How I got to 200 productive hours a month

by Ivan Mir on Sep 19, 2017

Two years ago I could spend a week not working because I was avoiding some task. One year ago it was 100 to 120 hours of work monthly. Nowadays I do around 200 productive hours each month, which is over six hours of productive time daily. All this time I have been working from home, mostly on the same project.

This guide describes how I achieved these results. As a former game designer, I organized my daily routines by applying the same behavioral psychology principles that are used to create video game experiences. Some of my advice is trivial, and you have definitely heard it before, but when used in a right way, it will create a robust framework to change ineffective habits.

The framework is built from three tiers: the environment, the body and the mind. It goes exactly in this order because a well-maintained body can't do much in a distraction-polluted environment, and a trained mind won't help an exhausted body. You don't need to perfect each element before starting to work on the next one, but consider them foundations for each other and direct your efforts accordingly.

While it's my personal technique, I believe it will work for you too. There's a high chance that I have undiagnosed ADHD: I have been expelled from two schools as a result of behavioral problems coming from inattention, and I still match most of the symptoms. So if you have a better natural attention span, this approach should be even more effective for increasing your concentration power.

Caution: The mentioned amount of hours is not advisable for people working on someone else's business for illusory stock options (https://tldroptions.io), with no payment for overtime. There's also no point in going beyond this number because working over 50 hours a week actually decreases productivity (https://www.economist.com/blogs/freeexchange/2014/12/working-hours). Life should come first in the "work-life balance."

Environment

A properly organized environment shapes a path to your goals while preventing accidental turns that lead to procrastination. Because our levels of willpower, motivation and self-awareness are not constant, setting a safeguard in advance is essential to overcome the low points.

The core principle of a productive environment is increasing the friction required to slip into distracting activities, so that it takes a significant effort to get distracted. A basic example would be erasing leisure sites from your internet history and start using them in a separate browser — it will both prevent the autocomplete from doing you a disservice and increase the number of actions you need to get to distractions. Or if you have problems with gaming, uninstall everything after each session so you will need to wait for a game to download when you want to play the next time.

But in my experience, this is not effective compared to eliminating **everything** distracting from your workstation and using a separate device for leisure in another room. This is where behavioral psychology shows up: you anchor different types of behaviors to locations with classical conditioning (https://www.verywell.com/classical-vs-operant-conditioning-2794861). They do not overlap, and it's clear for your brain where you do what. It's also much easier to feel that something is wrong when you sit in a "leisure place" all day. Even George R.R. Martin has a similar setup (http://time.com/99432/george-rr-martin-game-of-thrones-computer/) for writing his books.

You can also optimize your leisure device by unsubscribing from excessive emails, unfollowing or muting too-active posters and setting filters to hide useless information, which includes all nonprofessional news. Such news don't actually inform us but spread sensationalism, negative emotions, and outright lies to capture attention. What do you gain from following the latest political crisis or some scandal? You can't do anything meaningful about these events. They only depress you and occupy space in your mind. It's better to direct your focus toward things that we can actually impact and improve.
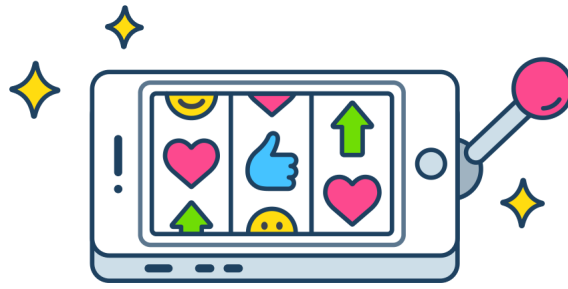
The next step is taming your pocket monster. That means disabling all noncritical push notifications and uninstalling all the apps you can use from your leisure device instead. You don't really need Facebook, Twitter or any news feeds on a phone unless you are a journalist. Messaging apps are enough to stay in touch; learning something new from saved articles in Pocket (https://getpocket.com) is a great way to spend time when you have nothing better to do. Also, keep the phone away from the workplace: you shouldn't be able to mindlessly reach for it to escape your current task with a "quick check."

> *Allowing an app to send you push notifications is like allowing a store clerk to grab you by the ear and drag you into their store. You're letting someone insert a commercial into your life anytime they want.*
> — David Pierce (https://www.wired.com/story/turn-off-your-push-notifications)

If this idea makes you uncomfortable, it means that you have already formed an addiction to the infinite entertainment feeds that are optimized to work like slot machines (https://journal.thriveglobal.com/how-technology-hijacks-peoples-minds-from-a-magician-and-google-s-design-ethicist-56d62ef5edf3). The marketers behind these feeds don't care about your well-being or productivity — their goal is to maximize profits. They do it by getting as much of your attention as possible by abusing our ancient weakness toward uncertain rewards (https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/brain-wise/201311/use-unpredictable-rewards-keep-behavior-going). So the choice is between gaining freedom and getting things done or losing years of your life (http://www.adweek.com/digital/mediakix-time-spent-social-media-infographic/) to these attention traps, which sell as "fun" and "staying connected."

When it comes to planning, my approach is trivial:

- Split big tasks into small ones, so nothing looks overwhelming and daily progress is visible
- Leave some boring simple tasks for the evening when the brain is tired
- Adjust task order before going to sleep, so there's always a clear plan in the morning

I don't schedule my days but keep them structured in the same way: two blocks of about three hours each, divided by an afternoon walk and chores. Some people report success with Pomodoro (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pomodoro_Technique), but I find it too short to make a deep dive into work. It's better to try different approaches and stick with the one that works best for you.

These working blocks should be free from interruption: all chats and messengers are off, doors are closed, people around you are informed that they shouldn't disturb you. In case you don't have this opportunity, a co-working space could help; also, it will contribute to the location separation described above.

> *Merely having the anticipation of being distracted is like a leash that keeps us from diving into deep work. The back of our mind tells us that at any minute we could get tapped on the shoulder, or asked to come to a meeting, or our kids may barge into the office.*
> — Shawn Blanc (https://thefocuscourse.com/quick-wins-for-being-creative-and-productive/)

Summary

1. Remove all entertainment and news from both your phone and workstation.

2. Turn off all noncritical push notifications and keep the phone out of your workplace.

3. Get a separate device for leisure and use it far from your workplace to cultivate location-based behaviors

4. Clean or eliminate noisy feeds like social networks and political news that disturb you without helping you reach your goals.

5. Split big tasks into small ones, arrange them for the next day in advance and leave some tedious ones for the times when you are too tired to think.

6. Divide your day into blocks when you can't be interrupted.

Resources

- Free browser extensions to limit daily time on distracting sites: StayFocusd (https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/stayfocusd/laankejkbhbdhmipfmgcngdelahlfoji) (Chrome), LeechBlock (https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/leechblock/) (Firefox), WasteNoTime (http://www.bumblebeesystems.com/wastenotime/) (Safari)

- Apps that schedule site blocking on the system level: Cold Turkey (https://getcoldturkey.com/pricing/) (Windows, Android), Focus (https://heyfocus.com) (Mac), about:blank (https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/about-blank/id1239181721?mt=8) (iOS Safari)

- Qbserve (https://qotoqot.com/qbserve/) — our automatic time tracker for Mac that I use to measure productive hours

- ManicTime (https://www.manictime.com) — a similar app for Windows

- App Usage (https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.a0soft.gphone.uninstaller) for Android; on iOS, usage stats are available at "Settings → Battery → Clock icon"

- Pocket (https://getpocket.com) — bookmark articles to read them later from your phone

- Tools I use for planning: Scapple
  (https://www.literatureandlatte.com/scapple.php) (big picture, idea
  drafts), Trello (https://trello.com) (specific plans for projects)
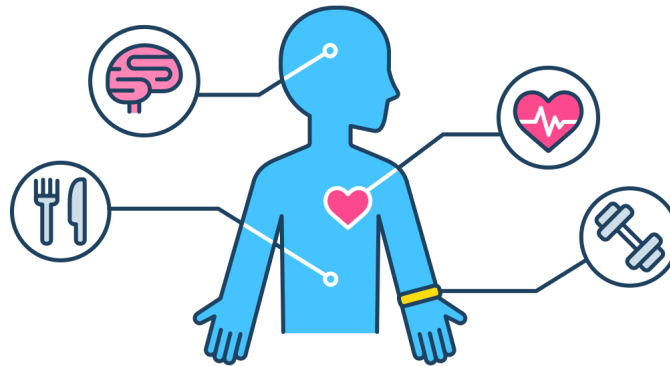
Body

There's no virtue in wearing out the body for the sake of some short-term
deadlines. Lack of sleep, physical inactivity, junk food and liters of caffeinated
beverages are the signs of a workflow failure. Crunch is not productive — it is
an emergency effort to compensate for the lack of real productivity that is
achieved through good planning and sharp focus.

Sleep is the fuel for feeling and thinking better: at least seven hours is a must,
but some people need eight, and it's perfectly fine. Sleep deprivation not only
affects the ability to focus
(https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22830415-100-why-lack-of-
sleep-makes-us-emotionally-distracted-by-everything/) but also damages
both the body and the mind
(https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/12/how-sleep-deprivation-
decays-the-mind-and-body/282395/) in no time and should be avoided at all
costs. I take 30-60 minute naps if I feel "brain fog" in the middle of the day
because sleep flushes out brain toxins (https://www.nih.gov/news-
events/news-releases/brain-may-flush-out-toxins-during-sleep) and clears
the mind. No amount of coffee will do the same. As a side note, I prefer to
take caffeine only a couple of times a week — it keeps the tolerance low, so
even a small amount gives me a huge concentration boost for the hardest
tasks.

Being a night owl, I spent many years drifting into all-nighters and waking up
at random times. That was a huge mistake. Getting up on an alarm between
9 and 10 in the morning is not a big deal for a night owl, but it keeps you
disciplined: you work and go to sleep at the same times. Good discipline is
more sustainable than the ever-changing motivation.

Nowadays probably everybody knows that physical inactivity kills us (http://www.bbc.com/news/health-30812439), but if that weren't enough, it affects your memory and thinking (https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-athletes-way/201212/the-brain-drain-inactivity) too. Our bodies evolved when our ancestors moved a lot to survive, so they expect (https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-do-you-think-better-after-walk-exercise/) higher blood flow for top performance. This is why going to the gym twice a week won't help — we need to be active regularly throughout the day to stay both productive and healthy.

> *The researchers found that the widening of the artery in response to blood flow reduced over three hours spent sitting without moving. However, getting up for five-minute walks in this period stopped this from happening.*
> — NHS UK (https://www.nhs.uk/news/lifestyle-and-exercise/regular-walking-breaks-protect-arteries/)

On your desktop install an app that forces 3-5 minute breaks every hour. What's very important: make it block the screen completely and hide all the "skip" or "postpone" buttons, or you'll be ignoring these breaks. Sometimes getting locked from your computer in the middle of implementing some idea may be annoying, but having a short walk, a good stretch, or bodyweight exercises will help you to focus for the next hour.

A walk in a park in the middle of the day brings multiple benefits at once — body activity, fresh air, improved mood (http://news.stanford.edu/2015/06/30/hiking-mental-health-063015/) — and gives you a break from thinking about work (ideally, from thinking about anything). Our minds need time to step back from processing thoughts and relax. Relatively bad weather is not an excuse: I live in a city (https://valdiviaguide.com) with three months of nonstop rain and still walk daily unless it's storming. I would also recommend signing up for a swimming pool — it takes significantly less effort than a regular gym and does a great job stretching and relaxing the muscles strained by sedentary work.

Finally, nutrition. Your gut is your second brain (https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg21628951-900-gut-instincts-the-secrets-of-your-second-brain/) that produces 50 percent of dopamine and 95 percent of serotonin; it directly influences your motivation (https://hbr.org/2014/10/what-you-eat-affects-your-productivity) and mood (https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/nutritional-psychiatry-your-brain-on-food-201511168626). The diet for productivity is not complicated; simple rules (https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/21/upshot/simple-rules-for-healthy-eating.html) are enough: pass on heavily processed junk foods, watch sugar and salt intake, watch total calories, drink water and tea instead of sweetened beverages, stick to home-cooked meals if possible and use mostly plants for ingredients.

Pay close attention to the feedback from your body to find out what's most effective for you. Also get a monitor for indoor CO_2 levels during cold seasons — bad ventilation affects cognitive performance too (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2015/10/27/why-your-office-air-could-be-crimping-your-productivity/).

Summary

1. Sleep seven hours or more, go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.

2. Take naps instead of coffee when you feel a brain fog in the afternoon.

3. Take 3-5 minute breaks every hour and move around a bit, stretch or exercise if possible.

4. Walk for at least 30 minutes daily in a green place to relax your mind.

5. Go to a pool multiple times a week to relax your muscles, especially the back.

6. Maintain a quality diet free of junk and processed foods; drink water instead of sweetened beverages.

7. Monitor indoor CO_2 levels.

Resources

- Apps for making forced breaks: Time Out (http://www.dejal.com/timeout/) (Mac), EyesRelax (https://themech.net/eyesrelax/) (Windows), Workrave (http://www.workrave.org) (Linux, Windows)

- MyFitnessPal (https://www.myfitnesspal.com/es) — a journal for nutrition

- CO_2 monitoring devices (https://www.aliexpress.com/w/wholesale-co2-monitor.html?site=glo&g=y&CatId=15370104) on AliExpress (usually 1.5 to 2 times cheaper than on Amazon)

Mind

We are shaped by our habits. Day after day both useful and harmful ones fight each other for the steering wheel of our minds. But none of them is static, thanks to neuroplasticity (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELpfYCZa87g). By discipline and willpower alone it's possible to unlearn useless habits and change your behavior. This is why environment and body tiers are so important — they create comfortable conditions for hacking our minds.

The key is persistence. Often you will need many months to see the results, so don't surrender early. Habit-tracking apps are really helpful for this case — they both remind you to do things and motivate you to keep daily streaks. If some activity is too hard to start, try the method called "No zero days (https://www.reddit.com/r/NonZeroDay/)": do at least one small thing in this direction daily.

By watching your mind regularly, you can start noticing recurrent patterns, probably related to the biological rhythms of your body. They come like waves and, after experimenting, you can learn to surf each of them. Sometimes it's the best time for taking lots of creative notes or reviewing strategic plans. Sometimes your head is completely empty, and it's pleasant to do some tedious work that would be a dread otherwise. Or it may be unproductive to work on the current project at all, and it would be more useful to learn something irrelevant. But the core idea is that you can adapt your workflow to these states instead of resisting them.

For this reason, I also pay attention to my mind's feedback toward music. To get into a productive mood in the morning or after a long break, I boost my focus with relatively fast rhythmic tracks (example (https://theeanachronist.bandcamp.com/album/rgb)). Later I could switch to a lower tempo (example (https://suduayamusic.bandcamp.com/album/venus-24bits)), to something relaxing (example (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ch5BqDrqqo4)) or turn the music off completely due to high cognitive load. But when nothing helps to concentrate, get a truly free time so your mind can rest. No phone or consuming any kind of content — just walking, exercising or taking a nap.

Procrastination itself can have different causes — maybe the task is too complex or too boring, fear of failure or simple laziness. Even a slight presence of these negative factors can make us go for instant rewards instead of doing something that will create a better future in the long term. A traditional approach is to try understand the causes and work with them. But it didn't help my problem — I was still procrastinating while knowing perfectly well why I'm doing it.

A few years ago I had a problem with obsessive thoughts but was able to successfully fix it on my own. The key was the insight that these thoughts are always present in my head, and trying to defeat them with thinking is like trying to put out a fire with gasoline — they will only grow stronger. So I stepped back and refused to participate in this fight at all. Nowadays I don't care if some obsessive thought appears in my mind — I just move my attention to something more important.

Avoiding work is similar — these are just the thoughts of what you don't like about your tasks and what you wish you could do instead. This desire to get instant rewards is just a natural thirst for dopamine (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reward_system). But you are not your thoughts, and they have no power over you until you feed them with attention. You can ignore them like a background noise by keeping your focus on your goals.

The downside to this approach is that you need to make your self-awareness strong enough to regularly escape ineffective thinking patterns and restore the focus. This is why one of my main breakthroughs from 150 to 200 hours happened when I finally got myself meditating 20 minutes daily — without exceptions. Popular modern misconceptions (http://www.vipassana.com/meditation/mindfulness_in_plain_english_4.php) about meditation say that it's for "stress relief" or "living in the moment," but the original goal (http://www.vipassana.com/meditation/mindfulness_in_plain_english_5.php) is to train concentration and become more self-aware of what's going on as a result.

> *Meditation is a direct and gradual cultivation of mindfulness or awareness. It proceeds piece by piece over a period of years. The student's attention is carefully directed to an intense examination of certain aspects of his own existence. The meditator is trained to notice more and more of his own flowing life experience.*
> — Bhante Gunaratana (http://www.vipassana.com/meditation/mindfulness_in_plain_english.php)

Similar to walking, it's one more chance to step out of your daily routines and return later with a fresh mind. Meditation is also great for learning how to let go of stressful thoughts and emotions so they don't exhaust your mind either. Don't simply reject the practice because of the "corporate mindfulness" fad or questionable modern teachers. There's a lot of scientific evidence (https://nccih.nih.gov/health/meditation/overview.htm) that regular meditation helps our minds, and you can learn it completely on your own.

The last possible barrier to getting focused: are you working on something futile? Spending your life on fruitless nonsense is a road to burnout, and even a good salary won't prevent it. I'm not suggesting the "quit your job and follow your passion" cliché — this would be immature, and not everybody has a passion. It's about finding something worth doing and feeling that the result of your efforts is helpful to the world. Your work still should not be prioritized over your loved ones, but throwing away addictive sites or gaming becomes easy when you start to see them for what they are: just obstructions on the way to getting something valuable done.

Summary

1. Change your habits with persistence: keep track of them and try to make long streaks.

2. Observe your daily mind cycles and surf the mood waves; have music playlists prepared for them.

3. Escape procrastination by constantly shifting focus to your long-term goals.

4. Meditate daily to increase power of concentration and self-awareness.

5. Work on something truly helpful for the world.

Resources

- Apps to track daily habits: Productive (http://productiveapp.io) (iOS), Strides (https://www.stridesapp.com/) (iOS + web), Loop

(https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=org.isoron.uhabits)
(Android)

- Mindfulness in Plain English
  (http://www.vipassana.com/meditation/mindfulness_in_plain_english.php)
  — free book to learn meditation
- Headspace (https://www.headspace.com) — nice guided meditation
  course with some free sessions

Afterword

When improving your productivity, don't expect it to increase in a week
because the brain needs a lot of time to restructure to new behaviors.
Instead, set a small performance goal like "get 5% better each month."
Aiming for faster results will make you too stressed out, while productivity
requires a calm mind and a well-rested body. Be tough on your ineffective
habits, but please be easy on yourself.

I'd be happy to hear from you via email (https://qotoqot.com/contact/) or
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Ivan Mir (https://twitter.com/ivmirx) has been running small independent software
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