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INSIDER: The Productivity Project
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Author and blogger Chris Bailey claims that productivity is not about how much you do. Instead, productivity is all about how much you accomplish. In his book, The Productivity Project, he explains the productivity tactics he believes will have the biggest impact on your work and help you stop procrastinating, feel more energized, and work smarter not harder. He breaks productivity down into three ingredients: time, attention, and energy. The more time, energy, and attention you invest in your most significant and high-impact tasks, the more you accomplish. But, before attempting to apply any of his recommendations, Bailey challenges the reader to start by identifying why he/she wishes to become more productive. Investing your time into becoming more productive is a waste if you don’t really care about the new habits you’re trying to implement. Without the why behind your desire for increased productivity, you won’t have the motivation to sustain the changes in the long run anyway.

Once you know why you want to be more productive, you can identify what you wish to accomplish by applying Bailey’s rule of three. At the start of each day (and each week), write down three things you want to accomplish by the end of that day (week). The three things you listed are now to be your focus for the day and the week to come. Do this for your work life and your personal life. Now that you know your why and what, you can move on to the how, specifically, how to manage your time, attention, and energy, the three ingredients of productivity.

THINK POINT #1: Managing Your Energy

Contrary to popular belief, you can actually accomplish so much more if you work on your most important and meaningful high-impact tasks when you have the most energy instead of the most time. Taking on your high impact tasks when you have the most energy, which Bailey calls your Biological Prime Time (BPT), allows you to not only do a noticeably better job on them, but also, most importantly, finish them faster since you are able to put forth at least double the amount of energy and focus during your BPT than during other times.
In order to enact this strategy, you must first identify when your BPT is by tracking how your energy fluctuates over the course of a typical day. Every hour, on the hour, for at least a week, take a minute to rate how much energy you have at the moment on a scale of 1 to 10. Bailey has a chart with everything you need to do this on his website – www.productivityprojectbook.com.

In the end, the more you align when you work and what you work on with your energy levels, the more productive you will be.

If you observe that your energy levels fluctuate dramatically or are consistently low, Bailey offers three main ways to cultivate your energy levels. The first is to drink for energy. This involves drinking more water and fewer alcoholic and sugary drinks. Water helps you think more clearly and have more energy. Not drinking enough water can lead to fatigue, sleepiness, anxiety, and difficulty concentrating -- all of which will lessen your productivity.

There are absolutely no productivity benefits from drinking sugary drinks or fruit juices. Caffeine offers no productivity benefits either unless it is consumed strategically. For example, if you start your day between 6:00 am and 8:00 am, try consuming caffeine between 9:30 and 11:30 am to avoid mid-afternoon crashes and negative impacts on your sleep. Also, try consuming caffeine only before highly demanding tasks, such as giving an important presentation or writing a complicated article. Avoid caffeine before working on creative tasks as it has been shown to decrease your performance with tasks requiring creativity.

Although skipping the gym in favor of doing an extra 30 minutes or hour of work may seem like the most attractive and productive option at times, in reality, you accomplish more in the long run by nurturing your energy levels through exercise. Exercise is the most powerful way you can optimize brain function and combat fatigue and stress. Exercise ultimately increases productivity because it enables you to bring more energy and focus to your work and therefore get the same amount of work accomplished in less time.

Similarly, we are often faced with the decision to cut back on sleep in favor of having more hours to work on tasks, but, as with exercise, consistently getting the recommended seven to nine hours of sleep a night allows us to work more efficiently and with more energy. Lack of sleep greatly reduces productivity because it has detrimental impact on our mood, memory, mathematical reasoning skills, and our ability to concentrate, learn, and solve problems. So, the extra working hours you gain from cutting back on sleep are rarely worth the energy and productivity costs.

Despite being the last ingredient of productivity that Bailey mentions, energy is no less important than attention and time. Cultivating your energy levels through adequate sleep, exercise, and water consumption will help you maximize not only your BPT but your productivity overall as
well. Regardless of how well you manage your time and/or attention, if you don’t also manage your energy, your productivity will inevitably plummet.

THINK POINT #2: Managing Your Attention

The first step in managing your attention is identifying what has your attention and deciding if it's actionable or not, and if so, what that next action must be. To do this, Bailey recommends performing a brain dump in which you externalize your tasks by writing them down. Brain dumps free up mental space and allow you to think more clearly. Bailey suggests externalizing tasks into different types of lists, such as a to-do list, a waiting-for list, a worry list, an inbox review list, and separate lists for each individual project you have. But, of course, simply listing tasks and projects isn’t enough. In order to reap the full benefits from the lists and truly clear up any mental space, you must actually tackle what you have listed or else you will go back to paying too much attention to what you still haven’t accomplished.

A second attention strategy Bailey proposes is the use of hotspots. Hotspots are the seven basic areas of our life into which all our tasks, projects, and commitments can be placed. The seven hotspots are as follows:

1. Mind
1. Body
2. Emotions
3. Career
4. Finances
5. Relationships
6. Fun

The idea behind hotspots is to list all of the commitments you have in each category. Then, once a week, review the lists and think critically about how much time you spent in each during the week before and decide how you wish to distribute your time and focus in the week to come. This is called tilting and it separates the most productive people from everyone else. The most productive people are able to adjust every week to gradually become more productive and correctly prioritize the hotspots in their lives. They are able to tilt between hotspots to focus on one more than the others over both the short and long run.

Has your mind wandered at all since you began reading this? Yes? Well it would be surprising if it hadn’t. Throughout the day, your brain seesaws between two modes: wandering mode and central executive mode. Unfortunately, Western society has come to over value the central executive mode, but by letting your mind wander at times, you can carve out more attentional space for yourself, creating room for more, brainstorming, problem-solving, and creativity. The more attentional space you have, the more productive you can be.
To advantageously let your mind wander, perform this mind capture ritual every day or two. Sit somewhere with a pen and a sheet of paper, set a timer for 15 minutes, allow your mind to wander and write down any ideas or thoughts that bubble up to the surface. The mind capture ritual is especially great on days when you feel overwhelmed and need to quickly carve out additional attentional space for yourself.

Research indicates that we only focus solely on what’s in front of us for about 50 percent of the time. Strengthening your attention muscle will increase your ability to focus on a present task and allow you to become more efficient with your time and attention. Your attention muscle is made of three parts. The first part is the central executive, or the thinking and planning portion of your brain. The second and third parts are focus and awareness. Single tasking is one of the best ways to strengthen your attention muscle because it builds up your focus. Multitasking yields a false sense of productivity in the form of busyness, and almost every study has actually demonstrated that multitasking is detrimental to your productivity. Single tasking, on the other hand, allows you to invest all your time, attention, and energy into one task and accomplish more in the same or even less time. The other great way to strengthen your attention muscle is meditation. Meditation builds your awareness and may help with impulsiveness, the trait that contributes to procrastination the most. Defending your attention muscle against distractions is also vital. Limiting interruptions from your smartphone, computer, and other devices affords you extra attention and focus. The most productive people are those who work deliberately, and it's impossible to work deliberately without strengthening and defending your attention muscle.

**THINK POINT #3: Managing Your Time**

When working to become more productive, managing your time should actually take a backseat to managing your energy and attention because time management is actually impossible. We can’t control time. Time has ticked away and will continue to tick away -- minute by minute, hour by hour, unchanged, as it has always done. What we can manage is when we work on tasks and for how long. When scheduling time for a task, you are essentially forming attentional and energy boundaries around the task. When you limit the amount of time you spend on a task, you motivate yourself to expend more energy, focus for a shorter period of time and create a sense of urgency that pushes you to work faster and more efficiently with less procrastination. However, managing your time is only important when you cultivate how much energy and attention you
will have during the day and identify what you wish to accomplish. Remember, you can manage and control your attention and energy, but you cannot manage and control time.

Conclusion

Increasing your productivity by cultivating your energy and attention and scheduling when you work on tasks and for how long have great rewards when coupled with clear goals and reasoning. However, it is possible to take productivity too far. Don’t focus so much on being productive that you forget to actually be productive. The point, Bailey stresses, is to take the productivity techniques that work best for you, and leave the rest behind. Lastly, to accomplish more, it’s true you have to make sacrifices, but don’t try to make them all at once. The road to productivity is one of small incremental changes, but small changes add up over time.

Recommended Reading


About the Author

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Courtney is a graduate student from Valdosta, Georgia. She earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology from Duke University in 2016. Before beginning graduate school at Baylor, Courtney worked with The Fossil Group, a North Carolina based marketing and investing firm, as an intern, and later, junior executive, in their brand management division. Courtney is seeking an MBA degree with a concentration in marketing and plans to work in the entertainment industry.