

# ACCOUNTABILITY ON DEMAND

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I am a big proponent of accountability partners and groups because they work. I've had several accountability relationships, and have come to see that when they are designed with knowledge of the science of behavior, they are effective.

Years ago, I used stickK Commitment Contracts, where you build a plan for a goal and the steps to reach it. You assign an amount of money to put on the line if you don't meet your commitment. You nominate an arbiter who checks your proof of goal completion and informs stickK. If you succeed, your wager is returned, and if you fail, it is sent to a charity or other recipient that you designate—even your enemy.

Later, in college, I joined an accountability group with several other students. We would meet in the library, write out goals on a whiteboard, and check in regularly with each other to see how we were doing. We cleared our workspaces of any physical distractions, added restrictions to our internet browsers, and sat facing one another. Since then, I have worked in numerous coworking spaces surrounded by people who are doing their jobs and projects while periodically checking in with each other or sharing goals for a period of work.

Finally, after a long post-COVID stretch of inactivity and poor eating habits, I hired a “health accountability coach” who called me every day to check in. He provided some helpful nutritional advice and ways to navigate workout challenges posed by traveling, but his other antecedent strategies didn't cut it, and I didn't arrange contingencies that support the time and effort it takes to move into a healthy living mode. After three months, I cut ties and found better support from a group of fitness fanatics who live near my apartment.

All of these approaches are coordinated and well planned for people who have busy lives. Partners can work, too, but it's hard to get from one person the regularity of support I need in order to do the most aversive tasks in my life. I need more frequent check-ins that result in consequating my activity and the problem-solving challenges that arise.

## JOINING A VIRTUAL COWORKING PLATFORM

While searching for an alternative to accountability

partners in 2022, I came across an Instagram ad for [Flow Club](#), a virtual coworking space of “committed folks” who are reaching for their goals. It is one of many online working platforms, including Caveday, Flown, Focusmate, and old-fashioned Zoom working meetings.



Flow Club is a subscription-based community. You log onto the platform to view upcoming “flow sessions,” which take place 24-7 with people worldwide and are hosted by other Flow Club members who have attended at least ten sessions. At the start of a session, attendees log in and enter a “space” that resembles a virtual meeting. Most people are on camera, and on the left side of the screen is a panel where you enter and track your goals for the session, watch the running clock, chat with attendees, and select music. The host kicks it off: *What's everyone working on this session?* Attendees respond and share, and then the Flow begins. Sessions range from 30 minutes to three- to four-hours, with dedicated breaks and periodic check-ins.

As you complete tasks, you check off a box in the left panel and confetti gets strewn across the screen—it's pretty great! Flow Club captures your data and reports tasks completed and other metrics in your dashboard. At the end of a session, the host asks everyone: *How did your session go? What did you accomplish? What worked and what*

*didn't?* Some members give a few details while others note at length the barriers that impeded their flow.

#### THE FLOW CLUB EXPERIENCE

If you've never used a virtual coworking service, it might seem odd: you're in a room filled with strangers who are sharing and posting their goals publicly through the tracker. But after a few sessions, these people are no longer strangers. They become your community, an available crew of people who have similar work styles or tastes in music, the need for similar accountability supports, and other commonalities. There is mutual understanding about the power of community, accountability, and social contingencies. Once members grow comfortable with each other, they sometimes arrange extra supports outside of the sessions, such as text check-ins with Flow Club members, posting on social media (for the likes!), contingent rewards, and so on.



#### FEATURES OF FLOW CLUB

For behavior analysts seeking a conducive, productive work environment, Flow Club is filled with ingredients worth exploring.

**Stimulus Control.** I am strict about my Flow sessions. I play low-fi music, turn on the “no phone” feature, and lock down my computer browsers. In other words, I set things up to tunnel focus on my work. When the Flow Club panel appears on the left side, I break goals (even simple tasks) into micro-steps so I can check off more completion boxes faster and see the confetti and other visual reinforcers on my screen. I try not to attend Flow sessions I can't complete, and I prepare a to-do list that does not tax my limits. For example, I do not take a second Flow session after completing a three-hour one. Flow Club has helped me create stimulus conditions that result in productive work-related behaviors, regardless of location. It has become my virtual workspace because it works very well for a frequent traveler who works

on trains and in coffee shops, botanical gardens, and museums.

**Goal Setting.** I frequently set goals for my work behavior, but the Flow Club format encourages me to set realistic, granular ones that can manifest in some work product. Rather than work on a task for 20 minutes, I look for an achievable outcome—for example, three lines written, first half of a form completed, two pages read—and break that into smaller tasks in the Flow Club room goal box. Some tasks are already granular, but I apply this approach to everything I work on so that I can maintain consistency in my productivity tracking and achieve more (and see more confetti!).

When writing this article, I attended a Flow Club where I listed every section header with a suggested word count as separate tasks. Throughout the Flow, I drafted a section, reread it, checked off the box, and moved on. In one Flow, I skipped around and wrote the *high-probability* sections of the article to gain momentum to enter the harder (i.e., more thinking required) sections. The next day, I had an “editing flow.”

“Flowers” work on an endless variety of goals, some of which might surprise you: bookkeeping, writing, studying, cleaning their homes, holding tough conversations, sleeping, completing physical therapy exercises, and home manicures. When people need help getting started and sticking with something hard or otherwise aversive, they have found it in virtual coworking.

**Check In and Check Out.** Check-in at the start is sharing and posting goals. The check-out is showing progress in your goal tracker and discussing your accomplishments. This routine creates peer pressure and accountability, as the host and other members chime in with solutions to challenges you encountered. A woman in one session I attended was working on her divorce papers, a task she had put off for months. At the end of the session, she shared what she accomplished but said she had struggled to read and complete a few sections. Another participant suggested she cover the document with a blank piece of paper and slide it down to reveal a couple of lines at a time, so as to break it into smaller pieces. The woman tried doing this and successfully made it through the rest of the document. In the next session, she signed and sent off the divorce papers. Onward and upward!

**Data Collection.** Flow Club tracks metrics on your dashboard: sessions completed, sessions hosted, tasks completed, duration of flows, duration of “no phone” mode, personal bests, and so forth. Goal and tasks lists are formatted as Markdown files, which allows a participant to copy and paste what they worked on into another data collection system. The developers at Flow Club seek user feedback to improve the platform, and they attend Flow sessions themselves. (I've been in several flows with the

company's CEO.)

**Weekly Progress Monitoring.** Every week, a Flow participant receives an email with a summary of their Flow Club progress. Members receive shoutouts in the newsletter and on the dashboard. With an established attendance rhythm, it's possible to overlap with the same people who will check up on your progress. Flow Club also sends messages with ideas for how to increase session attendance frequency and ways to optimize your time in a Flow Club.

**External Contingencies.** Some members build relationships outside of Flows to garner stronger accountability than what they get in sessions. They might recruit members to help arrange contingent rewards or penalties or provide check-ins throughout the week. One member shared that he shows his wife his Flow Club data, and they set up rewards as a couple based on his success.



#### LESSONS LEARNED

Flow Club has helped me get enough regularity with applying behavior analytic principles *to myself* that I have identified trends in certain areas of my life, such as my writing practices and completing household chores. Through virtual coworking, I am regularly reminded of these three lessons.

**1. Contingent Rewards.** Flow Clubs have increased the likelihood of my arranging positive consequences contingent on meeting goals. Tracking goals, seeing data summarized, and hearing about other people engaging in reinforcing activities after a successful session have helped me reward small wins and progress toward a larger goal.

**2. Building Community.** “There’s something sacred about talking to strangers.” A woman who occasionally sits across from me in the gym lobby said this while she contemplated the complexity of organizing her daughter’s wedding. She explained that talking to a stranger is comforting. They aren’t embroiled in your life, wrapped up in the details, histories, or judgments. They only know what you tell them. The same is true of a virtual coworking community—people know you in the context of working on yourself and toward your goals. They support you for that and aren’t influenced by other areas of your life. It’s a fresh start for people who have nagging partners or coworkers telling them what they *should* do or *haven’t* done. Clean slate, positive environment.

**3. Hosting a Session.** Flow members can schedule sessions and host them when it’s convenient with their schedule or a session needs a host. I host sessions when I need an extra boost of productivity, because it heightens my sense of duty to be a role model for accomplishing goals, using Flow Club tools effectively, and applying my behavior analytic techniques to self-manage. Hosting a session is a chance to practice what we preach.

#### GIVE IT A TRY

Whether it’s Flow Club, another app, or an improvised version of coworking, try it out. I’ve shared my success stories with friends and colleagues, and some balk at working alongside strangers or paying for a subscription. But think about that project or task you can’t get started on, or the accountability partner who did not check in or implement consequences. You might find a way to trial an approach that helps you get there, and you might grow to like it. ○

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