

How to Make the Most of Your Workday

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Do you often find your workday spiraling out of control? You start each day with a plan to get so much done, but soon find yourself becoming distracted, focusing on low-priority tasks and, simply, procrastinating. So how can you regain control of your time? One-size-fits-all lists on how to be more productive don't work; we'll outline productivity techniques that can be adapted to your personality and working style.

Three Basics of Productivity

Use these principles to help guide you through your workday.

All workers and workdays are unique. With fewer companies and employees adhering to a traditional 9-to-5 day, the differences in our workdays are becoming more pronounced. But putting those differences aside, three overarching ideas apply to all our productivity tips:

- 1. Trust the small increments.** You can't expect to change years of working habits overnight. Small changes in how you work can gradually add up to big changes in productivity. Try one tip to start, and keep adding more as you find the strategies that work best for you.
- 2. Be accountable.** Whether it's weekly check-ins with a co-worker or setting your own deadlines and announcing them to others, having to answer to someone else can often force you to get the job done.
- 3. Forgive yourself.** You are human: Accept that you are sometimes going to slip up, become distracted and have a bad day. It's more important to move on than to dwell on your mistakes.

For the Multitasker

If you're trying to do three things at once, you're often accomplishing very little.

A Biological Impossibility

Think you can get more done by juggling multiple tasks at the same time? Try calling your co-worker while typing an e-mail and checking your Facebook page. You may feel as if you're being productive, but you're probably not getting any of those tasks done efficiently.

We all have a limited amount of cognitive bandwidth — the number of thoughts and memories we can hold in our minds at any given time. Your brain may delude itself into thinking that it has more capacity than it really does, but it's really working extra hard to handle multiple thoughts at once when you are switching back and forth between tasks. **Your ability to get things done depends on how well you can focus on one task at a time, whether it's for five minutes or an hour.**

"Multitasking is not humanly possible," said Earl K. Miller, a neuroscience professor at the Picower Institute for Learning and Memory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

More Errors and Less Creativity

When you multitask, you tend to make more mistakes. When you toggle back and forth between tasks, the neural networks of your brain must backtrack to figure out where they left off and then reconfigure, Dr. Miller said. That extra activity causes you to slow down, and [errors become more likely](#).

“People are much more efficient if they monotask,” he said.

Trying to multitask also impedes creativity, he said. Truly innovative thinking arises when we allow our brains to follow a logical path of associated thoughts and ideas, and this is more likely when we can focus on a single mental pathway for an extended period.

The brain is like a muscle: It becomes stronger with use, Dr. Miller said. As with physical exercise, the more we strengthen our mental connections by focusing on one task to the exclusion of all others, the better we can perform.

How to Monotask

To the best of your ability, set up a work environment that encourages the performing of one task at a time. It’s probably not realistic to think that we can block off hours at a time for a single task, but even committing to monotask for five minutes can yield productivity benefits.

Here are a few small changes you can make:

Remove temptation: Actively resist the urge to check unrelated social media while you are working on a task. Some workers may need to go so far as to install anti-distraction programs like [SelfControl](#), [Freedom](#), [StayFocusd](#) and [Anti-Social](#), which block access to the most addictive parts of the internet for specified periods.

Work on just one screen: Put away your cellphone and turn off your second monitor.

Move: If you find yourself losing focus – reading the same sentence over and over or if your mind continually wanders off topic – get up and briefly walk around, Dr. Miller said. [A brief walk around your office can lift your mood, reduce hunger and help you refocus.](#)

Work in intervals: Set a timer for five or 10 minutes and commit to focusing on your assignment for that amount of time. Then allow yourself a minute of distraction, as long as you get back on your task for another five or 10 minutes.

When Distractions Take Over

The tendency to [become distracted](#) is primal, so forgive yourself if you do. It arose in our earliest days as humans, when we needed to respond instantly to lions, tigers and other predators that threatened us, said Dr. Miller. Every sensory input was deeply interesting, and our response to it was sometimes a matter of life or death. Our brain has not let go of this ancient survival mechanism; we still crave that informational tap on the shoulder, he said.

Fortunately, the more we work on focusing on one task at a time and ignoring distractions, the more we exercise the prefrontal cortex – the more evolved part of our brains. Then it becomes easier to focus.

More About Managing Distractions

For the Procrastinator

Accountability – whether it’s to yourself or to another person – can be crucial to your productivity.

Be Accountable

To combat procrastination, **find an accountability partner**. This can be a colleague or a manager, whose role is to receive regular progress reports on your project. The person you choose will have to take his or her role seriously, expressing disappointment if you have not achieved your goal, and appreciation if you have. Some inveterate procrastinators even agree on a set of rewards or punishments to go along with their deadlines, depending on what motivates them the most. A reward could be a free lunch; a punishment could be an email to the department announcing that a deadline was not met.

Stay on Track

[To-do lists work](#) to keep you accountable because they help you stay on the path to getting your most important work done – if you use them effectively, that is.

Before you leave work for the day, make a list of five to eight goals that you would like to accomplish the following day, said Julie Morgenstern, a time management expert based in New York. On a separate list add any personal errands that need to be done that day — like booking a flight for a vacation or buying a birthday gift. That list should contain no more than two or three items. Be realistic about what you can accomplish in a day of work, and resist the urge to make a to-do list for the whole week, which can leave you feeling stressed and overwhelmed.

Make the items on your to-do list specific, realistic and simple — don't secretly pack eight or 10 tasks inside one huge item, like "finish project." Instead, break your project into small, discrete components.

To-Do List Downsides

Because our primal mind craves distraction, the classic to-do list can prevent interruptions from taking over your day. But humans are also vulnerable to so-called "structured procrastination," where in order to avoid working on a hard task, they spend time on a much easier one. Answering an email or liking a post on Facebook can be a form of structured procrastination. [Writing your to-do list can also be a form of structured procrastination](#). So, **give yourself five minutes or less to write a to-do list each morning**. Keep it focused and short, so you're not spending more time checking off items than actually completing them.

List Keepers

Some people like to keep their lists on paper – making emphatic and satisfying checkmarks whenever they complete a task. Others prefer the computer route. If that's the case, [many apps are available](#), including these:

- **Todoist**: This app works well across many platforms and is rich with features like reminders, notes and the ability to sync your lists with your devices.
- **Remember the Milk**: This one includes a feature that allow users to share tasks with others, like coworkers and family members.
- **Evernote**: This note-taking app allows you to create to-do lists in the form of personal notebooks.

To avoid confusion, pick either paper or digital for your lists, as it can be hard to manage both.

At Your Desk

Where you work can be just as important as how you work.

What Your Desk Says About You

There's no one right way to organize a desk. But your physical workspace can have a big effect on productivity. It

“can either energize you or deplete your energy,” said Ms. Morgenstern, the time management expert.

In general, only 25 percent of a desk’s messiness is related to organizational skills, Ms. Morgenstern maintains – the rest is tied to time management. “Every paper on your desk has a task associated with it, and that task is going to take time.” Have you factored in enough time to get it all done? Out-of-control piles of paper may be a sign that you need to delegate, she said.

Ask yourself: Are the piles on your desk the same ones that were there three weeks ago, or are they moving? As long as they’re not stagnant, you’re probably doing O.K. with some clutter, Ms. Morgenstern said.

In most cases, **keep your desk clear except for the project you are tackling at the moment**, along with the equipment you need to complete it, she said. You should also create a space for an “in zone” – brand new things that have just come in – and an “out zone” for things that are finished and need to be distributed.

One of the easiest ways to start to change your work space is to **spend the last 10 minutes of your workday readying your desk for the next day**. Then you won’t have to start your day with yesterday’s mess, Ms. Morgenstern said. Starting out with a desk prepared for the day ahead could have a powerful effect on your mind-set and productivity.

For Computer Users (Everyone)

As much as they speed up the pace of work, computers can slow things down, too.

Know Your Computer

Not understanding the capabilities of your computer can be a serious hindrance to your productivity. Some people fear that asking for tech help will make them look incompetent, but in fact the opposite is true, [according to research](#).

Ask for technology advice when you think a computer or online task is taking longer than it should. It could be that you don’t know how to use a particular type of technology efficiently, or you don’t know what a company’s past practices have been in a certain area. Make an effort to seek out the people who can fill in your knowledge gaps, while being respectful of their time and responsibilities.

Managers can assist in this process by offering regular information sessions and company-specific manuals related to technology like email, Excel, Microsoft Word, Slack and others. A mentorship program is another option.

Take Control of Your Inbox

Do you find yourself constantly stopping to check your email? Email is an ideal way to practice structured procrastination — when you work on an easy, unimportant task rather than tackle a harder, important one.

Email is like life: It is messy, imperfect, full of surprises, and everybody handles it differently. **There is no perfect email system.** Experts may promote the value of techniques like “Inbox Zero,” where you try to clear your inbox every day, but even if your inbox is empty, your work life – with all its unanswered questions, incomplete projects and challenging problems – will remain full. Embrace the daily challenge of keeping your work life under control by using email as your ally rather than your nemesis.

Here are a few techniques that can help make your email work for you:

- **Set aside dedicated times every day to process email.** This could be a few times a day or five minutes every hour, Ms. Morgenstern, the time management expert said. “Give email your undivided attention when you’re working on it,” she said.

- **Divide email into groups.** As you scan your email, sort the messages into two groups: those requiring quick responses and those needing thoughtful ones. Try the “two-minute rule,” as popularized by David Allen, author of “Getting Things Done.” If you can dispense with an email in two minutes, do it now; if not, do it later at a scheduled time. If emails are going to require a few days of thought, buy yourself some time by acknowledging receipt that day and saying you will respond later. Make it a point to follow through.
- **Try to identify the emails you are actively avoiding.** Often there is an emotional component to emails you avoid, Ms. Morgenstern said, because they involve saying “no” to someone or making a difficult decision. Instead of procrastinating on replying, you will likely save time by responding in person or on the phone, where your tone and personality will come through more readily, rather than trying to write the perfect diplomatic response in an email.
- **Turn off notifications.** Some email experts advise checking email only two or three times a day, but in many work environments this is not realistic – an all-important message from the boss or a client may need a quick response. But almost anything can wait for 20 minutes. So, turn off your email notifications for 20 to 30 minutes when you need to focus on something else.

Related Guide

How to Hire the Right Person

Learn the strategies that chief executives have developed through trial and error to help you go beyond the polished résumés, pre-screened references and scripted answers, to hire more creative and effective members for your team.

Get Help

Spend a week or two identifying the email issues that consistently frustrate you or slow you down. Then, **find an “email guru”** in your company and see if that person would be willing to sit down with you for a half-hour to explain the various capabilities of your email system. Your guru could be a super-efficient co-worker or someone from tech support, but it should be someone who can show you how to use built-in features that you may not be aware of, like filters that can block unimportant messages and send them to spam. Ask about how you can use labels, folders, filters, archives, starred messages, unsubscribe lists and other features to help you spend less time on email.

No email guru in your office? There [are plenty of online resources](#) for email management tips. But if a particular technique doesn’t work for you, abandon it.

More on Creating a Productive Workspace

For Those Who Power Through

It’s no surprise that the way you treat your body can affect the way your mind works.

Move More

Working continuously and for long hours does not mean you’re getting more done. Sometimes the best way to get something done is *not* to work on it for a while.

Sitting for long periods of time is [just plain bad for you](#), but it’s also bad for your ability to be productive. [Standing up and moving around improves blood flow to the brain, which enhances cognition](#). Alan Hedge, an ergonomics professor at Cornell, suggests that workers try a combination of sitting, standing and walking to keep altering their

body position and give their minds a break from work.

How to Make Desk Work More Productive

A [timed combination](#) of sitting, standing and walking can help you work at your best.

1. Sit for 20 minutes and work.
2. Stand for eight minutes and work.
3. Stop working and take a walk for two minutes.
4. Repeat.

Take Long Breaks

Where were you the last time you had a great idea? Your desk? Or was it when you were in the shower, while you were walking your dog or driving your kids to school?

Working a 10- to 12-hour day may earn you points with some bosses, but it's not great for creativity. Instead of powering through, **consider intentionally taking a break from a large project for up to 10 hours.** That will allow new ideas to marinate in your subconscious, causing your neurons to make new connections.

Sleep is one of the most effective ways to take a long break, so try not to give it short shrift. Research shows that sleep allows our brains to make [new and unexpected connections](#), leading to insights and breakthroughs — which explains why we so often have brilliant ideas during our morning shower.

Learn to identify the signs of mental fatigue, like reading the same sentence over and over websites or writing emails with no real goals or priorities in mind. **Don't feel guilty about taking a break**, or leaving for the day when you can think that your brain needs time to recharge.

Try a Nap

It's pretty common to feel a "post-lunch dip" in the midafternoon. Your body naturally wants to go to sleep about seven hours after waking, and this is amplified by the effects of digestion. Unfortunately, this biological reality collides with an economic one: Most offices frown on napping.

If it's possible to take a 20-minute "power nap" at work (for example if you work at home), by all means do so. **To best increase your energy, it may be a good idea to [drink a cup of coffee before your nap](#).** Research has shown that this method likely works because the short power nap helps clear the brain of the sleep-inducing compound adenosine. Caffeine, meanwhile, takes about 20 minutes to have its physiological effect — kicking in just as the napper is awakening.

If a nap is out of the question, however, train yourself to quickly recognize the signs of the post-lunch dip: drowsiness and an inability to concentrate. Then, **get up and walk around**, talk to a colleague at another desk or work on something less demanding of your brain power until the sleepiness passes.

Fight Stress

When we feel overwhelmed at work, our fight-or-flight response tends to come into play, leading us to take quick, shallow breaths. This sends less oxygen to the brain, causing us to become even more stressed and to think less clearly. **Counteract the effects of stress by breathing more efficiently.**

Most people are vertical breathers, in that their shoulders move up when they inhale, according to Belisa Vranich, a

clinical psychologist and breath instructor. Many people also breathe from their upper chest, whereas the biggest part of the lungs is in the middle of the body.

Horizontal breathing may seem unnatural at first, but it is actually the way animals and small children breathe. Working with your body rather than against it, you will maximize the blood flow to your brain – and your mental capacity.

How to Breathe Horizontally

This technique can help you fight stress by taking deeper breaths.

Pay Attention to Posture

When you feel stressed, you may start to lift your shoulders up toward your ears, clench your face or tense up all over. Over time, these actions become so habitual that you become unaware of them. The purpose of good posture is to expand our bodies rather than to compress them. Good posture allows you to breathe more fully, prevent chronic pain and think more clearly.

As you do your work, try to be aware of any excess tension you are holding in your body. For example, you may tense up your hands far more than necessary when you type or use a mouse. If you start to feel any tension, try to stretch that area of your body.

How to Be Mindful of Your Posture

Try this exercise to improve your work posture.

This exercise is a component of the Alexander Technique, a way of learning about how to rid your body of harmful tension. According to Lindsay Newitter, owner of the Posture Police in New York, this technique warns of a practice called “end gaining,” where people try to get ahead of themselves and lose sight of the present. When you see people hunched forward in front of their screens, chances are they are end gaining. Good posture enables you to meet your work in the present moment, and therefore get it done more efficiently.

More on Your Body and Productivity

Zoning In, No Cushion Required

An author explains how seeing problems from a different perspective may have a similar outcome as the Eastern approach of suspending thought.

Why I Taught Myself to Procrastinate

Delaying the completion of a project may actually make you more creative.

The Downside of Treadmill Desks

Treadmill desks can be good exercise, but they may impair the ability to concentrate and remember.

When Engagement Turns Into Burnout

Too often “engagement” refers to employees who get to work early, stay late and remain connected. That’s not a recipe for enduring high performance.

Common Productivity Myths

Here’s the truth behind common misconceptions about working smart.

Myth: People who are good multitaskers get more done.

Fact: Multitasking is an illusion. [Research shows](#) that people get more done if they concentrate on one task at a time. Switching frequently between tasks – or believing that you are actually doing more than one thing at once – will actually slow you down.

Myth: It’s important to have zero emails in your inbox by the end of the day.

Fact: The goal of “inbox zero” works for some people but not for others. The key to managing email is to designate specific times of the day for reading and responding to it, to differentiate between emails that can be handled quickly and those that require more time, and to learn how to use all of your email software’s features (folders, filters and archives) in ways that work best for you.

Myth: It’s best to stand while you work.

Fact: It’s better to change your position throughout the day, in a regular cycle of sitting, standing and moving around. Among other things, this variety helps [bring more blood to your brain](#), improving your cognition and therefore your productivity.

Myth: The more hours you work, the more you get done.

Fact: It is important to take breaks throughout the workday. [Even a five-minute walk around the office can boost your mood with no impact on your ability to focus](#). Getting enough rest and sleep can serve you better than working longer hours. Walking away from your work for a longer period – overnight, over the weekend or on vacation – gives your ideas a chance to marinate [in your subconscious mind](#), allowing for new bursts of productivity when you return.

Myth: The secret to improving productivity is to find the right system and stick with it.

Fact: Every person and every workday is different. While we may be able to develop new strategies and habits that work for us most of the time, our jobs and lives will always throw us curve balls that lead to less-than-perfect results. We need to accept this imperfect reality, forgive ourselves and try again tomorrow.

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About the Author

Phyllis Korkki is an assignment editor for the Business section of The New York Times and the author of "The Big Thing: How to Complete Your Creative Project Even if You're a Lazy, Self-Doubting Procrastinator Like Me" (HarperCollins).

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