PRODUCTIVITY HACKS

Tips & Tools To Work Less and Do More

Introduction

According to an article in the Washington Post, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) reported in 2013 that lost productivity is costing us a bundle.

Facebook drains away about $28 billion per year in valuable workplace productivity in the United States alone.

Fantasy football saps another $18.7 billion. Angry Birds? $1.5 billion — gone!

And that's just the Interwebs! Add in things like excessive commuting times, showing up late and leaving early, smoke breaks — and you're talking some real money!

Granted, most of that is employees who are "at work" but not working. If you're self-employed as a freelance contractor or entrepreneur, you don't have to worry about employees.

But the same issues apply. If "time is money," how much money have you thrown away in the last year by being unproductive. By wasting time? By procrastinating?

Ask yourself this question: Knowing what you do about how you work, would you hire yourself? If you answered with a resounding "YES!," congratulations! This book is not for you!

If you said "No" or even "Not sure," you may need to hack your productivity!

Let's face it, everyone needs a productivity boost now and then—sometimes just to get out of bed, sometimes to finish a project on time.

We each want to be productive for very personal reasons—to accomplish more, to make more money, to get done earlier to make more time for our personal lives, to accomplish our goals.

Whatever your reason, these Productivity Hacks can help do the trick. I've compiled a list of the most valuable and easiest to implement ways to kick your productivity into high gear.

Feel free to jump around if that's the way you like to read. But I think you'll get more out of them if you read them in order, front to back. Roughly speaking, they're ordered from the most basic to the more advanced.

Where appropriate, I've included links to online resources for more information or downloads.

Some of those links are to products, and yes, some of those product links are affiliate links. This means if you click through and then buy something, I might make a little bit of money.

I hope you will agree that the massive benefit you'll have gained from the product in question more than offsets the meager cost of my commission (to the company you're buying from -- your price is never affected).

But even if don't buy a thing, I sincerely hope you find value in at least one or two of these hacks. Have a productive day!

About The Author

[Author Name] has been a professional [profession] for [time period]. He/She is an expert in the field because… Etc., etc.

The Goal's The Thing

Unproductive? No motivation? Procrastinate much? Welcome to the club. (It's a big club!)

But wait — why do you think you're in this mess? What are you working for? Do you even know? If you don't know where you're going, why do you care about your productivity?

The first step in beating procrastination and improving your productivity is to have a plan. The first step in creating a plan is to have something to plan *for*: a goal. As the saying goes, if you fail to plan, you plan to fail.

So think about your life, and write down some goals. Start with one if that's all you can think of. (Having more goals could be one of your goals!)

I suggest having goals in at least two areas of your life; your career and your personal life. Really productive people also write out 5-year goals and 1-year goals. Some break down the current year into quarters, or at minimum have a 30-day goal, a 6-month goal, and then a 1-year goal, so they can plan ahead better.

But this book is about hacks. We're going to go simpler than that, and you're going to prove to yourself that goal setting works.

Here's the hack:

Write down a goal that's achievable within the next 30 days. Something important to you. Something you have control over, so it can't be "Meet the girl of my dreams," for example.

Write your goal in this format: "By (date 30 days out) I will have (accomplished goal)." In other words it should be a S.M.A.R.T. goal. (Google it, I'm not going to go into it here.)

For example: "By June 30th I will have written a new marketing plan."

Write your goal on half of a 3x5 index card, or the blank back of a business card. Put the card in the cash pocket of your wallet, right up front where you can see it.

For the next 30 days, every time you take out your wallet to buy something, pull the goal card out and look at it. Coffee at Starbucks? Read your goal. Fill up at the gas station? Read it again. Buying a newspaper at lunch time? Again. Get the picture? Good.

Do it now. Start today.

In 30 days you will have knocked out that goal. Maybe sooner. I promise.

Here's a hint: you can do it again any time you want. Cool, huh?

Narrow Your Gap

There's a gap in your life. No, I'm not talking about the Gap® store at the mall. I'm talking about the gap between where you are and where you want to be.

You're here but you want to be there. You're single but you want to be married. You're poor but you want to be rich. You're fat but you want to be thin.

The difference between here and there is the gap you need to fill, the valley you need to cross. But you can't even begin working on a solution until you understand exactly how big the gap is. Is it the Grand Canyon? Or is it a ditch you can jump over?

Knowing your gap is the first step in the process.

Consider your current situation. What do you most want to fix? Why are you reading this book, unless there's a shortcoming you want to overcome?

If you're procrastinating, or feel you're not as productive as you should be, first figure out what it is you're working toward. Not sure? Sure but don't like what you see? Could be part of the problem.

If you hate your job and your paycheck barely covers the bills, and you don't see yourself getting out of your current situation anytime soon, procrastination is practically a given. If you run your own business but feel like a rat on a treadmill, running constantly but going nowhere, a lack of motivation is perfectly understandable.

Figure out what is most important to you. Look at your goals. (You do have your goals written down, don't you?) Do you have financial goals, career goals, personal goals, relationship goals? If you could wave a magic wand and make one come true tomorrow, which would it be?

That's the goal you should be working on. Now let's look at the size of the gap.

Let's assume for a moment that losing weight is the goal you feel is most important to you. You weigh 400 lbs. but your goal is to get down to 175.

That's too big a gap. That's the Grand Canyon. It seems impossible. No wonder you can't find the motivation to go to the gym! The solution is simple: narrow the gap.

Change your goal from "Lose 225 lbs." to "Lose 5% of current weight." That's just 20 lbs. Not a walk in the park for someone who never goes to the gym, but certainly achievable.

Now your gap is closable. It's reasonable. Just knowing your goal is closer should give your motivation a bit of a jump start.

To Do: Use a To Do List

Some experts say you should always use a to do list because it helps you organize your tasks and remember what you need to do.

Other experts say to do lists take up too much of your time to manage, and they can make you feel guilty when something goes undone day after day.

Obviously, I fall into the first camp. Unless you have a mind like a steel trap, you're going to forget things. Writing tasks down makes them impossible to forget. And checking things off your list is a great feeling.

Don't worry about feeling guilty if something stays on your list awhile. If this is the case, either that to do isn't something you really need to do, in which case you can cross it off and forget about it, or it's the *only* thing you need do—which makes for a very short list.

Do *nothing else* until you knock that one item off your list. Either way, guilt doesn't help. Guilt is for grandmothers.

And the trick to keeping your list manageable is to find a tool that lets you manage your to dos easily and quickly. There are a number of great tools available, many free, some really inexpensive. Some are even covered in this book, because they're great hacks.

For now, just start a list. Use pen and paper if you don't already have a favorite app. Make separate lists for home, work, personal, family...whatever makes sense in your world.

Just write everything down that you know you need to do. Everything! Get it out of your head and onto paper (or into your app). Then clear your mind of worry because now you can't forget anything.

Any time something comes to mind that you need to do, add it to the list. When you finish a task, cross if off the list. Simple, right?

To be *really* productive, don't do *anything* that's not on your list.

Watching TV isn't on the list, is it? So don't turn the TV on. Surfing the web isn't on your list, is it? So get off of Facebook!

Stick to the list. You'll get a lot done, I promise.

Do WorkFlowy

Speaking of to do lists apps, I love WorkFlowy for its drop dead simple interface. It's clean and intuitive. It gets out of your way and lets you just write.

You might say it's the ultimate online list maker. And it's totally free.

Just login and start writing. Hit Enter and you've created a list item and you're ready to write the next one. Hit Tab to indent your current item, nesting it under the one above. Shift-Tab undoes the nesting.

After you've written a bunch of things and nested some, you'll see a familiar + and - signs indicating you can expand or collapse the child list underneath. It's also easy to rearrange the order of items by dragging the handle on the right side up or down. As I said, it's intuitive.

A great feature is that the keyboard shortcuts are can be displayed in a tight and unobtrusive sidebar. So rather than searching through the menus, you can quickly see that Ctrl + Enter marks an item as completed.

Point your mouse at the dot next to an item, and click on it. You'll instantly "dive down" into that list, hiding all your other lists. You can see where you are thanks to the breadcrumb menu across the top of the page, so it's simple to jump back, partway or even all the way back to the top with a single click.

Hover over that dot, and you'll see a popup showing all the things you can do with that list. You can mark it complete. You can add a note. You can share it with a friend using a secret link. You can copy or delete it, or you can export the entire thing in HTML, a text file, or OPML.

WorkFlowy works on Android and iOS devices, or online at http://workflowy.com.
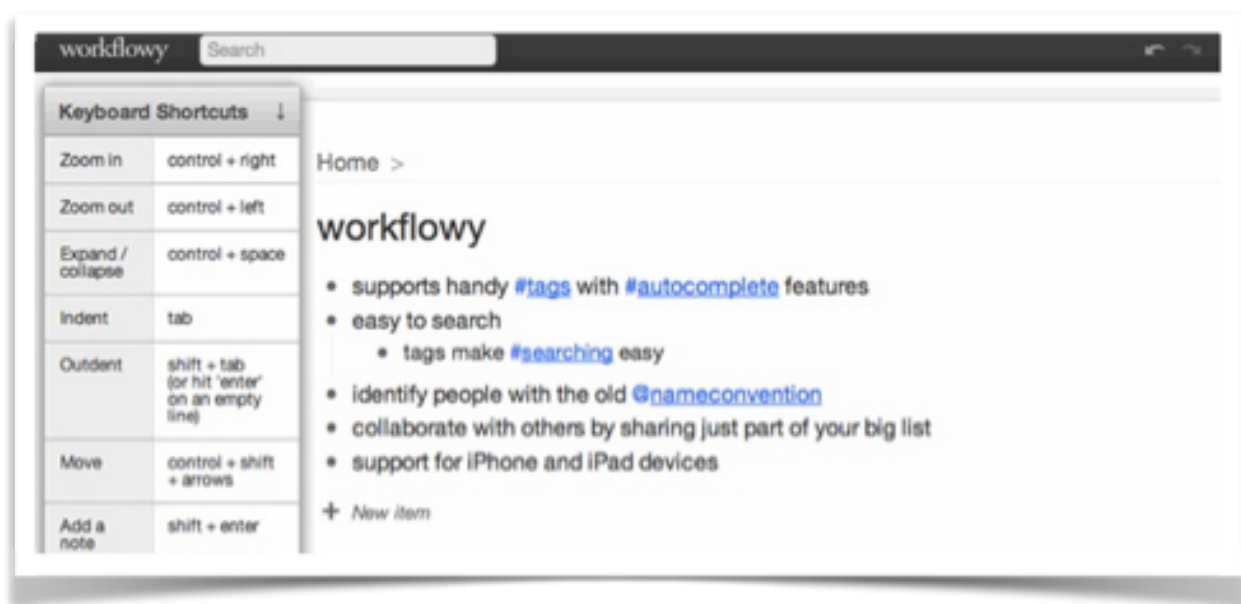
Start With Your MIT

It's common sense to do what's important first, before moving on to less-important things. So let's borrow a page from David Allen's world-famous "Getting Things Done" book.

Look at your to-do list, and mark *one thing* as the Most Important Thing (MIT) of the day—then take care of that thing first.

I recommend having just *one* MIT to start out with, especially if you're in a real rut, and are having trouble getting anything accomplished.

Having one MIT forces you to focus on that one thing, and you're more likely to get it done. More than one can muddle the mind.

Let's face it, your Most Important Thing for the day—the *one* thing you most need to accomplish that day—should take priority over everything else.

However, we all know that fires come up throughout the day, interruptions through phone calls and email and people dropping by, new demands that will push the best-laid plans aside.

If you put off your MIT until later in the day, you might end up not doing it.

Before you check email or blogs or do anything else in the morning besides planning out your day, start on your MIT.

Don't let yourself be distracted by anything else, and work all the way until you finish that first MIT.

There. Now you've gotten at least one important thing done. Give yourself a pat on the back and take a 10-minute break.

If you can stand it, figure out your *next* MIT, and get started on that. If distractions keep you from finishing the second one, no worries, that will be your MIT tomorrow.

If you finish the second one, go on to a third. Try to get all three MITs done before moving on to anything else (but no more than three!). If you can do that, the rest of the day is gravy!

First Things First

Stephen R. Covey literally wrote the book on how to become more effective when he penned *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. This much smaller offering has an arguably more important goal: To make sure that what you work on is what you *really* want to do. You might say it's about a higher level of time management.

The book opens with the question, "How many people on their deathbed wish they'd spent more time at the office?" Indeed. This book can help you figure out what's important to you, so you're doing the right things, not just the things on your to do list.

Even though it's over 300 pages, it's still a quick read. Put this one on your "to read" list and get it soon. It just might impact several areas of your life in a positive way.

Find it on Amazon here:

http://www.amazon.com/First-Things-Stephen-R-Covey/dp/0684802031/
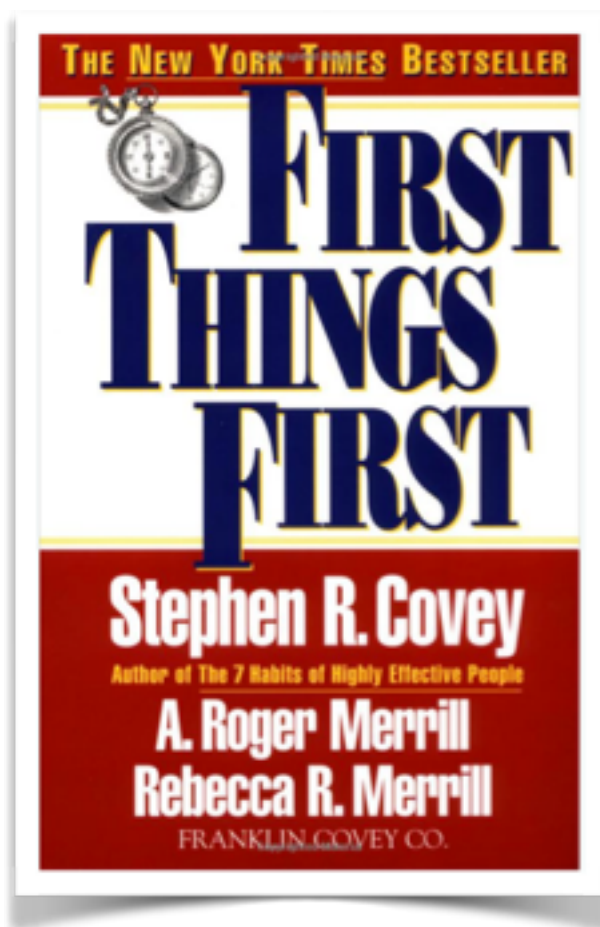
Tough It Out

Assuming you've already knocked out your MITs for the day or the week, consider the rest of the tasks on your to do list, and do the toughest one first.

Then tackle the next toughest.

You know what those tasks are. What have you been putting off that you know you need to do? Sometimes when you put things off, they end up being things you don't really need to do. But sometimes they are things you just gotta do. Those are your tough tasks.

Been putting off that report? Start on it first thing in the morning. It will be a relief to get it over with.

If you're not sure what the tough tasks are, take a quick scan of your to-do lists: what's been sitting there the longest? Is it something you really need to do? If not, delete it. If it is, do that task first thing.

Getting at least one of these tough tasks done first thing in the morning lifts a great load off your back and gives you a psychological boost to go forward in your day.

Only *after* you've done the hard stuff should you allow yourself to do fun stuff like checking your email or updating your Facebook status.

Break It Up

You say your MIT is huge? Daunting? A project that seems like it will take forever?

Easy peasy hack: Just break it up into smaller, more manageable tasks, and list each one separately on your to do list. Then knock them out in order, one at a time.

For example, if building a website is your MIT, that's a pretty big project. You won't get it done in a day.

So instead of putting "build website" as your MIT, break it up into the individual tasks required. For example:

- Diagram site layout/main menu

- Design home page layout

- Write text for home page

- Etc.

Make sense? Each of these is a doable task that takes you toward your goal. They're in the right order so your progress is clear, and as you cross them off your list, you can visually see how much closer you are to finishing the project.

What if your task isn't so easy to break into smaller ordered steps?

Let's say "Write a novel" is your big MIT. It's very important to you, something you've been intending to do for a long time. Clearly this is not something you can do in a day, plus it's not so easy to figure out Step 1, Step 2, and so on.

So erase "Write a novel," and in its place put "Write 500 words of novel" instead.

Five hundred words is doable. That's a piece of cake. If you can't write 500 words a day, you might want to reconsider becoming an author.

Not going to reconsider? OK, change it to "Focus on novel for 30 minutes." Same project, same basic MIT. Just a smaller, more doable chunk.

Even if you only write down a few character ideas, the basic plot overview, or get a few paragraphs done, you've made progress. You've started it.

You're being productive. Rinse and repeat until novel complete!

Try Trello

I recently started using Trello for project management on the recommendation of a friend, and I must say, I love it. It is so intuitive and so easy to use that you can "Get organized as fast as you can think," just as the site promises.

You create a board for a project. Inside a board you add lists, and lists have cards. Cards can contain all manner of things inside them, such as notes, bullet lists, even attached documents. It's easy to move cards around to reorder them, delete or archive them, even move them from list to list.

What's nice is the ability to assign a card (or task) to another user. This is how you delegate! You can also give a task a deadline, and deadlines can come with warnings so you don't miss them. Nice!

Best of all, Trello has an app for every device you own, including Android, iPhone, iPad, Windows 8 Tablets, and of course your web browser. They all stay in sync automatically, so you can update your project or to do list from anywhere.

If you collaborate with other people on projects, give Trello a try. It has the potential to make your entire team more productive! http://trello.com.
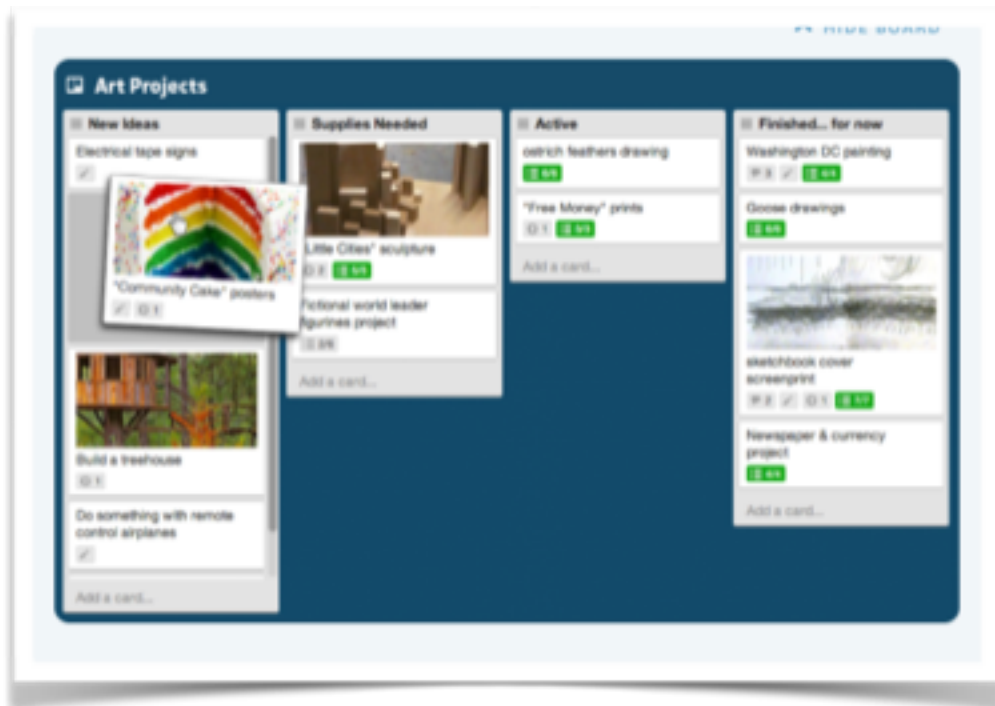
Zero Your Inbox

Merlin Mann was the first to suggest it was not only possible, but desirable, to have an empty email inbox. If you're like most people, you get hundreds of emails each day, and you might have several thousand emails just sitting in your inbox.

A fully loaded inbox can be a stressor in and of itself. Just opening email can make your skin crawl, and sometimes it can seem so daunting, you just close it immediately or look away.

At the very least, having an overflowing email inbox is a drain on your productivity.

Adopting an Inbox Zero (http://inboxzero.com) strategy takes you to the other extreme, and keeps you there. In short, archive or delete all messages sitting in your inbox now, then take an aggressive stance toward any thing new coming in.

Go through each message fast, and do one of five things to it right away:

- delete it

- archive it

- defer it for later response

- generate an action from it

- respond to it immediately (if it—literally—will take less than 2 minutes or is so Earth-shattering that it just can't wait)

If you use Google Mail, turn on the filtering feature to automatically filter promotions and other clearly impersonal messages. The only stuff that actually shows up in your inbox will be, by default, more important.

The trick is to make sure your inbox *stays* at zero. To do this, make it a point to deal with each message immediately and decisively.

Only then will you know the Zen of email.

Mailbox for iPhone

A number of apps have come out to help you achieve Inbox Zero status. I've been using Mailbox on the iPhone for about a year. Combined with Gmail's filtering, I see very few emails in my inbox.

Archiving them is as easy as swiping them to the right. Deleting them is just as easy. If I swipe to the left, I can make them disappear until later, when I know I'll have more time to focus on them.

I can also archive everything in my inbox with one swipe, if I want to. It's very handy, and very fast. My biggest gripe with Mailbox is that it works *only* with Gmail. I use the built in Mail app for all my other email accounts.

Unfortunately, at this time it's iOS only. Find it at http://www.mailboxapp.com.
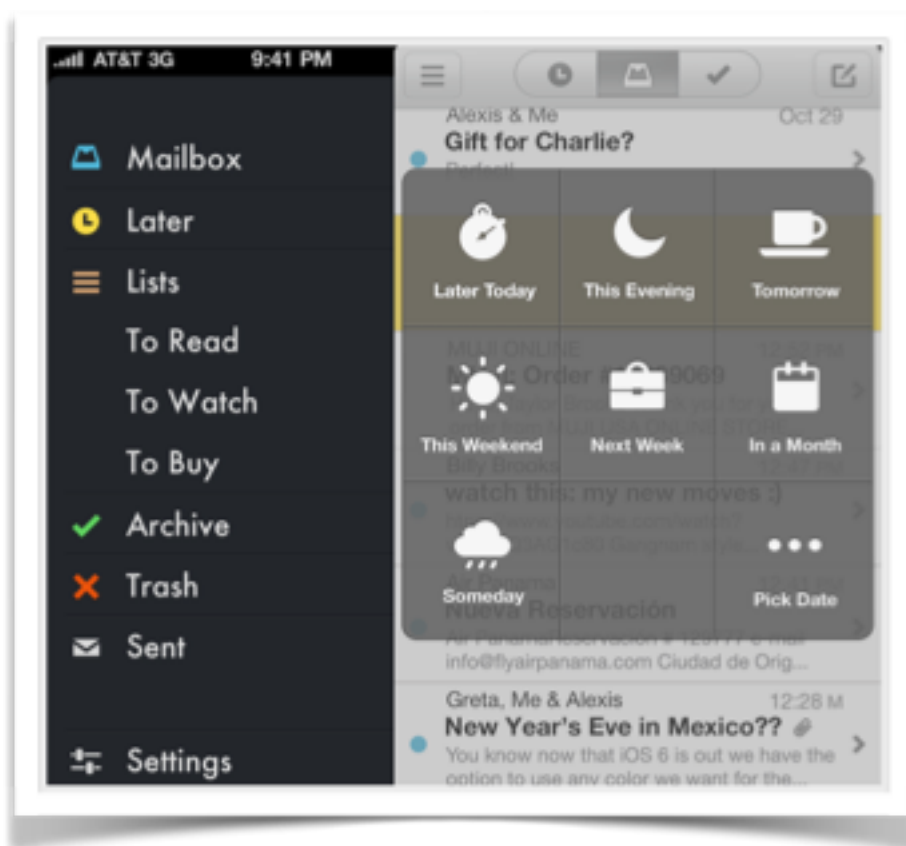
Dispatch

Another iPhone-only mail app that's getting a lot of buzz is Dispatch. This one supports multiple mailboxes, and while it doesn't support POP or Exchange email, it does support IMAP.

It's been tested with Gmail, Google Apps, iCloud, AOL, Yahoo! and FastMail, so it should work on your domain-based email as well.

The main attraction of Dispatch is that it helps you take action with your email immediately. It interfaces directly with 26 other iPhone apps, such as Evernote, Pocket, Google Maps, Calendar, Skype, Twitter & Facebook. This makes it fast and easy to, for example:

• Save links to read later with Pocket

• Set reminders in Reminders

• Share something great on Facebook

Dispatch lets you reply quickly with built in snippets of conversation, in case you find yourself typing the same few words over and over. It even starts your emails with "Hi," so you can start your message ASAP. Hey, every letter counts when you're trying to save keystrokes!

Watch the ad and download the app at http://www.dispatchapp.net.
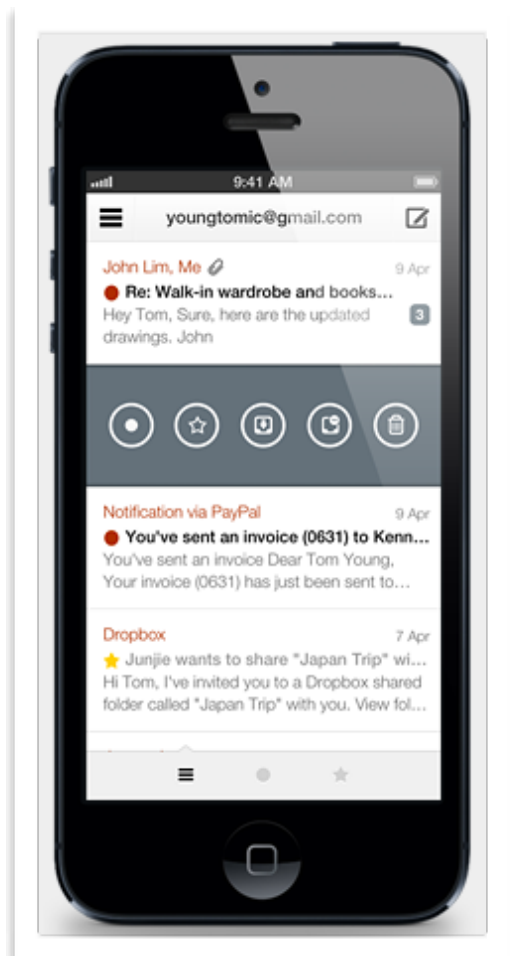
Wake Up Early

Waking up early might be the most widely-known "secret" of highly-productive people. Mornings are a fresh start, peaceful and free of ringing phones and constant email notifications.

You can tackle your MIT before the rest of world wakes up, and a win like that is a great way to start the day.

But it's not as easy as it sounds for many people. I know plenty of people who have tried getting up early and failed, over and over. Maybe you have tried and failed too.

Some try going to bed earlier so they can get up earlier, only to stare at the ceiling for hours at night, unable to sleep. Then they can't get up early for lack of sleep!

Others say listen to your body's needs, and go to bed when you're sleepy, and get up when you wake up. Sounds reasonable enough. Our bodies should know how much rest we need, so we should listen to them...right?

But both of these methods are wrong if you care about productivity. It's hard to become an early riser using the wrong strategy. But with the right strategy, it's relatively easy.

The optimal solution is to combine both approaches. It's very simple, and natural early risers do this without even thinking about it.

The solution is to go to bed when you're sleepy (and only when you're sleepy) and get up with an alarm clock at a fixed time every day—that's right, 7 days a week. Your body doesn't know what a weekend is.

I always get up at the same time (in my case 5am), but I go to bed at different times every night. I go to bed when I'm too sleepy to stay up.

My sleepiness test is that if I can't read more than a page in a book without drifting off, I'm ready for bed.

Reading is an excellent activity to do during this time, since it becomes obvious when you're too sleepy to read.

Watching TV is the absolute worst activity for this time, because it stimulates the brain and keeps you awake artificially. In fact, TV programming is designed to keep you watching to find out what happens next. So turn off the TV and pick up a book instead.

You may be tired the first couple of days from getting up too early or getting only a few hours of sleep the whole night, but after a few days of using this approach, your sleep patterns should settle into a natural rhythm.

You'll find a pattern of going to bed at roughly the same time and falling asleep right away.

So become an early riser easily by this simple hack: Go to bed only when you're too sleepy to stay up, and get up at a fixed time every morning, seven days a week.

Work Less

Building on the previous hack, this one takes working early to a higher level.

My best days come when I get to the office early, and begin my work day in the quiet morning hours, before the phones start ringing and the office descends into chaos.

It is so peaceful, and I can work without interruption or losing focus. I often find that I get three or even four MITs done before anyone comes in, and then the rest of the day is dealing with whatever comes up.

But you can ramp it up if you leave work early so you're "at work" fewer hours.

I don't mean to shift your 8-hour day to 7 a.m.-4 p.m. … that by itself would work well, but I'm recommending you take it even further: actually work seven hours, or six…or even five.

I know: you may not be able to take this option, depending on your job. But you might be surprised. Many bosses are not worried so much about the number of hours you work; they're more interested in the amount that you produce.

So think out a plan, write up a proposal, and talk to your boss. The worst that can happen is he/she will say no. If you work for yourself, you have no excuse.

Why does this hack work? If you commit to working only six hours a day, and leaving by 3 p.m., you have a much tighter deadline. You have no time to waste surfing the net or playing solitaire or talking to your coworkers or sitting in long meetings.

You must crank out the work, and get everything done, so you can get out of the office on time. On the days when I leave early, and know that I have to get out of the office early, I am laser-focused. I'm a productivity machine.

Motivation tip for this hack: set a daily appointment, so that you'll be sure to get out of the office on time. This could be a gym date with a workout buddy, picking up your kids, or something you need to do with your significant other.

Whatever it is, be sure that you will not miss it, and get out of the office in time to be there.

It's paradoxical, but if you work fewer hours, and know that your time is limited, you will be more focused and a lot more productive.

Log Your Time

This hack is for the already productive person who wants to take it to an even higher level. Use a time log to find out how you're currently spending your time. Simply record the time whenever you start or stop any activity.

This takes discipline, but you can do it. Use a pad of paper or a computer spreadsheet, whatever works best for you. At the end of the day, give each time/activity chunk a name or category.

Next, figure out what percentage of your time is being spent on each activity. What does your log tell you?

Are you checking email a lot? Facebooking for hours? Tweeting too much? Looking at youtube videos? How much time are you actually working? Scary, isn't it!?

Now figure out how efficient you are. The amount of time you spend on actual work, divided by the total amount of time you're in the office, is called your *Efficiency Ratio*.

Here's how it looks as a math equation:

Efficiency Ratio = (Time Doing "Real Work") / (Time Spent "At Work")

If you're spending 9 hours at the office and only getting 3 hours of work done, your efficiency ratio is just 33%!

Now let's see if we can increase that to 50%, or even more. If your time log shows your efficiency ratio to be on the low side, the thing to do, as in the hack above, is to shorten the time that you're "at work."

Try cutting from 9 to 6 hours. Yes, that's right: cut your hours *way back*! You might be amazed that you'll still get 3 hours of work done! If you do, you're now at 50% efficiency!

Cut your day to 5 or even 4 hours, and you might see 80% efficiency.

When you have all the time in the world, it's easy to be inefficient. When you have tight time constraints, you will usually find a way to get your work done.

As you get used to higher efficiency, gradually increase the number of hours you spend "at work." You might be amazed to find that you can maintain a 60% or even 80% efficiency ratio even as you get back to 35, 40, or even 50 hours of work time per week.

The key is to do it gradually, and to maintain that time log as you go. If you find your efficiency slipping, cut your hours back again until it comes back up to where you want it.

Time logging is a high leverage activity that takes very little time and effort to implement, but the long-term payoff is tremendous.

RescueTime

RescueTime is a time logging software that can automate the previous hack. It works best for professionals who spend most if not all of their day on the computer, so it's not for everyone.

But if you use it, you will quickly discover how much time you waste being non-productive. Then you can "rescue" a portion of that time and put it to better use.

Install the app on your Mac, Windows or Linux computer, and your Android tablet and phone. There's no iOS app as of this writing.

RescueTime works in the background, quietly logging all the time you spend on various programs and websites.

Set goals for work and play, then see how well you do against your ideals. At the end of the day you can look at the data, and know exactly how much time you spent working in Excel, and how much time you spent playing Angry Birds.

RescueTime also has an idle timer. The program can sense when you're away from your computer, and records that time separately.

Recent enhancements can proactively encourage better behavior, or even *force* you to be more productive! Create a reminder to alert you that you've been on Facebook for 30 minutes.

If you want to play hardball, set it to actually *block* a website after you've spent, say, 60 minutes on it.

Download it today at https://www.rescuetime.com.
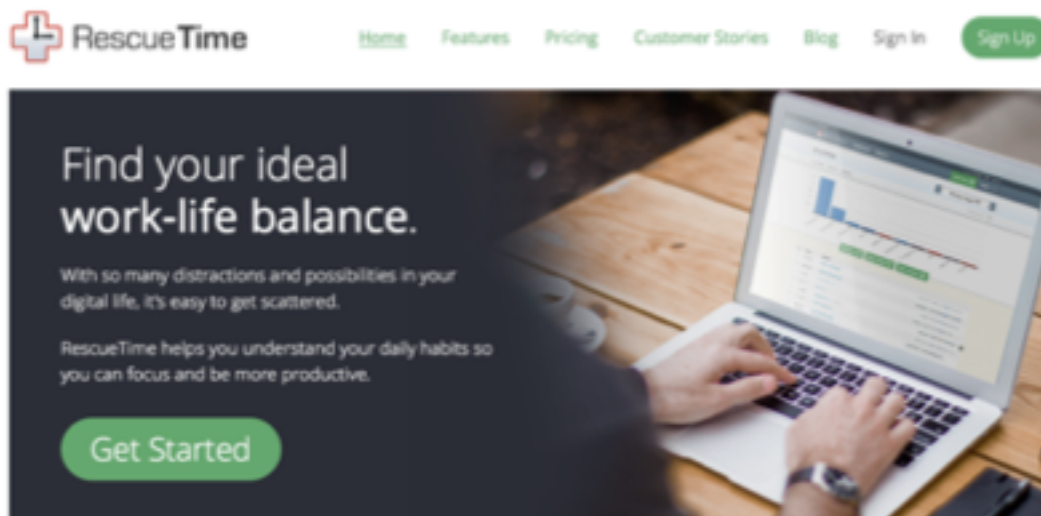
Declutter

Declutter your workspace so you can work on one thing at a time. This removes all the extra distractions on your desk and on your computer. If you've got a clean, simplified workspace, you can better focus on the task at hand.

Here's how to do it:

Gather all papers on your desk (including any scraps, post-its, phone messages, etc), put them in your inbox, and process through them rapidly.

If you've got folders or stacks of paper on or around your desk, process them and put them away as in step 1—listing them on your projects or actions lists, and filing them out of sight.

Get rid of distracting knick-knacks, posters, pictures, etc. A few photos of your family is fine, but if you've got a lot of other stuff, it's probably distracting.

Clear your computer desktop of icons. File or trash them, then turn off desktop icons so you've now got a clutter-free desktop. Close unnecessary windows on the computer (especially solitaire or minesweeper or whatever your current distracter is). Now choose a nice, serene desktop picture (and using a photo of a magazine model doesn't qualify as serene).

Ahhh. A peaceful working environment. I also suggest using headphones if you have a problem with the ambient noise in your office, or people dropping by too much.

Now, with distractions minimized, focus on the task at hand. Don't check email, don't work on five projects at once, don't check the stats on your blog, don't go to your feed reader. Work on that one task, and work on it with concentrated focus until you are done. Then celebrate your achievement!

Removing distractions from your workspace so you can really focus on one task at a time will greatly increase your productivity.

Go Offline

The Internet is the biggest distraction ever invented. It can keep you occupied—distracted and unproductive—for hours on end.

To increase your productivity, disconnect yourself from your Internet connection. Work offline as often as possible, and for as long as possible.

If the Internet is integral to your work, create pre-scheduled times when you're going to use it. Set an alarm to check your email or conduct your web research, and another alarm when time is up.

When the timer goes off, unplug again until the next scheduled time. Only let yourself check your blogs or surf the web when you've gotten a certain amount done, or during your lunch hour.

You'll be amazed at how much work you'll get done.

This is one of the best productivity hacks I've ever used. Period.

Stop Meeting

Avoid meetings whenever humanly possible.

Personally, I hate meetings. I think most people do, and yet we have so darn many of them.

And if you really analyze most meetings, you'll see that they are a huge waste of time. In the hour or more that you were sitting in that meeting, you could have gotten 10 times more accomplished if you were working alone.

Are there meetings you go to regularly that you can avoid? If you think the answer is no, think about it a little more: perhaps you've been told it's mandatory, but it's still possible that if you make a good enough sales pitch to your boss, you could get out of the meeting.

Show him/her how much more you could accomplish by not being there, and how you could send a simple email to accomplish the input you would have given in the meeting, at 1/10th the time.

I find it best to say no to meetings up front. I just say, "Sorry, I can't make it. I'm tied up with a project right now." And that's always true.

I've always got projects I'm working on that are more important than a meeting.

Really now, who doesn't?!

Cut Meeting Time

Now, you probably won't be able to get out of *all* meetings. When you must meet, make it quick and effective.

Here are some tips for making meetings you do have to attend, more productive:

- Every meeting should have an agenda. People should know, beforehand, what will be discussed, so they can be prepared.

- The agenda should include the desired outcome. If it's not on the agenda beforehand, it should be the first thing you bring up in the meeting, right when (or even just before) the meeting starts: what do you want to accomplish in the meeting?

- Take notes of important points, especially next actions. Mark the next actions with arrows or asterisks or something, so you can see them at a glance later.

- Review the next actions at the end of the meeting. Everyone should leave the meeting knowing what decisions were made, and what everyone needs to do next.

- Harvest all next-actions to your to-do lists immediately after the meeting, so you don't forget.

If you're still stuck going to a completely useless meeting, take your read/review folder into the meeting.

At least you can use that time productively by cranking through your stuff that you need to read or review. I also like to use this time to plan projects or brainstorm for new ideas.

The best long-range strategy is to convince the higher-ups that most meetings are a waste of time, and meetings that must take place should be short and effective.

I know someone who installed a countertop, with no stools, as his office's conference room. If people wanted to meet with him, they had to do so standing up. It made for fairly brief meetings.

Avoid Unnecessary Work

The key word here, of course, is "unnecessary." How do you know if work is necessary or not? You must first know what your goals are—work that forwards you towards your goals (which should probably be in line with your organization's goals) is necessary, essential.

Trim everything that is not essential, or you will be wasting your time.

If we just do any work that comes our way, we can be cranking out the tasks, but not be productive at all. You're only productive if you are doing work that moves you towards a goal.

Say someone calls you and says they need something right away. Well, they might need it right away, but is that really your problem?

Is serving this person immediately part of your job description? It might be if this person is an important client, but if they are just a co-worker who is trying to make you do their work, then that's unnecessary work for you.

Doing their work for them is a waste of time for you.

It's good to do an inventory of your to-do lists every week or so… look at each task, and ask if it's truly necessary, and what goal it is moving you towards.

If it's not necessary, see if it can be eliminated or passed on to the right person.

And this next step is just as important: as new tasks come in, say no to unnecessary tasks. Evaluate each request. If it's not necessary, tell the person that you simply do not have time to do it.

Tell them that you have high-priority projects that are due soon, and you regret not being able to help them. Refer them to someone else who might help. Be polite, but regretful.

If it's your boss, you might need to have a talk with your boss about priorities and goals. Be sure that you are both clear on what your work objectives are, and ask that extraneous tasks be assigned to someone else. Tell your boss that the extra tasks are getting in the way of your productivity.

If you do not speak up and say no more often, you will be constantly overloaded with work that you simply do not need to do.

Cut out the non-essential tasks, and focus on those that really matter--to you.

Simplify, Then Crank It Out

Another two-part hack that can make a world of difference. Think about all the information you receive (email, blogs, newsletters, mailing lists, magazines, newspapers and more) and edit brutally.

Cut out every information source that's not critical to your work, and eliminate it. Once you've simplified your information streams, you can crank through blogs & email in a breeze.

The first step of this hack is the more necessary part—we often have an overload of information coming at us in different ways, and it is distracting and a waste of our time.

Do we really need to read 100 blogs every day? Edit your feeds to just the ones that you really love or depend on. Trust me—you can let go of the rest.

Also edit the email (and snail mail) that comes in: can you unsubscribe from mailing lists, newsletters, or other unnecessary, regular emails? Can you filter out all the forwarded chain mail you get from friends and family (or ask them to stop sending them)?

I've done this, and it saves a lot of time. The few chain mails (or joke emails) I still get, I delete immediately. Stop getting catalogs in the mail, too.

All it takes is a brief letter to the publisher, or possibly a phone call or a quick visit to their website. Besides, you can find better deals online anyway when you're ready to buy something.

What other information are you receiving on a daily, weekly or monthly basis? Can you cut out your magazine and newspaper subscriptions without really missing anything? Do you get routed email from coworkers that you really don't need to be getting? Do people routinely "cc" stuff to you unnecessarily?

Think about everything you receive, and get rid of as much of it as possible. You will drastically reduce the time you spend reading. For everything else that begins to come in after your editing process, ask yourself if you really need to be getting that information regularly. Most of the time the answer is, "No!"

Now, after this process, you should be left with a lot less to read. Here's the next step: crank through it all.

I make sure to empty all my inboxes every day—physical, voicemail, email, blog reader. I just crank through them, making quick decisions as necessary, saving some important ones to be read later if I don't have the time to read them now.

Sometimes I'll print them out and take them with me on the road for reading when I catch some unexpected spare time, like waiting at the doctor's office.

Of course, there are apps for that too.

Editing your inbound stuff and cranking through the information you receive can free up a lot of time for more important things—like achieving your goals.

Pocket It For Later

I stopped using Evernote, and now have Pocket for keeping track of all my "save for later" stuff. When I get an email I want to act on later, find a video I want to watch later, or stumble across an article I want to read later, I just put it in my Pocket.

Later, when I'm in line or sitting in a waiting room somewhere, I fire up Pocket and catch up. It doesn't even require an Internet connection.

Pocket used to be called "Read It Later," before they came up with what I think is a much more insightful name.

Pocket is drop dead easy to use once you've configured your apps for it. Put it on all your devices, and install the extension in your browser, and enable syncing.

From that point on you'll never have to worry about losing that recipe you want to try this weekend, missing out on the latest viral video, or forgetting about that in-depth feature article that piqued your curiosity.

The interface is clean and well designed, another reason to like it. It's easy to find content by type, and after you've saved about 30 or 40 things to Pocket, the Highlights feature kicks in to shows you your most relevant content, based on your prior usage.

Pocket is available on all your favorite devices, including Android and iPhone. Best of all, it's free to use. Go to http://getpocket.com to get started.
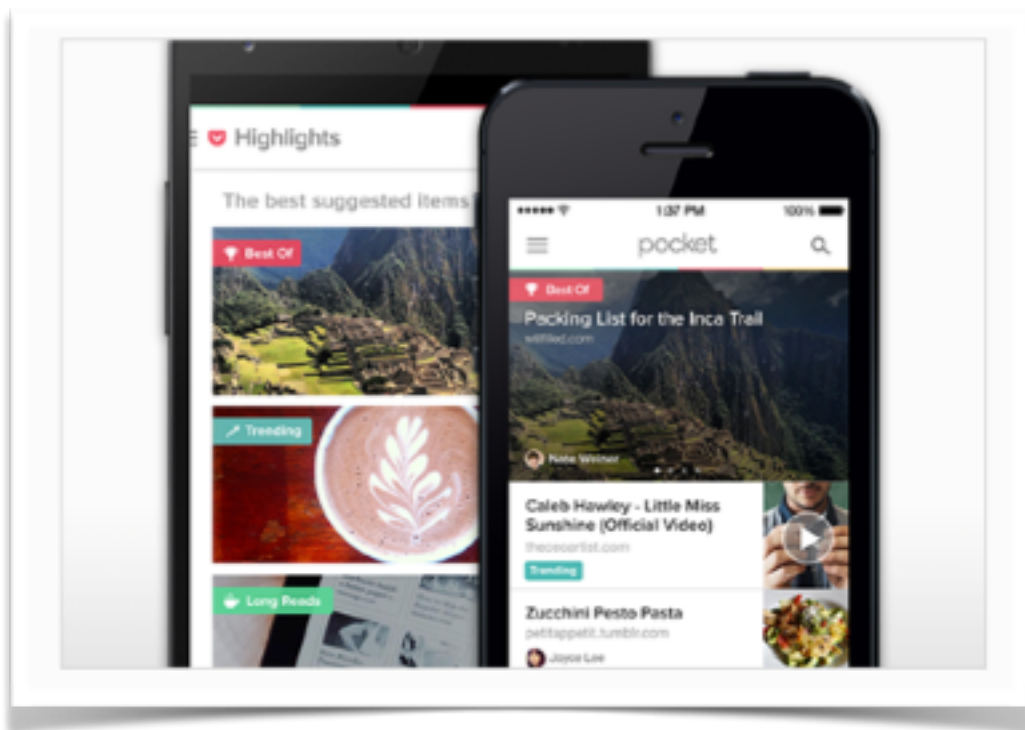
Touch Once

Save yourself a ton of time by handling each piece of incoming information once. Whether it's catalog in the mail, an email, a file over Skype, or anything else, touch it once and deal with it.

This could mean you:

- Delete it.

- Work on it.

- Forward it.

- Reply to it.

- Delete it.

- Print it.

- File it.

- Copy it.

- Delegate it.

- Delete it.

The less you handle each thing that comes up and the faster you get them off your plate, the more productive you'll be.

You'll find you desk will be uncluttered, your file cabinet fuller, and your computer desktop devoid of stray icons.

The only snag might be when you get something and you're not sure what to do with it. Should you reply right away or wait until tomorrow? Should you print it and file the paper, or file it electronically? Decisions, decisions!

In this case, make a decision and stick with it. File it if you think you'll need it again. Make a note to deal with it tomorrow, then archive it. Or forward it to someone else to make a decision.

You get the picture. Touch it once, and keep moving on.

Document and Optimize Processes

Everyone says, "Work Smarter, Not Harder!" Easy to say, not so easy to do. Here's one way to make working smarter a daily occurrence.

If you do the same thing regularly, whether it's once a day or 5 times a year, this is the hack for you. This works especially well for complex, multi-step processes.

Identify the steps used to complete the task, and write them all down, in order. Add enough detail so that if you handed the document to a total stranger, they would be able to follow along step-by-step and get the job done without asking any questions.

In the future, every time you have to do this task, just pull out the process doc and follow along. You'll get it done a lot faster because you won't forget any steps. There's no guesswork involved, no looking for a random snippet of critical information. It's all right there in front of you.

As a bonus, having the whole process down on paper makes it easier to see how you might improve the process.

If you think of something that will make it faster or easier, write it down and test it the next time you do the task. If it works, update your procedure document accordingly.

Sometimes we just can't see what's right in front of us until we see it on paper.

Delegate Documented Processes

This hack is really quick and easy, but only if you've done the prior hack.

Now that you've got a complex, multi-step, recurring process thoroughly documented, you can easily delegate it.

Just send them the process document you use yourself when doing the task. You made it so thorough anybody could do it, right? This is why!

If you're a small business owner who needs a helping hand, or an entrepreneur looking to hire outsourcers for the day-to-day drudge work at the core of your business, this is the hack that can truly take your business to the next level.

Being able to "train" a new hire by simply giving them a single document is manna from heaven. Do this 10 times and increase your productivity 1,000%! *Literally*!

Just Five Minutes

We all tend to avoid tasks that we envision will take too long. Let's face it, if you think it will take you two hours to finish writing that report, and you've only got an hour until lunch, chances are you'll find something to do that will take less than an hour, which will give you a few minutes to goof off before you head out to lunch.

Even though you *know* you could split that two hours of work into one hour before lunch and one hour after, you still tend to want to push it off until after lunch so you can do it all at once.

But if you say to yourself, "I'll give it just five minutes," you can easily avoid the pain that comes with the inevitable missed deadline (because you *never did* find two solid hours to dedicate to that report!)

Here's how it works. Whenever you have a big, important, but daunting task, or even drudge work like clearing out the file cabinet, just get it in your head that you're only going to devote five minutes to the task.

Really, truly, tell yourself you will *only* spend five minutes on it. Just. Five. Minutes!

Now that you've convinced yourself it's just five minutes, you're more likely to get started on it. Five minutes of anything is bearable, even drudge work.

And after five minutes, you can stop. Really, you can! Because it was just five minutes!

Many times, however, you'll find yourself on a roll and you won't want to stop. In the first five minutes you might solve a vexing problem that's been nagging at you, and it will take at least five more minutes to implement that solution.

Heck, that's just five more minutes, right? No big deal. And so it goes.

Often, a project you devote "just five minutes" to will expand to fill all the time you have available. At the end of that time you'll be pleased to find your report is half finished, or your file cabinet is completely reorganized!

Try this with *any* task you've been putting off or avoiding, for any reason. It works!

Timeboxing

Timeboxing is similar to Just Five Minutes, but whereas JFM is a jumpstarting hack, timeboxing can help you overcome procrastination *and* avoid perfectionism once you've gotten started. It's a two-fer!

In a nutshell, you give yourself a fixed time period or "box of time," like 30 minutes or an hour, to work on a given task. Do nothing else but that task during that time.

You can use timeboxing in two different ways.

First, let's say you want to get something done, but you're afraid it could end up taking more time than it's worth. Maybe it's one of those projects where you might be inclined to, say, exhibit perfectionist tendencies.

Just give yourself a specific amount of time, which you won't go over, and you simply do the best job you can within that time. When the box of time is up, you're done. Stop. Ship it.

The second way to use timeboxing is when you have a huge task or complex project to work on, but you don't know where to begin. Or maybe it's something tedious or repetitious, the kind of thing you tend to procrastinate on.

Timeboxing helps you commit to getting started on, or continuing, the task for a given period of time. It could be 20 minutes or two hours, or anything in between. Longer than 120 minutes and you're less likely to start, so keep it under that.

Don't worry about how far you get. Don't think about milestones. Forget about everything but the box of time you have allocated. Just make a dent in it.

All you need to do is commit to a time period and start; or if you've already started, all you need to do is to continue.

Put in a little time. There, that's not so bad, is it?

Single-Task

You're working on two projects at once, while your boss has placed two new demands on your desk. You read new emails as they come in while you're on the phone.

You make calls on the way home, even as you stop to pick up a few groceries for dinner. Your work phone is going off and so is your personal or home phone.

Congratulations, you're a multi-tasker.

In this age of instant technology, we are bombarded with an overload of information and demands of our time. This is part of the reason "Getting Things Done" or GTD is so popular in the information world—it's a system designed for quick decisions and for keeping all the demands of your life in order.

But even with a great multi-tasking system, sometimes we are so overwhelmed that that system can start to fall apart. It can drive you crazy!

You need to learn how *not* to multi-task. Here are a few quick reasons not to multi-task:

- Multi-tasking is less efficient, due to the need to switch gears for each new task, and then switch back again.

- Multi-tasking is more complicated, and thus more prone to stress and errors.

- Multi-tasking can be crazy, and in this already chaotic world, we need to reign in the terror and find a little oasis of sanity and calm.

If you Single-Task instead, you can get more done and, more importantly, preserve your mental health. Here's how to single-task:

- Set up to-do lists for different contexts (i.e. calls, computer, errands, home, waiting-for, etc.) depending on your situation.

- Have a capture tool (such as a notebook or to do app) for instant notes on what needs to be done.

- Have a physical and email inbox (as few inboxes as possible) so that all incoming stuff is gathered together in one place (one for paper stuff, one for digital).

Use the timeboxing hack, and focus on *one* task—and only that task—during each block of time. Keep blocks open in between for urgent stuff that comes up. You might try 40 minute blocks of work, with 20 minutes in between them for miscellaneous tasks.

If other things come in while you're working, put them in their respective inbox, or take a note of them in your capture system. Now get back to the task at hand.

Go Pomodoro

The Pomodoro Technique is a simple time management hack that combines periods of focused work followed by short rest periods. It can be used for any kind of task.

The aim of the Pomodoro Technique is to use time as an ally in accomplishing your tasks, rather than thinking of time as the enemy. The work / rest sequence is widely considered the key to its success.

As described in the book by the same name, the method uses an actual kitchen timer, which is set for 25 minutes. You work on your intended task until the bell rings.

Then you take a 3 to 5 minute break. Rinse and repeat. When you finish the first task, move on to the second.

You can use any kitchen timer, of course, or you can find a slew of timer apps that support the technique in your app store. But if you want to do it right, get the book and the official app and work the system as intended by the creator, Francesco Cirillo.

He recently set up a new online store, at http://www.FCGarage.com

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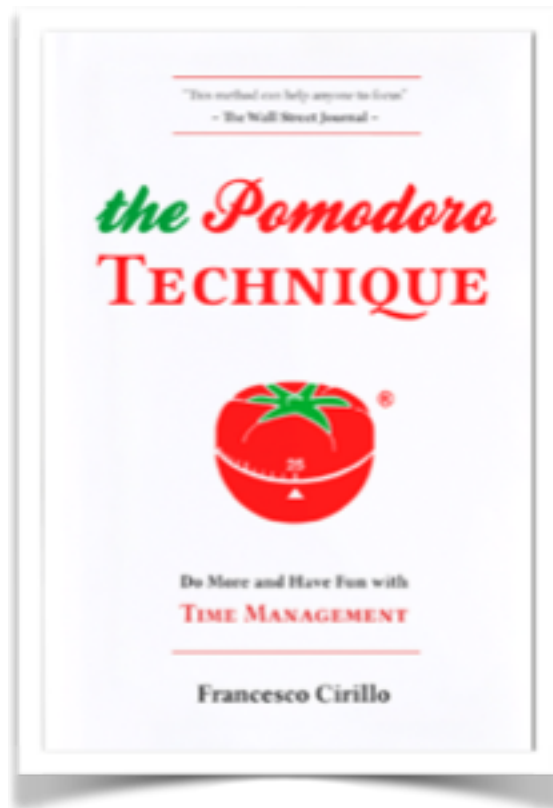
Do It Daily At The Same Time

If you've been putting of a huge project that you know will take a long time, the trick is to schedule a specific time each day for working on it.

Make it a habit, and stick to it.

Create an event in your calendar, and set it to repeat every day. Set a reminder 10 minutes prior to remind you the time is near.

If you make it first thing in the morning, you can enjoy the feeling of having accomplished something all day long. That's my recommendation.

But right before or right after lunch works just as well. Use an already recurring event, something you do every day anyway, as a trigger to remind you to do th`   is habit.

If it's something you really enjoy doing, something you're passionate about, it could even be right before bed time. You will certainly sleep better!

When the time comes, put everything else aside and work on that project. Do nothing else. Don't answer the phone, don't check email. Focus on that project for your set time period.

You could work for five minutes, 25 like a Pomodoro, or an even hour at a time.

Just think, one hour a day could leave you with a finished book a year later.

Don't Break The Chain

Sometimes you can't do a task at the same time every day. But if you commit to doing it every day regardless of the time, you'll still come out ahead.

Jerry Seinfeld once told an aspiring comic his secret to success. He had committed to writing one joke every single day when he was starting out as a comedian.

He put a big calendar on his wall showing every day of the year. At the top he put, "Write a Joke." Then he would put an X through the day after he had written a joke.

The calendar was where he had to look at it every day. He wouldn't go to bed until there was an X on the calendar for that day.

As the X's added up, they started to form a chain. "It's simple," Seinfeld said. "Don't break the chain."

The calendar served as a constant reminder of his commitment. The X's acted as visual reinforcement of his progress.

Not breaking the chain became more than just a challenge. It became an obsession.

Find a full year calendar at your local office supply store. Put it where you'll see it every day. Write your daily activity at the top. Use a big red marker and start putting X's on it.

And don't break the chain.

Find An Accountability Buddy

When you commit to something and you're the only one who knows about it, and then you miss a deadline or even fail to start, you will probably let yourself off the hook.

"Well, I didn't feel so good yesterday," you tell yourself, "so I wasn't able to get much done. And that movie was really good the day before, so I couldn't stop watching it. And of course, when my friends called and invited me out to lunch on Tuesday, I had no way to know that would take all afternoon. It's just been one of those weeks."

"It's OK," yourself answers you. "You'll do better tomorrow. Don't worry about it."

But when you commit to another person that you're going to do something, you're a lot less likely to drop the ball. Especially when that other person is counting on you.

If your boss is expecting that report by Friday morning, you make sure it's done Thursday afternoon, don't you?

If your biggest client is expecting you to hit a milestone by the end of the month, you don't miss that deadline, do you?

If there's no boss or big client to please, create the same situation with a peer. Tell your spouse, a coworker, or a friend what you have committed to, and request that they ask you about it every day.

Better yet, find someone who also needs some accountability, and commit to each other to hold one another accountable.

You can accomplish the same thing with people you've never even met, if you announce publicly what your intentions are. Find a forum related to your endeavor, and post what you're doing and why. Include your daily activity goals, milestones and their due dates, and so on.

Include a reward you'll give yourself when you stick to it, and a penalty you'll submit to if you fail. Then post your results every day. If you've engaged enough interested people, they will happily encourage you to do your best.

Good accountability buddies cheer for your successes and offer some good natured ridicule for your failures. They'll rarely accept your excuses or let you slide.

Lift

This simple but effective smart phone app is gaining wide popularity, primarily in the fitness world, but increasingly among business people as well. It helps you adopt positive habits as you work toward your goals.

Choose from thousands of goals already in the app, or create your own. Set daily reminders and the app reminds you.

Share your progress with hundreds or even thousands of like minded people in the Lift community who are working toward the same goal.

Lift is available for iPhone and Android, and is available via the web as well, at https://lift.do. Highly recommended.
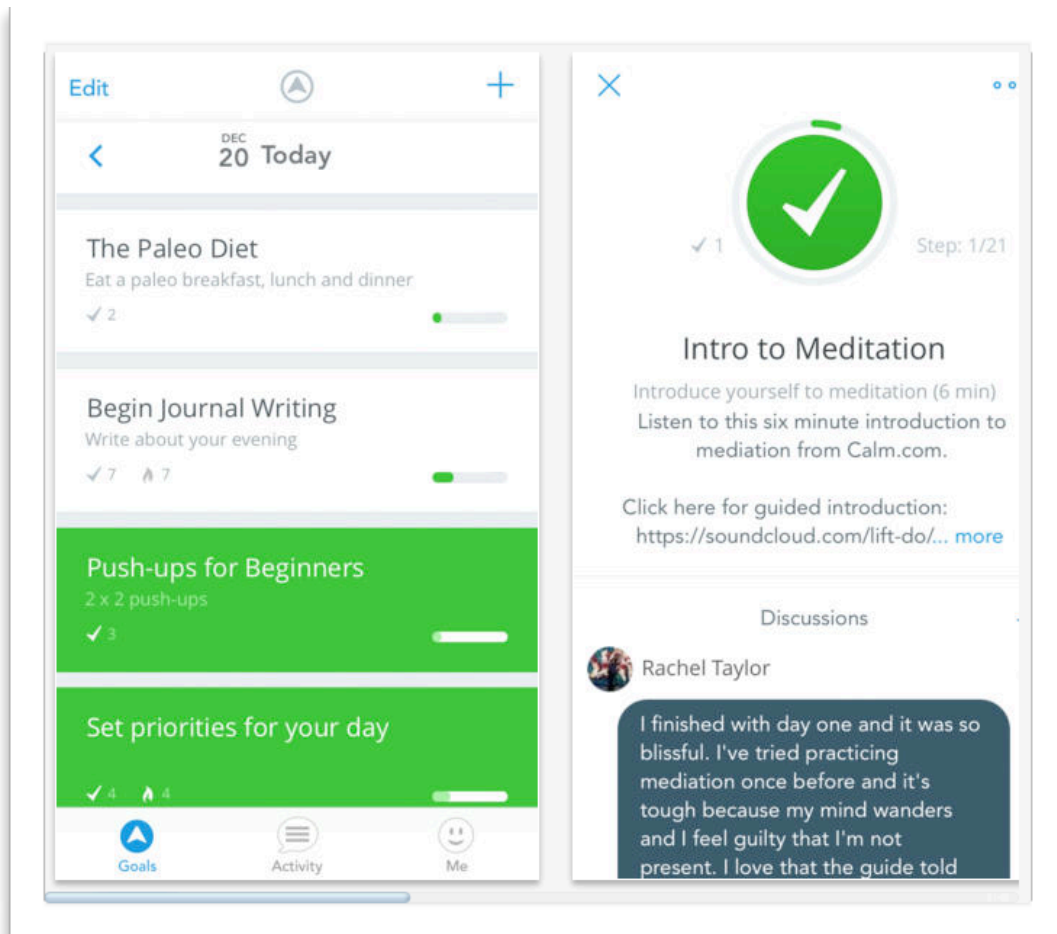
Have A Hackathon

Many software programmers like to collaborate in marathon coding sessions they call "hackathons," in which they lock themselves into a room and don't come out until they've achieved their objective.

The goal might be to finish something they've been working on, or to brainstorm to conceive something brand new, then set about making it a reality.

Hackathons are a great way to bypass the boredom and bureaucracy of a normal work environment, and they make work fun.

Most importantly, they work! A hackathon is a productivity-making monster. Group-think on steroids. A pedal-to-the-metal, no-BS jam session. Do or die time.

You don't have to be programmer to create your own hackathon. You don't even need to lock your door, or be face-to-face with your collaborators.

But you do need some collaborators. Hackathons only work if there's someone else hacking along with you.

They don't have to be directly involved in your project, or even in the same company. You just need someone else to agree to bang on it like you are for the duration of the event.

Pick a day next week, a night coming up, or even the entire weekend, and don't do anything else — just crush it on the project at hand.

Keep a private chatroom open (Skype works great for this) and stay in touch with each other. Tell your hack mates how you're doing. Celebrate your successes. Ask for help overcoming obstacles.

See if you don't knock it out of the park.

And if you do, you have to ask yourself, why not work this way more often? You might get a heck of a lot more done.

Quit

Now here's a real hack for you! If you're not productive at your job, it might be that you're doing work you hate. If you come in late, leave early, put things off, and generally don't get much done, this one's for you.

Just quit already!

I'm not suggesting you just up and walk out without first putting a plan in place. Oh, no, that would be counter-productive! But knowing you're going to be leaving your job—or firing your best client, or switching to a new field, or whatever "quitting" means to you in your world—will make you realize just how much you have to do to prepare.

And you will be productive because you have to be!

Depending on your situation, this could take a few days or weeks, or even a few months. But set a deadline and mark it on your calendar. Tell your spouse or significant other what you have in mind.

When the day comes to give 2-weeks notice or call that client you hate working for, you'll be ready.

Don't let the stigma of the word "quit" stop you. There's no shame in quitting. As they say, when one door closes, another one opens.

It's up to you to figure out what your next venture will be, but don't dwell on the quitting of the old thing. Focus on the starting of the new thing!

And watch your productivity go through the roof!

Find Your Passion

This is less of a hack and more of a long-term strategy, but I can't leave it out. Do something you're passionate about. Give it a thought: if you really want to do something, you'll work like hell to get it done. You'll work extra hard, you'll put in even more hours, and you're less likely to procrastinate. You will a productivity monster!

For some people, this hack might seem impractical, especially if you're in a ho-hum job that you don't really feel like doing. It's for you that this tip was written: if you hate your job, or are just doing it for the money, I highly recommend that you give this some thought.

If you force yourself to do your work every day, you can only do this for so long before burning out. You'll probably quit eventually anyway, so give it some consideration now.

What do you really want to be doing right now? (Don't say sleeping!) What do you love doing? What is your dream job, and how can you get it?

Give this some thought, not just right now but for the next few days. If you can identify that job, your next step is to plan how to get it.

My suggestions:

Do some research. Who else is doing your dream job? What is their experience? How did they get the job? What are the requirements? Research it on the internet, ask people you know, make some calls. The more info you have, the better.

What are your obstacles? What do you need to do to get there? Do you need more education or to learn some skills? Do you need to know the right people? Do you just need to fill out a job application?

Make a plan. Work out some possible solutions to your obstacles. If you need an education or skills, you will not be able to execute this plan overnight, but if you don't plan it out now, you might never get there. Lay out the path to your success.

Take action. Don't wait for opportunity to come hit you on the head. Go out and find it, and grab it. Execute your plan—do at least one thing today, tomorrow, and every day, until you get there. It might seem like it will take forever, but if you really put in the work, you'll achieve your dreams someday.

Be persistent. Don't give up because you've been rejected a few times (or even a lot of times). Keep knocking on doors. Keep making those calls. Keep submitting your resume. Keep making appointments. Don't ever let up. The person who is relentless will win over the person who quits.

Land your dream job, doing something that you're passionate about, and you may never need to motivate yourself to be productive again.

Conclusion

I hope you have enjoyed this little book of productivity hacks. More importantly, I hope you have found it useful.

I didn't write this for the fun of it. I wrote it because I saw a need for it.

If you take action on any or all of these hacks, I'm confident you will see a noticeable improvement in your work, and more importantly, in your life.

Please let me know how these hacks help you. I would greatly appreciate that feedback. I plan to keep producing similar material, and if you would permit me, I would like to include some personal stories about how my readers have licked procrastination and improved their productivity.

You can contact me through my website, or simply email me.

Stay focused, my friend!