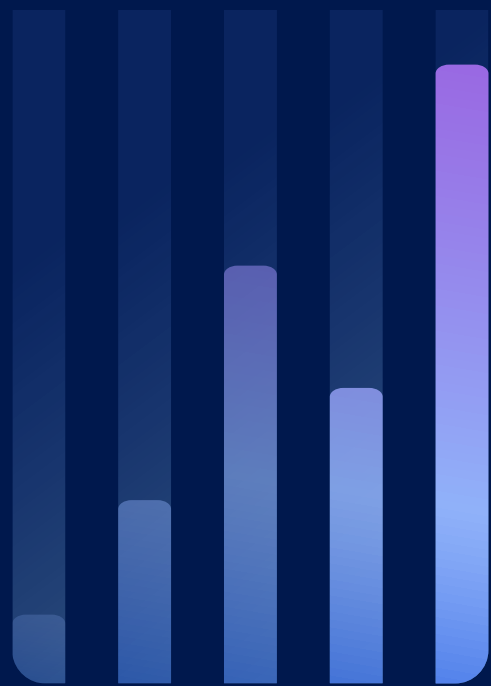




SMARTSHEET RESEARCH REPORT

The Great British Productivity Paradox:

Helping Leaders Burst the 'Busy Bubble'



Executive summary

UK businesses are caught in a profound productivity paradox. While the modern leader intellectually recognises that 'hours logged' is a reporting relic of the past, old habits die hard.

The truth is, workplace habits remain tethered to an outdated measurement concept: busyness equals productivity. Too many leaders seem addicted to the optics of effort, even when that effort yields little to no impact. This is the sobering picture **Smartsheet** uncovered in our **latest survey of 500 UK businesses**.

The 'Culture of Busyness' has become an operational deficit. And this isn't just a minor inefficiency; it's a 'productivity tax' that's costing businesses, with **teams estimated to lose a full working day each week** to busy work.

Right now, the average UK team loses 10 full work weeks a year to busy work.

Our research shows that when teams are trapped in the busy bubble, operational drag builds and time-to-value slows. Day-to-day work starts drifting further away from strategic goals. Busyness doesn't just waste time; it quietly undermines business performance.

The path forward is no longer about expecting your employees to 'work harder'. It's about leaning into intelligent work to decouple activity from achievement. This shift lets you free your teams to focus on the strategic work they were **actually** hired to do.

In this report, we help leaders deconstruct the UK's productivity paradox through five critical questions:

1. **Defining the Deficit:** What exactly is 'busy work' in our post-digital age?
2. **The Persistence of Presence:** Does the 'always-on' culture still dominate?
3. **The Compound Interest of Inefficiency:** Can we quantify the true cost of administrative drag?
4. **The Intelligent Pivot:** How can decision-makers successfully shift their teams from activity to impact?
5. **Scaling Clarity:** Is there a sustainable framework for intelligent work?

New to Smartsheet? Here's your cheat sheet.

What is it? Smartsheet is an AI-driven enterprise-grade Intelligent Work Management (IWM) platform that helps businesses bridge the gap between strategy and execution. That matters because most organisations don't struggle with effort — they struggle with execution.

What does that mean? We know you need more than incremental productivity gains or basic collaboration features. Many digital collaboration tools help teams stay connected but fall short of helping work truly move forward. What's missing is the link between strategy and execution. And it's this gap that prevents organisations from operating at the velocity of their ambition. The gap exists because work is still trapped in execution silos. Human judgement and AI intelligence sit side by side but don't work together, so strategic goals never quite translate into measurable business impact. Smartsheet tackles this gap head-on. It doesn't just manage work; it removes the barriers between ideas and execution, between people and intelligence, between enterprises and their partners. By bringing everything into a single, governed system, Smartsheet ensures that everyone operating in the digital environment is aligned around outcomes and able to deliver them at the speed and scale today's enterprises demand.

From badge of honour to system-failure signal

Defining the Deficit

Busy work is an activity that keeps you occupied, not progressing. If you're measuring hours spent and volume of tasks completed, we've got bad news: you're using outdated productivity metrics. Why? These metrics only show how busy someone was, not what they achieved toward a business goal. Simply put, **there is zero context of the real impact made using 'busy work' metrics.** And impact is what your customers want to see: measurable in the real world, tangible in their day-to-day.

The Persistence of Presence

Are we living in an 'always-on' culture that upholds the optics of effort? Sad to say, but yes. We know this because **68%** of surveyed decision-makers strongly believe that you must 'be busy' to achieve business outcomes, with **over half** still using 'busyness' as the primary measure of productivity. **The unspoken truth this practice implies is that efficiency has no value.** And that's not useful in today's fast-paced, competitive business environment.

There was a time when 'being busy' was worn like a badge of honour. Secretly, that flustered, tired-looking colleague who was always rushing around, always doing something, enjoyed being seen as hardworking. And while that may very well be the case, **businesses can't just go on appearances.** Tracking hours, or how many tasks were ticked off a checklist, isn't a valuable way to measure productivity.

What we've described above is **busy work**: a focus on low-value or repetitive tasks that are disconnected from meaningful outcomes. In the workplace, this plays out in different ways. Consider a marketing coordinator who is responsible for monitoring a campaign's progress. The coordinator might spend hours each day manually updating an impressive-looking, colour-coded spreadsheet with tabs and detailed notes. They look busy, but all that effort just repeats what already lives in the team's project management system. No one uses the spreadsheet to make decisions, since leaders rely on automated dashboards, yet the coordinator still spends valuable time on it. Meanwhile, the work that genuinely moves the campaign forward — like analysing performance and refining tactics — gets pushed aside.

Teams can look and even *feel* busy, but still make little progress on the goals that matter.

So, what's the alternative to 'busy work'? To answer that, it's worth looking at how we got here. Over the past five years, businesses invested heavily in digital collaboration tools to help teams work across time zones, offices, and hybrid schedules. This era of Collaborative Work Management (CWM) made work more connected and collaboration easier. But these perks didn't guarantee effectiveness nor efficiency. Teams still had to spot workflow risks, chase updates, and keep work from stalling. And we know that when the **operational burden falls on us humans, busy work has space to creep in.** AI moved things in the right direction, but early iterations focused mainly on automating low-value admin and repetitive tasks. Helpful and a clear way to reduce some busy work, but not enough to fundamentally change business outcomes.

BUSINESS

As AI has evolved, leaders have been able to raise the bar, carving out a new space for **intelligent work**. Intelligent Work Management (IWM) goes further than CWM. It doesn't just remove the manual admin layer — it adds intelligence that actively shapes work direction. IWM learns which actions drive results, flags where our effort is being wasted, and redirects our attention to the needle-moving tasks. The system continuously learns which actions improve outcomes, and then it applies that insight to better steer work so we can reach our end goal.

Here's what that looks like for our hypothetical marketing team: they set a clear campaign outcome to increase qualified leads by 15%. As work unfolds, the IWM platform identifies that content using customer

anecdotes converts at 3x the rate of other formats. The system flags where priorities should evolve — recommending budget reallocation, highlighting which content should be repurposed, and focusing effort on the tasks most likely to deliver impact. The team lead doesn't hunt for this insight; the system surfaces it for them, linking every action to an outcome.

Intelligent work connects people, data, and AI to deliver quantifiable outcomes.

Why collaboration is no longer enough

Collaborative Work Management (CWM)

Strategic goals between connected teams may be clear, but delivery still relies on people to connect the dots between data, priorities, and actions in real time.



Intelligent Work Management (IWM)

AI intelligence drives progress, giving teams instant data-led insights on where and how to refocus tasks toward outcomes.

Without Intelligent Work Management, execution slows as complexity increases. With it, work moves forward with less friction and fewer surprises.

BUSYNESS

To recap, in our digital era, we're moving **from CWM** – where busy work can thrive because people still have to push everything forward – **to IWM**, where AI-led intelligence gives work its own momentum. Intelligent work moves forward because the IWM platform knows where "forward" is based on the goal you've defined. And that's the value AI unlocks for your team: **direction + speed = velocity of intelligent work.**

If you're pondering whether you're stuck in the productivity paradox, think about the value of each action your team takes. Can they be linked to an outcome? If not, what can be optimised to streamline processes and accelerate time-to-market?

This is where AI insight can empower you and your team. If you switch to **intelligent work**, you can focus on the impact of what has been delivered, not on the volume of activity that fills the day. Instead of thinking 'how much has my team worked?', you're asking 'what impact has my team's actions had on our goal?'. That shift makes value visible, and visibility is what drives better decisions.

The leaders we surveyed agree that pinpointing value is a priority. And although they understand the need to shift from action to impact, there's still a disconnect between this belief and how it shows up in practice.

The belief

63%

agree that '**number of hours worked**' isn't an effective way to measure productivity



The reality

26%

say it's **still** how they assess productivity

60%

believe '**number of tasks completed**' is an outdated productivity metric



25%

still use it to track performance success

The growth ceiling is costing you in more ways than one

The Compound Interest of Inefficiency

Consider this: your staff headcount grows, and teams appear at capacity, but you notice that your output doesn't scale proportionally. The reason is simple: too much effort goes into **maintaining motion rather than creating progress**. You'll notice that your innovation pipelines thin, strategic initiatives take longer to land, and competitive advantage erodes. Again, **it's not because teams aren't working hard, but because too much effort is tied up in work that doesn't compound**.

Let's translate this loss of productive capacity into something more tangible: right now, **the average UK team loses 10 full work weeks a year to busy work**. At today's average labour costs, that's around £12,000 in lost productive value per employee, per year. For a team of 10, that's roughly **£120,000 of productive capacity lost**; a missed opportunity for revenue-generating work, customer-experience improvements, or innovation initiatives.

Lost time impacts the bottom line

- On average, UK teams lose 8 hours – **a full working day** – each week to busy work.
- That's roughly a **fifth of annual productive capacity** – amounting to ~10 full work weeks per year.
- In a £10m business, losing 10 productive weeks a year could quietly **wipe out £2m in annual revenue potential**.

In the grander scheme of what must be achieved, busy work is unproductive. And a third of decision-makers we surveyed agree, recognising that a culture of busyness causes a massive disconnect between activity and impact. Our findings show the depth of this divide between belief and reality: **40% of leaders see busy work being prioritised over strategic initiatives**. The good news is that you can help put a stop to busy work by empowering teams with technology, which is exactly what the move to intelligent work is about. This solves the issue when busyness is an unintentional form of inefficiency, where your employees are doing tasks that feel productive but aren't.

PRODUCTIVITY TAX

But what happens when busy work is intentional? When your employees are consciously doing tasks they know aren't productive just to look busy, it's usually in response to workplace cultural pressure. This is the top driver of **task masking** in organisations, which, unlike busy work, is an intentional act to change optics. It's far more common than you'd imagine: **6 in 10 surveyed leaders say they frequently witness this behaviour**. Fear of what management will think and a lack of meaningful work or clear direction account for the remaining top three task-masking drivers.

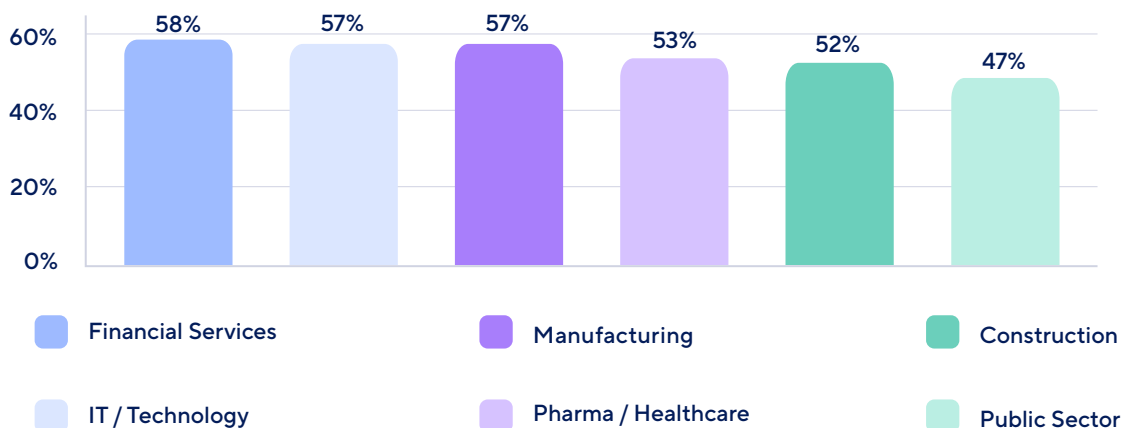
When the pressure to look or be busy is lifted, productivity should trend upwards. That's because busy work and task masking aren't just strategic problems; they are people problems: remove the culture of fear and watch your team blossom. Companies that don't act on the people part of the equation risk falling behind.

The Human Cost of Busy Work

While busy work first appears as a business inefficiency, it also takes a toll on your team. When low-value tasks dominate the day, your employees spend less time on meaningful, creative, or problem-solving work – the work they were hired to do. Over time, this lack of purpose makes them feel less engaged, more frustrated, and at greater risk of burnout. This is a concern because we know that healthy, happy employees produce better work: in fact, **4 in 10 business leaders recognise employee wellbeing as a key driver of productivity**. A simple reminder, but something to keep in mind: you want to retain and attract top talent. Think about all the hard-won experience and know-how that people take with them when they leave – the more you lose, the harder it will be for innovation to happen in-house.

Busyness Pressure Index

Sector insight on the importance of appearing busy, weighted and ranked highest to lowest:



CROSS-SECTOR AVERAGE = 54%

How to burst the busy bubble

The Intelligent Pivot

How do you burst the busy bubble? There are three ways, according to the leaders we surveyed. First, **change your mindset**: focus on outcomes rather than outputs. Second, make sure teams are crystal clear about their **priorities** and goals. Finally, use **Intelligent Work Management (IWM) tools**: **over 8 in 10 say this keeps them focused on strategic tasks**. What makes a work management tool 'smart'? If it meets these four enterprise needs, you'll have intelligent work up and running in no time:

1. Standardised operations with real-time insights.
2. Intelligent project and portfolio co-ordination.
3. End-to-end visibility of the digital estate.
4. Secure and frictionless internal and external collaboration.

If you take away anything from this report, it's the knowledge that **leaders are not powerless to turn the tide on busyness**. Selecting the right tools, technologies, and strategies can help your team focus on what matters to accelerate work. What works best? Decision-makers we surveyed say the **top three keys** to bursting the busy bubble are: IWM tools, a greater focus on outcomes versus outputs, and clearer team priorities. While the latter two seem quite clear-cut, the definition of 'IWM tools' may not be. Below, we home in on the tech and tools you can introduce to make the shift from busy to intelligent work.

With **nearly three-quarters (74%)** of business leaders concerned that shifting from busy to intelligent work will be "moderately, very, or extremely challenging", we break down which capabilities to look for when selecting the right solution for the job.

82%

of those who use **project management software** credit it for keeping them focused on strategic work – just **68%** say the same of email.

80%

say **AI** has already increased productivity – and **more than half** believe it'll be the top productivity driver in the next 3 to 5 years.

4 Enterprise Needs for the Shift to Intelligent Work

1. More consistent operations with real-time insight

Operational teams should investigate intelligent work solutions that can establish standardised ways of working across sites and enable real-time visibility into what's happening. When processes run the same way everywhere – and leaders can see trends and bottlenecks instantly – teams shift from firefighting to anticipating issues before they escalate.

2. Smarter project and portfolio coordination

To get out of the cycle of status meetings and spreadsheet-chasing, companies need tech-powered tools that can plan work, spot risks, and keep everything moving without constant manual oversight. Think: automated scheduling, early-warning signals, and routine updates handled quietly in the background. Consider a solution that brings AI orchestration to the table; one that can tap into agentic AI capabilities to offer native agents that can take on the busy work.

3. Clear visibility across the digital estate

As technology stacks grow, businesses need a joined-up view of their systems and workloads to make better decisions about where to invest, modernise, or streamline. That also requires governance that allows teams to move quickly without cutting corners on security or compliance – especially as AI becomes part of everyday development.

4. Secure, frictionless collaboration inside and outside the company

Today, work rarely happens within a single team or even a single organisation. Businesses need a solution that helps them collaborate safely with clients, partners, and suppliers – sharing the right work, with the right people, with the right guardrails. Think: workflows that protect sensitive information while still making it easy for everyone to contribute and move work forward.

Helping you bin the busy work

Scaling Clarity

Old-school productivity is holding teams back by focusing on activity rather than outcomes. The Intelligent Work Management Platform by Smartsheet replaces the chaos of siloed tools with one connected ecosystem of execution that unites people, data, and AI. It's the smart way to expand intelligent work at Fortune 500 scale.

UK organisations aren't struggling because people aren't working hard enough — they're struggling because old-school productivity norms are still in place, focusing on activity rather than outcomes. It's little wonder that companies are dealing with fragmented execution, endless admin, and teams buried in low-value work. Part of the problem is that there is no visibility into workflows and no impact-measurement insights because organisational data is siloed in point solutions.

Unlike point solutions, Smartsheet consolidates everything into a single space. And, yes, it's a unified platform capable of meeting those four enterprise needs we identified. By uniting people, data, and AI in a single ecosystem of execution, Smartsheet makes the move to AI-powered orchestration simple — and this is how you accelerate the velocity, quality, and impact of work across your enterprise.

In a nutshell? You'll sidestep the productivity tax. Smartsheet customers have experienced this when busy work is binned. For example, Cathy Evans, Head of Portfolio Management Office at [Leeds Bradford Airport](#), saw a significant return on investment after rolling out the IWM platform by Smartsheet:

“We've probably saved the equivalent of a full-time role each year”.

This shift isn't just about productivity. It's about **unlocking strategic capacity** while also reducing the pressure to “always be on”. This intelligent work approach creates a workplace where employee wellbeing is supported, and energised teams have more time to innovate, problem-solve, and deliver higher-value outputs that move the business forward.

With Smartsheet you can:

Automate the noise

with AI-driven orchestration that eliminates busywork and streamlines execution.

Surface what matters

with real-time visibility and measurable outcomes that align teams around impact.

Enable connected collaboration

across complex, hybrid environments – without creating new silos.

Work with, not against, AI

knowing that robust security, privacy, governance, and transparency guide every AI touchpoint, responsibly.

Build resilience

supported by a secure enterprise-grade architecture that's purpose-built for intelligent work.

Future Insight

As AI takes on tasks that drain time and focus, teams are freed to do the work only humans can: spotting patterns in context, solving harder problems, and creating meaningful impact. The real shift isn't about endlessly reskilling; rather, it's about elevating the value people can deliver. With intelligent platforms handling admin and surfacing insights in real time, employees can connect dots faster, collaborate more effectively, and serve customers with greater context and creativity. In this future, **digital fluency** isn't just a technical skill; it's the multiplier that helps every individual exponentially increase their contribution to their organisation's goals.

Dear busy work: We're finished.

Time to ditch busy work because we know that the future belongs to organisations that don't just keep up with change but thrive because of it. And that change is a definite shift away from 'activity for the sake of activity.' It's about leaning into AI-led work management to reclaim the space for work that matters. You have a choice: continue losing productive time in the busy bubble or embrace a smarter way of working that's better for your business and the people propelling it forward. Let's break up with busy work.

Smartsheet has already helped 120K+ organisations declare the end of busy with intelligent work: are you ready to join these ranks?

Learn more at smartsheet.com.

Methodology

The online survey was conducted among 500 UK business decision-makers (senior managers and above) who are involved in organisational productivity and performance at companies with more than 100 employees. Respondents span a range of sectors.

DISCLAIMER

This report is provided for informational purposes only and represents Smartsheet's analysis of research findings at the time of publication. Smartsheet makes no representations or warranties, express or implied, regarding the accuracy or completeness of the information herein, and any reliance on this content is at the user's sole risk. This document does not constitute professional, legal, or financial advice, and Smartsheet expressly disclaims any liability for business decisions made based on the data or opinions presented.

