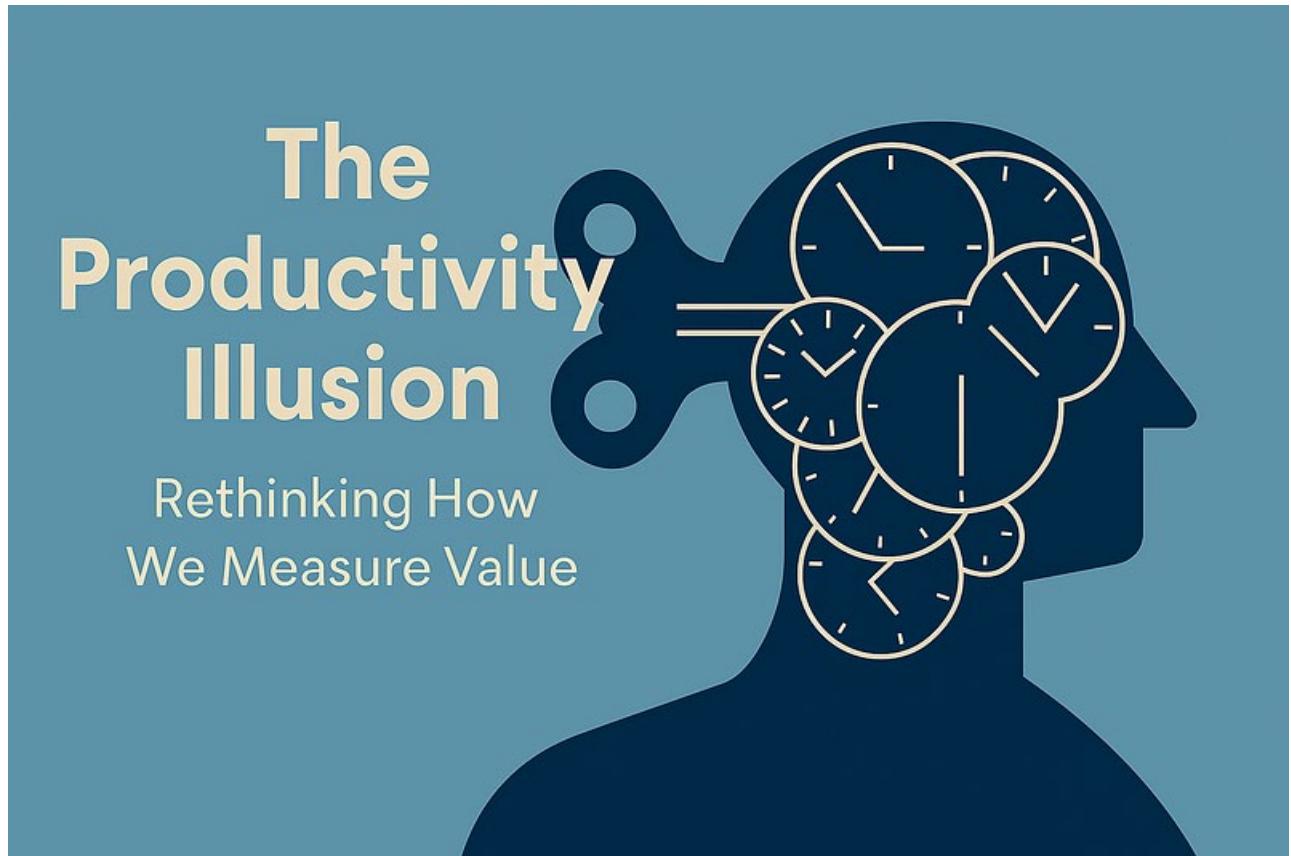


The Productivity Illusion



Rethinking how we measure value

We've been taught to value the visible. Consistency. Responsiveness. Clock-time.

The person who shows up early, answers quickly, works late.

What if those aren't actually the best measures of value?

What if our systems are rewarding *performance theatre* more than meaningful contribution?

And what if that illusion is especially damaging for neurodivergent people?

Steady output: the myth that hides real work

For people with ADHD, productivity doesn't come in a tidy, linear package. It's often cyclical—driven by interest, novelty, and urgency, not routine. That's not laziness or lack of discipline. That's dopamine-regulated motivation at work.

A task might seem impossible at 2pm... and flow effortlessly at midnight.

If value is measured by *when* something gets done—not *what* gets done—then entire working styles get excluded, despite delivering huge value in bursts, breakthroughs, or insight.

Hyperfocus isn't a problem—unless the system is

One of the ADHD brain's greatest strengths is hyperfocus: total, fast-flow immersion in what matters. When harnessed well, it's a superpower, but it doesn't conform to fixed time slots, daily progress trackers, or “check-in by 3pm” cultures. That doesn't mean it's not valuable, it just means the system isn't built to hold it.

Hyperfocus is intense, but unpredictable. It might mean solving a week's worth of problems in a single evening (and needing space to recover after). It's not less reliable, just *differently* reliable.

When systems demand constant, even output, they often miss the brilliance that comes in waves. Designing for hyperfocus means

recognising this pattern, allowing for recovery, and valuing output over optics.

The question shouldn't be "Why don't you work like everyone else?"—but "How can we make space for the way you work best?"

'Productivity' isn't always what it seems

Productivity is often confused with visibility.

The person who speaks first. Sends follow-ups. Attends every meeting. Sticks to the schedule.

Not everyone works that way. Some people work best when they're quiet, reflective, asynchronous—or when they're trusted to deliver without constant performance check-ins.

Yet we continue to reward *performance theatre*—behaviours that create the appearance of productivity without necessarily delivering meaningful outcomes. This includes meetings with no clear purpose, emails that say little but include everyone, and performative busyness designed to signal commitment. These rituals of visibility can eclipse genuine contribution, reducing value to what can be seen rather than what actually drives impact.

If we're only rewarding those who present as productive, we're excluding those who *are* productive—just differently.

Burnout is not a badge

Too often, exhaustion is treated as proof of effort. If someone's

overwhelmed, overworked, or stretched thin, it's seen as a sign of commitment.

For many neurodivergent people, burnout doesn't come from the work—it comes from the system:

- Masking to fit a rigid structure
- Working against natural rhythms
- Being expected to produce in a way that doesn't match how their brain works

The cost of pretending to be a “normal worker” is often invisible—until it isn’t.

Redefining value

When productivity is judged by how well someone matches the template, we lose more than talent—we lose trust, energy, and the freedom to work well.

The Productivity Illusion is the false belief that output must look a certain way to be valid.

What if we defined value by:

- *Impact over immediacy*
- *Quality over clock-time*
- *Results over rituals*

- *Sustainability over exhaustion*

When we redesign systems to recognise different patterns of productivity, we don't just include neurodivergent people—we create workplaces that are more human for everyone.

By [Nik Charlson](#) on [July 28, 2025](#).

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