the little book of
Productivity

by Scott Young

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Introduction

This is the little book with a lot of ideas. Ninety-nine of them, in fact. Seven chapters with 99 ideas to help you do more in less time. In this guide I've collected the best productivity ideas I've stumbled upon. Some of these are simple and others have almost doubled my productivity by adopting them.

To get you started, here's the first one:

Have a reason to be productive. Write down what you would do with more time and energy. Would you start new interesting projects? Would you lie on the beach and get a tan? If you don't have a clear outline of what you want to do with the time you save, you'll just end up bored.

Having a written list of these ideas can give you the motivation to stay productive, when it is easier to fall into lazy habits. Some of these ideas will be easy, others will require practice. Clearly defining your motivation can help you with the other 98.

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Beating Procrastination

Weekly/Daily Goals

The Weekly/Daily Goals method is a technique I've found extremely helpful in combatting laziness. The idea is simple:

1. At the end of each week, write a list of work you want to finish in the next seven days.

2. At the end of each day, transfer some of the tasks from your weekly list onto a new list. These are your daily goals.

3. When you complete your daily goals, stop working for that day.

The Weekly/Daily Goals method works because it forces you to break-up your infinite to-do list. Instead of trying to accomplish everything, you finish a set amount of tasks for each day. By splitting up a mountain of work into a daily chunk, it is easier to convince yourself to get started.

Keeping weekly goals as well as a daily list allows you to add non-urgent, but important items. Weekly goals keep you focused on the big picture while daily goals keep you from feeling overwhelmed.

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Timeboxing

Set a timer. Don't stop working on a task until you finish, or the time is completed. This is the essence of timeboxing, the sledgehammer of productivity tricks.

Timeboxing beats the urge to procrastinate from two directions:

1. The time amount is short (ideally between 30-90 minutes) which is less daunting than several hours of continuous work.
2. The only way to finish early is to complete the given task. This creates an added incentive to work quickly.

The real beautyof timeboxing is that often you will keep working past the timebox. Once you've built up momentum into a task or project, it is easier to keep working. Setting a timebox can be the first push you need to get started.

Try setting a 90-minute timebox the next time you can't seem to get started. Clear your desk, close your inbox and focus on working for the next ninety minutes.

Dissolving Tasks

Large, vague projects are the breeding grounds of procrastination. In order to get moving, you need to know the next step. Dissolve larger tasks into actionable chunks.

Your to-do list should make it obvious what should be done in the next 60 seconds. Dissolve non-routine tasks that you haven't done before. If you haven't prepared a tax return for a new business, getting started on this project can be difficult. However, if you break it down into steps of collecting your documents, printing an income statement and filling out relevant forms, it is easier to finish.

Dissolve tasks that you dislike doing. If you hate writing essays and need to finish a term paper, having the to-do item "Write Essay" won't inspire you to get work done. Instead, break it down into smaller steps. "Pick Topic", "Find Research Material", "Create Notes", "Write Thesis" and similar tasks are easier to swallow.

Dissolve tasks that don't have clear stopping points. "Reorganize Filing Cabinet" could be done hastily in fifteen minutes or take a dozen hours of sorting and cross referencing. Without a clear organizing plan, it is easier to put the task off forever.

Sprinting Theory

Sprinting Theory is the key to self-discipline. Studies have shown1, that willpower is not just a state of mind. It's an resource that can be drained and recharged just like a car battery. When you procrastinate, it's not because you are a "lazy" person, but because your internal energy source is running low.

Sprinting Theory tries to fix this problem by encouraging you to focus on the timeframe where discipline is required. If you were running a 100m dash, the focus would be different than finishing a marathon. Sprinting in a marathon usually means you won't make it more than a few miles.

To use Sprinting Theory, try to find the relevant range of any task. This is the range where discipline is most critical. Then, when setting your timeboxes, focus on that range. It will keep you from burning out early or running too slowly. Examples:

1. Waking up. Force yourself to stay awake for 10 minutes before hitting the snooze button again. Usually, after that point, it is easier to just stay awake.

2. Habits. Focus on one behavioral change for 30 days. After that it's permanent.

3. Creative Blocks. Keep churning for another 20 minutes before taking a break.

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Schedule Calibration

Let's play a trust exercise. You're going to stand up and then fall backwards. Don't worry, I'll catch you.

What? You fell backwards and hit the floor. That must have hurt. It's not really my fault, see I wrote this months before you're reading it. And we aren't even in the same location.

It would be understandable if you didn't trust me after my little prank. It would be hard to rely on me in the future if you can't trust me. While it's easy to understand why a lack of trust damages a relationship, it can be harder to see how a lack of trust keeps you procrastinating.

When you don't trust your to-do list, it's hard to procrastinate. When you finish everything on your list, and proceed to add more, that's violating trust. Before you started working, you had motivated yourself by saying you would be finished when the list was over. Adding more tasks breaks that trust, so you can't motivate yourself again.

Schedule calibration is when you have full trust in your to-do list. When it says you have a lot of work to do, you get all of it done. When it says you are finished, you stop. By keeping that trust, you avoid bad habits of both overwork and laziness.

Building Self-Discipline Muscles

Training self-discipline is a lot like lifting weights. If you're a chronic procrastinator, that's similar to being out of shape. Laziness isn't in your blood, it's in your muscles. By lifting "self-discipline" weights, you build the mental muscles that can keep you going when you feel like quitting. Here's a few ways to get started:

1. The next time you want to stop working, go another ten minutes. Pushing past your quitting threshold builds muscle.

2. Figure out the duration of work you can sustain, before you start becoming distracted. The next time you work, try to go an extra 10-20%.

3. Does your mind jump between different projects? Set a goal to focus on only one activity for the next month.

Measure how strong your discipline is currently. Then use that measurement as a basis for making small improvements. Even if you can only lift 10 lbs, you can build up to 100 lbs by resistance training. You can do the same with your willpower.

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Using a Mantra

A mantra is a phrase you repeat to yourself. By associating a mantra with a particular state of mind, you can use it to kick yourself into a productive state.

Think back to the smell of your mom baking cookies (or if your mother didn't bake cookies, just hallucinate with me). I bet if you got a whif of that cookie smell again it would bring back warm feelings of being at home. A mantra works the same way as your mother's cookies, although less delicious.

Coming up with a productivity mantra requires that you come up with a phrase that you associate to being productive. Legend has it that W. Clement Stone who built an insurance empire had his employees shout "Do it Now!" whenever they felt like procrastinating.

A good place is to look for quotes you like that make you feel productive. Put them as your desktop image or screensaver, so when you feel like procrastinating you'll snap out of it.

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Remove Your Hidden Roadblocks

Try growing plants in soil filled with salt. It's not going to work. You can try watering them, giving the right balance of shade and sunshine or adding industrial fertilizer. All of your green-thumb techniques won't overcome the fact that the plants are sucking up poison through the roots.

If you've tried everything to cure your procrastination, and can't motivate yourself, the problem might be in the soil. Shouting "Do it Now!" and timeboxing aren't going to help when the goals and desires that root your motivate are covered in salt.

Chronic procrastination deserves more attention. When I face it, I try to test the soil by asking myself a few questions:

1. Does the goals I'm working on still inspire me?

2. Are the reasons I'm trying to become productive still meaningful to me?

3. Am I using "productivity" as an excuse to avoid my real fears and dreams?

Replacing the soil needs to come before you start adding the industrial fertilizer of productivity techniques.

Motivation Catalysts

Time to go back to high-school chemistry. Remember catalysts? A catalyst is a chemical that speeds up a reaction, but doesn't take place in the reaction itself. It's the middle-man, the arbitrator, the deal-maker. Catalysts lower the activation cost required to get a reaction started. It makes things happen without getting its suit and tie dirty.

Motivation catalysts reduce the activation cost of getting started. They lower the amount of energy you need to start moving. While a reaction can occur on it's own, having catalysts speeds up the process. Here are a few example catalysts:

1. Keeping a list of your goals. I often keep a written list of my goals on my desktop. They add a punch of motivation when I need it.

2. Making a public commitment. Tell your boss, a coworker or a friend when you plan to have something completed. The added pressure will keep you motivated.

3. Post-It Notes. Write your ideas on Post-It Notes and place them where you live. They will remind you of what you need to be doing.

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Churning

Churning is the art of producing garbage. Churning out writing that isn't your best quality. Making sales calls when you don't feel you could give your product away for free. Finishing designs even though everything you make looks ugly. If you want to beat procrastination, learn to churn.

Your brain can be a bit like an old water pump. You crank the lever up and down to hopefully get water out. Unfortunately, sometimes the water has been sitting in the pipes too long. It's brown, rusty and tastes disgusting. The solution isn't to stop pumping, but to pump out the garbage. Churn out those bad ideas and don't stop just because the quality is low. Eventually the bad water will be pushed out of the system and you can hit the clean water hidden below. Churn enough garbage and you can start creating great work.

Just accept that you will have to scrap most of your sub-par work when you churn. Lower your quality threshold and expect to trash most of your output eventually. I've found that going into a churn mode usually kicks me out of a creative block after only a few minutes.

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Create a Distraction-Free Workplace

Procrastinators love distractions. Anything to occupy your mind so you don't feel guilty for having accomplished nothing in the last hour. Productivity-junkies know understand that the key to avoiding procrastination is to eliminate distractions. Here are a few starters:

1. On your computer. Turn off the inbox. Hide the pop-ups. Disable the internet if you have to. Work should be the only thing on your screen.

2. On your desk. Clear off any items that might draw your attention away from what you need to be doing.

3. Turn off the noise. Put up a Do-Not-Disturb sign on your door and threaten death upon anyone that might enter your fortress of solitude.

4. Let people know your "focus" hours. When I'm writing, I can't have any distractions. An incoming call can throw me off my rhythm for 15 minutes. But website maintanence doesn't require a similar degree of focus. By letting people know your "focus" hours, you can give them better times to call or meet with you.

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Don't "Should" Yourself

"Should" doesn't motivate, it just makes you feel guilty for not working. I strive to maintain only two piles for activities: "Want to do" and "Not going to do". Anything that belongs to a third category of things you "Should do" is going to be agonizing to get finished.

I recommend keeping a list of your reasons for working on a goal or taking on a job. This way you can refer to it whenever a "should do" item appears. Sometimes this will mean that your current task is just an intermediate one. You might be working a job you don't like in order to get a career you do. You might be doing an essay you hate to get a degree you need.

By seeing how, albeit indirectly, any task fits into your major goals, it is easier to get them accomplished. Of course, if an item that falls into the "should do" pile doesn't connect to you major goals, it should probably fall into the "not going to do" pile instead.

Ready, Fire, Aim!

Everyone is familiar with the "Ready, aim, fire" approach. This means getting your resources, making a plan and then taking action. However, it's easy to get stuck in the aiming phase. If you are uncertain about taking action, you might end up planning forever.

Ready, Fire, Aim! is the opposite. It means that you should take action and then correct your approach. Focus on getting the first draft done before planning out your suggestions for improvement.

Aiming works better when you have feedback to work from. If you're planning a new design, it's easier to see flaws when you get it in the hands of users. You can do your best to anticipate everything that might go poorly. But it's easier to just finish and make a test. Once you have accurate feedback, you can cut down on planning and take action into the next cycle.

Advocates of extreme programming use the Ready, Fire, Aim! approach to design programs efficiently, without creating bulky, inflexible software.

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Quit Your Procrastination Vices

Everyone has procrastination vices. Bad habits that steal away time without offering much in return. Your procrastination vice might be television, video games or random internet surfing. By quitting these vices entirely, you can reinvest the saved time back into things you actually care about.

Getting rid of your vices shouldn't remove your genuine sources of fun. If you love watching a specific television show each week, eliminating that to save 30 minutes won't be worthwhile. However, this isn't the case with most vices. Most people watch television because it's easy, not because it adds anything back to their lives.

Write out a list of the things that eat up a lot of your time without adding much value back. Then strive to either:

1. Eliminate the vice entirely.

2. Constrict the vice so you use it deliberately. If you really enjoy a certain television show, you might want to record that program and otherwise keep the TV off.

Becoming Organized

Organization is a Skill

A lot of people have they hypothesis that being organized is a personality trait. Truly organized people just have a different brain wiring that forces them to have neatly filed folders and a memory for deadlines and to-do items. This is nonsense. Organization is a skill that can be learned.

If organization were a personality trait, it definitely wasn't something I was born doing. My natural state is almost total chaos, with the floor as a shelving area and a box as a file-folder. If I can learn to become organized from a complete slob, then I'm guessing you can too.

Organization is a mix of design and maintenance. If you have a well-designed organizing system (which messy people don't), then you can keep everything in order with less effort. Regular maintenance is necessary because even with near-perfect systems, there will be events that will disrupt them.

Less Mess, Less Stress

Organization is only marginally related to productivity. I've known many highly productive people who never keep anything organized. The real purpose of organization is to reduce the brainpower required to keep track of everything. If you haven't developed a system to keep everything in order, you need to store everything in the hard drive of your brain. And your brain isn't very reliable.

Learning the skill of organization means adopting the philosophy that "Less Mess = Less Stress". This means organizing on two fronts:

1. Your physical environment. Keeping things ordered instead of just tidy. Giving everything a home and avoiding clutter.

2. Your tasks & work. Having an organized system for how you process to-do lists, calendars and store projects will save you a lot of stress. When your organizing system keeps everything in order, you can focus on doing the work, not remembering what to do.

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The Capture Device

This suggestion comes straight out of Getting Things Done, the bible for organizing fanatics. A capture device is a way of recording events, ideas, projects, tasks or notifications wherever you are. If you're wearing pants you should have a capture device armed and at your side.

My capture device takes the form of several 4"x6" index cards I keep in my pocket, along with a pencil. Whenever I'm given new information I need to store, it goes onto the paper. When I'm back home, I take any information off the card and process it into my more sophisticated systems for storing information.

A capture device is the #1 way you can remove the burden from your memory. If you have a capture device whereever you are, then you'll never forget anything. The ability to write something down at any time keeps you from accidentally forgetting dates, follow-up requests or new to-do items.

Keeping a capture device is also a sign of respect. I have far more respect for someone who makes a physical note of a request I've made than a person who just says,

"I'll get back to you." Index cards cost less than a dollar, so you don't need to invest in fancy technology to stay on track.

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Give Everything a Home

The key to staying organized is that everything should have a home. Every physical item in your house should have a place where it is supposed to rest. Every task, event and project should have a place in your system where it will wait. Messiness is caused by homeless items piling up.

You can start becoming organized simply by going through your existing system and giving homes to any homeless items. This can take an entire day or two to finish, but once it is done, maintenance is fairly easy.

Once you've assigned homes, mess can start to pile up when ambiguous items aren't immediately filed somewhere. These are items that don't clearly fit into one pile. You might have one folder for receipts and another for income. But where do you put your bank statements?

There are two options with this. If you feel the item is unusual, just put it into one of the related categories. If the item will probably reoccur, consider making a new home to store it. If you plan on receiving a lot of bank statements, you might make an entire new folder labeled, "Bank" where you can put similar files.

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The Simple Organizing System

For the last couple years, I've been using an organizing system I've found incredibly effective. I call it the Simple Organizing System because it takes all of my work information and sorts it into only three piles. GTD (Getting Things Done) has many different piles, many of which aren't necessary for most people.

My three piles are Projects, Tasks and Events. Almost everything I need to record fits into one of these three boxes. For the 1% rare cases where something doesn't fit, I can easily make a miscellaneous list to store these random thoughts.

Maintaining only three piles is relatively easy. If you have 5, 6 or 12 piles, you probably won't check any one pile regularly. That means that the pile is easily forgotten and it stops becoming an effective system. My three piles work effectively because I need to check them regularly. They are used actively and don't collect dust.

This is an important idea, so I'll cover each of my piles in detail over the next three pages.

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The Simple Organizing System: Projects

The first pile is for projects. A project is a collection of tasks all aimed towards a common goal. Tasks lack a structure. They are the jellyfish in the ocean of work, swimming around without a backbone or complex nervous system. Projects are different. With projects, tasks are grouped together to make something more important. Writing a book is a project. Writing a page is a task.

I maintain small slips of paper detailing my projects. These slips outline my desired end result and the expected tasks needed to complete them. Because completing the project, not the component tasks, is important, I have more flexibility. If I decide I don't need to write a particular chapter to finish my book, I can scrap it. One task can die to benefit the project as a whole.

Projects are relatively stable and won't be updated as often in the flurry of new information. They can help structure your day for the weeks and months to come. Therefore, the project pile is updated the least out of the three parts of my system. Next up, tasks!

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The Simple Organizing System: Tasks

Tasks are my to-do lists. They are smaller, independent actions that need to be accomplished. There are three parts to this list. My global to-do list, my weekly goals and my daily goals. The global to-do stores any tasks that don't fit neatly into projects or events on the calendar. The weekly and daily goals are my active to-do lists that I mentioned at the beginning of Chapter One.

All parts of the system boil down to the tasks. Projects filter their tasks into the weekly list each week. Events filter their way into the daily list each night. My daily goals list is the only active list I need to check to see what needs to be done right at the current moment.

Any tasks that don't have a project are added to the global to-do. Once a week these are filtered back into the weekly list along with any project work. If the new task needs to be finished this week, I'll make an adjustment to the weekly list. If the task needs to be finished this day, it goes straight to the active, daily list.

I use TadaList to store these 3 To-Do lists online. I use my computer frequently, so regular checking isn't difficult. You can get a free TadaList account here: http://tadalist.com.

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The Simple Organizing System: Events

The final leg of my organizing tripod are events. Events are activities that can only be done at a certain time. While my to-do queue can be accomplished whenever I feel like, events are more restricted. I can't go to lunch with Paul at 2:30 if we had previously agreed to 12:00.

I keep a calendar to store events. Then, when the day of the event comes by, I push the activity from the calendar onto my daily list of goals. I avoid filtering it into the weekly list to ensure that list doesn't become too large to easily scan. My daily list therefore contains all the isolated tasks, tasks from projects and events that need to be done that day.

Google Calendar is my preferred source for storing events. Not only is it free and accessible from anywhere you have the internet, it has many useful features. You can store locations, notes, times and details that won't fit on a paper calendar. You can also store multiple calendars to further sort your events into different categories. Get a free account here http://google.com/calendar:

Write Out Your Goals

Along with projects, I believe it is important to write out your goals. Keeping your goals in your head is a barrier from having them accomplished. Writing them out on paper does a few things:

1. It makes them unforgettable.

2. It gives you added motivation to accomplish them.

3. It takes vague desires and turns them into concrete objectives.

I store my goals in a binder along with my projects. I prefer paper for goal setting because it makes the act of writing more tangible. Holding a goal written down is akin to holding a contract with yourself.

When you've completed any goal, you can check it off on the piece of paper and store it in a different section of the binder. Feeling a weight of papers from goals accomplished can be an incredible motivator. Being able to quickly scan through goals you've already accomplished gives you the confidence to do more. But you can't flip through those pages until you start writing them down.

The Branch Method

My philosophy towards organization is the Branch Method. I believe that you can't design the perfect system for organizing in advance. Your life will change and the types of information and objects you need to store will change with it. Instead of searching for the "perfect" system, it's better to develop a system that adapts to new changes.

The Branch Method is such a system. With the Brach Method, you should be doing regular reviews of your organizing system. In this review, look for a few things:

1. Are any piles becoming bloated? If one pile is storing too much, branch it off into smaller piles.

2. Are any piles not being used? Merge them into a related pile. If the pile needs to be checked frequently (to-do lists, calendars, documents) keeping it spliced can be dangerous.

3. Are there any new categories developing? If you take on a new role, you might create piles that didn't previously exist. Separate these off so they don't blend into existing systems.

Communication Logs

Communication logs are an optional, additional pile you can add to your organizing system. I consider them optional because some people won't need them. A student probably won't need to keep records of email interactions over the past month. A salesperson making calls and follow-ups to dozens of people a day will.

The basic communication log is a sheet of paper with each person and organization you deal with. Create a column for the date, time, method of contact, name of the person contacted and what was said. Whenever you talk with a person on one of your logs, write down this information in point form.

Communication logs are useful for:

1) Tracking commitments. Are you doing what you say you will do?

2. Looking for contact length. Still waiting for a reply? You can refer to your log to see the last contact date, to judge whether you should send another email.

3. Filter communication logs into your existing system. Use logs as a reminder to back any new information into your tasks and events lists.

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Do What You Say You Will Do

This advice combines many steps of staying organized. I would guess that at least 60% of the time you fail to act on a promise it is because you forgot, not because you weren't able. Someone asked you for a piece of information and you forgot to reply. You were sent an email and it piled up in your inbox.

The first step to becoming more reliable is to record everything said on your capture device. If someone asks you for something, your first step should be to write it down. I never let action items sit on my short-term memory when I'm in a conversation. My only exception to this rule is when I can input the items directly into my tasks, events or projects piles.

The next step is to make sure ambiguous items can filter down into your weekly and daily goals. Let's say you promised to send a report to someone, but you didn't say when. When this happens, give yourself a timeline for finishing the task. Add it to your daily goals, weekly goals or calendar. This way you can be sure it will eventually slide down to your current tasks. If your system doesn't have this trickle down feature, it is easy to procrastinate on items like this forever. Constant delays look just as bad as broken promises in the eyes of the people you work with.

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Tidy VS Organized

There is a difference between being tidy and being organized. Your desk can be clean and free of clutter, while being disorganized. Organization isn't about appearances, it's about keeping a system that makes finding what you need and storing what you find easier.

You might remember pulling this trick when you were a kid. You were told to clean your room, so you proceeded to sweep everything under the bed. The room looked clean, but it wasn't organized. It's easy to fall into the same trap as an adult. While you might not be sweeping everything under the filing cabinet, you may be tidying instead of organizing.

Organization is a system. That means you're organized if:

- New items you get have a place. This includes non-tangible items like tasks and important information.
- It doesn't take long to find what you need. Hours of searching for an item are a sign of disorganization.

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Reading Notes

How do you organize everything you learn? For the college and university students, they probably already have a system of keeping notes and highlighting textbooks. But once you finish school, how do you stay on top of any ideas you get?

I've found that it's useful to keep a general binder for taking notes when reading. This way I can capture ideas, quotes or pieces of interesting information when reading a book. While keeping a notebook might seem rigorous when you aren't going to be tested on the material, I've found keeping a notebook helps in a few ways:

1. It helps you capture the main points about a book. This way if you want to look back and gather key ideas, you can skim 2-4 pages of notes, not 200-400 pages of writing.

2. It's faster than dogearing and underlining. Making notes inside the book is fast, but it is much slower if you want to check later. Writing ideas into a notebook gives you faster recall.

3. Your memory isn't perfect. I've found ideas from a book stay active in my brain for about a month. Notebooks can act as a refresher course.

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Digital Organization

There are many different ways to keep your harddrive organized. Although there are dozens of articles on the internet promoting one system over another, the same principles apply: Give everything a home, regular maintenance and look for changes in the system.

There are a few differences with digital files to look out for:

1. Digital storage is nearly unlimited. With the cost of harddrive space becoming cheap, there is no pressure to throw anything away. This can have a price for organization where old files clutter the new. I recommend regular purging of unneeded files and separating archives from active files.

2. Branching is incredibly easy. Splitting and merging folders depending on usage is incredibly easy with digital files. When you start noticing a folder is becoming cluttered, subdivide it into pieces. If a folder is rarely used, merge it back into another folder. Just remember to purge unneeded files or your folders might branch uncontrollably.

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Staying Energized

Morning Rituals

Mornings are a challenge for many people. It can take 90 minutes and several cups of coffee before they are moving along at full capacity. I can sympathize because rising early and overcoming grogginess definitely aren't in my genes. However, by building a morning ritual, I've been able to make mornings a way to add more energy into my day.

A morning ritual is a set of activities you do consistently for the first 30-60 minutes after you wake up. You can start a morning ritual by practicing the same hour of activities every time you start the day. After you condition it, this ritual replaces your current habits and makes it easier to start the day without the struggle.

I'd suggest adding some form of exercise to your routine. Push-ups, running or going to the gym will wake you up more than taking a shower. I've found you should also avoid activities that use your brain passively. Reading and television won't engage your brain as much as writing or another creative activity.

Ideally you should wake up at the same time every day. This isn't always possible as events can keep you up later into the night, making it harder to wake up early. However, you can train yourself to wake up at the time you decide the night before. By making this part of your ritual, you gain more control over tomorrow.

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Take a Day Off

My productivity went up dramatically when I decided to work for six days instead of seven. My capacity to finish work increased, even though it was spread over fewer days. By taking a day off, I was able to recharge the batteries that were drained throughout the week.

Taking a day off sounds nice—when you're not busy. But it takes a lot of discipline to give yourself a day of nothing, when you know your upcoming week is going to be insanely busy. This is one of those productivity suggestions that sounds easy in theory, but few people take it on in reality.

If you can set the habit of taking a day off each week, it isn't hard to maintain. I went from 7 to 6 days of work and my productivity went up. Having done this for months, I can now avoid slipping back into workaholic streaks when I'm incredibly busy.

Surprisingly, taking a day off also helps with procrastination. Often burnout and procrastination are tightly related. When you run out of energy, your body procrastinates as a line of defence. By taking a day off you can recharge the mental energy you use throughout the week.

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Make an Exercise Routine

Few investments will give a higher return than exercise. Unfortunately, in a busy schedule, exercise is often the first thing most people drop. When time seems limited, spending an hour in the gym or running outside seems frivolous. However, these temporary breaks from exercise become months and soon you aren't exercising at all.

Energy is the limited resource, not time. Even if you work 16 hour days, that time could be used more efficiently if you had more energy. A task that takes 2 hours when you're exhausted can be finished in 40 minutes with a clear head. Exercise increases your energy so you can work better with the time you have.

For productivity junkies that aren't looking to become musclemen or marathon runners, a simple way to add exercise is in a morning run. Just add a quick 20 minute jog to your morning ritual. If you wake up 20 minutes earlier, you won't lose any time from your day and the energy will be worth it.

If you're already exercising, I suggest taking the investment up a notch. I try to keep a mix of aerobic (e.g. running) and anaerobic (e.g. lifting weights) exercises. Think of exercise as taking the AA batteries you're running on now and trading them in for a D.

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Eating for Energy

I shouldn't have to tell you what's in a healthy diet. Low grease, less meat, more plants and real food. Eating healthy is important for maintaining your energy. If you're eating a variation of the Standard American Diet, you're probably not eating close to the ideal diet for your body.

Blood-glucose levels are important for maintaining energy. Every food you eat has a glycemic index. That index is a measure of how quickly you digest and utilize the carbohydrates in the food you eat. A high index means that the food you eat will be turned into energy quickly. That might be useful if you want to do a few sprints, but it is going to be a disaster for the typical 8-hour workday. Eat whole grains and foods with a low glycemic index. These will release energy slowly, so you don't experience the crash that comes from sugary treats.

Eat smaller meals more frequently throughout the day. Eating 4-6 meals instead of 2-3 ensures a steady supply of energy to your body. I've found it's useful to cook one meal (such as supper) and eat it over two periods (once at 5:00, another at 8:30). This way you don't add to preparation time, but you have a smoother nutrient intake.

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Make Your Time Top-Heavy

A top-heavy joke is one with a long build-up for a short punchline. A top-heavy building has more weight higher up, than at the bottom. A top-heavy schedule means that your most difficult, time consuming or least desirable tasks are first on your to-do list. Top-heavy schedules help you maintain your energy levels by putting the hardest work first.

A bottom-heavy schedule is the exact opposite. People with bottom-heavy schedules procrastinate on the work they like least. Hard, long and mentally tiring work is placed last, in favor of email and simple chores. As a result, they have burnt themselves out before they get a chance to start on the most important tasks.

If you're using the Weekly/Daily Goals system, there are two ways you can make your time more top-heavy. The first is on the daily level. Place your biggest tasks right after your morning ritual. Your ritual should give you the energy to push through these tasks first. You can also create top-heaviness on a weekly level, placing more work on Monday than Friday or Saturday, with Sunday as a day off.

Top-heaviness is also more rewarding. When you finish the biggest tasks early in the morning, that gives you the confidence to handle smaller tasks, even if you're tired.

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Work in Cycles

Cyclicity is the key to energy management. Your body was meant to work in cycles of rest and recovery. Viewing work as a series of sprints, rather than a marathon, will give you a better picture for staying energized.

Staying calibrated is important for energy management. If you recall from Chapter One, schedule calibration means that you stop working when you reach the end of your daily or weekly list. This practice also encourages working in cycles. Since it forces you to work intensely followed by a complete break.

Another method for staying in cycles is to assign your time off first. Give yourself the rule that, no matter what, you will have Sundays off (or another day of the week). Block out time each evening where you aren't allowed to work. By restricting your work into a smaller space, you are forced into working in cycles.

Energy management is a big topic, so I suggest reading The Power of Full Engagement if you're interested in learning more about working in cycles.

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Close Open Loops

Open loops are the productivity devil. An open loop is a task that has no clearly defined stopping point. When you don't have a stopping point you can't work in cycles. Procrastination, burnout and sloppy work are the result of open loops that aren't closed. Look at the following to-do list items:

· Work on blog.
· Write 4 articles for blog, respond to comments and add a new widget.

The first is an open loop. How do you know when you're done? The other version has taken the open loop and closed it. There is a clear stopping point for when you're done working on your blog (at least for this week).

A few common open loops include:

· Study for test.
· Research for project.
· Polish rough draft.
· Have a team meeting.

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Multitasking: The 8th Deadly Sin

Multitasking should go right after Sloth and right before Gluttony. Alas, biblical times didn't have to deal with the modern vices of Twitter and StumbleUpon. Multitasking makes you stupid. Research has shown[1] that multitasking can lower your IQ more than smoking marijuana.

When you're working on a task, that task should be your complete focus.

Attention is in a limited supply, so if you pay too much attention to too many places, you might go bankrupt. Keeping yourself focused on one task also has the advantage of putting you into flow. Flow is the mental state where you lose awareness of yourself as every mental resource goes towards a task. Flow isn't possible if you're juggling email while writing code and talking on the phone.

If your position requires you to do a lot of communication, I suggest assigning "solitude" hours, where you aren't allowed to be disturbed. Put a sign up and threaten people with bodily harm for entering your cave. This can give you a solid chunk of time where other people won't force you to multitask.

The 15-Minute Rule

Fifteen minutes is often all you need to overcome a temporary slump. The fifteen minute rule says that whenever you feel close to quitting, commit only to another fifteen minutes of work. Energy levels fluctuate up and down and hard problems can drain you. Usually by sticking for another fifteen minutes, you can push through the slump and regain a flow.

Using the 15-Minute Rule also increases your self-discipline. Self-discipline is like a backup fuel tank when your energy hits zero. Committing to an extra fifteen minutes can help you overcome hiccups in your normal flow.

If you still feel strongly about stopping after the fifteen minutes, take a break. This could mean working on a different task or temporarily stopping work altogether. If you don't regain your energy after fifteen minutes, you are probably experiencing a bigger block than you realized. Taking some space away from that challenge and working on something else can give you a fresh perspective when you go back.

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Drink Water

Your body is over 2/3's water. If you don't stay hydrated throughout the day, you may feel sluggish even if you aren't thirsty. Eating food (especially most snack foods) will spike your blood glucose temporarily. But after 20-30 minutes, your energy levels will crash again as your body overcompensates, balancing for the extra carbohydrates.

Water doesn't have this problem, so it is a better way to stay energized between meals. Caffeine is a popular "energy" source, but I try to avoid it. Caffeine is habit forming and can result in a lowered ability to concentrate. Caffeine is also a diuretic, which means it causes your body to lose water. Caffeinated beverages shouldn't be used as a substitute for plain-old H_2O.

Water is important when exercising. Always bring a water bottle with you to the gym. It's almost impossible to stay hydrated just by using the water fountains. Exercise builds energy, but it also forces you to drink more water.

Try keeping a bottle of water with you at your desk. It will make it easier to drink when you need to take a short break. It's much easier to be dehydrated than overhydrated, so fill your bottle regularly.

Recharging Your Motivation

Motivation is the most important form of energy. If you are in an emotional slump, it won't matter how many miles you can run or pushups you did that morning. Unfortunately, it's hard to maintain motivation over months and years. Frustrations, plateaus and criticism can all slow down your progress. I believe it's important to regularly recharge my motivation so I can access that energy source.

The best way to stay motivated is to do a review of your goals. Look at your progress and read your reasons for setting them in the first place. Reconnecting with my original goals is usually enough to overcome any temporary frustrations. Losing a contract or having a slow month doesn't seem as critical when you think about the big pictures of financial freedom, fitness or career success.

If reviewing your goals doesn't motivate you, you've chosen the wrong goals. Either they were wrong from the beginning or they have stopped being important to you. You can use your goals as a source of energy, so remember to recharge your motivation the next time you're in a slump.

Stay Sharp

Physical fitness is important for energy. If you're 20 lbs overweight, that is like carrying a 20 lb weight with you everywhere you go. I've already talked about the importance of diet and exercise for energy levels, but it can't be understated.

Mental fitness is another factor for staying energized. Although mental muscles are harder to see, if you have a poor quality mental diet, your energy will go down. You may not feel physically tired, but your mind will be running at a slower pace. Ideas will take effort to bring out and it will be more difficult to solve problems.

Start by changing your mental diet. Remove information sources that don't give you new ideas to work with. Newspapers, websites and people that keep giving the same, stale output should be replaced. Read books from a variety of sources and watch programs that fuel you with new thoughts.

Next, take up mental exercise. I make it a rule that I should always be engaged in some form of learning. It might mean taking dance classes, learning a new programming language or taking free online courses from MIT*. Don't count your work as learning. While you may be learning new things, the focus is too narrow to get the full benefits of mental exercise.

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Work/Play Schedules

Energy management involves cycling between work and rest. Going through these cycles helps you maintain energy that time management often ignores. According to this philosophy, the 12-hour workdays aren't as valuable as the 6-hour, highly focused work efforts.

However, one side-effect of this philosophy is that it can be misinterpreted to mean resting whenever you feel like it. You should respond to your body's need for rest and exercise, so doesn't this approach make sense? Shouldn't you rest when you feel tired and work when you have energy?

Imagine if an Olympic athlete tried using this approach. I'm guessing they wouldn't win a gold medal. Athletes, who rely on this rest/strain cycle to build muscles and endurance, follow strict schedules of exercise and recovery.

Similarly, you need to see yourself as a workplace Olympian. Follow your daily and weekly goals lists as a way of deciding when to continue and when to stop. Falling into a laissez-faire strategy of energy management doesn't make you productive, it makes you a couch potato.

Balance Creative Muscles

Different activities require different modes of thought. If I'm writing an article, I'm in a different state of mind than when I'm drawing a picture or sending emails. Each of those different activities drains your energy in different ways. You can maximize your productivity if you learn to balance the use of these creative muscles.

An analogy would be lifting weights. If you go to the gym and immediately do 100 push ups, your pectoral muscles and arms will probably be fairly tired. You won't have nearly the same strength to go and do the bench press right afterwards. However, your leg muscles are probable still in good condition, so you could run or do squats without any difficulties.

I try to balance my creative muscles by noticing when I'm running low on energy with a particular type of task. Instead of giving up altogether (especially if my daily goals list isn't finished), I'll look at my to-do list for activities that might use different muscles. If I am burned out from writing, I can switch to making phone calls.

You can take this approach too far, and cycle so quickly you don't get a chance to use any creative muscle long enough to get work done. But moderate cycling, when you start feeling tired, can boost your energy levels.

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The Little Book of Productivity

Getting Things Finished

Complete Projects, Not Tasks

Productivity is measured not by how much work you do, but by how much is accomplished. You shouldn't be trying to fill your day with things to do. Each of those things should fit into a larger picture, otherwise you're just wasting time—being busy instead of productive.

Focusing on projects over tasks is one way to avoid this trap. Projects are a higher lifeform than tasks. Tasks flop around without structure or a larger goal. Projects have a structure and a specific purpose. Usually accomplishing a large project will have bigger rewards than a twenty minute task.

In my Simple Organizing System, I place the emphasis on projects first. While tasks and events are important, they shouldn't consume your life. More weight should be given to completing entire projects. Your goal should be to cross off the entire page in a project file, not just the little tasks that move towards it.

If you want to read more about the benefits of a project focus, I suggest Cal Newport's excellent guide, "The Art of the Finish".

Set Deadlines

How would you feel if your government operated without a budget? Politicians just spending money on whatever suits them in the moment without regard to debt, taxes or human welfare. I'm guessing you wouldn't be happy. You would probably say they are a bunch of crooks. Budgets are useful because they control spending.

Deadlines are a budget for your time. Without deadlines, projects mutate into a fiendish creature that eats up your time without ever being finished. Unpleasant tasks are left half-finished and your goals wait until half-past never. Deadlines put the limit on how much a project is worth to you. Without deadlines, your spending is based on a whim, not a decision.

All of your projects and tasks should have deadlines attached. I set deadlines for each phase of a major project along with a deadline for the project itself. These deadlines ensure I focus on finishing, not just working. My tasks are given deadlines when they are filtered through my weekly and daily goals lists.

Write your deadlines out. If your deadline is just a thought in your head, it won't motivate you when you need it. Put it on paper so it can call your attention when you start getting distracted.

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Weekly Reviews

Every seven days, give yourself 90 minutes of complete isolation to think. Don't play music, don't watch television and don't juggle the cellphone and email. Just you, a writing surface and your brain. Weekly reviews make sure that all the effort your putting forward is useful and not just keeping you busy.

I combine my weekly reviews with my day off. This combination gives me the time to think clearly as well as time away from work. Introspective reviews require a different frame of mind than actively working, so separating it from your weekly routine is important.

Your weekly review should assess how well the work you are doing is fitting with your deadlines. You should also assess what your stumbles and weaknesses are, so you have a chance to improve them in the upcoming week. If you had trouble getting motivated for a few days, try to correct that error before it becomes a habit.

I also combine my weekly goals list with my review. Finishing a review should naturally lead into deciding what projects and tasks to finish in the upcoming week.

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Avoid Hard Deadlines

This advice may seem to contradict my earlier suggestion to set deadlines. But that advice should really read, "Set Soft Deadlines". Hard deadlines, are a crutch for productivity junkies, and they should be replaced. Relying on hard deadlines results in schedule crunches and makes controlling your time difficult.

Hard deadlines are deadlines imposed by other people. Due dates for assignments. Project milestones set by your boss. Deadlines for forms to be filled. Soft deadlines are the deadlines you set yourself. You can turn hard deadlines soft by setting a personal deadline ahead of the official deadline.

Hard deadlines tend to pile up. Students know that exam periods are incredibly busy, but the first days of school are usually light. Relying on hard deadlines here means that you'll be underworked in the fall and overworked in the winter. Setting soft deadlines helps you break apart the work chunks.

Soft deadlines also give you a chance to work on your self-discipline. If you always rely on external deadlines, you won't build the muscles needed to stick to your own. Then if you start a personal goal or project, you won't have the strength to stay committed to your own timetable. When it comes to deadlines, go with a softer touch.

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Parkinson's Law

Parkinson's Law suggests that, "Work will tend to expand to the time given." That means if you give yourself 2 hours to complete a task, it will take close to 2 hours. If you give yourself 30 minutes, it will take 30 minutes. Work is flexible for the timeframe given.

You can use Parkinson's Law by setting deadlines before planning a project. Before I start a large task or project, I ask myself:

How much is this project worth?

That question should have more importance in setting deadlines than asking, "How long will this project take?" I set tight deadlines on projects which force me to stay simple.

This rule doesn't give you unlimited freedom. Unless you're churning at an incredible pace, it's difficult to write a 300 page book in a week. But by setting deadlines based on value first, you'll avoid wasting time.

Hofstadter's Rule

In seemingly opposite advice to Parkinson's Law, Hofstadter's Rule states: "It always takes longer than you expect, even when you take Hofstadter's Rule into account."

This may seem to contradict Parkinson's Law, but they can work together. Hofstadter's Rule suggests that it is easy to be overly ambitious when setting deadlines for complex projects. A similar rule many software developers use is, "Take your worst- case time and double it. That is now your realistic deadline."

I suggest using both. Set firm deadlines based on the value of a project, not your anticipated timeframe. However, you should be aware that your ambitions of what you want to accomplish with that time will probably be unrealistic. Set firm deadlines, but expect to accomplish fewer features of your project plan than your ideal estimate.

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Reward Laziness

Productivity ≠ work. If you make the mistake of believing the two are equal, you will waste a lot of time. Laziness is both a vice and a virtue. It is a vice when it is meant to mean lacking self-discipline. Self-discipline is often necessary to be productive. However, laziness is a virtue when it means doing no more work than is necessary.

I've known software entrepreneurs that run their own business. Busy into a project, they claim to work 10 hour days, 7 days a week just to get by. However, despite this busy schedule, I'll notice they make long forum posts, answer their emails almost immediately and spend time chatting.

How much of those 70 hour workweeks is actual work? If that person compressed their workload into a smaller timeframe without distractions and low-value activities, they might be able to do more working only 35 hours a week. Unfortunately, because many people see working less as being unproductive, they avoid signs of laziness.

Work less, do more. Use your laziness constructively to help you accomplish more actual work. Eliminate large tasks that don't add value. Simplify complex projects that can be made smaller. Use your brain to save yourself time and energy.

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Skeleton Planning

A typical planning process involves going through every detail of a project and making every decision up front. I'm against this form of planning for two reasons. First, excessive planning is just an excuse to procrastinate. It's better to get started with a rough plan than obsess details forever. Second, obsessive planning is usually wrong. Your initial ideas won't work correctly, so you need modifications. Excessive planning only creates the illusion that you know what to do.

Skeleton planning is the opposite approach. Creating a skeleton plan means you only plan out elements that are absolutely necessary before moving forward. Only rigid decisions that can't change once you start should be made. Flexible decisions that leave several options should be left until later.

Skeleton planning helps you finish projects because it gives you opportunities for shortcuts. In an early software project, I made the mistake of planning out an extensive interface design. Three weeks into writing the code, I realized I could buy a library containing most of what I needed for only $15. A skeleton plan wouldn't have made those assumptions and given me options when the time came to build an interface.

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Don't Reinvent the Wheel

Look for shortcuts in your projects. These are areas where you can completely eliminate large sections of work by using premade solutions, outsourcing or just removing a feature. A task-focus will often ignore these solutions, which is why it is crucial to focus on completing an entire project, instead of just a to-do list.

I used an example in the last section where I saved myself 3 months of work for $15. But examples are everywhere. You can outsource design of a webpage and save yourself time finishing it. Eliminate an low-value feature to save yourself time. Use software designed to your task to make completing a step easier.

Shortcutting is often prohibited in certain settings, so be careful. Academics call it plaguerism and your boss might fire you for being lazy. Make sure the shortcut you're taking is allowed in your setting. One of the reasons I prefer self-directed projects is that almost no shortcuts are off-limits. Violating patents and copyright are no-no's, but in most cases only a small fee can give you access to hundreds of hours of someone else's labor.

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Rapid Prototyping

A prototype is a copy of an invention that is built for less money and time than creating a complete manufacturing run. Businesses use prototypes to test products before they go to market. You can use prototyping as a way to test out your ideas before you commit months of your life.

Project prototyping means that the first incarnation of your project should be as simple as possible. Have only the features necessary to demonstrate your idea. Don't spend time on polish or presentation. Starting from one prototype, grow it into a larger version. At each point, you can more easily correct errors and save yourself from walking down dead-ends.

Here are some prototyping examples:

1, Create a mini-application before writing a full software program.
2. Write an ebook before looking for publishers for your novel.
3. Offer to do skilled work for free on small projects before taking the step to finding clients as a freelancer.

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Don't Pay Yourself By The Hour

If you work at a company, you may be paid an hourly wage. Worse, you may be paid a salary just for showing up. Although these methods of payment are simple for HR departments, they aren't an ideal way to value your own time. Pay yourself for work done, not time spent.

I know self-employed people that, unfortunately, carried over the "hourly wage" mindset into their business. Instead of rewarding themselves for results, they work an eight hour day. This may make sense if you're working on the company's dollar, but it's insane if you bill yourself.

When working on self-directed projects, focus on work done. I do this through my daily to-do list. When that list is finished, I stop. I don't work an arbitrary 8 hours. If I work quickly and finish my list in 3 hours, then I have a 3 hour workday. If I'm slow and need 10 hours, I stay later.

For some people a 3 hour day would be blasphemy. "You've just wasted 5 hours of potential working time," I hear them cry. What they don't realize is that they may be wasting 5 hours of working time by having an hourly billing mentality. Except when I waste 5 hours, I get to enjoy time off, whereas they sit in their office.

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Forced Productivity

Productivity works best under pressure. Being productive is a bit like being a bodybuilder. Unless you are putting your "productivity muscles" under strain, the natural tendency will be for them to shrivel up. This means that before trying to become productive, you should set up your schedule to force productivity. There are two approaches you can take with this:

1. Set more work. If you have big projects to finish, the easiest way to kick your productivity up a notch is to increase amount of work you need to accomplish. Large weekly and daily to-do lists force you to become productive.

2. Place your time off first. If you don't want to increase your workload, you can force productivity by placing your time off first. Give a priority to your leisure activities and squeeze your work into a tighter schedule.

Efficiency doesn't work in a vacuum. Without pressure forcing you to become productive, it's easy to waste time.

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Daily Checkmarks

Benjamin Franklin was famous for discovering electricity and being one of the founding fathers of the United States. He embodied productivity and accomplished many things in his lifetime. One of his secrets was to maintain a daily checklist storing 13 virtues he felt were important to living. If he felt he was true to one of the virtues, he would check it off for that day.

You can take a similar measure to your productivity. You can create a list of habits or productive virtues that you want to focus on each day. Every day you achieve it, check it off the list. This helps by keeping you focused on certain habits of thinking as well as rewarding you for sticking to those thinking patterns.

Here are a few potential checkmarks to keep:

- Morning ritual
- Self-discipline
- Avoiding procrastination
- Making time top-heavy
- Work towards an important goal

- Working without distractions
- Completing all daily tasks
- Putting important activities before urgent ones
- Exercising

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Develop an Exit Strategy

What are you going to do when you've finished? Not being able to answer this question holds a lot of people back. It can mean the difference between being accomplished and spinning your wheels. An exit strategy is a plan for what you will do after a project is done. If this step isn't clearly defined you can end up with re-verse procrastination, being able to work easily but being unable to finish.

Exit strategies are important on the project level. After you've finished a several month long project, what will you do? Relax for two weeks? Start a new project? Unless you know what comes next, it's easy to keep pushing back the deadline. It's safer to sit on projects and avoid releasing them, but unless you move to finish, you're just wasting time.

Exit strategies are important on the task level. What will you do after you finish your daily goals? If you can't answer this question, it's easy to let that list occupy your entire day. Unless I have a clear picture of how I want to relax when I'm done, I tend to let my daily goals list expand to fill every waking hour. Know what comes af-ter the end, so you won't get stuck.

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Paying Attention: The Role of Habits

Very little of your life is processed consciously. I've read estimates that suggest out of the nearly 11,000 sensory inputs coming towards you every second, your brain only consciously processes about 40. That's less than 1%. With so much information, your brain has to rely on subconscious habits to direct your behavior. Habits exist whether you like them or not, so you'd better take control over this force.

Paying attention is a literal term, concentration has a cost. And that cost is eating up that small sliver of conscious resources that make up less than 1% of your processing. There are 99 ideas in this book, but it's impossible to focus on them all at once. It would be difficult to focus on 3, nevermind 33 times tha many. Being productive requires that you take these ideas and make them habits.

Everyone relies on habits. There isn't one group of people that does things spontaneously and another set that act like robots. There are just people who don't even realize that their conscious thinking is just an iceberg, with most of it's mass hidden beneath the water. The question isn't whether you will have habits or not. The question is whether you will turn the habits you already have and make them more productive.

The 30-Day Trial

The 30-Day Trial, made popular by Steve Pavlina, is one of the best methods for changing habits. The idea behind the 30DT (30 Day Trial) is simple:

1. Focus on running one habit for a month.

2. If you forget or slip up, reset the clock and start back on Day 1.

3. When you reach Day 30, the behavior should be conditioned sufficiently that it no longer requires mental effort. You now have the option of continuing or leaving it behind.

The 30DT is simple, but powerful. I've used it to reprogram dozens of habits including changing my diet, exercising daily, implementing GTD, batching my email and more. The 30DT works through the power of focus. By getting you to focus on one change for a month, you can utilize that 1% of conscious resources to sculpt part of the 99% of unconscious processing.

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Routine VS Non-Routine Tasks

The first step you should take when going on the path to automated productivity is separating your routine tasks from non-routine tasks. Like most people, I face both in my daily schedule. Writing blog entries is a routine task that I do the same way each week. The content might change, but the process is routine. I also face many one-time tasks that will change from day to day. Today I'm installing a new feature on my website which I'll never need to do again.

Non-routine tasks don't leave much room for automation. You can automate the background habits (avoiding procrastination, batching, morning rituals), but you can't automate the tasks themselves.

Routine tasks, however, give you the ability to automate them fully. By deciding the best way to execute them, you can condition yourself to rely on that routine. We all have habits for handling our routine, but unless you design your routines efficiently, you'll end up with sloppy habits.

Ideally your mental energy should be spent on non-routine tasks. Routine tasks should be integrated into your schedule so firmly that they don't require thinking if you aren't doing them at that very moment.

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Triggers

The 30DT isn't the only way to condition habits. Triggers can be used either alone or in conjunction with the trial periods to make your routines stick. A trigger is simply a highly conditioned starting point for running a full habit. It consists of two parts: the signal and the ritual.

The signal is the cue for starting your habit. Let's say you wanted to start the habit of waking up earlier by using a trigger. Your signal would be the sound of your alarm clock ringing. Other signals might be a certain time of day for going to the gym or a particular set of feelings or actions you want to avoid.

The ritual is what you need to do immediately after your habit. Unlike morning rituals, these rituals need to be extremely short (30-60 seconds max). The idea is that these short rituals should trigger the remainder of the habit. Your cue of 4:00 might lead you to take the ritual of grabbing your gym bag and getting in the car. Once that step is complete, the rest of your workout should follow.

You can set up a trigger by practicing the signal and ritual repeatedly. To wake up earlier, I practiced waking up from my alarm clock during the day. Triggers aren't always necessary for changing habits, but they can be useful if a habit doesn't stick.

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Replacement Theory

Your habits are designed to fill emotional and physical needs. Tearing down habits and putting up new ones may disrupt the balance used to fulfill those needs. Failing to provide for those lost needs is one of the reasons most long-term habit changes fail. It isn't that changing habits is difficult (it's not), but designing habits that fulfill all the old needs requires more skill.

Consider the habit of not watching television. This might improve your productivity, but what balances are disrupted? TV may have provided a social outlet to spend time with friends. TV may have given you a way to relax or escape daily stresses. TV might have given you a way to feel connected to other people.

Giving up television without coming up with alternatives to fill these needs will be difficult. Your body is used to the pattern of inputs and by quickly changing those patterns, it resists the change. Alternative habits might be finding other ways to spend time with friends or finding a new hobby to help your relax.

Replacement theory isn't necessary for all changes. But for drastic changes, it is something you should keep in mind.

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Operant Conditioning

B. F. Skinner was one of the pioneers of operant conditioning when, in 1930 he invented the famous "Skinner box". The Skinner box consisted of a switch a mouse could press to get a reward. The mouse, upon receiving the reward, would be trained to press it repeatedly. Operant conditioning is a powerful force when sculpting habits and it can't be ignored.

Taking operant conditioning into consideration with your habits means making sure that the balance of feedback for a new habit is positive. There are a few ways you can maintain that balance:

1. Negative reinforcement for not following the habit. Punishing yourself for procrastinating or sleeping past your ritual would be an example.

2. Positive reinforcement for following the habit. Rewards for good habits.

3. Negative feedback for following bad habits. Punishing slips into bad habits.

4. Positive feedback for avoiding bad habits. Rewarding self-discipline.

I usually focus on #2 and #4, as negative feedback can be less effective.

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One Habit at a Time

I've spoken with dozens of people about changing habits and 30DT's since I started writing about them two years ago. Inevitably the question always comes up, "How many trials should I do at one time?" The idea being that changing 3 habits at once has triple the productive force of only one change.

Taking on multiple habit changes at once usually fails. The reason is that a trial works through focus. Focusing part of that 1% for 30 days. If you spread that focus thinly between several different habits, you'll end up with nothing. One reason habit changes are hard for many people is that there isn't adequate focus. It's easy to concentrate on one idea for a day, or even a week. But sticking to one idea for a month, without interruption, takes effort. That effort is what conditions the habit.

Unless you've completed several 30DT's flawlessly, I'd avoid taking on more than one at a time. It's better to have one strongly conditioned habits than to have 5-6 habits that are unreliable.

Be Consistent

When conditioning a habit, make sure the habit is run the same way, every day. If you're inconsistent, the habit won't form properly. Imagine a habit is like a path through deep snow in winter. Consistency means walking through the same path, day after day. After a month, you will have compacted a deep trench to walk through easily. Without consistency, you'll have many paths where the snow is still hard to walk through.

Every habit you condition should be made daily, if possible. It's easier to condition daily exercise than exercise twice a week. It's easier to condition waking up early every day than only on weekdays. Ensure that, for at least the first month, there are no interruptions and your habit is repeated daily.

Once the thirty days are over, you may want to resort to a slightly less regular version of the habit. I exercise 4-5 days a week, not 7. However, when I was conditioning the habit, I made the effort to go every day. I generally wake up at 5:30, but I make exceptions if I need to stay up later. You have more flexibility with a trial after you've reached the one month milestone.

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Invest in Yourself First

"Pay yourself first," is a popular personal finance mantra. It means that you should be saving or investing your money before it is eaten up by your regular expenses. The idea being that expenses tend to expand to match your income, only by saving money first, can you protect it from regular costs.

"Invest in yourself first," is a mantra I like for setting habits. It means that your investment habits should come before any other scheduling of your time. By putting these activities first, you ensure that a busy schedule doesn't eat up all of your extra time. Here are a few investment habits to consider:

- Exercise
- Reading
- Journaling
- Time with family
- Studying

The most common excuse I hear for avoiding exercise or similar habits is that the person doesn't have enough time. However, I've experienced the opposite. When I go to the gym as a habit, it doesn't take away from my schedule. Only when I'm absent from the gym for a long time do I get the feeling I'm too busy to go.

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Set an Unbreakable Standard

In order to succeed with the 30DT you need to develop an unbreakable standard. That standard is simply that, no matter what, you'll reach the end of the first 30 days. Even if you later decide to drop the habit, you won't quit until you reach that milestone. Having that level of discipline isn't easy, but it makes a huge difference when trying to change more difficult habits.

Recently I went through a 30 Day Trial to go running each morning. About one week into the trial the temperature dropped down to several degrees below zero (25-30° for those using Fahrenheit). It was freezing, but I still got up and ran. On a different day a thunderstorm started right as I was about to leave. I was soaked, but I finished the entire run.

After the 30DT is over, you probably won't need to push through blizzards and thunderstorms. But having an unbreakable standard greatly increases the power of the 30DT. If you quit at the first sign of difficulty, your habits won't have the strength to hold up afterward.

If you can't make it through a 30DT, start back at Day 1. Cheating a 30DT by continuing through a failed day is worse than stopping entirely.

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Ratchet Theory

Becoming productive is hard work. Don't expect to instantly improve all of your habits. Sometimes it works better if you slowly ratchet them upwards, starting with a simple change and gradually expanding. A ratchet works by only turning in one direction. You can ratchet your productivity by locking in any improvements as habits before moving onto the next change.

Let's say you wanted to start the habit of waking up earlier. If your current waking time is 7:30, getting up at 5:00, might be a too abrupt a change. Instead you might want to start the first 30DT to wake up at 7:00 or 6:45. After a month, when that habit is fully conditioned, you can go a step further and wake up at 6:00 or 6:15.

If a habit change is particularly difficult, taking this ratcheting approach can be far more effective. By breaking it down into several 30DT's instead of just one, you have several times the power. It's the difference between tightening a bolt with one turn of a ratchet and making several smaller turns.

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Constructive Vices

A mistake I made early on my road to automated productivity was to eliminate every potential source of low productivity. Weilding the power of habits, I removed almost every behavior that wasn't ideal. And I was left without time to relax or have fun.

This was a mistake I made, but it isn't the inevitable result of changing habits. Your goal for changing habits is to eliminate the behaviors the vices that don't offer much value back. There are three categories of tasks:

1. Productive work.

2. Productive vices.

3.Unproductive vices.

Use habits to get rid of the unproductive vices, but don't through out their useful counterparts. Those are the activities that don't directly contribute to work, but are still valuable. Socializing might not be directly productive, but if it helps you stay focused on work, it is still worthwhile.

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Internet Rituals

One way you can use habits to save time is through having an internet ritual. This ritual is a routine for handling your email, RSS, web surfing, Facebook or any other digital information streams. By forming a ritual around this, you can remove many of the extreme inefficiencies that come with using the internet.

An example of one internet ritual I have used is a daily check of all my major informatin sources. In the ritual, I've prioritized my access so that I start with the most important information feeds and end with the least important. This way if time gets short, I'll know I started on the most important feeds of information.

Set a 30DT to practice your internet ritual, at the set time. I've found it useful to split the information sources the need daily checks from those that only require weekly checks. My web statistics and other information sources only need to be checked once a week. Checking stats every day is a waste of time when patterns only appear after weeks and months.

Come up with an efficient way to handle your email and set it as a habit. Add any other online sources you may need and create an internet ritual.

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Experiment With Habits

A lot of habits you try won't work. The productivity gains might not be worth the cost. Or the habit might conflict with too many other habits to make it easy to run beyond 30 days. Other times you'll discover habits that completely revolutionize how you work and how much is accomplished.

Take risks with habits. At most you lose a month of your time. I'd say that only about 30-50% of the trials I set result in permanent habits. This is not because the method doesn't work, but simply that I experiment with a lot of different behaviors. Some turn out to be duds, but others are great additions.

Habit changing is a bit of a meta-habit on its own. Before you get used to the process, you probably have dozens of behaviors that seem like great candidates for new habits. But once you have covered the basics, the next step is experimenting. Don't settle for the status quo and push yourself to find new ways to do things. The 30 Day Trial works perfectly for experimenting because it never assumes a permanent change. It only assumes one month. After that month is finish, you're free to abandon any failed experiments and keep the successes.

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Outsourcing

Don't do work you don't have to. Outsourcing is a popular new trend because it completely changes the nature of productivity. If you can exchange money for work done, you can accomplish far more than one person is capable of doing. Outsourcing removes the glass ceiling of what is possible with your time.

Outsourcing can work on two levels. First of all, you can use outsourcing to avoid work that has a lower value per hour. If you have work that is only work $25 per hour, and you want to focus on $50 per hour tasks, outsourcing can help you avoid that lower-cost work.

Secondly, outsourcing helps you focus on your strengths. Let's say you're a freelance programmer, but you lack web design skills. Sure you could put up an ugly webpage to promote your services. Or you could save yourself time and pay someone with web design skills to build it for you.

Outsourcing isn't a cure-all. It requires setup and unless you are savvy, it can be more expensive than doing it yourself. For personal projects that don't earn a lot of money, it may not be the best option. But it is a trick to remember when you need to boost your productivity.

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Turn Off Automatic Messaging

Automatic updates are the devil. If your email client tells you the moment you have a new message, you're going to be slowed down in the productivity race. The same is true for keeping your instant messanger accounts active while you're trying to work.

Staying connected isn't worth the price in productivity. It's better to go offline temporarily than to be constantly at the mercy of whoever wants to say hello. If you want to accomplish any major work, turn off any automatic messages you receive. You'll save enough time by having fewer distractions to have plenty of communication time later.

The other hidden threat with constant messaging is it creates the illusion of social interactions. When you have instant messangers at your fingertips, it's harder to realize you aren't spending time face to face. Genuine social interactions are important for keeping your energy balanced. Even if you're introverted, being completely isolated for a long time won't help your productivity. Turn off the messaging and with the time you save, spend time with people face to face.

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Two-Flow Theory

Most creative tasks have two challenges. The first challenge is building enough creative fodder. This is the raw idea material that needs to be present in order to come up with work. The second challenge is refining and sculpting that material into something useful. A writer needs to generate many ideas for what to write about, but also needs the ability to restrict those ideas into something meaningful.

The reason creative blocks often occur is that people try to do these two tasks at the same time. The generation task and refining task require two completely different frames of mind. One you must be confident, enthusiastic and expressive. The other you must be reserved, critical and limiting. These two flows cancel each other out when you try to use them both at the same time.

You can reduce the time it takes to finish creative work by splitting up these two phases. I did this with my writing by having one phase to write a large list of article topics and another phase for actually writing the articles. I used this method when writing this book, by writing out all of the ideas before actually finishing the content. You can use two-flow theory for almost any creative task to save time and prevent the frustration of a creative block.

Batching

Batching is the art of taking similar tasks and doing them all at the same time. You can batch email by answering all your messages at one time during the day, instead of in little bursts throughout the afternoon. I batch my writing by doing a weeks worth of content in two days. I batch any school work by completing projects in one sitting instead of drawn out over several weeks.

Batching is a great trick to save time for a few reasons:

1, It removes the start-up and slow-down phases of work. Working on a task requires a certain amount of momentum. You probably aren't working at full speed until 10-15 minutes into a task.

2. It keeps you in the same frame of mind. Two-flow theory suggests that different states of mind are productive to different kinds of work. By batching you can maintain the state of mind that is suited for your particular task.

3. Batching simplifies your workload. By doing larger chunks at a time, you decrease the amount of work you need to keep track of mentally.

Avoid Lazy People

Attitudes are contagious. If the people you spend time around aren't productive, their bad habits will wash off on you. While I don't suggest immediately dumping all of your friends that aren't overachievers, there are a number of ways you can use this fact to your advantage:

1. Spend time with productive people. Meet people who in some way, beat you in productivity. Aside from what you can explicitly learn from them, you can also pick up their habits through osmosis.

2. Find people with the same goals. Look for people that have the same ambitions as you. Far from being competition, these people are an asset. Their motivation can reflect yours and give you a crutch to use if you're temporarily discouraged.

3. Look for friends with the right habits. Spend time around people who have the habits you desire. I go to the gym with people who like going to the gym. If your gym partner has trouble motivating herself to get going, that will rub off on you.

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Information Dieting

Productivity requires selective attention. In the last chapter, I discussed how attention was a limited resource and you need to use it to fuel habits. Here I'd like to discuss why having selective attention is necessary for staying productive. Selective attention means completely ignoring some information streams and severely restricting others.

Start by eliminating informations streams that aren't useful to you. Television news programs or celebrity magazines might seem important, but unless they spur direct actions, they are just fluff. Any information stream that doesn't influence your actions is a waste of your time.

Next, cut down the information streams you don't need to view regularly. I restrict viewing any details regarding my income to once a week. Checking constantly only wastes my time and causes me to become impatient. By limiting this resource I only look at the totals instead of the individual ups and downs.

The Now Habit

Work can only be done right now. Planning is important, but it doesn't accomplish any useful work. The only way you can get work done is by working on it this moment. Focusing on the now can help you shake off the tendency to focus on what can't be changed.

Although focusing on the now is important for procrastination, it's more than just that. Focusing on the now also changes the way you work. If you experience what you're doing, the quality of your work will go up. By focusing on the current task, instead of letting your mind wander, you can produce high-quality work at a much faster rate.

One of the barriers to the now habit is resisting what you're doing. Surprisingly, focusing hard on what you're doing makes even boring tasks more enjoyable. People eat food they dislike more slowly than great tasting food. By focusing hard on work you don't feel like doing, you can make it more fun to do.

Look for Exponential Payoffs

I have a large sheet of paper. Folding it in half, the thickness doubles. Folding it again in half means the thickness quadruples. One more time and the thickness is eight times what it originally started. Let's pretend, with an ordinary sheet of paper, that I continue this process of folding until the paper has been folded fifty times. How thick with the paper be?

Everytime I ask this question, nobody gets the correct answer. Most people use linear estimates like six inches or several feet. No one imagines that the correct thickness is approximately the distance between the Earth and the Sun. Exponential payoffs are so powerful, precisely because they are so unexpected.

A 1% increase that grows constantly will soon be better than a 50% increase that stops. You can greatly increase your productivity if you focus on activities that invest with exponential payoffs. Setting up an online business is an example where, with each step refining your process, the improvements work on an exponential scale. It is just as difficult to go from $100 to $200 as it is to go from $100,000 to $200,000. Businesses and money aren't the only exponential payoffs, look for other ways you can take advantage of this effect.

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Speed Reading

Speed reading is a bit of a misnomer. The skills you learn as a speed reader can be used to read faster, but mostly they are designed to help you read more efficiently. By being able to slow down and speed up depending on what you're reading, you can increase both your reading rate and your ability to understand. Speed reading is a skill that takes practice, but the basics are fairly easy to start:

1. Use your finger to underline the words you are reading. For the first two weeks, this will seems slow compared to reading by eyesight. However, once you adapt, this becomes a faster method. Your eye doesn't stay fixated on one location, using your finger cuts time lost from these eye movements.

2. Practice reading faster than you can comprehend. This will train you to understand at faster rates.

3. Read faster than you can subvocalize. Subvocalization is hearing the words pronounced inside your head as you're reading them. Many people mistake subvocalization (a by-product of slower reading) with comprehension. However, with practice, you can understand words without subvocalization.

Holistic Learning

Most people are incredibly inefficient learners. The typical strategy tends to rely on rote memorization, the equivalent to bashing information into your skull. Holistic learning is a different strategy that avoids rote memorization. Instead, it relies on connecting ideas together as a means of remembering them.

Here are a few ways you can connect ideas:

1. Asterisk your notes. Put side-thoughts and comments into your notes to connect a main idea with something else. Textbook authors do this all the time, but you'll get more benefit if you take control.

2. Create metaphors. Try to explain topics to yourself as you would explain them to a five year-old. That might not be easy for quantum physics or macroeconomics, but any steps to simplify abstract ideas into simpler metaphors makes them easier to remember.

3. Be vivid. Create big, vivid pictures to describe ideas. You can do this by making diagrams in your notes, or you can create mental images. The more extreme and imaginative, the better.

Write to Solve Problems

Slow thinking is a big obstacle to productivity. If your mind is flowing like molasses, then your work can't move any faster. But you don't need to wait until they invent computer chips that fit inside your brain to enhance your thinking. In fact, you have the tools available right now.

Writing is one of the best ways to control and speed up your problem solving methods. The next time you get stuck, write your way out of it. There are a few reasons writing is thought-enhancing:

1. Enhanced short-term memory. The human brain equivalent of RAM can only store 5-9 items at a time. With paper, your short-term memory can triple.

2. Multiple threads. When you go onto a different thread of thinking, it is difficult to backtrack later. Paper helps you because you can scroll back and remind yourself of what you were just thinking.

3. Writing is active. Thinking without an activity is passive. It's easy to get distracted and almost impossible to maintain a consistent focus for long periods of time. Writing makes it easier to stay focused.

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To-Learn Lists

By now, you're familiar with to-do lists. But do you keep to-learn lists? I maintain a to-learn list because it helps me keep track of ideas worth pursuing, but don't immediately fit into any projects. To-learn lists provide great idea banks for future projects and interesting ways to spend your time off.

Books to read, films to watch, classes and subjects to study are all parts of my to-learn list. Whenever I encounter an idea that seems intersting or potentially valuable, I write it down in the list. Then, when I'm without a book or have room for another project, I consult my to-learn list for making an addition.

Learning is a big part of productivity. Having more skills in an area can greatly increase your effectiveness. Knowlege is a weapon against the onslaught of unnecessary work. The more you know, the more power you have to be productive.

However, learning is not an urgent activity. Therefore, learning new things often takes a back seat to the distractions of daily life. Keeping a to-learn list helps ensure your time is invested in improving your brain.

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Get Ruthless Feedback

Nobody likes to be criticized. Even if you have stone skin, you're still going to appreciate a compliment more than an attack on your work. However, being able to absorb harsh criticism is critical if you want to avoid wasting time on projects. I've wasted months of time on projects because I wasn't willing to aggressively seek critics early on.

You can get ruthless feedback by changing how you ask for it. Most people won't give you brutal feedback. People would rather be kind than helpful. However, if you change how you ask for feedback, people will feel more comfortable revealing their honest opinions.

One way you can do this is to force people to ask for weaknesses. Ask questions like, "What do you feel the biggest weakness of this product/design/essay thesis is?" This will force the other person into a corner where they can't give trite advice. Another question would be, "If you were in my position, how would you approach this problem?" This gives the other person a cover to point out possible flaws in your strategy without sounding critical. Getting criticism can hurt, but a little ego-bruising can prevent you from running into dead-ends.

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Sensory Deprivation

If you have trouble staying focused for long periods of time, try sensory deprivation. This is the step of, while working, eliminating every possible sensory distraction. This includes:

- Turning off music.
- Clearing your desktop.
- Shutting the door, turning off the phone and unplugging the internet.
- Removing any background applications with notifications.

If you want to take this to the next level, you can clear your computer desktop of any icons that don't immediately relate to your work. The goal of sensory deprivation is to make the task ahead of you the only possible object to focus on. As long as there are interesting things surrounding you, it can be hard to work through difficult tasks. I wouldn't use sensory deprivation as a rule, but it can be a useful measure when faced with a difficult deadline or boring set of tasks.

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The Daily Six

The story of the Daily Six speaks for itself:

A young man walked into the office of a powerful executive of a steel company in the early 20th century. He told the executive he could triple his productivity. All he asked was that the executive would later pay him what he felt the idea was worth. The idea was this:

Each day you write the numbers one to six on a piece of paper.

Then write out the first, second and up to the sixth most important tasks of the day. You then begin on number one. Even if you spend the entire day on that one task, there was no way you could have been more productive using any other system.

A month after his speech the young man received a check from the executive. It was worth ten thousand dollars. (Over one hundred thousand dollars in today's prices)

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Know What You Want

If the outcome of a project isn't clear, you'll waste a lot of time on things that don't matter. Clarity is something that most projects lack, but few people realize. Before you start a large assignment, task or project, here are a few questions to answer. If you can't answer them easily and with a few sentences, you probably haven't spent enough time defining what you want:

1. Why am I pursuing this project?

2. What will I have accomplished when the project is finished?

3. What features need to be in place to complete this project?

4. What is the primary goal of this project?

5. What are the secondary goals of this project? (Example: If you're creating a product, a primary goal might be to make money. Secondary goals might be to add value to your industry, gain recognition or build distributor alliances. If you're writing an essay, a primary goal might be to get a B+ or A, secondary goals being to improve your writing skills or understand a topic.)

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Separate Planning From Doing

Planning, especially for complex projects, can be a tricky productivity issue. On the one hand, you want to plan carefully. Creative planning decisions can speed up projects by months and mean the difference between success and failure. On the other hand, excessive planning can lead to analysis paralysis, where you never get started. My solution to this problem is to clearly separate my planning and action phases. Weekly and monthly reviews are a good time for planning. This is when you can pull out of the project and assess big question. This is the time to ask yourself the hard questions, set targets and look for shortcuts.

However, when you're not actively doing a review, your focus should be shifted to getting work done. Leave the debating about what to do for your review periods. Once you've made a decision about what actions to take, work from that perspective unless something drastic forces you to reconsider.

This approach of separating planning from action can help balance the best of both perspectives. Trying to plan when you should be doing work results in procrastination and a lack of motivation. Trying to act when you should be planning results in wasted time from doing unnecessary work.

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Measure

An old business adage is, "That which is measured, improves." Information is a weapon. Without regular measurement, you don't have the feedback to know whether your actions are making any progress. If something is important enough to think about, it's important enough to measure.

Rarely are the most important things easy to measure. It's way easier to keep track of traffic levels than value added. It's easier to keep track of grades than ideas learned. However, keeping track of these easier measurements can encourage improvement in the more important, subjective factors.

All measurements should be focused on trends, patterns and aggregates. Many measurements have a lot of random fluctuations. Only when you look at broader patterns, can you see the effects of your habits. This is why logging measurements is so important. If you only rely on your day-to-day judgement of events, you'll have a horribly skewed picture of reality. However, if you can moderate any daily judgements with the trends of the last month, you have a better chance of seeing your actions clearly.

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Experiment

There are two common modes to approach a problem. One is the theory approach. This method suggests that you should study every detail and come up with complex mental models to explain what is happening. The other is the trial-and-error approach. It suggests you should avoid thinking, take a lot of action and do what works.

A better approach combines the two. The experimental approach involves making hypothesis about the way the world works (theory) and then testing them in a controlled setting (trial-and-error). You'll never reach the scientific accuracy of a laboratory in your personal life. However, even crude experiments can save you time.

Here are a few experiments you might want to consider:

1. What would happen if you stopped working on a task for the next month?

2. What would happen if you compressed all your work between 9 and 4?

3. What would happen if you stopped eating junk food for thirty days?

These are general experiments. Experimenting is even more powerful when used on specific ideas for your work.

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Timelogging

A timelog is simply a record of every activity you spent time on, usually kept for 4-5 days. I've done several timelogs, and while they can take a little effort to put together, the results can be amazing. A timelog will tell you where you are spending most of your time, what are your most frequent time wasters and whether you're spending enough time on critical projects.

The real beauty of a timelog is that it removes any illusions. Every time I do a timelog I'm surprised at how different my idealized version of my productivity is from my actual work habits. Although I've made considerable improvements, a timelog reveals all the ugly details and can show you where you need to improve.

Running a timelog is fairly simple. Just keep a notepad with you at all times. When you start or stop a task, write down the time and what you were doing. Then, when you have finished several days, you can enter the information into a spreadsheet. With spreadsheet software you can categorize how your time is being used across different areas (eating, sleeping, working, internet, television, socializing, etc.). When your timelog doesn't reflect your goals (i.e. you have big academic goals but most your time is spent playing games) you can make adjustments.

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Pareto's Principle

The Italian economist, Vilfredo Pareto, made an unusual observation in the distribution of wealth in Italian landowners. He noticed that 80% of the wealth was held by only 20% of the people. This inequality soon showed up in other areas and was generalized to be called the 80/20 principle. This principle states that approximately 80% of the effects are from 20% of the causes. 80% of your income is from 20% of your work. 80% of your work is completed in 20% of your time. The inequality isn't always 80/20 (it can be 90/10, 70/40 or even 50/2), but the principle remains the same.

You can use the 80/20 Rule as a way to save time. Let's say you have more possible tasks than you have time or energy for. When running a business, I have hundreds of possible optimizations I could implement, but only enough time to add a couple. When this happens, I try to look for the 80% bulk that is contributing the least to the equation. These activities are eliminated in favor of the valuable 20%.

Think of the 80/20 rule as a filter for your work. By constantly cycling through the filter any new tasks you get, you can keep your workload manageable while having the maximum effect. All tasks are not created equal, with Pareto's help you can split the ones that matter least from the ones that matter most.

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To-Stop Lists

It's easy to build up a large to-do list. But have you made a to-stop list? To-stop lists are equally important. In order to do important work, you need to stop doing less important work. Sometimes this will happen naturally, as unimportant tasks flake off your to-do list in the face of pressing concerns. However, more often, you need to take this step manually. Even when extremely important work is not given attention, low-value tasks still fill your to-do list.

It's harder to create a to-stop list than a to-do list. A to-do list is a bit like highschool gym class, all the players are brought onto the team, even if they can't play well. To-stop lists are more like an NBA draft, where many possible sources of value are rejected for all but the best.

To-stop lists are important when important work is being crowded out by urgent, but unimportant work. One question to ask yourself is, "Will completing this task or project matter in five years?" If the possible horizon for a task is only a few weeks or a month, it probably doesn't compare to the bigger picture.

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Fail Quickly

A quick death is better than a long, painful one. However, many people get in the trap of believing it's better to avoid failure as long as possible. The faster you can get feedback, even potentially project-crushing feedback, the better. Let me use two examples:

John is starting a business. Instead of releasing his product early to get market experience and feedback, he spends years polishing it. When it finally is released, it busts because of mistake he made years earlier. If he had released it with less polish, that error would have been fixed much earlier.

Susan is writing an large essay. Instead of approaching other students and professors to refine ideas, she waits until the due date. When she hands in her paper, she doesn't realize that her introductory paragraph is unclear, making an otherwise convincing essay into a dud.

Consider any project to be in constant beta, unfinished, but available for feedback.

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Organization VS Accomplishment

Organization is an important step in becoming productive. It's harder to get work done when your task lists are going missing and you can't properly store files. However, it's important to note that organization and accomplishment aren't the same thing. The book, Getting Things Done, by David Allen focuses on organization, particularly with tasks and projects. What is given less attention is the other half of productivity, Getting Things Finished.

Accomplishment is more than staying ordered. It is about taking a lot of action, doing work and being ruthless in your pursuit of the end result. Wandering around, busying yourself with tasks that don't mercilessly attack the finish line show a lack of accomplishment.

If you want to read more about how to become accomplished I suggest reading Cal Newport's popular article, The Art of the Finish:

http://www.scotthyoung.com/blog/2007/10/18/the-art-of-the-finish-how-to-go-from-busy-to-accomplished/

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Be a Hedgehog

In his famous book, Good to Great, Jim Collins explains the importance of being a hedgehog. In the Greek fable, "the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." The hedgehog is great at one thing, while the fox is only mediocre at many things.

It's more important to be a hedgehog than a fox. Trying to be great at everything can result in being good at nothing. Picking a select few skills to master is usually a better strategy.

A more nuanced version of this principle is called the "T" model. It was first suggested to me by Ben Casnocha and suggests that a person should be extremely skilled in one area (the vertical bar in the T) and have minor skills in a broader area (the horizontal bar in the T).

By having an area of focus, you can cooperate with other people who specialize in the areas you lack. But if you lack an area of focus, you'll probably end up losing to groups of people who can effectively divide up their strengths and specialize.

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Hard Work Isn't Important

My first taste of the unimportance of hard work came when working on one of my first software projects. Midway through a 3 month section to design an interface, I realized I could purchase the libraries to do the work for me for $15.

Hard work is usually necessary for reaching goals. I know few people who have reached any considerable success without having to work hard. However, that doesn't mean that hard work is valuable in itself. It's a necessity in some cases, but it isn't the only factor that is important for productivity.

Creative shortcuts (like my $15 purchase for 3 months of work), better skills or even completely reexamining the problem can eliminate huge sections of work. To be truly productive, you need to balance two complete different skills. One is the ability to work hard. It's important, but not enough. The other skill is the ability to avoid hard work.

Productivity is an imbalanced field. There are people who earn thousands of times your income every year. But there is no one is is a thousand times smarter or a thousand times harder working. Balancing the ability to work hard and avoid hard work is the essence of productivity.

Calculate Your Value Added

How much is a task worth? If you can give it a dollar figure, you have a better chance of assessing what is important and what is fluff. It can often be impossible to know the long-term dollar impacts of activities like writing an email, finishing a report or completing an optimization. But even if you can't know the precise figure, coming up with an estimate can remove your doubts about how much your time is worth.

If you make $5000 per month, try to give a dollar amount to the relative contribution each task provides to this $5000. Some activities, like routine emailing might only be worth a few hundred dollars, even if they occupy 20-30% of your time. Combining this value-added calculation with a time log can show you a relative distribution of your effectiveness.

Let's say you're making $5000, but you're working on a project that could bring that income to $6000. Then, include the extra investment return in your dollar per task calculation. This will prevent you from underweighting tasks that have little impact on current income but have a huge impact on potentially larger, future income.

Once you know you're distribution, you can find target areas that deserve scaling back or even elimination from your weekly routine.

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Productivity with a Purpose

What is the point of all this productivity stuff, anyways? Is it just to save a bit of time or make an extra buck? With this idea, I'd like to answer the question I asked in the introduction, that is, "What is your reason for being productive?" and I'd like to offer mine:

1. Work on a passion. If you love what you do, productivity helps you get more of what you love. While productivity can escape boring work, these tips are best suited for people who are looking to get even more.

2. Work on something meaningful. I've emphasized the importance of projects over tasks in several places in this book. The reason isn't just that projects can be more productive, but because they are more meaningful. Productivity tricks can help you build something you will later be proud of.

3. Work on improving. The joy of productivity is that it doesn't just stop when you've finished your to-do list. Work smarter so you can improve your life.

About the Author

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