The Productivity Project
Accomplishing More by Managing Your Time, Attention, and Energy

Chris Bailey
306 pages
Book: getab.li/26999

Rating
9
10 Applicability
7 Innovation
9 Style

Take-Aways

• Every person gets the same amount of time each day. To make your time more valuable, increase your productivity.

• Productivity requires managing your “time, attention and energy.”

• Productivity doesn’t mean being constantly busy; it means accomplishing your goals.

• Make a list of three tasks to get done each day, and do them.

• To manage your energy, schedule your crucial or most difficult tasks during your “biological prime time” – the time of day when you’re most productive.

• To build your attention, focus on a single task. Don’t multitask.

• Working more than 40 hours a week reduces your productivity.

• Productivity doesn’t require doing things fast. It requires doing things deliberately.

• Meditation can help you become more deliberative, which fuels productivity.

• The happier you are, the more productive you will be.
Relevance

What You Will Learn
In this book summary, you will learn: 1) How to break productivity down into three basic components and 2) How to use 25 techniques to become more productive.

Recommendation
Productivity expert Chris Bailey has delved into this specialty for his whole career. After college, he took a year off to research productivity and to conduct carefully controlled and monitored productivity experiments. After that, Bailey spent ten years investigating “thousands of productivity hacks” to determine what people can do to increase their productivity and become consistently more productive. Bailey used that decade of experimentation to identify 25 effective productivity techniques. To get the most from your time and effort, getAbstract recommends checking out his insights and methods.

Summary

Make Your Time Count
You get 24 hours every day to live your life and pursue your dreams. If you’re like most people, once you take care of your obligations, you’ll still have about two and a half hours of discretionary time left. That’s not much time to achieve what really matters to you.

The only way to find more time is to increase your productivity by becoming more deliberate in everything you do. Productive people don’t operate on autopilot. They work smarter and more efficiently, move slowly, focus on what’s important and handle everything with purposeful attention.

Productivity Components
Productivity has three components: “time, attention and energy.” To become more productive, you need to manage all three – individually and simultaneously. You can exert maximum energy and a laser focus, but if you waste your time, you won’t be productive. And, if you’re always tired, having time and focus won’t help.

For maximum productivity, prioritize your tasks and duties. Assess what matters most to you and in what order, and direct your productivity efforts to those tasks. Then you’re ready to embark on a full-fledged productivity program.

Productivity Strategies
Draw from this menu of 25 effective methods, techniques and strategies for getting the most from your time, energy and attention.

1. “Deep meaningful reason” – Becoming more productive is hard, but with strong intention and clear purpose you can maintain a productivity program. It takes “efficiency, meaning, control, discipline, growth, freedom, learning” and “staying organized.”

2. “Not all tasks are created equal” – Some activities, tasks and goals matter more than others. Productivity requires stepping back to gain perspective on what is really important. Your goal is meaningful productivity. Devote your time, attention and energy to your most vital activities, tasks and goals.
3. **“Three daily tasks”** – In *Getting Results the Agile Way*, J.D. Meier recommends following the “Rule of 3” to become more intentional and deliberative. At the beginning of each week, write three goals for that week. At the start of each day, write down three tasks to do before bedtime. Don’t make your tasks and goals too big or too small.

4. **“Everyone procrastinates at times”** – Don’t worry about this normal behavior unless it gets excessive. A Salary.com survey reports that nearly one of three people wastes an hour or more daily and more than one of four wastes at least two hours daily. To motivate yourself to avoid procrastination, list the costs you will incur for tasks you put off doing. Jump into a task you dislike. Spend only a little time on it initially, say, 15 minutes. Use a timer. Often, a task doesn’t seem as onerous once you begin to work on it.

5. **“Meet yourself...from the future”** – Every time you put off a task, you’re assigning it to your “future self.” Most people treat their future selves (themselves tomorrow, next week, next month, next year, and later) as strangers. This is easy because your future self isn’t that important to you today. But if you stay close to your future self, you’ll be less inclined to create a backlog of delayed tasks. Periodically use a website like FutureMe.org to send the future you an email – from you to you.

6. **“Work smarter”** – When you schedule specific work chores, you establish “attentional and energy boundaries” for each task and focus on each component of productivity: time management plus energy management plus attention management.

7. **“Working less”** – Many people assume that their productivity will increase if they work extra hours. Actually, putting in longer hours is counterproductive to productivity. You will lose energy and risk burnout. When you’re working longer hours, you may tend to work less urgently. But, when you have fewer hours available to get your work done, you’ll focus more intently and become more productive of necessity. People who work 35 to 40 hours each week are more productive than those who work longer hours.

8. **“Energy enlightenment”** – Every person has what author Sam Carpenter – in his book *Work the System* – calls a “biological prime time” (BPT). This is when people have the most energy, operate most effectively and are most productive. Individual BPTs vary. Some people are early birds. Others are night owls. Author Chris Baily finds that he has two BPTs: 10 a.m. to noon and 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. Schedule your most crucial, most challenging work – your Rule of 3 tasks – for your BPT.

9. **“Ready for prime time”** – To discover your BPT, monitor your “energy levels” for a couple of weeks or at least a few days. Log every hour of every day. During this tracking period, avoid caffeine, alcohol, sugar, and any additional stimulants, because they affect your energy levels. Likewise, don’t use an alarm to wake up. Instead, go to bed at whatever time seems most natural and get up whenever you awaken.

10. **“Cleaning house”** – Maintenance tasks – shopping, laundry, cleaning, yard work – don’t generate any income, but you’ve still got to do them. If it’s practical, do all your maintenance tasks the same day – your “maintenance day.” That lets you focus on your priority tasks the rest of the week.

11. **“Highest-return tasks” deserve most of your time** – Give your “real” work the majority of your time, attention and energy. Give less impetus to “low-return” tasks such as conference calls, email, website maintenance and meetings.

12. **“Shrinking the unimportant”** – Parkinson’s Law says that work always expands to take up all the time you make available for its completion. This is especially true for low-return maintenance tasks. They’re “work candy” – easy to do and quick to finish. They give you a great sense of satisfaction but a false sense of productivity. When feasible, cut back on low-return tasks. See if you can reduce meetings, phone calls and projects that demand your time but involve you only tangentially.

13. **“Removing the unimportant”** – Whenever possible, delegate. Some low-return – but time-consuming – maintenance tasks don’t require your direct involvement. Figure out
what your time is worth and how much time a specific low-return task takes. If it makes financial sense, delegate it to someone who will do it for money. You can also pay someone to do both professional and personal tasks. Recruit qualified freelancers, and pay them well. You’ll get the best workers and spend less time training and coordinating them.

14. “Emptying your brain” – The purpose of your brain is to figure things out, answer problems and come up with new ideas. Don’t use it as a mental storage facility for accumulated tasks, goals, plans, ideas and bits of information. Retaining all that data in your head is a stressful, losing proposition. Productivity expert David Allen explains, “Your head is not for holding ideas; it’s for having ideas.” To free your mind, do a “brain dump” and externalize your to-do list, planning calendar and other reminders. Keep notepads available to jot down new goals, tasks and ideas as they come up.

15. “Adding in hot spots” – To get the best picture of your life, how you are trying to improve it and what you want it to be like in the future, view your tasks, plans, goals and activities from “10,000 feet” up. Gain this perspective by using Meier’s concept of hot spots. Think of hot spots as “the portfolio of your life.” Segment your to-do lists and other lists into these seven hot-spot categories: “mind, body, emotions, career, finances, relationships” and “fun.” This gives you a helpful bird’s-eye view of everything you’re doing and planning.

16. “Becoming more deliberate” – On average, people can focus their attention on a task only 53% of the time. Then, their minds start to wander. Take steps to build your “attention muscle.” Neuroscientists explain that exerting attention involves the thinking and planning part of your brain – the “central executive” – plus the brain’s focusing and awareness functions. Develop both parts to strengthen your ability to pay attention.

17. “The art of doing one thing” – To build your attention, focus on a single task. This is the opposite of multitasking, which is never productive. When you “single task,” you rivet your attention to only one thing. Use the “Pomodoro Technique” to single task: Intently focus on one task for 25 minutes; take a five-minute break. When you complete four 25-minute work sessions, take a 15-minute break. Repeat this throughout your day.

18. “Attention hijackers” – You face a million daily interruptions: emails, instant messages, phone calls, computer alerts, Facebook notifications, and more. Every time one of these steals your attention, it can take 25 minutes to regain your focus. The research firm Basex reports that interruptions and the necessary recovery periods rob workers of 28% of their work time. To avoid these productivity killers, turn off alerts and notifications.

19. “Making room” – When you’re at work, you don’t want your mind to wander. At other times, a wandering mind can become a positive asset. For example, many people come up with their best ideas when they’re in the shower, where ideas are free to “bubble up” to the surface. Occasionally make time for your mind to wander – but do it strategically.

20. “Why the Internet is killing your productivity” – The Internet, one of the modern era’s primary disruptors, can waste your time and ruin your productivity. Many routine tasks and activities are not fun or sexy; nevertheless, you must do them. In marked contrast, the Internet, with its endless intriguing sites and attractions, is fun and super-sexy. Your routine tasks can’t compete with the web for your interest and attention. The Internet will win every time. Use the same strategy with the Internet as with all electronic attention hijackers: Turn it off when you must focus on an important task or project.

21. “Meditation” – To be productive, you need to be in control of your mental processes. Such control enables deliberation and intentionality – essential requirements for productivity. Meditation takes charge of your mental processes, including attention. To meditate, find a quiet place, sit straight in a chair, use a timer to measure your meditation time (start with five minutes), turn your attention exclusively to your breathing and
passively observe your breath. When your attention wanders from breathing (it will), refocus. That’s all meditation requires.

22. “Refueling” – You need to feel energetic to be productive, and the food you eat is fuel for your energy. The foods that support productivity are the same foods you should eat to maintain good health. Follow two dietary rules for good health and maximum energy: First, let unprocessed foods form the bulk of your diet and, second, stop eating as soon as you are full. If that’s not how you normally eat, try to change. Making minor, incremental changes to your diet is the most reliable way to achieve long-term dietary success.

23. “Drinking for energy” – Drinking coffee gives you a temporary energy boost. The problem is that you steal this energy from yourself later in the day when you crash from your caffeine high. You will experience the same thing with alcohol. Drinking coffee and alcohol together only exacerbates the energy loss that comes from “borrowing energy from tomorrow.” Consume coffee strategically, for example, shortly before you deliver an important presentation or start a major project. To bolster your energy and your health, drink plenty of water. The recommendation is eight cups daily. When you drink water, it turbocharges your metabolism, helps you lose weight and boosts your energy.

24. “The exercise pill” – You will achieve a tremendous productivity payoff from exercise. Author John Ratey writes in Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain, “If exercise came in pill form, it would be plastered across the front page, hailed as the blockbuster drug of the century.” If exercise is new to you, start small and build up. Spend 15 minutes walking to elevate your heart rate. If 15 minutes is too much exercise initially, cut the time to whatever seems right for you.

25. “Sleeping your way to productivity” – About half of the people in the United States suffer sleep deprivation. To maintain energy, everyone needs seven to nine hours of sleep. Don’t shortchange your sleep to squeeze a little more time out of each day. Every hour of sleep you lose translates to two or more hours of lost productivity. To get enough sleep, set up a “nighttime ritual.” Starting at the same time every night, go through a customized routine to let go of the day and ease into restful sleep. Take a nap during the day to recharge your batteries. The blue light from electronic devices sabotages restful sleep, so shut off your electronic devices a few hours before you go to bed.

Be Happy

Happy people are productive people, so strive to be happy. To increase your happiness, periodically reward yourself as you work. After you complete a big project, do something nice for yourself. Buy yourself a gift, or enjoy a meal at a nice restaurant.

Increase your energy by taking regular breaks. The more breaks you take, the more energetic you’ll feel. As your energy goes up, so will the deliberative nature of your work.

Create a positive feedback loop: As productivity increases, so does happiness. As happiness grows, so does productivity. “Investing in your happiness and being kind to yourself can have a huge impact on your productivity.”

About the Author

Chris Bailey is an author and productivity consultant. During his year-long productivity project, he wrote more than 216,000 words (864 pages) about productivity in his blog, A Year of Productivity.