

Managing Your Productivity

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Chapter outline

Managing Your Productivity

- 5 habits that might be holding you back
 - Being interrupted and getting distracted
 - Task switching
 - Using too many task reminders
 - Starting with the smaller tasks
 - Urgency addiction
- Your two key hours at work and how to make the most of them

5 habits that might be holding you back

Something funny is happening: we are working longer hours and using more technology at work. But our productivity – the value we get from that time – is not increasing. German time management expert, Lothar Seiwert, estimates that the average person works at 40% productivity. This is mainly due to poor habits.

The reality for most people is that work is a very tiring place, physically and mentally. Work is also a cluttered place: desks piled high with papers, inboxes full of mails, messages and reminders coming from all angles. We work hard, often rushing around for the day before going home exhausted.

Habits are powerful. Good habits save (and poor habits waste) huge amounts of time and energy. This chapter highlights five key reasons why most people work hard without getting the return they deserve:

- 1 Being interrupted and getting distracted
- 2 Task switching
- 3 Using too many task reminders
- 4 Starting with the smaller tasks
- 5 Urgency addiction

In this chapter, we are going to drill down and look at how you currently make decisions about

how you use your time. Some suggestions are made to help you get more from your day. More suggestions follow in later chapters.

1 Being interrupted and getting distracted

What Happens? You're working on something important, the phone rings and even though you let it go to voice mail, you have been interrupted. Then you are notified about an incoming email, even without looking at the email, you have been interrupted. In the workplace nowadays, we are interrupted, on average, once every nine minutes (more in open-plan offices, less in offices with closed doors) and the time between interruptions is decreasing.

Why is this a problem? When you are working on simple tasks, interruptions are generally not a problem, it is easy to get back on track. But they are a problem when you are working on something that needs your full attention, or when you have a tight deadline.

While your subconscious brain can handle tens of tasks at a time, your conscious brain can only focus on one thing. When you are interrupted your conscious brain switches to the interruption and then needs to switch back

to the task on which you are trying to concentrate. This is time-consuming and tiring.

Your Issues

- Use your time log to find who is interrupting you and why. What needs do the interruptions point to?
 - People asking for information - a training need
 - People asking to get documents signed or authorised because there is no set way of looking after this
 - A discipline need - people not bothering to look up something themselves because asking you is easier
 - An availability need - some of your job happens at unscheduled times
- Reflect on whether it would make sense to set up a system to communicate on a regular basis with key people – your boss, direct reports, peers, key suppliers - and encourage them to do the same for you.
- Set up a small file for each person and keep notes of delegated work, ongoing projects, ideas to discuss, items which require follow-up, in these files; so that when you are speaking to these key people you can catch up with a number of items at the same time.

- Or organise a regular meeting time (daily or weekly) where all these issues are dealt with in one go.

2 Task switching

What happens? We constantly switch from one type of task to another. We do a couple of emails, then make a phone call, deliver a document, get a coffee, sign papers, do some work on a presentation and then check the inbox.

Why is this a problem? Constant switching of tasks means that there is a loss of focus and concentration. Economies of scale are not harnessed and consequently work takes longer. It can often lead to reacting to what is happening around you rather than pro-actively making decisions about what to do.

Your issues:

Think through your past few days at work and identify which of the following were reasons for moving from one task to another. Tick which apply to you.

- Doing a task that was on a list
- Doing a task because it was quicker than putting it on a list
- Responding to a new email, ringtone or reminder
- Working on something that you had noticed on your desk
- Doing a task before you forgot it
- Doing a task to meet a deadline
- Getting bored and moving on to a more interesting task
- Getting distracted, perhaps while surfing the net or looking through a file
- Following a normal routine (first I do task A, then task B)
- Making time for a task that was important but not urgent
- Switching to a task or spending extra time on it mainly because you like it
- Doing a task that you did not have time to delegate
- Doing small tasks as you didn't have enough time or energy to do important tasks

The chances are that you have ticked many of these reasons. For now, start to become more aware of what is driving your decision-making about moving from one task to another.

3 Using too many task reminders

What happens? Most people record the tasks they have to do in 10 different places.

Why is this a problem? Imagine 10 wardrobes with your clothes randomly distributed between them. It would be hard to decide what to wear. Similarly, when your tasks are stored in many different places, it is harder to make a quality decision about how to spend your time. Managing the lists becomes a task in itself and this can lead to less useful decision-making strategies.

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Your Issues

Tick which task reminders you use.

- To-do list (written or electronic)
- Papers and files on the desk – waiting for your attention
- Email inbox – with un-actioned emails
- Mobile phone reminders/text messages
- Computer reminders
- Computer calendar
- Paper or electronic diary
- Messages on post-its and other bits of paper
- Performance management form (or other documents which record your goals)
- Voicemail
- Instant-messaging, Real-time or other chat-room technology
- Memory
- Somebody to remind you (e.g. assistant)
- Other _____
- _____
- Total _____

We will come back to this, for now, make an effort to put all of your tasks onto one list.

4 Starting with the smaller tasks

If you have not already completed the exercises in the introduction, it would be useful to do exercises 3 and 4 on page 8 before you continue.

What happens? Most people spend their first hour at work on numerous quick, easy and fairly straightforward tasks which typically fall into four categories:

- 1 Getting an overview of what the day holds, e.g., writing a to-do list, checking diaries and calendars
- 2 Doing routine tasks, e.g., checking figures, making arrangements, completing paperwork
- 3 Socialising/personal time, e.g., greeting colleagues, getting coffee, scanning the newspaper, checking bank accounts online
- 4 Checking for potential problems, e.g., checking emails and listening to voicemails to see whether anything needs immediate attention

Why is this a problem? Often we do these small tasks with the best of intentions. We want to ‘clear the decks’ or get a few ‘quick wins’. The problem is that most people fill their heads with large quantities of tasks first thing in the morning. This causes a feeling

of stress and attention is paid to getting many small things off the list, often at the expense of the larger, more important tasks. Few of the tasks above would ever be discussed at a performance appraisal or promotion interview.

What is the alternative to starting with these types of tasks? When asked about tasks that they would love to have enough time for, most people identify five types of tasks:

- 1 Thinking/planning – about a product, system, project, time-period
- 2 Research – finding out what is going on in the organisation, industry, profession. Personal development
- 3 People issues – working with team-members, consultation, coaching, delegation. Creating a network inside and outside the organisation. Getting close to customers
- 4 Challenging projects – getting on with projects which are important, complex or have been put off
- 5 Creating a robust infrastructure – creating systems, templates, procedures, policies which help you to get through your day-to-day work more quickly. Harnessing technology

We rarely pay enough attention to these tasks because they are not urgent. Yet, they would make a big difference to our work

Your Issues

Check to what extent the answers you gave to exercise 3 correspond to the four categories identified on page 26 and whether the answers you gave to exercise 4 correspond to the five categories above.

5 Urgency addiction

What happens? Urgency addiction can happen at either a corporate or individual level. Urgent issues and long hours worked become high profile, attract attention and get talked about. Red exclamation marks become the norm on emails.

Why is this a problem? Urgency can be really useful. It can create a sense of energy and momentum that makes something important happen quickly.

Where urgency becomes a problem is when the organisation (or individual) starts to value activity over productivity. With a consequent loss of focus on what is really important.

Former President of the USA, General Dwight Eisenhower, said: “What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important”. Rather than just reacting to urgent situations, it is useful to stand back and

If this is urgent, then we must be important!

Sandra was delighted with her job in the training department of a large insurance company. As soon as she joined, she started hearing stories about how busy the department was. Sandra was puzzled as the department was considerably less busy than her previous workplace. Whenever she ventured this opinion, she would be told to 'just wait' and see how busy things got. Sandra found the emphasis on busyness intriguing. Much of the talk was about how busy things were, how late

people were working or who had worked over the weekend. She was also intrigued by how badly organised the dept was. Sandra regularly made suggestions about reducing the daily workload through clever use of technology. She would be told that everybody was 'too busy' to set these systems up. Sandra recognised that the department was addicted to urgency. The team saw urgency as a measure of their importance and they weren't going to let anything or anybody diminish that!

identify why a particular issue has become urgent, for example:

- Lack of planning - something was done badly or important steps were left out and tasks had to be re-done/fixed.
- Poor communication – not all of the people who needed to know were told or consulted with resulting delays, misunderstandings and bad feelings.
- The person requesting the work does not actually know when it is needed or does not have a system for keeping tabs on work that they have asked other people to do. They impose an urgent deadline

as they want the reassurance of knowing that you have delivered. Weeks later, you might ask about the work you submitted, only to hear "I'm so busy, I haven't even got around to looking at it".

- Power trip or image management (urgency is the prerogative of important people).

Your Issues

Look through your time log and identify when you were working on urgent items and why. Did the urgency add value, i.e. were you capitalising on an energy and momentum or did the urgency detract from value, i.e. were you

re-doing or fixing something that had gone wrong?

Your two key hours at work and how to make the most of them

Your two key hours in the day are your first hour and your last hour at work. Using these two hours effectively ensures that you use your time most productively during the day. The last hour sets you up to use the first hour most effectively.

The Last Hour

Often at the end of the day we run out of time, energy, or both. Sometimes we spend the last few hours of the day rushing to meet a deadline and we leave work exhausted, or we find that we are trying to work on something but are simply too tired so we go home. One of the key factors in really taking control of your time is to use your last hour effectively, to clear today away and set up tomorrow so that you can roll-out as much work as possible.

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Here is a great routine to finish the day, and set up success for the next day.

- Write your to-do list for the following day. Cluster small tasks together
- Take out your diary and schedule in your tasks in 60 – 90 minute chunks. Start with the bigger, more important tasks then fit clusters of smaller tasks around these
- Prepare for all the meetings you have tomorrow. Print out documents and make sure your paperwork is in order so that tomorrow you just pick up your file and go to the meeting
- Check your inbox and voicemail and deal with small and urgent tasks, particularly tasks that other people are waiting for such as authorising, checking and proof-reading
- Look ahead in your diary and chase things that you need for your work tomorrow or in the next few days
- Make arrangements e.g. book meeting rooms
- Talk to key people – your assistant, boss, key colleagues. If appropriate, check whether there is anything they need from

you before mid-morning tomorrow

- Tidy your desk and put away any files and papers you have been using
- Select an important task on which you intend to spend one hour first thing tomorrow morning. Leave it ready on your desk
- Go home!

This evening routine has a number of advantages:

- i It allows your subconscious brain to assimilate tasks and prepare for the next day
- ii It helps you switch off for the evening (this sounds counter-intuitive and many people worry that they will spend all evening thinking about work if they make their to-do list before they go home)
- iii It helps deliver an hour of uninterrupted time first thing in the morning

The First Hour

The other key hour in your day is your first hour at work. You can really ramp up your productivity by spending your first hour at work on something that would make a big difference to your job but which is not urgent, e.g. some of those tasks that you identified in exercise 4. Time for these tasks will never be simply handed to

you, yet they are the tasks that will help you to produce your ‘product’ more quickly and with better quality. You need to create and protect time for these tasks.

The first hour is ideal for this important, non-urgent work, for a number of reasons:

- Many people experience higher energy levels in their first few hours at work
- There are fewer interruptions in the first hour at work (everybody else is writing to-do lists and checking emails!)
- You will catch up on the time that you have spent on these tasks. Think about how much work you get through in the couple of days before your summer holidays. Files that have been lying in your inbox or on your desk for weeks get dealt with (or perhaps binned) very decisively

Most of our deadlines are ‘end of’ deadlines (e.g. end of day), and we tend to meet our deadlines. It is the important tasks that do not have deadlines that need your attention.

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Like most people, Robert, a translator in a European institution, found it hard to accept that non-urgent tasks (like planning or creating great infrastructure) should be prioritised. Robert and his colleagues were often asked to translate difficult material with very short deadlines. Robert was able to clearly describe the differences between translators who were able to meet the challenge of doing a high quality job quickly, versus those who just about made the grade: the high quality translator had a

glossary of terms and could access previous translations which had been properly archived (infrastructure). They were up to date with the institution's work as well as developments within their own country (research). They knew people throughout the organisation who could clarify points and provide background information (network). Robert recognised that, even though it is counterintuitive to spend time on tasks that are not urgent, these are the tasks that result in a high quality job done quickly.

Summary of Chapter 2

→ There are five main reasons why we work hard with low productivity:

- Being interrupted and getting distracted, which makes it harder for us to focus
- Switching tasks – which makes it difficult to build up economies of scale
- Using too many task reminders – which makes it hard to get an accurate picture of what we have to do
- Starting with the smaller tasks – which means that we stick with them for much longer

- Urgency addiction – which means that the deadline, not the importance of the task, gets priority

- Make use of the two key hours. The last hour of the day is used to set up tomorrow and the first hour of the day is used to do something with long-term importance
- Time spent on non-urgent tasks often helps us respond more quickly