Send smarter

Free to focus: expert advice on employee distractions and how to remove them

When people are distracted, they’re more likely to trip up – and even cause data breaches. Here’s how to reduce the noise, and help staff regain focus …

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About this content

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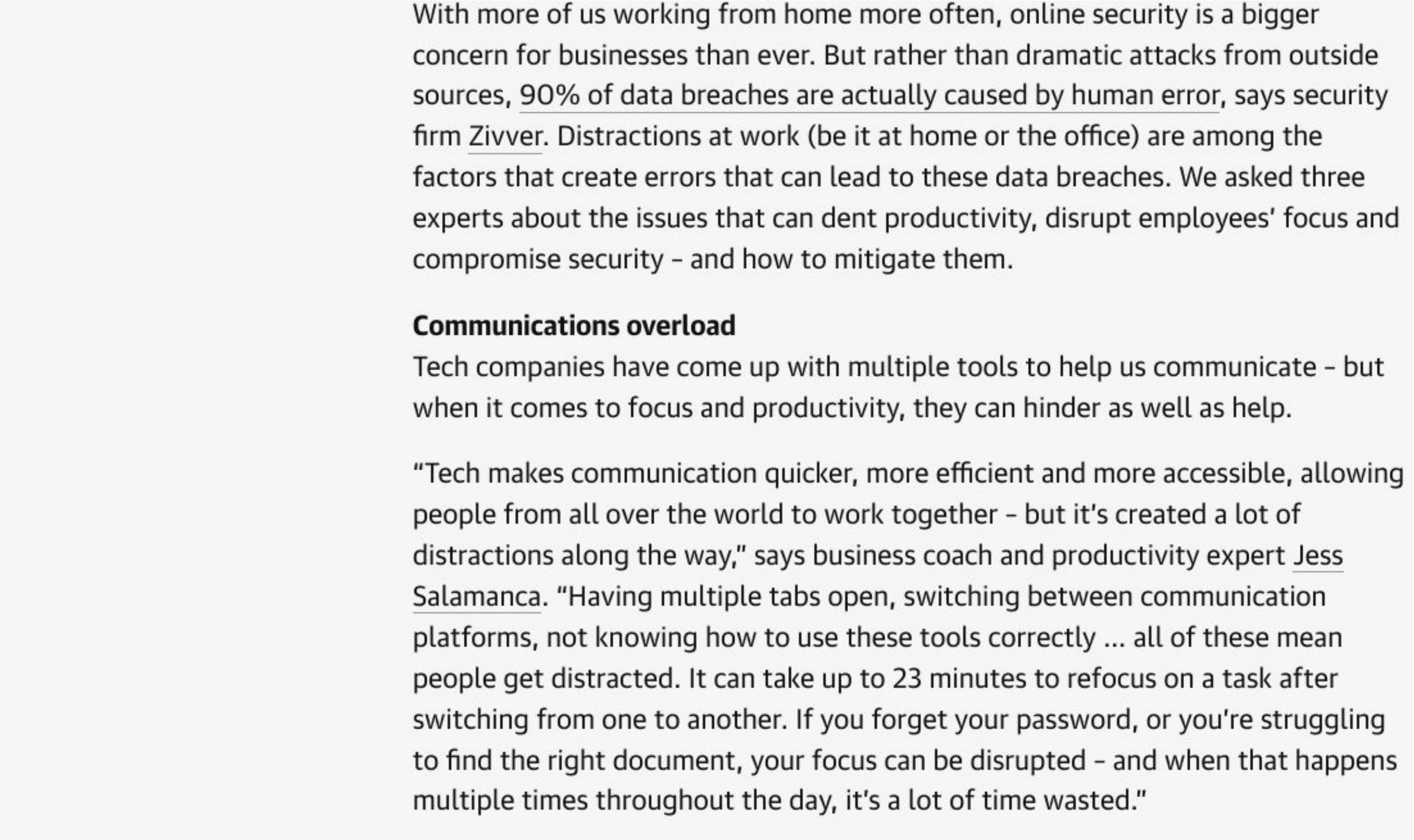
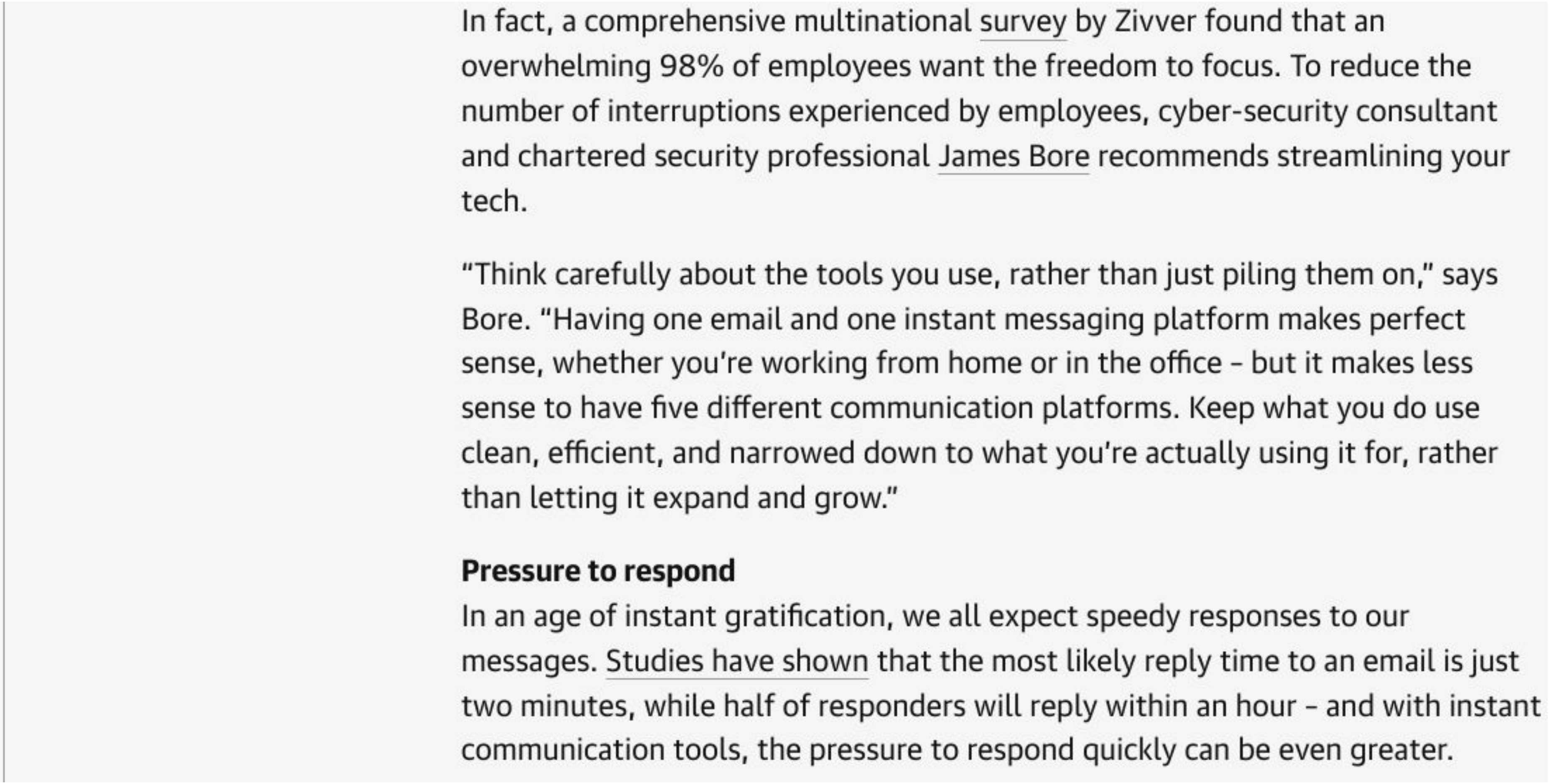


With more of us working from home more often, online security is a bigger concern for businesses than ever. But rather than dramatic attacks from outside sources, 90% of data breaches are actually caused by human error, says security firm Zivver. Distractions at work (be it at home or the office) are among the factors that create errors that can lead to these data breaches. We asked three experts about the issues that can dent productivity, disrupt employees' focus and compromise security – and how to mitigate them.

Communications overload

Tech companies have come up with multiple tools to help us communicate – but when it comes to focus and productivity, they can hinder as well as help.

"Tech makes communication quicker, more efficient and more accessible, allowing people from all over the world to work together – but it's created a lot of distractions along the way," says business coach and productivity expert Jess Salamanca. "Having multiple tabs open, switching between communication platforms, not knowing how to use these tools correctly … all of these mean people get distracted. It can take up to 23 minutes to refocus on a task after switching from one to another. If you forget your password, or you're struggling to find the right document, your focus can be disrupted – and when that happens multiple times throughout the day, it's a lot of time wasted."

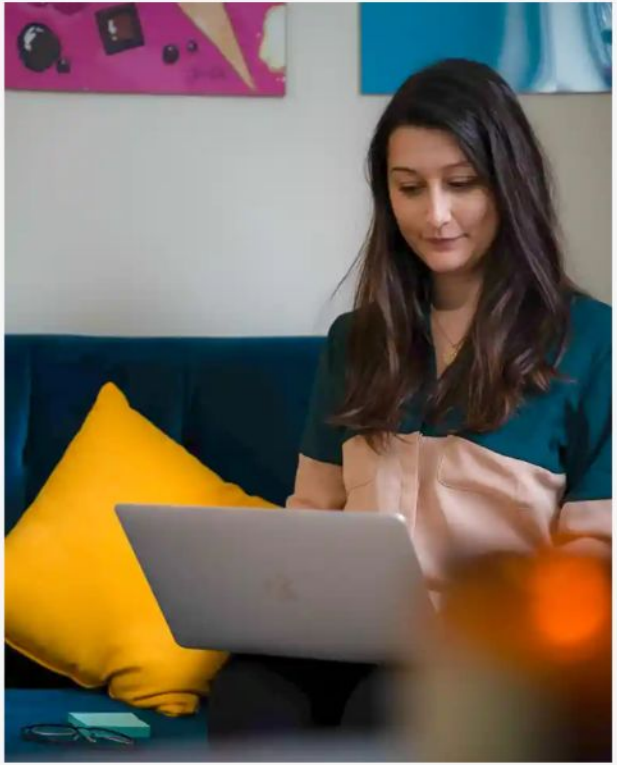


In fact, a comprehensive multinational survey by Zivver found that an overwhelming 98% of employees want the freedom to focus. To reduce the number of interruptions experienced by employees, cyber-security consultant and chartered security professional James Bore recommends streamlining your tech.

“Think carefully about the tools you use, rather than just piling them on,” says Bore. “Having one email and one instant messaging platform makes perfect sense, whether you’re working from home or in the office – but it makes less sense to have five different communication platforms. Keep what you do use clean, efficient, and narrowed down to what you’re actually using it for, rather than letting it expand and grow.”

Pressure to respond

In an age of instant gratification, we all expect speedy responses to our messages. Studies have shown that the most likely reply time to an email is just two minutes, while half of responders will reply within an hour – and with instant communication tools, the pressure to respond quickly can be even greater.



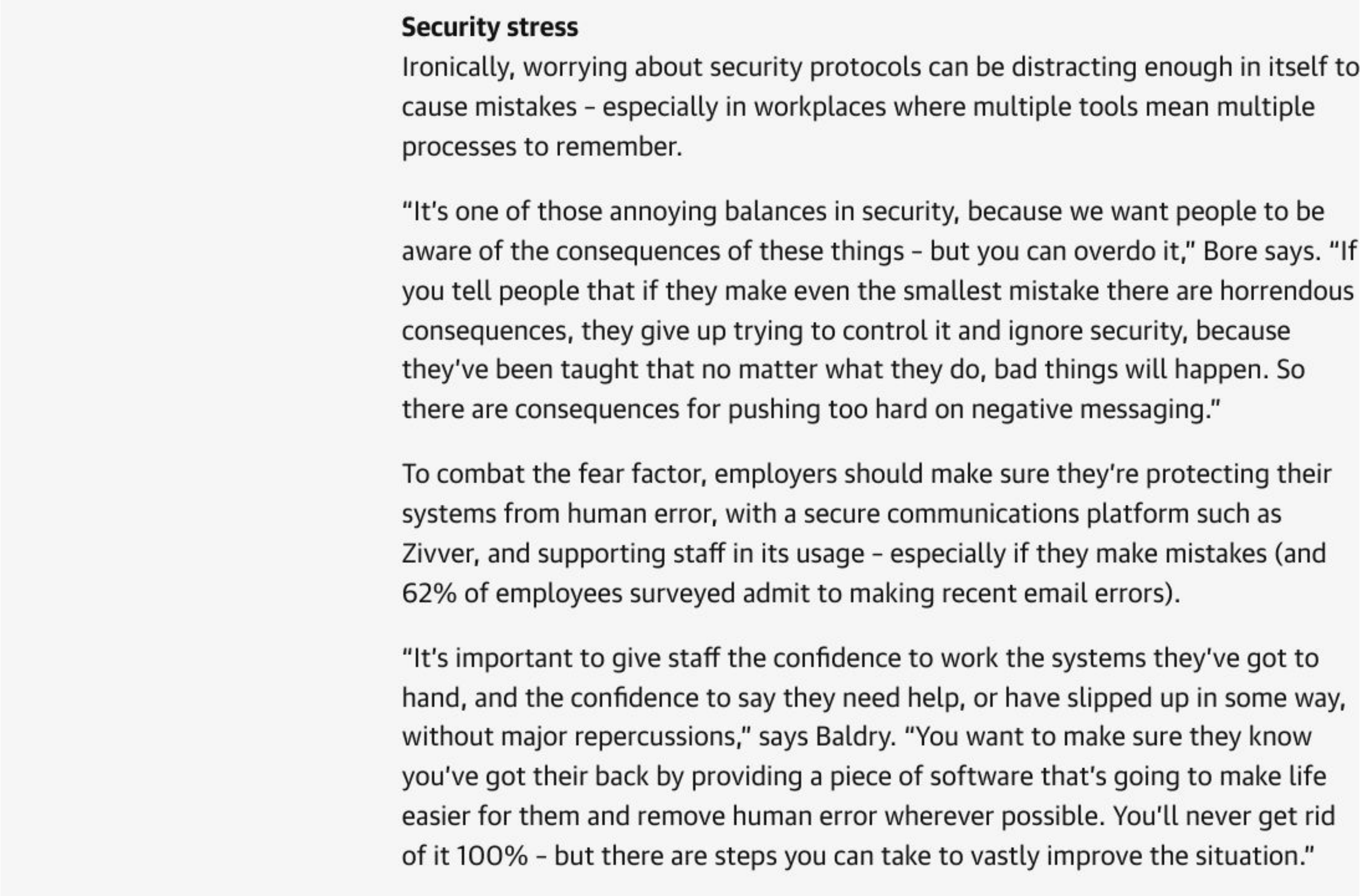
Business coach and productivity expert Jess Salamanca

"One of the joys of email is that I can send a message, and you can reply when you feel like it," says Bore. "But when you're looking at platforms that are more real-time, there's an impulse to respond instantly. It's like someone walking up behind you and tapping your shoulder every five minutes."

Salamanca adds: "We do our best work when there are as few distractions as possible. The quality of the work you're doing decreases a lot when your focus is interrupted, and in turn you can make more mistakes."

The answer is to either consolidate all your communications into one outlet – preferably an asynchronous one, such as email – or switch off notifications altogether when you need to concentrate.

"Allowing yourself to not get distracted and flustered by new work or emails coming in means your brain stays focused on the task at hand, and you're less likely to make a mistake – such as sending an email to the wrong person because you were thinking about them," says systems strategist Elle Baldry. "If you give yourself the permission to take your time and do things properly – or ask your employer if it's OK to switch off notifications for a period of time so you can work on one thing, rather than 30 at once – you'll be happier and more productive."



Security stress

Ironically, worrying about security protocols can be distracting enough in itself to cause mistakes – especially in workplaces where multiple tools mean multiple processes to remember.

“It’s one of those annoying balances in security, because we want people to be aware of the consequences of these things – but you can overdo it,” Bore says. “If you tell people that if they make even the smallest mistake there are horrendous consequences, they give up trying to control it and ignore security, because they’ve been taught that no matter what they do, bad things will happen. So there are consequences for pushing too hard on negative messaging.”

To combat the fear factor, employers should make sure they’re protecting their systems from human error, with a secure communications platform such as Zivver, and supporting staff in its usage – especially if they make mistakes (and 62% of employees surveyed admit to making recent email errors).

“It’s important to give staff the confidence to work the systems they’ve got to hand, and the confidence to say they need help, or have slipped up in some way, without major repercussions,” says Baldry. “You want to make sure they know you’ve got their back by providing a piece of software that’s going to make life easier for them and remove human error wherever possible. You’ll never get rid of it 100% – but there are steps you can take to vastly improve the situation.”

Overwork

Mistakes due to human error are often due to being overloaded and having tight deadlines, which mean people simply don't have the time to give their jobs and security protocols the level of focus they deserve.

"The more tasks you've got, the faster you want to get through them," says Bore. "Security goes out the window in favour of knowing once a task is done, you can move on."

Baldry adds: "If I'm rushing and on the go, my autofill takes over and people get gobbledygook from me. It's also easy to attach the wrong document or copy the wrong person into an email because you're typing the first three letters of their name, your software is automatically picking a person out of your address book, and you don't have time to check it."

If employees are complaining that they don't have time to focus on security, it might be a sign that they're overworked

"Ask yourself why employees are making these mistakes," says Baldry. "Is it due to the fear factor of: 'If I don't get this out, I'm going to be in trouble,' and rushing through things? If so, you need a multi-pronged attack, sort out your tech, yes – but start with the users."

Cyber-security consultant James Bore

Inadequate tools

Unintended sharing of sensitive data accounts for almost 74% of all data leaks (Excel file) – and if this sounds familiar, using secure outbound communication tools your employees can rely on should be a priority.

“If you’re sending out the payroll spreadsheet, and it’s three o’clock on a Thursday afternoon, it’s easy to accidentally type ‘all staff’ rather than ‘all finance’ into the recipient line,” says Bore. “That’s not the fault of the people involved, because their job is to send information – if someone can accidentally send a sensitive document to the wrong person, or to people outside the company, you need to look at your controls around email.”

Communication tools that aren’t fit for purpose could also compel employees to use unapproved third-party sites that do a better job, which could be another cause of unintended data leaks.

“If you’re using a productivity tool that’s not compliant with GDPR and the Data Protection Act, you’re illegally using it and not covered at all,” says Baldry. “So if someone made a complaint, you’d be at fault.”

Bore adds: “For example, forcing people to use unapproved transfer sites to send large documents because your email doesn’t cater for them is a big security risk. But using tools such as Zivver, which prevents data leaks like these – properly deployed and managed by a security team – will make a big difference.”

Smart sender or mail fail – how much do you know about secure communications? Take our quiz

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