

MANAGEMENT & CAREERS

How to Be More Productive at Work



There are habits that you can develop to increase your productivity and complete tasks in a more time efficient manner.

PHOTO: TAMMY LIAN AND JAKE ZUKE

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In brief

- ✦ When learning how to be productive you should identify your motivations and then define what productivity means to you.
- ✦ Prioritizing tasks will help you achieve better work productivity, as well as time efficiency.
- ✦ Increase your productivity by getting to the root of procrastination and taking steps to make your assignments more manageable.

You might think that you need to get everything on your to-do list done to be able to call yourself productive, but experts say increasing productivity often involves learning to check off the right things rather than every single item. Laura Mae Martin, executive productivity advisor at Alphabet Inc.'s Google, trains staff to be more productive. When she speaks to groups, she asks them to close their eyes and think of a day when they were very productive. She then asks the group to raise their hands if the day they pictured involved watching Netflix all day. Hands don't typically shoot into the air. A lot of times, she says, people associate being productive with checking many things

off their to-do lists. “But I think the point of productivity is really being thoughtful about what you want to do, and if that is spending time with family, if that is having a day where you’re just watching Netflix, and then you do it, well, then to me that is a productive day,” she says. We spoke with experts on productivity about how to be more efficient in a way that makes sense for you.

Increase your productivity by identifying your motivations.

From your first day on the job, you can improve your focus by establishing what is driving your desire to be productive. Striving for productivity without the right intention can be pointless, says Khe Hy, founder of RadReads, a newsletter and website that explores productivity, money and ambition. While it may sound simple, if you want to be more productive, Mr. Hy suggests you start by asking yourself, “What is this for?”

For example, if you are downloading a productivity app, ask yourself why you want to be more productive. Perhaps you want to get more tasks done at work. He then suggests asking yourself, “Why?” Perhaps you want to make more money. Think about why you want that—maybe so you don’t have to worry about financial insecurity. “A lot of it really comes back to asking the right question,” he says. “If you can’t connect the activity to the ultimate driving desire, then you could be the most productive person in the world—you’re just swimming in the wrong direction.”

Prioritize to boost work efficiency.

The cultural narrative that being productive means that you need to be working harder and doing more can be pervasive, says Chris Sparks, founder and chief executive of The Forcing Function, a performance coaching company for investors, executives and entrepreneurs. Because of this, a lot of Mr. Sparks’s clients are surprised when he encourages them to do less. If we are more intentional with our actions, we are more likely to spend our time working on meaningful goals, he says. “If we do fewer things, we can do the things that move us forward much faster.”

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— Khe Hy, RadReads

It can be a challenge to stay focused and on task during a regular workday, let alone during a global pandemic. If you are going to a workplace, you may be concerned about

staying healthy. Child-care arrangements are also a concern for many working parents, while working from home presents an array of other distractions, says Marie Poulin, a workflow consultant. This can leave us juggling multiple tasks at once. “I think multitasking is the quickest way to burn out,” she says. Instead of trying to do everything at once, it helps to be methodical about your to-do list.

Productivity tips

Set aside time to plan. People often forget to leave time to plan, says Ms. Poulin. Set aside time to think about your goals or to explore what you hope to get out of a project.

Prioritize tasks. During her planning, Ms. Poulin identifies three top tasks for each day. Even then, there tends to be one key task she wants to accomplish, she says.

Put your phone away. To stay focused, Ms. Poulin doesn’t bring her phone into her office. Instead, she charges it in a different room.

Find a tool that works for you. To help her stay productive, Ms. Poulin uses Notion, a note-taking and task-management app, but you could also consider other work-life apps, such as Calendly for scheduling appointments or Cozi for family organization.

Block off time to focus on tasks.

If your job involves spinning lots of plates, map out your recurring, short-term and long-term priorities, as well as how long you think each task will take, to ensure you stay productive, says Emily Ballesteros, a burnout management coach. If you find that you are often being distracted by impromptu meetings and other interruptions from colleagues, you could try to establish boundaries, Ms. Ballesteros says. “Setting blocks in your calendar reduces your availability so that you have the capacity to do your job.” If you don’t work in an office where putting blocks on your calendar is common, then she suggests you try disrupting the company culture. You could talk to your manager about allocating blocks of time until the end of the quarter, for example, because people are more likely to agree to temporary changes, she says. “Too often, people’s role evolves to include a variety of tasks that take away from your initial purpose. Don’t be afraid to set boundaries that allow you to do the job you were hired to do.” Your working relationships may also improve as colleagues learn when it is best to connect with you.

Top productivity tip

Create a consistent remote-work setup. You don’t need a home office to work from home, but having a dedicated space can help. Sit in the same spot every day, whether it is your kitchen table or a desk in the living room, says Ms. Martin. “What that does is it has your brain start associating the sights, smells and sounds of that spot with working and thinking about work,” she says. Similarly, identify a spot where you will never work, such as your bed, so you create a physical separation between your work life and home life. Ms. Poulin also suggests customizing your workspace to make it feel like your own. Her office, for example, is filled with plants.

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— Marie Poulin, workflow consultant

Develop habits that suit your work pace.

You can better achieve your goals if you identify what type of worker you are. Ms. Martin says two groups have emerged while working from home during the coronavirus pandemic: Marathoners and sprinters. She says marathoners include those who live alone or with a partner but no children and can work at a steady pace throughout the day. Sprinters tend to have children or caregiving responsibilities, and feel pressed for time, so their work is done in shorter spurts. These two groups should approach their work differently not only to maximize their productivity but also to prevent burnout.

If you're a marathoner: Pace yourself. You would never warm up for a marathon by running a few laps first, Ms. Martin says. Start the day with full energy and keep your schedule in mind. If you have an afternoon full of meetings, consider a later start so you will have enough energy.

If you're a sprinter: Know what you need to accomplish. Once you get to the starting line, keep in mind what you need to achieve during the allocated time. Sprinters often have short periods, such as when a child naps, to accomplish goals, so Ms. Martin suggests making the most of each period.

Create a culture of trust.

Tension at work can arise if there are inexperienced workers and managers who don't communicate well, says Mr. Hy. If a manager doesn't clearly convey team goals, and his or her report doesn't have the confidence to ask for clarification, it can be a "recipe for disaster," he says.

To create an environment in which employees can do their best work, Mr. Hy says managers should try to foster a culture of trust. In the context of remote work, this might involve giving employees more flexibility around their work schedules, such as shifting work around child-care responsibilities.

“Setting blocks in your calendar reduces your availability so that you have the capacity to do your job.”

— Emily Ballesteros, a burnout management coach

You can encourage your manager to foster this type of environment by setting boundaries. For example, if your team often works late, you could tell your boss that you will be unavailable during the two hours before your child's bedtime, but can be reached by phone in an emergency, says Mr. Hy. This demonstrates goodwill on the employee's part, while giving a manager reassurance that the worker can be reached if necessary. Communicating your preferences is all part of learning to manage up effectively.

Increase productivity by nipping procrastination in the bud.

Procrastination can stem from a few causes, says Mr. Hy. One is imposter syndrome, which involves feeling as though you don't deserve your successes. Another is fear of failure. It can also occur if you are unsure how to complete a task you don't understand. Our brains are also wired to give priority to instant gratification over long-term rewards, research shows. For example, you might set out to work on a long-term project but stall by paying your cable bill because it will provide instant satisfaction, and a feeling of accomplishment, says Mr. Hy. Instead, you should set yourself up for success by planning ahead so that you have time for each of these tasks.

Productivity tips

Break down your task. Ms. Martin suggests “swiss-cheesing” to combat procrastination. Take a big task that you have been putting off, and “poke holes” in it to chip away at what needs to be done to achieve it. Ask yourself, “What is the smallest possible action you can take that feels like it matches your energy or your level of commitment?” she says.

Set the scene. Give yourself the best chance to succeed. If you set aside an hour to work on a project, get a snack beforehand, put your phone away and take care of all possible distractions, says Ms. Martin. “Sometimes making sure you use the time you set aside is almost more important than managing your time or planning your time,” she says.

Eat the frog. Motivational public speaker and author Brian Tracy writes in his book “Eat That Frog!” that “it has been said that if the first thing you do each morning is eat a live frog, you can go through the day with the satisfaction of knowing that that is probably the *worst* thing that is going to happen to you all day long.” In Mr. Tracy's book, the frog is a metaphor for the most important task you have in front of you. It might sound like a cliché but sometimes you just need to go for the big thing on your to-do list, says Mr. Hy. Mr. Tracy asserts in his book that this task is likely to have the “greatest positive impact on your life” and should be done first thing, so that you don't have to spend too long thinking about it. “That's the thing you should be doing before the day runs away from you,” Mr. Hy says. If you have more than one “frog,” Mr. Tracy recommends tackling the “ugliest”—or most difficult one—first.

Resources

Calendly, Notion, Evernote and Cozi are among tools that can help you schedule appointments, take notes and stay organized.

RadReads offers tips about productivity, ambition and money.

“Eat That Frog! 21 Great Ways to Stop Procrastinating and Get More Done in Less Time,” the book by Brian Tracy.

What to read next

How to Have a Successful Side Hustle

10 Performance Review Preparation Tips

Are Office Romances Worth the Risk?

Further reading

Is a Home Office Actually More Productive? Some Workers Think So.

What People Really Love (and Hate) About Remote Work

Remote Work Is Here to Stay. Bosses Better Adjust.

Work-Life Balance Is Changing. These Apps Can Help.

Five Ways to Work Better From Home

Work-Life Conflict Can't Be Solved—and That's a Good Thing

New Ways to Fight 'Imposter Fears'

New Ways to Battle Procrastination

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