

Accomplish More at Work So You Can Spend More Time With Your Family

By Rebecca Morgan, CSP, CMC

Now, more than ever, it's important to be productive at work. Since September¹ we've had more than a million layoffs in America. The people still employed are left to do the jobs of their former coworkers. Now they're often doing the work of 1.5 – 2 people. This means they're working longer hours, when they'd rather be at home with their families.

"If I only had just one more hour a day..."

How would you spend it? More than half of those polled say if they were only more productive at work, they would spend more time with their families.² Instead, the work piles up, time speeds by, and you play tug-of-war between your task lists and your desire for personal time. It's no surprise we are feeling this way—with the recent slump in the economy, we are working harder to keep our jobs and our senses of fulfillment.

Apply some of these time-tested methods to your everyday routine. You'll optimize your time at work, so you can enjoy life outside the office:

- **Silence Your Visual Noise**
Work on silencing your Visual Noise—the clutter in your workspace. More than a quarter of those surveyed say they can't concentrate with a messy desk². Eliminate unneeded items—paper piles, empty cups, even unnecessary cables. For example, I use a wireless optical mouse, which not only eliminates wires, but it doesn't need a mouse pad.
- **Fine-Tune Your Focus**
One of the most common mistakes in the workplace is allowing focus to wander and our minds to be distracted. How much time do you spend ping-ponging between projects? It's easy to allow your mind to wander when you aren't clear on what you should focus. Work to concentrate on your most important project, even if it means putting up a "Do Not Disturb" for 30 minutes, or letting your phone go to voice mail until you finish.
- **Look for Allies to Accomplishment**
Use tools that are designed with productivity in mind. This could be a personal digital assistant, software or hardware. Get to better know the most powerful tool at your fingertips—your computer. Recent advancements in technology can boost your productivity—in fact, new keyboards feature scrolling wheels and launches to common applications at just one touch.
- **Tame the Email Ogre**
Email, can either be your friend or foe, depending on how you use it. While it can be efficient, it can also be a big distraction. Do you check your inbox each time you are alerted to new mail? Is Instant Messenger stopping the delivery of your work? Set several times a day to read and respond to your email, rather than whenever it comes in. Create signature files for common responses to questions. Use filters to automatically organize your incoming mail. Instead of firing off a long email, call or meet with the person.

¹ National Bureau of Economics

² MarketFacts Survey, sponsored by Microsoft® Corp., 1/02

- **Take a Productivity Pause**
Even a 5-minute walk around the building will help clear your mind, and give you new perspective. You'll return to your workspace ready to attack your work with new energy.
- **Continuously Improve**
Ask yourself if you could accomplish your tasks with less effort. Monitor your activities throughout the day and ask yourself "Is there a way I could improve how I do this? Could I accomplish it in fewer steps?" There are lots of ways to shortcut your tasks if you invest a few minutes to learn. Macros, programmable keys on your keyboard and mouse, all help you save time and accomplish more.
- **Redeploy the Troops (Your Past Work)**
Don't start from scratch if you've already created work you can reuse, even if it's just a part. If you need to write a memo, start with the email you wrote to your boss on this topic. You've already invested time to compose and craft your message, and spell check. Tweak that work so can save your time.
- **Play the End Game (Set an End Time on Work)**
Do you equate working late to working harder? Does your boss? Some people wear their long hours like a hard-won medal, which they think shows their dedication to the job. All it really means is you work long hours. Make a commitment to leave the office at a set time. You'll soon see you can accomplish just as much – maybe more – when you work limited hours. And you'll enjoy your non-work life much more, and bring that creativity, relaxation and fulfillment with you back to the job.
- **Find Face-Time**
Working effectively with coworkers is a key to success. However, it can seem easier to email your cubicle neighbor than to discuss an issue with her. Resist the temptation to fire off an email – especially if you are upset – rather than discuss it face-to-face. Invest time to create alliances that will head off time-consuming miscommunications and rework in the future.
- **Tickle Your Tasks**
"Tickle" refers to *objectively* deciding something isn't important enough to give your time to today. When you *subjectively* put something off, that's procrastination! How do you track those tickled tasks so they don't get lost? You can do it electronically, by rescheduling the task for a later date. If there is paper related to the task, use a tickler file (also known as an everyday sorter), which has folders for 1-31 and Jan. – Dec. When you have paper related to that meeting, phone call, training, or task, just drop it in the 1-31 folder corresponding to the event's date. That cleans it off your desk, so you don't need to focus on it until the day it comes up. But make sure you check your tickler daily, so you don't miss something important!
- **Caution: Brake for Interruptions**
Most people *break* for interruptions—they break their concentration and allow phone calls, visitors and emails to break into completing a task. There are times it *is* quicker to just deal with the interruption, like when a coworker comes by and says she needs your urgent input. But you want to practice putting the brake on interruptions. That can mean not answering your phone for an hour, not reading your email immediately, or gently asking a coworker if you can discuss his recent vacation over lunch. You won't have to come in early or stay late to have uninterrupted time if you put the brake on interruptions throughout the day.

- **Practice “No-ing”**

Do you get asked to participate in activities you have no interest in or don't want to make time for? Most people are invited to participate in work or non-work endeavors, and don't know how to say no. If you are asked by a coworker to attend a holiday party-planning meeting, and you have no interest in this, try saying “Thank you for the invitation. I'm going to pass on the planning committee this year.” By saying no, you'll focus your energies on projects that are more stimulating to you.

- **Go Away**

Give yourself something to look forward to: quality time away from the office. Schedule your time off – whether it's for the year or just the day – and stick to it. Take a 10-minute walk each day—getting exercise makes us more alert, awake and happier at the office, plus it provides a great outlet. Stress and other anxiety-related disorders cause employees to miss up to 20 days of work a year.³

By applying just a few of these ideas, you'll see a tremendous impact on your productivity. I know this because for 5 years we tracked groups that completed my productivity training. Eight weeks after the session, we followed up. Before the session participants reported, an average of 2.5 hours a day were wasted per person. Two months after the session, they'd turned an average of 1.5 of those hours into highly productive time, focusing on high-payoff activities. Based on their salary figures we calculated this equaled nearly \$10,000 of increased productivity per person per year. A seminar of 25 attendees was worth \$250,000 in higher productivity. Based on all direct costs for the training, companies saw a 2000% ROI.

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³ *Bureau of Labor Statistics*