



Presents:

Your guide to...

Productivity



Your guide to productivity

The problem with productivity?

Productivity is a challenge for every business owner. With so many calls on your time how do you prioritise when you should be doing which tasks, or even, whether you should be doing them at all?

There are two key problems you need to resolve to ensure you have the time in a normal working week to do all you need to achieve.

Firstly, you need to find a way to identify which jobs YOU need to do.

Secondly, you need to look to delegate those tasks someone else can and should do, in a way which requires a minimum of management time.

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Barriers to effective productivity

You

Often we are our own worst enemies when it comes to effectively managing our time.

For example:

Lack of goals

Not having clear goals will make it difficult to know what jobs are important to you? On the other hand, if you have clear business goals, you can review the tasks you think have to do, and decide which of them will help you move towards them. This will make it easier to say 'no' and stop you taking on too many commitments.

Understand the gains

Sometimes we are not compelled to do jobs we can't see the point of. By reviewing your workload, and finding the potential gain in doing each task, you will find it much easier to get started. If you cannot find a gain, why is the job important enough to be on the list?

Over commitment

As a business owner we often over commit ourselves and we struggle trying to do everything. We are generally best off doing a small number of tasks really well than a large number of jobs poorly.

Internal body clock

We all have an internal body clock which determines which times of the day we are most effective. Do challenging tasks when you are most awake and alert and you will find jobs take less time.

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Have a clear vision

Many of us find ourselves multi-tasking rather than concentrating on one task at a time. We allow ourselves to be distracted by phone calls, emails etc. If we work in focussed bursts we are much more likely to do the job well and effectively.

Self-sabotage

If you look at the list of tasks you have to do you will find there are some tasks you enjoy and some you find boring. It is interesting how we generally have time to do the jobs which we enjoy, but suddenly have no time to do those jobs we dislike or are bored by. Ask yourself if these boring jobs really need to be done and, if so, whether you are the best person to do them! If it has to be you, get them out the way so you can move onto something you like doing better.

Fear

There will be tasks which worry you and you spend a large amount of head time mulling them over - sometimes even after the job has been completed. Again, ask yourself if there is someone you can delegate these jobs to, especially if they involve a degree of professional knowledge.

Working environment

As a business owner you need to manage all areas of your business. This means that you have to be the creative thinker (entrepreneur), the detail person and the relationship builder. However, each of these business personalities requires a different environment to flourish. If you acknowledge this, and work in the right environment for the task, you will find jobs easier to accomplish.

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Treat yourself

If running your business feels like a slog, you will be ground down and find it difficult to motivate yourself. By scheduling short breaks to do activities you shouldn't do during work time, but get pleasure from, you will be re-energised! After all you are your own chief executive, so indulge your inner skiver every now and then, and you will find you are more productive overall. If nothing else you will be motivated by guilt!

Take regular breaks

With finite working days the temptation is often there to work on through without taking breaks – even for lunch. However, by taking regular breaks throughout the day we give our brain down-time, which makes it more eager to get going again. The trick is to have a timed length of break, or you may find the break goes on longer than you planned.

Others

Much of our time is spent doing what others expect of us.

If we can learn to manage the expectations of these time dictators we will have more control over our time:

Family and Friends

We love our friends and families and often find it difficult to manage their expectations against the needs of our businesses. If you started your own business because you wanted to spend more time with your family, acknowledge that this is important to you and make sure your business does not take over. If possible have a clear distinction between leisure time and business time. Although there will be times when one will impinge on the other, if these times are relatively rare, you should find it easier to manage the situation.

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Customers

Our customers are vital to our business success and we often find ourselves bending over backwards to keep them happy. However, if you are constantly bowing to their demands without any consideration of your own needs, you will become stressed and time management will be impossible. Before you agree to do a task for a client find out from them how important it is to them, and what their timescale is. You may well find that jobs you would automatically do straight away could easily be done later without any loss of client value.

Government

There are timescales we have no control over and these generally relate to government requirements. Posting your VAT returns, filing your tax and Companies House returns and responding to government questionnaires are a part of everyday life for business owners. However, if these activities fill you with dread let yourself off the hook and get a professional to do them for you.

Time wasters

We all find ourselves spending time answering the phone or dealing with emails from people who add no value to our businesses. You need to reduce the time you deal with these time wasters.

Engage an answering service to answer your calls so you are not distracted, and don't have to deal with calls you don't want or need to take. If a phone answering service is too expensive have an answer phone message which encourages the people you want to deal with to leave a message. You can then deal with the messages in a measured way.

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Emails, twitter, LinkedIn etc. can call on your time throughout the day unless you discipline yourself. Have a particular slot in your day for these and configure your email to only receive at specific times.

Make sure your spam filter on your email is working effectively so you are not plagued with unwanted emails. Also, make sure when you fill in forms that you opt out of receiving promotional material

Organising your time

It is important to make sure that you are in charge of your diary rather than it being in charge of you. There are various methods which will help you manage your time more effectively. What works for you may not work for someone else so it is important to choose a method which sits well with the way you work.

To do list

Many people use a simple to do list. As jobs come in they put them on their list and re-organise so that the most urgent jobs are at the top. However, the list is often made up of items which just get moved further and further into the future – these are often the more difficult items on the list!

The things you need to consider about using such a list are:

- An ongoing list can be demoralising. If you never seem to get to the bottom of the list it can feel as if you are not achieving anything.

So split your list into days.

- Each day should have a closed list of items you are going to accomplish, which you have laid out the day before.

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It is worth remembering that if you have a list of 20 tasks, achieve 15 but fail to do 5 you will generally beat yourself up over the 5 you didn't do rather than congratulating yourself for the 15 you did.

So keep your list short but with meaningful jobs on.

- Many tasks require regular attention and are just as vital as the larger tasks. Batch jobs such as reading emails, listening to voice mail, dealing with paper work, twitter etc. and have a particular time each day when you deal with these items.

Make sure you have a clear idea of all the work you need to plan for – not just the big projects.

- Many to do lists are just wish lists. They are a list of tasks which may or may not be accomplished.

Instead of having a list of items you wish to do, have items on your (short) daily lists which you commit to do. That way you are able to move your business forward.

Projects

- If you have a large project to do break it down into smaller tasks and plan them into specific days. This enables you to keep track of what has been done and what is still to be done.
- If you have problems starting a project, commit to working on it first thing each day until the project is complete. You need to do this first thing as you will avoid distractions which can de-rail your intentions later in the day.

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- Doing little but often will be a more effective way of getting larger task done than trying to get it all done in one go.
- It is often the getting started which is the biggest obstacle – once you have taken the first steps it is easier to keep going. So start off committing to five-ten minutes a day and you may well find you work on it for much longer.
- Ask yourself ‘How I will feel, once I have done it’. This will help provide the reason why you are doing the project in the first place, and help you find the commitment you need to see it through.

Diary/calendar

Having a diary is a key tool in managing your time. If you use it in conjunction with a closed list of daily items it can be a powerful aid in helping you manage your time.

You need to bear in mind:

- If someone else is managing your diary it is difficult for you to ensure you build in time for the things which are important to you, so make sure they know of times you need to yourself.
- Don't just put appointments in your diary, also put in jobs which need doing on that day. If you don't do this, you will find you have appointments when you really need time to do a task.
- It is easy to fill your diary with tasks which need to be done urgently to fulfil your current obligations. However, it is just as important to build in time to think and plan for your business future.
- Make sure you plan in down time.

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- Build in time buffers – we often give ourselves too short a timescale to do jobs for clients so we don't deliver. Set realistic expectations with your clients. You will have more time to do the job well and if you over-deliver they will love you.

One touch

Some people try to use a one touch approach whereby they visit tasks only once. This can be effective when dealing with emails and small jobs – assuming you are doing these small jobs at a set time rather than being interrupted all through the day.

Does it need to be done now?

When reviewing the work that comes in to your business during the day, it is important to ask yourself when it realistically needs to be done. We often do tasks as soon as they come in and this means we lose control of our working day.

Identifying which tasks to do

Urgent v important

Business gurus such as Steven Covey recommend concentrating on important non-urgent tasks as a way of ensuring you take a long term view of your business. However, the notions of importance and urgency are relative and often hard to quantify. You can find yourself ignoring the needs of key customers, suppliers and other people working in your business.

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A better way?

Focus on activities which:

- ➔ Avoid problems
- ➔ Add value to your business

If you focus on adding value, but not on avoiding problems, you will see only short term growth. Sorting out problems properly builds the foundation for a strong business in the future.

By focussing only on avoiding problems, you will not be growing your business (in these days of fast change standing still actually means going backwards) as you will not spend the time needed to move your business forward.

Classify each task as avoiding problems or adding value to your business. Tasks which add value are generally those which contribute to your goals. Tasks which avoid problems often include honing your systems to make sure you are working as efficiently as possible.

Avoid completely tasks which do not avoid problems or add value – these tasks are just time stealers!!

Delegation

Clearly a key way to alleviate your time pressures is to find someone else to do some of the work you currently do.

Just because you own and run your business does not mean that you can, or should, do everything in it. It is a mistake to see your time as cheap just because you are not paying someone else.

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In fact, you are the most expensive person you have working in or on your business. You are the only one who knows where it is going, or who provides the passion behind what the business does. You should therefore concentrate on those jobs only you can do, especially if you have time pressures.

Identifying which jobs to delegate

Review the tasks you currently do and try to identify the following:

Jobs a professional can do it better

Certain jobs require a degree of skill, or temperament, you don't have. Having these on your task list will probably cause you worry and stress, and will deflect you from working effectively.

In particular look at the following to see if you are best suited to do them, or whether you should delegate to a professional:

- Bookkeeping and accountancy
- Marketing and prospecting

A word of caution – just because you are delegating the work does not mean you delegate the responsibility, nor does it mean you don't need to know the basics and what results you should expect.

Jobs you hate or find boring

If you hate doing a job or find it incredibly boring to do, make sure first it is necessary and, if it is, see if it is possible to delegate it.

A word of caution – once you have decided to delegate don't make the mistake of trying to micro manage.

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Be clear what you expect of them, in particular:

- Be clear where their responsibilities lie
- Give them give them a clear, agreed picture of their job description, but don't make the mistake of telling them how each element of their job should be done
- Tell them what resources they have available to them
- Make sure they know the standards of performance and behaviour you expect
- Let them learn from their mistakes, and praise them for great results
- Make sure they know the timescales involved
- Help them take ownership of their role by empowering them to do the best they can

Running your business and planning for its future

Unfortunately this is an area you can't delegate. If you find running your business stressful you need to find ways to alleviate this stress. Take time out; do your thinking at times when you are most effective; and create the best environment for clear thinking (for example, go for a walk if you are trying to think through a particularly taxing problem).

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And finally...

Remember you cannot create more time however hard you try. You can only make the best use of the time you have available to you.

As business owners we have a seemingly endless list of tasks to do and too little time in which to do them all.

We need to cut ourselves some slack and let those jobs go which someone else could do better or which we do not need to do at all.

It's worth bearing in mind that the easiest way to delegate a job we don't want to do is not to take it on in the first place – in the words of the Grange Hill song “Just say no!”