

ONE-PAGE EXECUTIVE BRIEF

What Actually Improves Productivity: A Review of What Works, What Doesn't, and Why

EXECUTIVE QUESTION

Is your organization's productivity strategy removing friction — or just adding pressure?

CORE SIGNAL

Productivity is driven by execution design under cognitive constraints — not by effort, tools, or incentives. Interventions that add pressure, activity, or tooling without removing friction reliably raise visible busyness while degrading judgment, coordination, and output quality.

BUSINESS RELEVANCE

Unaddressed friction shows up as execution risk — slower project completion, higher error and rework rates, coordination breakdowns, and margin pressure — even when effort and headcount appear adequate.

WARNING SIGNS — FRICTION, NOT EFFORT, MAY BE THE REAL PROBLEM

- ☐ Teams report high busyness, but completion speed and error rates aren't improving.
- ☐ Multitasking, constant responsiveness, or long hours are treated as proof of commitment.
- ☐ New tools, metrics, or reporting requirements have piled on faster than old friction has been removed.
- ☐ People are optimizing for the metric (hours, tickets, responsiveness) rather than the outcome.
- ☐ Autonomy has expanded without matching role clarity or decision rights.
- ☐ Escalations, handoffs, or rework are rising even though reported activity looks strong.

FIVE QUESTIONS BEFORE APPROVING ANY PRODUCTIVITY INTERVENTION

1. What level does it act on — individual task execution, team coordination, or organizational structure?
2. Does it remove friction, or does it add cognitive, coordination, or informational load?
3. Does it simplify decisions, or introduce competing, parallel demands?
4. Do the people using it have the expertise to absorb any added load?
5. Will the metrics used to judge it reflect execution quality — or only activity and volume?

FAILURE PATTERNS TO AVOID

- Treating a visible output shortfall as an effort or discipline problem when it is a system-design problem.
 - Letting a metric become the target, so the target replaces judgment.
 - Assigning responsibility that exceeds the authority, clarity, or support given to carry it out.
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Next step: Before the next operating review, score one active or recent productivity initiative against the five questions above.

Source: SignalJournal Research

Full article: [*What Actually Improves Productivity: A Review of What Works, What Doesn't, and Why*](#)