

# Improving Productivity

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It is easy to blame poor productivity on external factors. There are more distractions than ever, customers' and colleagues' expectations for speedy actions have increased, and the amount of information available is immense.

Productivity comes down to what we pay attention to and how we manage our time; some people manage a heavy workload and potentially overwhelming distractions productively while others struggle.

The good news is that it is possible for us to learn to improve our productivity. The bad news is it takes effort and practice to create better habits, and it rarely happens overnight. The place to start is motivation. If you are not really bothered by a lack of productivity, then despite all sorts of initiatives, not much will change. But if you are willing to make and sustain changes, then you can usually achieve significant increases in productivity.

Focus first on the *benefits of improving productivity*, for yourself and for those around you. This should provide the motivational fuel to power the change.

## What You Need to Know

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### Can we spend less of our lives in meetings?

Probably! It is a great question to ask and here are some points to help you:

- Only call a meeting if gathering people together is really necessary. Could you send a document out for comments by e-mail or use a conference call instead?
- Make best use of people's time. Can you ask for a meeting when participants will already be together, such as before training or following a weekly meeting?
- Keep down attendee numbers. Invite only those really needed or your meetings can get mired in extraneous discussions.
- If you do not think your attendance is required, ask the organizer why you have been invited. Suggest you attend just the part during which you can contribute.
- Help people to be productive in the meeting. Ask for phones to be switched off. Be clear about the objective of the meeting and each part of it. Tell people the time allowed for agenda items. Remind them of the finishing time if the discussion gets off the track.
- Thank people for helping to keep the meeting on track. Summarize and restate actions, clarifying responsibility and deadlines

## Will a smartphone or PDA really transform my productivity?

Not necessarily. When cell phones were new, people realized they would be excellent for productivity. However they have also meant greater distraction and no escape from pressure. With access to the Internet and e-mails, your latest gadget can do the same. Lucky you! A black hole for time in the palm of your hand!

These are *tools* to help you organize your workload and life. What makes the difference is *how* you use them. To see the productivity gains that advertisers of these products claim are possible, you will need to develop the discipline and habits that highly organized people foster.

## What to Do

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### Remove Barriers

Talk with people about enablers and barriers. Identify the things that help and hinder them in their work. Listen carefully. Some barriers can be easily gotten rid of. Some enablers can be quickly and cheaply put in place. Do this for yourself too, looking at your own environment.

Removing some barriers will take a lot of time and money. Discuss this with your team and ask how much time the barrier wastes, and for how many people. Then figure out whether there is a cost benefit over time in removing it despite the initial expense. Removing barriers and increasing enablers can motivate a workgroup. Free up energy to focus on the work!

### Deal with Incoming “Stuff”

Put in place a good system for turning e-mails, phone calls, meetings, mail, information, etc. into decisions about action. Managing the IN is crucial to improved productivity. IN is no longer just a physical basket on the desk but also includes the answering machine, voice mail, e-mail inbox, fax tray, and any other source of incoming data or documents.

Sometimes people get snowed under and start to ignore their IN, in an attempt to keep the workload manageable. But as soon as you avoid what is coming in, you are unable to make things happen effectively. IN is not a storage area and should be emptied every day. But before you panic, this does not mean you have to *finish* all the work.

Choose a time each day to go through your IN from top to bottom and clear it. In the first instance, when you receive any kind of “incoming,” all you have to do is decide: *Should I do something with this?*

If not, throw it out immediately. If you really need to keep it, make sure it is labeled and filed properly so that finding it again will not waste your time. If the answer is yes, decide: *What should I do?*

## **Tackle Immediate Tasks**

Some tasks are so quick they would take longer to put off or give to someone else, than to do. Do these things immediately. For example, professional membership renewal—you know you need it; it will take 3 minutes; pay online right now. That is one less loose end to think about.

## **Group Similar Tasks**

The exception to this is the regular string of similar quick tasks. For example, requests for a brochure. If you stopped to do this every other time the phone rang, you would never do anything else. Gather these and process them at a convenient time each day.

In fact, longer similar tasks are also done more quickly when you group them. Structure your week so you have blocks of time for concentrating on a particular area of your role.

## **Delegate Tasks**

If you work with a team, you need to become an expert at this. You should delegate when:

- someone else has the skills and time;
- doing this task will help someone else develop;
- someone else relishes or specializes in this type of action.

Introduce the task to the person, describe clearly the outcomes required, set a completion date, and offer the necessary support. Thank them for taking it on. Make a note on a “waiting for...” list.

## **Keep track**

People experience “overwhelm” when they no longer can keep tabs on all they need to do. They are aware some of the balls they are juggling are dropping but cannot recall easily what they are or stop to pick them up. By the time they do stop, the balls have rolled away.

Make a note in one place of all actions that are not immediate and not delegable. This sounds simple and it is. This list will keep them safe, while you are juggling more urgent matters. Your action list

frees up your mind to concentrate fully on what you are currently doing. It is critical to keep track of and prioritize your actions effectively.

## Choose Tasks in Context

Many people worry they have more actions than they can actually complete. Do not panic. Highly successful people who are famous for getting things done *don't do all the tasks on their lists*. As your workload increases, become disciplined in your choices of what you do. Make better decisions about which actions you do by:

- categorizing tasks by project, by stakeholder, or area of your role;
- sorting tasks by importance as well as urgency;
- using your calendar to schedule time to complete certain tasks that are date specific.

## Monitor Your Progress Daily

Every day, review the date-specific tasks and appointments you have, the actions you must do that day, and "waiting for..." items from others. You should also glance over your entire task list, for items to move up, delete, or delegate now.

## What to Avoid

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### You Find It Hard to Say "No"

Having a "can-do" attitude is highly valued in organizations but being able to say "no" should be too. Taking on more than you and your team can cope with helps nobody. It is better to learn to be politely assertive, suggesting that the additional task would be better performed elsewhere this time.

Saying "not now" is another underrated skill. Turn off the "ping" on your e-mails and deal with them at the time you have chosen. Switch your phones through to a colleague for a period so you can do some quality concentrating. Your productivity will soar.

## You Micromanage Your Staff

When you delegate a task to staff members you may get some resistance, or “pushback.” Perhaps they are not sure how to go about it, are looking for guidance, are not eager to take on responsibility, or perhaps something new seems scary to them.

Managers can react to pushback by launching into time-consuming and unnecessary micromanagement, which stifles the development of the individuals.

Avoid this by going into coaching mode:

- Clarify what the outcome needs to be.
- Ask them what the options are to achieve it.
- You can then add your ideas and discuss the benefits of the different options.
- Ask them to think about any other areas not yet discussed.
- Ask them to integrate the options into a plan.
- REMEMBER, it might not be exactly what you would do. That is all right; concentrate on the outcome.
- Once the task is done, ask them what they learned.
- Express your gratitude generously.

## You Decide to Do What You Like Doing

People are imaginative, finding reasons to avoid what they do not feel like doing. Others always choose tasks they relish. While this makes them happier in the short term, it does very little to improve productivity.

To stay focused on the tasks that make a difference, remind yourself of what you stand to gain from increased productivity. Then return to your list and structure your day or week. What needs to be done? Finally, throw in something you relish toward the end, a reward for discipline.

## Where to Learn More

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### Book:

Allen, David. Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity. Piatkus, 2001.

## Web Site:

lifehack.org: [www.lifehack.org](http://www.lifehack.org)

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