Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

The Green Dot on Teams Became the Measure of Engagement

How to Stop Proving Your Presence with an Online Status, Set Sensible Availability Rules, and Focus on Results Instead of Looking Busy



We've got a problem. But relax. It can be solved—and we'll even have something to laugh about.

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INTRO

At 2:36 on a Thursday afternoon, Rebecca was standing in the warehouse, trying to establish why an expensive shipment had arrived with the wrong specifications. Her laptop was upstairs, her phone was in her pocket, and she was having a conversation with the only person who could explain what had happened. Meanwhile, back at the office, her manager opened Microsoft Teams and noticed that Rebecca's status said Away. He sent a message asking whether she was working that afternoon. When Rebecca returned to her desk, she discovered that the shipment was no longer her only problem. She now had to explain why solving a business problem had made her appear unavailable. Somewhere in the invisible machinery of corporate logic, physical movement away from a keyboard had apparently become evidence of professional misconduct.

This is the strange little world we have built around a colored dot. Originally intended to help people understand whether a colleague might be available for a conversation, the presence indicator has acquired responsibilities that no sensible hiring committee would ever have approved. It is expected to reveal commitment, productivity, discipline, responsiveness, and occasionally the moral character of the person sitting behind the screen. Green suggests enthusiasm. Yellow raises questions. Red can be interpreted as legitimate busyness, although it reveals remarkably little about whether the meeting occupying your calendar is important or merely the latest gathering of people who enjoy hearing one another say, "We should take this offline." A

technical signal has become a substitute for judgment, and the substitute is often considerably easier to consult.

The trouble is that availability, activity, and valuable work are not interchangeable. A person can be actively clicking through applications without accomplishing anything useful. Someone else might spend an hour reviewing a complicated contract, sketching a solution on paper, or discussing a difficult decision with a colleague. Their digital footprint could be surprisingly modest. Neither example proves anything about the employee's overall performance, but the contrast exposes the weakness of judging work through visible computer activity. Good work sometimes produces messages, documents, and rapid responses. At other times, it requires thinking before speaking, checking before approving, or allowing a complicated problem to remain undisturbed long enough to understand it. The software can report certain signals about presence. It cannot establish the business value of the thoughts occurring between keystrokes.

Yet once people believe their status is being watched, their behavior begins to change. An employee interrupts an important task to answer an unimportant question because silence might look suspicious. Another accepts an unnecessary meeting because declining it could suggest insufficient engagement. Someone finishes work for the day but checks the company chat again from the kitchen, just in case an unread message is silently damaging their reputation. Nobody needs to announce an official policy requiring these behaviors. An ambiguous comment from a supervisor, a few colleagues who always respond instantly, and a lingering uncertainty about expectations can be enough. Eventually, the workplace develops an unofficial

competition in which the prize for being constantly reachable is an even greater number of people trying to reach you.

What makes this especially frustrating is that many of the people caught in this cycle are genuinely conscientious. They care about their colleagues, take deadlines seriously, and dislike leaving others waiting. Their willingness to help is precisely what makes them vulnerable to endless interruptions. When everyone else's request becomes an immediate obligation, their own responsibilities get pushed into whatever time remains. They finish the day exhausted, surrounded by evidence of activity, yet dissatisfied with their progress. The obvious reaction is to work harder, answer faster, or extend the working day. Unfortunately, doing more of the behavior that created the problem rarely repairs the underlying arrangement. You can become extraordinarily efficient at appearing busy while becoming progressively less effective at completing the work you were hired to perform.

There is another temptation: to defeat the little indicator itself. People look for ways to preserve a favorable online appearance, fill their calendars with impressive-looking appointments, or manufacture enough visible activity to discourage questions. Such tactics may briefly relieve the anxiety of appearing absent, but they leave the real issue untouched. Colleagues still lack clear expectations. Managers still struggle to understand progress. Important work still competes with unpredictable interruptions. Worse, misleading signals can create fresh misunderstandings when someone reasonably expects a supposedly available colleague to respond. Winning a contest against a presence indicator is a rather limited achievement, particularly when

the prize is spending the rest of the afternoon maintaining the illusion that you won.

Managers, meanwhile, are not necessarily villains lurking behind dashboards with a suspicious expression and a notebook labeled EMPLOYEES WHO WENT YELLOW. Many have legitimate reasons to care about responsiveness. Customer service, urgent operations, collaborative projects, and time-sensitive decisions depend on people being reachable when their participation is necessary. A supervisor who cannot obtain essential information may face genuine consequences. The mistake is treating permanent visibility as the solution to every coordination problem. An effective team needs to know who is responsible, what requires immediate attention, when an answer is reasonably expected, and what happens if the relevant person is unavailable. These questions require decisions and agreements. The green dot answers none of them reliably.

There is a difference between being easy to contact and being easy to interrupt. A healthy working arrangement recognizes it. It allows people to collaborate without assuming that every message deserves the same urgency. It makes room for concentration without turning employees into unreachable mysteries. It also gives managers a more meaningful basis for evaluating performance than whether someone appeared online during an arbitrary afternoon. The aim is not to abolish meetings, silence every notification, or make workers defend their right to disappear whenever they please. It is to develop a working relationship in which availability serves the task rather than becoming the task itself.

That requires practical choices, not motivational slogans. You need to understand how to communicate realistic

response times, distinguish genuine emergencies from ordinary requests, protect demanding work, and show progress without publishing a minute-by-minute documentary of your professional existence. You also need to recognize what happens when colleagues have competing needs, when managers disagree with your preferred approach, or when the organization's demands exceed the time and resources available. Some situations can be improved through a small change in communication. Others involve structural problems that no individual productivity technique can solve. Knowing the difference can save you considerable effort and more than a few conversations that begin politely and end with someone saying, "I just need everyone to be more proactive."

This book is written for people who want to do their jobs well without spending their working lives performing a convincing imitation of productivity. That includes employees worried about being judged for normal periods of inactivity, managers trying to lead teams they cannot physically observe, and colleagues whose work depends on timely cooperation. It does not assume that everyone enjoys the same freedom or faces the same risks. A new employee on probation, an experienced specialist with established credibility, and an operations manager responsible for critical incidents cannot necessarily follow identical availability rules. Personal circumstances, employment arrangements, organizational culture, and financial responsibilities matter. Sometimes the sensible solution is a conversation. Sometimes it is a revised process. And sometimes the most useful realization is that a particular problem exceeds your authority to fix.

For now, consider one question the next time you feel compelled to check your online status: what would you be doing differently if nobody could see that dot? Would you still interrupt the document you are reviewing? Would you attend the same meeting, send the same unnecessary confirmation, or reopen the chat simply to demonstrate that you are there? Some of those activities may still be useful. Others may reveal how much effort has quietly shifted from performing work to advertising its existence. The distinction is worth noticing before you attempt to change anything. You cannot build sensible working habits while treating every moment without visible activity as something requiring an explanation.

Your professional worth cannot be condensed into a small circle beside your name. You may owe your employer reliability, competence, communication, and the responsible completion of agreed work. Those are substantial obligations, and they deserve to be taken seriously. But your mouse movements are not a complete biography of your working day, and your availability indicator is not qualified to conduct your performance review. If a piece of software can change the apparent value of your contribution simply because you stepped away from a keyboard to solve a problem, perhaps the software is not the part of the arrangement that needs improving. Perhaps we should start asking what the work actually achieves.

Chapter 1 - The Green Dot Gets Promoted to Management

At a quarterly performance review, a senior analyst named Oliver received an unexpected piece of feedback. His manager was pleased with the accuracy of his reports, satisfied with his deadlines, and impressed by his ability to identify problems before they became expensive. There was, however, one area requiring improvement. Under the heading "Professional Engagement," the manager had written: "Not always visibly active on Teams during working hours." Oliver read the sentence twice. He had expected a discussion about his recommendations, the decisions they had supported, or perhaps the unusually complicated project he had completed ahead of schedule. Instead, he found himself explaining why his computer occasionally displayed a yellow circle. For the first time in his career, he wondered whether his greatest professional weakness was insufficient mouse movement.

The manager was not necessarily attempting to be unfair. He supervised employees working across several locations and wanted reassurance that everyone remained accessible. Oliver's colleagues sometimes needed his input, and the manager disliked uncertainty about whether a question would receive a timely answer. Those concerns were understandable. The trouble was that he had taken an indirect technical signal and promoted it into a measure of professional commitment without establishing whether it accurately represented the behavior he wanted to evaluate. The presence indicator had never attended a project meeting, examined a completed report, or listened to an

explanation of a difficult decision. Nevertheless, it had apparently earned a seat on the performance review committee.

To understand how this happens, consider what an online status actually tells you. Depending on the application's behavior, device activity, calendar information, and settings, Microsoft Teams can display indicators associated with availability, inactivity, meetings, or deliberate status choices. These indicators are useful for deciding whether attempting a conversation makes sense. They are not reliable measurements of intellectual effort, responsibility, or productivity. Someone might be thinking through a complicated problem while the application reports inactivity. Another employee might be actively interacting with a computer while making remarkably little progress. The system has no direct understanding of the business importance of what either person is doing. It supplies a limited piece of information, and human beings provide the interpretation. Unfortunately, human interpretation occasionally arrives wearing the confidence of a laboratory instrument while possessing the accuracy of an office rumor.

The distinction matters because three separate questions are frequently collapsed into one. Is the employee present? Is the employee available for communication? Is the employee fulfilling their responsibilities? These questions may overlap, but they do not mean the same thing. A customer support specialist may be present and working hard while temporarily unable to answer a colleague because they are assisting a customer. A project engineer may be available for questions but have completed little of the design work expected that day. A finance manager may

be unavailable during a confidential discussion while making an important contribution to the business. Any attempt to draw a conclusion about overall engagement from only one of these conditions loses essential context.

Yet the green dot is seductive precisely because it makes a complicated judgment appear simple. A manager trying to assess performance faces numerous uncertainties. Results may take weeks to emerge. Some work is difficult to observe directly. Individual contributions can be intertwined with those of colleagues, and circumstances outside anyone's control can affect outcomes. By contrast, a colored indicator is immediate, easy to see, and apparently objective. The temptation is to treat the easily available information as a substitute for the information that actually matters. That substitution may happen gradually, without anyone consciously deciding that a software feature deserves the authority of an experienced supervisor.

Imagine two consultants assigned to review an organization's purchasing process. One spends the morning conducting structured interviews and examining exceptions that employees have learned to work around. By lunchtime, she has discovered why several purchases repeatedly require manual corrections. The other remains at his computer, responding to chat messages, reorganizing folders, and participating in several discussions about how the review should proceed. Both may be making legitimate contributions, but their visible activity tells us little about the usefulness of their work. To understand their performance, we need to consider the assignment, the quality of their findings, and what the organization can do with the results. Counting online activity would be easier. It would also be an

excellent way to reward the appearance of progress while overlooking its substance.

There is a broader psychological trap here. People naturally form impressions from information they can observe. If you repeatedly see a colleague responding quickly, you may begin to regard that person as dependable. If another colleague responds less frequently, you might wonder whether they are sufficiently engaged. These impressions are not necessarily unreasonable starting points. Responsiveness can be genuinely important. The mistake occurs when an impression becomes a conclusion without checking whether the behavior affects actual obligations. A person who responds slowly to a nonurgent question but consistently delivers excellent work may be entirely dependable. Someone who answers immediately but repeatedly misses important commitments may be wonderfully accessible and professionally unreliable.

A particularly revealing question is whether the behavior being measured connects to a specific requirement of the job. Consider an employee responsible for monitoring a live operational queue during an agreed shift. Availability matters because unanswered incidents may create immediate consequences. A manager has legitimate reasons to check whether coverage is being maintained. Even here, however, the relevant question is whether incidents are properly handled, not whether a particular icon remains green without interruption. The employee might be actively resolving an incident through a telephone call or another approved system. If the process requires coverage, the organization should define coverage and measure the handling of relevant responsibilities. A colored dot may offer a clue, but

it cannot replace evidence of whether the service was delivered.

For a different role, the connection may be considerably weaker. A researcher preparing a complex assessment might need extended periods with no incoming conversations. Requiring continuous responsiveness could directly undermine the quality of the expected result. This is why identical availability expectations across unrelated roles can create unfair comparisons. The organization believes it has established one consistent standard, while employees with different responsibilities experience radically different consequences. It is rather like judging a chef and a delivery driver by how frequently they open the refrigerator. The measurement may be consistent, but consistency alone does not make it meaningful.

How a technical signal becomes an unofficial rule

The transformation rarely begins with a formal announcement. More often, it starts with a comment. A manager asks why someone was marked Away during the afternoon. Another praises an employee for being "always online." A colleague jokes that a yellow status means an early start to the weekend. Individually, these remarks may seem harmless. Repeated often enough, however, they create expectations. Employees begin to anticipate how their behavior will be interpreted and adjust accordingly. Nobody has to introduce a written rule requiring a green status throughout the day. People may enforce the perceived rule upon themselves, motivated by the entirely reasonable desire to avoid criticism.

Once that happens, the indicator stops functioning as a neutral communication aid. Employees may hesitate to leave their desks for legitimate tasks, worry about how meetings

are displayed, or feel obliged to explain ordinary periods of inactivity. Managers, meanwhile, may regard increased visible activity as confirmation that their expectations are working. A self-reinforcing arrangement emerges: the more the organization values the signal, the more employees optimize their behavior around producing it. Eventually, the signal becomes less trustworthy because it reflects pressure to appear active rather than the underlying activity it was supposed to help describe.

This creates a particularly uncomfortable situation for conscientious employees. They want to satisfy their manager and fulfill their professional obligations, but the expectations may conflict. A request for sustained concentration competes with the desire for constant visibility. The employee can finish important work efficiently or maintain the appearance of immediate availability, but doing both perfectly may be impossible. Without explicit priorities, they may attempt to compensate by working longer or repeatedly interrupting themselves. The organization gains the appearance of heightened commitment while quietly making its actual work more difficult.

The problem becomes more serious when status observations enter formal assessments. Performance discussions have consequences. They can influence development opportunities, compensation decisions, and professional relationships. An employee should therefore be able to understand the standards against which their work is judged. If availability is an important requirement, the relevant expectations should be explained in terms of actual responsibilities. What kind of contact must be monitored? During which agreed hours? What response is needed, and

what happens when the employee is legitimately occupied? Without that context, the instruction to "be more active" provides little guidance beyond encouraging the employee to look busier.

Oliver eventually asked his manager which responsibilities had been affected by his supposedly inconsistent online presence. The manager initially struggled to identify an example. After further discussion, he explained that another department had occasionally been unsure when Oliver would answer questions about a monthly report. That was a much more useful problem. It concerned the predictability of communication between two teams, not Oliver's moral commitment to employment. They could examine when the information was needed, whether the relevant deadlines were known, and what communication arrangements would allow the work to continue without unnecessary interruption.

Notice that this approach does not require pretending the employee is always right. If Oliver had ignored an agreed response obligation, the manager would have been justified in discussing it. If another department genuinely needed timely information, that dependency deserved attention. A sensible examination might uncover an individual mistake, a confusing process, or unreasonable expectations. What matters is that the conclusion follows from the actual circumstances. A manager should not dismiss genuine performance problems simply because status indicators are imperfect. Equally, the manager should not invent performance problems because an imperfect indicator appears to suggest them.

When evaluating whether a presence signal matters, it helps to follow the evidence in the right direction. Begin with the obligation: what was the employee expected to

accomplish or support? Then consider the observed outcome: was the obligation fulfilled, delayed, or compromised? If there was a problem, examine the relevant behavior and circumstances. Only then decide whether a particular availability signal contributes useful information. Starting with the dot and working backward encourages the observer to invent explanations for a conclusion already forming. Starting with the obligation provides a more reliable basis for understanding what actually happened.

This distinction protects managers as much as employees. A supervisor who relies on weak indicators can miss genuine problems. Someone who spends all day visibly online may still require additional training, clearer priorities, or more appropriate accountability. Another employee whose status regularly changes may be delivering outstanding work. If the manager focuses on the presence indicator, both situations can remain misunderstood. Good supervision requires knowing enough about the work to recognize when something is going well and when intervention is necessary. It may demand more attention than watching a list of contacts, but management has never been a particularly successful spectator sport.

There is also a question of fairness when interpreting unusual patterns. An employee may work with several devices, use approved tools outside Teams, attend training, perform on-site responsibilities, or work according to an agreed schedule that differs from the team's usual hours. None of these possibilities automatically establishes good performance. They do demonstrate why a status snapshot cannot be interpreted without context. Before challenging someone's commitment, a manager should establish what the person was actually expected to do. Otherwise, the

organization risks turning perfectly legitimate working arrangements into suspicious behavior simply because they do not resemble continuous desktop activity.

For an employee, the practical starting point is to understand what your role genuinely requires rather than trying to win an argument about the limitations of software. If someone questions your availability, ask whether a particular responsibility was affected. If an expectation is unclear, seek a concrete description of the required response or outcome. Where appropriate, communicate the status of meaningful work so colleagues do not have to infer progress from your presence. These are not defensive tricks. They are ordinary professional habits that create better information for everyone involved. And if a manager does have legitimate concerns, they make those concerns easier to identify and address.

The green dot is not inherently ridiculous. It performs a useful, modest function, and many people benefit from knowing whether a colleague might be reachable. The ridiculous part begins when we demand that it answer questions it was never designed to understand. Is this employee dependable? Are they doing the right work? Are they exercising sound judgment? Do they contribute meaningfully to the team's goals? Those questions require evidence, context, and occasionally the terrifying managerial activity known as having an actual conversation.

Oliver did not need to demonstrate that his computer had been sufficiently entertained throughout the quarter. He needed clear expectations, dependable communication, and an honest assessment of his contribution. Once those became the subject of discussion, his status was free to return to its original role: a small convenience for colleagues

trying to get in touch. A promotion had been reversed, no one needed severance paperwork, and the organization could finally stop asking a colored circle to perform duties considerably beyond its qualifications.

Chapter 2 - The Corporate Theater of Looking Exceptionally Busy

There is a particular kind of exhaustion that comes from spending an entire working day demonstrating that you are working. You finish with a crowded calendar, an impressive collection of answered messages, and the uneasy realization that the document you intended to complete is still sitting exactly where you left it. If someone asks what kept you busy, you can provide an exhaustive account. If they ask what moved forward, the explanation becomes rather more complicated. You have attended, acknowledged, reacted, followed up, checked in, circled back, and occasionally aligned with stakeholders. You have performed nearly every activity recognized by modern corporate vocabulary, apart from the one involving the actual completion of your assignment.

This is the world of performative busyness, where employees devote part of their working day to creating visible evidence of effort. It does not necessarily involve deception. Most people participating in it are doing real things, often with good intentions. They answer questions, participate in discussions, share updates, and make themselves available. The problem emerges when these activities are valued for their visibility rather than their contribution. A task that produces an immediate signal of engagement begins to feel more professionally rewarding than work whose benefits appear later. The organization unintentionally encourages its employees to become excellent performers in a production nobody consciously decided to stage.

Consider Sophie, a communications specialist responsible for preparing an important customer announcement. Her assignment requires reviewing the final wording, confirming several details, and coordinating publication with colleagues. Yet her morning begins with a series of small rituals. She acknowledges the team's daily greeting, reacts to a department announcement, confirms that she has seen an updated schedule, and replies to a question already answered in a shared document. None of these actions is particularly unreasonable. Together, however, they establish a rhythm in which Sophie feels compelled to demonstrate continuous participation. When she finally opens the announcement, another message arrives. She responds immediately because she has become accustomed to being the person who responds immediately. By lunchtime, she has maintained an excellent reputation for accessibility while making surprisingly limited progress on the work that originally required her attention.

Why would an intelligent, conscientious employee behave this way? Because workplaces communicate expectations through more than written policies. People notice who receives praise, whose messages get answered, and which behaviors attract criticism. If visible responsiveness brings approval while quieter contributions are rarely discussed, employees may learn to prioritize the former. There is no need for anyone to announce a policy called "Please Interrupt Yourself Constantly." The incentive develops through ordinary interactions. A manager compliments someone for being available at all times. A colleague expresses mild annoyance when a question remains unanswered. Another employee receives recognition for attending every meeting. Gradually, behaviors associated