

Flow at work

*Factors determining
the optimal experience at work*



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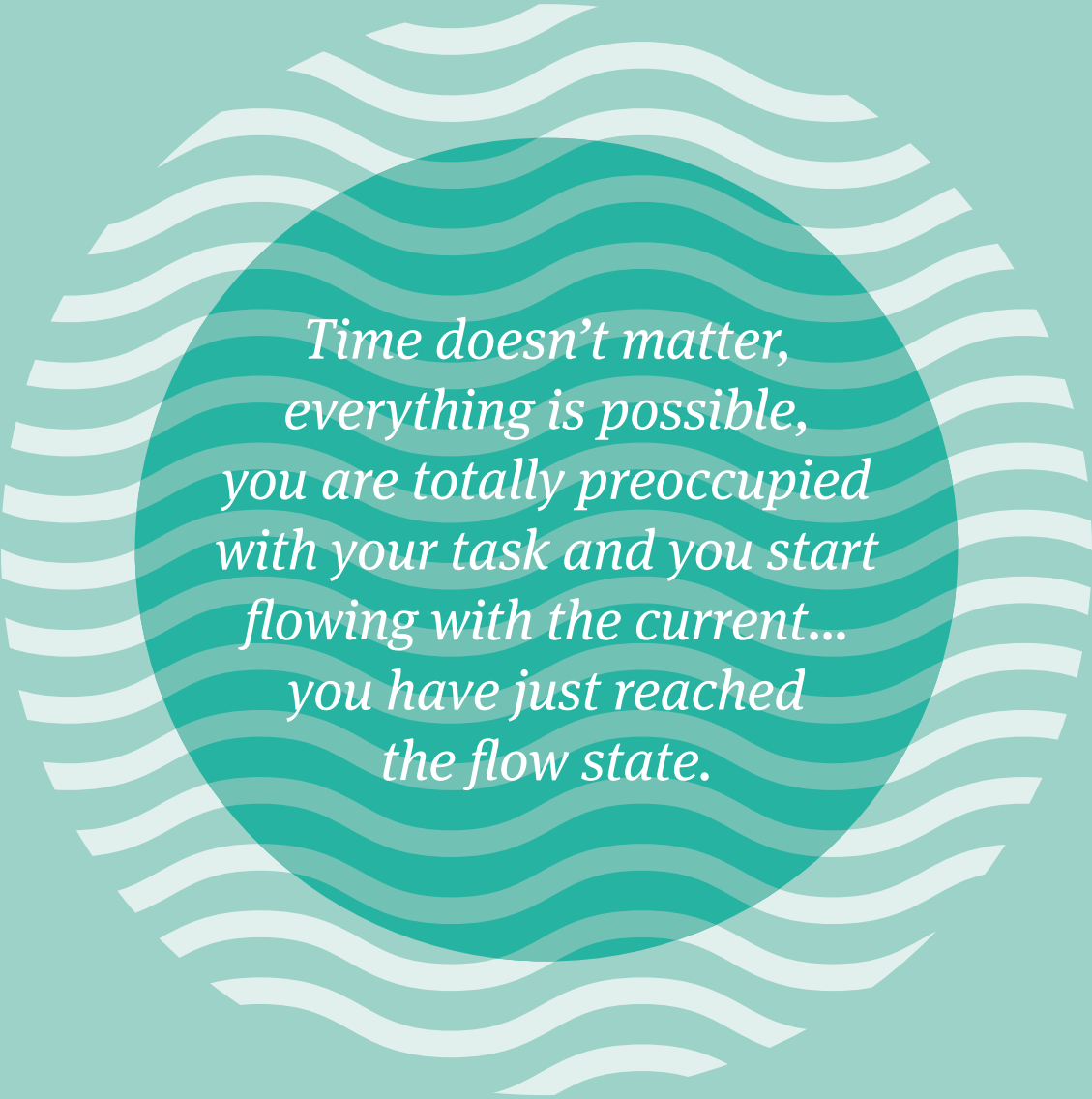
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*Time doesn't matter,
everything is possible,
you are totally preoccupied
with your task and you start
flowing with the current...
you have just reached
the flow state.*



1 *Introduction*

Elation, inspiration and total absorption – these words are very often used to describe the state of flow. It results in great commitment to the task completion process, satisfaction and increased efficiency; that’s why it is a desirable experience in different areas of our social life. In terms of working, the flow state is exceptionally valuable. Flow is accompanied by employees’ great commitment, which contemporary companies consider a key aspect for achieving their market success.

Contemporary organisations do their best to attract the most talented employees and motivate them to work effectively. However, the most important actions are those that are aimed at influencing workers and the whole organisation in a constant way. Improving the working environment is one such action. A well-designed space, which facilitates the achievement of the optimal *flow* experience, can increase employees’ productivity and job commitment. As a consequence, it turns out to be a very valuable investment made by an employer.

How can organisations create a working environment that will facilitate the achievement of flow?

In this report, we will answer this question. We will do this by analysing the current research findings concerning the concept of *flow* on various levels. We will present not only theoretical deliberations based on the reference literature, but also empirical investigations into the aspect of workplace and office space optimisation. We strongly believe that understanding this phenomenon will result in better use of human capital, which is the key value of contemporary companies.

Flow – the optimal experience

The concept of *flow* is placed on the boundary between positive psychology and motivation. It was defined by Hungarian-born American psychologist **Mihály Csíkszentmihályi** (1975). According to Csíkszentmihályi, *flow* is a psychological state strongly connected with the task being performed by an individual at a particular moment. It is an optimal experience involving pleasure and great satisfaction.

Flow is defined as an autotelic experience. “Autotelic” is a word composed of two Greek roots, meaning “self” and “goal”. It means that an individual undertakes the activity leading to the *flow* state, and continues it because it is pleasurable and intrinsically rewarding. The individual is characterised by intrinsic motivation and isn't influenced by external factors or benefits (Csíkszentmihályi, 1975, 1979).

...and the universal one

Flow is universal, because it can be experienced by all people, regardless of their differences. It has been demonstrated by a multi-year research project conducted by psychologists with more than 8,000 representatives of different ethnicities and cultures, being of different genders and different ages, having different levels of education and carrying out different tasks. All of the respondents, regardless of their background and other aspects, described the experience of performing a satisfying activity in a similar way.

The people surveyed very often compared the state to spontaneous flowing with a current, and defined its features almost the same way (Csíkszentmihályi, 2005). Based on the research findings, Csíkszentmihályi worked out a list of the characteristic elements of the *flow* state. Each of them can have different intensity, and each can influence the intensity of the *flow* experience. To reach and experience *flow* at least one element is necessary (Csíkszentmihályi, 2005). If there is one element, or a few elements with low intensity, the general *flow* experience will be less intense. But when there are all elements with great intensity, it will result in reaching a very intense *flow* state.

The *flow* state is strongly linked to positive emotions and a high level of commitment (Csíkszentmihályi, 1975). It can make people totally preoccupied with their task and forget about the entire world (Csíkszentmihályi, 2005). The process of carrying out a particular task is so involving that an individual loses self-consciousness – their perception of the surroundings, their own body and tiredness. Pain, hunger, and other physiological needs are no longer important. The concentration state the individual is in is so deep and intensive that it is not possible to focus on any other aspects, apart from those concerning the activity that is being performed.

Flow is a psychological state strongly connected with the task that is performed by an individual at a particular moment. It is an optimal experience involving pleasure and great satisfaction.

Source: Csíkszentmihályi, 1975





According to Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, the flow state consists of the following elements:

- › *clear goals in the form of tasks or challenges,*
- › *a balance between high level skills and high level challenges,*
- › *direct and immediate feedback,*
- › *total concentration on the task that is being performed,*
- › *the loss of self-consciousness – physical needs are no longer important,*
- › *a sense of control over the action,*
- › *the transformation of time – hours seem to pass by like minutes and*
- › *a feeling that the activity is satisfying and intrinsically rewarding.*

When can we reach the flow state?

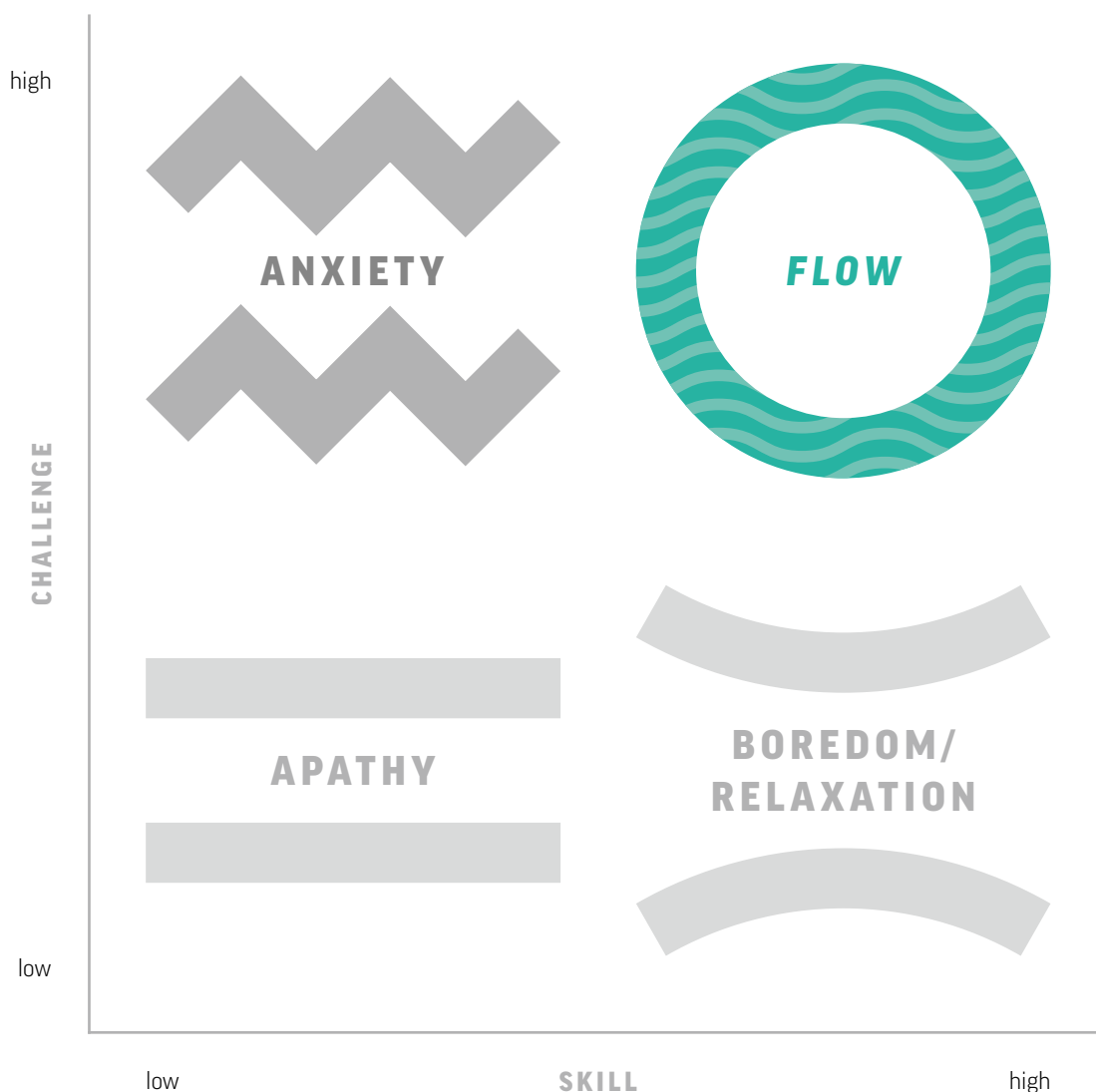
The *flow* experience is possible when people undertake an activity they are able to complete, and which has clear goals. These two aspects allow for greater identification with the task and greater awareness of all its elements. A key aspect is also immediate feedback on progress towards completing the task. Thanks to this, the person who performs a particular task gets information on its completion process and the achieved results.

Another important aspect is the sense of challenge: the *flow* state is experienced when performing a demanding task, if the individual's skill level is high. If the task is not challenging, the individual experiences boredom. But if the task is too difficult,

and the individual's skills are not sufficient, the individual feels anxiety and stress (Csíkszentmihályi & Csíkszentmihályi, 1992). So to reach the *flow* state, the individual's skill level must be commensurate with the difficulty level of a particular task; there must be a skill-challenge balance. This condition must be fulfilled both in terms of both physical and mental work (Csíkszentmihályi, 2005).

It doesn't matter what type of task is being performed, because every single activity can lead to experiencing *flow*, but it must pose a challenge to an individual and fulfil the above-mentioned conditions (Jin, 2011).

The flow model (Csíkszentmihályi & Csíkszentmihályi, 1992)



How can we experience flow?

Researchers Ghani and Deshpande (1994) have defined two aspects of the *flow* experience: concentration and pleasure. An individual is totally concentrated on a particular task and doesn't experience any negative reinforcement or pressure, which results in continuing the activity and deriving pleasure from performing it.

The *flow* state is accompanied by total commitment and great satisfaction. These two aspects are closely related and the link between them can be defined as a cause-and-effect one. Commitment is perceived as a consequence of pleasure and satisfaction; it implicates a lack of anxiety and motivates an individual to undertake activities with courage. Awareness of the direction an individual is heading in and the clearly defined goals ensure a sense of control over an individual's own actions and the whole situation. In connection with concentration and the transformation of time, the task performed in the *flow* state results in increasing both productivity and the innovative potential of an individual.

Every single activity can lead to experiencing flow, but it must pose a challenge to an individual and fulfil the above-mentioned conditions. The task performed in the flow state results in increasing both productivity and the innovative potential of an individual.





2



Flow with passion



Commitment and pleasure: that means passion

The *flow* experience is very often mentioned in the context of performing leisure activities (Csikszentmihályi & LeFevre, 1989). Passions and interests are the best examples of tasks that an individual undertakes just for sheer pleasure. They are initiated by an individual voluntarily, therefore they could be considered as a trigger for human intrinsic motivation (Kwilecki, 2011).

To fully understand why a particular passion – which is often expensive or dangerous – attracts an individual, it is necessary to go deeper into the way it is experienced. All the information gathered from the people surveyed clearly confirms the existence of the *flow* state. They claimed that while fulfilling their passions they experience “an absorbing feeling, being itself

a source of satisfaction, which goes far beyond the borders of anxiety and boredom” (Csikszentmihályi, 1997). In this psychological state, concentration on the task being performed is so deep that an individual cannot focus on anything else and doesn't think about their possible failures or other negative factors. What's more, the findings of research carried out into different types of passion (writing, sport, art, games) explicitly show that there is a positive correlation between the *flow* state and the effects an individual achieves (Csikszentmihályi & Csikszentmihályi, 1992). This means that the *flow* experience additionally motivates an individual to go on and do even more.





You are fully concentrated. Your thoughts aren't racing. You don't think about anything else. You are totally focused on the task you are carrying out. Energy is flowing freely through your body. You feel relaxed, free and at the height of your powers.

A dancer describing her experience during a good performance (information gathered by means of an interview, source: Csíkszentmihályi, 2005)

In a musical trance

It is believed that music has a positive influence on an individual. Research has shown that the process of composing music can increase human well-being (Valentine and Evans, 2001; as cited Lamont, 2012) and improve quality of life.

Musicians are often so engaged in creating a piece of music that they even lose self-consciousness, which means they experience *flow* (Gabrielsson & Lindström Wik, 2003). The *flow* state has an impact on the quality of the results they achieve: **the more often musicians experience flow, the better the results of their work** (Fritz & Avsec, 2007).



When I create a new piece of music, the whole world is

far away from me. I am in a trance, nothing and nobody else matter. I'm only with myself, in my own body. The here and now stop existing.

A musician describing his experience when composing (information gathered by means of an interview, source: Csikszentmihályi, 2005)



Sport without limits

It is widely accepted that sport and health are mutually related. Physical activity helps to reduce the negative emotions experienced in stressful situations, improve well-being and minimise anxiety, anger and depression. Other benefits of physical activity are self-improvement and self-development (Kwilecka & Brożek, 2006).

Several different sport disciplines are very often accompanied by the *flow* experience. However, to reach *flow*, the following conditions must be fulfilled: clearly defined goals, a sense of challenge, concentration and immediate feedback on the achieved result. The aspect of physical effort plays an important role here as well. It has been proven that there is a relationship between the *flow* experience and the way our bodies function – the rhythm of our hearts, blood pressure and the depth of a breath.

Research conducted among athletes (Swann, Christian et al., 2012) shows that more than 80% of people surveyed claim that the *flow* state they experience is always accompanied by a high concentration level, and almost 75% of them experience a strong sense of control at the same time. The loss of self-consciousness and transformation of time are experienced together with the *flow* state by 30% of the athletes surveyed.



I spend a lot of time on a boat and I spend lots of money on it, but I don't regret it – nothing can be compared to the feeling I experience when sailing.

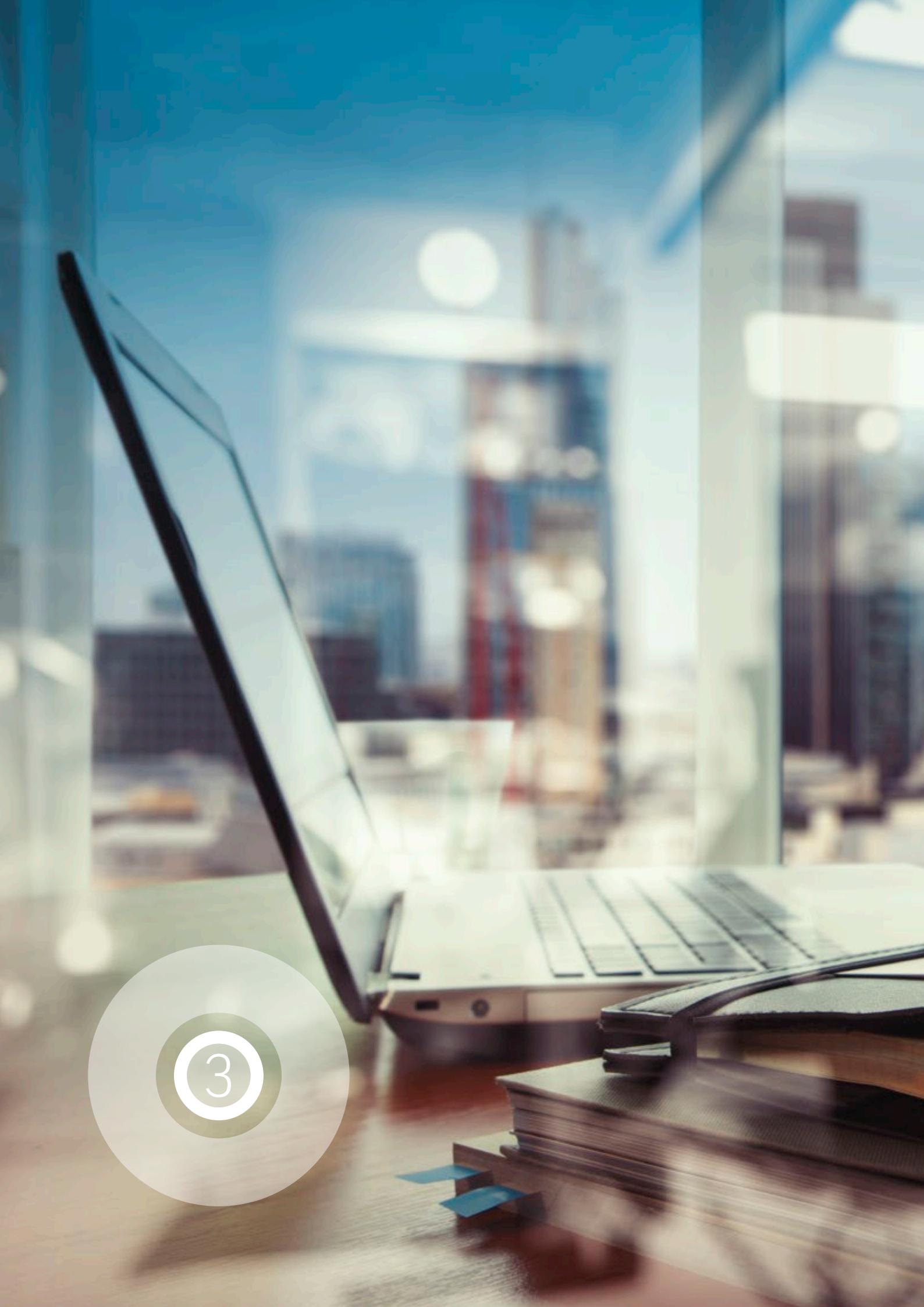
A sailor talking about his solo sailing across the ocean (information gathered by means of an interview, source: Csikszentmihályi, 2005)



”

You are so preoccupied with your task that you can't think about yourself as a separate being. You feel as if you are united with the activity you are undertaking.

An alpinist describing his experience when reaching a summit (information gathered by means of an interview, source: Csikszentmihályi, 2005)





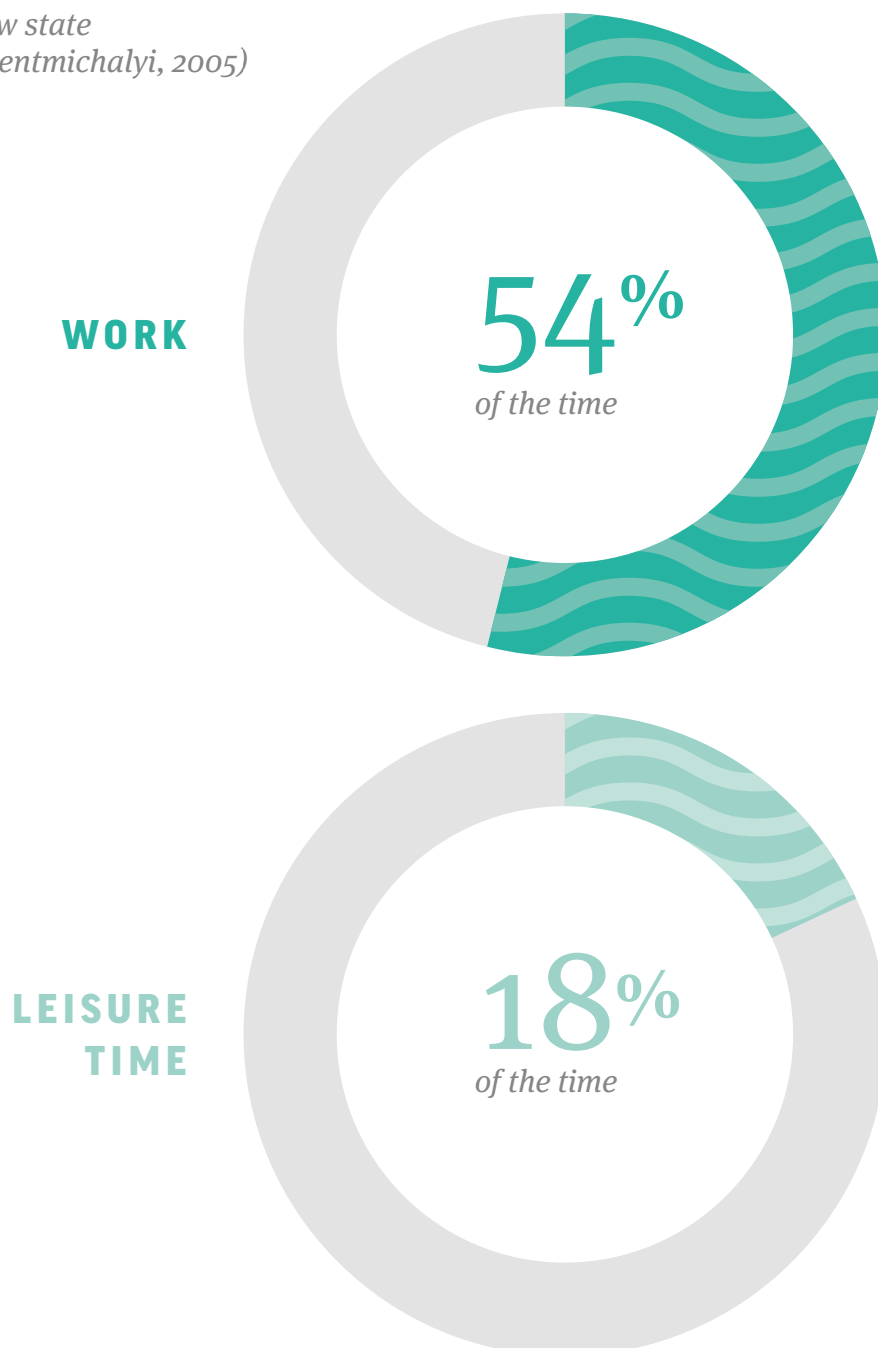
Flow at work

Is it possible to experience flow at work?

It is believed that people have difficulty in deriving pleasure, losing track of time and feeling totally committed at work. Leisure time and entertaining activities are definitely more often associated with the above-mentioned aspects. However, despite all these beliefs, research clearly shows the following paradox: **people reach the flow state at work almost three times more often than during their free time** (Csikszentmihályi & LeFevre, 1989). It has been found that employees experience great satisfaction and *flow* for over half of the time spent in their workplace. In comparison, when performing entertaining activities outside working hours, they experience the *flow* state for only 18% of their leisure time (Csikszentmihályi, 2005).

To fully understand the research findings, it is necessary to take a closer look at the characteristic features of both working time and free time. Work has a structured form: there are clear goals and tasks have a defined scope. Employees get immediate feedback on the results they achieve while performing their duties, which have a difficulty level often commensurate with their skills. So the “challenge” condition is fulfilled. Free time, in contrast, has no structure; it is up to an individual to decide how to manage it. Even though certain passions, interests or hobbies require an appropriate level of skill and have clear goals, which are the aspects accompanying the *flow* state, **the majority of people spend their leisure time passively**, losing control over it.

*The flow state
(Csikszentmichalyi, 2005)*



Difficulties in reaching the flow state at work

Why don't we associate an optimal experience such as *flow* with work, even though we know that the characteristic features of work aid in reaching the *flow* state? We are more willing to talk about the *flow* state we experience during leisure time than the *flow* we experience at work, even though the working environment is a place where we can reach the state almost three times more often than we do outside it.

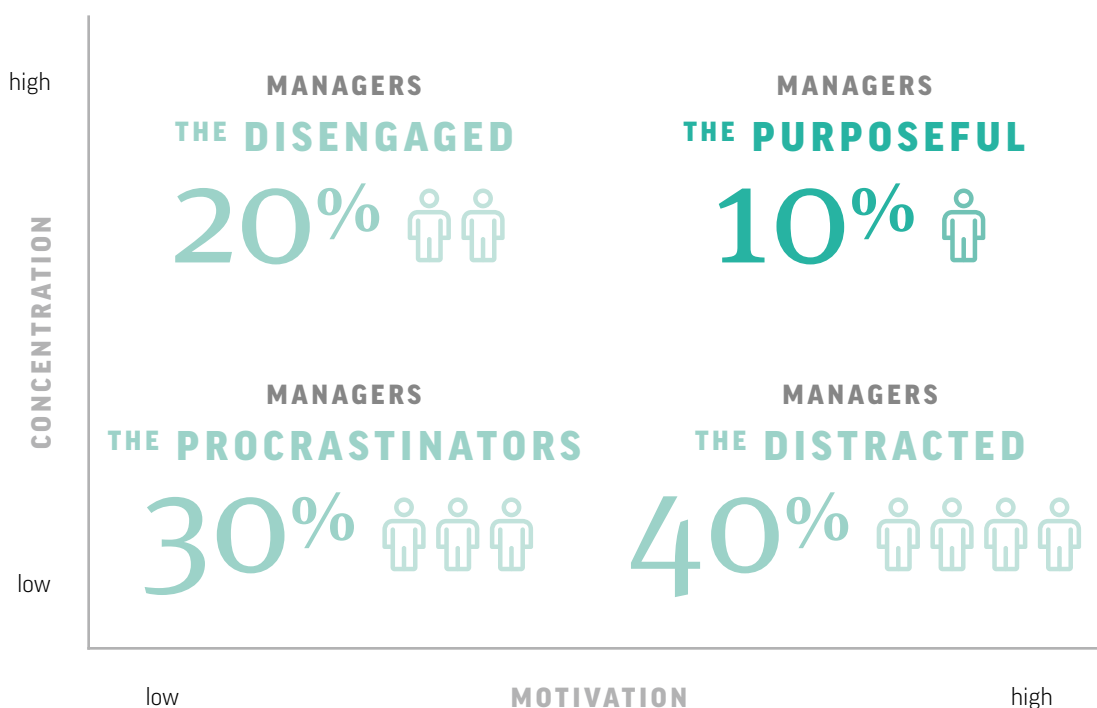
Despite all the research findings, which demonstrate the possibility of experiencing *flow* is higher at work than during leisure time activities, there are some survey results (Csíkszentmihályi, 2005) that clearly show **the flow state reached in a workplace is underestimated by employees**. This is connected with the negative approach people adopt towards their work. The people surveyed reported a frequent wish to work less and to spend more time on relaxation and entertainment, even though they experienced lots of positive feelings at work. Why do people have this kind of attitude? It is undoubtedly connected with the specificity of their workplace, and the difficulty in functioning within the environment of contemporary organisations, which is getting more and more complex. As a consequence of these factors, people start feeling occupational stress, which is a reaction to the difficult situations they have to go through at work. Work is in contrast with people's expectations; people encounter difficulties they must come to terms with (Penc, 2001).

Researchers (Łuczak & Żołnierzyk-Zreda, 2002) have defined the following sources of occupational stress:

- › unfavourable physical working conditions,
- › the state of having too much or too little work,
- › the lack, or a very low level, of control over work,
- › role vagueness or role conflict,
- › bad interpersonal relationships and
- › the lack of possibilities for professional development.

How do the factors above influence the situation within organisations? Professors Bruch and Ghoshal (2002) conducted research among different companies and found out that only 10% of the people on management boards are highly concentrated and highly committed at the same time. These people are able to plan their time properly and carry out the tasks they have been entrusted with in an efficient way; they can reach the *flow* state easily. 40% of the managers turned out to be highly motivated, but had difficulties in achieving the proper level of concentration within their working environment. They tend to be absent-minded, have no time for reflection over their work and get easily distracted. 20% of the managers surveyed appeared to be focused but not committed. They have a low level of intrinsic motivation and lack the resources necessary to work effectively. 30% of the managers turned out to be unable to concentrate and to see any meaning in their work; they are passive and they show neither initiative nor creativity in the activities they undertake.

The concentration and motivation levels of managers (Bruch & Ghoshal, 2002)



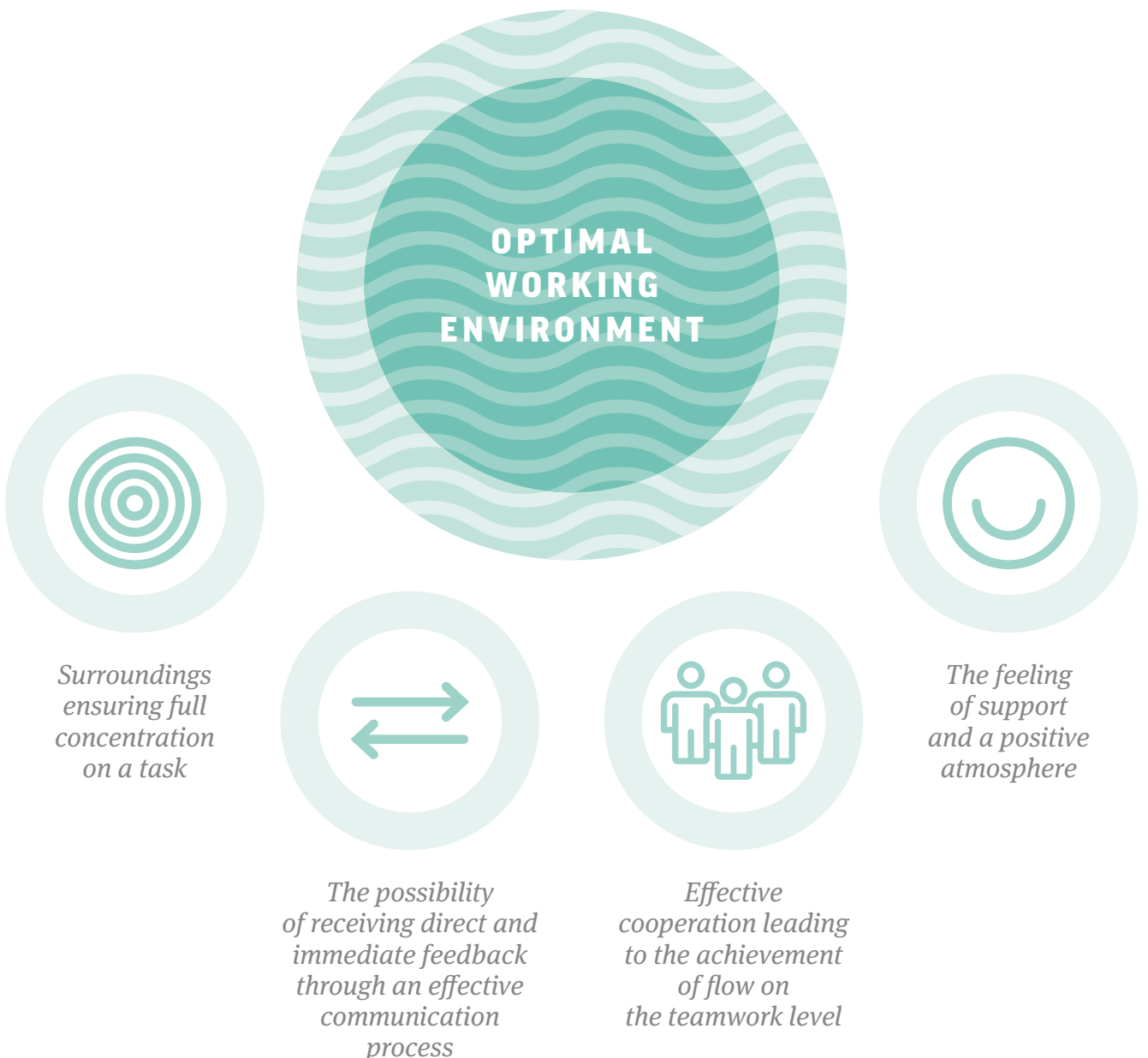
Conducive working environments

An optimal experience is something that people create themselves. Everything depends on their ability to control reality and events in a conscious way. Occupational stress, low work motivation, unfavourable working conditions, the inability to concentrate – these are the aspects that may prevent us from reaching the *flow* state or lead to lowering its intensity. So how can we rearrange our working environment and turn it into a place that will help us experience positive emotions more frequently, increase our commitment and finally reach the *flow* state?

In theory, every single activity can be changed so that it meets the requirements of the *flow* state (Csikszentmihályi, 2005). **Very often, however, the type of work and the scope of duties cannot be altered so easily.** Yet it is still possible to create the working conditions that will support employees in achieving

flow. According to research carried out among a group of employees, **91% of the people surveyed claimed that comfort in a workplace is the most important factor influencing their well-being** (Savillis, 2014), but only 25% of them work in an optimal working environment (Jones & Volpe, 2011).

The optimal working environment, which facilitates the achievement of the *flow* state, should be a place where employees are able to fully concentrate on a given task, receive immediate feedback within a process of effective communication and cooperate with others in an efficient way in order to experience *flow* on the teamwork level. It should also support employees in performing their everyday duties, create a positive atmosphere, minimise occupational stress and increase employees' identification with the tasks they perform.





A man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a light blue button-down shirt, is sitting in a chair by a window. He has a thoughtful expression, with his hand resting on his chin. He is holding a silver tablet computer in his other hand. The background shows a window with a view of a cityscape.

85%

of the office employees surveyed consider the level of noise as one of the most important factors influencing their well-being at work.

Source: Savillis, 2014

Concentration

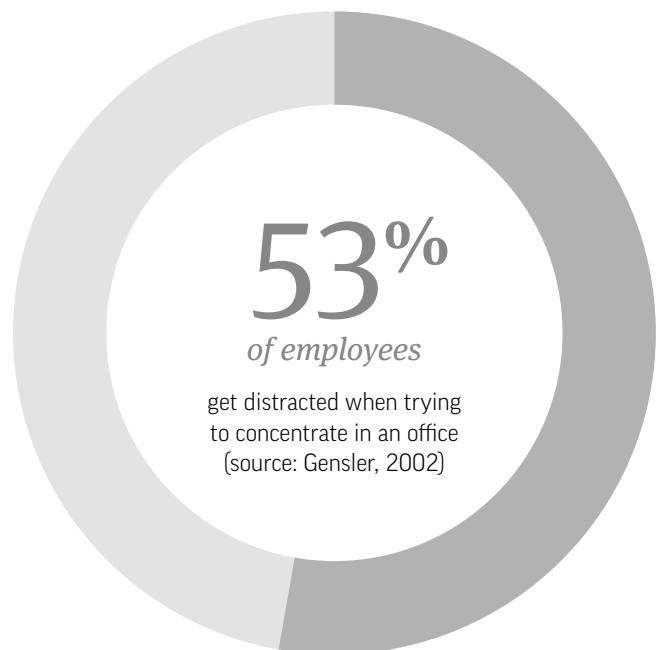
The main, and most important, aspect in the process of experiencing the *flow* state is full concentration on the task an individual performs. The number of interfering factors people are constantly faced with may prevent them from concentrating, or even distract them, during the task completion process. This has been confirmed by research data gathered by Bruch and Ghoshal (2002), which clearly shows that more than 40% of the managers surveyed are highly motivated, but they cannot reach the *flow* state due to their inability to concentrate.

Therefore, a key aspect in arranging an optimal working environment is to reduce the number of factors distracting people from reaching their optimal level of concentration. According to research conducted in different workplaces, 85% of the office employees surveyed consider the level of noise as one of the most important factors influencing their well-being at work. However, offices based on an open plan concept don't often ensure the proper conditions for undisturbed work. As a consequence, employees find it difficult to focus on the task they are carrying out at a particular moment. The research shows that 53% of the employees surveyed get distracted when trying to concentrate (Gensler, 2013).

Make your office like your home

Employees who work at least one day a week from home are more likely to reach the *flow* state than those who work only in an office (Peters & Wildenbeest, 2010; as cited in Peters, Poutsma, Vander Heijden, Bakker & Bruijn, 2014). When working from home, people have more time for reflection and concentration, which helps them experience *flow*. All employers should, therefore, deal with the following questions: **how can we provide employees with home-like conditions in their office?** How can we ensure enough privacy for people to carry out tasks requiring concentration?

There are many space and acoustic solutions for an office space arrangement that can provide employees with optimal working conditions and the proper level of concentration. Ideas like sectioning off zones designed for undisturbed work, designing individual workstations that separate employees from distracting factors, equipping office spaces with silent rooms, the use of special panels, flooring or materials with sound-absorbing properties – these are supported by available solutions that can increase employees' ability to concentrate and improve their comfort in an office.



Communication

The communication process plays a crucial role in a company – it helps employees exchange information and share their knowledge and ideas (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2002). Employees can communicate with each other in an indirect way by means of technological solutions, or in a direct way through face-to-face interactions. Direct communication can be divided into two types: formal, which takes place at a fixed time and place, and informal, which is initiated spontaneously, at any time. Many analyses of contemporary working styles have shown that informal communication is used more frequently and considered by employees as more valuable during the task completion process (CEBE, 2005).

Communication in the process of individual work

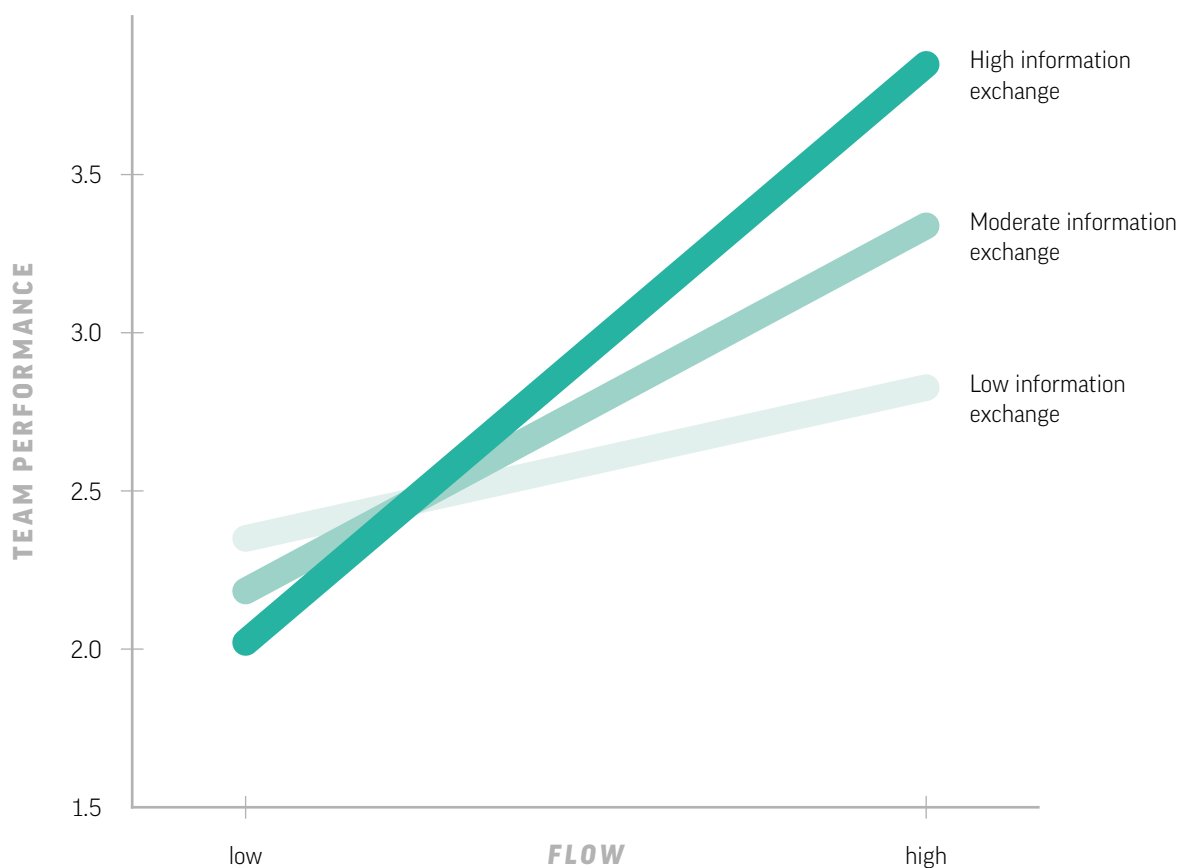
Effective communication is essential in terms of both individual work and teamwork. During the process of carrying out individual duties, **employees need to communicate the goals of their tasks and receive immediate feedback** on the progress they make. By communicating with superiors, employees are

able to understand the relationship between the task, the need and the expected result in an even better way (Stankiewicz, 1999), which in turn provides them with the optimal conditions for reaching the *flow* state (Csikszentmihályi, 2005).

Cooperation and effective information exchange

Most researchers focus on the analysis of the *flow* state reached during individual work. However, there is still some empirical evidence that clearly points towards the possibility of experiencing *flow* during teamwork (Aubé, Brunelle & Rousseau, 2014). Effective information exchange, which is the basis of efficient cooperation, helps employees reach the *flow* state. The process of exchanging information between team members involves a number of interactions and different forms of communication, which facilitates completion of the task with which they have been entrusted (Mesmer-Magnus & De Church, 2009). The research results clearly show that the more frequently employees communicate within a team, the more intense the *flow* state they can reach (Aubé et al., 2014).

The relationship between team performance and the flow state when information exchange is low, moderate and high (Aubé, Brunelle & Rousseau, 2014)



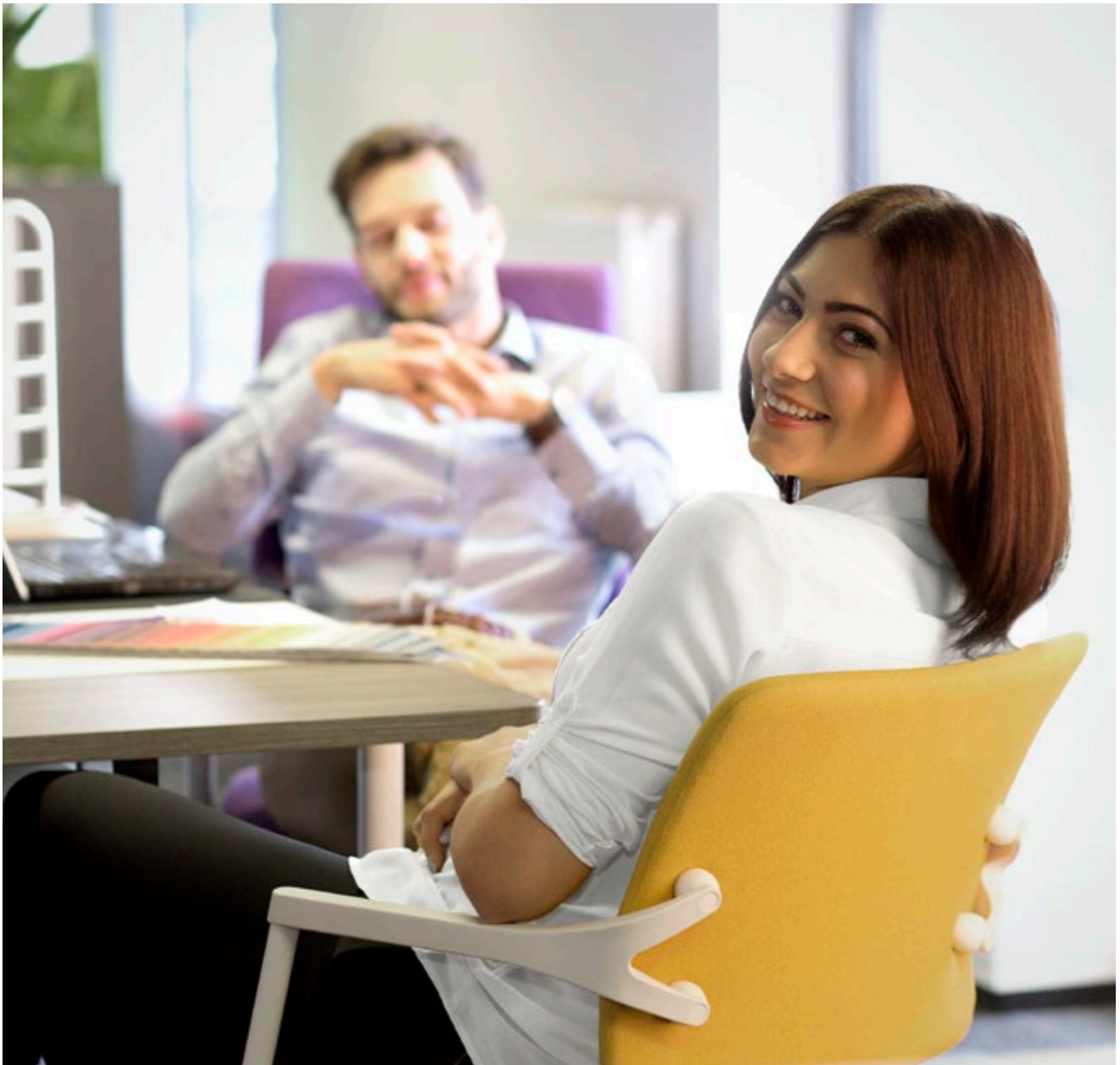
An office that supports communication

Unproductive communication in a company can lead to the ineffective use of its resources. To provide employees with a conducive working environment, which will support communication and aid in reaching the *flow* state both on the individual work and teamwork levels, it is necessary to ensure places designed for effective information exchange.

Both types of communication – formal and informal – have their own characteristic features, which means they require differ-

ent space solutions. Formal communication has a structured form and takes place in dedicated meeting rooms. Informal communication, in contrast, is free and spontaneous, and can occur practically anywhere in an office.

To improve cooperation in a company, it is highly recommended to arrange meeting zones designed for both types of communication. Because employees hold spontaneous interactions more often than formal ones, it is also advisable to reduce the number of standard meeting rooms and replace them with place zones designed for holding informal meetings within the office space.





Support and a positive atmosphere

A working environment that supports employees has a positive impact on their well-being and the overall atmosphere in an office. In a company, the aspect of support applies to the way employees are managed and to the types of relationships between them. According to research, the supportive attitude of an employer has a highly positive influence on the results achieved by employees and their job satisfaction (Bakker, Demerouti & Euwema, 2005). It has been shown that those employees who perceive their superior as a supportive person can experience the *flow* state more often than others who do not (Salanova, Bakker & Llorens, 2006).

Research results also show that friendly relationships between colleagues correlate with job satisfaction level (Cook & Wall, 1980; as cited in Peters et al., 2014) as well as with other psychological and behavioural aspects, including the *flow* state (Peters & Wildenbeest, 2010; as cited in Peters et al., 2014). Many researchers support the notion that positive social interactions at work facilitate the experience of *flow* (Walker 2010; Lin & Joe 2012; as cited in Aubé et al., 2014), while support from colleagues aids in reaching the state more frequently (Bakker, 2005).

Socialising office

An office space cannot guarantee the supportive attitude of an employer or good interpersonal relationships between co-workers. However, it can stimulate social interactions to a great extent and improve the general atmosphere at work. It is believed that a positive atmosphere in an office is strongly connected with the right office space arrangement, which **should reflect the company's values and meet employees' needs**.

An office should support employees in performing their everyday duties and facilitate the task completion process. Thanks to this, employees are sure to feel greater identification with an organisation, which in turn will help them adopt a positive approach towards the company they work for (Witting, 2006).

An office space which creates favourable conditions for a positive atmosphere and good relationships between colleagues should include so-called socialising zones.

Such zones include the canteen, informal meeting rooms, the fun room and other places designed for relaxation. If an office is equipped with these zones, of the proper size and adjusted to the company's character, it will support improved communication between employees, increase their creativity and strengthen the organisational culture (Ford, 2012).



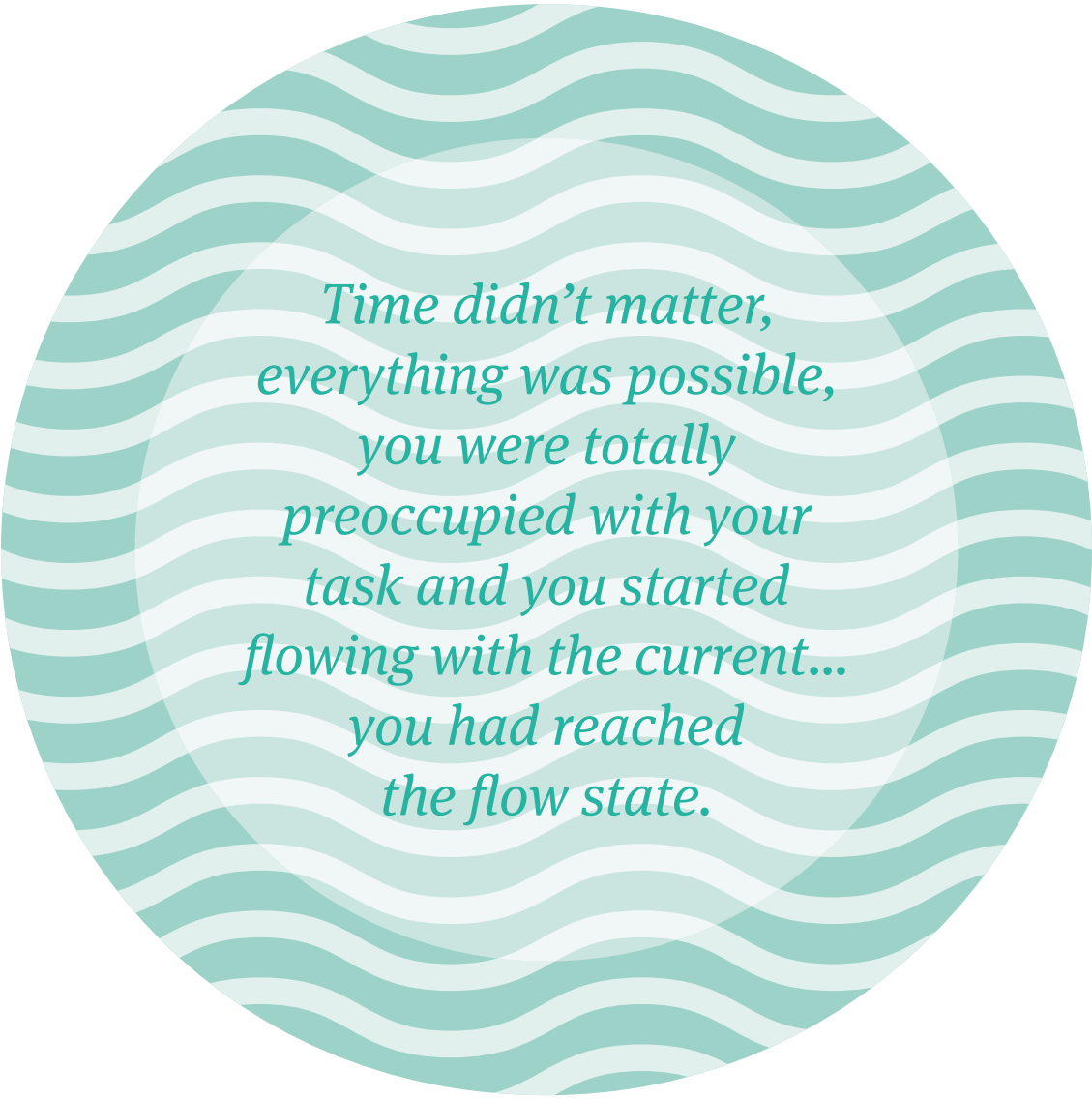
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Summary

Many of us associate the time spent at work with a tiring process of reaching external goals. Leisure time, in contrast, is something desirable, yet very often wasted. People spend their free time passively, which prevents them from deriving pleasure. They can neither work nor relax in a satisfying way. As a consequence, they live boring, uninspiring lives, losing control over them gradually.

The *flow* experience helps us regain that control, find the meaning in our lives and make all areas of our lives more interesting and more satisfying. Research (Csikszentmihályi, 2005) clearly shows that the more often we reach the *flow* state in a week, the better the quality of all experiences becomes. The *flow* state can improve the quality of life to a great extent and make it more valuable.

To make *flow* a more frequent experience at work, it is necessary to create a working environment that will help employees reach the state more easily. An optimal working environment influences employees and the whole organisation in a constant way, so it is a very valuable investment made by contemporary organisations. All the actions aimed at improving concentration, communication, cooperation and the overall atmosphere in an office can have a positive influence on employees' well-being and their job satisfaction, which will consequently result in facilitating the experience of *flow* in their professional lives.



*Time didn't matter,
everything was possible,
you were totally
preoccupied with your
task and you started
flowing with the current...
you had reached
the flow state.*





About the author



Ewelina Adamus – is an organisational psychologist and graduate of Jagiellonian University, Institute of Psychology. She is a specialist in the field of customer needs analysis, organisation and its environment assessment, preparing and conducting research projects.

Ewelina is currently working in the Workplace Research & Consulting Department of Nowy Styl Group. She is responsible for preparing and conducting dedicated research processes in workplaces, which are aimed at optimising the office space arrangement and supporting an organisation in reaching its intended goals. She monitors research findings concerning occupational psychology, produces reports and trains people both inside and outside the company.

About Nowy Styl Group

We are one of the leading European suppliers of comprehensive furniture solutions. Every day, we furnish new office blocks, conference halls, cinemas, stadiums, centres for music and sports, and multifunctional facilities. Every space arrangement project is based on an in-depth analysis of the customers' needs, their efficiency and working styles, and their ergonomics and acoustics. We accompany our customers at each stage of project implementation, from the research process through space planning, coordination of production and logistics to assembly. Thanks to our vast experience and our technological and production facilities, we ensure that every offer is tailor-made.

Nowy Styl Group comprises six product brands: Nowy Styl, BN Office Solution, Grammer Office, Rohde & Grahl, Sitag and Forum Seating. They all provide customers with a wide range of products, including highly ergonomic office armchairs, designer modular seats and furniture systems that can be used to furnish all zones of modern offices and public spaces.

The Group's client list includes, among others, big international corporations and cultural institutions, such as the Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Opera house in Munich and all the Polish stadiums where the European Championship in football 2012 was held. It was the Group's chairs that heads of governments were sitting on during the NATO Summit in Lisbon; the Group's chairs can also be found in the German Chancellery and the Leicester Square Theatre in London.

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