



the little book of
Productivity

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Procrastination

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Becoming Organized

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Introduction

This is the little book with a lot of ideas. Ninety-nine of them, in fact. Seven chapters with 99 ideas to help you do more in less time. In this guide I've collected the best productivity ideas I've stumbled upon. Some of these are simple and others have almost doubled my productivity by adopting them.

To get you started, here's the first one:

Have a reason to be productive. Write down what you would do with more time and energy. Would you start new interesting projects? Would you lie on the beach and get a tan? If you don't have a clear outline of what you want to do with the time you save, you'll just end up bored.

Having a written list of these ideas can give you the motivation to stay productive, when it is easier to fall into lazy habits. Some of these ideas will be easy, others will require practice. Clearly defining your motivation can help you with the other 98.



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Weekly/Daily Goals

The Weekly/Daily Goals method is a technique I've found extremely helpful in combatting laziness. The idea is simple:

1. At the end of each week, write a list of work you want to finish in the next seven days.
2. At the end of each day, transfer some of the tasks from your weekly list onto a new list. These are your daily goals.
3. When you complete your daily goals, stop working for that day.

The Weekly/Daily Goals method works because it forces you to break-up your infinite to-do list. Instead of trying to accomplish everything, you finish a set amount of tasks for each day. By splitting up a mountain of work into a daily chunk, it is easier to convince yourself to get started.

Keeping weekly goals as well as a daily list allows you to add non-urgent, but important items. Weekly goals keep you focused on the big picture while daily goals keep you from feeling overwhelmed.

Timeboxing

Set a timer. Don't stop working on a task until you finish, or the time is completed. This is the essence of timeboxing, the sledgehammer of productivity tricks.

Timeboxing beats the urge to procrastinate from two directions:

1. The time amount is short (ideally between 30-90 minutes) which is less daunting than several hours of continuous work.
2. The only way to finish early is to complete the given task. This creates an added incentive to work quickly.

The real beauty of timeboxing is that often you will keep working past the timebox. Once you've built up momentum into a task or project, it is easier to keep working. Setting a timebox can be the first push you need to get started.

Try setting a 90-minute timebox the next time you can't seem to get started. Clear your desk, close your inbox and focus on working for the next ninety minutes.

Dissolving Tasks

Large, vague projects are the breeding grounds of procrastination. In order to get moving, you need to know the next step. Dissolve larger tasks into actionable chunks.

Your to-do list should make it obvious what should be done in the next 60 seconds. Dissolve non-routine tasks that you haven't done before. If you haven't prepared a tax return for a new business, getting started on this project can be difficult. However, if you break it down into steps of collecting your documents, printing an income statement and filling out relevant forms, it is easier to finish.

Dissolve tasks that you dislike doing. If you hate writing essays and need to finish a term paper, having the to-do item "Write Essay" won't inspire you to get work done. Instead, break it down into smaller steps. "Pick Topic", "Find Research Material", "Create Notes", "Write Thesis" and similar tasks are easier to swallow.

Dissolve tasks that don't have clear stopping points. "Reorganize Filing Cabinet" could be done hastily in fifteen minutes or take a dozen hours of sorting and cross referencing. Without a clear organizing plan, it is easier to put the task off forever.

Sprinting Theory

Sprinting Theory is the key to self-discipline. Studies have shown¹, that willpower is not just a state of mind. It's an resource that can be drained and recharged just like a car battery. When you procrastinate, it's not because you are a "lazy" person, but because your internal energy source is running low.

Sprinting Theory tries to fix this problem by encouraging you to focus on the timeframe where discipline is required. If you were running a 100m dash, the focus would be different than finishing a marathon. Sprinting in a marathon usually means you won't make it more than a few miles.

To use Sprinting Theory, try to find the relevant range of any task. This is the range where discipline is most critical. Then, when setting your timeboxes, focus on that range. It will keep you from burning out early or running too slowly. Examples:

1. Waking up. Force yourself to stay awake for 10 minutes before hitting the snooze button again. Usually, after that point, it is easier to just stay awake.
2. Habits. Focus on one behavioral change for 30 days. After that it's permanent.
3. Creative Blocks. Keep churning for another 20 minutes before taking a break.

Schedule Calibration

Let's play a trust exercise. You're going to stand up and then fall backwards. Don't worry, I'll catch you.

What? You fell backwards and hit the floor. That must have hurt. It's not really my fault, see I wrote this months before you're reading it. And we aren't even in the same location.

It would be understandable if you didn't trust me after my little prank. It would be hard to rely on me in the future if you can't trust me. While it's easy to understand why a lack of trust damages a relationship, it can be harder to see how a lack of trust keeps you procrastinating.

When you don't trust your to-do list, it's hard to procrastinate. When you finish everything on your list, and proceed to add more, that's violating trust. Before you started working, you had motivated yourself by saying you would be finished when the list was over. Adding more tasks breaks that trust, so you can't motivate yourself again.

Schedule calibration is when you have full trust in your to-do list. When it says you have a lot of work to do, you get all of it done. When it says you are finished, you stop. By keeping that trust, you avoid bad habits of both overwork and laziness.

Building Self-Discipline Muscles

Training self-discipline is a lot like lifting weights. If you're a chronic procrastinator, that's similar to being out of shape. Laziness isn't in your blood, it's in your muscles. By lifting "self-discipline" weights, you build the mental muscles that can keep you going when you feel like quitting. Here's a few ways to get started:

1. The next time you want to stop working, go another ten minutes. Pushing past your quitting threshold builds muscle.
2. Figure out the duration of work you can sustain, before you start becoming distracted. The next time you work, try to go an extra 10-20%.
3. Does your mind jump between different projects? Set a goal to focus on only one activity for the next month.

Measure how strong your discipline is currently. Then use that measurement as a basis for making small improvements. Even if you can only lift 10 lbs, you can build up to 100 lbs by resistance training. You can do the same with your willpower.

Using a Mantra

A mantra is a phrase you repeat to yourself. By associating a mantra with a particular state of mind, you can use it to kick yourself into a productive state.

Think back to the smell of your mom baking cookies (or if your mother didn't bake cookies, just hallucinate with me). I bet if you got a whiff of that cookie smell again it would bring back warm feelings of being at home. A mantra works the same way as your mother's cookies, although less delicious.

Coming up with a productivity mantra requires that you come up with a phrase that you associate to being productive. Legend has it that W. Clement Stone who built an insurance empire had his employees shout "Do it Now!" whenever they felt like procrastinating.

A good place is to look for quotes you like that make you feel productive. Put them as your desktop image or screensaver, so when you feel like procrastinating you'll snap out of it.

Remove Your Hidden Roadblocks

Try growing plants in soil filled with salt. It's not going to work. You can try watering them, giving the right balance of shade and sunshine or adding industrial fertilizer. All of your green-thumb techniques won't overcome the fact that the plants are sucking up poison through the roots.

If you've tried everything to cure your procrastination, and can't motivate yourself, the problem might be in the soil. Shouting "Do it Now!" and timeboxing aren't going to help when the goals and desires that root your motivate are covered in salt.

Chronic procrastination deserves more attention. When I face it, I try to test the soil by asking myself a few questions:

1. Does the goals I'm working on still inspire me?
2. Are the reasons I'm trying to become productive still meaningful to me?
3. Am I using "productivity" as an excuse to avoid my real fears and dreams?

Replacing the soil needs to come before you start adding the industrial fertilizer of productivity techniques.

Motivation Catalysts

Time to go back to high-school chemistry. Remember catalysts? A catalyst is a chemical that speeds up a reaction, but doesn't take place in the reaction itself. It's the middle-man, the arbitrator, the deal-maker. Catalysts lower the activation cost required to get a reaction started. It makes things happen without getting its suit and tie dirty.

Motivation catalysts reduce the activation cost of getting started. They lower the amount of energy you need to start moving. While a reaction can occur on its own, having catalysts speeds up the process. Here are a few example catalysts:

1. Keeping a list of your goals. I often keep a written list of my goals on my desktop. They add a punch of motivation when I need it.
2. Making a public commitment. Tell your boss, a coworker or a friend when you plan to have something completed. The added pressure will keep you motivated.
3. Post-It Notes. Write your ideas on Post-It Notes and place them where you live. They will remind you of what you need to be doing.

Churning

Churning is the art of producing garbage. Churning out writing that isn't your best quality. Making sales calls when you don't feel you could give your product away for free. Finishing designs even though everything you make looks ugly. If you want to beat procrastination, learn to churn.

Your brain can be a bit like an old water pump. You crank the lever up and down to hopefully get water out. Unfortunately, sometimes the water has been sitting in the pipes too long. It's brown, rusty and tastes disgusting. The solution isn't to stop pumping, but to pump out the garbage. Churn out those bad ideas and don't stop just because the quality is low. Eventually the bad water will be pushed out of the system and you can hit the clean water hidden below. Churn enough garbage and you can start creating great work.

Just accept that you will have to scrap most of your sub-par work when you churn. Lower your quality threshold and expect to trash most of your output eventually. I've found that going into a churn mode usually kicks me out of a creative block after only a few minutes.

Create a Distraction-Free Workplace

Procrastinators love distractions. Anything to occupy your mind so you don't feel guilty for having accomplished nothing in the last hour. Productivity-junkies know understand that the key to avoiding procrastination is to eliminate distractions. Here are a few starters:

1. On your computer. Turn off the inbox. Hide the pop-ups. Disable the internet if you have to. Work should be the only thing on your screen.
2. On your desk. Clear off any items that might draw your attention away from what you need to be doing.
3. Turn off the noise. Put up a Do-Not-Disturb sign on your door and threaten death upon anyone that might enter your fortress of solitude.
4. Let people know your "focus" hours. When I'm writing, I can't have any distractions. An incoming call can throw me off my rhythm for 15 minutes. But website maintenance doesn't require a similar degree of focus. By letting people know your "focus" hours, you can give them better times to call or meet with you.

Don't "Should" Yourself

"Should" doesn't motivate, it just makes you feel guilty for not working. I strive to maintain only two piles for activities: "Want to do" and "Not going to do". Anything that belongs to a third category of things you "Should do" is going to be agonizing to get finished.

I recommend keeping a list of your reasons for working on a goal or taking on a job. This way you can refer to it whenever a "should do" item appears. Sometimes this will mean that your current task is just an intermediate one. You might be working a job you don't like in order to get a career you do. You might be doing an essay you hate to get a degree you need.

By seeing how, albeit indirectly, any task fits into your major goals, it is easier to get them accomplished. Of course, if an item that falls into the "should do" pile doesn't connect to your major goals, it should probably fall into the "not going to do" pile instead.

Ready, Fire, Aim!

Everyone is familiar with the “Ready, aim, fire” approach. This means getting your resources, making a plan and then taking action. However, it’s easy to get stuck in the aiming phase. If you are uncertain about taking action, you might end up planning forever.

Ready, Fire, Aim! is the opposite. It means that you should take action and then correct your approach. Focus on getting the first draft done before planning out your suggestions for improvement.

Aiming works better when you have feedback to work from. If you’re planning a new design, it’s easier to see flaws when you get it in the hands of users. You can do your best to anticipate everything that might go poorly. But it’s easier to just finish and make a test. Once you have accurate feedback, you can cut down on planning and take action into the next cycle.

Advocates of extreme programming use the Ready, Fire, Aim! approach to design programs efficiently, without creating bulky, inflexible software.

Quit Your Procrastination Vices

Everyone has procrastination vices. Bad habits that steal away time without offering much in return. Your procrastination vice might be television, video games or random internet surfing. By quitting these vices entirely, you can reinvest the saved time back into things you actually care about.

Getting rid of your vices shouldn't remove your genuine sources of fun. If you love watching a specific television show each week, eliminating that to save 30 minutes won't be worthwhile. However, this isn't the case with most vices. Most people watch television because it's easy, not because it adds anything back to their lives.

Write out a list of the things that eat up a lot of your time without adding much value back. Then strive to either:

1. Eliminate the vice entirely.
2. Constrict the vice so you use it deliberately. If you really enjoy a certain television show, you might want to record that program and otherwise keep the TV off.

Get the Full Version...

Thanks for downloading the preview version of *The Little Book of Productivity*. The full e-book includes another six chapters with ideas to help you save time, energy and get more done. The e-book only costs \$9.95, and comes with a 120-Day return guarantee.

A few of the ideas covered in the full e-book:

- * The Simple Organizing System - An extremely easy way to get organized.
- * What open loops are, and why they ruin your productivity.
- * The difference between hard and soft deadlines, and how they impact your stress levels.
- * How to change your habits permanently, to stay productive long after reading the book.