

# Economists conduct research into how to best allocate time between creative and routine tasks

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How can employees' working time be organized to enable them to perform in the best possible way when completing both creative and routine tasks? Two economists at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU) investigated this question and made a surprising discovery: The working model that works best depends on employees' impulsiveness.

Should an [employee](#) first respond to e-mails, then write invoices until bored, switch to working on the concept for a new advertising campaign, then go back to routine tasks? Or should they first finish off routine tasks and then focus on creative tasks during defined time slots? How employees split their time between creative and routine tasks is managed differently by companies. In doing so, they try to choose the method that promotes creative work the most, as there have not been any established theories about the most effective method until now. Nevertheless, companies like 3M or Google have been using rules for several decades that allow employees to use 15 to 20 percent of their working time for [creative thinking](#) and working.

FAU researchers Prof. Dr. Alexander Brem, Chair of Technology Management, and Prof. Dr. Verena Utikal, Assistant Professor of Behavioural Economics, have now undertaken research into how best to organize time for [creative tasks](#), and thus also time for [routine tasks](#), and what factors influence peak performance in employees.

During their study, they asked 233 participants to work on various tasks. The routine [task](#) involved solving simple mathematical problems, whereas making as many words as possible from a given set of letters simulated the creative task. While one group was able to switch between these two tasks as often as they wanted, the second group had to complete one task before they were allowed to start the other.

## **How impulsive are employees?**

The results show there is no universally applicable working model. Professor Brem says, "Which model provides the best results depends to a great extent on the individual involved." And in this case, it depends on how impulsive a person is. "Impulsive people are more creative when they can choose how they split their time between various tasks, which means they don't have to limit their impulsiveness. On the other hand, less impulsive people demonstrate the opposite effect as their [creative work](#) suffers when they are given an entirely free rein." This surprised the researchers. "This result contradicts previous studies that indicate that personality traits such as assertion or impulsiveness only have a limited influence on creative output," says Prof. Utikal.

What do these results mean for companies that value high creative output? "Managers should learn to assess their employees and their teams well, so that they can select the working model that suits them best," advises Professor Brem. "Or they should assess during job interviews whether prospective employees would be a good match for the company's working [model](#)."

**More information:** Alexander Brem et al. How to manage creativity time? Results from a social psychological time model lab experiment on individual creative and routine performance, *Creativity and Innovation Management* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/caim.12309](https://doi.org/10.1111/caim.12309)

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