and set an auto-responder to let others know you'll get back to them in a few hours.

Be clear about urgency in team chats

It's tempting to jump on requests in chat immediately, but not all requests are truly urgent. Try establishing a standard like adding specific emojis to messages to indicate priority and if help is needed right away. This empowers teammates to take more control of their own time, and not always feel a need to respond immediately.

> "The feedback I am getting from my team is that they indeed have more time to do high-quality work."
>
> **– Zipwhip Manager**

Further reading

- Case study: Zipwhip
- Book: "Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World," Cal Newport
- E-book: The Dev Team Playbook
- Ebook: A dev's guide to burnout
- Ebook: The Data Behind Uplevel
- The high cost of context switching
- Webinar: The Dev Soapbox: Protecting Deep Work

An engineering manager’s guide to improving team Deep Work

If you’re seeing low Deep Work on your team’s dashboard, missing deadlines, or just hearing, “I don’t have enough time to get my *real* work done,” this guide is for you. Follow these four steps to improve Deep Work for your team.

STEP 1

Investigate the current state of Deep Work

The first step is understanding the current state of Deep Work for your team. Each team has unique factors that can impact Deep Work, including team dynamics, remote work, and individual experience levels. It’s your responsibility as an engineering manager to investigate what’s contributing to low Deep Work, and to apply the context you have about your team.

Sometimes low Deep Work is actually a *good* thing – you have to do the work and dig in to understand and apply context. Once you confirm you do in fact want to make a change, and where a change needs to be made, you’re ready for the next step. But before we go there, let’s talk about how to find the root cause of what’s going on with your team’s Deep Work.

Step 1 outcomes

- You understand what is cutting into your team’s Deep Work time.
- Your team understands the importance of Deep Work and has helped identify the root causes.

Actions

1. **Review** the Uplevel Deep Work metric as a starting point for understanding potential problems.

   Use the available data to understand your team's trends in context. Consider the Uplevel Benchmark range, your team's baseline over the previous year, and comparable teams at your organization.

   Identify
   - Are you noticing an upward or downward trend or a spike?
   - Is this a sustained pattern?
   - Are some people getting significantly less time than others?
   - Are the individuals on your team outliers within their roles at the organization?

2. **Understand** the nature of the problem by digging into the metrics that could be contributing to it.

   Investigate
   - Is your team's meeting load trending up?
   - Are chat interruptions and context switching high?
   - Is there a pattern of high Always On? This can suggest there isn't enough time in the day to get things done.

3. **Listen** in standup discussions for mentions of developers running out of time and the causes behind that.

   Consider
   - Are we meeting our sprint goals or missing our expected deadlines?
   - Are we in control of our time during the week or pulled in different directions?
   - Is my team complaining about not having enough time to do work?

4. **Discuss** the patterns you see with your team and what they believe is behind it. With greater context around your team's low Deep Work, you can narrow in on the root causes of the problem.

   Ask

   - If this is a new problem? What changes are impacting their Deep Work time?
   - What's creating new demands on their time?
   - Are systemic problems – such as a rising number of incidents or outages – causing context switching and interruptions?
   - Was there a reason to expect lower Deep Work, such as onboarding of new team members?
   - Review the identified root cause with your team. Make sure it resonates, and allow them to challenge assumptions and ask questions.

Potential pitfalls

- Failing to identify the root causes that impact your team's Deep Work time
- Failing to take your team's context into account when setting appropriate targets
- Failing to take accountability for protecting your teams time

STEP 2

Develop a plan and get buy-in from the team

Focusing on the reasons behind any Deep Work problems your team is facing, identify some specific actions to help solve the root problem. Remember, the goal isn't just fewer meetings but more efficient and productive use of time, so look for ways to address the team's specific issues in a way that maintains a balance between productivity and collaboration. Ensure the team understands how solutions or new processes can help address their Deep Work problems.

Step 2 outcome

- You have an action plan the team agrees on.

Actions

1. **Develop tailored solutions** based on the issues identified. See the Deep Work Tips for specific habit changes that could help in your situation.

   Discuss
   - How can the specific issues causing a lack of Deep Work be addressed effectively?

2. **Share data** and specific challenges you've heard from the team to better explain the benefits of improving Deep Work.

   Consider
   - How can you help teams understand the importance of addressing Deep Work problems?

3. **Collaborate** with the team to find an approach that works for everyone.

   Explore
   - Are team members open to trying new approaches?

Potential pitfalls

- Implementing generic solutions that may not address the root causes
- Ignoring the importance of balancing productivity and collaboration
- Imposing a top-down approach without involving the team

STEP
3

Be patient and create transparency

Change takes time. Be patient as the team adjusts to new habits and processes, and understand that it may take several cycles to see the impact of the changes. Continuously support and champion the change throughout the process. Make sure your team has access to the Deep Work dashboard so they can see the result of their change (in addition to feeling it). This also builds transparency and communicates to the team that creating good working conditions is an ongoing priority.

Step 3 outcome

- You have increased Deep Work within your team.

Actions

1. **Set** an achievable goal and date to work towards.

   Discuss with your team
   - How long should it take for your team to adjust to new habits and processes?

2. **Celebrate progress.** Continuously support and encourage the team throughout the change process.

   Generate visibility
   - Make sure the team has access to the metrics so they can see how they're improving.

STEP 4

Evaluate the impact of changes

Use data and your observations to evaluate the impact of the changes on team Deep Work. Be prepared to try different approaches as necessary. Identify any new demands or context changes that may affect the team's time and attention, and strive to maintain the new baselines you achieved while recognizing week-to-week variability.

Step 4 outcome

- You've maintained a team culture around the habits that work for you.

Actions

1. **Review** the impact of the changes on Deep Work availability.

   Discuss
   - Have the implemented changes improved Deep Work availability and effectiveness?

2. **Asses** the overall effectiveness of the team and how improved Deep Work has impacted their ability to meet goals.

   Discuss
   - Are there any new demands or context changes that may affect Deep Work?

3. **Adjust** your approach based on what's working.

   Discuss
   - Are further refinements needed, such as to ensure good collaboration habits to complement the increase in Deep Work?

Potential pitfalls

- Failing to follow up over time to evaluate the impact of changes on Deep Work.

By following this guide, engineering managers can proactively address Deep Work problems within their teams, leading to improved productivity and overall team effectiveness. Keep in mind that the process may require patience and adaptation, but the resulting improvements in Deep Work availability can lead to significant benefits for both individual developers and the team as a whole.

Click here to get started.

Ready to transform your team using Uplevel data?
Schedule a demo today.

uplevelteam.com

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