

Life with digital calendars

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions.

1. Do you use a digital calendar for your work schedule, personal schedule or both? If so, which calendar do you use?
2. If your company uses a digital calendar, is it open and shared with everyone, or private so that only you can see it?
3. What are some possible advantages and disadvantages of an open digital calendar at work?

2 Key words

a. Scan the article to find the key words that match the definitions. Then read the complete article to see how each of the words is used in context. Note that some of the words are in a different form in the article.

staple	surveillance	afford	repurpose
nuance	haggle	breakneck	convener
warrant	ubiquitous	transformative	denote

1. _____: causing a major change
2. _____: to justify because of circumstances or to deserve or require something
3. _____: to indicate or give a signal
4. _____: to bargain or negotiate a price or the terms of an agreement
5. _____: a subtle difference
6. _____: to provide or give something such as an opportunity or a benefit
7. _____: a basic necessity
8. _____: observation of a suspect in a crime or hidden monitoring of a group or activity
9. _____: a person who requests or organises a meeting
10. _____: extremely fast; often means too fast for there to be a positive outcome

11. _____: present everywhere, in general or in certain places or situations
12. _____: to adapt or change for a different use

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity.

1. The now _____ cell phone is a(n) _____ of modern life, both in professional and social contexts.
2. In our view, the mistake did not _____ the firing of the employees involved.
3. As negotiators _____ over the terms of international contracts, they have to understand every _____ of cross-cultural communication in order to be successful.
4. The green and red lines in the chart _____ the _____ effects that AI has had on the company's ability to handle large numbers of customer service interactions and to gather data on consumer demographics.
5. Remote working technologies _____ employees greater flexibility in working hours and location than they had before.

The tyranny of the digital calendar

AS WORKERS STRUGGLE WITH COMPLICATED SHARED SCHEDULES, TECH COMPANIES SAY THEY CAN HELP

BY EMMA JACOBS

- 1 At this time of year, juggling social drinks, work parties and pre-Christmas deadlines, while also scheduling when to pick up the turkey and host relatives, the electronic calendar can feel tyrannical rather than helpful.
- 2 I hate mine so much, I am considering returning to a paper diary next year. This is not a humble brag about being busy, but a whinge about overcomplicated scheduling. Most of us recognise the email back-and-forth, flipping between apps to hold multiple times in diaries, or discovering a meeting convener in a different timezone has reserved 30 minutes to chat when you should be tucked up in bed. One San Francisco-based executive I know repeatedly sent me a bunch of dates via Calendly, all for 10pm. I blocked him. At least I have not fallen victim (yet) to scammers adding phishing links to my diary.
- 3 The digital calendar has become a staple of office life, with companies such as Google as well as newer, smaller tools like Motion and Reclaim offering to streamline and optimise scheduling. These ubiquitous shared calendars have brought some interesting dynamics to the surface.
- 4 When teams have access to each other's schedules, it can help protect time or it can become intrusive, as one man revealed on social media. He discovered his calendar was not private after his boss asked if they could "do the product intro" on Friday — at a time the busy employee had blocked out to "get a chicken".
- 5 Patrick Lightbody is attempting to rectify some of these problems with Reclaim.ai, the artificial intelligence app he co-founded that promises to schedule work, meetings and life. He says shared electronic calendars have historically suffered from a lack of nuance, unable to denote whether an appointment is open to negotiation.
- 6 Social dynamics — and tensions — inevitably come into play. Vanessa Ciccone, a social scientist at the London School of Economics and Political Science, studied an organisation that set employees' default calendars to "open", giving them the option to make them private. "People were largely willing to accept that senior-level workers had things to do that warranted calendar privacy, whereas non-senior-level workers were not afforded this same level of understanding." Junior workers opting to keep their calendars hidden were described as "secretive", with suspicions that they were hiding something.
- 7 Open calendars can help with logistics if, for example, only two people are booked to use a giant boardroom that could be repurposed for a larger meeting, notes Ciccone. The flipside is surveillance, with managers monitoring their teams' time.
- 8 There can be other outcomes from such transparency. One man used colleagues' schedules like Instagram, scrolling "through people's calendars as a person might scroll through a social media website", says Ciccone. "He also felt exclusion at times due to this scrolling, where he would occasionally find a meeting or an after-work drinks event that he wasn't invited to."
- 9 Then there's the etiquette. Julian Givi, associate professor of marketing at West Virginia University, found that a "maybe" response to diary invitations was seen as kinder, by those RSVPing, than a hard "no"; it was, in reality, far more annoying, making it harder to plan a party or arrange a meeting. "While a 'maybe' leaves you with flexibility, it's not really good for those who invited you," says Givi. "They might be left feeling disrespected that you left them in limbo."
- 10 While my instinct is to return to paper-based diaries, efforts by tech enthusiasts to solve such problems look promising. Already, Google's Gemini is proving useful to me by entering suggested meeting times in my electronic calendar based on discussions in email exchanges.

Continued on next page

11 “Right now, your calendar is a passive tool that lets others claim your time,” says Louise Ballard, co-founder of Atheni, an AI-powered coach that helps users navigate agentic tools. “Soon, AI agents will actively defend it, learning when you do your best thinking, blocking out focus time, even negotiating meeting slots on your behalf. I’m certainly going to train my agent to protect the hours I need to get stuff done.”

12 She says the time drag of negotiating scheduling with others could be fixed by an agent, for example by setting a future date to meet in response to a discussion over Zoom. “Tools like Motion are already doing this — automatically rescheduling your day when plans change and protecting deep work time.

We tried it last year, and it wasn’t brilliant, but things are moving at breakneck speed.”

13 Lightbody says AI’s ability to work beyond the simple binary between busy or free will be transformative. “You’ll actually have more of a conversational state with someone’s personal assistant, a digital personal assistant.”

14 The future, says Ballard, will be “two agents haggling over diary slots while you get on with actual work. Liberating or terrifying, depending on your outlook.”

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Emma Jacobs, 16 December, 2025.

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3 Understanding the article

a. Choose the sentence that summarises the main idea of each paragraph.

1. Paragraph 2
 - a. The author wants to switch to a paper diary because she doesn't like email.
 - b. The author feels that scheduling has become unnecessarily difficult and complex.
2. Paragraph 4
 - a. An example shows how shared calendars can invade privacy.
 - b. Employees should never put personal entries on their work calendars.
3. Paragraph 6
 - a. A study found that people have different attitudes toward open calendars for junior and senior employees.
 - b. A study found that people who keep their calendars private are usually hiding something from their managers.
4. Paragraph 7
 - a. Large boardrooms should never be used for small meetings.
 - b. Open calendars can help with scheduling, but can also allow managers to monitor how their teams are using their time.
5. Paragraph 10
 - a. The author feels that electronic calendars will never be as good as paper calendars.
 - b. The author feels that, despite some problems, electronic calendars will help solve scheduling problems.
6. Paragraph 11
 - a. AI agents will be able to save us a lot of valuable work time by negotiating schedules that fit our needs.
 - b. AI agents will soon control our lives, and we won't be able to make our own decisions about how we spend our time.

7. Paragraph 13
 - a. In the future, AI assistants will replace all human assistants.
 - b. In the future, AI assistants will be able to approach scheduling in a more nuanced way than just 'busy' or 'free.'
8. Paragraph 14
 - a. Everyone agrees that having AI agents negotiate their schedules is an excellent innovation.
 - b. People have different opinions about the idea of having AI agents negotiate their schedules.

4 Business language – scheduling and office dynamics

a. Complete the sentences with the phrases in the box.

deep work time	juggle deadlines	streamline schedules
time drag	meeting slots	social dynamics
agentic tools	default calendar	

1. Project managers often have to _____ for several different projects simultaneously, at times having to work very long hours to finish the projects on time.
2. Our company's _____ is set to 'visible to everyone,' but we are allowed to change it to a private setting if we want to.
3. The large number of email exchanges required to agree on meeting times was creating a(n) _____ and wasting valuable work time.
4. The use of AI agents that can negotiate meeting times helps _____, making the process faster and easier and allowing employees to concentrate on important work.
5. Every company has its own _____, and managers have to understand and learn to work with the different personalities of their employees and their relationships with each other.
6. Many people who engage in critical thinking as a part of their work block out _____ when they can focus on a task without being interrupted.
7. The advent of _____ means that AI systems can act autonomously to make decisions and negotiate agreements on behalf of their users.

- b. Complete the sentences from the article with phrases from the previous activity. In one case, the form of the word is slightly different from the form in the box in task a. When you have finished, scan the article to check your answers.

(1) _____ — and tensions — inevitably come into play. Vanessa Ciccone, a social scientist at the London School of Economics and Political Science, studied an organisation that set employees' (2) _____ to 'open', giving them the option to make them private.

"Right now, your calendar is a passive tool that lets others claim your time," says Louise Ballard, co-founder of Atheni, an AI-powered coach that helps users navigate (3) _____. "Soon, AI agents will actively defend it, learning when you do your best thinking, blocking out focus time, even negotiating (4) _____ on your behalf.

She says the (5) _____ of negotiating scheduling with others could be fixed by an agent, for example by setting a future date to meet in response to a discussion over Zoom. "Tools like Motion are already doing this — automatically rescheduling your day when plans change and protecting (6) _____.

5 Discussion

- a. Discuss these questions.

1. According to the article, what are some of the advantages and disadvantages of using shared digital calendars? Can you think of any more advantages or disadvantages? In your opinion, do the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, or vice versa?
2. Does your national culture, or the culture of your company, lean more toward collaboration and transparency among workers, or more toward independence and privacy? Do shared digital calendars work well within your national or company culture? Why or why not?
3. Do you think your company or type of work will move toward having AI agents manage scheduling or not? Would you like for an AI agent to manage your schedules? Why or why not?

6 Wider business theme – AI in business

- a. You and your group are the directors of a company. You have to decide whether or not the company would benefit from using AI, and if so, in what ways. Look at some of the pros and cons of AI in the business world. Then use the questions below as a guideline to make your decision. If necessary, do some research on the topic.

Positive uses and effects of AI in business:

- AI can process data and do other tasks very quickly, which saves time and money.
- AI can work all the time, which humans cannot do. This means that it can do more work than humans and can provide customer service to all time zones.
- It can easily identify patterns and trends in the economy and in consumer habits, which makes it easier and faster for companies to make decisions.
- It can do routine tasks like scheduling or data entry, which gives employees more time for creativity and strategic planning.
- It can process data or do mechanical tasks with far fewer errors than humans make.

Negative uses and effects of AI in business:

- AI is replacing many human workers, especially in jobs related to manufacturing and data processing.
- AI systems and the training to use them are very expensive, so most small or medium-sized businesses can't afford them.
- AI cannot judge certain situations like humans can, so it may sometimes make bad decisions.
- Because AI systems collect all kinds of data, there is a danger that criminals could access personal details, bank accounts and other private information.
- If there is too much dependence on technology, nothing will be able to function if there is a problem with electricity or an AI system. Many people also worry that we will lose the ability to think critically if we depend on technology to think for us.

1. What type of company is it?
2. In what ways can AI be used in your type of business?
3. What are some of the positive effects of the use of AI in your business?
4. What are some of the possible negative effects?

5. In your collective opinion, is it beneficial to your company to use AI? If not, why not? If so, in what ways can it be used effectively?

b. Explain your decision to the class. Are more groups in favor of or against using AI in business?

Useful language

I'm in favor of / against using AI because ...

I think the main issues with/dangers of using AI are ...

In my opinion, using AI would allow us to ... / would mean that we could ...

I take your point, but I think ...