Ways to improve productivity

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How many hours a day did you work say three or four years ago? And how many hours a day do you work now? The chances are that you're probably working longer hours now than you were in the past. Certainly, that's the global trend for most office workers. Falling sales and tighter budgets in many organizations mean that most employees and their managers are having to do the same amount of work – or even in some cases *more* work – with fewer resources.

But in this article I'll suggest that it may be a good idea to do a little less work in order to get more done. How?

Focusing on productivity rather than hours

I would suggest that a significant proportion of employees may be using their time ineffectively. I've observed that some people – and this can include even some quite senior managers – can get sucked into the practice of being busy for its own sake.

You can spot these people by how they hurry around the office, complaining about back-to-back meetings and conference calls with important customers. They rush around with their heads buried in their BlackBerrys, almost seeming to enjoy how *busy* they are. They rush from one meeting to the next telling colleagues and customers how they have so much to do as if being busy is almost like a badge of honour.

However, I would argue that there is a big difference between busy and being productive. Long hours do not automatically lead to high productivity.

There are plenty of research studies telling us that performance drops the longer you keep doing the same thing. If you're in back-to-back meetings or staring at a spreadsheet for several hours at a time, you can expect your performance to drop off.

Rather than working for four or five hours at 80 percent capacity, it is a good idea to take a break occasionally to help you get back up to your 100 percent output.

Scheduling several 15-minute breaks into your day – or even taking a 30-minute lunch away from your desk – might at first feel as if you're simply lengthening your day. However, your performance may be higher throughout the day and you may find yourself speeding through your tasks more effectively. As a result, taking breaks may actually allow you to leave the office earlier than later.

Several years ago, I was interested in meeting the chairman of a communications agency who had an unofficial rule banning his employees from eating lunch at their desks. He was keen for his workers to get away from their computers and phones for at least a short period every day. He even provided braver members of his team with free bicycles to encourage them to get out of the office. And the chairman did these things not out of the goodness of his heart but because he believed that pushing his employees to take a break would help them to be more effective in the long term.

More recently, a client of mine that I've been coaching who had been very hassled and feeling under a lot of pressure at work started going to the gym at least a couple of days a week at lunchtimes. Within the space of just a week, he found that he was much more productive in the afternoons. Taking a break from meetings and his computer to pound a treadmill and lift weights allowed him to return to his work fresher.

Prioritising with Plan-Do-Review

When you are at your desk, there are many techniques that may help you to get more done too. However, perhaps the most important one is to identify your priorities. Once you've identified your priorities, you must schedule time in your diary to get those key tasks done the next day.

The reason this is so important is because we've all experienced days on which we've been busy and rushing around but end the day feeling as if we've not done any of the *important* things we really wanted to do. But, by identifying these key tasks, we can ensure that we leave the office every day with some sense of satisfaction. Sure, some of the lesser tasks may have fallen through the cracks, but at least we can always know that we got those hefty and critical tasks done.

I have to admit this is not a wholly original time management tool. Management writers and experts have their own variants on it and perhaps the late Stephen R. Covey (author of "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People") was the first person to come up with this kind of technique. However, the point is that spending just a minute or two identifying our priorities for the next day and then making a strong effort to get them done in the morning of that next day gives us a better chance of actually getting those things done.

I have a technique which I call Plan-Do-Review. At the end of one day (let's say it's a Monday evening), I make a list of the key things that I must, absolutely must do. I tend to have a longer list of everything that will at some stage need doing. But this shorter list is simply a plan of the key tasks that I really want to get through the next day, on Tuesday. On Tuesday, I make it a priority to tackle those tasks first.

Then at the end of the day, I review how it went, just spending a minute or two thinking about the lessons of the day. Did the tasks go well? What could I have done differently or better? What does that mean for how I tackle my work in the future? Once I've done that review, I can make a plan for the next day, Wednesday and the Plan-Do-Review cycle starts again.

Not every day will go to plan. There will sometimes be occasions when a genuine crisis comes along to derail the best of plans. But the point is to try as often as possible to get the really important work done whenever we can. You may not get *more* done, but you will usually at least get the most *important* things done.

Try it for two weeks. I can assure you that it will help you to prioritize and feel more in control of your work.