

Using Productivity Tools

Productivity Skills

Team FME

www.free-management-ebooks.com

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Preface

There are personal productivity tools available for planning, scheduling, task prioritizing, monitoring, and much more besides. Some of these tools are technology-based whilst others need nothing more than a pencil and paper. This eBook explains how to choose the best tools for your own particular needs and describes how to use them to boost your productivity.

You will learn:

- How to perform ABC Analysis and Pareto Analysis to prioritize tasks.
- The advantages of a closed to do list and when to use one.
- How to integrate productivity-boosting software tools into your work practices.
- Why you should consider monitoring software to control productivity killers.

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Introduction

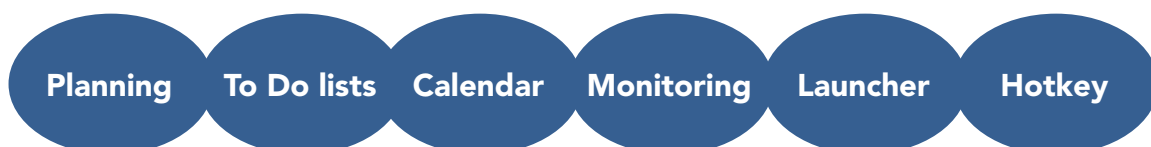
Many people think that if only they had the very latest tools then their time management and personal productivity problems would be miraculously solved. They spend a lot of time, effort, and money researching, buying, installing, and learning to use the latest software or mobile app only to discover that the productivity gains are marginal.



The fact is that in reality, time management and personal productivity tools are no substitute for adopting the right behaviors. The gains that you will achieve by setting yourself goals, minimizing interruptions, not procrastinating, and learning to delegate effectively will outweigh those that you could attain by using the best time management tools that money can buy.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that you should ignore the tools on the market; you should just be realistic about the benefits and improvements you will actually gain.

Tools can be categorized as:



Planning Tools

These tools are not dependent on any particular technology. They are simply methods of doing something, or formalized ways of thinking about a task, that will help you to be more productive. Some of them—for example the Urgency/Importance Grid, or the Reverse Schedule—need nothing more than a pencil and paper to implement and are designed to help you clarify planning and scheduling issues in your own mind.

Others, like Activity networks and Gantt charts, have their roots in formal project management and are most useful when managing specific, large-scale, information technology or construction-based projects. Due to the specialist nature of such planning tools, they are discussed in detail in their own eBook.

They can be useful if you find yourself needing to coordinate human and other resources in order to complete a particular task. You will find it most effective if you have dedicated software to help you draw the charts.

Calendar and To Do List Tools

There are dozens of software programs that you can use to help you schedule your time and any outstanding tasks. Some of the more sophisticated applications are designed to work on multiple devices and have automatic synchronization, with the additional benefit of allowing you to share data with your co-workers.

This is a rapidly growing market with new programs and updated versions of established ones being launched all the time. This makes it difficult to make recommendations, or even to describe the current features of these applications. The calendar and to-do list tools on iPhones and BlackBerrys', also offer a simple method of efficiently managing your time.

This eBook provides a brief description of some of the more popular tools and informs you of the general principles of such tools that are offered on most cell phones. The best way to find out the current position is to search the Web for recent independent reviews by authoritative websites such as the following:



The learning curve associated with productivity tools and the time required to import your own data, means that time spent choosing the best application for your own particular needs will pay for itself many times over. Don't forget to check out YouTube where you can see many of these applications in action.

You should also spend some time reading the forums and technical support sections of the vendor's own website, as these often highlight weaknesses in the product that the vendor prefers to gloss over in their marketing spiel.

Launcher and Hotkey Tools

These tools are designed to save time by reducing the number of keystrokes that you need to make. Whether this is worth investing in will depend on how many times a day you perform a particular task or series of keystrokes that could be pre-programmed.

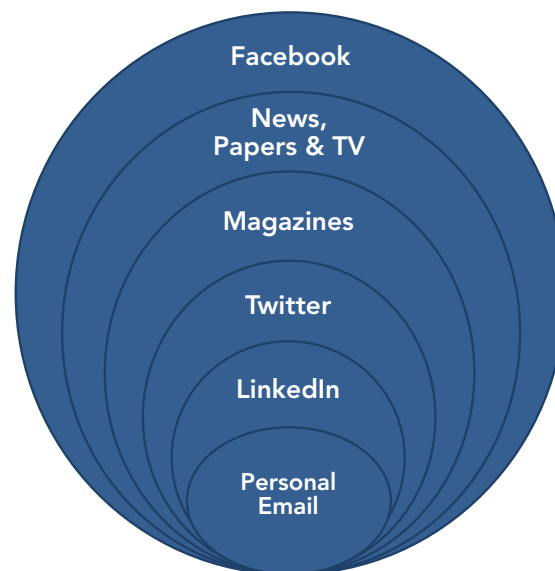
It may also be something that you need to authorize with your IT department before implementing as your organization may have strict policies in this area.

Monitoring Tools

The Web browser has become the platform most people use to access a variety of applications, such as email (e.g. Gmail), that are essential to their working day. In the past, each of these applications would have been a stand-alone system, but now, by using one of the many browsers available, you can have numerous tabs open at any one time. This gives you access to a whole range of diversions and distractions that are just one click away.

The browser is one piece of software the majority of people use throughout their working day, particularly as many of the tasks that used to be completed by using an in-house, or off-the shelf, application running on a PC are now done 'in the cloud' via a browser. Whilst this has its advantages with regard to cost and the ease of sharing work, it does have some implications for productivity.

An increasing distraction for many people is their online presence that exists outside of work and includes things like Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and personal email. The problem is that these are only ever a mouse click away and can be productivity killers as they are often far more enjoyable than work-related tasks.



Monitoring tools are designed to help you limit the amount of time you spend on non-work-related websites. You can set them up to block all messages from these online systems so that you have a period of time totally focused on your task at hand.

Miscellaneous Tools

These tools are each designed to make a specific task as easy as possible and using them can give your productivity a major boost. The best approach is to download and install the tool that seems to offer you the biggest productivity gain or one that overcomes a pet hate.

Remember that to gain worthwhile results from each tool, you will need to invest time and effort. Once you have integrated the tool into your work, you can then add others until you feel as though you are chasing diminishing returns.



KEY POINTS

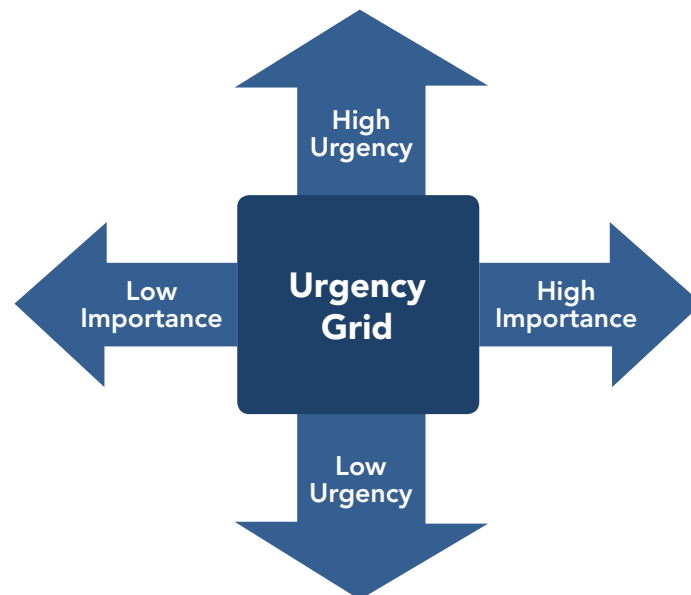
- ✓ Personal productivity tools are useful but they are no substitute for adopting the right behaviors.
- ✓ Planning tools are designed to help you clarify planning and scheduling issues in your own mind.
- ✓ Calendar tools should have automatic synchronization between any devices that you use as well as allowing you to share data with your co-workers.
- ✓ Use independent reviews and the vendor's technical support pages to help you select the best calendar software for your needs.
- ✓ If you find yourself spending too much time on non-work activities, then a monitoring tool could help you get this bad habit under control.

Planning Tools

Planning tools are not dependent on any particular technology; they are simply methods of planning your time and prioritizing your work, which will hopefully help you to become more productive.

Urgency/Importance Grid

The Urgency/Importance Grid is one of those simple tools that require nothing more than a pencil and a piece of paper. Simply draw and label a grid like the one shown below. Then prioritize each of your outstanding tasks on it according to its relative urgency and importance.



Obviously this is not an exact science and represents a subjective judgment on your part. However, the resulting completed grid can be a significant aid to helping you prioritize tasks and avoid the common pitfall of confusing urgency with importance.

Whilst many factors can change to make any one of your activities more or less important, time is not one of them. An unimportant job remains unimportant, even if the deadline for delivery is in an hour's time. As you receive new tasks, you will revisit your grid, adding in the new task appropriately. This may mean that the urgency or importance of another task may be altered as a result of the new task.

Urgent but Unimportant Tasks

You should put tasks here that are fairly urgent but relatively low in importance. It is easy to find yourself spending too much time on these tasks because of their urgency. Ideally they should be completed adequately, but above all quickly.

Ask yourself the following questions:

'How can I avoid spending too much time on these tasks?'

'Is this a task I could delegate?'

'Does anyone have the appropriate skills?'

Non-Urgent and Unimportant Tasks

You should put tasks here that are neither important, nor urgent. These tasks represent a particular danger, because if you reduce the time spent completing them, you may find that you enjoy your working day less. If some of these tasks involve interacting with others, then you may feel that reducing the time spent will distance you from your co-workers.

If you really want to manage your time effectively, you will need to be disciplined enough to eliminate some of the things that make your work more enjoyable in the short term and focus on your own long-term personal development and promotion. This may mean that you need to persevere in the face of resistance from colleagues.

Ask yourself:

'How can I avoid the temptation to do these easy or enjoyable tasks?'

'Does this task further my long-term aspirations?'

Urgent and Important Tasks

Tasks that appear here should be both urgent and important. The danger is that you fail to properly plan these tasks because of their urgency and then crisis-manage them because of the pressure you're under to complete them.

Tasks that are both urgent and important require immediate attention. Suppose, for example, that an important customer needs a detailed proposal on their desk for Monday morning. This may require you to re-arrange existing commitments and prioritize work

on the proposal; you may decide to concentrate on the key parts of the document whilst delegating more straightforward parts of it to others.

Ask yourself:

'How can I give myself enough time to do these tasks well?'

'Which of my activities can I re-arrange without any adverse effects?'

'Can I delegate some of my other tasks that are preventing me from working on this one?'

Important but Non-Urgent Tasks

Tasks that appear here should be important but not urgent. They may have no specific deadline, or a deadline that is a long way off. If there is no deadline, you may never get around to them, or you may wait until the deadline is very close and resort to crisis management to get them done.

Tasks that are important but not urgent are in danger of being deferred. Critical functions that relate to long-term effectiveness, such as strategic planning and progress reviews, often fall into this category. It is often the non-urgent nature of these tasks, combined with the slightly daunting prospect of tackling them, that leads to them being constantly delayed.

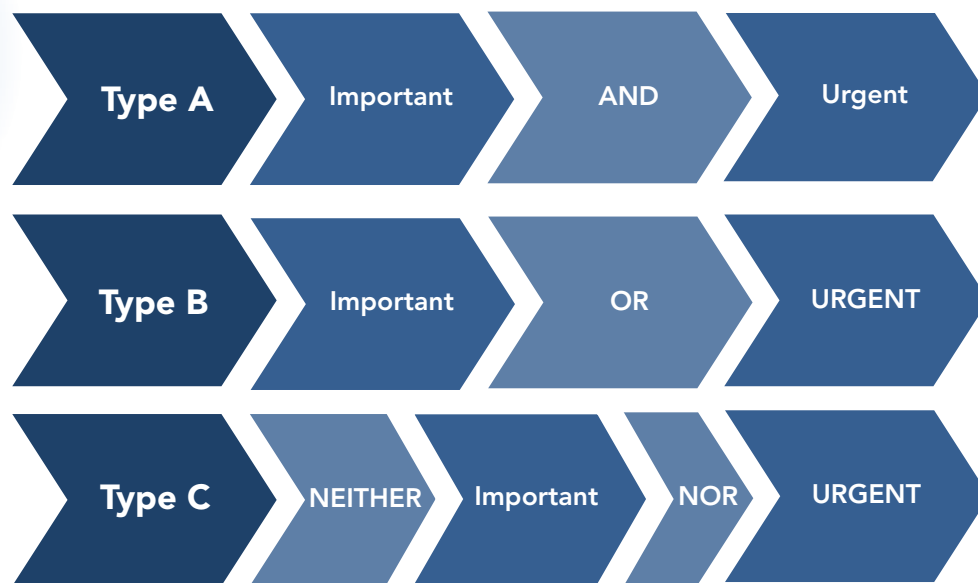
Take control of these tasks; set aside time to address them and break them down into manageable chunks.

KEY POINTS

- ✓ An Urgency/Importance Grid is a quick and easy way to help you prioritize tasks.
- ✓ Even though the placement of tasks on the grid is highly subjective, it is often better than just looking at a list of tasks.

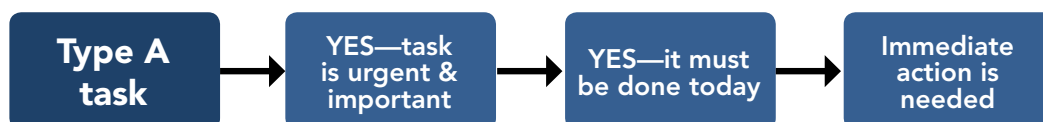
ABC Analysis

Whilst this is similar to the Urgency/Importance Grid, it does not require as detailed an analysis of the individual tasks. For example, if two tasks are classified as important and urgent then they are both classified as Type 'A'; it is not however necessary to consider them in relation to each other.

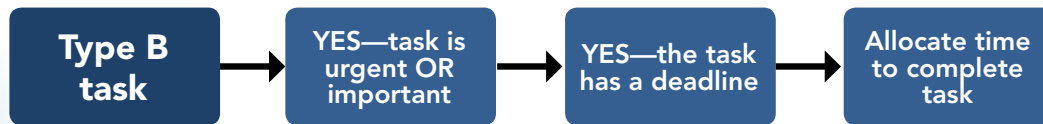


When it comes to scheduling tasks into your working day and deciding which type of task category they fall into, the following guidelines should be kept in mind.

Type A tasks—try to complete a few of these urgent and important tasks each day. Your questions and answers will look like this:

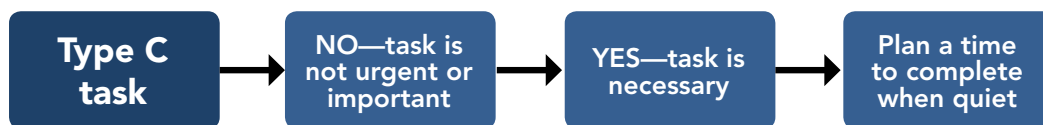


Type B tasks—these are likely to represent the majority of your work and should take up most of your day. Your questions and answers will look like this:

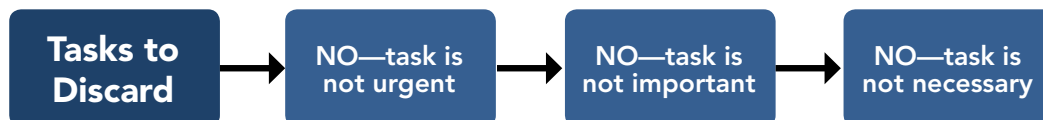


For some Type B tasks there may not be a deadline attached, so you will need to set a realistic timeframe in which to complete the task and then allocate your time appropriately to achieve it.

Type C tasks—these low-priority tasks should be fitted into your schedule, as time allows. Your questions and answers will look like this:



Tasks to Discard—some of your tasks will not fall into any of these types and you will need to remove them from your workload. Your questions and answers will look like this:



A typical working day will include a mixture of A, B, and C types of task. It is good practice to address different types of task at various times of the day rather than working through all the A-tasks, followed by the B-tasks, then the C-tasks. This will enable you to have periods of the day when you are concentrating intensely, followed by periods where you can address less-demanding tasks.

Nearly everybody is subject to performance fluctuations throughout the working day. At certain times you will feel particularly energetic and alert, whilst at others you feel tired. If you can tune in to your own daily cycles then you will be able to plan the optimum times at which to tackle the different types of task.

Whilst there are some quite dramatic individual variations, the majority of people feel most energetic and alert during the middle to late morning period and again in the middle to late afternoon. Conversely, most people suffer troughs soon after lunch, and again towards the end of the day.

KEY POINTS

- ✓ The ABC categorization is another quick way of helping to prioritize tasks.
- ✓ Try it in addition to the Urgency/Importance Grid and see which one you prefer.

Pareto Analysis

The Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto discovered that within any system the tendency is for some elements to yield much higher returns than others. Usually, around 20% of the elements will be high yielders and the remaining 80% will be low yielders.

What is even more interesting is that the 20% of high yielders tend to produce around 80% of the yield and the 80% of low yielders produce the remaining 20%.

Whilst Pareto's research was concerned with economics and found, for example, that 20% of an organization's customers are responsible for 80% of its profits, the 80/20 principle has been found to apply to a wide variety of areas.

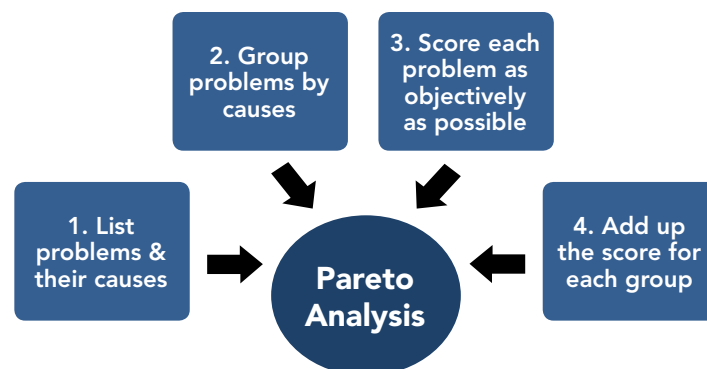


The figures 80 and 20 are illustrative—the Pareto Principle illustrates the lack of symmetry that often appears between two related factors. For example, 10% of your clients could generate 90% of the complaints you have to deal with, or 75% of your suppliers may be responsible for only 25% of your inventory.

In terms of time management and productivity, it implies that 20% of the time that you spend on something will produce 80% of your final output, while the remaining 80% of your time will produce only 20% of it.

The Pareto Analysis is a useful technique for prioritizing problem-solving work, enabling you to ensure that the first piece of work you complete also resolves the greatest number of problems.

There are 4 steps in performing a Pareto Analysis:



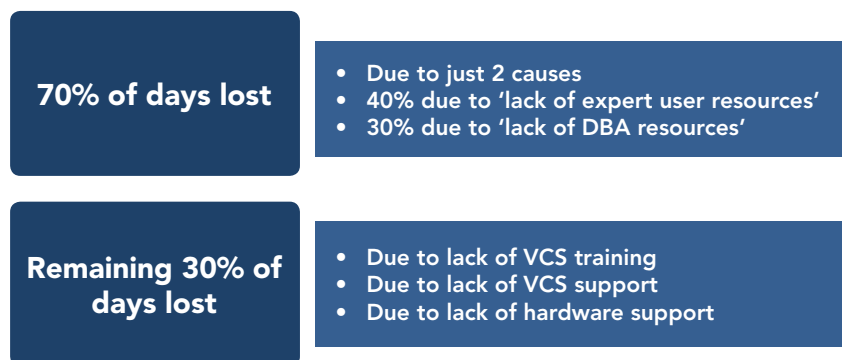
This exercise not only shows you the most important underlying cause, it also gives you a numerical score, allowing you to compare the severity of the problems caused by it.

Imagine a scenario where you are the IT manager and you have been given responsibility for turning around a strategic business project that is running behind schedule. Your first action is to interview all of the team leaders involved and ask them to explain how their part of the project has been performing, highlighting any areas that have fallen behind and to provide valid reasons for this, whilst quantifying the number of days lost in each case.

From this exercise you obtain the following data:

Problem	Cause	Days Lost
1. Test database not being kept up to date	Lack of DBA resource	$3+2+4 = 9$
2. SQL queries not signed off	Lack of DBA resource	$1+2+0 = 3$
3. Server downtime	Hardware Support	$1+1+1 = 3$
4. Waiting for confirmation of changes to user interface	Lack of expert user resources	$2+3+2 = 7$
5. Waiting for test cycle results	Lack of expert user resources	$2+4+4 = 10$
6. Version control system downtime	VCS Support	$1+1+2 = 4$
7. Version control system problems	VCS Training	$2+3+2 = 7$
	Total Days Lost	43

This table clearly shows you what has caused days to be lost on the project and highlights which of these causes have accounted for the greatest disruption.



You can clearly see that **'lack of'** in both expert users and DBA resources is the key issue you need to address with some urgency to get your project back on track.

Whilst using Pareto Analysis can be helpful in aiding your decisions about what priority to set each task, it does have certain limitations, which you must factor into your decision-making process:

- No account is taken of the relative difficulty of dealing with each underlying cause.
- Each problem is difficulty to quantify with an objective score.
- Only historical data is taken into consideration.

It takes no account of the relative difficulty of tackling each underlying cause

It can be difficult to quantify each problem using an objective score

It only looks at historical data

When you take into account how these limitations could influence your ability to resolve the cause of lost days in our example, you will appreciate the practicalities of using this method of analysis.

- **It takes no account of the relative difficulty of tackling each underlying cause.**

In the above example, 70% of the days lost are caused by two resource issues. Your ability to tackle each of these causes will vary, as one is under your direct control and the other is not.

You might be able to address the lack of DBA resource with a single phone call, as these are all under the direct control of the IT project manager who reports to you.

This is also likely to be applicable for the more minor causes of lost days of VCS Training, VCS Support, and Hardware Support problems. A single call to the relevant department or management colleague will ensure training is organized and the necessary support levels are increased.

When you look at the best way to address the major cause of lost days (being in this case the lack of expert user resource), this is not an area you have any direct authority over as it is due to the actual users themselves and is not an IT issue per se. It could also be an intractable problem due to long-term illness or a chronic lack of resources in the relevant user department.

Therefore, in order to bring the project back on schedule, your priority is to address the first issue of lack of DBA resources with a single phone call. This enables you to achieve the greatest gain for the least effort.

The lack of expert user resources will require more of your time and budget to address satisfactorily and to resolve this issue for the project to run successfully.

- **It can be difficult to quantify each problem using an objective score**

Asking each of the team leaders to provide a figure for the number of days lost because of each problem appears to be an objective measure, but how much faith can you really place in their answers? They may be tempted to blame external factors rather than issues that they themselves are responsible for.

The quality of the Pareto Analysis will always be dependent on the reliability of the scores that you assign to each problem.

- **It only looks at historical data**

The lack of expert user resources has led to the loss of 17 days so far. However, it is possible that this resource will become less important as the project progresses. In fact it may not be required at all.

The assumption implicit in the Pareto Analysis is that the system you are trying to fix is constant through time. This may or may not be true.

Each of these limitations means that you will need to exercise careful judgment when using the Pareto Analysis method.

KEY POINTS

- ✓ Pareto Analysis is a useful technique for prioritizing problem-solving work, so that the first piece of work you tackle simultaneously resolves the greatest number of problems.
- ✓ Whilst Pareto Analysis appears to be totally objective, you need to be aware of its limitations.

Reverse Schedule

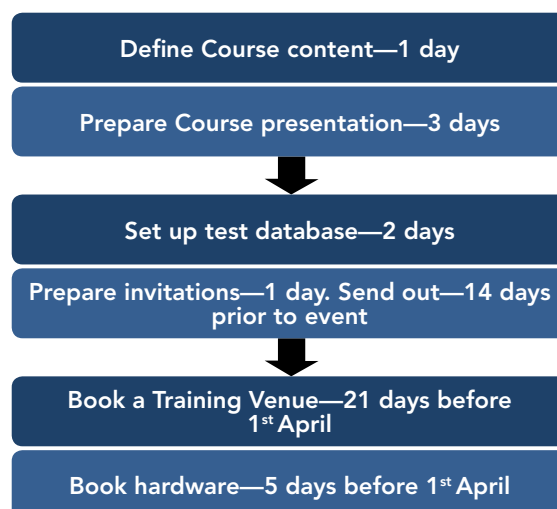
A Reverse Schedule is a way of setting milestones and a start date by working backwards from the required task's completion date. Even though it is a relatively straightforward process to perform, many people do not allocate sufficient time to allow the planning benefits of creating a Reverse Schedule to be realized.

By allocating adequate time at the planning stage you can avoid the stresses and strains often experienced in some projects through having to react to unforeseen circumstances.

Suppose, for example, that you are asked to organize a training workshop for a new piece of software. Today is Thursday, February 20, and the new software is due to go live on April 1.

- You decide that the workshop will run on Tuesday, March 25.
 - This allows you time to reschedule if it has to be cancelled at the last minute.
 - Also, in the event of the workshop needing to be re-run, it allows you time to train those off ill or on vacation on the date.
- This is the perfect time for the workshop as all of the skills that the trainees will have learnt during the training will still be fresh in their minds when the software goes live.

Once you know what task you will need to perform to organize your workshop, all you will then need to do is to allocate how many days you think each activity requires.

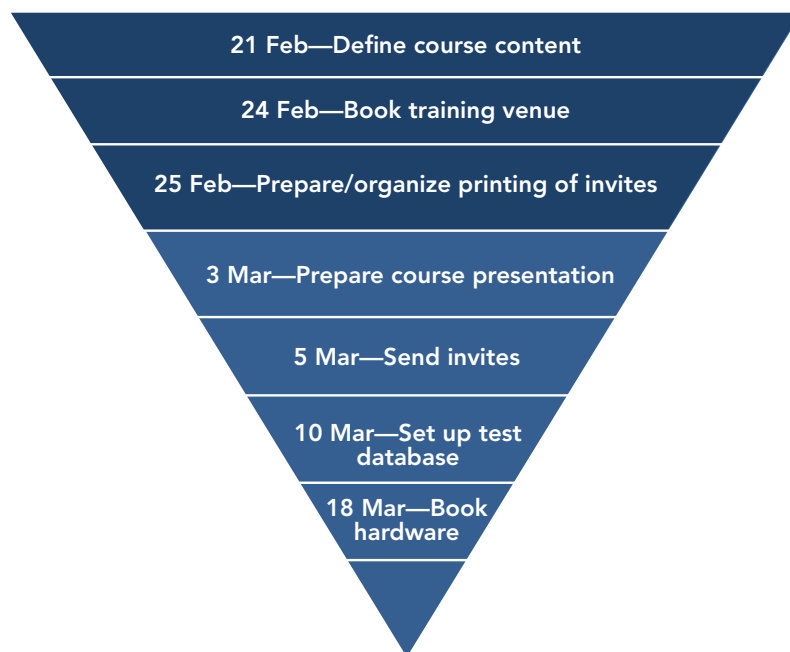


As you can see, some of the tasks are described in terms of the man-days required and others in terms of how far in advance of the workshop they need to be completed.

Using this information, you can then work backwards, setting the start and end dates needed to achieve them.

As part of your scheduling, you will need to take into account the fact that some tasks are dependent on others. You also need to consider that you cannot work on more than one task at the same time without affecting the total time required.

Finally, you will need to adjust your schedule to take into account weekends, when much of the work cannot be done, making your lead time longer. As part of this reverse scheduling you will also highlight any activities where you are dependent on another colleague or external supplier. This will enable you to build in the appropriate contingency you will need when relying on third parties.



The resulting schedule is useful in that it can prevent you from either panicking and trying to do everything at once, or procrastinating and leaving yourself insufficient time to complete some vital sub-task.

KEY POINTS

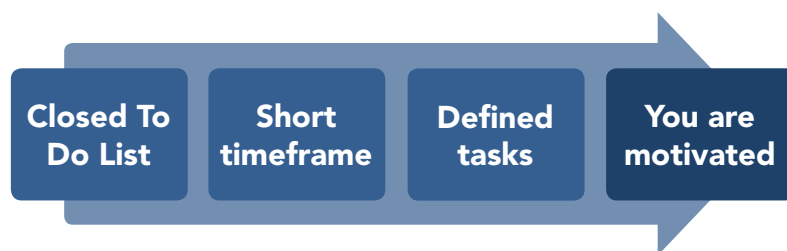
- ✓ A Reverse Schedule is a way of setting milestones and a start date by working backwards from the required task's completion date.
- ✓ It can prevent you from either panicking and trying to do everything at once or procrastinating and leaving yourself insufficient time to complete some vital sub-task.

Closed To Do List

Many people view a 'to do' list as an essential part of their planning strategy. Items are appended to it as and when they appear and are prioritized on the fly. This means that the list can never be completed, as new items are continually being added. Some low-priority items can remain on the list for months as they are moved down to make way for higher-priority tasks.

This type of 'open to do list' can be quite de-motivating to use, as it never seems to get any shorter. When items have been on the list for a long time, they can cause you to feel guilty for not having addressed them. An alternative to this sort of list is the so-called 'closed to do list.'

A closed list is one where nothing can be added to until all its items have been completed. It is designed so that all of the items will be finished within a specific timeframe—for example, an afternoon, a day, or a week.



Closed lists always work better if they have a short timeframe. The main advantage of a closed list is motivational: the feeling that it represents a finite amount of work that can and will be done by a specific point in time.

If you decide to try using a closed list, then the best approach is to specify it the day before you plan to start it and to make absolutely certain that you can complete it in your working day. You will need to allow time for the inevitable interruptions and you should not try to be too ambitious.

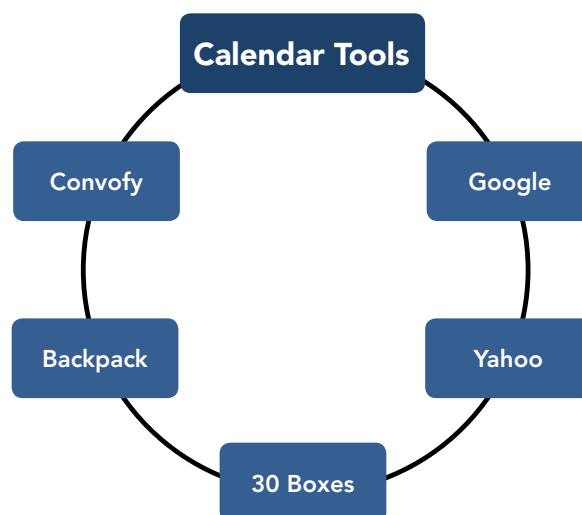
The whole point is that you are setting yourself a realistic target that you will feel positive and motivated about achieving.

KEY POINTS

- ✓ Using a closed list can be exceptionally motivating.
- ✓ You should set yourself a realistic target that you feel positive about achieving.

Calendar Tools

There are dozens of calendar applications available but your best option will probably be one that the people you work with can share. If this is not an issue for you, then Google Calendar would be a good choice, but you may also want to look at 30 Boxes and Backpack before you make a final decision, as they both have extensive functionality and are worth investigating.



We have also included a brief description of Convofy, which positions itself as more of an integrated environment for collaboration than a calendar. This is worth looking at if you

are working in a team and need to communicate effectively and in real-time over content that is being developed cooperatively.

Google Calendar—calendar.google.com

This is a free time-management Web application offered by Google. It is simple and easy to use and has multiple calendars, as well as email reminders and quick add extensions. Users are required to have a Google account in order to use the software.

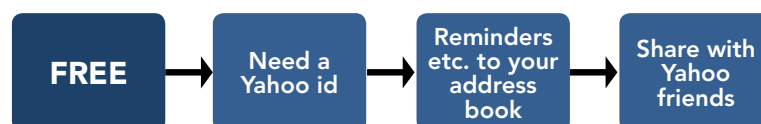
Events are stored online, meaning that the calendar can be viewed from any location that has Internet access. In the case of a user experiencing a hard drive failure, it also means that no data is lost. The application can import Microsoft Outlook calendar files (.csv) and iCalendar files (.ics, the de facto open calendaring file format).



Multiple calendars can be added and shared, allowing various levels of permissions for the users. This enables collaboration and sharing of schedules between groups. General calendars available for importing into one's account include those containing national holidays of various countries.

Yahoo Calendar—calendar.yahoo.com

This Web-based calendar service from Yahoo can read calendar feeds and events syndicated from sites that make use of the Yahoo calendar API. While users are not required to have a Yahoo Mail account, they are required to have a free Yahoo ID in order to use the software.



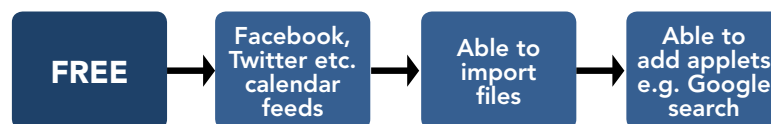
Reminders and event invitations can be sent to anyone in your Address Book through Yahoo Mail or Messenger. Group editing in Yahoo Calendar is managed through a friend

list. Add your friends (they'll need Yahoo logins) and mark them as 'Special' to give them edit permissions.

Larger groups may find it more useful to set up private group calendars in Yahoo Groups.

30 Boxes—www.30boxes.com

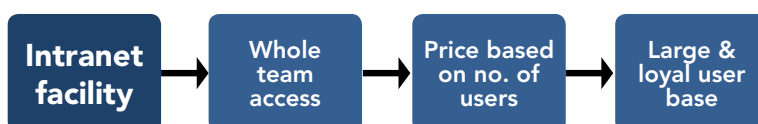
In a list of the best Web-based calendar software for small businesses, Forbes ranked 30 Boxes second, after Google Calendar. Calendars can contain feeds from Twitter, Blogger, MySpace, Facebook, and Wordpress.



Users can also import and export data as .ics or .csv files, or as an RSS feed. They can also add applets to the page, such as Google search, Yahoo mail, and Google Calendar. 30 Boxes is also available as a mobile application.

Backpack—www.backpackit.com

A highly rated package which is described as 'an easy intranet for your business. Store, share, discuss, and archive everything that's essential for your team.'

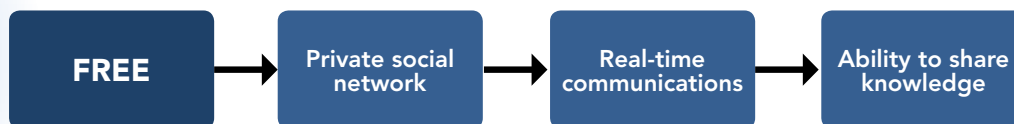


Backpack is priced depending on the number of users wishing to share the intranet and is billed monthly. It has a large and loyal user base.

There is an introductory video on the site that is worth viewing, even if this is only for an overview of the features that this 'calendar plus intranet' type of software can offer to users, particularly those who are working in a highly collaborative team.

Convofy—www.convofy.com

This free downloadable application is more of a private social network than just a calendar. It is aimed at groups of people who are collaborating closely and who need to share knowledge and content with each other and communicate effectively and in real-time over that content.



The collaboration features of Convofy go farther than any other app to make it easier to converse over your shared content. You can markup images, files, Web pages, and videos. This allows you to discuss almost any type of content, down to the specific details, to really get your point across faster and in far fewer words.

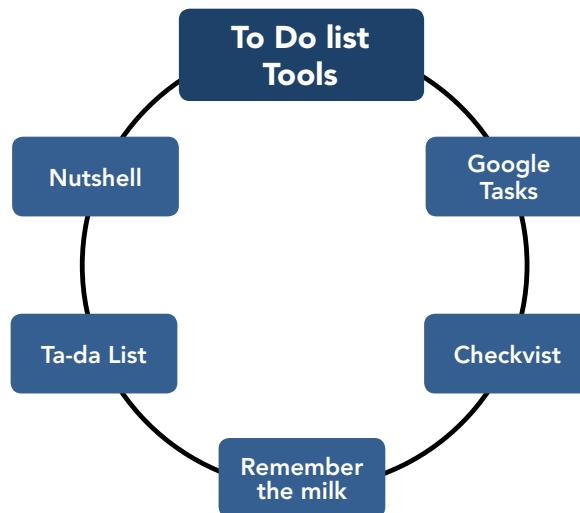
You will need to assess how well each of these calendars meets your own individual requirements and select the one that best matches your needs and those of your organization and team.

KEY POINTS

- ✓ If your organization has already settled on a particular calendar tool, then you may not have any choice in the matter.
- ✓ Keep in mind cross-platform functionality, ease of data sharing, and support when choosing a calendar.

To Do List Tools

These are an essential productivity tool and are well supported by both free and low-cost apps. The most important considerations when choosing such a tool are that it integrates well with your calendar and can be shared with other members of your team, if necessary.



Google Tasks—mail.google.com/tasks

Google Tasks is a free application that integrates with the other Google services like Gmail, Google Calendar, and iGoogle. It supports categories, hierarchies, and notes.

It is available in two versions:

- A basic version currently supports viewing your task list(s), adding new tasks, and marking tasks as completed.
- An optimized version, available for Android, iPhone, and Palm webOS devices. It is currently available in English only.

Checkvist—www.checkvist.com

CheckVist makes it easy to create functional, online outlines and lists that can be used for many purposes. The versatility of CheckVist makes it unique. Users can build lists that allow them to collaborate with an entire team or a few other individuals to complete a project.

Hierarchies can be applied and users can share their lists quickly online. Checklists have proven to be a very valuable tool when planning and executing a project. CheckVist takes this concept and improves upon it with added features that give the user more options. Users can create lists that include hierarchies, as well as add tasks and share their lists with others. Lists can also be printed or published online.

Easy to use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Versatile
Shared lists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hierarchical lists
Keyboard short cuts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Import facility
Updates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Export facility

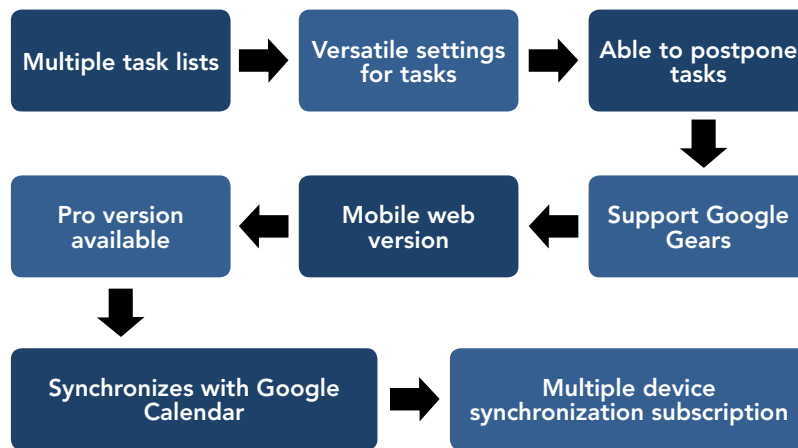
CheckVist also includes built-in keyboard short cuts to make it even easier for users to take notes quickly using the application. Import and export features are also available, as well as notifications when changes are made to CheckVist lists.

CheckVist gives individuals and teams a better way to work on projects and accomplish objectives. Team leaders can build prioritized lists and share them with the entire team or key team members who need the updated information quickly.

Remember the Milk—www.rememberthemilk.com

This is one of the most full-featured list managers, handling tasks and contacts. Tasks can be assigned dates, tags, categories, time estimates, and even geolocation.

Remember the Milk allows users to create multiple task lists. Added tasks can be edited (or not) to include various fields; locations can be added, and an integrated Google Maps feature allows users to save commonly used locations.



Tasks can be postponed, and Remember the Milk will inform users of the number of times this has been done for a given task. However, users must pay a subscription to be able to synchronize among multiple devices more than once a day. It supports Google Gears for offline use, has a mobile Web version, and syncs with Google Calendar. The \$25 Pro version offers sync clients for the iPhone, BlackBerry, Windows Mobile, and Android devices.

Ta-da List—www.tadalist.com

Described by the vendor as ‘the web’s easiest to-do list tool,’ Ta-da List is very simple to use and allows you to create a list, name it, check items off, and share it if you want to. This application will run on most browsers and iPhones and is free.

Nutshell—www.gonutshell.com

The Nutshell dashboard features three text entry fields: one for search, one for adding notes, and another for adding items to a list selected from a dropdown menu.

The search field defaults to Google, but you can use keywords that redirect queries to other websites:

- wp [keyword] will do a Wikipedia search,
- yt [keyword] searches YouTube,
- etc.

The actual list management portion is fairly simplistic, supporting descriptions and a checkbox to flag an item as 'high priority.'

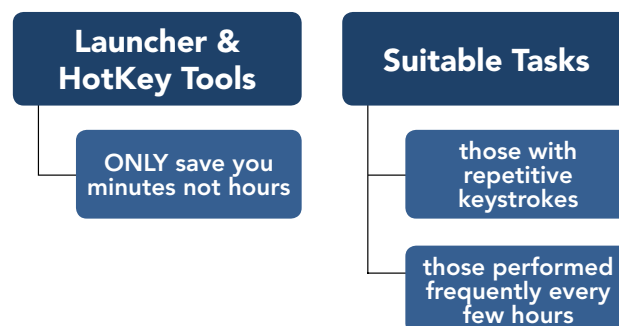
You will need to define your exact requirements for a 'To Do' List and then assess each one in terms of how well it matches these needs. You will then be able to select the one that best matches your needs and those of your organization and team.

KEY POINTS

- ✓ The most important considerations when choosing a To Do List tool are that it integrates well with your calendar and can be shared if necessary.

Launcher and Hotkey Tools

All of these tools are designed to save time by reducing the number of keystrokes that you need to make. Whether this is worth investing in will depend upon how many times a day you perform a particular task or series of keystrokes that could be pre-programmed.



If this is part of your everyday activity, then you may want to evaluate the following well-known utilities that are available on the Internet:

- www.launchy.net
- www.qsapp.com
- www.autohotkey.com
- memokeys

In all likelihood, this type of program will save you minutes a day rather than hours.

Launchy—www.launchy.net

Launchy is a free cross-platform utility designed to help you forget about your start menu, the icons on your desktop, and even your file manager. Launchy indexes the programs in your start menu and can launch your documents, project files, folders, and bookmarks with just a few keystrokes.

This is a well-regarded keystroke launcher, with a high approval rating from its user base. The main criticism of it seems to be that the development team responsible is no longer updating it.

Quicksilver—www.qsapp.com

Quicksilver is a computer utility software program for Mac OS X, originally developed by Blacktree Software, and is distributed freely. It is essentially a graphical shell for the Mac OS X operating system, allowing users to use the keyboard to rapidly perform tasks such as launching applications, manipulating files, or sending emails.

Quicksilver also has a built-in plug-in architecture, allowing the user to choose and install plug-ins, providing integration with a specific program, interface, or new feature. For example, plug-ins exist for sending email via Mail without opening the application or manipulating images via text commands.

Autohotkey—www.autohotkey.com

AutoHotkey is a free, open-source macro-creation and automation software utility that allows users to automate repetitive tasks. Any application user interface can be modified by AutoHotkey.

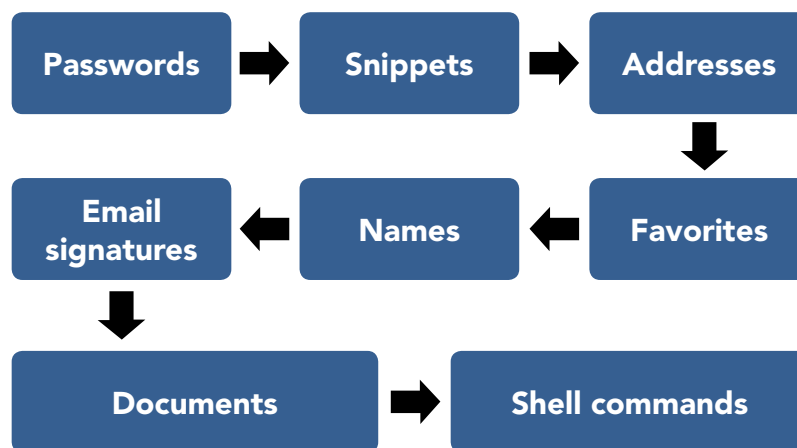
The application is driven by a custom scripting language that is aimed specifically at providing keyboard shortcuts or hotkeys. With it, you can:

- Automate almost anything by sending keystrokes and mouse clicks. You can write a mouse or keyboard macro by hand or use the macro recorder.
- Create hotkeys for keyboard and mouse.
- Expand abbreviations as you type them. For example, typing 'btw' can automatically produce 'by the way.'
- Create custom data-entry forms, user interfaces, and menu bars.

- Remap keys and buttons on your keyboard and mouse.
- Respond to signals from hand-held remote controls via the WinLIRC client script.
- Run existing Autolt v2 scripts and enhance them with new capabilities.
- Convert any script into an .exe file that can be run on computers that don't have AutoHotkey installed.

Memokeys—Downloadable from several sites

Memokeys allows you to create shortcut key combinations (hotkeys) like 'F5 + A' or 'F2 + G' and associates them with any text information or email and link action of your choice. You can use it to store and code:



Therefore, instead of typing 'Best regards' every time you email your friends, you could just press F10 + B and the text is instantly typed for you. You can assign preset emails and Internet links to 500 available shortcuts.

Memokeys is compatible with any software application, including word processors, email programs, Web forms, and any other window that accepts text input. Special tags can be used to include automatic date/time functions in your text to create complex date stamps that you can use everywhere on your computer.

Memokeys has been tested with more than 40 target applications. A secure hardware version (special USB key) is also available.

KEY POINTS

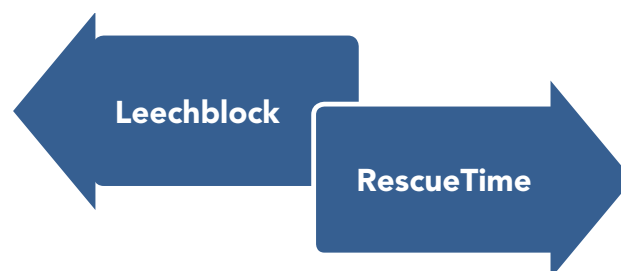
- ✓ If you perform a particular task or series of keystrokes that could be pre-programmed, then a hot key tool might be worth getting.
- ✓ In all likelihood, this type of program will save you minutes a day rather than hours.

Monitoring Tools

The Web browser is the one piece of software that most people use almost continuously throughout their working day. This is especially true as many of the tasks that used to be completed using an application running on a PC are now done 'in the cloud' via a browser.

Whilst this has its advantages with regard to cost and the ease of sharing work, it does have some serious implications for productivity, as the temptation to divert attention is high. Most people have an online 'presence' that exists outside of work and includes sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter, as well as personal email.

The problem is that these are only ever a mouse click away and can be 'productivity killers' as they are often far more rewarding than work-related tasks.



If you are someone who uses social networking sites, you will no doubt often find yourself making excuses such as 'I'm just popping to have a look at ...,' and before you realize it fifteen minutes have disappeared. If you recognize this behavior in yourself, then there are some browser-based applications that can help you to control this tendency.

Leechblock—<https://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/leechblock/>

LeechBlock is an extension for the Firefox Web browser designed to block access to time-wasting sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Twitter. All you need to do is specify which sites to block and when to block them.

This is easy to configure and extremely flexible. For example, you can block sites within a fixed time period, after a time limit, or with any combination of the two. You can override these blocks by using a password, but the idea is that this requires a conscious effort, hopefully meaning that you are much less likely to do it without thinking about the effect it will have on your productivity.

RescueTime—www.rescuetime.com

This application sits in the background and measures which site is in focus and for how long. This format allows you to obtain detailed browsing statistics that break down the amount of time you spend on individual websites.

RescueTime infers relative productivity by using its own database of websites, although the user can opt to customize this. However, RescueTime can take a significant effort to set up if the results are going to be meaningful.

A common criticism is that it cannot discriminate among different activities that use the same application. For example, you may be writing a report, updating your resume, or writing poetry using a word processing application, but RescueTime can only assign that time to one assigned tag.

Having said that, many users have reported seeing increased productivity after using this application, presumably as it does correctly identify many of the productivity killers that affect so many people: Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, etc.

You may be surprised to see just how long you spend on these types of diversions and you can then ensure you restrict such activities to out of hours or your lunch breaks. In this way you will guarantee that you are working most effectively.

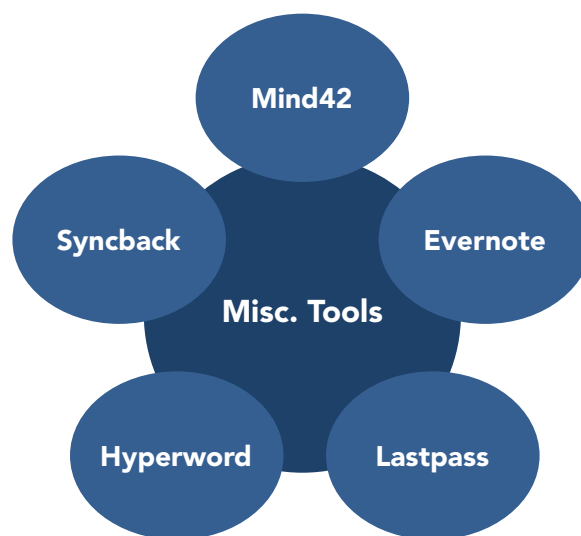
KEY POINTS

- ✓ If you think you may be spending too much time on non-work-related browsing, then monitoring tools can help you control this tendency.

Miscellaneous Productivity Tools

There are literally hundreds of productivity tools available on the Internet and to review them all is beyond the scope of this eBook. Many of these tools are free or sold for a nominal price and cover a wide variety of activities.

You need to decide which areas of your everyday activities or tasks take up more of your time and effort than you feel is reasonable. When you have this list, you can then research the best available productivity tool for you.



To give you an example of the type of tools you can harness to improve your efficiency, we have selected and described five. Each one deals with a different aspect of your work tasks and gives you an idea of the huge number of tools you can utilize to improve your productivity.

Hyperwords—www.liquidwords.info

This application is compatible with Firefox and Google Chrome as well as WordPress and Mac OS X. It offers multiple actions to be taken with just one click on any highlighted text.

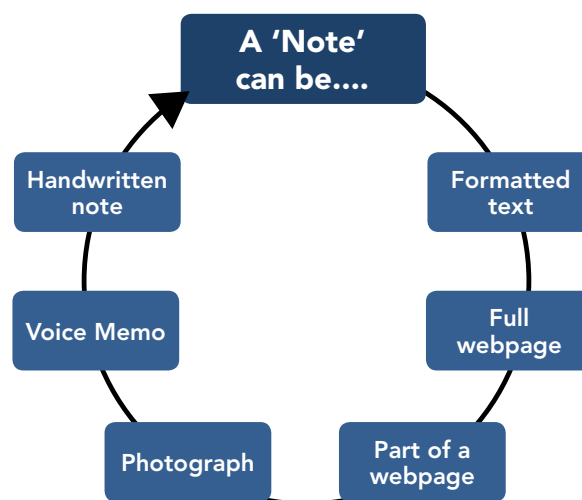
For example:

- Search Google, Bing, Yahoo or any other search engine you specify.
- Look up in Wikipedia or any other reference of your choice.

- Share what you find with email, Facebook, Twitter, and Wordpress.
- Convert any number, including currencies.
- Translate into different languages.
- Copy plain text or as a citation, with Web address and so on.
- Dynamically change how you view your page.

Evernote—www.evernote.com

Evernote is a suite of software and services designed for note taking and archiving. Within this system a 'note' can be a variety of different files, offering you great flexibility in how it can be incorporated into your daily tasks.

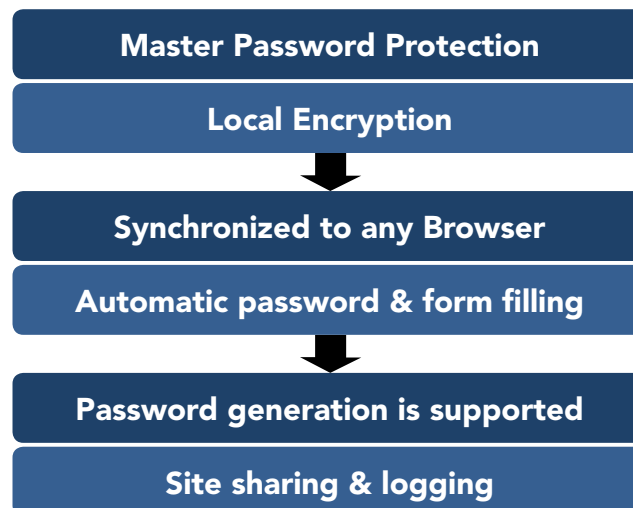


You can use your 'Notes' as file attachments themselves, or attach other files to your Note. Your Notes can also be sorted into folders, then tagged, annotated, edited, given comments, searched, and exported as part of a notebook, offering you great flexibility.

Evernote is extremely versatile and supports a number of operating system platforms (including Microsoft Windows, Mac OS X, Chrome OS, Android, iOS and WebOS), and also offers online synchronization and backup services.

Lastpass—www.lastpass.com

This is a password management program available as a plug-in for Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox, Google Chrome, Opera, and Safari. Password security and management is an increasingly complicated, frustrating, and time-consuming business.



Passwords in LastPass Password Manager are protected by a master password and are then encrypted locally and are synchronized to any other browser.

The system also offers its users many benefits, such as a form filler that automates password entering and form filling, password generation, site sharing, and site logging.

This application also offers a premium subscription that includes iPhone, BlackBerry, Android, Windows Phone, Windows Mobile, WebOS, and Symbian applications, enhanced support, multi-factor authentication, and no advertisements.

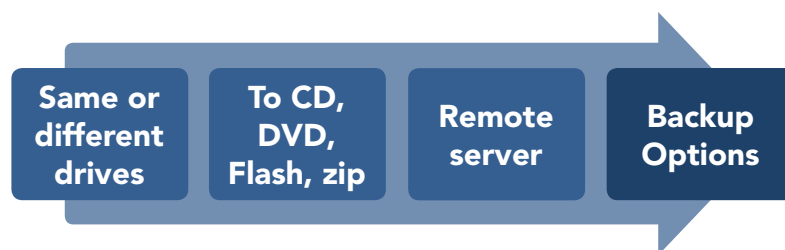
Mind42—www.mind42.com

Mind42 is an online mind-mapping application that allows users to visualize their thinking using the proven mind-mapping method. The product runs within a browser and provides WYSIWYG functionality. It is available as a free version limited to five users. Collaboration is an important feature of this product and offers you considerable flexibility. It is recommended by *Freelance Weekly* as one of their favorite time-management and organization tools.

Syncback—www.2brightsparks.com

This application is free for home and business use. It allows you to schedule backup jobs, enabling you to create specific backup jobs for certain folders or file types. You may wish to familiarize yourself with your organization's backup procedures and policies before you incorporate this into your own or your team's working practices.

This straightforward utility allows backing up and synchronizing files to the same or different drives, to different media (CD, DVD, Flash, zip), or to a remote server.



You can control the way files are compared and selected for backup, although the program comes with ready-made profiles to make the process as easy as possible.

From the above descriptions, you should begin to see which areas of your work can become more efficient and less time consuming for you, simply by using these types of tools.

To have a significant impact on your own productivity, you should select a specific area you wish to address, download and install the best tool that offers you the biggest productivity gain, and then gradually integrate the full functionality into your working life. Alternatively, you can choose one that overcomes one of your pet hates, for example remembering passwords.

Once you have integrated this into your work, you can then add others until you feel as though you are chasing diminishing returns. Remember that each tool will take time and effort to get worthwhile results.

The more familiar you become with the tool, the better able you are to define which aspects of the tool best fit with your working patterns. It is always better to use one tool well than several tools poorly.

KEY POINTS

- ✓ These tools are each designed to make a specific task as easy as possible.
- ✓ The best approach is to download and install the tool that seems to offer you the biggest productivity gain, or one that overcomes a pet hate—for example, remembering passwords or backing up your work.
- ✓ Each tool will take time and effort to optimize results and you should master them one at a time.
- ✓ You can then add others until you feel as though you are chasing diminishing returns.

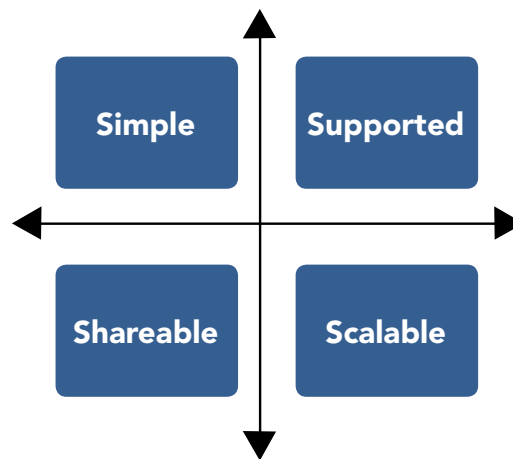
Summary

Personal productivity tools are no substitute for adopting the right behaviors. The gains that you will achieve by setting yourself goals, minimizing interruptions, not procrastinating, and learning to delegate effectively will outweigh those that you could attain by using the best time management tools that money can buy.



This does not mean that you should ignore the tools on the market, but you need to be realistic about the benefits that you will gain.

All of the software tools you choose should have four basic principles:



Simple

There is always a temptation to choose the application with the most features, but it is important to keep in mind how much time it takes you to learn how to use any new software.

Supported

Free software that is backed by a giant like Google, or which represents a cut-down version of a commercial product, is usually a better choice than something that relies on the goodwill of hobbyist developers for its existence.

Occasionally a piece of software like Firefox or Open Office will attract enough attention and build sufficient momentum to be a viable open source, and therefore free, product. More often, though, the original developers move on and an initially promising product is left unsupported.

Shareable

Even if you don't need to share your data in your current situation, this could potentially change in the future, leaving you with a learning curve to contend with as you are forced to move to a new application as well as dealing with migration headaches.

Scalable

Is there a limit on the size of workgroup that the software will support? Once again, this could cause you problems in the future if you find yourself collaborating with a larger group.

Improving your personal productivity will be the result of your own behaviors and your determination to succeed. What you can do, however, is use the best tools to help you attain this goal.

Other Free Resources

The Free Management eBooks website offers you over 100 free resources for your own professional development. Our eBooks, Checklists, and Templates are designed to help you with the management issues you face every day. They can be downloaded in PDF, Kindle, ePub, or Doc formats for use on your iPhone, iPad, laptop or desktop.

eBooks—Our free management eBooks cover everything from accounting principles to business strategy. Each one has been written to provide you with the practical skills you need to succeed as a management professional.

Templates—Most of the day-to-day management tasks you need to do have already been done by others many times in the past. Our management templates will save you from wasting your valuable time re-inventing the wheel.

Checklists—When you are working under pressure or doing a task for the first time, it is easy to overlook something or forget to ask a key question. These management checklists will help you to break down complex management tasks into small controllable steps.

FME Newsletter—Subscribe to our free monthly newsletter and stay up to date with the latest professional development resources we add every month.

Social Media—Share our free management resources with your friends and colleagues by following us on LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and RSS.

Visit www.free-management-ebooks.com