

METRO MONEY

# These Commuters Stretch Daily Grind Far Beyond 9 to 5

Podcasts, audio books and meditation: Workers keep travel to and from the office as productive as possible



PHOTO: JAMES O'BRIEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



By

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Some New Yorkers spend their morning train ride playing “Candy Crush” or trying to doze. Then there is Natalie Jaeger, master of the productive commute. “In a city as busy as New York City, every moment counts,” she says.

Ms. Jaeger leaves her home in Bushwick, Brooklyn, listening to a lengthy NPR news podcast on her phone. Upon boarding the L train, she keeps the podcast going while reviewing the day’s appointments and allocating five minutes apiece to newsletters about venture-capital and marketing topics.

“A big part of my job is staying on top of the latest trends when it comes to business and markets,” says Ms. Jaeger, a marketing director for a fintech startup.

Transferring at Union Square to take the N or Q uptown, she uses her wait on the subway platform to respond to a half-dozen Slack messages and emails—while still keeping an ear tuned to the podcast.

The uptown trains have more elbow room, offering her a chance to crack a book: currently, “Fearless Leadership” by Carey Lohrenz. Disembarking at 34th Street, Ms. Jaeger orders coffee on her Starbucks app and uses the walk from the train to the cafe to her office to call a friend or family member. “You’d be surprised how much you can pack into a 10-minute window,” she says of those morning calls.

According to a national survey by driving-tests.org, a driver-education platform, most workers use their commuting time to relax. On public transportation, one-third listen to music and 29% read books or magazines. But there is a small minority—8%—determined to get as much done as possible.

Colette Coleman, a business-development director at a small startup, has a 45-minute walking commute from the Lower East Side to Union Square, and there is little she can’t accomplish along the way.

She speed-walks while doing light muscle work and listening to audio books on topics such as product management and search-engine optimization. “This gives me 1.5 hours a day to learn from books,” she says.

While walking and listening, she also practices mindful-breathing techniques, she says. And when she stops at an intersection, she often checks her email and taps out a quick response. “It’s fun to get that dopamine hit if I’m at a stoplight,” she says. “I can’t resist.”

Driving-tests.org says the average commuter who works while in transit gives their employer more than \$1,500 of personal time annually. But those commuters also report feeling more content and less stressed on the job. One possible explanation: Folks who love their job are naturally inclined to work after hours. Another possibility: They are bonkers.

One couldn’t always conduct business while commuting, of course. For decades, New York subway riders had to content themselves with a tabloid paper. It wasn’t until December 2016

that cell and wireless service became available at all 283 underground stations, according to connectivity provider Transit Wireless.

Manhattan real-estate agent Travis Carroll depends on underground service. During his commute and while crisscrossing the city for home showings, he sends dozens of texts and emails a day to prospective clients and listing agents from the train. If you let an hour pass without responding, opportunities vanish, he says.

He has tricks. Because it takes his phone a few seconds to jump signals between stations, he says, messages can time out before they send and get stuck in his outbox. He briefly toggles his phone in and out of airplane mode as his train pulls into the next station, ensuring it immediately gets a strong signal and messages go through.

Another weapon: a phone case with a finger loop that allows him to type messages with a single thumb while gripping a subway pole with his other hand. “I hold on for dear life,” says Mr. Carroll.

Some folks take the opposite tack, striving to maximize their productivity by going unplugged.

David Waring, co-founder and chief executive of FitSmallBusiness.com, meditates every morning on the 5:30 a.m. express bus from Cranford, N.J., to Manhattan. The resulting powers of focus and concentration make him far more productive during his long workday managing a \$10 million company with 149 employees, he says.

His commute home is a different story. He books a private car, which costs \$125 for the hourlong ride, and uses the time to return emails, Slack messages and calls—tasks that would be difficult to manage on the bus. It sounds like a splurge, he acknowledges, but his time is worth more.

“The key is you have to work,” he says. “If you don’t work on the commute home, then the math doesn’t work out.”

Not everyone can swing a private car. To keep up with West Coast clients, media strategist Eric Katzman is often on the phone during his hourlong commute home from Midtown to Plainview, Long Island. He recently sustained a single call on the train from Manhattan to Hicksville, which continued on the drive home, including a stop at Qdoba to pick up dinner for his family. The call ended just as he pulled into his driveway.

But Mr. Katzman knows how to balance things out during his train rides. “In the morning,” he says, “I nap.”

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