THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO

OFFICE PRODUCTIVITY HACKS FOR SMBS

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INTRODUCTION

Everyone can agree that employees are a company's best resource, and in today's competitive landscape, it's more important than ever that employees operate at peak productivity.

Unfortunately, humans are not machines. They can't simply be tuned up or given an upgrade to make them work harder. Humans are complex, and all sorts of factors can come into play when it comes to productivity – even the air around you could be having an effect.

Thankfully, we're here to help. In our Big Book of Office Productivity Hacks, we'll tell you:

- How to create the ultimate productivity generating environment
- How to boost office morale and make people love coming to work
- How technology can be used to foster productivity

ENVIRONMENTAL HACKS

As I said, humans are not machines. Yet sometimes it seems like offices are designed for working robots rather than real people. Glaring fluorescents; cold, blank walls; uncomfortable chairs … And yet somehow people are expected to do their best work in these places? Sounds a bit ridiculous when you think about it.

The environment around us can actually play a huge role in how productive we are – you might be surprised at how effective a few simple adjustments around your office can be. After all, as a full-time employee, you're spending at least a quarter of your week, maybe more, in that environment. Don't you want it to be a pleasant one?

If you want the ultimate productivity-generating environment, consider:

- Promoting office ergonomics
- Providing a variety of working spaces
- Providing an enticing and relaxing break area
- Using "green" practices where possible

Office ergonomics

According to Safe Work Australia, Australia spends over $60 billion annually on workplace injury and illness. A significant proportion of those injuries are musculoskeletal disorders, which account for 60% of serious injury claims, and can be caused by poor ergonomics.

While your employees might not look like they're doing much harm to themselves simply sitting at their desks, repetitive strain and poor posture can cause fatigue and discomfort in the short run, and potentially injury in the long run. Simply ensuring your employees are comfortable can go a long way to helping them operate at their peak.

Individual ergonomic assessments are the best way to mitigate this risk, but in the meantime, here are some quick tips for ensuring your workstation is properly adjusted.

Quick tips for maximising comfort

- Ensure chairs have adequate lumbar support at the lower back, and armrests that support the arms at all times. Arms should be able to rest at a 90° angle with the wrists straight.
- Monitors should be placed directly in front of employees, at least an arm's length away to avoid eye strain, with the top of the monitor no higher than eye level. The keyboard and mouse should be directly in front of the monitor to avoid having to turn your head.
- Feet should be able to rest flat on the floor. If the desk height prevents you from lowering your chair to allow this, rest your feet on a stool or stack of books.

Diversity of working spaces

Evidence shows that the average density of workplaces is increasing, both in terms of the area of workstations, and the ratio of desks to occupants. As space decreases, discomfort rises, and people are more adversely affected by noise.

As more workplaces adopt bring-your-own-device (BYOD) policies, employees are more mobile than ever before. It's therefore no longer necessary to be chained to your desk throughout the day – if needed, people can be easily reached via phone, email, or instant messaging apps.

By allowing employees the freedom to work where they choose, they can place themselves in environments that will work best for them, so they can do their best work. In fact, a change of scenery can be a great way to get a fresh perspective and get those creative juices flowing.

Some ideas for working spaces you could add include:

Quiet workrooms

Some employees, particularly if they are working on tasks that are especially taxing, require complete silence in order to work effectively, and in fact one study found that performance on a task dropped by 66% when participants were exposed to distracting noise.

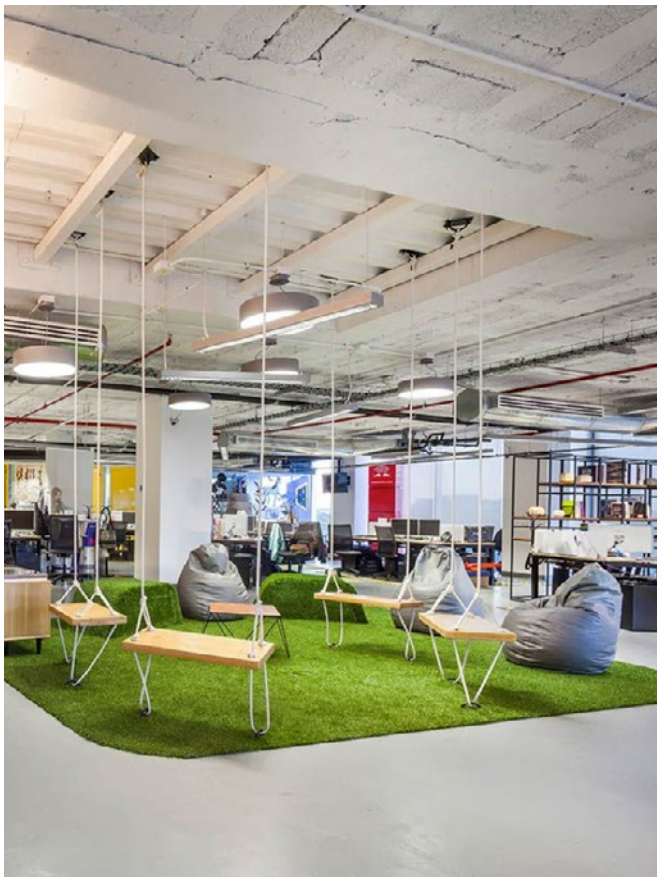
But silence can be difficult to come by in a busy office, especially if your office is open plan. Providing a place where people can go when they need a quiet sanctuary can be a great way to boost productivity during those times when the office is particularly rambunctious.

Standing desks

While there's been some debate as to whether sitting is in fact the new smoking, it's generally agreed that sitting for long periods of time is not good for your health. Standing desks gives people a chance to stretch and get the blood circulating, which can provide a mental boost. In fact, one company found standing desks led to 10% more productivity.

Creative meeting rooms/spaces

Forgo the stuffy old conference room and replace them with smaller, more informal meeting rooms or spaces geared towards creativity and quick-fire meetings. Some people put in whiteboards; others prefer flipcharts. Some prefer to paint an entire wall with chalkboard paint so the entire wall effectively becomes a canvas. You could even be a bit creative with the furniture – the Red Bull office in Mexico City, for example, has swings and bean bags instead of chairs.



Don't be afraid to think outside the box when designing yours – after all, if you can't be creative with a space geared to induce creativity, where can you be?

Employees' homes

With increased connectivity, working from home is easier than ever. While some might think workers would be less productive at home, one company found that those who chose to work from home were 13.5% more productive than those who opted to stay in the office.

Allowing employees the flexibility to work from home also has other benefits, such as cultivating loyalty, and decreasing sick days and absenteeism.

Relaxing break areas

Did I mention that humans aren't machines? We therefore need regular breaks in order to reset and recharge our brains, so we don't burnout.

Yet in most offices, many employees aren't taking adequate breaks. One survey of Australian and New Zealand workplaces found that over half of employees ate lunch at their desk rather than leaving the office, in effect robbing themselves of this vital time.

This can be partially combatted by providing a break room or area that is especially inviting. Think comfy chairs, plush sofas, and an adequately- stocked kitchenette where employees can make themselves a nice cup of tea or coffee. Don't forget lunch tables – it seems obvious, but in the drive to increase workplace density, break areas are often the first areas to get cut or diminished, and many offices don't have enough places for employees to actually sit and enjoy their lunch together.

Ensure it is visually appealing too, by decorating the walls with art. One survey found that 64% of employees agreed that art in the workplace increased creativity and productivity.

You could also add an element of fun with games, such as board games, a pool table or a ping pong table.

Providing break areas where employees can socialise has been found to promote cohesion, leading to a reduction in stress and employee turnover.

Turn your office "green"

While buildings designed with green practices in mind are obviously better for the environment, studies have found they can also have a markedly positive effect on productivity.

Don't worry – you won't have to apply for any building licences or move offices with these simple hacks.

Be mindful of energy and waste

Did you know that a printer, copier and monitors in sleep mode uses just 2 - 5% of the energy of one in standby mode? Programming devices to move into sleep mode after 5 minutes of idle time can therefore add huge savings to your energy consumption and power bills.

Similarly, once you recognise that evenings and weekends combined make up a full **75% of the week**, you'll actually want to start turning devices off at the wall as you leave. It might feel a little old-school, but just as you wouldn't leave the office lights on overnight, neither should you leave large, powerful devices running on wasted energy. Investing in smart power strips can help you minimise the manual labour.

Further green office hacks include:

- Energy efficient lighting
- Encouraging reuse and recycling of paper waste
- Choose sustainable suppliers
- Ensure larger waste parts (e.g. toners and cartridges) are recyclable to prevent them ending up in landfills

Boost natural light

Numerous studies have shown that natural light boosts the productivity of office workers. Natural light increases attention and alertness, which can be especially helpful for work that is boring or monotonous, and it also helps our circadian rhythms, leading to better sleep. A recent study found workers in "green" buildings had a 6% higher sleep score than those in buildings that were still considered high-performing, but had not received green certification. And well-rested employees are less stressed, take less sick days, and are more productive.

Ensure employees' desks are as close to windows as possible to maximise the use of natural light. Where it is not possible to use natural light, use artificial light that closely resembles natural light.

Bring in more plants

If Maria Kondo is to be believed, your workers will be more productive with clean desks with hardly a misplaced sheet of paper or piece of stationery to be seen.

But before you bin your little desk plant, think twice – it may in fact be doing more than you realise. One study found simply bringing in plants to a previously minimalist office increased productivity by 15%. They also significantly increased workplace satisfaction and self-reported levels of focus. Other studies have found that having plants present can lower stress and improve wellbeing.

Plants can also help to minimise pollutants in the air, so if you aren't able to open the windows, adding plenty of indoor plants is another good way to improve the air quality in your office.

Plus they're just a nice way to brighten up the place!

For more information on turning your office green, check out our very own Green Office Guide today.

OFFICE MORALE HACKS

A large factor in what makes employees happier and more productive is the workplace culture, and how the culture is reflected in the day-to-day. Often, it's the things you don't really think about, the things you think are just part and parcel of the normal working day, that can actually be having an eroding effect on people's morale, thereby negatively impacting on productivity.

Break the cycle and boost morale with these simple hacks.

Make breaks a part of the culture

Australians are working hard – perhaps even too hard. According to a report by Walking The Tightrope, full-time employees work 6 hours of unpaid overtime each week, while part-time employees work an extra 3 hours.

The Australian Institute found Australian workers donate almost $110 billion in unpaid overtime every year – that's $2.1 billion a week.

When people are struggling to keep up with their workload, it can seem logical to work longer hours. But all this does is cause extra stress, leading to employee illness and absenteeism.

"The personal impact of mental stress on workers is a serious and detrimental issue for workers, their families and also employers," said Safe Work Australia Chair, Ann Sherry AO. "The loss of productivity and absence of workers is costing Australian businesses more than $10 billion per year."

Studies have found that working *less* may in fact be the solution.

In order to operate at our peak, we need regular breaks to recharge our brains, to regain focus and to allow new insights to form. As Tim Krieder wrote in a New York Times essay:

> "Idleness is not just a vacation, an indulgence or a vice; it is as indispensable to the brain as vitamin D is to the body

and deprived of it we suffer a mental affliction as disfiguring as rickets. The space and quiet that idleness provides is a necessary condition for standing back from life and seeing it whole, for making unexpected connections and waiting for the wild summer lightning strikes of inspiration – it is, paradoxically, necessary to getting any work done."

Yet, while most people understand this intuitively, most people don't take a break other than lunch (and even then many people eat lunch at their desks). One survey found 1 in 5 employees said they didn't take breaks because of guilt; there's a perception that they will be seen as less dedicated to their work, and that those who are seen to be working harder will be more likely to get promotions, whether or not those employees are in fact generating more or better output.

Taking breaks, therefore, not only needs to be actively encouraged; it needs to become an integral part of the workplace culture.

Here are a couple of tips for instituting regular breaks in the workplace:

- **Make break rooms inviting:** As discussed in the previous chapter, making break rooms comfortable places to hang out and relax will make employees more likely to want to use them.
- **Lead by example:** Seeing you and other senior members of the company taking regular breaks will signal to employees that this is a practice upper management are taking seriously, which will encourage them to follow suit.

Break Techniques

So we've established that breaks are important. But how often should you break, and for how long?

There are various schools of thought on this – you just have to find what works best for you personally.

Here are two different techniques for you to test:

The 90-minute Block Technique

Professor K. Anders Ericsson and his colleagues at Florida State University studied a range of elite performers, including athletes, musicians, actors and chess players, and what they found was that the best performers typically practice in uninterrupted sessions lasting no more than 90 minutes. Typically,

they would start in the morning, take a break between sessions, and they would rarely work for more than 4 and a half hours on any given day.

This 90-minute interval may be effective because it works in line with our "ultradian rhythm". Over 50 years ago, sleep researcher Nathan Kleitman found that while we sleep, our bodies progress through five stage of sleep, from light to deep, over 90-minute periods. What is less known is that he also observed that our bodies followed the same rhythm during the day, moving from high to low alertness. This is our ultradian rhythm.

By mapping our work onto our ultradian rhythm, we can take advantage of our natural periods of alertness to work at a high intensity, and use those periods of low alertness to renew ourselves, physically, mentally and emotionally.

This is a technique touted by Tony Schwartz, CEO of The Energy Project; he is such a firm believer in it that he even wrote an article in The New York Times about it. "Renewal is central to how we work [at The Energy Project]," he said. "In a decade, no one has ever chosen to leave the company."

They must be doing something right.

The 52-17 Technique

This comes from a study by time-tracking software company Desk Time. They collect an astounding amount of data (5.5 million logged records per day) about how people use their time throughout the day, and in this study they isolated the top 10% most productive employees to see how these high performers spent their time.

What they found is that the most productive people work for 52 minutes, then break for 17 minutes.

The reason these top performers are able to get so much done, according to Desk Time, is because they **work with purpose**. In other words, during the 52 minutes, they dedicate 100% of their energy and focus into whatever task they are doing at that moment. Conversely, during the 17 minutes, they are entirely switched off from the task, allowing themselves to rest fully.

Stop the scourge of meetings

According to Atlassian, most employees attend 62 meetings every month, half of which are considered a waste of time. They also found that 31 hours are spent in unproductive meetings in any given month – that's a lot of time that could have been better invested.

A lot of meetings are simply too long, but because our calendar automatically schedules meetings for one hour, that's what we go with. As Red Hat CEO Jim Whitehurst wrote in an article, "whoever invented the one-hour default in calendar software wasted millions of people-hours."

Instead of simply accepting the default, could the meeting be done in 30 minutes? Or even 15 minutes?

And is the meeting even necessary in the first place? Or could a simple email or phone call suffice?

Asking ourselves these questions can help to eliminate a lot of unnecessary meetings, and save time that can otherwise be spent more mindfully. If a meeting is indeed necessary, be sure to issue out an agenda beforehand and stick to it religiously.

And if you're really serious about stopping the scourge, why not try adopting Asana's No Meeting Wednesday rule? By not allowing any meetings to be scheduled for a full day, employees can focus on projects without distractions. It works for Asana – according to them, Wednesday is the most productive day of the week.

Provide productivity boosting perks

Everyone loves perks. In fact, a survey by Glassdoor found that 79% of employees would prefer new or additional benefits or perks over a pay increase.

Perks are a great way to show your appreciation for your employees, thereby cultivating loyalty and increasing job satisfaction. And you might just find they pay for themselves in increased productivity.

Here are some perks to boost productivity.

Office yoga

Offering free yoga classes at work can be a great way to get people away from their desks for a much-needed break.

Yoga has also been shown to improve stress management, increase energy and mental alertness, reduce muscle tension due to being sedentary for long periods of time, and generally overall health, leading to less illness and absenteeism.

Gym memberships

Similarly, paying for or subsidising gym memberships shows your company cares about the health and wellbeing of their employees, and employees who look after their health will perform better at work.

Meditation sessions

Meditation has been taking the corporate world by storm, with companies like Google, Apple, Nike and Goldman Sachs providing meditation rooms and offering their employees meditation courses.

A Harvard University study found that participants who partook in an eight-week mindfulness meditation program developed reductions in the gray-matter density of the amygdala, a region of the brain associated with anxiety and stress. They also developed increased gray-matter density in the hippocampus, known to be important for learning and memory.

A recent study by the Max Planck Institute also found that different types of meditation can affect different parts of the brain, with certain types of meditation being better at cultivating "soft skills", like empathy and compassion – skills that are all the more crucial in an increasingly competitive and disconnected global economy.

The study also found that meditation may be more effective at reducing stress when performed in a group setting, so it could be be a great team bonding exercise too. Win, win, win.

Employee recognition programs

A company culture that shows they recognise and value people's contributions will have higher retention rates, and lower costs associated with recruitment.

Atlassian, for example, have a system whereby any staff member can give their colleagues 'Kudos' – which includes a gift and a handwritten card – for a job well

done, without needing the approval of management. Around 11 per cent of staff members receive a Kudos each week. They may also be awarded 'Big Kudos' for significant achievements, which may include a voucher for a fine-dining restaurant, a Red Balloon experience or even a holiday. In 2015, Atlassian was awarded the top spot in the "BRW Best place to Work for companies with 100 or more employees" list.

Extra leave days

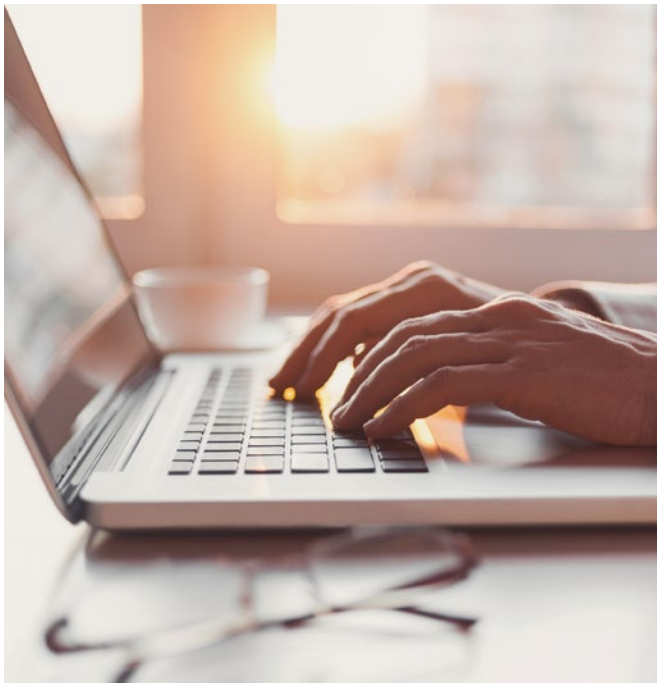
If you want to take employee reward and recognition to the next level, why not give them some extra time off?

In addition to offering free yoga and personal training classes and daily meditation sessions, Australian company Swisse also give their employees an additional "health and happiness" leave day every month, on top of their usual annual leave allotment, if the employee delivers on a specified benchmark. According to Swisse, this type of reward and recognition creates an engaged workforce and cultivates a culture of high performance. In 2017, Swisse was recognised as an Employer of Choice in The Australian Business Awards for the second year in a row.

Staff events

Organising staff events is another great way to reward your employees for their hard work, while also fostering social cohesion and team building, both of which will encourage more productivity in the workplace.

It can be as simple as taking your team out to lunch, or as elaborate as organising a go-karting tournament – whatever you decide to do, just make sure that it's fun!



TECHNOLOGY HACKS

In this digital age, technology makes so many aspects of our lives easier. But too often it can also work against us. Could technology – or lack thereof – be having an impact on the productivity of your organisation?

These workplace hacks might just transform the way your office functions.

Audit workplace devices

Technology is crucial to the smooth operations of any workplace – and this is no more apparent than when they are not functioning properly.

We've all had experiences with printers going on the fritz, photocopiers malfunctioning or computers running painstakingly slowly. Not only are these experiences extremely frustrating, adding more stress to your day,

but dealing with malfunctions can also take up a significant amount of time, making them real productivity killers, which can wind up being a significant opportunity cost to your business.

One survey calculated that the average short-term financial cost of an isolated technology performance issue was $10.8 million.

Your employees need the right tools in order to do their jobs properly, and they need those tools to be operating well. So if you've been putting off upgrading computer equipment, printers, photocopiers or other devices because "they work just fine", consider what those devices are costing you in lost productivity.

Complete an audit of the computers, printers, photocopiers and other devices necessary to daily operations, and assess their age and functionality.

It is worth asking your employees directly how they think the devices they use every day are performing, and what technology they think might make their day-to-day a little easier.

You could also use a professional service to help you – KYOCERA, for example, offers a site audit, where we assess your print and document management environment to identify any gaps in asset utilisation and recommend a solution that streamlines workflows, minimises outlay and maximises output. It is also a completely free service.

Companies like KYOCERA also offer proactive managed print services (although check out service vignettes - we're proud to say not all companies are made equal in this department). These managed print services make your chosen partner responsible for the smooth operation of these machines, and can include remote monitoring capabilities that identify if there is an issue - often before you do. This means higher productivity, while you don't lift a finger!

Upgrading devices like printers might seem like a significant upfront cost, but the return on investment will be worthwhile. According to The Telstra Productivity Indicator, investment in ICT is seen as the biggest overall contributor to productivity.

Adopt collaboration tools

According to Atlassian, the average employee receives 304 business emails every week, checks their email 36 times an hour, and spends 16 minutes refocusing after handling incoming email. They also field 56 interruptions and spend 2 hours recovering from distractions every single day.

That's a lot of lost productivity right there.

Online collaboration tools, like Basecamp, Slack, and Atlassian, can help. These tools allow you to keep all projects in a central location, so that all team members can easily keep track of where projects are at, and avoid wasting time searching through inboxes and files for documents. It also helps to simplify workflows: team members can manage their daily tasks by assigning to-dos, which helps them prioritise their work properly and stop the barrage of emails.

The in-built reporting tools can also be a godsend for managers, particularly those managing large teams. These tools give the ability to quickly generate detailed reports, and less time spent reporting on results means more time *producing* them. This is also an excellent way of quantifying productivity – something that can be particularly challenging when it comes to knowledge-based work, and something that is essential if you are serious about improving productivity in your workplace (which, if you're reading this, you probably are). This way you can tell if all those productivity initiatives you are implementing are actually working!

Adopt automation tools

The robots are coming to take over our jobs. According to economist Andrew Charlton, over the next 30 years, automation will affect every job in Australia – but not necessarily in the way you expect.

According to the McKinsey Global Institute report on automation, released in 2017, automation is estimated to raise productivity growth on a global basis by as much as 0.8 to 1.4% annually, but this growth is predicated on people working alongside automation. In other words, it's not necessarily about machines destroying jobs, but actually enhancing them.

By automating the more repetitive and mundane tasks, your employees are free to concentrate on the fun stuff, the stuff that actually gets them out of bed in the morning. This can lead to increased job satisfaction, as Teresa Amabile, a professor at Harvard Business School, found. She looked at the diary entries of 238 professionals to explore why workers in America had such high levels of job dissatisfaction, and found "of all the events that engage people at work, the single most important – by far – is simply making progress in meaningful work".

"As long as workers experience their labor as meaningful, progress is often followed by joy and excitement about the work … This kind of rich inner work life improves performance, which further supports inner work life — a positive spiral," she wrote in an article for The New York Times.

So how can you make automation work for you? Here are some of the tools that could help your employees develop a richer inner work life.

X.Ai

Don't waste hours of your time scheduling meetings. Instead, get your AI assistant Amy to do all the hard work for you. Amy emails the other meeting attendee(s) to work out the best time and location (based on your preferences, of course), and then magically inserts the meeting into your calendar. Easy!

MailChimp

MailChimp allows you to craft slick automated email campaigns, that puts the right content in front of the right people at the right time. Send a welcome message and guide to new customers, share blog posts and downloadable content, give product recommendations, re-engage lapsed customers and more, all within a single platform.

Conversica

A Sales AI assistant, Conversica automatically engages leads and emails back and forth with them, nurturing them towards an opportunity for conversion. Once a lead is qualified, a sales rep is automatically contacted. Conversica is so natural and convincing, most people aren't aware they're not talking to an automated system.

Buffer

Schedule, publish and share content to multiple social media platforms with ease. Buffer has a super user-friendly interface with built-in analytics, so you can see at a glance what the engagement for your posts are like, and automatically "re-buffer" any updates that were especially popular.

HubSpot

A automation platform jam-packed with features, HubSpot offers a full suite that covers marketing and sales with a free CRM database at the core. Run successful inbound marketing campaigns, then seamlessly hand off to Sales for the ultimate in Sales and Marketing alignment.

IFTTT

Make mundane tasks a thing of the past by automating just about any online workflow or daily task. IFTTT (If This Then That) connects seamlessly with countless services, including Facebook, Twitter, Gmail, Slack and Trello, allowing you to create simple 'applets' that brings these services together for even more functionality.

Zapier

Similarly to IFTTT, Zapier links web apps and allows them to share information, so you can create automated workflows called Zaps. With more than 750 web apps available, you can quickly and easily automate routine tasks like data entry and content management.

CONCLUSION

By creating an environment that promotes comfort and wellbeing, using morale boosting techniques that makes employees feel valued and appreciated, and ensuring they have the right technological tools to do their jobs to the best of their abilities, you can get your office running like a well-oiled machine.

Be mindful, though, that what works for one business may not work for another, so before unleashing a slew of productivity hacks upon your organisation, consider your company culture and how these techniques might complement it.

And be sure to put your employees at the heart of any productivity initiative, by simply asking them what techniques they think might be the most beneficial. The techniques that will have the most effect are most likely to be the ones your employees are the most enthusiastic about.

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