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# TO-DO LIST

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**HOW TO IMPROVE TIME MANAGEMENT,  
PRODUCTIVITY AND MULTI TASKING**

**To Do List**

**How to Improve Time  
Management, Productivity, and  
Multi tasking**

**Jared Anderson**

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# Introduction

The to-do list is one of the simplest task management systems in use today. Yet it continues to frustrate millions of people. You may be one of them.

First, it's not your fault. Few people receive formal training on how to create effective to-do lists. It's rarely taught in school. And by the time most of us enter the workplace, we've adopted a poor, ineffective approach to getting things done.

Second, without solid training, you're likely using a task management method that's sabotaging your ability to complete tasks. I call this the "productivity paradox," which we'll discuss in detail in a few moments. The results are catastrophic.



# Chapter I

## Is Your To-do List Really a To-do List?

If you are a person with a busy, complex life, you are likely using some type of to-do list. Sometimes getting done can feel all too difficult. You look over your list, and looking at some items, think, “Yuck, I don’t want to deal with that.” There could also be some items on your list you ignore consistently and don’t want to have to deal with it.

So what’s the problem here? Is it that you are an individual who procrastinates or is lazy? It’s unlikely that’s the real problem. Most people are a little bit lazy. If one aspect of being lazy is the tendency to want to get things done efficiently with the least amount of effort, that’s really not such a bad thing. Ok, so what is the actual problem here?

Did you know that often the biggest problem is that your “to-do list” is not really a to-do list? Get your list and scan it over right now. Are you immediately aware of the next action you should take? If this is not readily apparent to you, then you probably do not have a correct “to-do list.” The reality is, most “to-do lists” that people make are actually a combination of different items, which are:

**To-dos (action steps)** - these are the items which you look at and understand clearly just what it is you need to do to accomplish them. Here are some examples: “Call Frank and discuss how to improve the accounting system.”, “brainstorm 10 ideas about how to increase revenue “, “compose an email to my top client to thank them for their business and loyalty”, “mow the lawn”.

**Projects** - these are items that by necessity need multiple specific action steps to complete and these need to be listed as separate distinct tasks. Sometimes you will know all the steps necessary to finish the project but other times you don’t. An example of a project would be, “hire a new assistant”. It’s a

project since completing it involves multiple steps, such as “place a wanted ad in the paper”, “review resumes” and more.

**Other stuff** - this is everything else on your list, things you have written down you might need to do something about, but you just don't have a clear understanding what the action is you should take.

It's a really big problem if there are things on your list that aren't actually “to-dos”. When you look at the list and you're not sure what to do about some of the items, you will actually start to fear looking at it, because you'll think it will be too hard sorting through all the issues. Or you might read through the list and just pick out the easy stuff to do, skipping over those items that you're not quite sure about.

As this happens, the usefulness of the list will be reduced as you start avoiding items that are important. You do this mainly because you have not defined “first action steps” to take in order to accomplish the less simple tasks.

Now, in theory, you could figure out the specifics of what to do about each item as you get to it. However this is a dangerous approach because likely you will then end up procrastinating on what to do for each item and this will lead to more procrastination in taking the action itself.

Therefore, you have to make sure that you only put items on your “to-do list” that you are crystal clear about and to know what actions are required in order to complete the tasks. So, you have to look at everything on your list and ask the following questions:

1. Do I know exactly what I need to do next with this item without having to think about it?

2. Do I know what the end result or outcome is that I want from this item?

3. Will this “to-do” take me less than eight hours (or a full day's work) to accomplish it? If the task will take longer than eight hours, then you should consider breaking it down into smaller, more manageable parts. The 8 hour figure is not exact

or specific but something to consider in order discovering what works for you.

4. Is this to-do really a specific action? As an example, “contact about the sales report” is not as specific as “. It may seem like a small thing, however saying “telephone” rather than “contact” means that you’ve thought about how to specifically complete the task. Then it will be psychologically much easier when it’s time to get the task done. Also, as for putting the phone number in the to-do, when it’s time to call, it allows you to take the action faster, although this may not be necessary if number is easily accessible on your contacts list.

An additional example about actions being specific is that sometimes the next action is to think about an item or brainstorm about what to do. So, instead of writing, “Think about what do about such and such...”, you need to write down a specific action another person could observe to confirm you have completed it. For example, “Think about and write down 5 ideas about what to do regarding such and such...” Now this is still essentially the same thing, but the added specifics is a powerful motivator since your mind will now know clearly when the task is done. Any time you are able, try to make a to-do more specific. This will make it that much harder for you to resist it.

5. Is this to-do the very next thing I need to do? Sometimes you can’t follow through on a certain to-do item because there is a particular action you need to do first. What you need to do is consider and write down the specific first thing that should be done.

Now this may all seem simple and in theory you could figure out any “first action steps” for each item without specifically noting or writing them down. In practice though, it becomes really easy to procrastinate regarding your action items if you do not specify the “first action step” to take in order to actually achieve the goal.

6. Can I break the task down into smaller components? If the task on your to-do list appears too difficult, then you need to think, “What is the very first action that I need to do for this?” and then mark that down on your list.

Now here is the problem: Every time you see the item on your list you want to ignore it and not take any action; you're intimidated by how much is involved in doing it. This particular task is actually a project and in order to complete it, will require multiple, distinct, sequential to-dos.

You have to look at the task, break it down and consider what would be the very "first action step" that can be done towards the goal of completing the overall project.

In this case, it might be "brainstorm a chapter list for the book" or perhaps, "go to the library to research reference material needed for the book." Whatever it is, this very "first action step" needs to be something small that can be done in less than 8 hours, or even better, less than 30 minutes.

7. Is this task really a to-do or is it something I am waiting on? Another reason why tasks don't seem to go away from your to-do list is that you're waiting for something you need that you don't currently have. Now, it is not a good idea to leave those types of items on your to-do list. Why? Once again, your mind will freeze up because of a list that is mixed with to-do items you can do now and those which don't have an immediate action that can be taken. Items like this need to be moved to a different list, which we will talk about more below.

8. Do I really want to do this task? On your to-do list, sometimes there may be an item on it you just never seem to get around to doing or even starting. The reason for this could simply be that the task is something you just don't really want to do.

You might get to it later, but it is not a high enough priority to properly take care of at the present moment. Now instead of just leaving it on your to-do list to bug you, the task should be moved to an "on hold" or "to do later" list, which includes items that you may do someday but you aren't committed to doing at the present moment.

Your to-do list needs to only have things that you can do NOW, not tasks that have components that you are waiting on in order to complete them or tasks you may want to do in the

future. You need to keep a separate list for those particular items. Keep one list for things of which you are waiting for something. Put the other to-dos that you are not able to do now but may eventually want to get to on a separate list called “To do later” or “On hold”.

Finally, once you have gone through the process of dividing the items on your main to-do list into other lists as described and reduced it down to only items you can actually do now, you’ll then be able to determine clear “first action steps” and you’ll feel much better! You will be much less intimidated by your list because you can look at each task and say, “yes, I can do that!” It just won’t feel hard anymore.

Use the outlined method to clarify your to-do list and reduce it to only REAL “to-dos”. You will feel decreased stress as you begin to get much more done.



# Chapter II

## Get Your To Do List Under Control

Is your to-do list almost too long to read every day? Or have you simply given up trying to keep a current to-do list. Don't give up; get your to-do list under control to compliment your time management strategies.

To begin, you need to understand that a to-do list is a "hot list" not a planning pad, wish list or long term idea starter. Your to-do list is for tasks that must be accomplished in 48 hours or less. For anything further ahead, use advance planning list or add the items to your day planner for the appropriate due date.

### **Take Inventory**

Start by writing down every task you need to complete on individual index cards. Arrange the cards in three piles: Must Do, Need to Do, Want to Do. The "Must Do" pile is the tasks that have to be completed in 24 hours.

### **The Approach**

Take any "Must Do" items that could wait an extra day and place them on the next day's to-do list. These are what some time management systems call the "A" level tasks. Next sort the "Need to Do" or "B" level tasks. These are important to do in the next day or two but not as imperative as showing up for a presentation or catching a plane.

### **Productivity is Yours**

Finally, deal with the "Want to Do" or "C" level tasks that could be done any time in the next several days. Some time management systems suggest that you toss out the "C" tasks or add them to a "Someday" list for when you have extra time. If you want to include these, just make sure they don't serve as a distraction from necessary items. For example, you might enjoy surfing the net for collectible books but you don't need

to do that “C” item when you have an “A” list report due in four hours.

### **The Superhero Syndrome**

How many items can you manage on a daily to-do list? It depends on whether each item is a one step process or multi-step process. With complex tasks, you may only be able to reasonably complete 3 or 4 “Must Do” items in a day. As you are adjusting to this time management technique, make a note by each item about how much time you expect to spend on this task.

### **Using Your Tools**

You can create a paper to-do list or one on your computer, just as long as it’s easily accessible during the day. When an item is done, cross it off, make a checkmark beside it or in some way be able to see what’s done from what needs to be done. If you use an electronic to-do list, you can add color background for each level. The advantage of color-coding items is that you can quickly see how many yellow highlighted Must Do items are left compared with the green highlighted Need to Do items.

### **When the Day is Done**

At the end of the day, transfer any remaining important items to the proper category on the next day’s to-do list. When you finish the day and see most or all of the “Must Do” items finished and crossed off your list, it’s a great sense of relief and motivation to keep your time management system working for you.



# Chapter III

## Plans to Turn Your To Do List into a Ta-Da! List

Does it seem like no matter how hard you work, not much seems to get accomplished? Read on to change your “To Do” List into a “Ta-Da” List!

You’ve got big dreams and you know you’ve got what it takes to achieve them. You’re eager to roll up your sleeves and start producing massive results. The problem is, no matter how hard you work, not much seems to get accomplished.

In fact, your To-Do list is a mile long and growing. You’re constantly busy yet you get to the end of the week before you get to the end of your list. Important things fall through the cracks. And you’re starting to feel frustrated, drained and overwhelmed.

You wonder how you’ll ever achieve your big goals when you can’t seem to dig yourself out from under this avalanche of tasks and ‘have to do’s’.

It’s time for a To Do list Makeover. Let’s turn that time and energy sucking list of “To Do’s” into “Ta Da’s!” you can smile about.

### **So what’s a Ta Da! List?**

A Ta-Da! list is results focused. It’s a list of high payoff tasks, that when completed have massive impact on your level of energy, results and success. List produces results that energizes and focuses you.

By contrast, a To Do List is a never ending list of everything you think you should be doing. Not all items are created equal - some are simple to do, others take major effort. A To Do list is full of busy work that feels heavy and draining.

**Here is a 5 step plan to tame that To Do list:**

## **1: Focus on Your Top 3 Priorities.**

Every “Ta-Da” List requires a clear focus. At the top of every list you make, start with your 3 most important projects or priorities. Don’t let your high payoff tasks get buried within a mile long list of ‘this and that’. Clearly focus on the 3 priorities that must get done, no matter what else happens. Let this focus your actions.

## **2: Start Dumping.**

Filter your To Do List for things you can DUMP. Your first reaction is going to be “There’s nothing I can dump!” But take an honest look. If everything is equally important then nothing really is.

What items on your list fall in the ‘great idea’ category but have very little payoff if you do them? What items have absolutely no consequence if you DON’T do them? (I ask myself: Is NOT doing this of Cosmic Significance?) What items are “shoulds” that you keep procrastinating on because they aren’t aligned with your top priorities? Cross them off and be done with it.

## **3: Delegate. Delegate. Delegate.**

Identify anything and everything that you can DELEGATE to someone else (involve a family member, hire someone, give it to a team member, ask a friend or barter with someone to get it done). Retire the superhero cape and be honest: Does this task need ME AND ONLY ME to get it done? Is this something that someone else could help me accomplish? Once you’re clear on who else can do the task, hand it off. If you’re concerned it won’t get done to your standards, set a ‘check in’ date to review progress and provide input. But commit to letting someone else handle it to completion.

## **4: Defer anything that can wait.**

Take another spin through your list. If there’s anything on your list that doesn’t have to be completed within the next 7 days, defer it. Put these tasks in your calendar for a future time. Just knowing you’ve created a time and space for them will free you up to focus on other, more important, priorities.

## **5: Time Block the rest.**

All that should be left on your list are those items that (a) must be done by you only you, (b) are linked to a top priority item and (c) must be done within 1 to 7 days. Now block time in your calendar to complete them so that you know they will get done.

One of the biggest mistakes we make with our “To Do lists” is keeping them separate from our calendar. You end up with a ‘to do’ list the length of your forearm and a calendar filled up with commitments that aren’t even on the list. That leaves you with no time to complete the items, skyrocketing your level of overwhelm and stress.

That’s it. 5 simple steps to create your Ta-Da List! I challenge you to test this process for the next 30 days. See how much more focused and productive you are. Oh, and get ready to take your bow!



# Chapter IV

## Top 7 To-Do List Mistakes People Make

A well-constructed and properly utilized to-do list is a great first step in becoming a person of action, a doer who gets things done and, as a result, gets what they want in life. However, if you make any one of a number of critical mistakes, your to-do list may do more harm than good.

**Here are the top seven to-do list mistakes people make:**

### **1 - They Don't Have Any List at All**

Many people begin their day without the slightest clue as to what they want to get done that day and thus, quickly mired in interruptions and trivia, they get little, if anything, of significance accomplished. My advice? If getting what you want in life is important to you, don't you be one of them!

### **2 - Their List Isn't Written Down**

Some people feel they can easily keep their list in their head and don't feel the need to write it down. However, personally, I find that a huge waste of "memory" that would much better be used for producing constructive results.

### **3 - They Have Too Many Lists**

Many people have a list for home, a list for work, a list for each of the different activities they're involved in, a list for each of the people they're associated with, along with any one of a number of other lists. Too many lists lead to confusion and confusion breeds inactivity. Keep it simple. Have one daily list and one daily list only.

### **4 - Their List Is Too Long**

I limit my daily list to two items. Any more and I start the day feeling overwhelmed and, if I don't finish them all, end the day feeling "behind the eight-ball". I'd rather start the day with two items on my list, get them done, add more to the list

as the day goes on, and get them done as well than start the day with twenty and end it with eighteen of them undone.

### **5 - Their List Is Too Complex**

Too complex in that it contains items that may take days, weeks, or even months to complete. I've found that by breaking "big", often overwhelming tasks into "small", easily actionable, tasks that can be done in just a few minutes and by putting these items on my daily list instead, I develop a momentum that allows me to plow through major projects far faster than I could by attempting the whole at once.

### **6 - Their List Lacks Priorities**

If you start your day with the question, "Which of these items should I do first?", guess what you'll spend the majority of your day doing? You got it! Trying to decide which of those items you should do first. Need I say more?

### **7 - Their List Isn't Visible and/or They're Not Using It**

In order to be effective, your to-do list needs to be where you can easily see it, when you need to see it, and, you need to refer to it frequently throughout the day.



# Chapter V

## Time Management - Be Most Effective at Work by Managing Your Time

Management and staff must remember that they alone cannot perform all of the practice's duties on their own, and such duties cannot be performed at once.

Therefore management must use efficient time management skills and must also teach such skills to staff.

It is common that employees feel a sense of urgency to complete their tasks. This can be caused by the fear of reprimand or generating the perception of poor performance by having uncompleted tasks. Some employees experience significant anxiety knowing they have multiple tasks waiting to be completed.

Management and staff gain satisfaction by completing their tasks urgently as it helps them feel useful. This reinforces the need to work in an urgent manner. Although this provides employees with a temporary relief of stress, the perception of urgency creates more stress than what is relieved after quickly completing many tasks.

Employees should always keep a work-list of tasks that need to be done. During the day, tasks can manifest during the busiest of times and the employee may easily forget about it if they do not write it down. Employees would benefit from carrying around a notebook so that they can make notes and reminders as the day progresses.

**A work-list should also be prioritized.**

Management and staff should know the difference between what is important and what is urgent, and should prioritize accordingly. Organizing this way reduces stress as and relieves anxiety as employees will feel more confident that duties will

be completed when they need to be and that nothing will fall through the cracks.

Employees should prioritize urgent matters but must ensure that important issues are addressed as well, as important issues that are not taken care of will later become urgent.

To manage time on a broader perspective, managers should plan about 30 days in advance to ensure that they are prepared for tasks or events in the future. Management should make use of a calendar and refer to such while planning.

Specific times should be set for certain tasks. i.e. Nurses should choose a time each day to return phone calls when they are least busy and so they can avoid interruptions.

Staff should communicate to each other at times when they cannot be disturbed. For managers, the most effective time management skill is delegation. Managers CANNOT control everything. Some managers are reluctant to delegate duties because they feel that by passing their responsibilities onto others, they are threatening their own jobs.

However, if the employees that a manager manages do well, it is reflective of their leaders. A good leader not only has a goal and a vision for the practice, but shares such goals with the staff and the challenges in the way of reaching its goals.

Delegation also empowers staff and involves them in the challenges of the practice. Therefore, they take more responsibility and pride in their work and become stronger employees.

When delegating responsibilities to employees, management should provide specific instructions on what is to be done and should monitor the employee's progress on the task. Management should not micromanage the employee on tasks that were delegated as it defeats the purpose for the manager as it would not free up any time for them.

Management should conduct a morning meeting each day. This ensures that all staff is sharing the same vision and goal

for the day. The daily schedule should be reviewed for anything that may cause an issue or delay. Management should lay out a “game plan” to staff of what needs to be done that particular day. Most of all, management should provide encouragement to staff to boost morale before they begin their work day.

### **Time Management - Why it is a Problem**

Some of the reasons people use time management can be counter productive to achieving sustainable change that delivers consistent results. Part of the problem is that the phrase can be misleading.

Here’s why:

Time doesn’t need managing. It’s YOU that needs managing!

The problem is that you are diverting attention from resolving underlying problems permanently that would create lasting solutions that would then no longer require managing.

The problem with time management strategies is that they are often used inappropriately - and that is what concerns me. What we are often doing is using time management to manage ineffective behavior patterns and bad habits instead of using them for improving productiveness and effectiveness.

So instead, I chose to focus on, what I call, self management.

Focussing on self management is about finding lasting changes to ineffective behavior patterns and bad habits, whereas time management often is about managing these problems.

Self management deals with real change that delivers tangible results, hence my preference for focussing on self management, not time management. You are going to dramatically increase your effectiveness if you remove problem areas totally rather than putting things in place to manage them.

Now, don’t get me wrong, I am not suggesting you throw out the current methods you use to get things done or that time

management tools don't have a place. What I am suggesting is this - Focusing on self management is more likely to give real solutions, lasting change and effective habits that naturally produce results.

A good starting point is to look at the mindset you go into when something comes up that you feel falls into a "time management" issue.

If every time a bad habit or behavior pattern surfaces your immediate mindset is to put a time management technique or tool in place to manage it. You are going to be forever in managing issues mode, not creating lasting solutions mode.

The key is to create a mindset that looks inside yourself to the source and solution first and techniques to manage issues second.

A good rule to follow with this sort of thing is to remember to always look inside before you look outside.

The key to real change always starts on the inside, with you and your mindset.



# Chapter VI

## How to Improve Time Management

One thing that separates super successful people from less successful people is their time management skills. Time management is so important that it impacts everyone's lives from their job to their home life to their personal comfort.

If you feel like there is simply not enough time in the day to do everything you want and need to do, it is time to examine your time management skills.

To begin managing your time better, you need to be able to identify where your time is being wasted. Everyone wastes some time throughout their day. And, not all of those time wasters are bad.

Watching a little TV doesn't mean that you can't get everything done. It's all a matter of moderation. How much TV a person watches, how many long phone calls they make and unnecessary emails they return can severely impact how productive each day is.

Being organized is very important to time management. Deciding what to do first and preparing to do it can take as much time as actually performing your task. To stay on track you need a schedule. Writing down everything that you have to accomplish and giving yourself a specific time to do so is essential to managing your time and identifying time wasters.

Some of the worst of these time wasters are the emails and voice mails that come in so often. Most email is simply not needed. Most people spend a significant part of each day sending and returning email and phone calls. Of the necessary ones, many go on for far too long. To get extra time out of each day, try to separate the important communications from the unimportant ones. If you need to make a phone call, don't be too timid to cut it short to allow yourself to stay on schedule.

Another way to keep on time schedule is with a reward system. For people who are chronically late and never seem to have spare time, a reward system is a quick way to whip their schedules into shape.

Everyday can be divided into specific blocks of time or into specific tasks that need to be done. As each task is completed, reward yourself with something you enjoy. It can be listening to a song that you love, watching a TV show, calling a friend, etc.

That way, none of the things that you enjoy are really gone from your day. They are simply used to keep you on track and accomplishing what you need to.

## **5 Techniques For Improving Time Management**

Many people are well organized and can manage their time efficiently, but there are still many others who definitely need to work on improving their time management.

How exactly do we manage our time? We all have 24 hours in a day to work with, so why does it seem like some people are Time Management Guru's and others can barely get their teeth brushed? You are the only person who can decide how to spend your time.

Often, even if we have deadlines we waste time and complete the projects on our list in a rush under pressure. Work is not effective when it's done in a hurry. We need to focus on the end result and our productivity levels, above anything else. If you want to become more effective and efficient, you need to practice time management skills regularly. As you master these skills, your life will become less chaotic, more enjoyable, and you may even find yourself with time to do nothing.

After all, being busy is just being busy, often it accomplishes nothing. Taking time to sit and let your mind wander often allows time for thoughts to be organized making you more productive later.

People often spend 80% of their time spinning their wheels, and 20% obtaining results. Learn to focus on results

you want to achieve and not the act of being busy. It will move you closer to achieving your goals.

## **Let's look at 5 Techniques For Improving Time Management**

### **1. Acknowledge that you have a problem**

It is a crucial component to successful time management. If you want to change any behavior you must acknowledge that the problem exists and it is time to solve it.

### **2. Commit to your goals**

It is very easy to set up goals or New Year's resolutions but it is much harder to keep and accomplish them. With every goal you set, it is imperative that you truly commit to it as well. Try to visualize the goal so it becomes part of you.

### **3. Prepare a daily list of tasks and get organized**

Make sure every evening you write a to-do list. After the list is finished, put a number next to each task according to its importance. This will allow you to stay focused and finish the most important tasks first. Preparing action plan will put you way ahead in improving your time management. Do not forget to check mark every completed task on your list. This will give you great overview of what you have actually accomplished during the day and what still needs to be addressed.

### **4. Learn to say "NO"**

Yes, "NO" is an answer and it is your duty to learn to say "NO" to people around you when necessary. Learning to say "NO" will be critical in capturing the time you need to create the life you want. Learn to ask for help, delegate, and don't over-commit.

### **5. Learn to prioritize**

Stop struggling with your time management and learn how to prioritize. Write down 5 tasks that you want to accomplish on a particular day and then sort them from most to least important.

Always start with the most important and difficult one to get it out of your way and then continue with the rest. That way you will be on the right track not to miss the mandatory task.

Time management is a learned skill. We all have the same 24 hours per week and the more effective we are in managing these hours, the more successful and productive our lives and businesses will be.

Once you apply these 5 simple techniques for improving your time management, you will be on the way to accomplishing what you thought is not possible because you didn't have the time.

## **How To Improve Productivity - Focus, Filter, and Forget**

A recent McKinsey Quarterly article discussed how focusing, filtering, and forgetting were vital to how to improve productivity. While that article was geared toward corporate executives, small and home-based business owners face their own productivity challenges. It is therefore from this perspective, that we will discuss this advice on how to improve productivity.

The McKinsey article refers to a 2006 study where participants who multi-tasked, took up to 30 percent longer and made twice as many errors as those who completed the same tasks in sequence.

This is because our brains can't successfully tell us to perform two actions concurrently. When we switch tasks, our brains must cognitively turn off from the old task, and then turn on for the new one, much like when we set up a machine for a production run.

Set up time is just like down time - the end result is reduced output. Now imagine continually switching tasks and all the time that it takes to set up between them, and it's no wonder that focusing on one task at a time yields faster results.

So, the first tip how to improve productivity is to make sure tasks are done sequentially, not concurrently. It requires a discipline to eliminate all distractions and a desire to stay concentrated on the activity that needs to be done.

For small business owners this can be a great challenge with so many issues and problems to address and a reality that the business owner is more often than not, the prime resource to address them.

A useful technique is to divide your day into chunks, or boxes of time that are reserved for certain activities. This is called time boxing. By time boxing, you not only develop a habit but you also educate those around you of your routine.

For example, if your email and voice mail advise those trying to reach you that you will be returning your calls

between 3 and 5 pm, then they won't try to reach you by other means if you don't answer or call them back right away.

A particular challenge to small business owners, is to manage the volume of information we are exposed to. We need to be able to filter information so that the most important or urgent is easily discernible from all the rest. Email filters work extremely well in this regard and should be used all the time.

Some small business owners may wish to delegate the management of their email to an employee or virtual assistant as well. The key here is to establish the work rules and then adjust them until the desired level of filtering is reached.

This can be particularly effective when combined with delegating responsibility to handle some of the tasks or issues that arise. This leads into the last component we will discuss on how to improve productivity, which is probably the most important, and at the same time, the most difficult for solo-preneurs. That is that you have to be able to let go.

Delegating will undoubtedly increase your productivity but you have to accept to relinquish some control. While it is a habit that is hard to develop if you like being in control. For example, wanting to be in the know all the time or wanting to have a say in every single decision may be tough control issues to address, but the sooner you do, the better. As a business grows, it becomes harder and harder to do and the "boss" quickly becomes the bottleneck. It is therefore best to develop the habit of delegating early on.

The other aspect of this is obviously to make sure you get in the habit of leaving your business when you have to. Many solo-preneurs decide to go into business for themselves because they desire to have more freedom, only to discover that they are "working" all the time. This is actually counterproductive.

Turning off from work actually helps recharge, change perspective, and makes people more productive when they turn back on. So get in the habit of doing physical activity during your day, or taking the time to read a novel, or playing

with your kids after dinner instead of reading emails. You will actually get more done anyway.

So while much focus seems to be on improving big business or corporate productivity, we can see that some basic strategies such as focus, filter and forget apply just as easily, if not moreso, to small businesses as well.

### **How to Improve Productivity in the Workplace**

Is your organization plagued by substandard employee productivity? Do you depend on your employees to be motivated and engaged in their work? This book will provide you with information that can help you learn how to improve productivity in the workplace so that you can maximize your bottom line. Whether you're an owner, an executive or a manager, the following information will be beneficial to you.

Your employees are the most valuable asset to your organization. Keeping them engaged and motivated is the key to a successful, highly productive workforce. While some employees produce to their highest capability regardless of the incentive, others need an occasional jump-start. When handled effectively, the result can be greater productivity and increased employee morale.

Unfortunately, many organizations don't understand how to motivate their employees. They are under constant pressure to increase productivity, profitability and revenue growth and it often overshadows the importance of how an unengaged workforce can negatively affect corporate performance.

What causes low productivity among your employees? It could be a number of things! Each employee is an individual and the things that affect them negatively in the workplace are unique. They could be poorly matched to a job in which they don't have the skills to be successful. It could be poor work ethic, extreme job dissatisfaction, substance abuse or difficulty with a poor manager.

They may be guilty of employee theft or fraud. Whatever the factors may be, your organization must understand how to identify the root of employee behavior and how it relates to

low productivity so that you can establish strategies to improve it.

So, how can you improve productivity in your organization? Fortunately, employee productivity increases can be achieved by knowing more about your employees and what motivates them.

Managers must find ways to understand what drives each individual employee within the context of their respective roles in the workplace. Every employee has a different reason for working. Some employees may be motivated by things like performance-based bonuses, an opportunity for a promotion, personal satisfaction, flexible working conditions or additional paid time off.

Others work to accomplish goals and feel as if they are contributing to something larger than themselves. Whatever their reason may be, employees must find some satisfaction in their work or they may become unhappy and unproductive.

Many companies use employee assessments to help them find ways to motivate employees as individuals. This provides better results as each employee's reason for working is unique. By using assessments, managers are able to find out what makes employees want to live up to their full potential.

Assessments can also be used to match people with the work they do. By measuring the essential factors that mark the difference between success and failure in specific jobs, your organization put the right person into every position, allowing them to utilize their talents without limitations. This leads to greater job satisfaction and improved morale because your organization is staffed with a workforce of people who are highly productive, skilled and committed to doing their very best.

#### **4 Secrets on How to Improve Productivity in the Workplace**

Experts on productivity have developed simple ways on how to improve productivity in the workplace. Generally, such methods involve either working smarter or working harder. I personally prefer working smarter over working harder.

If you want to know how to improve productivity then read on.

### **1. Work harder and look for ways to increase the level of your work focus.**

Lessen your time socializing or doing other things besides those that are work-related. This will help you finish the tasks you are supposed to do and accomplish for today. You need to focus on your tasks at hand and avoid wandering on other tasks or new tasks. Focus is truly the key and not waste time when you are working.

### **2. You also need to work faster and look for ways to increase work pace.**

Build and improve a certain work rhythm and sustain it. Work on an ideal speed without jeopardizing quality. If you start to feel tired or you slow down, then take a quick break and freshen up a bit. Do not let your tempo go down.

### **3. Sort out your tasks.**

Look for ways to concentrate on tasks that are related. Avoid multi-tasking. This defiles the essence of focus. Put together related tasks and work on those at the same day with designated time. As much as possible, finish a certain task before jumping to a new task. If you constantly switch from one task to another, you are wasting wee amounts of time which can be huge when you add them all up. You can lose time since you need to set your mind up on a new task and figure out where you left off.

### **4. Learn how to work smarter.**

Look for effective ways to simplify the work given to you. Every complex task can be simplified without altering the expected results. Simplifying tasks does not mean reducing the quality of your work, but it only means that you are making tasks easier and less complicated which consequently helps you finish tasks faster and meet your deadlines.

The Law of Complexity states that complexity of the task and the time needed to accomplish a task increase as the steps of a task escalate in number.

Find ways to simplify each step. If you can skip some steps and not ruin your output then do so. Do not skip indispensable steps, though. Find ways to shorten these steps. However, you need to know that there are some crucial steps you need to execute exactly without simplifying.



# Chapter VII

## How To Improve Your Focus Everyday

Feeling like there is just too much going on that doesn't seem to get done and that the hours of the day are escaping and you do not know why? This could be due to a lack of focus. You can get out of your focus rut with these how to focus tips.

**Stop Multi-tasking:** Let's be honest, we all tend to do this! It appears to be an action that allows us to "accomplish" more done in our daily life. However, the truth is that when someone multi-tasks, they are essentially splitting their brain function into two separate items of thought. Doing these more than two tasks at the same time actually lowers performance and can use up to twice as much unnecessary energy in our daily routines. This leads to our next topic on how to focus.

**Concentrate on Two Critical Things Per Day:** If you take the time to make a to-do list each day for items, narrow it down to just critical items! Putting little tasks on the list will lower your energy levels.

Would you really want to use your peak energy while you take out the trash or washing the dishes? No! Get to a subject or topic that takes serious thought and consideration and your results will show!

**Control Email:** Email Inboxes. It is something that most people have to check constantly to stay on top of the constant flow of questions sent and answers replied. The feeling of cleaning out one's inbox is one of accomplishment and satisfaction, but it comes at a cost.

Checking your email can cause the brain an average of 15 minutes to refocus on a task you were previously working on. We recommend that emails be resolved with a simple phone call or even talking in-person. It's quicker and much easier than sending an endless chain of wordy emails.

**Interval Train:** What does this mean? Think of it in terms of sports. Athletes learn how to focus by regularly alternating between doing harder workouts for a set length of time and switching to a lesser routine or rest period.

The best solution to this problem is to set goals of when you will focus on your work and nothing else. For example, start focusing on only doing your assigned task for 15 minutes then gradually work yourself up to longer periods of time like 30 minutes.

As well, you can use this solution to control your email problem listed above. Use the last 10 minutes of every hour to focus solely on email and the other 50 minutes for assignments.

**Practice The Brainpower Of None:** Taking the time to get away from everything in the world is one of the simplest things to do to improve your focus. Stepping back and getting away from all the technology and “noise” around us can help free your brain of clutter and let it process information more deeply and logically.

Having this opportunity of having fewer choices allows us to think clearly and ultimately change our thought process for the better.



## Chapter VIII

# Multi-Tasking - The Good and the Bad

There are two sides to multi-tasking. It's getting more done with less work. It's being effective with the resources available. It demands a high level of energy and commitment. But it's also the enemy of focus. It can be the enemy of effectiveness.

Multi-tasking can be the friend of Resistance - that force that keeps us from doing the really important stuff. Multi-tasking can keep us thinking about what we're not doing, rather than focusing on what's in front of us.

I just read an article on MSNBC about a media multi-tasking study. The study was conducted by Stanford University and used college students who were either heavy media multi-taskers or not.

The study concluded that the heavy users of media multi-tasking found it more difficult to focus and concentrate, and found it harder to ignore unimportant information than did the not heavy users.

This took a Stanford study to figure out? And the researchers were surprised by the results? I'm shocked that they were shocked. Whether it's media multi-tasking, or any other kind, there's a fine line between getting things done and just being busy.

I know that because every day I fight the urge to be busy as the means of fooling myself into thinking I'm effective. And multi-tasking plays right into the hands of that mysterious force called Resistance that fights like crazy to keep me from doing the things that I know need to be done. Multi-tasking can be like a magnet for "thin things"- attracting all the stuff that hangs around the edges and calls for attention. And it feels so good to do the "thin things".

An example of thin things was on The Apprentice show a few years ago. An accountant who was part of a team competing to complete a complex project appointed herself as the keeper of the balance sheet. The team ended up losing - but their balance sheet was great. It contributed little to the project. She was fired by Trump. She made the mistake of working on “thin things” rather than the main things.

Successful multi-taskers know how important focus is. They know focusing for a substantial period of time on the really important things - the true meaning of “Quality Time” - takes real work.

Focusing requires saying no - accepting that certain unimportant things will not get done - or will get done at another time or by someone else.

Focusing requires identifying and prioritizing the really important stuff. And it requires the self discipline to not be distracted by all the light weight, interesting, easy stuff that floats by on the breeze.

Successful multi-taskers know how easy it is to lose focus and cross over that line between being effective and just being busy. They use goals to help them stay on track - even when distractions and demands are coming at them hot and heavy. They know circumstances can change things in the blink of an eye. But they also know that goals can help them get back on course quickly and not lose sight of the main things.

To ensure multi-tasking is a personal strength, examine your own approach to it. We all need to do some of it - some more than others. Busy behavior can become addicting . Take the time to analyze what you’re doing and why you’re doing it. And if the answer is to meet important goals - you’re on target.

If, on the other hand, much of it is to keep from doing something else that’s more important, take the time to develop or modify the few main goals needed to keep focus where it should be. And then work those goals as the way to break loose from the busyness addiction.

### **Understanding The Myth Of Multi-Tasking**

Most of us are good at multi-tasking and we tend to equate this with being intelligent and productive. And while sometimes this is a good strategy, unfortunately, multi-tasking isn't always the answer to conquering our need-more-time-in-the-day syndrome.

In fact, there is a lot of misconception about multi-tasking. Folding laundry and watching Ellen may be a perfectly understandable multi-tasking activity but texting and driving can be a deadly.

The reason for this is simple. Our brains aren't designed to fully focus on more than one thing at a time. When we try to do this we compromise the quality of the work we are doing.

Folding laundry isn't necessarily dependent on how well we match up two sides of a shirt; but compromising driving skills because critical attention is directed away from the road, is a really bad idea.

And when it comes to working on your business, multi-tasking doesn't make you more productive. In fact, multi-tasking does exactly the opposite. When you multi-task two or more business activities, you end up taking longer to complete a project or a meet a deadline than you should because you are jumping from one thing to another. The reason for this is simple. Every time you bounce back and forth from one project to another, you end up breaking your concentration and focus, therefore, it takes even longer for your brain to get refocused again.

Even sorting paperwork files while talking with a client can cause that file to have to be re-sorted again, or an additional call may be made to a client because of something important you forgot to mention. Suddenly MORE time has been spent instead of less in an effort to save time.

### **So how do we prevent this?**

First of all, understand that we all have a tendency to want to jump from one thing to another in order to "get more done". Try to realize that if multi-tasking of any kind must be done, one of the tasks MUST be something that is completely

mindless - like emptying the paper shredder while being placed on hold.

**Here's what I suggest:**

- Set a timer and work on a project for a minimum amount of time then move on to something else and focus only on that for another specific amount of time.
- Label your tasks with a priority number of 1, 2 or 3 and make sure that you never try to tackle two #1 tasks at the same time.
- Schedule “down time” specifically to knock out as many #3 tasks as possible and combine these tasks with stress relieving music or consider sorting paperwork while sitting next to a pool or sitting under a nice shade tree.

This way you can feel more empowered and productive by taking care of necessary activities during a time when you aren't compromising anything else. This will re-energize you to fully focus on what's really important in the least amount of time.

**Stop Multi-Tasking - It's About Time!**

How many times this month have you or one of your colleagues talked about how you are swamped? You don't have enough time for this or that. There aren't enough hours in the day to get everything done.

**Picture this chain of events:**

- James starts the day with a cup of coffee. As he reads through the 25 emails that have come in overnight he quickly responds to an IM and then gets a phone call.
- As he's on the phone his assistant pops in with some documents. The assistant is using universal sign language for “sign here” as he points to the line with a ready pen.
- James is still on the call when he realizes he has a meeting to attend in 5 minutes. He hangs up, pulls the right folder for the meeting and heads down the hallway.
- During the meeting his blackberry beckons no less than 5 times. He quickly responds to three of the notes. The other

two he'll have to get to back at his desk.

- As the meeting ends a colleague sees James in the conference room and pops his head in, "can I ask you a quick question?" By the time James finishes with the "quick" question it's time to take a conference call back in his office.
- He gets back to his desk with just enough time to answer one of the other blackberry notes he received earlier before dialing up the conference call. Another colleague pops their head in as he's dialing in her call. He mouths the words, "I'll come back".
- By 4pm James sits back and thinks for a moment, finally a chance to get to what I had planned on working on today. Just then, that colleague who said, "I'll come back" came back. It was another 40 minutes by the time they were finished.
- Now it's 4:40pm and James has a 5:05pm train to catch. He sits and wonders for a moment, what can I get accomplished in such a short amount of time? Her answer: nothing. So he surfed the web and bought a couple of things on-line before calling it a day. Sound at all familiar?

This scene is too familiar for far too many of us. About the time you are ready to shut down for the day is about the same time you can finally start working on your own work or the projects you have planned.

Even though you may be able to tout that you're super busy and really swamped it may be fair to say you are not always as super productive or really focused as you would like to be. The problem is multi-tasking. While it is an important skill set that you cannot live without in today's workplace; there is the tendency to multi-task overdose.

We might define multi-tasking as being able to do more things at the same time. It seems productive. It even sounds productive, but don't let it fool you. Multi-tasking is deceptive. It is not always as productive as it sounds. Sometimes it is even counter-productive to the cause.

There is a reason why people seem to get more accomplished in the early morning and late in the day.

No one else is around.

They are naturally multi-tasking less.

So the big question is, “how do you strike a balance and multi-task just enough to have a high level of productivity before going overboard and becoming counterproductive?”

**Here are some Questions you can ask yourself to help determine if it’s time to multi-task or single track**

**How much brain power does it take?**

- If it takes a lot of concentration to work on the project; you may want to set aside uninterrupted time for it.
- If you are working on something that needs to get done, but doesn’t take a lot of brain power than multi-tasking may be just fine.

**How easy is it to get back into a project after being interrupted?**

- If you can jump right back to whatever you were doing without missing a beat then multi-tasking may not be a problem.
- If it takes 15 - 30 minutes to settle back into the project after being interrupted it may require more uninterrupted time to increase productivity.

**Are there any “burning issues” that may require me to drop what I’m doing?**

- If there are no known “burning issues” it may be a day where you can put aside 30 minutes or more to focus on just one project.
- You may be expecting interruptions and need to multi-task based on critical business issues.

Each of these questions the practicality of multi-tasking based on the task at hand, the level complexity or difficulty, and everything else going on around you.

There may be days when you have to stay available throughout the day and others where you will have the

flexibility needed to shut the door and let calls go to voicemail for a period of time while you focus on one project.

Carving out time to single track (stay focused on one thing) is not much different than being away from your desk for a meeting. While you are away it is a little more difficult to get in touch with you.

When you return you probably check your emails and voicemails to see what you've missed while you were away. Use the same principle in setting aside time to single track on a project.

## Conclusion

I've given you the basic ingredients in this guide. I've also highlighted important features that should be a part of your system. But ultimately, the task management strategy you design for yourself should be tailored in a way that works for you.

Here's another point that bears repeating: the purpose of your task lists - from your master task list to your daily to-do lists - isn't to make sure you get everything done. Rather, their purpose is to make sure you're focusing your limited time and attention on your most important work.

Remember, being productive isn't about keeping yourself busy. It's about getting the right things done based on your short and long-term goals.