THE PRODUCTIVITY PLAYBOOK

Three expert panelists joined hosts Jeff Cunningham of Bradley Arant Boult Cummings LLP and Cannon Carr of EP Wealth Advisors— along with a packed room of Atlanta business owners — to tackle productivity, not the "get up at 5 a.m." variety, but the real thing. We also ran questions simultaneously through Google Gemini, creating a live human vs. AI comparison thread throughout the event.

Bios of Our Panelists

Chris King — Status Flow. Trains teams to reach flow states: the optimal state of consciousness in which people feel and perform their best.

Cory Cook — Personal productivity coach. Focus: structure, habits, energy management and turning meeting outcomes into clear next steps.

Walt Carter — President & COO, THG Advisors. Represents 62 retired CIOs/CTOs who consult on AI and systems implementation.

The consensus: Productivity isn't about doing more things faster. It's about leverage, energy management and flow.

Key Themes

The biggest takeaways from our discussion:

1. Efficiency is meaningless if you're efficient at the wrong things. It's better to choose one outcome that matters most this week and protect time for it (not 10 "top priorities"). Productivity is more about focus and attention than volume.

2. Protect deep work and flow as if they generate revenue, because they do. The themes of 90-minute focus cycles and the high cost of interruptions came up consistently. Expecting eight straight hours of real output isn't realistic; treat six strong hours as an excellent day and plan accordingly. Give high performers time to think and create.

3. Productivity breaks down when you overemphasize any one lens (people, process or technology enablement.) You need a workflow that's clear enough to execute, hand off and improve. Ask: Who owns the next step? Eliminate "ghost work" quickly.

4. Use AI, but only after the process is clear. AI is a force multiplier when applied to a solid workflow, but it can create new waste (including AI-generated bloat) if you're not careful.

What the Panel Debunked First

The Myth	The Reality
Time can be managed	Time is fixed. Walt: "You get 24 hours. What you manage is priorities and attention."
The 5 a.m. club	Fighting your chronotype creates cognitive fog. Honor your biology.
Multitasking	It's context switching. Research shows productivity losses of up to 40% and 20% more errors.
App-hopping / AI wrappers	Corey: "The app doesn't fix the problem." Walt: "AI makes a broken process break faster."

Workflow: Three Lenses, One Framework

Each panelist defined workflow through a distinct orientation. Together, they form a diagnostic framework:

Lens	View	Definition
Operational	Tech / AI	Repeatable steps, inputs » outputs. Documented clearly enough to automate or delegate without requiring judgment at every step.
Cultural	People	Orchestrated human activity: handoffs, ownership and clarity around who does what by when. A social contract designed to prevent burnout.
Financial	ROI	Converting resources into value with minimal friction. The fuel gauge: "If Tech is the engine and Process is the steering wheel, Finance is the fuel gauge."

Chris's meta-metric across all three lenses: leverage. "You can be efficient without impact. Leverage is the input-to-output ratio—a whole lot more from a whole lot less."

The Neuroscience: Why Most Productivity Advice Fails

The 90-Minute Rule

The prefrontal cortex fatigues after about 90 minutes of intensive work. Protect that block—then honor the stop. Pushing past it produces worse work, not more.

The 23-Minute Tax

Every interruption requires about 23 minutes to fully reengage. "Just checking Slack real quick" doesn't cost two minutes—it costs 23. A day filled with 30-minute meetings becomes a day spent recovering, not working.

The Alpha-Theta State

Creativity and flow operate at lower brain-wave frequencies than grinding through tasks. Walking away from a hard problem—literally taking a walk—hands it off to the subconscious. That's often where breakthroughs occur.

Dopamine Is the Enemy

Every notification is a chemical reward. Turning them off isn't just a productivity tip—it's managing a behavioral addiction. Chris: "We strip things away. Michelangelo didn't add to the marble to create the David—he removed what wasn't him."

What The Research Says About Leading For Productivity

The Informal Organization Beats the Org Chart

Walt described a study involving Charlie (the company's top performer) and Sally (Charlie's friend at the company). When Charlie is assigned the most critical project, he abandons it every time Sally faces a crisis to help her.. "The informal organization is far more powerful than the org chart. Design systems around how people actually behave, not how you want them to."

Incentives Drive Everything

At Nucor Steel, Ken Iverson set below-market base pay but offered massive team bonuses when goals were met. Within years, Nucor employees out-earned counterparts at U.S. Steel. Underperformers were managed out by their teammates because poor performance hurt everyone's bonus. Walt: "People do what they're paid for. If you want a behavior change, pay for it."

What actually motivates people: meaningful work and a supervisor who genuinely cares rank higher than money as long as pay is sufficient to avoid financial stress.

The AI Acceleration Paradox

Technology is moving faster than organizations can adapt. Google Gemini's analysis identified the "2026 Productivity Paradox": capital spent optimizing for the AI future can hurt current margins and morale before any returns materialize. The panel recommended sequencing implementation based on business stage:

Business Stage	Lead With
Stability (tight cash flow)	Finance first — you cannot fund culture or AI if you can't make payroll.
Scaling (growing but chaotic)	Process & culture first — scaling a confused culture leads to turnover and errors that wipe out gains.
Optimization (profitable, stable team)	AI / Tech — at this stage, they're true force multipliers. Applied to a broken process, they accelerate collapse.

Your Action Checklists — Pick One From Each, This Week

Owners & Leaders

1. Name your current constraint: margins, morale, or throughput. Fix that one first.
2. Set an org-wide no-interruption window. Model it yourself—Do Not Disturb on.
3. Shift reviews to outcomes: "What moved the needle?" not "how long did it take?"
4. Quarterly tool audit: cut zombie subscriptions; standardize on a minimal tech stack.
5. Align incentives with your current priority. If you want the behavior, pay for it.

Startups

1. Apply an 80/20 weekly rule: drop anything not advancing revenue or learning.
2. Build a central nervous system: one task board, one docs space, one comms channel.
3. Use a three-bullet protocol for every recurring task: trigger, tool, definition of done.
4. Write the vision visually—mockups and maps, not paragraphs.

Teams

1. One 90-minute focus block daily. 5-minute buffer after every meeting for decision capture.
2. Establish an async-first norm: batch questions for 1:1s. Mute non-urgent pings.
3. Document 'Definition of Done' on recurring tasks; attach resources up front.
4. Maintain a shared AI prompt library—stop reinventing prompts that already work.
5. Conduct a monthly ghost-work hunt: identify where people manually bridge systems and automate the worst offender.

Quick Workflow Audit

- **Financial:** Is the owner doing $25/hr tasks? Cut or delegate them.
- **Cultural:** Can every person on a project name who owns the next step?
- **Tech:** Where is data being entered twice? That's your first AI automation candidate.

> "The most expensive thing in your business isn't software or salary—it's the 20 minutes of focus lost every time a bad workflow interrupts a talented person. Start with the humans. Clarify the workflow. Then apply the technology. In that order."
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> **- The Panel**