3 strategies to skyrocket your productivity while studying for coding interviews

Posted by *Sam Gavis-Hughson*

In this day and age, the term "productivity" has really taken on a life of its own. Pretty much every single person has strong associations with the term, but no one actually has quite the same associations.

For some people productivity means writing everything down in a GTD-style obsession. For others, it means meditating until four in the afternoon before sitting down to crank out ungodly amounts of work.

However you view it, though, productivity is important. After all, our goal with almost everything we do is to make progress, and if you're not productive, it is quite difficult to make any sort of real progress.

Consider preparing for coding interviews as an example. The goal here is ultimately to get a great job that you're going to love, and to do that, you need to master the skill of the coding interview. Whether it's enjoyable or not, learning the skill is necessary and so productivity is a must.

In this post, I'm not going to talk about some woo-woo productivity ideas that you can never integrate into your life in any meaningful way. Rather, I'm going to show you 3 concrete concepts that you can use to increase your productivity in whatever you do.

I recommend in particular that you take these techniques and apply them to your coding interview prep. I see so many people fall flat on their faces because they just can't get their ass in gear to really study for interviews. They make excuses and try to rationalize, but in the end, those who succeed are those who put in the work. If you use these strategies, they will help you put in the work, whether you enjoy it or not.

Track your energy levels

Do you normally find yourself reaching for coffee in the afternoon when your energy levels start to crash? Do you find that as soon as you get into bed you all of a sudden have a rush of energy and want to do more work? Maybe you drag yourself out of bed after hitting snooze for the 5th time only to stay up until 4am coding.

All of these are pretty common phenomena, and they all mean one thing: You aren't listening to your body's natural energy levels.

The first key to being at your most productive level is to figure out what times of day you're most productive and focus the most critical work you do during that time. For example, if you know that you're super productive between 10am and 12pm, that is the time that you should do the most important work of the day.

So how do you figure out what your most productive time of the day is? Well ...drumroll please... you track it! I know, what a revolutionary idea.

Here is an image of how I tracked my own energy levels over (part of) a week. I personally like pen and paper because I'm living in the dark ages, but you can get a spreadsheet version of this chart here.

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Track your energy levels with ease and skyrocket your productivity with our easy-to-use spreadsheet.

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Regardless of how you do it, though, here's how it works. Every hour while you're awake for one week, you are going to track your energy levels on a scale from 1-10, with 10 being the most energy. In addition, I also recommend making a brief note of what you did during that time period.

When choosing a number, consider how energetic you feel, as well as how focused. One finding of mine was that even though I might feel tired physically in the morning, my mind was actually a lot more alert in the morning that later in the day.

When you use our tracking spreadsheet, here's an example of what this might look like:

I also recommend finding an app to use or setting hourly reminders on your phone/computer. I personally find it almost impossible to remember to do something on an hourly basis because I get totally wrapped up in my work. I personally use this really simple app called Hourly Chime, but I'm sure there are lots of options here.

Once you've tracked your energy levels for a week, it's time to go back and look for any patterns. What you will likely notice (although coffee can throw off your results, so try to abstain during this week if possible) is that there are clear trends of certain times of day when you have the highest energy levels, versus other times when your energy levels tend to slump.

Now, insomuch as you have the ability to do so, it is time to rearrange your schedule to accommodate these periods of high energy and low energy. The key is to schedule the most important stuff when you have high energy. For example, if you're prepping for coding interviews, you would want to schedule that studying during this time. In the slumps, you can put all of your low-level tasks, like responding to email or meetings with colleagues.

If you do nothing else in this post other than tracking your energy levels, I guarantee you will see a bump in your productivity. However, if you bring in the other two techniques, you will be able to go even further.

Focus on small, consistent effort

One thing that I see all the time when people are starting to study for their coding interviews is that they say something like the following: "I'm just going to study all day on Saturday."

Now I appreciate that they want to get a big chunk of studying in and feel like they made a lot of progress, but unfortunately this is the exact wrong way to approach your studying.

Here's another thing that I hear incredibly often. Maybe you can relate to this: "I feel like I study something one day and then a week later I don't remember it." Chances are, this is because of studying in big blocks rather than breaking it up.

When you sit down to study, it is important that you study in the most effective way possible. If you don't you're going to end up doing a lot of extra work and taking a ton of time that you don't have. Time is such a limited resource, that you shouldn't waste it!

The key to studying most effectively is to put in small consistent blocks of effort every day, rather than either one big chunk once a week or even trying to study 10 hours every day. The former just isn't particularly effective, and the latter leads to burnout.

> ## The key to studying most effectively is to put in small consistent blocks of effort every day.
>
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When people ask me how much they should be studying, I generally answer "as much as you feel like you can do consistently every day." If you're working full time, this may mean starting with half an hour every day. If that's easy, you can work your way up to an hour or even two. If you can just put in one hour per day five days per week, you're getting in five hours of studying every week. After a couple of months, you'll be good to go!

If you decide to spend only half an hour, consider alternating what you do each day. One day you study part of a topic and the next day you do a practice question on the topic. Since you'll be dealing with the topic over multiple days, you'll reinforce the knowledge and make it less likely that you would forget it. If you have longer periods of study time of an hour or more, I recommend splitting the time 50/50 between studying the material and doing practice problems.

It's important to note at this point that, if you have extra time, I'm not saying that you shouldn't devote some of that time to studying. Studying for longer periods is not a *bad* thing, it's simply less effective than breaking up your studying into smaller chunks. Keeping a steady pace will increase your productivity level so you can get more done with the same amount of time, and avoid burnout in the process.

Make a plan

If I had to say the number one reason why people don't make progress to their goals, it would be this: They don't know what their goal really is.

Planning ahead takes a lot of work, but the costs of not doing it are substantial. By not creating a clear plan, there is no possible way to know that you're going in the right direction. That means potentially doing lots of unnecessary work or even work that is counter to your real goal.

Making a plan happens at multiple different levels. At the highest level, you are making a plan for your whole interview prep journey. This includes taking a deep look at what your goals are and how you can most effectively accomplish them. I wrote an in depth article on roadmapping your interview journey.

At a lower level, though, it comes down to weekly and daily planning, which is incredibly important as well. I'm going to share with you how I do this. I find this method works well for me, but I also highly recommend experimenting and finding out what method of planning works best for you.
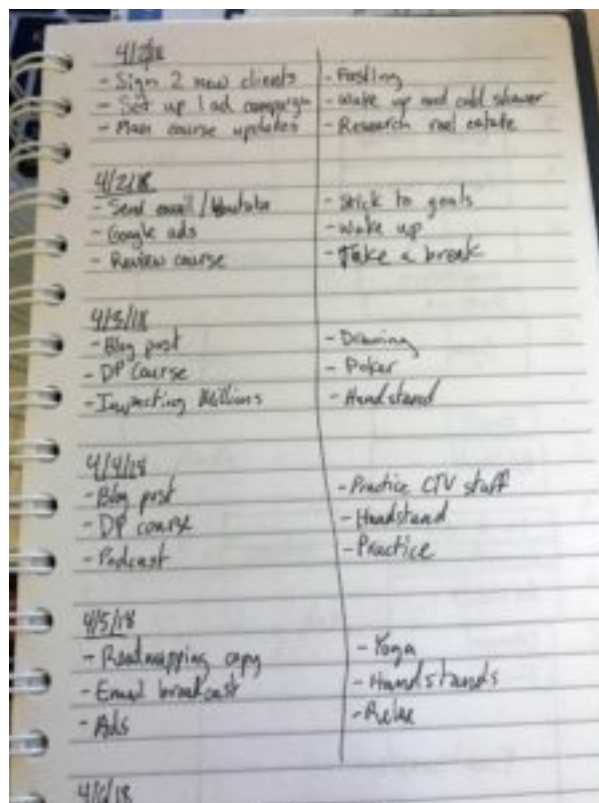
For me, it all starts with weekly goals, followed by daily goals. As you can see in the image, the first section at the top is my weekly goals. I divide my goals into personal goals on the right and professional goals on the left. Then each section below is my goals for that day.

The way that I do my goals, I do the weekly and Monday goals on Monday morning and then I do the goals for each subsequent day either the evening before or that morning. I find that trying to do too many goals too far in advance is really hard to plan for.

Like with the energy tracking, I do all of this with pen and paper because I find that easiest, but there are countless ways that you could do it. The key is to stick to a couple of guidelines:

1. **No more than 3 weekly goals and no more than 3 daily goals.** I actually find 3 goals to often be a lot and have considered cutting it down, but you can consider 3 to be the maximum. If you are working full time while you study, you will likely have 2 of your goals be related to your full time job and only one of these goals be related to studying.
2. **Write your goals down.** This is absolutely critical because you need to be able to see what your goals are for the day. Writing them down somewhere also gives you a record so that you can see what you've accomplished.
3. **Set realistic goals.** This may be easier said than done, but it is important that you try to scale the goals to the amount of time that you actually have. You don't want to be consistently only making it halfway through the goals that you've set for yourself. I've talked before about how to determine if your goals are realistic.

With these weekly and daily goals, the next step is to create a daily schedule. Once I have the daily goals, I take a look at my calendar and schedule everything in.

Again I do this on paper, and start by adding the hours along the left hand side. Then I take all of the immovable things on my calendar and add them as wide boxes. See "Call with Jonathan" and "Podcast recording" in the image as examples. The wide boxes basically mean that this thing is at a fixed time and can't be changed.

After I add in all of the things that are on my Google calendar, I go through and fill in the gaps with all of my goals that I want to get done. As much as I can, I try to frontload the work. As I mentioned, I find that I am much more productive early in the morning, so the more I can do my intensive work in the morning, the better.

Here are a couple tips based on my experience:

1. **Leave space in your schedule for breaks.** It is so easy to forget about needing to take breaks, but ideally you want to stick to your schedule as closely as possible. Scheduling in breaks will help you prevent burnout, which is super important.
2. **Make sure to schedule meals.** I just did this to myself the other day. I forgot to plan in time to eat lunch and it threw off my whole schedule as a result.
3. **Use wide and narrow boxes.** The wide boxes mean that something is at a fixed time. Narrow boxes mean that you can move it around if need be. With a narrow box, you can cross it out and redraw a new schedule item next to it so that you can reconfigure your schedule as necessary.

With these strategies, productivity becomes much easier. Having structure to your studying means that you did all of the difficult planning up front so when you're in the moment all you have to do is sit down and execute.

Recommended reading

A lot of the techniques recommended in this post were the result of reading two books that particularly changed my outlook on productivity. If you're interested in digging deeper, then these are two great places to start.

The Productivity Project [Affiliate Link]
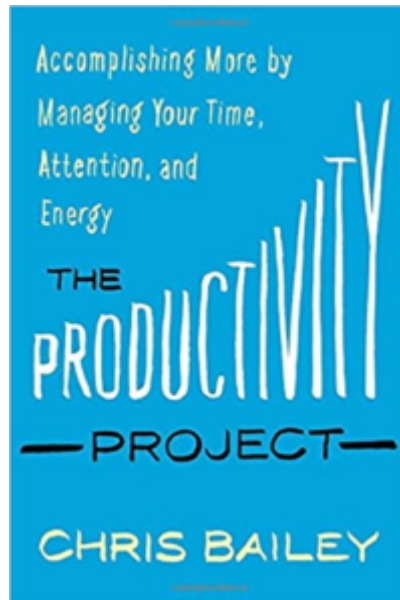
If you're a fan of Tim Ferriss, this book is for you. Imagine Tim Ferriss-level self-experimentation, but all focused around productivity. Chris tests out tons of different assumptions about productivity from whether meditation makes him more productive, to how much coffee optimizes his productivity. This book is definitely a good and relatively easy read.

Deep Work [Affiliate Link]
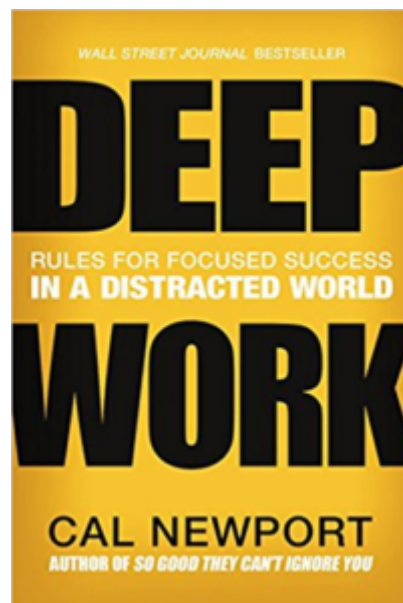
Part of productivity is certainly about how you structure your time, but another large part is what you do with the time that you are actually working. In *Deep Work*, Cal digs deeply into how we can be more effective in our work and get into that elusive *flow state*. This is another interesting read, and Cal is a CS professor at Georgetown if that is any additional incentive to read it.

Becoming your most productive self

As with many things, attempts to be as productive as you possibly can be will pull you in a million directions if you're not careful. As evidenced in *The Productivity Project*, there is an entire book full of ways that people say you can make yourself more productive.

However, the more options are presented to us, the more we need to be careful about how we spend our time. If we apply the 80/20 rule, we ask ourselves, "What are the 20% of productivity strategies that will give us 80% of the results?"

From experience, the three concepts laid out in this blog post are my 20%. To start with, I recommend you pick the single strategy that resonates most with you and start implementing. Productivity is a constant process of self improvement, so you aren't going to magically change overnight.

However, if you start applying these principles to your daily work and experiment to find the strategies that work best for you, I guarantee that you will see your levels of productivity improve dramatically.

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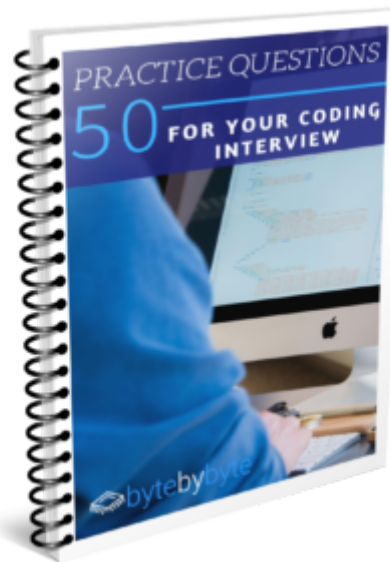
Sam Gavis-Hughson

Sam, founder of Byte by Byte, helps software engineers successfully interview for jobs at top tech companies. Sam has helped thousands of students through his blog and free content -- as well as 400+ paying students -- land jobs at companies such as Google, Amazon, Microsoft, Bloomberg, Uber, and more.

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