



Mastering Personal Productivity

MOVING AT THE
SPEED OF LIFE



By Laura Stack,
MBA, CSP



Mastering Personal Productivity

Moving at the Speed of Life

Does the speed of life leave you feeling tested, bested, toasted, and roasted? Would you like to learn how to leave the office earlier, with less stress, and more to show for it? Read this innovative, research-based e-book on improving your personal productivity! This is NOT your old-school “time management” material...it offers a multitude of physiological, psychological, behavioral, and environmental productivity strategies. Professionals, managers, and administrative staff will gain scores of new ideas from “The Productivity PRO”[®] on increasing output without increasing effort and performing at your matchless best!

Make it a productive day! TM

Laura Stack, MBA, CSP
The Productivity Pro[®]

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ABOUT THE PRODUCTIVITY PRO, INC.



Laura Stack, MBA, CSP, has consulted with Fortune 500 corporations for nearly 20 years in the field of personal productivity. She helps her clients achieve Maximum Results in Minimum Time® and develop high-performance cultures. She is the president of The Productivity Pro®, Inc., which specializes in productivity improvement in high-stress organizations. Since 1992, Laura has presented keynotes and seminars on improving output, lowering stress, and saving time in today's workplaces. She is one of a handful of professional speakers whose business focuses solely on time management and productivity topics. Laura is a high-energy, high-content speaker, who educates, entertains, and motivates professionals to improve workplace productivity.

Laura is the bestselling author of four books, including *SuperCompetent: The Six Keys to Perform at Your Productive Best* (Wiley, 2010); *The Exhaustion Cure* (Broadway Books, 2008), *Find More Time* (Broadway Books, 2006), and the bestselling *Leave the Office Earlier* (Broadway Books, 2004), which was hailed as "the best of the bunch" by the *New York Times*. Her books have been published in nine countries and translated into six foreign languages, including Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese, Italian, and Romanian. She is also a contributor to two of the popular *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books. Laura's popular monthly electronic newsletter has subscribers in 38 countries. She is a Microsoft Certified Application Specialist in Outlook.

Widely regarded as one of the leading experts in the field of employee productivity and workplace issues, she has been featured nationally on the CBS Early Show, CNN, NPR, Bloomberg, NBC TV, WB News, the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *WashingtonPost.com*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *O Magazine*, *Entrepreneur*, *Readers Digest*, and *Forbes* magazine. Laura has been a spokesperson for Microsoft, 3M, Skillsoft, Office Depot, and Xerox, and she is the creator of The Productivity Pro® planner by Day-Timer. Her client list includes top Fortune 500 companies, including Starbucks, Wal-Mart, IBM, GM, MillerCoors, Lockheed Martin, Wells Fargo, and Time Warner, plus a multitude of associations and governmental agencies.

Laura holds an MBA in Organizational Management (University of Colorado, 1991), integrating the importance of productivity in business with employee retention and satisfaction. She is the 2011-2012 President of the National Speakers Association (NSA) and is the recipient of the Certified Speaking Professional (CSP) designation, NSA's highest earned designation.

Laura lives with her husband and three children in Denver, Colorado.



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The Ten Key Competencies of Personal Productivity

Mike M. was a senior manager for one of my large corporate clients, but you wouldn't know he was on the fast track if you looked at his office. He worked long hours, felt pressured, and was always playing catch up. Mike was unresponsive to requests and missed key deadlines. His company's upper management had reached the end of its patience, so I was called in to help Mike with his productivity. It didn't occur to him that he could lose his job; he thought his past successes would carry him through. It took us three months to turn a potential disaster into a triumph. It's three years later, and Mike still sends me a thank you note each year on the anniversary of our turn-around sessions.

This situation is not uncommon. I work with hundreds of companies and thousands of individuals every year. My hands-on coaching experience – plus thousands of interviews and email surveys – has enabled me to identify the ten main factors affecting personal productivity in the workplace. The first letter of each factor spells the word “**PRODUCTIVE**”:

Preparation

This competency relates to how well you've planned and laid the foundation for your daily activities. If you excel in this competency, you are *PROACTIVE*, rather than *REACTIVE*. Most people don't have well-articulated goals. Perhaps you don't know how to set them. Perhaps writing goals down seems like too much effort, or you simply haven't taken the time to write them. It's worth the work to create a plan, because the goals you set will provide *direction* for your life and *focus* your activities. *You must translate your lofty, long-term goals into actionable tasks you can work on today.*

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Ten Key Competencies of Personal Productivity

Reduction

This competency has to do with how well you eliminate time wasters in your daily activities. If you excel in this competency, you are *ASSERTIVE*, rather than *PASSIVE* in allowing people to dictate your schedule. With a finite amount of time available, if you wanted to get more done, the temptation is to go faster and work more hours. However, productivity is not about squeezing more into your days. You must *reduce* “speed bumps” – things that waste your time. Speed bumps exist at organizational, departmental, and individual levels. They could include administration, too many meetings, unnecessary levels of bureaucracy, too much red tape, or unclear priorities. YOU can also be a speed bump – the causal factor in wasting precious time. *You must eliminate speed bumps, so you can create the space to accomplish the important.*

Productivity is not about squeezing more into your days. You must reduce “speed bumps”—things that waste your time.

Order

This competency relates to your level of organization. If you excel in this competency, you have *SYSTEMS*, rather than *PILES*. You can find what you want, when you want it, in thirty seconds or less. How well do you control the paper, email, reading material, and inputs into and out of your office? Order is your ability to sort, filter, and process this information effectively. It’s how tidy your work areas look, inside and out. Being organized will give you more control over your life and time. You must find the time and the self-control to start achieving more of the things you want to do through proper systems.

Discipline

This competency refers to your ability to maintain consistent, productive behavior. If you excel in this competency, you complete what you *MUST* do, rather than what you *WANT* to do. Are you persistent in completing your high priority tasks, without getting sidelined by menial activities? Do you put your nose to the grindstone each day, or do you only work hard when you’re in the mood? Do you have a set of “rules” for yourself that govern your behavior and activity? Everyone



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has an “off day.” But if you’re self-disciplined, you exhibit consistent focus in your day-to-day work. Learn to do what needs to be done and exercise restraint over your own impulses, emotions, and desires. Sometimes working on the right thing doesn’t mean doing the fun thing. You must focus on high-value output, as defined by your job requirements, and learn to stop procrastinating.

Unease

This competency refers to your ability to handle stress well, so that it doesn’t impact your performance and productivity. If you excel in this competency, you focus on VALUE, rather than VELOCITY. You’re not running around in a harried frenzy all the time. According to nationwide office productivity study conducted by Xerox and Harris Interactive in 2003, most people work over 60 hours a week total, and over 33 percent work on weekends. The “faster, cheaper, do more with nothing” approach has created a workplace where workers are always in high gear. This work style reduces productivity and increases stress. Stress is also a known factor in 70 percent of all diseases, so people must learn to reduce tension. You must be familiar with stress-reduction strategies, so you can recover when pushed to the limit every day.

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Concentration

This competency refers to your ability to stay on target and focus on the task at hand. If you excel in this competency, you are PURPOSEFUL, rather than DISTRACTED. As a child, I remember sitting for hours at a time, absorbed in my favorite books. My mother would enter the living room asking, “Didn’t you hear me call you?” I would look at her, confused, as I came back to reality, and answer honestly, “No, mommy I didn’t.” And that was the complete truth! That level of concentration is very hard to achieve today. With noise, interruptions, instant messages, and email, so many things competing for our attention in the workplace that it’s often very difficult to concentrate. *You must be able to achieve a state of “flow” and work without breaking focus.*



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Time Mastery

Effective time management brings purpose in life, structure to your day, direction, reduced frustration, and a sense of accomplishment.

This competency relates to how well you manage your activities throughout the day. If you excel in this competency, you focus on *QUALITY* of your activities, rather than the *QUANTITY*. Some people spend more time planning their vacations than their time. With good time management comes the rewards of results, recognition, free time, clarity, and focus. Effective time management brings purpose in life, structure to your day, direction, reduced frustration, and a sense of accomplishment. In addition, it reduces stress, since it gives you much more control over your day. *You must run your life, rather than allowing your life to run you.*

Information Management

This competency relates to how well you handle all the information coming at you. If you excel in this competency, you are *DECISIVE*, rather than *TENTATIVE*. We've become dependent upon computers, email, voicemail, the Internet, Blackberries, PDAs, cell phones, and pagers. These devices connect us to the world of work. Today, you must be technologically savvy and make choices quickly. You also must choose the best method and medium of communication for the particular message you want to convey. Technology can undoubtedly improve your productivity, but it can make you *LESS* productive if you're not careful. *You must use the latest technologies to your advantage, without letting technology take advantage of you.*

Vitality

This competency refers to your wellness. If you excel in this competency, you *TAKE CARE* of yourself, rather than *IGNORING* your physiological needs. How healthy are you? How much energy do you have throughout the day to accomplish the things you want to do? Do you sleep enough? You have the potential to dramatically impact our productivity by paying closer attention to our behaviors around health. In other words, we eat too much, drink too much, don't exercise enough, work too much, and don't sleep enough. No wonder some people can't be productive! Some studies suggest that



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upwards of 70 percent of doctor visits are prompted by our own choices in these areas. *You must practice proper self-care, so that are physically capable of performing at your matchless best.*

Equilibrium

This competency refers to the proper mix of activities in your life. If you excel in this competency, you feel *BALANCED*, rather than *UNBALANCED*. Balance is tough to achieve, because you have a real commitment to your job and to your family. You love your work life and your personal life, often with equal vigor, and don't want to give either one up. Professionals find it difficult to participate fully in one arena without sacrificing the other, but successful people know high performance depends on both personal satisfaction and professional achievement. *You must practice lifestyle tactics and make the proper choices that help you to work at a realistic level.*

The more solidly you feel you demonstrate each one of these competencies, the better the chances that your habits support personal productivity:

- ⌚ If you said a resounding, "That's me!" after each one, you're probably a Productivity PRO!
- ⌚ If you can identify with some but not all of the traits, you may be a "middle of the road" employee, which means you're not the most productive person, but you're not the worst. Ouch! Who wants to be average? Really work on kicking it up a notch!
- ⌚ If you just shook your head, select one competency every three weeks and work on systematically improving your productivity. If you are low in a particular area, reading the corresponding chapter in my book *Leave the Office Earlier* will give you specific tools and exercises to improve in that competency.

Select one competency every three weeks and work on systematically improving your productivity.



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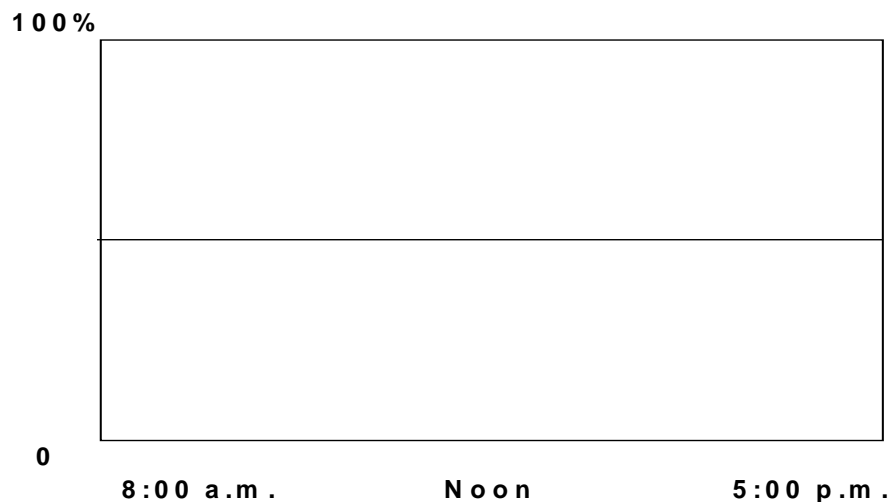
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Understanding Your Personal Energy Cycle

You're staring at a blank page on your computer. You're supposed to be typing an important sales letter, but the words don't seem to be coming to you. "What is wrong with me?" you wonder, "My brain isn't working!"

Everyone has a natural time during the day when they are "UP" (prime time) and a natural time when they are "DOWN" (down time).

It could just be that your brain isn't in the mood. Your productivity ebbs and flows during the day. Everyone has a natural time during the day when they are "UP" (prime time) and a natural time when they are "DOWN" (down time). During prime time, your brain is "on"; your batteries are charged and you're able to focus. During down time, your brain feels "slow"; it's difficult to muddle through your work. Think of your energy level like a dimmer switch. People don't operate at "OFF" and "ON." You're not running full-tilt all day long. It's not "0" and "100%" but rather various levels all day. People are more like dimmer switches.



On the chart above, your work hours are on the horizontal axis, and your energy levels are on the vertical axis as a percentage. 0 is brain dead and 100 means you are fully "on." When you arrive at work in the morning, draw a dot where energy intersects with time, to indicate how you feel in terms of your energy level. As the day progresses, draw a series of dots horizontally to show how your energy ebbs and flows. Then connect the dots, so you have a line drawing.



Understanding Your Personal Energy Cycle

Now draw a dotted line at about the 75% energy level mark across your line drawing to represent your peak productivity zone. Write these exact time ranges out to the side of your graph. These are your "expensive" hours, compared to other times during the day, because your brain is capable of doing higher-level activities in that range. It's important to know when you're in prime time, because you can get so much more done.

The key is to focus on:

- ⌚ Tasks requiring creativity
- ⌚ Sales calls
- ⌚ Critical decisions
- ⌚ Problem solving
- ⌚ Complex thought
- ⌚ Detailed analysis
- ⌚ Projects requiring high concentration

If you wait until you're in down time to work on these types of activities, it will take much, much longer and be much, much more painful. The challenge for most people is that when they're in prime time, they feel GOOD! The last thing you might feel like doing when you're "up" is working on that report, writing a proposal, or analyzing figures. But if you wait until you're going down, you've lost the opportunity to get it done quickly. The trick here is a lot of self-discipline. Resist the urge to do "fun, easy, trivial" things or talk to your friends during this period.

I actually have two prime times: one in the morning, and one early afternoon. When I'm in prime time, I need to make my marketing calls, because I need to be "up" and on top of the conversation. Sometimes, I will purposely let my voice mail pick up my calls, when I know I'm in down time and won't be as articulate as I'd like to be with a client. I will also respond to Requests for Proposals (RFPs) sent by prospective clients in prime time. I want to write quickly and succinctly, and my prime time is the key opportunity for that work.

Resist the urge to do "fun, easy, trivial" things or talk to your friends during your prime time.



Understanding Your Personal Energy Cycle

Similarly, I listen to my body when I'm in down time. When I feel my energy level waning, a quick glance at the clock will usually tell me why. I know I need to get up, stretch, and perhaps go for a quick walk around the block, eat an energy snack, or make a cup of tea. Then I will go back and work on some different activities, not necessarily ones with low priority, but those that don't require the brainpower of the prime time tasks. If I don't listen to my body's signals and respond appropriately, I will get a rip-roaring headache, preventing me from taking advantage of my second prime time.

My kitty Emma follows the sunshine all day. She plays some, sleeps some, eats some, and pays attention to her own desires. People say things like, "I *have* to check email at (x) time of day." Better to schedule times to handle email when you're in down time and stick to a self-imposed limit. Rarely do people need to be going a hundred miles an hour to handle email. Pay attention and slow down when your brain and body tell you to.

Be a cat. Be a dimmer switch. Follow your rhythms and work with your brain and body's desires for you throughout the day. Remember, it's costly to have key people, including yourself, tied up in routine meetings during periods of peak energy and productivity. And it's costly for you to work on things you can do in your sleep during your peak productivity zone. Once you know what that zone is, protect it for all your worth! Be self-disciplined when you're "up." And give your brain a break when you're down. Meow.

Be self-disciplined when you're "up." And give your brain a break when you're down.



Achieving a State of ‘Flow’ at Work

Do you ever feel like your mind is a million miles away? You watch someone in a meeting who is “somewhere else,” and they have a far-away, glassy look to the eye. You *know* they are not hearing a word of what is being said. They’re with you physically, but their minds are somewhere else, thinking about some meeting, worrying about that errand, or trying to figure out what someone meant by a passing comment.

Contrast that with a time you were so immersed in an activity that time just stood still? Your stomach suddenly growls, and you look up at the clock to discover you worked right over your lunch hour and didn’t notice! You were totally immersed in what you were experiencing or doing. **What are the benefits of this extreme focus?**

- ⌚ **Output is increased.** You simply get more done when you are 100% attuned to your task. You’ll get more letters written and more projects completed
- ⌚ **You perform optimally and do your best work.** If you are giving your total attention to something, the quality will be better. Isaac Newton said, “If I have ever made any valuable discoveries, it has been owing more to patient attention than to any other talent.”
- ⌚ **The time invested in projects is decreased.** If you don’t feel like doing something in the first place (like paying bills), wouldn’t you rather have it over in an hour instead of stretching it out over three?
- ⌚ **Less rework.** Your focus reduces the time it would have taken you to correct the mistakes and omissions that are a byproduct of inattention.
- ⌚ **Peace of mind is enhanced.** There is an old legend about a man who travels the world searching for the meaning of life. One day he climbs a high mountain to a monastery to get the advice of a monk who is reputed to be the wisest man on earth. When asked for the secret to happiness, the monk replies simply, “DO whatever you’re doing.”

When asked for the secret to happiness, the monk replies, “DO whatever you’re doing.”



Achieving a State of 'Flow' at Work

What are some of the characteristics of the non-flow state?

- ⌚ Continually stopping one task and starting another
- ⌚ Not establishing a goal or "end" state
- ⌚ Constant disruptions and interruptions, which make it difficult to concentrate
- ⌚ Feeling overwhelmed
- ⌚ Low energy period

A characteristic of the flow state is a strong belief that you can and will accomplish your goal

What are some characteristics of the flow state?

- ⌚ A vested interest in the outcome
- ⌚ A strong belief that you can and will accomplish your goal
- ⌚ Total focus, with no interruptions
- ⌚ High energy period
- ⌚ Passion/fun/enjoyment
- ⌚ Proper environmental conditions (temperature, smells, noise)
- ⌚ Minimal effort required (low learning curve)

How do you achieve this wonderful state of flow and become fully present-focused?

- ⌚ **Master your job.** Research shows that your ability to experience flow is related to your mastery of the mechanics of your job. The more unfamiliar you are with your work, the harder it is to achieve. Just as learning to drive was at first a conscious behavior, when mastered, it became subconscious. If you're on a learning curve in a new activity, it will be harder to achieve intense focus. The more you learn the job, the better your ability to concentrate and "let go."
- ⌚ **Prepare for and expect to achieve focus.** Set your mind properly. Consciously, willfully decide that you are going to concentrate. Have a positive attitude going into the task. Prepare your materials in advance of getting started and have what you need at your fingertips.



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Achieving a State of 'Flow' at Work

When you become focused on the task of the moment, time seems to fly, and you get the job done easier and faster.

- ⌚ **Clear your desk.** Do your piles talk to you? “Do me!” “Don’t forget me!” Clutter can be psychologically distracting. You will focus better on what’s in front of you if you don’t have ten other things surrounding you. Clear the piles, so everything is out of your line of sight except the single thing you’re working on.
- ⌚ **Set aside some time.** Estimate how long the task will take and schedule an appointment with yourself on your calendar. Total absorption is very relaxing. It’s splitting your attention—between what you’re currently doing and what you have to do next—that’s exhausting. When you become focused on the task of the moment, time seems to fly, and you get the job done easier and faster.
- ⌚ **Ensure no interruptions.** The ability to work uninterrupted is very important to devote your complete attention to an activity. Having privacy will help you achieve a state of flow. Tom DeMarco and Timothy Lister, co-authors of *Peopleware: Productive Projects and Teams*, claim reaching a state of flow requires at least 15 minutes of ramp-up concentration. People are especially sensitive to interruptions during this time. When people are disrupted, they can’t go right back in. They require an additional 15 minutes of time to get started again. This leads to increased frustration and reduced productivity. Close your door if you have one, or leave your office and retreat to an empty office where no one can find you.

Take each step deliberately and with full attention. Strive to be “in the moment.” When you read a book to your child, really READ a book to your child. Don’t be focused on all the to-dos that you must do when you’re finished. Be present and available and in the now for those people and tasks you care about.



Focus and Finish

With phone calls, hallway conversations, emails, and people “stopping by,” how often do you get interrupted during the day? Let’s say you interact with six people frequently throughout the day, and each one interrupts you in some form every two hours. With six stakeholders, that would be 24 interactions a day, or 120 a week, resulting in an average interaction three times an hour in a 40-hour week. If each interruption took ten minutes, you would spend 50% of your time on them. If you can’t work for more than a few minutes without being interrupted, a small project could end up taking all day.

We’ve tried the extremes, which are (1) an open-door policy, and (2) blocking off time for several hours and hiding from everyone. The open-door policy produces so many interruptions that it’s almost impossible to get anything done. If you’re not available at all, a small problem you could have handled promptly turns into a crisis because you couldn’t be reached. You need a balance between controlling interruptions and staying informed.

Use an understood signal

If several people in your department are having problems with drop-in visitors, agree on a signal that says, “Please don’t interrupt unless it’s an emergency.” A manager I worked with at Coca-Cola had an “open-door” policy. He wanted his employees to feel comfortable talking to him about anything, anytime. Unfortunately, he rarely could find time to get his work done. At his next staff meeting, he explained the problem he was having. He said that when he had a deadline, he would put on his red Coca-Cola baseball cap. His door would remain open in case there was an emergency, but he would prefer employees didn’t interrupt him during those times. He reported it worked like a charm. Get together with your department and agree on a signal everyone will use consistently. Installing curtains across the cubicle door? Turning your nameplate around? Wearing orange armbands? Partially closing the door? One group I worked with found that coworkers respected the signal about 80% of the time. When I questioned the people who

With phone calls, hallway conversations, emails, and people “stopping by,” how often do you get interrupted during the day?



Focus and Finish

said others weren't respecting their signals, it turns out they *never* took down their signals. They were never available to their coworkers, so their coworkers simply ignored their signals. If you use this system, make sure you don't abuse it.

Establish conditional interruptions

If you'd rather not use a signal, you can agree on which issues merit interruptions:

Type 1 issues are those that require your input specifically. The world will stop until you are available to discuss it. Condition your colleagues to interrupt you only for these types of issues.

Type 2 issues need only a quick "yes" or "no" answer and require just a little interaction. Have your colleagues "save up" these issues and check in with you once a day for five things instead of five interruptions with one thing apiece.

Type 3 issues are those that could be answered by someone else; you're not the only person in the world who can help. Kindly request that people look elsewhere for answers to Level 3 issues. Avoid the "it's not my job" attitude; simply educate the visitor on the appropriate resource.

Type 4 issues are already answered in print somewhere—like a procedure, guide, or employee manual—and don't require your assistance. People ask these types of questions when they're being lazy. Tell your coworkers clearly, "Please don't bother me with Level 4 issues."

Set aside "down time"

Some companies have instituted a period of time every day where you cannot interrupt another employee, schedule a meeting, or answer your phone. Can you imagine having an hour and a half to yourself every morning? These "quiet times" can be used quite successfully. Allow employees to turn on their voicemail if they are up against a tight deadline. Work out an agreement with your colleagues to cover phones for one another at certain times to etch out a little uninterrupted time



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Focus and Finish

each day. You might consider closing your door (if you have one) when you truly need to concentrate. Establish fixed office hours when you can be interrupted.

Schedule regular check-in times

Are you rarely available to talk? Perhaps people are interrupting you because they know they must grab you when they can. The solution is to schedule regular check-in times for updates from people you must talk to often. Have each person create a running list of things they need to discuss, so you can cover all the points at once. Pay attention to who interrupts you the most and chat about this new approach.

Turn away from busy hallways or doors

Humans are curious, so when someone walks by, it's our nature to look up to see who just passed. If people are wandering around looking for someone to bother, they will catch your eye and smile. Not wanting to be rude, you smile back. They enter your office and ask the death question, "So, how's it going?" Congratulations, you just bought yourself an easy ten-minute interruption. One solution is to rotate your desk or change the layout of your cubicle so that your back faces the door. If someone walks by and sees that you are busy, they are *less* likely to interrupt you (but not always). If you can't rotate your desk, work at an angle or face a corner. Use a computer screen or cabinet to block your corridor view.

Don't obey your thoughts

Many times you interrupt yourself. You're sitting at our desk, concentrating on an important project, when all of a sudden you remember you forgot to tell Chris about a project update. So you get up or pick up the phone or dash off an email to tell Chris. Then you go back to your desk and start working again, only to get another thought. "Oh, that's right!" you say, and you do that.

Stop!

Ask yourself *when* you will do the task.



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Focus and Finish

Write it on the appropriate daily to-do list, or if it is a few months from now, write it on your master task list.

Don't listen to your brain or you will never complete what's in front of you.

Don't listen to your brain or you will never complete what's in front of you. This is why so many people have "half-done" projects all over the place!

Communication Logs

Grab a three-ring binder, some loose-leaf paper, and A-Z tabs. Create a separate sheet for each person you communicate with frequently. File the sheets behind the first letter of their last names. When your brain reminds you of something, log it on person's sheet and go right back to what you were working on. When a person's sheet has several thoughts "saved-up," call that person and set up a meeting to review the items you've come up with.

Go into hiding

When I needed to put the finishing touches on my book, I knew I could never complete it if I worked in my office. So I would escape for three days at a time to my friend Kay Baker's house, where no one could find me. Without the daily office distractions, I finished my book. If you absolutely have to get away for a solid hour without being interrupted, find an empty conference room or borrow a vacationing colleague's office.

Lastly, set your mind properly

Consciously, willfully decide that you are going to concentrate. Have a positive attitude going into the task. Prepare your materials before getting started and have what you need at your fingertips. Here's to focusing on your work and finishing what you started!



Butterflies and Stamps

The Difference Between Distracted and Purposeful People

I was an avid reader growing up. I've read the *Little House on the Prairie* series probably 30 times and an unknown number of *Black Beauty* and *Nancy Drew* novels. I remember sitting for hours at a time, in the corner of our living room in my daddy's favorite recliner, absorbed in the stories. My mother would come fuming into the living room occasionally, demanding, "Didn't you hear me call you??" I would look at her, confused, as I came back to reality, and answer honestly, "No, mommy I didn't." And that was the complete truth!

That level of concentration is very hard to achieve today. There are so many things competing for our attention in the workplace, that it's often very difficult to concentrate. Do you have "half-done" projects all over your office and your home? Do you get distracted easily and tend to blow like the wind in a many different directions? Do you continually talk to yourself about all the things you need to do ("I don't know...do I talk to myself?")?

A Butterfly randomly flits from task to task. A Stamp sticks to one thing until it gets there.

If so, this article is for you. There is a fine line between ineffective distractedness and effective juggling. The former is created by Default, and the latter is created by Design. I call the ineffective type the "Butterfly" and the effective type the "Postage Stamp." A Butterfly randomly flits from task to task. A Stamp sticks to one thing until it gets there.

Butterflies

Let's describe the Butterflies first, so it will be easily to distinguish them from the Stamps. Here's a sample scenario: "I'm going to go to the grocery store. Wait, I should make a list. Put my keys down. Go through pantry. Yikes, this place is a mess. Throw out some stale chips, combine snacks, and put Oreos in a Ziploc bag. Whew, I'm hot. Take off coat. Okay, milk, bread, eggs, ah, darn my pencil broke. Go to study to



Butterflies and Stamps

sharpen. Ooops, this letter needed to go out today. I should stop by the mailbox on my way to the grocery store. Sit at computer to get address of client. Notice that I have seven unread messages. I wonder what's in here? Here's one from my sister with a link to a site. Click. Click. Click. Cool. Wait, the address. Write letter. Back to kitchen. What was I doing? Shoot! Pencil. Back to study. I should just keep pens in the kitchen. Sort pencil holder to find some spare pens. Back to kitchen. Put pens in drawer. Clean out old coupons. Yikes, finish list. I'd better go to the bathroom first. Bathroom. Coat. You know...if I ran the dishwasher, the dishes will be clean when I get back. Dishes. Notice grime in cracks of tile, gross. Spray with cleaner. Scrub. Scrub. Okay, I'm ready to go. Hey, where are my keys? Phone rings...I wonder who that is? Oh it's mom...I'd better make sure everything's okay. Yack yack. Hang up. Darn, it's too late to go to the store now. I'll do it first thing tomorrow..."

This Butterfly flitted around from place to place and never made it to the grocery store or mailed the letter, the two most important things at that time. The dishes are clean, the grime is gone, and mom is happy, but those things weren't the true priorities of the moment. However, this Butterfly has the sensation of having worked hard from being so busy. They don't stay focused and concentrate on what must get done. Butterflies experience a "flurry of activity" from doing a lot but accomplishing little.

Stamps get one thing started, and then purposely switch to something else for a time. They know when and why to switch back to the original task.

Stamps

Stamps, on the other hand, are very purposeful in their activities and can juggle many things. They get one thing started, and then purposely switch to something else for a time. They know when and why to switch back to the original task. Here's a sample scenario: "Okay, in the next half hour, I've got to book this airfare, review this report, and load this software on the computer. Let's see...start the install. Let that run. A new email; let it go. Call the airline. Hold. Put on headphones so I can write. Start reading report. Hello? Put sticky note where I left off. Make reservations. Remember that I need to



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Butterflies and Stamps

call to confirm my meeting for tomorrow. Write it down and go back to task. Glance at computer and click OK. Finish install and registration. Continue reading report. Co-worker walks in with interruption. Listen. Low priority. Schedule phone appointment for tomorrow at 3:20. Back to report, write comments. Check. Now, I'm going to handle email...and... what was it? Good thing I wrote that reminder down."

Stamps stick to the task at hand and don't get distracted by a million different things while working. They don't let themselves get distracted by brain traffic, emails, or interruptions. In the first scenario, a Stamp would not have checked email, surfed the web, done the dishes, cleaned the grime, or talked to mom.

How do you become less of a Butterfly and more of a Stamp?

Isaac Newton said, "If I have ever made any valuable discoveries, it has been owing more to patient attention than to any other talent."

Practice

When you know you're off task, get into the habit of self-correction: "I really shouldn't be doing this right now. Get back on task!"

Write down distractions, but don't follow them

If you think of something that needs to be done while you're working on a higher priority task, write it down (paper or electronic) to remember it, then get back to the task at hand.

Avoid your known distractions

Personally, I love to surf the net and read the latest news. When I'm working on a high-priority project, I don't allow myself to launch my browser. I close Outlook so incoming email doesn't distract me. I make sure I've got a fresh cup of coffee before I begin so that I don't have an excuse to get up and go to the kitchen (where I might find something "important" to do).



Butterflies and Stamps

Defer interruptions

Resist the urge to check email that just came in. Ask a friend who drops by if you can come by and visit at lunch, because you're right in the middle of something important.

Prioritize

Each day, ask yourself, "If I could only accomplish three things today, what would they be?" or "What would I need to accomplish today to feel good about the day when I leave?" Make sure to do those things first.

Self-correct yourself with a quick reminder "flit-flit!" when you're being a butterfly. Try to imagine yourself, instead, with a postage stamp on your head, focusing on priority tasks.

Try to imagine yourself with a postage stamp on your head, focusing on priority tasks.



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Complete What You Start!

How To Stop Doing Things Halfway

When my youngest son, James, was born, we decided to remove the built-in desk in his room, to give us more options for laying out the furniture. To install the desk, the prior owners removed a piece of the floorboard, so the desk would lie flush against the wall. Upon removal, the patch of missing floorboard was exposed. This was, of course, unacceptable to a mother with her third baby on the way. So my faithful husband went to Home Depot and bought the matching section of floorboard. Upon returning home, we discovered that the ends didn't match up, so John would need to cut the board. I bought him a big new circular saw that would do the job nicely.

James is now four years old...and that stupid piece of floorboard is still sitting in the garage...and when I enter James' bedroom, I look with annoyance at that bare patch. (Of course, when John reads this, he will have to finish the project, haha!)

Do you have little "half-done" projects like this all over YOUR house? Do you find that you can never actually FINISH anything? Here are some tips for eliminating the "half-done" projects from your life and moving things through completion:

Keep track of your projects

I keep a running list on a blank piece of paper the size of my Franklin planner labeled "Honey Do's." I file it behind the "H" in the A-Z tabs of my planner: a paper filing system of sorts. When John has some free time, he knows exactly where to look to remind him of what needs to be done.

Always ask, "What's next?"

I know I can't be the only one with such "half-done" projects all over the house. Why is it that things "stall" partway through completion? At some point, you stopped asking the question, "what's next?" What is the single next step you would have to take to see forward progress on the task? For John, it would be measuring the angle of the existing floor-

What is the single next step you would have to take to see forward progress on the task?



Complete What You Start!

board in the bedroom. If a belt is laying in the kitchen and needs to go upstairs in your room, you might just look at it and think to yourself, “I don’t want to run all the way upstairs to put that belt away,” so you leave it there. Instead, take the single next step and put it on the stairs. Every time you go upstairs, grab something to take with you.

Always seek to resolve incompletions

Unpack from trips. Put the dirty clothes in the hamper, refill toiletries while you remember what’s gone, and unpack your files. I was in one woman’s home office and noticed seven conference bags stacked against the wall. Upon inquiry, I discovered they were filled with her seminar notes, brochures, and vendor samples. She never spent time after the conference to review and activate her plans, so now she’s afraid to even look in there, for fear of how much time it will take. You may as well throw them all away. If you have a pile of magazines you haven’t looked through in months, set a timer for five minutes, force yourself to scan the table of contents for each one, and toss or review it before the timer goes off.

Break it down

Don’t bite off more than you can chew. If you define your Saturday project as “clean out the garage,” you’re sure to fail. It’s too much and takes too long. You will run out of steam before you’re finished, give up, and leave it “half organized,” which is almost more frustrating than unorganized. Breaking down a project into smaller chunks of time is often called the salami technique, slicing up a big task into digestible slices. Schedule a one-hour “declutter assault” and define a specific goal to achieve in that time: “Label the drawers,” “Tidy up the floor,” “Organize the gorilla rack on the left wall,” etc. Get an egg timer, set it for one hour, and then go at it! Dividing a task into small sections like this will allow you to see progress toward your goals and feel inspired, rather than discouraged.

Don’t bite off
more than you
can chew.



Multi-tasking is Counterproductive: Shifting Mental Gears Downshifts Productivity

What are you doing right now while you're glancing through this article? Monitoring a screen for stock figures? Ordering office supplies on-line? Installing a new piece of software? Carrying on Instant Message conversations with three co-workers? Eating your lunch while working on a proposal? If you're like most professionals today, you're probably multi-tasking. As technology increasingly tempts people to attempt several things at once, many have embraced multitasking as a valid way of increasing productivity. Or maybe it's a post-layoff corporate assumption that the few can be made to do the work of many.

Multi-tasking is switching back and forth very quickly between tasks.

Regardless, I'd like to clear up a couple myths. Most people think that multitasking is "doing more than one thing at a time," but it's really switching back and forth very quickly *between* tasks. **The conscious mind is actually incapable of doing more than one thing at a time.** For example, let's say you're typing an email and a co-worker walks in and starts talking to you. Can you give the same amount of attention to constructing the email as you can to listening to the person? Of course not. One or the other loses your focus.

Another myth is that multi-tasking allows you to increase your efficiency and productivity by working more quickly. Not so, according to newly released results of a new scientific study in multitasking. Scientists have discovered some hidden costs of what they call "task switching." **The research indicates that multitasking, in fact, reduces productivity.**

Joshua Rubinstein, Ph.D., of the Federal Aviation Administration, and David Meyer, Ph.D., and Jeffrey Evans, Ph.D., both at the University of Michigan, describe their research in the August 2001 issue of the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, published by the American Psychological Association (APA). They determined that for all types of tasks, subjects lost time when they had to switch from one task to another. The time loss (called "time cost") was even



Multitasking is Counterproductive

greater when the complexity and unfamiliarity of the task increased. The scientists estimated that not being able to concentrate for even ten minutes at a time may cost a company as much as 20 to 40 percent in terms of potential efficiency lost, or the “time cost of switching,” as these researchers call it.

You've got to (1) want to switch tasks (called goal shifting), you've got to (2) make the switch (called rule activation), and then you've got to (3) get warmed up on what you switch to or switched back to.

To explain why this happens, you have to understand the way the brain works. When you toggle back and forth between activities, whether it's talking on the cell phone while driving, using different computer programs, or writing an email while you're trying to have a conversation with a co-worker, you're using your “executive control” process, which is basically your mental CEO. You've got to (1) want to switch tasks (called goal shifting: “I want to do this now instead of that”), you've got to (2) make the switch (called rule activation: “I'm turning off the rules for that and turning on the rules for this”), and then you've got to (3) get warmed up on what you switch to or switched back to. For example, let's say you're banging away on a report on Word. Then the phone rings and you answer it. When you hang up, there is a lag when you return to your document where you say, “Okay, where was I?” and get your train of thought back. In effect, you briefly get “writer's block” as you go from one task to the other.

Rule activation itself takes significant amounts of time, several tenths of a second, which can add up when people switch back and forth repeatedly between tasks. Thus, multitasking may seem more efficient on the surface but may actually take more time in the end. For example, Meyer points out, a mere half second of time lost to task switching can mean the difference between life and death for a driver using a cell phone, because during the time that the car is not totally under control, it can travel far enough to crash into obstacles the driver might have otherwise avoided.



Multitasking is Counterproductive

So how do you stop multitasking and start focusing instead? Here are five ideas to get you started:

1. Batch

Email will kill your concentration. We have an almost obsessive-compulsive love affair with email. We're dying of curiosity and want to read each one as it arrives. Instead, turn off the notification on your email program that indicates you've got mail. Set aside a specific number of times per day that you will check and deal with your email. Enforce the same schedule on yourself each day, so that you aren't distracted by constant email and can concentrate on the task at hand. I check mine first thing in the morning, mid-morning, after lunch, and about an hour before I leave for the day.

2. Concentrate

Figure out what thoughts are distracting you and claiming your focus. Write out the following list: (1) Things I'm doing that I want to (satisfying to you), (2) Things I'm doing that I don't want to (things you are tolerating), (3) Things I'm not doing that I want to (things that are missing), and (4) Things I'm not doing that I don't want to (successfully keeping out of my life). I suggest that you focus on items 2 and 3 as a way of self-diagnosing the problems in your life. Clear up these areas, and the voices in your head won't bother you as much.

3. Prioritize

Don't get sidelined by interruptions. If you're working on the last-minute details of a report for a meeting that starts in 30 minutes, don't accept a drop-in visitor's request to "ask you something really quick." When people say, "Gotta minute?" they never mean just one. Deflect the interruption by saying, "Hi Donna (don't pause) I really want to talk with you about this AND I'm preparing for a meeting that begins in just a few minutes. Can I call you at 3:00?" If you MUST be distracted by a high-priority or emergency request, hold up your pointer finger (a universal way of saying "just a minute"), grab a sticky note, record your VERY LAST thought on where you were on the project, and stick it to your file or paper or screen. After the interruption, when you return to your work, you can pick

Figure out what thoughts are distracting you and claiming your focus.



Multitasking is Counterproductive

right back up where you left off without thinking, “Now, where was I?”

4. Control Self-Interruption and Blurting Through Communication Logs

Many times you interrupt yourself. You’re sitting at our desk, concentrating on an important project, when all of a sudden, your brain starts talking to you. “Oh, I need to tell Chris this,” and you interrupt yourself to get up (or pick up the phone or dash off an email) to “blurt” out whatever it was we were thinking about so you don’t “lose” it. Instead, get yourself a 3-ring binder, some loose-leaf paper, and A-Z tabs. Create a sheet of paper for each person with whom you communicate frequently. When your brain reminds you of something, simply turn to that person’s communication log, filed alphabetically behind their last name in the tabs. Jot down the thought or idea and go right back to what you were doing. When that person’s log has several thoughts “saved-up,” then call the person and set up a meeting or phone conference to review the items you’ve come up with.

5. Use Memory Tools

When something pops up into your brain, you MUST write it down somewhere. If you don’t, your brain will continue to serve its main function by reminding you again...and again...and again. That’s called memory...it’s a good thing! But if you don’t want to keep experiencing the same distracting thought over and over again, simply record the idea in the proper place. Writing something down gives your brain “resolution,” and your brain actually thinks you “did” it. Pretty neat, huh? The most important tools to use for this purpose are (1) Daily to-do lists (or the Outlook Task Pad), and (2) a “master” task list. If the thought is something that has to be done on a certain day, write it down on that day’s daily to-do list. If you use Outlook, create a new Task (with the day you need to work on the task as the “start date”). If it’s not for today, write it on a master to-do list, or memory list, which is just a running list of all the things you want to remember to do at some point, but you’re not yet ready to schedule or put on a daily plan. In Outlook, you would simply leave the “start” and “due” dates blank, and review activities with no due date each month to

Writing something down gives your brain “resolution,” and your brain actually thinks you “did” it.



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decide which ones are ready to have a “start date” added.

Give yourself one week to practice each of these five tips and see how much better you will be able to focus at the end of the five weeks! Just remember what Clint Eastwood said at the end of one of his ‘Dirty Harry’ movies: “A man’s gotta know his limitations.” Here’s to an end of multitasking!

“A man’s gotta
know his
limitations.”



Eliminating Traffic Jams and Bottlenecks in the Workplace

You could be so much more efficient if it weren't for other people, right? We waste a lot of time waiting for approvals, return phone calls, opinions, information, or pieces of a project. But if you're waiting on the same people repeatedly, or you routinely use "I'm waiting" as an excuse for not meeting a deadline, you need to take steps to minimize bottlenecks. Here are some techniques to analyze the patterns and minimize common slowdowns:

"What would work better?"
"How can we eliminate this step?"
"How can we do this more efficiently?"

Reorganize the workflow

Getting together with all the players in a particular process (sales, engineering, manufacturing, customer service, etc.) may quickly reveal what's broken. Sometimes a simple change in the flow of work will boost productivity. Use sticky notes to plot an entire process, using a wall to diagram the different steps. Ask, "What would work better?" "How can we eliminate this step?" "How can we do this more efficiently?"

Eliminate dependencies

Do you feel excessively dependant on others to get your work done? Perhaps you need training or additional experience to help you function more effectively in your present job. Perhaps your manager is over-supervising or micromanaging your work to a point where you feel nervous making simple decisions anonymously. Make an appointment with your supervisor and have a candid discussion about ways you can be more efficient.

Don't be a bottleneck yourself

If you hear others saying things to you such as, "I need you to look at this before I go on," or "When will you have time to review this for me?" are symptoms of other people trying to control your schedule. On one hand, it's a compliment to your expertise; however, their lack of confidence keeps them from handling things without you. If people truly don't have the skills, that's one thing. But if others are routinely delegating



Eliminating Traffic Jams

decisions to you, take a stand. State specifically, “I’m confident you’ll make the right decision.” Or “You are responsible for managing this project.” Or “This task is due September 5. This is how I will measure your success. This is your budget. If you run into problems, keep me informed on how you’re handling things.”

Keep the process moving

When coordinating a project with a co-worker, get buy-in on the due date. Once promises have been made, repeat and nail down the commitment. Say, “Great, you’ll get that to me by close of business Wednesday.” Then let that person see you write it down. Say, “Thanks so much for your support. I can always count on you.” Appealing to someone’s honor in this way may increase the chances of timely completion. When people finish a promised task, no matter how small, thank them. Never take others’ work for granted. They will want to help you again the next time.

Accept partial delivery

Some people are perfectionists, so create the proper expectations from the beginning. Explain what you need at a minimum to get moving. Let people know you’ll take incomplete information until the complete information is available. They can provide things in formal or final form at a later date. If necessary, escalate the problem to your supervisor to negotiate the situation at a higher level.

Pinpoint that recurring “thing” that halts your work and put energy into eliminating it.

Bottlenecks at work are like traffic jams: they bring things to a standstill. The “traffic jam” in your work will continue to occur until you do something about it. Pinpoint that recurring “thing” that halts your work and put energy into eliminating it. You’ll save much time and frustration in the long run.



How to Read More Productively (Better Known as, “Help, I’ve Been Swallowed By My Reading Pile!”)

Workers have unlimited information available right at their fingertips, thanks to the Internet. If you tried to read every web page, reports, magazine article, business book, or email that came across your desk, you could spend your entire career reading. If you simply have too much to read and too little time, you can benefit from new reading techniques to boost your productivity.

Traditional speed-reading requires intense, conscious focus with few interruptions, something hard to come by in today’s workplaces.

Getting through your reading tasks more quickly will free up time for other priorities. I’ve chatted with a few people who have attended traditional speed-reading classes, curious about the result. Most people tell me they never really got any good at it, or that the technique itself was stressful. The old method of speed-reading is basically regular reading on steroids. Traditional speed-reading requires intense, conscious focus with few interruptions, something hard to come by in today’s workplaces. Studies have also shown that retention decreases as speed increases. If you try to read too quickly, you end up re-reading the same paragraph over again, hardly an improvement.

Just as you wouldn’t give an important presentation without ample preparation, don’t just pick up a magazine and start reading without the slightest thought. You need to prepare for the reading activity. Apply this five-step process to help you be a more productive reader:

Step one: Prepare your materials

Try to batch your reading and put larger documents aside to read during a single sitting. Schedule an appointment with yourself to get through them (I like to use the time on airplanes to get through my reading pile). When you reach the appointed time, gather your documents. Grab a pen, a highlighter, and some sticky notes.



How to Read More Productively

Step two: Prepare your mind

If you can, retreat to an empty office or conference room so that you are interrupted as little as possible. Make the mental decision that you are going to attentively read your materials. Don't think how terrible it's going to be or groan inwardly. Think positively and set goals around what you plan to accomplish or learn by the end of your reading session.

Step three: Situate your body

Sit down with a straight spine and your feet comfortably on the floor. Don't hunch your shoulders, and take a few deep breaths to get oxygen to your brain. Try to relax your facial muscles, even turning up the corners of your mouth to match your positive attitude. Rest your book and your hands on the table, or prop it up on a reading stand. Hold your reading square in front of your eyes at a 45-60 degree angle.

Step four: Scan

When you begin, preview the text quickly to get a basic understanding of how the material is laid out and the main points are organized. For magazine articles, I like to read the title, headings, sidebars, and the first and last paragraphs. By noticing the writing pattern and sections, you'll help your brain quickly organize the material.

Step five: Read

My favorite reading technique is called rhythmic perusal, developed by J. Michael Bennett, a reading expert and professor emeritus at the University of Minnesota. You glide your eyes over the upper half of the letters; read each line in a single, smooth movement. The technique enhances your concentration and, with practice, allows you to increase speed and focus. Mark key passages and make notes in the margins as you go. If you don't, you will forget the important pieces and actions the next time you look at the item.

Mark key passages and make notes in the margins as you go. If you don't, you will forget the important pieces and actions the next time you look at the item.



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How to Read More Productively

Stay on top of important information in today's highly competitive work environment.

If you apply these five simple reading techniques, you will greatly improve your concentration, speed, and retention. You will also have the upper hand from staying on top of important information in today's highly competitive work environment.



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Managing Your Reading Pile

Information equals *potential* power.
If you have the information but don't do anything with it, you have no power.

How many magazines, journals, articles, and books do you have piled up? Do you have an almost obsessive-compulsive urge to read everything from aardvarks to zygotes? Do you ever feel guilty because you feel you're missing important information? Information does not equal power. Information equals *potential* power. If you have the information but don't do anything with it, you have no power. How do you get through all that material?

So, how do you tackle your reading chore reasonably and productively?

Publications often accumulate in a pile because they are physically located at an inconvenient place

Ask yourself where you really *like* to read. Locate your reading pile where you want it versus where you think it should go. Then watch that pile disappear! For example, I had a client that used to spread out her magazines nicely on her coffee table in her living room. She didn't enjoy reading there because it was a major traffic area and the television was always on. We relocated her stack to the back of her couch in her study. Although it looked pretty in the living room, it was not functional because she never read anything.

How about considering a revolutionary step to shrink your reading pile—throw out most or all of the pile and start fresh

It feels so good! And your career is not going to stall because you missed an article. You will still continue to receive the same magazines, newspapers, and journals. By the time you get a new edition of *Newsweek* or *Time* (sometimes the next day), the content of last week's edition is old news. Indecision actually causes clutter. If you can't throw out old magazines, catalogues you never order from, journals you won't read, and so on, your reading pile will quickly get out of hand. This is a time to get real with yourself and think of what you **WILL** do, not what you **SHOULD** do. Or, at the very minimum, if you



Managing Your Reading Pile

must save that catalogue you never order from, throw out the old one when the newer version comes in.

Don't read magazines cover to cover

The task is simply too overwhelming. Besides, most advertising never changes. Go through the table of contents, allow yourself a maximum of three articles per issue, rip them out, throw the rest of the magazine away, and put the articles in a folder marked "Reading" (I keep mine in an old briefcase). A stack of articles will make the actual reading task seem much less formidable than a stack of magazines. Then the key is to take your reading with you *everywhere*. Any time you're waiting for a client, stuck in traffic, at the doctor's office, picking up a child from an event, waiting for a meeting to begin, or eating a meal alone, you never waste the time because you have your reading pile with you. Whenever an opportunity presents itself, you have reading material available. Skim a book when it comes across your desk and mark the sections you want to read later with a sticky note and a key word. Don't read any books or magazines with a low return on investment. There is simply too much to read.

The key is to take your reading with you *everywhere*.

Spend a weekend catching up on the important reading once and for all

Get creative! Try the timer technique. Set an egg timer for fifteen minutes for each periodical. When the timer goes off, the paper goes in the trash. Another tip comes from Nobel laureate Herbert Simon, speaking in *People* magazine, "Reading daily newspapers is one of the least cost-efficient things you can do . . . read the *World Almanac* once a year. What's happening you'll hear by lunch anyway." Try subscribing to a clipping service, listening to books on tape, canceling subscriptions and downloading articles from the Internet, taking a speed-reading course, or going on a newspaper diet by shifting to liquid TV news. Another technique I recently witnessed was team reading. Team members traded off reading important articles and writing a synopsis of important ideas for the group. They also read books cooperatively by splitting up chapters.



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Managing Your Reading Pile

To completely conquer a reading obsession, you have to believe (despite your conditioning), that little of what you insist on saving is of real importance. Desperate measures must be taken.

You have to believe that little of what you insist on saving is of real importance.



You're Dreaming! How Can Daydreaming Be Productive?

You're staring out your office window...lost in thought about your upcoming dinner party...when you jerk back to reality: "Oops, where was I?" you think, as you look down once again at the report on your desk. You've been daydreaming.

Daydreaming can be a real productivity bandit, especially when you're supposed to be focusing on a higher-priority project. Excessive daydreaming can waste precious time that could be better spent on other things. But daydreaming isn't always bad. There's a difference between true daydreaming as the brain's response to overload or boredom and thinking time that may lead to promising ideas.

How do you ensure daydreaming time is productive time?

Don't use daydreaming to procrastinate

Daydreaming can be a good tool for transitioning to a new project during the day. It gives your brain a chance to change gears. Figuratively, your mind puts away the file on the last task, takes a break, and gets ready to open a new file and begin work. However, when you find your mind wandering when you're supposed to be concentrating on a task, self-discipline is required to stay focused.

Taking time in a place with no distractions gives your brain the opportunity to discover creative ideas and new solutions to problems.

Select your designated "daydreaming place"

Some of my best ideas come to me when I'm flying, when my body and brain are still. Taking time in a place with no distractions gives your brain the opportunity to discover creative ideas and new solutions to problems. You may find walking the dog, washing dishes, driving in the car, exercising, or reading the perfect time to develop new processes or plan projects.



You're Dreaming!

Spend an appropriate amount of time

For the most effective brainstorming, choose a place or activity that takes no less than 15 minutes and no more than 60 minutes. You want your brain to have time to rummage through the closets of your mind, but not so much time that you're wasting time unnecessarily.

Before you go to your daydreaming place, have a problem ready to mull over in your mind.

Approach your daydreaming place with purpose

Before you go to your daydreaming place, have a problem ready to mull over in your mind. Without the normal distractions, your brain will be free to explore new possibilities. By the end of your walk or plane ride, you may have discovered an innovative solution to that issue.

Use paper to capture the results of daydreaming

By writing down your ideas, you won't immediately forget them, and you can see them all at one time. Now you can look for relationships among your thoughts. Ask questions such as, "What causes X?" "What are the results of X?" "With what things is X related?" "What's behind this?" "Is this leading anywhere else?" "Who else might be affected?" I like to use a mind map with clusters of items, details, examples, and lines connecting them.

People don't often allow themselves the opportunity to think about challenging situations, because they're going ninety miles an hour all day long. And our culture and current work ethic doesn't condone thinking time. However, when you follow the tips above, daydreaming can synthesize the volumes of information that flow across your desk, the phone lines, and through your brain every day.





Educational Resources by Laura Stack

Join our LinkedIn Group, The Productivity Pro® Alumni, to exchange ideas and insights:

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LAURA STACK, MBA, CSP

Speaker • Author • Consultant



President & CEO

Laura Stack, MBA, CSP, has consulted with Fortune 500 corporations for nearly 20 years in the field of personal productivity. She helps her clients achieve Maximum Results in Minimum Time® and develop high-performance cultures. She is the president of The Productivity Pro®, Inc., which specializes in productivity improvement in high-stress organizations; she is also the 2011-2012 president of the National Speakers Association.

Keynoter

Laura presents over 100 practical, high-energy keynotes and seminars each year on improving output, lowering stress, and saving time in today's workplaces and homes. She is one of a handful of professional speakers whose business focuses solely on time management and productivity topics. Laura is a high-energy, high-content speaker, who educates, entertains, and motivates professionals to improve workplace productivity. She has earned the Certified Speaking Professional (CSP) designation, the highest earned designation given by the National Speakers Association (NSA).

Author

Laura is the bestselling author of four books, including *SuperCompetent: The Six Keys to Perform at Your Productive Best* (Wiley, 2010); *The Exhaustion Cure* (Broadway Books, 2008), *Find More Time* (Broadway Books, 2006), and the bestselling *Leave the Office Earlier* (Broadway Books, 2004), which was hailed as "the best of the bunch" by the *New York Times*. Her books have been published in nine countries and translated into six foreign languages, including Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese, Italian, and Romanian.

Recognized Productivity Expert

Widely regarded as one of the leading experts in the field of employee productivity and workplace issues, she has been featured nationally on the CBS Early Show, CNN, NPR, Bloomberg, NBC TV, WB News, the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *WashingtonPost.com*, *O Magazine*, *Entrepreneur*, *Readers Digest*, and *Forbes* magazine. Laura has been a spokesperson for Microsoft, 3M, Skillsoft, Office Depot, and Xerox, and she is the creator of The Productivity Pro® planner by Day-Timer.



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