How to Be a Productivity Ninja

What's in it for me? Level up your productivity game.

Let's be brutally honest. Traditional productivity tips like "Get up an half an hour earlier every morning" are well-intentioned – but ineffective. These days, more and more people work in fast-paced, ultra-demanding roles. And almost everyone carries a smartphone around, which allows their work to reach them anywhere and anytime. Getting up half an hour earlier is hardly going to make an impact when you receive hundreds of emails a day. And who really wants to get up earlier anyway? If you've tried and been disappointed by conventional productivity hacks and are looking for strategies that really work, then you're ready to become a productivity ninja! These blinks offer advice that's actually pitched to a contemporary professional context as well as ideas that will seriously streamline your workflows. In these blinks, you'll learn

how to achieve the seemingly impossible and reach inbox zero; why time management is a waste of time; and why the CORD model is a productivity ninja's secret weapon.

You can train yourself to become a productivity ninja.

There's no shortage of books, apps, and programs promising to help you achieve extraordinary levels of productivity. They'll teach you how to run on 3 hours of sleep a night, work on 17 tasks at once, and answer your emails in nanoseconds. In short, they'll turn you into a productivity superhero – or so they promise. Here's the problem with that. Superheroes don't exist. And unless you happen to get bitten by a radioactive spider, you'll never achieve anything you could really call superhuman levels of productivity. Ninjas, on the other hand, do exist – and not just the ones trained in Japanese martial arts. In the world at large, the term "ninja" simply means a person with elite skills and a focused mindset. By employing the right techniques, anyone can become a ninja. The key message is: You can train yourself to become a productivity ninja. What qualities does a productivity ninja have? To begin with, a ninja keeps her cool. Even when a ninja has a spiraling to-do list, she cultivates the calm mindset needed to tackle tricky decisions and balance competing priorities. She has processes in place to ensure that no task slips through the cracks. As a result, she's never overwhelmed. A ninja is ruthless, too. She says no to tasks and obligations that don't serve her ultimate purpose, and she doesn't tolerate unnecessary interruptions and distractions. On top of that, a ninja is weapons-savvy. But remember, we're talking about a productivity ninja here. She doesn't carry swords or throw stars; instead, her weapons of choice are well-honed workflows and time-management tricks – a suite of organizational tools that she can skillfully apply as needed. Here's another quality a productivity ninja possesses: she's unconventional. She's not afraid to take risks or challenge the status quo if it means getting things done quicker and better. She slashes through bureaucracy to take the shortest route between to-do and done. A ninja is also agile – she handles her workload efficiently and is a pro at knowing when to pivot between tasks. She's always prepared to drop everything to respond to an opportunity or extinguish a threat. Finally, despite all those amazing qualities, here's one thing a ninja is not: perfect. Sometimes, she'll miss a deadline or forget a task or spend the

morning scrolling through Instagram instead of tackling her to-do list. And that's OK, because it isn't perfection she's aiming for – it's consistency. Are you feeling ready to unleash your inner productivity ninja? The next blinks will tell you how.

Your attention is valuable currency, so spend it carefully.

Productivity is all about time management – or so the conventional wisdom goes. But ninjas are hardly conventional. And a productivity ninja knows that attention management, not time management, is the key to ultra-high productivity. You can follow all the time-management hacks you want – getting up 15 minutes earlier every day, scheduling meetings during your lunch break, and taking work calls on the treadmill. But if you can't bring a high level of attention to those extra tasks you've managed to squeeze in, then all that time management goes to waste. The key message is: Your attention is valuable currency, so spend it carefully. Over the course of a day, people generally fluctuate between three levels of attention. There's proactive attention, where you're sharp, focused, and in the zone. Then there's active attention – you're working in a good rhythm, but your attention is flagging and you're susceptible to distractions. Finally, there's inactive attention: you might be sitting at your desk but, let's be honest, you'd much rather be napping. Periods of proactive attention are optimal for achieving peak productivity, but no one can sustain proactive attention around the clock. A productivity ninja can, however, make sure his precious proactive attention is never wasted. That means he never attends pointless meetings when his attention is sharpest. On the flip side, he never schedules critical client negotiations when his attention is inactive. How does he manage this? First, he gets to know his own attention cycle. For a few days, he maps his attention levels, noting when he's at his best and when he slumps. Perhaps he finds that he experiences proactive attention first thing in the morning and inactive attention straight after lunch. Then, he tweaks his schedule to fit his rhythm. Critical thinking and key decisions are made in the morning. He saves mindless tasks, like deleting emails, for after lunch. Of course, our productivity ninja knows it's not as easy as simply managing his own attention windows; he has to be vigilant against outside interruptions, too. So he operates in stealth mode. He says no to unnecessary tasks and declines invites to meetings where he's not a stakeholder. When he's in the zone, his email notifications are off and his phone is in silent mode. Sometimes he even wears headphones to signal to his colleagues that he's not to be disturbed. You don't need to find extra hours in the day. Protect your attention, and your productivity will flow.

It really is possible to achieve and maintain inbox zero.

Have you ever seen one of those movie scenes where a ninja is surrounded by dozens of assailants on all sides – and has to execute an impressive array of kicks, leaps, and swordcraft before finally vanquishing her enemies? Well, in the modern workplace, you face thousands of assailants intent on attacking your productivity every day: your emails. But, with a bit of ninja know-how, you can vanquish all of them without breaking a sweat. How can you do that? By making two little words your mantra: Inbox. Zero. The key message is: It really is possible to achieve and maintain inbox zero. You can't make

the most of proactive attention periods when you're obsessing over unanswered emails. So you need to get your email under control. First, stop checking your emails, and start processing them instead. That means using your inbox as a landing pad – not a to-do list or a filing cabinet. You want to quickly get emails out of your inbox and into designated holding pens. To process email efficiently, remember the three d's: if you can deal with it, delete it, or delegate it in less than two minutes, then do it! Emails that demand more than two minutes from you should flow into one of three other folders. The first, the action folder, is for emails that require an action that will take more than two minutes. Next, the read folder is for emails you'd like to read more carefully when you have time. And finally, the waiting folder is for emails that need someone else's attention. Once you've created action, read, and waiting folders, avoid the temptation to create subfolders. You might feel disorganized having just three folders for all your emails. But think of your email as a balled up piece of paper. You want to throw it in the right container – somewhere it won't get lost and will get dealt with. Are you more likely to land it if you have three large buckets to throw it into? Or dozens of tiny cups? Inbox zero is really that easy: process rather than check emails, and then funnel them into an ultra-simple filing system. Maintain the magic number by going through emails in batches, say three times a day, and achieving inbox zero at the end of each session. It may not look as impressive as a cinematic fight sequence, but defeating hundreds of emails with a few swift clicks of your mouse will certainly make you feel invincible.

Capture outstanding tasks, and collect them in one place.

To get things done, you need to know what there is to do. It sounds simple enough, but when it comes to collating their tasks, many people go about it all wrong. They start to list what needs to be done – and then get distracted while strategizing about how they'll do it all. Or worse, they get overwhelmed and abandon the list altogether. Combat half-written to-do lists with the CORD model: an approach to creating your to-do list that's adapted to the realities of modern life. The first step, Capture and Collect, will ensure your to-do list is an accurate snapshot of outstanding tasks. The key message is: Capture outstanding tasks, and collect them in one place. Get in the habit of capturing your tasks without analyzing them. Do this by writing down tasks on your phone, or even go old-school with a notebook. And don't stop with just tasks. You can capture the brilliant ideas you have in the shower – just make sure you towel off before you jot them down. And capture nags, or recurring thoughts like "Maybe I should get life insurance." Capturing these things doesn't oblige you to deal with them immediately, but it will help you eventually complete them. Once you've captured your tasks, you'll need to collect them. Here's an exercise to get you started. You'll need a tray, a pen, and some slips of paper. Go back to your capture system, whether it's on your phone or in a notebook. Now, migrate each of the tasks you've captured from your list to a paper slip; you'll probably have a pile of them when you're finished. But you're not done yet! Make a sweep of all your main collection points. These are places like your email inbox, your physical mailbox, and your office in-tray – where tasks tend to land. Write each task you find on its own slip. Remember, you're not analyzing the tasks, simply capturing them. Finally, walk around your space and look for physical evidence of any other outstanding tasks. These might be Post-its, bills, letters, or vouchers. Add them to the tray! By now, you should be staring down a small mountain of paper. You might feel stressed looking at it. After all, it's a physical reminder of all you have to do. But by cluttering your tray, you're actually decluttering your mind.

Hack your to-do list to boost your productivity.

So you've finished the Capture and Collect phase of the CORD model, and now you're left with a big pile of outstanding tasks. But make no mistake – the mountain of to-do's in front of you is not your to-do list. Not yet, at least! But it will be once you've worked through the next phase of the CORD model: Organizing. The humble to-do list is one of the most popular productivity tools around. In its most common form – a numbered list of tasks that might range from "prepare presentation" to "buy milk" – it's also far from effective. But in the hands of a productivity ninja, a to-do list turns from a pointless piece of paper into a lethal weapon. The key message is: Hack your to-do list to boost your productivity. The mistake most people make with their to-do list is abandoning it at the Capture and Collect stage. If you want to turn the to-dos in that big pile of paper you just collected into dones, you need to organize them. First, sort your tasks into two categories: Projects and Master Actions. Projects are your most involved tasks. In fact, they're not really tasks at all. Let's say you've optimistically listed "change internet provider" as one of your to-dos. This involves canceling your old provider, researching new ones, and negotiating a contract. That's not one to-do – it's several, so file it under Projects. Noting down these big picture projects and referring back to them often will help keep you on target to complete them. Next, break your projects down into action items. This list of project-related actions forms part of your Master Action List. Non-project related tasks – things like "renew driver's license" or "book meeting room for Tuesday" – live here, too. Basically, if it's actionable, it goes on the Master Action List. Be as specific as possible when writing action items; that means using verbs and details to paint a clear picture of the task. "Cancel internet contract by Tuesday" is a far more useful action item than something vague like "internet." You might be tempted to organize action items by project. But why not try a true ninja hack and organize them by place? Group tasks into categories like "Office," "Home," or "Out and About." Then you can simply flow through all your office-related tasks when you sit down at your desk, for example, rather than waste time deliberating which project to tackle. You could even create subcategories within these places – for example, "email" and "online banking" could sit beneath your "office" category, while "phone" could be a subcategory for "out and about."

Thinking about what you do is as important as doing it.

Once you've weaponized your to-do list, you'll be amazed at how easily you flow from task to task, checking off to-do's and putting big projects to bed. All that mental energy you've saved by not agonizing over which task to tackle next can be put to good use in the third phase of the CORD model: Review. The key message is: Thinking about what you do is as important as doing it. Don't confuse being productive with working mindlessly, even if that does make you efficient. After all, you're not a robot, you're a ninja! And ruthlessly reviewing your to-do lists and workflows will help you achieve an elite level of productivity. How does this review work? Well, get ready to add two more lists to your productivity arsenal: the weekly checklist and the daily checklist. Your weekly checklist is your thorough review of your tasks, targets, and performance. You'll want to set aside about two hours a week to go through it. Begin with a round of

capture and collect, where you record all your tasks. First, capture on a micro level. Collect all the captures you made in the week, and sweep collection points like your inbox to spot any further tasks. Then, capture on a macro level. Look at big-picture items like projects and goals: Do you need to generate new action items here? Now you can think ahead to the next week of work. What new actions do you need to prioritize? What can you take off your agenda? Finally, to help you refine your to-do list, ask some key questions. After a few weekly checklists, you should be able to tailor your own questions, but here are some to get you started: Are there any tasks here that are unclear or need redefining? Any actions that can be broken down into more achievable tasks? Is there anything I am resisting doing? If so, why? Your daily review is simpler – but equally crucial. Before you dive into your to-do list, check your calendar for the day's agenda and any looming deadlines. Then, identify your big rocks – that is, the tasks that are going to require some mental heavy lifting. Finally, decide which ones you're going to tackle today, and allot some proactive attention time for them. Put simply, the key to staying on top of your to-do list is, yes, more lists. But more lists don't mean more work. The time you spend working through your weekly and daily checklists will allow you to approach your actual work with a sense of momentum and flow.

The best way to get things done is to do them.

At last, you've reached the final stage of the CORD model. You've collated, you've organized, and you've reviewed. What's next? What's the mysterious final step that will unlock the secret to ninja-level productivity? The secret is . . . there is no secret. Once you've established what needs doing, organized how you're going to do it, and refined your approach to doing it, all that's left to do is, well, to do it! That's why the final component of the CORD model is the Do stage. The key message is: The best way to get things done is to do them. Of course, there's doing things, and then there's doing things ninja-style. Here's how a productivity ninja tackles his to-dos. To supercharge his productivity, a ninja aligns his to-dos with his attention level by checking in with himself as he works. Is he feeling focused? Time to do deep thinking, not data entry. Is his energy flagging as he works on a big pitch? He recognizes he's in inactive attention mode, so he switches to paperwork instead. Cultivating agility is important to a ninja. He knows his day can look one way at 9:00 a.m. and look completely different by noon. If he needs to pivot from one task to another, he simply refers to his Master Action List to get up to speed. If there's one thing a ninja hates, it's spending too much time in setup mode. He's aware that there's a time cost to setting up tasks. Online banking and email, for example, require setup in the form of signing in and loading a web page. Working on a report requires setup in the form of reading through a draft and getting reacquainted with key concepts. So once a ninja sets up a task, he spends as long on it as possible. Switching from one task to another can incur serious costs in setup time. Working on a single task, or tasks that require the same setup, can be a real productivity booster. Boredom is the ninja's enemy. When he's bored, he's prone to procrastination – so he's careful to keep things interesting. After a few days in the office, he'll work from home. If he spends Monday working alone on a presentation, on Tuesday he'll prioritize collaborative work. In short, he'll mix things up to keep himself as focused as possible. So make sure you manage your attention, stay flexible, minimize your setup costs, and defend against boredom. That way, you won't just get things done – you'll do them well!

Use smart strategies to boost your productivity.

Let's finish up with a rundown of some of the most effective productivity techniques you can have in your arsenal. You've probably heard of multitasking, where someone stays on top of many different tasks at once. So-called multitaskers tend to wear this label as a badge of pride, but they shouldn't. Sure, you can stay on top of lots of tasks if you choose to. But if you want to finish a task in an efficient, frictionless manner, you're far better off giving it your full attention from start to finish. So instead of multitasking, try monotasking. In other words, do one task at a time, do it well, and move on to the next one when you're finished. You'll find you get far more done that way. The key message is: Use smart strategies to boost your productivity. Monotasking isn't the only technique you should be using. As all productivity ninjas know, attention management is far more important than time management. But there is one time-management technique that can really boost your attention levels. It's called the pomodoro technique, and the premise is actually pretty simple: It's easier to sustain proactive attention for short bursts rather than long periods of time. And taking small, scheduled breaks boosts your level of focus even further. To use the pomodoro technique, set a timer for 25 minutes – that's a single "pomodoro." At the end of the pomodoro, take a five-minute break before tackling another 25 minutes of work. It's easy to keep your focus sharp and guard against procrastination when you know you have five minutes to scroll social media at the end of each pomodoro. A final technique that every productivity ninja needs to have in her toolkit is the power hour. This trick is especially useful for tackling the tasks you've been dreading. Maybe you're nervous about starting your taxes for the year. Maybe you loathe writing performance reviews. Whatever it is, putting it off will only make you dread it more. So deal with it head-on – but only for an hour – by scheduling a power hour in your calendar. An hour isn't very long to spend on something, even if it's a task you actively hate. And at the end of the hour, you'll probably have made enough progress that your bugbear task doesn't seem so daunting after all.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Productivity is a learned skill. And with the right techniques and mindset, you can reach ninja levels of elite productivity. By staying agile, mindful, and organized, even the most daunting to-do list can be swiftly dealt with. And here's some more actionable advice: Don't give yourself more time than you need. Ever heard of Parkinson's Law? Work expands to fill the time allocated to it. Whether you have two weeks or two days to write a report, you'll probably still be putting the finishing touches on it when you hit your deadline. So be ruthless with the amount of time you allocate for specific tasks. There's no point allowing yourself five hours to do your expenses when, if you really knuckled down, you could get them done in one.