



# Daily habits that increase productivity

Based on “The Daily Routines of 7 Famous Entrepreneurs and How to Design Your Own Master Routine” by **Belle Beth COOPER** (*Buffer*, September 2013), “4 Surprisingly Simple Ways to Maximize Productivity” by **Margaret HEFFERNAN** (*INC*, May 2014), “5 Incredibly Effective Ways to Work Smarter, Not Harder” by **Jeff HADEN** (*INC*, April 2014), and “10 Lessons I Learned From a Year of Productivity Experiments” by **Chris BAILEY** (*Lifehacker*, March 2014).

**Just about all of us have to deal with too much work and pressure and not enough time or energy; as a result, our efficiency varies more than we like to admit. How can we keep our minds clear enough to make the right decisions all day long? How can we limit phases of lassitude and ineffectiveness? We can all become more productive by adopting a number of simple routines.**

## FOCUS ON WHAT MATTERS MOST

It is impossible to do everything at once. Multitasking does not work<sup>1</sup>. It is tiring and hinders your ability to think clearly. How can you learn to prioritize?

The most successful business leaders tend to be quick, instinctive decision-makers. What is their secret? They stick to routines that make them the most productive they can be. People like Amazon’s Jeff Bezos, Twitter’s Jack Dorsey, and Free’s Xavier Niel are perceived as intuitive geniuses, innately capable of making shrewd business decisions, but the truth is, these people are all highly disciplined. You too can create a routine that will boost your productivity. While some of the following tips seem obvious, recent studies show that the key to productivity is the consistency with which you apply them and turn them into natural reflexes.

### ■ Keep your calendar in front of you

If you do not want to become overwhelmed, you have to learn to say no. It might be tough to resist getting involved in a new project, but if you do not have the time to see it through, either say no, postpone the project, or delegate. Similarly, even if you keep your office door open, do not allow your co-workers monopolize your time and attention with issues unrelated to your own priorities. Indeed, meetings are one of the most common obstacles to productivity. Serial entrepreneur Margaret Heffernan (see interview, page 6) recommends accepting no more than two

## MEMO

- **Breaking down and ranking tasks in order of importance** allows you to focus and keep track of project advancement.
- **Building a routine is a means to use your energy wisely.** You can work when you are most alert, and do less demanding tasks when your energy level is lower.
- **Productivity is contagious.** Clarifying expectations and creating a positive environment encourages others to find ways to be more productive as well.

“ When you adopt a routine, you build neural networks in your brain that process information and decisions faster. ”

meetings a day, and generally to refuse to spend more than two hours in a single meeting. In addition, she says to never take part in a meeting whose length has not been determined in advance. But all of this is easier said than done. Less than one out of six business managers actually refuses to attend meetings they judge unworthy of the time, effort, and preparation involved.

#### ■ Sort and prioritize

Effective organization means understanding the difference between the truly important and the only seemingly urgent. One way of making each day more productive is to redo your “to do” list every morning, then focus only on the “Most Important Tasks” (MIT) — the things that are difficult or challenging but must be taken care of before the day’s end. This means they are both important and truly urgent. Personal development specialist Leo Babauta, creator of Zen Habits, advises doing MITs before anything else. This is the best way to avoid becoming overwhelmed and too short on time and energy to take care of them. Because as the day gets longer, willpower gets weaker.

#### ■ Measure results, not time

Are you spending more and more time at the office without getting through any more work? Change the way in which you assess productiveness. Staying at the office until 9 pm is not tanta-

mount to putting in a good day’s work, and the most productive people disregard the time factor and measure the value of their work by looking at what they have accomplished. This requires getting into the habit of breaking down complex projects into a series of tasks to get done within a specific amount of time. Make a to-do list to clarify such tasks, one by one. Crossing items off the list as you move forward offers momentum to reach the finish line. Bill Gates is known for keeping a journal in which he writes down everything he has accomplished each day. The benefit of this type of practice is a strong focus on the present and consistent momentum.

### ESTABLISH A ROUTINE

Following a routine helps to build neural networks in your brain that enable you to deal more quickly with important information and decisions.

#### ■ Make each day a ritual

The power of a routine is that your brain and body end up knowing when it is time to do things. Regular morning coffee, stretching exercises, or music can end up triggering your reflex to get to work. And just as it is worthwhile to create habits that get you working, the same should be done to ensure you take regular breaks and bring the work day to an end. This will actually make you more productive. Contrary to the popular belief that you should always finish what you have started, according to Jeff Haden, “stopping in the middle of a project can work well. You know what you’ve done, you know exactly what you’ll do next, and you’ll be excited to get started again<sup>2</sup>.”

#### ■ Build a routine that is right for you

Is it hard for you to be productive throughout the entire day or week? If so, reconsider your routine. First of all, keep track of non-productive phases (i.e., after-lunch meetings, late nights at the office, and so on) for a few days to figure out where you are wasting time. You can then start to alter such habits<sup>3</sup> and build a new, more effective routine, i.e., excluding afternoon meetings, featuring an alarm to tell you to leave work at 7 p.m., etc. Be ...

### Start the day with an intellectual *mise en place*

Chefs always plan ahead. That way, they can focus on the dish they are preparing and not have to stop to a missing ingredient or cooking utensil. Such planning is more than a time-saver; it is the prerequisite for the state of mind necessary to perfectly execute the tasks to follow. Inspired by this example, Ron Friedman, founder of Ignite80 consulting, recommends starting each day with a mini-planning session. Instead of getting distracted by emails, which automatically put you into reactive mode, you should use the first ten minutes of your day for an intellectual *mise en place*. This will enable you to focus your mental energy on your most important tasks.

Source: “How to spend the first 10 minutes of your day” by Ron Friedman (*Harvard Business Review*, June 2014)

... sure to take your biological clock into account as well, because it will tell you when the best times to eat, sleep, exercise, and work are for you. For example, Margaret Heffernan never stops for lunch until she is truly starving, because she knows that she has trouble concentrating after a meal. In sum, by limiting the number of choices you have to make, a routine frees up energy for the most important things.

### ■ Maintain a balanced lifestyle

Lifemaker founder Chris Bailey spent a year conducting productivity experiments on himself and testing hundreds of productivity-improvement techniques<sup>4</sup>. His top three tips for being more productive are: eat well, get enough sleep, and exercise. These basic yet critical principles are part of a healthy routine and key factors to avoid burn-out and even simple energy lapses that hinder productivity. Generally speaking, efficiency is not a matter of working excessively hard or long. Your brain is at its best when you give it some breathing room and regular “vacations.” The most effective business people know there is no good in staying locked up in an office, and that you have to get out, take walks, and move around several times a day to stay in good working shape.

## CREATE MOMENTUM FOR TEAM PRODUCTIVITY

Becoming more efficient is not only a personal matter. Use the time and energy that you learn to save to help the people you work with become more productive as well.

### ■ Set a goal of long-term productiveness

People need their leader to create a positive atmosphere and provide ongoing encouragement so that minor failures do not disrupt the productive process. (success > engagement > efficiency > success, and so on.). You have to help the members of your team overcome any tough times or discouragement by systematically pointing out their strengths and presenting them with new challenges. It is also essential to communicate your

goals and expectations precisely enough so that people know where to focus their energy. How can you make such managerial behaviors automatic? Learn to picture your success and that of your team. Set specific goals to reach, make them tangible, and keep them in mind at all times. Finally, think about how satisfied you and your team will be when you have achieved your goals, and remember that productivity is contagious.

### ■ Boost collective effectiveness

In *Leaders Eat Last*, Simon Sinek explains that the most productive teams are those where people help each other out<sup>5</sup> — teams in which members share information, ask each other for help when a problem comes up, and mutually support each other. Mutual support is even stronger when people know, like, and trust each other. That's why encouraging social bonds between people can boost team effectiveness. In the UK, Rob Jones, CEO of ASE Global (automotive business management consultants), decided to ban the practice of eating lunch alone at your desk. “This seems so simple that it's hard to take seriously,” comments Heffernan. “But the impact of such action on work quality and ultimately on business profitability is quantifiable. It's a matter of building social capital, which has as significant of an impact on a business as financial capital.”

It takes considerable effort to become more productive, and especially, to change habits. And it can indeed be discouraging to set aside what you know and step back in an aim to jump forward. So Bailey reminds us all, “You have to put pressure on yourself to perform better, but...it is important that you are kind to yourself.” ■

1. See “Distracted? Learn how to (re)focus”, *Business Digest* no. 241, November 2013.
2. “The Daily Routines of 7 Famous Entrepreneurs and How to Design Your Own Master Routine” by Belle Beth Cooper (*Buffer*, September 2013)
3. See “Change your habits for greater effectiveness”, *Business Digest* no. 235, April 2013.
4. “10 lessons I learned from a year of productivity experiments” by Chris Bailey (*Lifemaker*, March 2014)
5. See “Do your teams feel safe?”, *Business Digest* no. 247, June 2014.

## The secret of Twitter's Jack Dorsey: a theme for every day of the week

In 2011, Jack Dorsey was CEO of two quickly growing start-ups, Twitter and Square. Each required a full time commitment. To deal with 16-hour work days, Dorsey deployed extraordinary discipline. What was his routine? Up at 5:30 a.m., then meditation or a run before going to the office. Furthermore, he assigned a theme to each day of the work week and applied it in both of his companies. Monday was for management and running the company; Tuesday was for product issues; Wednesday, marketing and communication; Thursday, developers and partnerships; Friday, company culture and recruitment; Saturday was for hiking; and Sunday, for reflection, strategy, and preparing the following week.