

DIRECTION OF THOUGHT WORK – SERIES, PART 4

WHAT DOES HIGH-QUALITY THOUGHT WORK LOOK LIKE?

Choose to think,
not to rush.



HELTTI + FILOSOFIAN AKATEMIA

HELTTI

Preface

The new year always brings the desire to do things in new ways.

For the third consecutive year, the Management Agenda (Johdon Agendalla) annual report confirms that enhancing efficiency and productivity by optimizing operational functions and processes remains at the top of organizations' development objectives.

Due to the economic situation, many companies have been forced to drastically cut costs and, unfortunately, reduce manpower last year. This year, the goal is to achieve more with less.

The challenges of job burnout have unfortunately not disappeared. Efficiency is not achieved, at least in the long term, by increasing people's work pace or work load.

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On the contrary. Now is the time to dare to stop, think, and design work methods that respond to the challenges of modern work.

In this fourth part of Heltti's Direction of Thought Work report, we aim to provide answers on how to enhance thought work and improve productivity in concrete terms. How should one plan individual and collaborative work with an understanding of brain function and by protecting one's energy levels? And why is self-leadership especially important in today's work life?

You are now reading **the fourth part of the Heltti and Philosophy Academy's Direction of Thought Work publication series**, where we give a voice to those who do thought work, those who lead it, and those who develop it.



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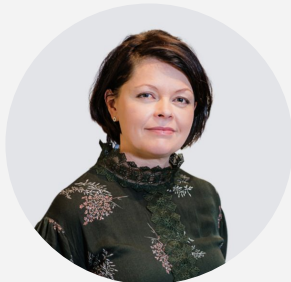
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02

What Does Quality Thought Work Look Like?

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What Does Quality Thought Work Look Like?

From my experience, few workplaces have jointly considered what quality thought work should look and feel like.

What work methods lead to better productivity?

What are we willing to give up, and what should we adopt in its place?

Could the start of the year be a good time to collectively ponder what good looks like?

I believe that each of us has the ability to develop our own work and our working methods. Experts like me cannot provide ready-made answers to what good and quality work life should look like for you.

However, we can offer good questions that, by working on them, you or your work community can develop your work in a more quality, sustainable, and rewarding direction.





What does good work mean to you?

When was the last time you got into a work mode that could be called quality thinking work? What kind of work is valued by you and in your work community?

In order to feel like you're doing high-quality work, aligned with your values and what is valued, you must first define what you are aiming for.

We all know that feeling when we rush through the workday, caught in the hustle and bustle, but by the end of the day, it feels like we've accomplished nothing significant.

On the other hand, we also know what it feels like when the workday progresses smoothly: the mind is clear, actions are focused, and the to-do list is efficiently checked off. It feels like we are doing the right things in the right way.

When we are aware of what we consider quality and desirable, we can strive towards it and achieve a sense of accomplishment.

What does quality thought work mean to you? What components does it consist of?

What is my core mission and the value created by my work?

It's important to regularly step back and assess your own work to ensure alignment with strategic goals and priorities. Pausing, clarifying, and focusing is essential from many perspectives.

Our work time tends to be filled with various tasks and the different needs of people. Most of us always have more to do than time available. To strengthen our sense of accomplishment and ensure that our work generates the value we were hired for, we must focus on doing the right things.



A common symptom of burnout is the feeling that work no longer has any meaning, and experiences of success become rare. There is no longer a clear sense of what needs to be accomplished or what one's role and value at the workplace are.

One crucial way to protect oneself from burnout and enhance a sense of balance in daily life is to identify the value that work is meant to create. Who benefits from your work? What is the value of your work to you? And how is this value measured?

Workdays filled with important and meaningful tasks foster experiences of success, satisfaction, and a deeper sense of purpose.

What aspects of your work are important to you? In what areas are you important to others?

In which tasks or situations do you experience a sense of purpose and passion?

Protecting Your Calendar

If you were your own assistant and responsible for scheduling your workday, what would your calendar look like? Would it include more value-creating tasks and less of everything else? Would your assistant say "NO" on your behalf?

For years, workplace discussions have highlighted the increasing sense of urgency and the fragmentation of workdays.

Saku Tuominen and Pekka Pohjakallio wrote in their 2012 workbook: *"As a general rule, both the greatest sense of satisfaction and the most significant economic value come from proactive actions, but we don't have time to focus on them because our days are almost entirely filled with quick, reactive tasks."*

Unfortunately, the situation in workplaces has not improved since 2012; on the contrary, it has worsened. We are faced with an increasing number of distractions that capture our focus and time.

The sheer volume of information, various communication channels, and the alternatives presented by social media overwhelm our brain's capacity. We must learn to better set boundaries and regulate our work.



The tasks of a thought worker can roughly be divided into five categories:

Individual and quick tasks, such as handling emails and Slack messages, status reports, meeting minutes, and updating various systems.

Individual and time intensive tasks, like writing longer texts or preparing presentations.

Collaborative and quick tasks, such as different meetings, calls, and joint short gatherings.

Collaborative and time intensive tasks, such as workshops, innovation work, and development days.

Meta-Work, often invisible and non-billable preparatory and planning work, correcting mistakes, and adjusting in various directions.

When you review your calendar, where does your time go? Are there tasks that you can't assess the value of, or whose benefits aren't clear?

Where should you be spending more time, and where less?

Most knowledge workers feel that there is far too little time in their workdays to think, plan, and dive deep into tasks (*Heltti's Direction of Thought Work Report, Part 1*). The days fill up with putting out fires and ad-hoc tasks, which are often more important to others than to oneself.

Protecting your calendar and clearly planning your workday are key to eliminating unnecessary busyness and enabling you to focus on what truly matters.

Mental Resilience

In today's work environment, there is a lot of talk about self-leadership and managing one's mind. Have you ever paused to consider why this is the case?

One likely explanation is that there is more to manage in the world than ever before. To succeed in our work and maintain our well-being in the future, we need to learn how to focus and firmly protect our minds from distractions. This requires mental strength to avoid checking WhatsApp or other social media temptations during tasks that require concentration—temptations that reward and hook us without us even realizing it.

Individually and Collectively

When we talk about thought work, many people first think of solitary thinking. The image that comes to mind is that of a knowledge worker sitting in their office, reflecting and writing down their thoughts. And indeed, knowledge work is often like this. At its best, individual cognitive work brings a sense of purpose and accomplishment.

However, no organization can thrive if everyone is only thinking alone in their own silos. Collective thinking and interaction with others are essential.

This year, leadership and social influencing skills, along with empathy and active listening, are again featured among the top ten future skills in the World Economic Forum's *Future of Jobs* report.

You can dive deeper into the skills of thought work mentioned above in the writings of this report.

As experts in thought work, we regularly collaborate with various organizations and individuals to explore how thought work can be done in a more sustainable way.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach, but we are happy to share effective practices that can be adapted to individual work styles and continue learning together with our clients.



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03

A Snapshot of a Thought Worker's Daily Life

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A Snapshot of a Thought Worker's Daily Life

The following example story isn't about anyone specific, yet it reflects the reality of far too many.

Do you recognize any patterns from your own workday?

8:00 AM. Morning routines felt rushed, and you sit down at your desk with a cup of coffee. Without much thought, you open your emails and messaging apps, skimming through everything that's come in. You remind yourself of other important tasks scheduled for the day but decide to respond to a couple of quick and easy messages immediately, marking some as unread for later follow-up.

This automatic habit floods your mind with countless contexts: people, tasks, timelines, and problems. Because you don't address everything, some of your time is wasted as you'll need to revisit these messages again later. Multiple "mental tabs" remain open, starting an unnecessary strain on your working memory.





9:04 AM. You begin working on the most critical task of the day—your contribution to a thought-intensive project. You had deliberately kept your morning free, knowing it would require focus. After a brief moment of orientation, you're getting into the flow, but notifications ping and flash, causing repeated interruptions. Then, without you noticing, a meeting gets added to your calendar for 10:00 AM.

A poorly planned start to the day delayed your transition to critical work, draining your energy. Notifications constantly disrupt your focus, wasting time and effort while increasing stress levels. For the brain, breaking concentration and resuming work is labor-intensive.

The ad hoc meeting shortens your available work time and becomes the first unforeseen event of the day. Predictability fosters a sense of control, while unpredictability erodes it, leading to greater cognitive strain.

10:00 AM. The meeting begins, and you join it on the fly, without reviewing the agenda. The task you were working on remains unfinished. The meeting's purpose is vague, and you're unsure of your role. You were invited "just in case" because your calendar looked free. Meanwhile, you glance at notifications and reply to a few quick messages.

The incomplete work lingers as an open "mental tab." The lack of clarity in the meeting frustrates you, as does the lost time you had reserved for your project.

The messaging back-and-forth triggers multitasking, wasting energy on context-switching and increasing the likelihood of errors.

11:00 AM. Another meeting starts immediately after the previous one, leaving no time to prepare. It takes you a moment to grasp what the discussion is about. Some topics don't even concern you, and you quickly respond to a few emails you left unanswered earlier.

The lack of a break between meetings hampers your ability to transition and recover. Multitasking continues, creating a false sense of productivity. For brain-friendly work, balancing strain and recovery is crucial.

12:10 PM. You eat lunch at your desk while scrolling through messages. You check social media and news on your phone during your meal. A message arrives, requesting a quick call. A colleague informs you about a task requiring immediate attention. The task itself isn't difficult, but the instructions are vague, forcing you to gather details from multiple people. Another meeting looms, and there's no time to start the new task.

Your lunch break doesn't provide rest for your brain. Scrolling on your phone doesn't qualify as rest; it's demanding for your brain due to its constant input and context-switching. Detaching from work proves impossible as you keep checking messages. The day's second unplanned task raises your stress levels further, while the lack of clarity adds cognitive load.

2:07 PM. After a project-related meeting, you've finally gathered the necessary information to tackle the urgent task. However, your focus is already severely diminished. Your hand instinctively reaches for your phone, but you attempt to stay on track. Suddenly, your manager sends an urgent but quick request.

By this point, the day's mounting strain and insufficient breaks have depleted your resources. Focus and executive function are suffering, and the third unplanned task arrives.

3:30 PM. You've completed the day's urgent tasks and breathe a sigh of relief. You take a break on the couch, scrolling through your phone, but find it hard to unwind.

Your phone pings, and you're asked about the status of the morning's project—the one you were supposed to finish today so a colleague could continue working on it tomorrow. Another colleague messages about an email you sent earlier with missing attachments, and another was sent to the wrong recipient.

The day's chaos left the most critical task unfinished and forgotten. Now you approach it with far fewer mental resources. The sense of productivity from multitasking reveals itself to be an illusion, as small errors and unnecessary rework pile up.

5:48 PM. After a sluggish effort and multiple distractions, you finally complete the project. You close your laptop, but your mind feels foggy. Unanswered messages linger in your thoughts, and you habitually check work notifications on your phone throughout the evening.

The lack of focus prolonged your workday significantly. The heightened state of alertness from the day refuses to subside, keeping your “work mode” active even during personal time. Recovery remains insufficient.

7:02 PM. You realize you didn't go to your evening hobby. Instead, you're still on the couch, streaming content in the background while scrolling through short videos on your phone. You lack the energy to do anything else.

11:00 PM. As you lay your head on the pillow, work thoughts flood your mind, delaying sleep. You dream about forgetting to go to work entirely.

2:30 AM. You wake up, remembering that you didn't send the attachment with an email earlier.

Work demands and elevated stress levels have consumed your evening and night. The day lacked moments of joy and recovery, as exhaustion outpaced your capacity to focus. The deep sleep your brain craves is minimal, making the next day even harder.

As an occupational psychologist, I've heard countless versions of this story from individuals on the brink of burnout.

Improving **cognitive ergonomics** not only boosts brain health and well-being but also enhances productivity, increases job satisfaction, and creates a more sustainable work life.



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04

**Smart Work Methods And Tools to Support
Cognitive Work**



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Smart Work Methods And Tools to Support Cognitive Work

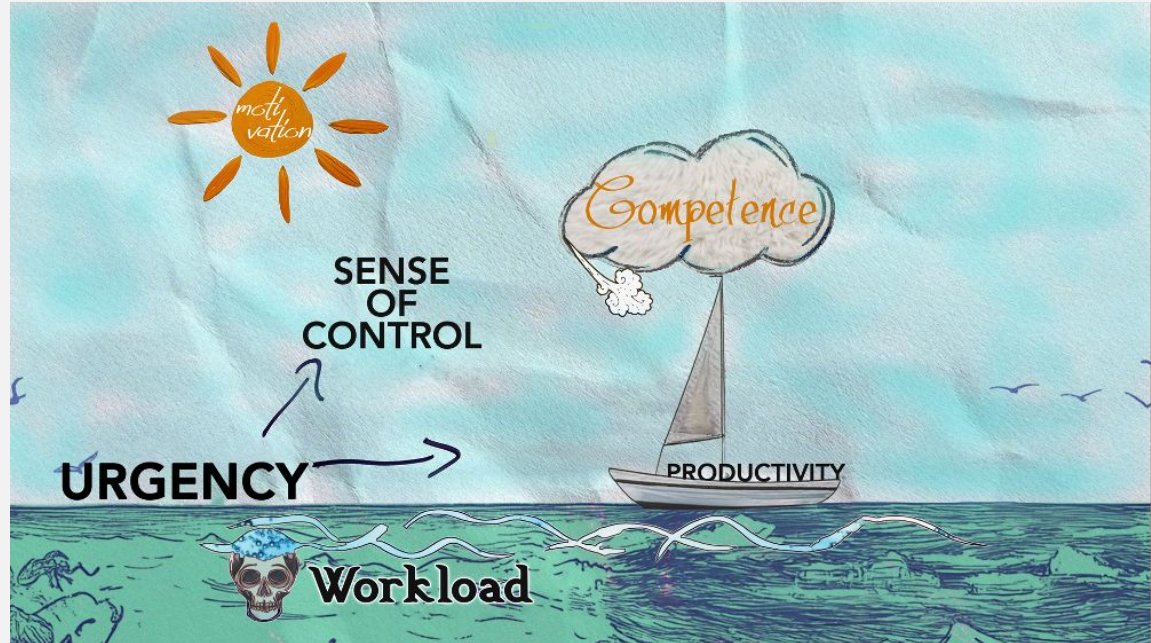
Our current work life is characterized by urgency. This is evident even in how people feel unable to engage in one of the most fundamental human activities: thinking. A survey conducted by Heltti on the direction of thought work revealed that 61% of knowledge workers feel they have too little time to think, ponder, and reflect amidst their other tasks. This lack of thinking time manifests as stress, which in turn becomes a problem for well-being and the meaningfulness of work.

Urgency is to some extent a part of our work life. There are simply many things that need to be done and considered. Modern work is inherently quite hectic and information-heavy.



Urgency becomes a problem when it starts to burden us. At its best, having a lot to do is reflected in strong productivity. Urgency can also help us identify and focus on the essential aspects of our work amidst all the distractions. However, these things do not happen automatically; they require smart working methods and tools to support them.

I have often described the relationship between urgency, stress, and productivity using the image on the side. When navigating the seas of work life, the stress caused by urgency can at worst drag us down. However, our goal should be that everyday urgency leads to productivity: it drives us to do the right things in the right way. This requires a strong sense of control over our daily lives so that we can stay on top of the situation.



Productivity also requires skills, particularly the development of meta-skills in working, meaning how one can prioritize, plan, and work in a smart way. Additionally, productivity demands genuine motivation towards the work itself, as without it, it can be very difficult to maintain enthusiasm amid all the clutter and chaos.

Next, I will list proven tools to conquer urgency and support productivity. These methods and tools have been used to support our clients in their daily work, and they are backed by both tested and researched foundations. With these tools, we can create time for thinking in our daily lives.

Mind management, in its simplest form, is about organizing your work habits and environment in a way that does not cause unnecessary strain on your thinking. The human mind is very susceptible to distractions. Our thoughts easily wander when we try to concentrate. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that:

1. Your work environment is modified to support focus and productivity, reducing stress and conserving willpower.
2. Your actions are rationalized, increasing productivity and a sense of control.
3. Your task field is planned by outsourcing tasks to a reliable and functional system, such as a to-do list.

These are the three aspects of mind management. All of these areas can be developed in daily life with simple changes.



Your Work Environment

Modifying your work environment to support focus starts by reducing the noise and distractions in your surroundings.

In your daily activities, it's beneficial to block notifications that disrupt focus and to schedule specific times for checking emails during the workday.

These practices give your mind the bandwidth to concentrate without constant reorientation that shifts your attention away from the task at hand.

A good way to protect your focus is to minimize temptations. Make the tasks you want to do as easy as possible and make those you want to avoid as difficult as possible. This reduces their allure because the effort required to engage in them prevents easy distraction.

For example, one of my colleague who found himself visiting Facebook too often during the workday changed his password to something so long he couldn't remember it without a cheat sheet, which was buried in the clutter of his desk. This significantly reduced the temptation to visit Facebook.

Your work environment is also influenced by others, such as colleagues. Therefore, it's important to agree on shared rules for interruptions: under what circumstances and how it's appropriate to interrupt someone's work.

A good practice is to consider how to signal to others that you want to focus on your tasks. Various methods, such as wearing headphones or using color-coded signals, can be effective.

It's also important to recognize that different spaces in the office can be used for different purposes. However, it's crucial to follow the rules of the space, such as not having conversations in a quiet area.

Your Actions

Smart work methods involve working in a way that does not create unnecessary cognitive load. Rational thinking and our working memory function efficiently when they can focus on tasks.

Since we have a limited number of attention channels and brainpower, a very good recommendation is to avoid multitasking—focus on one thing at a time.

Also, try to batch similar tasks together and work on related topics for as long as possible. This allows your mind to focus better without constantly adjusting to irrelevant distractions.

In your work, consider your energy levels and resilience. Try to tackle challenging tasks when your energy is at its peak, while routine tasks can be managed even when you're not at your best.

It's individual when each person feels most effective, so this principle requires self-awareness and the courage to manage your work.





Planning Your Task Field

Our implicit cognition (unconscious mind) constantly pushes open loops into our explicit cognition (conscious mind), which we use when trying to focus on things. Other information channels in our work also flood us with tasks that need to be handled.

To manage these open loops (like tasks that pop into your mind), we need to create closure. Tasks that distract from thinking and focus should be transferred to a task or to-do list.

This ensures that our mind can relax because the tasks on the list are no longer distracting us since they've been consciously acknowledged. They're effectively closed loops in our mind. The to-do list also ensures that tasks are completed on time. Therefore, tasks should be scheduled, defining when they need to be done.

A practical approach is to gather all tasks and ideas into a collection tool. They stay safer there than in your memory (and don't strain your thinking in the same way).

Since the to-do list should also support productivity and action, it's advisable to break larger projects into smaller, concrete actions that are easy to start working on.

The purpose of the to-do list is to help you plan your daily work.

Adding Planning To Daily Work

Smart work methods largely involve increasing planning in daily life. Our working environment is increasingly hectic and fragmented. Tasks and systems have become more complex, so we need more planning to support productivity and well-being at work.

The calendar is an extremely important tool for managing your work. It's important to allocate time in your calendar for planning your work, moments when you can calmly organize your task field and prioritize daily work. One effective way to increase thinking time in daily work is to reserve time for it directly in your calendar.

The time spent on planning pays off as more efficient work, reducing chaos and freeing up mental bandwidth. This increased flexibility in daily life also allows time for thinking.

Also, dare to prioritize genuinely. Prioritization is the art of cutting; to add something, you must also be willing to take something away.

Weekly planning is highly recommended for all thought workers.

You can start by reserving time at the beginning and end of the week. At the start of the week, review what needs to be done and when, and prioritize goals by importance.

At the end of the week, reflect on what you've accomplished, what has been postponed, and what's coming up next week. After doing this, your mind can relax for the weekend without work matters spinning in open loops in your head.

Link weekly planning to quick daily planning: spend a short time at the beginning and end of each day planning—review what needs to be done and prioritize in the morning and provide feedback by reviewing what you've accomplished and what has been postponed at the end of the workday.

Once you've got your daily and weekly planning in order, you can incorporate monthly and annual planning into your work. These focus on larger goals related to your development.

If you haven't done detailed work planning like this before, you might start with the following exercise:

A background image of a calendar with dates and days of the week (T, F, S) visible. The text is overlaid on this background.

EXERCISE TO IMPROVE PLANNING SKILLS AT WORK

TAKE OUT YOUR CALENDAR

1. **RESERVE MORE TIME FOR PLANNING AND ORGANIZING YOUR WORK: CREATE MOMENTS IN YOUR DAILY WORK FOR PLANNING YOUR WORK AND STRENGTHENING YOUR TIME MANAGEMENT.**
2. **THINK ABOUT WHEN AND HOW OFTEN YOU WANT TO DO THIS (DAILY, AT THE BEGINNING AND END OF THE WEEK), AND CONSIDER WHAT CONTENT YOU WANT TO REVIEW (THE CONTENTS OF YOUR TO-DO LIST, ORGANIZING YOUR CALENDAR AND TIME MANAGEMENT, PRIORITIZING TASKS).**

TRY THIS APPROACH FOR ONE MONTH AND REFINE IT ACCORDING TO YOUR NEEDS. FIND A METHOD THAT WORKS FOR YOU TO INCREASE PLANNING.



Remember Compassion, Humanity, and Well-Being

Smart work habits encompass many elements: improving personal and collective prioritization, adopting efficient communication practices, and rationalizing shared tasks since urgency in organizations is always a collective creation.

However, I want to conclude with a different perspective. The purpose of mind management and adopting smart work practices is not to push everyday work efficiency to the extreme.

Smart work habits and planning are about sustainable, not temporary, productivity. It must be effective over the long term.

Such an approach would be senseless as it would only lead to burnout. Occupational burnout is already almost a national illness in Finland, so what we need is not more intensification but smart productivity.

Part of this smart productivity is learning to be compassionate with ourselves, recognizing our own and others' humanity, and supporting each other's well-being.

Time must also be reserved for recovery, and there should be flexibility in work that allows space for reflection.

Returning to the image presented at the beginning of the text, we see a vessel sailing forward on the sea, which serves as a metaphor for achieving results at work.

It is important to recognize that, just as at sea, the conditions at work can be very challenging. Achieving results is easier when conditions are favourable.

However, there are situations where achieving results is very difficult precisely due to the circumstances.

In these moments, self-compassion becomes crucial: avoid rushing and panic, instead adjust your actions according to the challenges. Plan and prepare for better conditions so you can move forward effectively once again.

Smart work habits and planning are about sustainable, not temporary, productivity. It must be effective over the long term.



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05

Why Should Knowledge Workers Care About Their Own Mindset?

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Why Should Knowledge Workers Care About Their Own Mindset?

In a rapidly changing, complex world, better mental skills are increasingly needed. The ability to reflect, take perspective, develop one's thinking, and regulate one's actions will play a crucial role in the future job market.

The work of a knowledge worker increasingly involves navigating changing configurations and systems, which require versatile thinking skills, collaboration, and the ability to adjust one's actions. Reflection skills and calming the mind are vital meta-skills that become even more important in the midst of constant change.

Various impulses and increasing demands make regulating attention, expanding thinking, and controlling interaction skills critical. A calm mind also enables the use of intuitive thinking and the ability to make quick, successful decisions.





Squirrel! – Attention Grabbing and Mind Control

In the past couple of decades, our work environment and the way we work have undergone significant changes due to technological development and globalization.

Over the same time period, there has been little developmental change in the human processor—the brain. The way the human mind operates and thinks in everyday life follows basic mechanisms: it is based on past experiences, established mental models, and routines.

Research shows that modern humans use only a fraction of their brain's capacity—ignoring the increasing demands of the changing environment for learning, adapting to changes, and solving problems in new ways.

Thus, the environment requires us to use our thinking and processing capacity more efficiently, while our daily lives are filled with more and more distracting signals, stress, and performance pressure, both at work and in our personal lives.

Our minds are like a rabbit caught in headlights, bouncing from one light beam to the next, heart racing and fighting for survival. From this state of mind, it's virtually impossible to think clearly, make conscious choices about our actions, or take restorative moments.

The good news is that we can choose, and we can influence our own mind – if only we can calm it down.



The Art Of Calming The Mind

Calming the mind is not a basic human trait but, for modern humans, it is quite a demanding skill—since the human mind is naturally restless. However, modern humans need the ability to stop for even just a moment in the here and now, to notice and distance themselves from what is happening inside their minds.

One of the best ways to calm the mind is to become aware of what is happening in the present moment.

For some, breathing exercises are a great way to stop a wandering mind: a few minutes of focusing on one's breath and bodily sensations brings the mind back to the here and now and helps guide one's thoughts.

For others, it works best to give the mind a task of observing the environment: find five square-shaped objects, three circular ones, two triangles, and one rectangular object.

Another method is to scan one's body lightly, noticing tightness or sensations in each body part before moving on to the next. There are many ways to do this.

When the mind's constant wandering is paused for a moment and the body's alertness is brought back to normal levels, the parasympathetic nervous system is activated, which lowers stress levels in the body.

The fewer signals of stress or danger the body receives, the more freely we can observe our environment, ourselves, and our thoughts.



Emotions and Thinking: Emotions Drive Decision-Making

The image of humans as rational, logical decision-makers is strong. However, in everyday life, numerous unconscious emotions guide human behavior and decision-making. Recent brain research shows how emotion is faster than our thinking: measurable bodily changes occur before we are able to name the emotion.

Likewise, experiments have shown that even unconscious emotions influence our perceptions and direct our attention—we just explain the choices driven by emotions with logical arguments after the fact.

In a constantly changing environment, humans are prone to experience uncertainty, which triggers a desire to be on guard. We are naturally inclined to detect threats.

At such times, we become sensitized to signals of danger and are more likely to interpret things negatively.

Our perception is tightly focused on this important but narrow observation, making it harder to see alternative interpretations or solutions to a situation.

And all of this happens in our everyday actions, unnoticed—activated by our finely-tuned survival mechanisms.

It is one thing to focus on what is happening to me, and quite another to focus on what is happening within me.

The Role of Awareness: Reflect on Interpretations and Recognize Emotions

The future will require us to have better awareness of what is happening in our minds and on an emotional level.

Recall a situation where you felt uncertain or feared rejection.

Imagine yourself back in that situation and feel what happened in your body: changes in breathing, heartbeat, and muscle tension.

Pay attention to where your focus went—whose voice, tone, and gestures did you particularly observe?

How did you respond, and how did you interpret the situation? Were you able to look at yourself and your feelings with acceptance and allow them to flow through you?

Can you find words for what you are experiencing and recognize what defensive behavior your mind might want to engage in: "I notice I am afraid that others will laugh at my ideas, and I interpret that they want to end the meeting soon. I don't want to make myself vulnerable and share my thoughts."

Now place yourself in the same situation, but this time, take on the role of a benevolent observer, stepping back. Take a few deep, focused breaths to awaken your curious mind. Pay attention to looking for different signals: can you find a gentle look, a calm posture, a friendly smile, an interested expression, etc.?

Reflect on how you want to act in this situation and how you choose to approach it.

Updating Your Belief System: Are You Ready to Rethink?

Haste and time constraints expose us to old thinking patterns, which limit our ability to think creatively and find new solutions.

Psychologist Ilona Rauhala speaks about complex thinking skills—the ability to understand the big picture, recognize our own cognitive biases, and challenge old thought habits. By reflecting on our own thinking, we can better tolerate uncertainty and collaborate more effectively.

In a complex world, the ability to take different perspectives and view situations more broadly is needed. When we practice selective attention and look at things from different angles, we find more solutions and can make better decisions. This improves both mental well-being and responsibility, as the ability to see multiple options opens active agency and decision-making, regardless of environmental pressures.

We have the power to influence selective attention—what we look at, think about, and how we react. You can practice selective attention by consciously deciding to focus on one positive aspect of each participant in team meetings.

You can also learn to take different perspectives and think about what other viewpoints might exist beyond the one from which you are approaching the matter.

Or, what if you tried to make a generous interpretation of a comment or action that triggered difficult emotions: what good intention might lie behind this remark or behavior?

Reflecting on one's own mind, emotions, and belief systems can be effectively developed through self-reflection.

Often, significant steps in the development of thinking skills can be taken with the support of systematic development, such as through external supervision or coaching.

The key, however, is to begin with improving the skills of one's own mind.



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06

The modern workplace challenges teams' quality of thinking and collaborative learning

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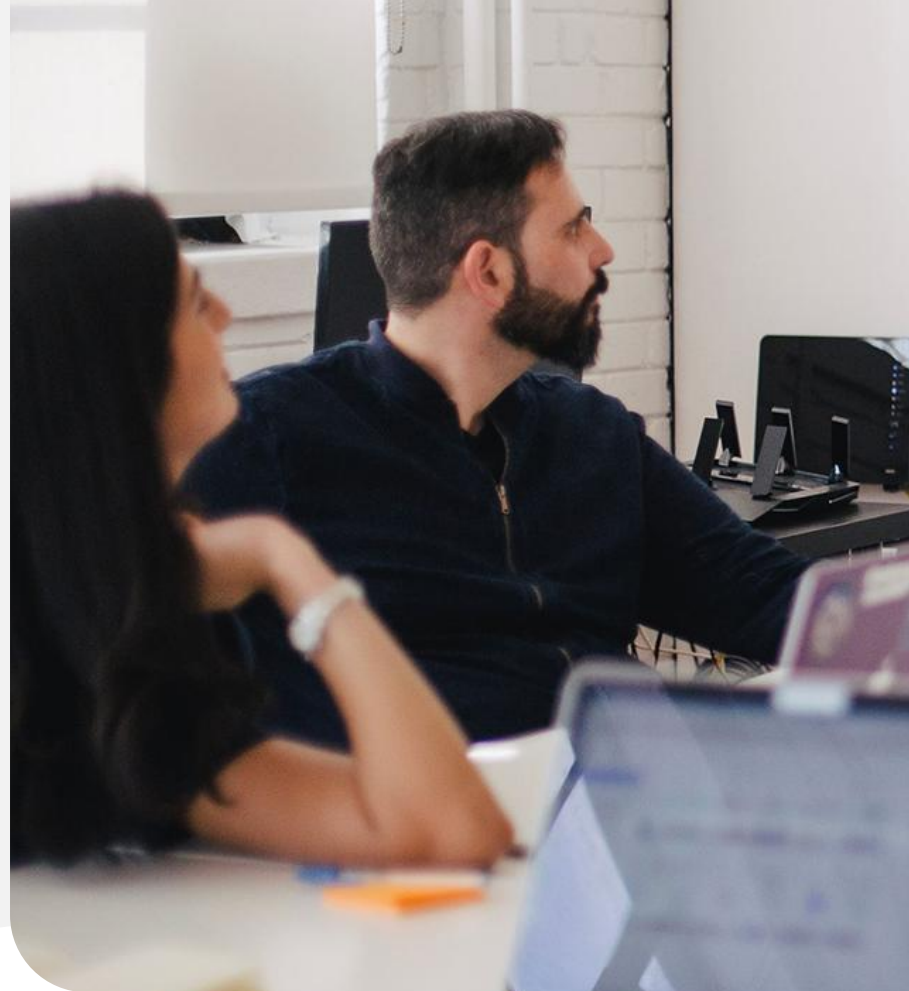
The modern workplace challenges teams' quality of thinking and collaborative learning

In recent years, the workplace has undergone significant changes that impact how organizations think, learn, and collaborate.

The shift in work structures, particularly the rise of hybrid work, has undermined traditional rituals for building community and forms of interaction.

At the same time, the growing focus on task-oriented work has led to shared thinking and learning taking a backseat.

As a result of these changes, the conditions for high-quality thinking and collaborative learning within teams have weakened.



The Challenges of Building Community in Hybrid Work

Hybrid work, where part of the work is conducted through remote connections, has reduced opportunities for spontaneous interaction and the development of a close-knit community. While virtual meetings and digital tools offer ways to stay connected, they cannot fully replace the richness of face-to-face interactions.

In remote settings, observing emotions and team dynamics becomes significantly more challenging, and even with cameras on, it's difficult to sense the nuances of others' presence or mental state.

This can lead to a situation where participants are only present in name, engaging in other tasks or missing out on genuine interaction.

When there are no established practices for communication and strengthening community, meetings are easily filled with task-oriented discussions. In such cases, the conversation fails to deepen, and there is no assurance of shared understanding.

While task-focused communication may be productive in the short term, it does not foster a sense of community or promote deeper thinking in the long run.

The Impact of Overemphasized Task-Oriented Work Communities

When task-orientation dominates work communities, the sense of shared purpose can diminish. Employees may begin to feel like mere tools, with their sole role being to complete tasks rather than contribute to collective thinking and interaction.

As a result, the connection to the community weakens, and the value and meaning of work become narrower. There is neither time, space, nor resources for dialogue, collaborative thinking, or building shared understanding.

However, research (e.g., Edmondson, 2023; Lampinen et al., 2017) shows that fostering community and connection not only improves employee well-being but also enhances organizational efficiency and customer experience.

Shared thinking and interaction can generate new, creative solutions that improve an organization's ability to tackle challenges and develop its operations.

Therefore, supporting high-quality thinking and collective learning should be a central aspect of organizational leadership.

Leadership of Thought Work – The Path to Collective Learning

Supporting high-quality thought work within an organization requires structural changes and cultural renewal.

Well-led thought work is not just about managing task-oriented activities but also about supporting shared thinking processes and interaction.

High-quality thought work demands the ability to evaluate both individual and collective work and to continuously develop through that reflection.

A **thinking-aligned approach** to working within a team involves agreeing on shared working practices, such as communication channels, mutual support systems, meeting structures, and methods for collective learning.

The **ethics of thinking-intensive work** refers to the mutual sharing of observations, thoughts, and fears that hinder progress, as well as discussing what it means to do thinking-intensive work in a professional and high-quality manner. It also requires the ability to honestly assess the value produced by both individual and collective work, as well as the process of learning together—that is, reflection.

It's not just about what is done, but also about how we think together and develop our ways of thinking.

Reflection skills—the ability to examine one's work and its impact collectively – can only develop with the support of others and through interaction.

The Leader's Role in Supporting Collective Thinking

Making changes to the culture of work communities and organizations is not easy, but it can be advanced through the everyday practices of teams and leaders.

Small experiments and changes that happen in daily routines can lead to significant, visible results.

In this context, the role of leaders increasingly becomes more facilitative, with an emphasis on understanding team members' experiences, needs, and capabilities.

A leader's role is to support the development of thinking through a coaching approach—by asking the right questions and helping the team find a shared understanding and direction.

The leader also acts as a facilitator of collective thinking and a driver of change, ensuring that the team does not overlook opportunities for reflection. This role requires strong communication skills, as well as the ability to guide the team towards its goals.

At the same time, team members' roles shift from being mere doers to active participants who lead their own thinking and contribute to creating collective change. Knowledge work becomes not just individual performance, but a process of shared learning and development

At its best, thinking together and working towards a common goal with great teammates is energizing, enjoyable, and effective. This is what our work life is sorely missing.



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Heltti's three wishes for Finnish knowledge work



1. Stopping to reflect on the bigger picture

We would like to give leaders of knowledge work the opportunity to take a week to stop, think, and plan how the year's work should be approached.

What would be the most important goals to strive for? What should be the main focus, and what could be left undone?

This would also include the chance to brainstorm with colleagues from their own workplace and seek advice from outside their usual circles.

2. The ability to concentrate and work without rushing

We would like to offer all knowledge workers the patience and opportunity to focus, delve deeply, and immerse themselves in their work. This would involve the ability to concentrate and the skill to work without rushing.

The result would be a peaceful state of mind, with energy to spare for life outside of work as well.

3. Restoring joy in work and shared energy

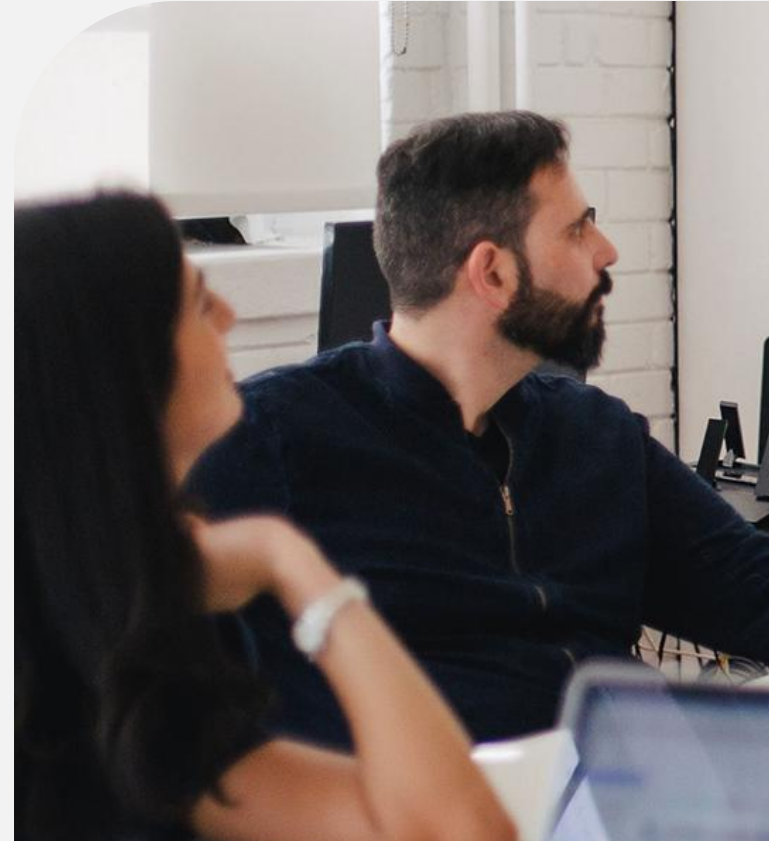
We would like to restore joy to the workplace, bringing back shared energy and laughter in the hallways and meeting rooms.

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In the daily life of thought work organisations and thought workers

[Heltti Oy](#) is Finland's only organisation specialising in thought work, comprising Heltti Business and Consumer Services, the Academy of Philosophy and Shortum.

The services provided by Heltti and the [Academy of Philosophy](#) for Thought work organisations cover occupational healthcare, mind, thought work leadership and thinking skills.

For consumers, Heltti offers [therapy services](#) such as brief therapy by psychotherapists, psychotherapy, couple and family therapy, and youth therapy.

[Shortum](#), which trains social and healthcare professionals, is also part of Heltti, and offers training in brief therapeutic working methods and therapy skills to private and public sector actors.

Our mission is to help people and thought work organisations work better.

Direction of thought work –series

I	Part I: Sometimes I think in secret
II	Part II: A firm grip and room to breathe
III	Part III: Mind at work
IV	Part IV: Choose to think, not to rush



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