

How to increase your productivity*

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As I write this article there are many things going through my head. I have to get to the bank to put some cheques in, I have to collect some currency for a conference abroad next week, I have to buy some nappies for my daughter as we ran out this morning, I have to buy a birthday card for my Mum. There are always "must do" things that take time out of the working day. However much you are into your job, there will always be days when you think you have achieved absolutely nothing for all the effort that you have put in. All academics are busy. It is now a fact of life. None of us can fit everything we want to do into the time that we have available. Time is a limited resource; therefore like money we have to be economical.

Here are my tips for being more productive facilitate effective time management:

- Procrastination is the worst enemy of productivity. Look at the reasons for procrastination. Do you need a holiday? Are you bored with your work? Is it too easy? Too hard? Have you the right conditions to work? Unless your heart is in what you are doing, you will find it difficult to be productive. The most productive people are those who have a feeling of satisfaction because they've achieved their personal goals.
- New graduates often have a problem with time management with a tendency to leave everything until the last minute. At work or in postgraduate study you need to prioritise and expect the unexpected. You need to work out what is best for both you and your department.
- Learning to juggle lots of tasks is important especially when some jobs depend on teamwork. This includes learning to say 'no' without feeling guilty.
- Set limits on the working day. You need to know what is feasible within the space of a day. You need adequate time to recharge your batteries. "All work and no play" is more likely to lead to inefficiency in the long run. The importance of breaks is often understated.
- Balance out routine and dull tasks with the things you really enjoy doing to maintain motivation. For instance, move from a cerebral task to a manual one when you can to give your brain a rest. If you can't get away from the desk, then at the very least switch between tasks (e.g., go from report writing to an administrative task)
- There are two types of motivation - internal (job satisfaction) and external (status, earning money). If you are externally motivated you will only feel you've become more productive if you get promoted or a pay rise.
- Work smart rather than hard - remember that working long hours is not the same as working hard. Build in lots of breaks. Being productive doesn't just mean getting more done. It can also be about doing the same amount of work but in a more efficient manner.
- You need to know exactly what your supervisor or employer wants from you, i.e., your assigned roles and responsibilities. You could be working very hard but finding yourself doing very little good. If you have the power to delegate then do so.
- Become more productive by understanding the culture of your organization. You also need to know how the organization works. You need to know who to go to for advice and how the departmental politics operate.
- Seek out your organization's learning support and resources/staff development programme. Find yourself a mentor, even if your company has no official scheme. Work on your personal skills - particularly organization and prioritisation.
- Write out everything you need to do the next day the night before and sleep on it. Hopefully you will worry less, sleep better and wake up with more energy, able to get on with work as soon as you get to your desk.

- Draw up 'to do' lists based on short and longer-term tasks and prioritise them (learn to know the difference between important and urgent as they are not the same!). This includes being strategic and not doing things that do not count for anything.
- Work at home for at least a day a week. You will get far more done in one day at home than two in the office. There will also be no commuting time. On days that you do commute, use the train to work rather than coming in by car.
- Earmark particular times of the day for doing particular regular activities. For instance, check your e-mails periodically rather than answer everything as they come in; screen phone calls and reply when it suits you.
- Keep your work area tidy and uncluttered to avoid spending endless time searching for things that you should have where they are instantly.
- Be ruthless about attending meetings, and when you are in meetings encourage the practice of finish times as well as start times.
- If you do some part-time teaching, create office hours for any students so that you can guarantee when you will not be disturbed. Give clear guidelines where possible as this may prevent endless questions being asked by students over and over again (i.e., front end things and provide a FAQ handouts)

*Note. This article is a much expanded version of the following article: Griffiths, M.D. (2003). Tips on...How to increase productivity. British Medical Journal 326:S92.