



Productivity Means Working Smarter, Not Longer

Workers in Australia put in more hours at work and take fewer vacation days than those in most industrialized countries. But Australia isn't the most productive country in the world. When it comes to full productivity, according to a recent article in *The Economist*, France wins, working only forty hours a week with lots of vacation.

Conversations with clients and friends suggest we're working hard, but, well, stupidly. We're busy, but our important priorities are falling by the wayside as we work hard when we should be working smart.

Working smart means getting the same results in less time. To do that, you must change how you work. You'll get the most by changing your speed, increasing focus, and organizing to do things in parallel.

Start with your Eyes open

Before you read on, I must warn you: Working smart is risky. If you work smart, you'll have more free time. That means more leisure, shorter work hours, or . . . more work. If you use the free time to take on more commitments, you're just as busy as before, but now you are so tightly scheduled that a slip in one project can cascade to many more projects. Happiness happens when productivity enables a higher-quality life, not frantic overachievement.

Right now, we get more productive by working longer. But how about working faster? To work faster, you'll have to get into the zone. In the zone, you're running a marathon. You bring your full focus to one task and build momentum until you're producing results like nobody's business.

Key to entering the zone is eliminating distraction. Your major distractions—let me guess—are e-mail, telephone, visitors, and yourself. One of my clients, a high-tech CEO, blocks out four hours each day for focus time. He closes his door, forwards the phone to voice-mail, and starts working to build up his rhythm. He rarely works the entire four hours, but by having the time blocked out, he's sure to get a couple of hours of solid work under his belt. And without distractions, he can spend time doing big-picture thinking, instead of being pulled into details. After five years, he considers this one of the best habits he's ever developed.

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Your biggest distractions will come from you, though. You'll multitask. And sadly, you'll believe you're getting more done as you do. Face reality: People are *less* productive when multitasking, and that's been shown in many studies over the last few years. We feel busy, but most of that busy-ness is spent switching from task to task, not making forward progress on any one task.

Increase focus

If you're like me, you hardly ever procrastinate—except for the really important stuff. The rubber bands get dutifully sorted by size, but that client proposal? Not so much. Another way to work smarter is by distinguishing busy from productive. Oh, we're busy, and we *feel* productive, but we're only productive if we're producing the results that are most important to moving the company forward.

E-mail is a great way to waste time feeling productive. And we get so much of it, so surely those two hours a day reading and replying is time well spent. But if you spend two hours of an eight-hour workday on e-mail, that's 25 percent of your time. Unless that 25 percent of your time is producing at least 25 percent of your total income, it's a low-value-added activity, no matter how many one-shot, ad hoc contracts you get that way.

The same applies to any activity. The 80/20 rule says that 80 percent of your results come from just 20 percent of your efforts. Companies find most profits come from a few customers. And you'll find most of your output comes from a few of your tasks. So what? Well, look at the math. If you double the time you spend on real-output-producing activities and stop doing the others, you'll double your output and spend 60 percent less time! If you started with a ten-hour workday, you'll get twice as much done, working just four hours.

Consider Belinda. Belinda is a self-employed sales trainer. In a typical day, she might write her electronic newsletter, deliver one-hour training, make a dozen prospect calls, categorize her receipts, and straighten her office. These all must get done, yet only delivering the training and making prospect calls directly bring in business. Belinda's hidden productivity opportunity comes in making more prospecting calls, and spending less time categorizing receipts. In fact, she can hire a bookkeeper for a year with the extra money she makes from one additional sale.

Once you're concentrating on your high-output work, you can get another boost by streamlining. If Belinda gets 10 percent better at prospecting, that adds more to her bottom line than anything she can do in other areas.

Say NO

My favourite 80/20 principle is saying "no." Most of us take on more than we can handle. Then our companies lay off 30 percent of the work force and expect the same output from the survivors. Our overwork gets compounded by dumb high-level decision making.

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If you're working at capacity, say "no" to that new client. If someone proposes a project that will fall in 80 percent-work-for-20 percent-results category, just say "no." Face facts, my friend: There's a limit to how much you can do. You can manage that limit and do things well, or you can ignore the limit and do a lousy job on everything. The choice is yours.

Work in parallel, but don't multitask

When you multitask, you do many things at once. Bad idea. But you can find ways to arrange work so many things are happening at once. Good idea. If you are collaborating on a report and writing a marketing plan, you could write the plan and then work on the report. But look closely! Your colleague must review the report. So first draft your report and send it to your colleague. While she's reviewing, you get to work on the marketing plan. Work moves forward on both at the same time.

While we all work this way to some degree, a little thought can find golden opportunities for parallelism. Delegation is a great tool here. When you delegate a task, it keeps moving while you're working on something else. Just make sure you are delegating to someone with the time, tools, and resources to do the job. Otherwise, you'll find the task coming back to bite you.

Another great source of time delays is when something's being produced or shipped. Will your prospectus be going to the printer? Great! Use that time to hammer through your high-leverage tasks. The product is en route to your customer? That means more time for you to do other things. But if you putter around with low-priority tasks until you ship last minute via Federal Express, you lose the chance to work in parallel.

Combine and Think

You can get very creative in how you use these principles. A partner in a new SA private equity firm wanted to buy and run a company. He realized he would say "no" 99 percent of the time, and "yes" only once or twice. To speed things along, he got very clear on the criteria to disqualify a deal as quickly as possible. He said "no" a whole lot. His ability to quickly weed out the duds ultimately led to a deal that's showing gains of \$1.7 million in thirteen months. If he hadn't streamlined his low-leverage activity (saying "no") so he could reach his high-leverage "yes," he would likely have invested in one of his earlier, not-so-great deals.

Have you noticed a pattern? Working faster, identifying your 80/20 opportunities, and using opportunities for parallelism all take thought and planning before you reap the rewards. So your highest-leverage activity is taking regular time to re-examine and tweak how you work. This year, I'm spending a half-day every two weeks to build a life and business that are productive. And to me, productivity means producing maximum happiness for me, my family, and friends. I entreat you to do the same. Give it a shot. You'll be happier, you'll get more done, and you'll get to see your partner for dinner. And that's what I call working smart.

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