

**Date and time:** Thursday 8 October 2020

**Title:** In Search of Lost Focus

**Interviewer:** Priya Bapat (PB)

**Interviewee:** Dr. Megan Jones Bell (MJB)

| TIME CODE | DIALOGUE  |
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| 00:00     | <b>PB:</b><br>Hello, and welcome to In Search of Lost Focus. A podcast series by the Economist Intelligence Unit, exploring the role that focus plays in the modern working world.                                    |
| 00:10     | My name is Priya Bapat, and I will be your host for this episode.   |
| 00:15     | In Search of Lost Focus is sponsored by DropBox. We thank them for their support.   |
| 00:21     | Focus is an essential but under-explored part of the working world.   |
| 00:26     | Focus, or lack thereof, shapes not only individual job satisfaction and performance, but can also impact health, happiness and overall well-being.  |
| 00:36     | The effects of lost focus are felt not only by individuals, but also by companies and the economy as a whole.   |
| 00:43     | A recent study by the Economist Intelligence Unit, of 6 major knowledge work industries in the US, found that workers spent 28 % of their work day managing or recovering from distractions.                          |
| 00:57     | Compounded across the millions of knowledge workers in the United States, we found that in these 6 industries alone, distractions accounted for as much as 1.2 trillion dollars in untapped employee potential.       |
| 01:11     | What can companies do to address the challenges of lost focus in the workplace?   |
| 01:16     | Over the next few episodes we will host conversations with experts who have done extensive research and thinking on how companies and individuals can build focus for themselves and their teams.                     |
| 01:28     | In today's episode, we will be speaking with Dr Megan Jones Bell, Chief Strategy and Science Officer at Headspace, a tech company with the goal of improving health and happiness through mindfulness and meditation. |

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| 01:41 | <b>Megan speaks and writes about the importance of structure, balance and flexibility and enhancing focus in the workplace.</b>  |
| 01:48 | <b>Today these values are being tested in unprecedented ways, particularly for those in the knowledge work economy.</b>  |
| 01:55 | <b>As the Covid-19 Pandemic took hold across the globe, almost everyone in the knowledge working world, from lawyers and teachers to I.T. specialists and researchers, abandoned their offices to work from the safety of their homes.</b>   |
| 02:09 | <b>Although this was a necessary change to ensure the safety and well being of these knowledge workers, and frontline essential workers, it was by no means an easy transition.</b>  |
| 02:20 | <b>We'll speak with Megan about what this adjustment has meant in the way we think about protecting and building focus, both now and in the future.</b>  |
| 02:29 | <b>PB:<br/>Hi Megan, how are you doing today?</b>  |
| 02:31 | MJB :<br>I'm doing well, thanks so much for having me  |
| 02:34 | <b>PB:<br/>Yes, thank you for joining us for this interview</b>  |
| 02:37 | <b>We've spoken in the past about how focus really affects the way that people are able to spend their work days. You've also spent many years researching strategies on how people can improve focus and happiness in their daily lives.</b>  |
| 02:53 | <b>In this pandemic and the sudden accompanying disruption to our working routines, how have things changed?</b>   |
| 02:59 | MJB :<br>Well I think it's been a dramatic shift for many people, and many of us are not the only (giggle) ones working from home in our households.   |
| 03:10 | If you are living with roommates (giggle) you have them around you 24/7, your partner or spouse may also be working at home, your children may be, you know, doing remote learning, and so I think we've had a change to our surroundings (giggle), the people that we're with. We've lost this transition time between work and home, which of course, as a commute, was a source of stress for many people, but there was I think this unseen hidden benefit of the commute that we are now really appreciating when |

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|       | you can go from your (giggle), bed in your pajamas to your desk in 30 seconds, it really doesn't help you get in that mind set of preparing for work or help you leave work behind and transition back to home.  |
| 04:07 | And so, for many people they aren't creating new routines that help with that transition.  |
| 04:14 | I think we're also seeing that overall, people are having more meetings, their calendars are packed. There is also less unstructured social interaction.   |
| 04:25 | We took for granted the coffee talk or lunch breaks we got to enjoy with our co-workers, which were really a source of connection and culture-building for many people in organizations.   |
| 04:41 | We also know (giggle) that breaks are hugely important for enhancing focus and helping us to replenish our energy, and so in this shift to back to back zoom meetings, people are really losing the breaks that let them re-charge, think creatively and rebuild their capacity for focus.   |
| 05:07 | I think also a huge impact that we're seeing associated with the pandemic and related crisis is just rising levels of chronic stress across the board, which of course, leads to lower productivity, lower cognition, less creative thinking, employee burn out, attrition and, and then eventually, to increase the healthcare spending and so we know that there are things that people in companies can do to mitigate some of these unanticipated challenges that have arisen from this shift.                         |
| 05:46 | <b>PB :</b><br><b>What have been some of those more unanticipated or unexpected challenges that have come up? I know that you have been looking at this topic for a number of years. What has been one of the changes that has occurred that has surprised you?</b>  |
| 06:02 | <b>MJB :</b><br>Well I think we are seeing that companies are realising that they need to add a different kind of structure to the day and a different kind of flexibility because I think for the early months of this pandemic, meetings were starting to pile up (giggle) in really an uncontrolled way. If there was white space on your calendar a meeting got stuck into it and so companies are realising they really need to create blocks that empower their teams to actually get work done outside of meetings. |

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| 06:36 | We see a rise in the number of companies that are adopting no meetings in parts of the day or better yet, no meeting (giggle) days.   |
| 06:46 | We are also seeing companies start to respond to employees' need for more flexibility in their work schedules. This is really particularly relevant for parents or caregivers, where you may be needing to help your children manage remote learning during the conventional work day and manage (giggle) household responsibilities and catch up on your work after the kids have gone to bed. |
| 07:12 | And so, this time management challenge and the challenges around synchronous work expectations really have needed to shift in order to adapt to the changing circumstances.   |
| 07:28 | <b>PB:</b><br><b>There's been a lot of discussion in what the challenges have been. Have you seen any benefits in terms of how people are able to improve focus and control over their work lives as a result of this shift to work from home?</b>  |
| 07:42 | MJB :<br>Well I think there are a lot of silver linings that can occur in regaining time that had been previously spent on commuting or travelling for work and so the best case is that you actually potentially have more time to invest in healthy routines that enhance your overall well-being, and of course, also enhance your focus.  |
| 08:09 | You may have more time to vote, [spend time with] the people that you care about in your life and actually use that time to enhance your (giggle) well being.   |
| 08:20 | I think that that's probably the primary benefit.   |
| 08:24 | I also think that some of the companies which have adopted policies that really are long overdue around flexible working hours, flexible or unlimited vacation policies, to really empower employees to still be held accountable for delivering the quality of work in the outcomes that they need to, but to do it on their own terms, and frankly, treat everyone (giggle) like an adult.    |

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| 08:53 | It goes a really long way and so, I think there are changes to work culture that shift us both in a more empowering way, and also ideally, could help |
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|  | people build in new routines like taking walking breaks during the day or sitting down with your family or other you know roommates for meals, taking time to meditate before work. |
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| 09:22 | You know, these are all routines that you know have enormous benefit to enhance our ability to focus but really foster overall well being, we see that people are cooking again we know that eating nutritious food particularly (giggle) that you make yourself, enhances your health, will lead to improved cognitive abilities.   |
| 09:41 | But I do think one of the risks is around sleep. Because we know that a lot of the, both the stress associated with what's going on in the world around us and this loss of a boundary between work and home, is really making it hard for people to get the same quality of sleep and so I hope that as a result of that, it's prompting people to really you know, lean in to creating new routines around bedtime, that remove technology from their bedroom, that help them really create the conditions for restful sleep by winding down, (giggle) not reading the news before bed, allowing themselves to have that space so that they can get quality sleep which really will have a huge impact on their ability to focus the next day. |
| 10:34 | <b>PB :</b><br><b>That's a really great point that you just made about the lack of boundaries and how that's really impacted people in their day-to-day lives.</b>   |
| 10:42 | <b>For many people we've seen that this lack of boundaries has lead to more flexibility in terms of the way they are able to structure their work day but for others, particularly parents and those who are caring for family members and young children, it's almost become a more inflexible working environment without that benefit of childcare or having a structured time to be at work and to be off work.</b>  |
| 11:07 | <b>What has this inflexibility taught us about the importance of having control over our physical spaces and our working hours in terms of being able to ensure focused work?</b>  |
| 11:20 | <b>MJB:</b><br>Well, I think we are really learning the hard way that having control over how you work , (giggle) where you work is just so critical for people.   |
| 11:31 | We've seen in our own "Headspace 2020 Mental Health Trends" report that this line between work stress and life stress has been completely dissolved and that stress in any area of your life contributes to or can be  |

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|  | exacerbated by stress at work. |
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| 12:53 | Because we're starting to see this shift in people who are privileged or more affluent are able to make these accommodations to the whole family being at home by having one on one child care, such as getting a nanny, given that many day cares, preschools, etc. are closed, or getting a tutor for their child who's doing remote learning, because many children really aren't at an age or developmental stage where they can manage this technology, independently of support from a grown up. |
| 13:28 | So many families are (giggle) trying to accommodate the needs of their children, really at the cost of potentially contributing to their retirement accounts or taking on debt, or are just trying to do it all themselves.  |
| 13:43 | And I think for anyone who's a parent, if your kids aren't set up for success, it's going to be really hard for you to pay attention to anything else that's going on. And so I do think that if employers want to retain parents, and you know, really get the most out of those employees, then giving them tangible support, not only emotional support by parenting, you know, or caregiver, employee resource groups, but financial support, really is what they need.                            |
| 14:14 | I think pay equity is another issue that we're seeing.   |

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| 11:50 | And what we found is that 30% of workers suspect that they suffer from depression or anxiety, both of which impede your ability to focus. And we found that 45% of participants said that stress would cause them to lose up to two hours of work time each day.  |
| 12:09 | And that this work-life balance was the greatest source of stress in their lives and spilled over onto their personal relationships.  |
| 12:18 | And so giving people the tools to manage this transition by investing in them and helping them set up a comfortable space, at home to work, giving a monetary allowance to have people who don't have a home office setup, be able to get an appropriate home office setup really is conducive to your ability to get your work done. |
| 12:44 | We also see that supporting parents with ideally financial support, as well as flexibility, is critical.  |

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| 14:18 | Specifically for women and people of colour, we see that women are dropping out of the workforce in record numbers that will set us back decades. And given that women make less on average than their male counterparts and spend more time managing family household responsibilities and childcare responsibilities, not only is their focus impeded by that, but they may altogether leave the workforce, and as an economic consequence, if they're not paid at a comparable wage to their male counterparts, families are deciding for financial reasons, potentially childcare reasons, to have women drop out of the workforce. |
| 14:58 | The other aspect of pay equity is around people of colour, because we know that COVID-19 and unemployment disproportionately affects people of colour due to structural racism. So given what's going on in this country around racism, that the systemic trauma associated with that, with what many black people and other people of colour groups have experienced, that is going to be distracting them from their ability to focus.  |
| 15:28 | So one, ensuring that their pay equity issue is addressed, but also giving them appropriate resources that are trauma informed - this is really critical that you are supporting this group of your employees and setting them up for healthy and productive working conditions.  |

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| 15:47 | <b>PB:</b><br><b>We're currently in the middle of one of the most severe economic downturns in recent history, as you're speaking with companies about the importance of these types of initiatives in order to build focus, what have been the conversations with these companies in terms of how they're looking at their priorities? I can imagine that there are a number of competing priorities for company executives at this time, and where they're looking to focus their efforts.</b> |
| 16:16 | <b>Why should preserving focus be a priority for these companies?</b>  |
| 16:21 | <b>MJB:</b><br>I think many of these companies are realising that there's a connection between focus and the mental health and well being of their employees.  |
| 16:30 | And thankfully, really, immediately when this crisis started in March and April, we saw this conversation actually shift into the C suite in the boardroom of companies.   |

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| 16:45 | I'd say over the last five years or so, companies have started to talk about what their role is, in actually creating the conditions and bringing in |
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|       | resources that would promote focus as well as overall mental well-being.  |
| 17:02 | And some progressive companies had started to adopt tools and resources, service of that policies (giggle) in the service of that. I think there's been this awakening of companies that, one, focus is connected to overall mental well being, and it's up to them to ensure that they invest in it.   |
| 17:21 | And so even while companies have been in dire financial situations, they're also investing in mental health in its connection to focus.   |
| 17:33 | Because they know that that's what they're going to need to invest in to support their workforce's ability to weather the storm. And in these times of crisis (giggle), for a company, for the world, for individuals, focus is one of the first things that we lose.   |
| 17:49 | And so if we can help people maintain a sense of calm, manage their stress appropriately, get quality sleep, you'll actually be able to creatively problem solve more effectively, because you'll have your employees bringing their whole attention and capability to work.  |
| 18:09 | And so I've been encouraged to see that leaders are actually talking about this, investing in this, experimenting with new policies that have been tossed around as ideas for (giggle), really the last decade, certainly the last five years, but are really implementing these policies are really investing in resources now. And I hope that that sets up a precedent that we continue. |

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| 18:37 | <b>PB:</b><br><b>About these policies, as you've seen these companies and all of their individual employees go through the challenges of COVID-19 and working from home, what has separated companies that have been able to preserve balance for their workforce from those who haven't?</b>  |
| 18:56 | <b>MJB:</b><br>I think it's several things. One, that they create cultures where whatever policies they implement, it's adopted by all people within the organisation, that leaders model adherence to these policies, meaning that if you have set up a block of time for no meetings, or you set up a day, that is what we call it at Headspace, a mind day. These blocks really need to be respected. |

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| 19:29 | And leaders need to follow it themselves. They want (giggle), they need it themselves as well. They really will be the ones to whom the rest of the organisation is looking to see. Are you really sure, you know, can we? This is a nice thing to do, but can we believe it? Are we actually allowed to |
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|       | follow it?   |
| 19:49 | I think another thing is reduction in on-going monitoring of meetings. So developing hygiene as an organisation around reviewing what kind of meetings are on the calendar? Do they need to be synchronous conversations? Is there a way to design a more efficient recurring meeting schedule?  |
| 20:08 | Most organisations have people within them who are expert at organising this type of thing, but we really need to make sure that we are self correcting routinely, because we are well aware that the drift and tendency right now is to add meetings that might be 30 minutes when it actually could be a five minute conversation or it could be email or it could be shared document that you collaborate on. |
| 20:39 | And so really questioning the purpose and intention behind meetings is important.  |

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| 20:45 | We also see companies who are adopting flexible schedules to accommodate people who really need to manage other responsibilities during the day. Those are another policy that are going on a long way for people, as well as breaks during the day.             |
| 21:02 | There is a ton of research showing that people who take breaks during the day are better able to focus, they're more productive, and so it's not wasted time as work quality is enhanced, your mental well- being is enhanced your ability to focus is enhanced. |

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| 21:17 | And so really empowering employees to take these breaks, some companies, like mine, actually blocked calendars. And in that calendar invitation (giggle) to what we call them as, of course, a mindful break. |
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| 21:32 | There are suggestions of things that you can do that actually are more conducive to a restorative break, like, take a walk, do a 10 minute meditation, do some stretches. There are a lot of ways we can use breaks (giggle) in the service of our well being and focus. There are also ways we can use those breaks that really don't give us the benefits that we need. |
| 21:58 | But scheduling those in, blocking time again, respecting those blocks on your calendar goes a long way, as well as additional resources and benefits that support focus, like access to meditation and mindfulness training, access to home workouts, we know regular exercise, and meditation, both, enhance our ability to focus.                                       |

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| 22:20 | So those are great new additions to the workplace as benefits that many employers are starting to adopt.   |
| 22:29 | <b>PB:</b><br><b>You mentioned that meetings have a tendency to pile up and multiply. And this has been definitely something that has increased all the more as we have all moved away from a central office location.</b> |
| 22:43 | <b>The knowledge work economy, in particular, depends on collaboration, and collaboration is almost synonymous with meetings at this point.</b>  |
| 22:52 | <b>Has there been any new lessons learned in terms of how we can make room for collaboration and creative brainstorming, without necessarily relying on synchronous communications and meetings?</b>                       |

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| 23:07 | I think there's some really interesting things happening around collaboration. And many of these tools have been available to us, but I'm seeing adoption of them within companies rise in a really interesting way.  |
| 23:24 | So, on one hand, I see that there is an equalising opportunity in the shift to remote collaboration.  |
| 23:32 | So if you think about what was a collaboration or brainstorm session that you might have had pre COVID, you might have been in a room with people, the participation of each person may have been predicated on their temperament, their interpersonal style, the power dynamics in the room. |
| 23:53 | So you might have had a situation where some people were sitting more in the centre or closer to a whiteboard, or a wall with sticky notes (giggle), or just the conversation.  |

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| 24:06 | Others might have sat in the back, they may have, not engaged fully. And so, with a shift to one, a synchronous collaboration, and also collaboration, where you're all in the same (giggle), little tiles in the same hierarchy, there's no back of the room anymore, that there is a different ability for people who are more introverted, to actually communicate their thoughts. |
| 24:35 | They can type into the chat, they may feel more comfortable speaking in a breakout room, they may feel more comfortable commenting on something after they've had time to think about it.   |
| 24:47 | And so allowing the space for a synchronous collaboration, feedback,  |

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|       | contemplation and participation really may actually let you get more out of your team because in the past, you may really have only been hearing from the voices of more extroverted people who could feel more comfortable thinking on the spot and speaking up.   |
| 25:12 | We also see that the software tools that have been designed to mirror these sticky notes or whiteboards etc. allow people to spend a little bit more time thinking about what they say, to reflect, to come back to it throughout the day. And so this is where I think we get our best ideas where we can digest something, get the input of others, but contribute not on the spot. |

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| 25:40 | And that's why breaks matter. That's why these no meeting blocks matter. Because those are the times when your brain can really process and come up with an idea that you probably wouldn't have just off the cuff on the spot in a brainstorm.   |
| 25:28 | And so, many people talk about this experience of when I go for a run, or when I go for a walk, or when I'm driving or in the shower, I have my best ideas. And so it's really important, particularly for knowledge workers to have the space to just let their brains process information and not be distracted by something else.    |
| 26:23 | But this shift, if we really lean into it, of allowing downtime, but giving our teams the support to know how to make the most of that by not just turning on to social media or scrolling through your email, but actually get away from the computer, move your body, ground yourself, cultivate this sense of calm, focused mindset. |

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| 26:49 | You really may get a different quality of work out of more people on your team. The last thing I'll say is around global teams. So in companies where there are some remote team members and some employees previously who are all in one physical location, there's also this great equalising function, because those remote team members, whether they're in the same city or in another country, they don't miss the conversation after the meeting happens. |
| 27:18 | And so, there in the past may have been this almost unseen hierarchy of influence of who got to actually walk out of the meeting together, have a side conversation, that playing field has been levelled in this shift to remote work. And so collaboration has the potential to be more equitable in this new environment.   |

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| 27:43 | <p><b>PB</b></p> <p>You mentioned that a lot of these strategies that we're talking about now, about how companies can maintain and protect work-life balance and focus for their employees are not new ones. There have been a number of companies that have had these in place, although as you mentioned, some of these companies, many companies have not yet adopted these types of policies.</p> |
| 28:07 | <p><b>Have you seen a difference between companies that have had these flexible and supportive workplace policies in place prior to the pandemic, and those which have not, and their ability to weather the effects of the pandemic?</b></p>  |

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| 28:20 | <p><b>MJB:</b></p> <p>We certainly have seen a difference in companies that had developed these policies to support work life balance and flexibility, and those who had been maybe more resistant to it, because those companies that had been flexible and supportive in the past were really ready and able to adapt to a new work environment.</p> |
| 28:44 | <p>They intuitively knew how to support their team. And so they likely maintained levels of focus and well being among their employees that prevented burnout, that prevented attrition and really allowed them to, of course, probably still have some (giggle), bumps in the road because this was all very unprecedented for all of us.</p>         |

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| 29:12 | <p>But to shift and adapt faster than their counterparts who hadn't invested in these policies previously.</p>  |
| 29:23 | <p><b>PB:</b></p> <p><b>Are there any new policies or initiatives that have emerged as a response to the pandemic, and that you see as potentially having long term impacts in terms of how we think about preserving and protecting focus and work life balance?</b></p>   |
| 29:38 | <p><b>MJB:</b></p> <p>Well, I'm hearing a number of corporate leaders talk about offering mental health day or mind days to their teams, and I'd really never heard (giggle) CEOs talk about mental health before this crisis, let alone connect mental health to focus and and productivity, or actually realise that people may just need more time to manage life.</p> |
| 30:07 | <p>And to recalibrate, and so that's that's a completely new thing that has emerged during this time, that does protect focus, enhances your ability to try (giggle) to have work life balance.</p>   |

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| 30:24 | I think that's more of an aspirational state for many people.   |
| 30:29 | But we see then a more widespread adoption of no meeting blocks which had been popular in engineering, but really hadn't spilled over to other parts of organisations, or companies that had non technical workforces, as well as a shift towards unlimited vacation policies, and that's the other shift that of course had been popular among some tech companies, but it has been adopted outside of that now. |

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| 31:04 | <b>PB:</b><br><b>There has been a lot of thinking and writing about what the long term impacts of the pandemic will be on the working environment. You must have read just as many articles about the elimination of the modern office and the rise of the four day work week.</b> |
| 31:21 | <b>What do you think will be the long term impacts of the pandemic?</b>  |

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| 31:25 | MJB :<br>I think that we will...I do agree that the impact will be a shift to a more efficient way of working, to really enable more autonomy and empower people to decide, is it better for you to go into the office so that you can focus? Or does that time you regain by not having a commute actually let you put more into work, reduce the stress of balancing work at home? |
| 31:59 | I think that we are shifting towards trusting our employees more and trust in actually holding them accountable for the quality and outcome of their work, but not believe that I need to see you at your desk (giggle) from nine to five to believe that you're committed and engaged as an employee.   |
| 32:23 | And so I think it's potentially this uplifting, empowering change when employees are out of sight. If you can actually let people feel like they have that sense of agency that there's so much research that shows that that is a driver of employee satisfaction, of creativity, of focus of retention.  |
| 32:47 | And so, I, I hope that we've all gained, as employers, the evidence we need that we can trust our teams/ That when we give them the resources, the flexibility and create cultures where we are more outcomes, focused, that we let people find the working style and environment that is most conducive for their productivity and creative thinking and problem solving            |
| 33:17 | I think that we're also learning the importance of breaks and transitions in   |

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|       | a way that we had never really fully appreciated before and particularly, for people who are working at home. And so I think that we're seeing even technology that is trying to integrate, Microsoft Teams has integrated this virtual commute into their software, because they recognise that people need support in that transition that there was actually a hidden benefit of your commute (giggle) whether you believe it or or not and so   |
| 33:58 | I do hope that one of the lasting effects is that people create routines in this pandemic that are durable, and last over time. I think when you see the evidence yourself of when I take a break, and I come back and I sit down at my desk or ideally (giggle) if you're lucky enough to have a standing desk, which also will help improve your focus, that you actually feel refreshed, you're more energised you're better able to focus on the task at hand, you don't get as distracted or you don't multitask |

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| 34:45 | When we are aware of what we're doing and how it's affecting us, and we experiment with these new routines, we can collect the evidence we need to actually change our behaviours, long term. So I hope that that's happening both, at an individual level, and at an organisational level.   |
| 34:57 | <b>PB:</b><br><b>And on that note one final question.</b>   |
| 35:00 | <b>What is the one lesson, you would like organisational leadership to take forward in terms of how they can create environments to better promote focus, both now, and in the future?</b>  |
| 35:10 | <b>MJB:</b><br>I would hope that they empower their teams in that you trust your team to know what is best for their ability to focus. It's not one size fits all. We all will have different routines and ways of working that are most conducive to us, bringing our best selves to work. And so this shift towards empowering and trusting employees and giving them agency to decide how they work is one of the things I hope lasts. |
| 35:45 | <b>PB:</b><br><b>Thank you. That's a good note to end the discussion with, so thank you so much for joining us today.</b>   |
| 35:51 | My pleasure. Thanks for having me.  |
| 35:55 | <b>PB:</b><br><b>That concludes our first episode of "In Search of Lost Focus". If you've</b>   |

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|       | enjoyed this episode, we invite you to subscribe to this podcast to join us for future conversations.                                    |
| 36:05 | You can also learn more about our work on focus in the workplace, by visiting <a href="http://lostfocus.eiu.com">lostfocus.eiu.com</a> . |
| 36:12 | Thanks again to Dropbox our sponsor for this series,   |
| 36:15 | and thank you for listening to this discussion. We hope you join us again soon for our next episode.                                     |