

10 Productivity Resolutions to Simplify Your Workday All Year Long

By Jared Lindzon; December 30, 2016

Put your brain on autopilot, make lists at the end of the day, and other simple tips and tricks can help you have a more productive 2017.

Most New Year's resolutions don't survive long enough to see February. There are myriad reasons why our January 1 ambitions disappear, and many abandon ship as soon as they realize just how difficult the journey will be.

But having a more productive 2017 doesn't require any life-changing revelations or complete lifestyle overhauls. Minor changes to routines, small adjustments to working habits, and a little bit more focus on a few oft-ignored areas are not only simple ways to improve workplace performance in the coming year, but can also help build habits that are more likely to survive the entire year.

Here are 10 extremely simple hacks, tricks, and habit changes that will lead to a more productive 2017.

1. Listen to Music at Work

Though it can be a distraction from any highly engaging or difficult tasks, multiple studies have shown how listening to ambient, familiar music can make repetitive tasks easier, provide an escape from a noisy workplace, and improve focus. Other studies have found that 15 minutes of music at work can help increase creative problem-solving abilities and performance and improve your mood while you work.

2. Declutter Your Workspace, but Don't Leave it Empty

Albert Einstein is often quoted as saying, "If a cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind, of what, then, is an empty desk a sign?" While a desk that makes things difficult to find can be a productivity killer, an empty desk can work against your motivation and creativity.

"Keeping too much other clutter around distracts me from getting things done," admits Michael Pryor, the CEO of Trello, a project management and collaboration software provider. Pryor instead recommends keeping no more than three items on your desk at a time, adding that his features only a photo of his family and his laptop.

Whatever permanent desk decorations you choose, however, the key is to ensure that all the other stuff that piles up is removed at the end of each workday. "When you start the workday with a clean desk, you have fewer distractions and you can focus on the work at hand," explains Janine Adams, a certified professional organizer and owner of Peace of Mind Organizing in St. Louis, Missouri.

3. Schedule the Unscheduleable

For those who are accustomed to having their day meticulously scheduled, it's important to carve out a portion of the day and dedicate it to the unscheduleable, according to Pryor, who recommends leaving a 30-minute window open each day.

"I try not to overschedule myself," he says. "Sometimes the best moments of creativity happen while I'm passing by someone's office or having an informal, unplanned lunch."

4. Make End-of-the-Day To-Do Lists

Bridging one day's productivity over to the next is often a challenge, which is why many spend the first part of their day figuring out where they left off the night before. You can save yourself a bit of

time and early-morning mental capacity by instead making a short to-do list at the end of each day, says Adams.

"A really helpful part of your end-of-the-day routine can be to jot down the three or four most important tasks you need to get done tomorrow," she says. "If they're in your face when you get to work, you can hop right to them before competing priorities rear their heads."

In fact, the humble to-do list is Girls Who Code founder Reshma Saujani's favorite productivity hack. She tells Fast Company that those lists include "what I want to accomplish this week, when do I want to get it done, how do I want to get it done."

5. Maximize Your Most Productive Hour

Everyone has a time of day when they're most productive, and it doesn't necessarily fall between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m.

Pryor defines it as the period when he's "getting through the most work without sticking to a strict schedule."

Whether you're a morning person, a night owl, or someone who's only fully awake after their first cup of coffee, it's important to find your optimal productivity time and make the most of it.

"For instance, if you get more done in the morning than the afternoon, try starting work earlier in the day on a busy day," says Adams. "That makes your morning longer, giving you more optimal work time."

6. Have a Low-Productivity To-Do List

We can't all be firing on all cylinders all the time, and when those sluggish moments inevitably arrive, it's good to be prepared with a to-do list packed with low mental-capacity activities.

"You can't be at 100% all of the time, so you want to have stuff that you can do when your brain is kind of fried but you still need to be working," says Lisa Zaslow, an organizational productivity expert and founder of Gotham Organizers. "That's the time to clear out your inbox, enter contacts into your database, or make follow-up calls."

7. Develop a Pregame Ritual

Many high-performing athletes are known for quirky pregame rituals and superstitions: Think Michael Phelps's preswim hoodie and headphones moments, Michael Jordan's lucky shorts, or Tiger Woods's red Nike shirt. Taking a moment to follow a routine before entering a high-pressure situation has been proven effective, and not just for professional athletes.

"It's about having a few simple steps that you can repeat consistently so that you know, 'Now I'm going into focus mode'," says Zaslow, explaining that these rituals can range from clearing off your desk to breaking out a lucky pen to striking a power pose. "Having these consistent steps can decrease anxiety and give you a sense of control in a situation where you might not have a ton of control, and studies show it actually does increase performance," she adds.

8. Put Your Brain on Autopilot as Often as Possible

Some of the world's most productive people, including Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, and Barack Obama, were known for wearing the same outfit every single day, and for good reason.

"You'll see I wear only gray or blue suits," Obama once told Vanity Fair. "I'm trying to pare down decisions. I don't want to make decisions about what I'm eating or wearing. Because I have too many other decisions to make."

Though it may sound boring, putting decisions like what to eat and what to wear on autopilot can help significantly improve productivity.

"Productivity is a function of your brain energy and the actual time you spend on stuff, and so often the mental space slows us down more than the actual work," says Zaslow. "Picking a couple of things, either in your personal or business life, where you basically just set 'em and forget 'em, saves a lot of time."

9. Aim for B+

They say that perfect is the enemy of the good, and while we should all strive to do our best work, being a perfectionist can be very unproductive. Zaslow explains that some important projects may require the extra time and attention, but too often we fall into the trap of wasting significant time on minor details.

"Not for every single project, but if you're trying to find a perfect word in an email, nobody really cares," she says. Zaslow says she even employed this tactic when designing her company's website. "The goal that I set for myself was to be 80% happy with it, because I knew I would just never be 100% happy with it. If you're not wasting time on that last 20%, you can just end projects and move on to the next."

10. Link Your Productivity Hacks Together

Pursuing too many resolutions and productivity hacks may become counterproductive if simply tracking and following each becomes a task of its own. Instead, Adams suggests making a mental link between the habits that already exist and those you'd like to pursue in the New Year.

"If you want to start doing a daily to-do list, for example, and you're already checking email every day when you get to work, start making that to-do list right after you check email," she suggests. "You may have to establish some reminders at first, but once the two are linked in your mind, a beautiful routine is born."

Such routines, suggests Adams, will have a much better chance of surviving beyond the typical resolution expiry date.

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