Work productively

Productivity is not about working harder, it is about doing more with less effort. Some people use it to move mountains of work, others use it to free up time for more leisure time. There really is no downside to being able to work productively.

Principles to work productively

1. Automate everything possible
2. Prioritise effectiveness over productivity
3. A task will expand to fill the time allotted to it
4. Prioritise based on urgency and importance
5. Collaborate and delegate where possible

In this chapter

- Automation tools you can use to let machines do your work
- Finding the 20% of tasks that generate 80% of output
- Why you never finish far ahead of a deadline
- President Eisenhower's prioritisation process
- "Everybody wins" scenarios in collaboration
- How I went from hating structure to thriving on it

Automate everything possible

Every task you complete should be subject to the question of whether you can automate is, or make it faster in the future. After a while these automations will allow you to spend more time on things that matter.

When it comes to investments in equipment, do the actual math. For a €200 dishwasher for example:

- It saves you 20 minutes a day
- Over a year that is 121.67 hours
- Is your time worth more than 200 / 121.67 = €1.64 an hour?

Look at the big picture. 5 minutes saved in a daily task is 30 hours per year, or about 4 full time work days.

Little things matter.

Text expander

If you type the same thing a lot, use a text expander like aText (mac) or PhraseExpress

(windows) to automatically type things with shortcuts. When I type $bank for example my keyboard automatically types my IBAN bank account number. $plan types a standard invitation to have a Skype meeting.

Clipboard manager

Use a clipboard manager like Copy'em Paste (mac) or ditto (windows) to save everything you copy. Very useful if you copy-paste text a lot and want to avoid accidentally losing what you copied.

Backup and sync

Make sure that all your useful documents and files are backed up using a service like Dropbox, Google Drive or Onedrive. This synchronises files across devices so you always have up to date versions everywhere, and it makes sure that if your devices stop working your files are fine.

Pocket

If you read articled and/or blogs a lot use Pocket to save articles into a reading stack. The articles save to your e-reader as well. I use this to save articles I find when I'm not wanting to read.

Window orientation

Having two windows on your screen side by side is very useful, for example a note taking app in the left of your screen and a document you are reading on the right. On windows press the windows button plus an arrow key to align screens automatically. For mac, download an app called Divvy.

Screen colour

Flux (mac/windows) reduces the blue light coming from your screen when the sun sets. This prevents your screen from messing with your sleep cycle. Pair with automatic screen brightness for full effect.

Robot vacuum

Having a daily cursory clean of your floor saves quite a bit of time in cleaning the house. I like to run mine an hour before I wake up.

Generalised automation tools

There are lovely non-code tools out there that will allow you to set up workflows. My two favourite tools are IFTTT and Tasker.

IFTTT (and Zapier) can be used to link cloud services. Think automated backups of your

Facebook pictures to dropbox, or getting a text message when you get an email with a certain keyword.

Tasker is an android only automation tool that lets you use anything in your phone as a trigger. Putting your phone on silent when you put in in your pocket, going into airplane mode when you leave the country and so on.

Prioritise effectiveness over productivity

Imagine you are on a little boat with a hole in it. You could spend your energy on finding the best bucket to remove water from your vessel. This kind of optimisation is productivity. You could instead also take a moment to think and instead decide to plug the hole. This is called effectiveness.

Many people are very good at optimising their productivity, but fail to spend time first deciding what tasks are effective to the extent that they deserve your attention.

The following questions will help you prioritise doing the right things (effectiveness), rather that doing the wrong things more quickly (productivity).

- Is there any task that will make other tasks obsolete? Start there.
- Which of my tasks will affect me long term? Do them first.
- Can I drop any tasks without serious consequences? Excuse yourself from them.
- Are there any tasks that don't require my expertise? Outsource or delegate them.

Even if you do them slower, choosing effective tasks will help you beat hyper productive but ineffective people.

A helpful principle to keep in mind is the Pareto principle, also known as the 80/20 rule. It observes that in many cases 20% of input is responsible for 80% of output. For example with 20% of words in a language you can have 80% of conversations. 20% of customers generate 80% of profits for a business. And indeed, 20% of tasks result in 80% of effective outcome.

A task expands based on allotted time

Parkinson's Law states that "Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion". While this principle started as part of a comedy piece, it rings true. If you give yourself a week to finish writing a piece, it will take a week. If you give yourself a month, it will only be done in a month.

Don't give tasks more time than they need. I recommend formulating how much time you allocate to a task based on how much time you:

- Think you need

- Are at most willing to spend

For example set a 30 minute timer to process your email inbox, or setting yourself deadlines for larger assignments.

Prioritise tasks based on importance and urgency

“I have two kinds of problems, the urgent and the important. The urgent are not important, and the important are never urgent.” Dwight Eisenhower

When it comes to tasks that have significant impact on your life and happiness they tend to me important but not urgent. By using a matrix based on Eisenhower’s quote you can prioritise the things that really matter.

This is the Eisenhower Matrix:

Important?	Urgent?	Example	Action
No	No	Social Media	Don’t do them or outsource
Yes	No	Exercise	Schedule in as soon as possible
No	Yes	Email	Delegate or spend as little energy as possible
Yes	Yes	House on fire	Fix this first

It might take some time getting used to, but it pays off to take 5 minutes in the morning to look at your plans for that day and to apply the matrix.

Collaborate where possible

With ever task ask yourself: are more people doing this? If the answer is yes, organise a collaboration to eliminate duplicate work. No area of your life is off limits. Work, household, recreational clubs and so on.

While collaboration might now have the exact outcome as you personally doing the work often the result is good enough. If you surround yourself with fantastic people, the result will be better than you could have made on your own.

Note that you shouldn’t care about freeloaders. Purely look at your own outcome. If working together saves you 50% of time who cares that someone who didn’t do anything benefits. You are better off now than before, that matters.

My journey to productivity

People who know me now will never guess how teenage me was. On multiple occasions I showed up to trampolining competitions in a different country without my gear. Likewise I never knew where to find school notes older than a week or so.

I remember my English teacher trying to convince me to keep structured records, and showcasing her cupboard willed with filing cabinets and folders. Back then the prospect horrified me.

Teenage me was cursed with fortunate circumstance. My genetics and parents had unwittingly instilled me with systems thinking. I never memorised things (which is why I failed at languages) and instead built intuitive networks of principles in my mind. This created a reality where:

- I could function perfectly fine without structure
- Those who applauded structure didn't understand systems, so I dismissed them

Only later did I discover for myself that systems thinking and structured thinking were two powerful tools that when combined well create new worlds of possibility. The transition for me started when I failed a grade in high-school.

17 year old me was very upset at being forced to redo a year because of a mediocre grade in Dutch. I had been clashing with close minded teachers who didn't want to answer my questions. Specifically one question: "but why"?

All except my biology teacher who always answered. You now who you are miss vd K.

Ironically the final straw was a grade I got due to having forgotten to bring a specific paper to a test. The teacher was unfortunately a closed minded woman who didn't care that my Dutch was perfectly fine. Rules are rules you know.

That summer break I was angry. Angry and frustrated. In a conversation with my mother I voiced how I basically felt a destructive urge to ignore school altogether. I felt betrayed and wanted nothing to do with teachers and their idiotic rules. My mother asked a very simple question: "but how is that going to make your life any better"?

Just like I went from hot to cold. Looking back it may have been a moment of mild sociopathy. I decided to use every tool at my disposal to show my teachers they were wrong. In a spiteful moment as only teenagers can produce, my physics teacher reacted to my (silent) contempt for his teaching by telling me I was welcome to not come to class and work in the hallway instead. I did, aced the test and he admitted defeat by asking me to come back to the class.

This was also the year where I learned the value of structure and self motivation. Once I

ignored the advice of my teachers on structure and made one that suited me, life suddenly became a lot easier. The last year of high-school I had three jobs and still graduated with A's.

After high-school I spent a few months in China doing Kung Fu at a school in the mountains. As far as discipline goes it was next level. It gave me valuable perspective on things people regularly consider hard, like getting up early or working hard all day.

University served as a playground to develop my skills further. It is there I learned the value of collaboration. By year 2 I had set up a department-wide dropbox folder where we shared summaries for all available courses. I still keep those summaries and read through them once in a while.

I experimented with a great deal of productivity and health protocols those years. Ranging from the Everyman sleep cycle (5 hours of sleep a day) to intermittent fasting and more productivity software that I can count.

Everything came together in my second year on the job market, when I decided to keep freelancing and launching products but also do a full-time masters program. For a year I got up at 6, spent the whole day working and learning and then got home between 6 and 10 at night. I still made time for exercise, meditation, reading books and learning new programming languages.

When I write it like this it sounds like hell, but it was actually a lot of fun[1]. As I'm writing this I'm not doing an insane amount of work. But knowing that I'm capable of moving mountains and remain happy is a feeling that is hard to describe.

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1. You can read about it here: https://www.skillcollector.com/post/how-i-survive-multiple-full-time-engagements/ ↩