



ELIMINATE **DISTRACTIONS**

TOOLS FOR SUSTAINED ATTENTION
AND INCREASED PRODUCTIVITY

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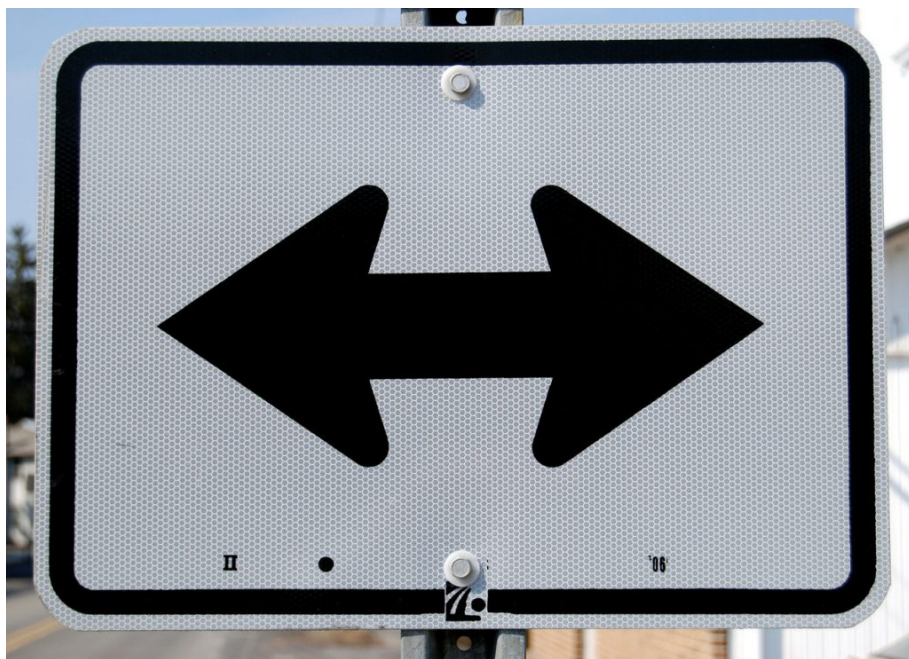
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You're distracted more often than you think

Takeaway: Research shows you're distracted *every 40 seconds* when working in front of a computer connected to the internet. This makes taming distractions and interruptions ahead of time critical.

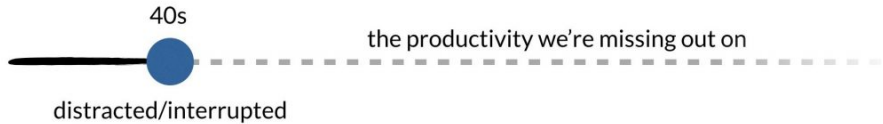


One of the most alarming productivity studies I've come across was conducted by Gloria Mark, in partnership with Microsoft.

In the study, Gloria tracked how 40 knowledge workers spent their time and attention when working in front of a computer. While she discovered a few interesting nuggets when poring through the experiment logs—like that our ability to focus suffers when we get less sleep and are stressed out—to me, the most fascinating finding had to do with how frequently we're distracted or

interrupted as we work.

The average person is distracted or interrupted every 40 seconds when working in front of a computer. This is remarkable. While it's easy to recognize that we live in an age of distraction, to me, this number is astounding. It's pretty hard to do good, deep work when you can't even focus for a minute.



In the timeline of our work, our best thinking happens after this 40 second mark.

I've started to think a lot more about distractions since stumbling on this statistic. Once you become aware of how rare sustained, focused attention is, it's impossible to look at your work the same way—it's like noticing the arrow embedded in the FedEx logo for the first time.

This further supports the fact that we need to eliminate as many distractions and interruptions from our work as possible. The disruptions—including email notifications and alerts—are infinitely easier to deal with before they come up, rather than after. Downloading apps like Freedom or Cold Turkey, or disconnecting from the internet completely while doing your most important work (you spend 47% of your time on the internet procrastinating), can go a long way in helping you charge past this 40 second mark.

Taking just a few minutes to tame distractions ahead of time can save you hours of lost productivity later on.

4 types of distractions that derail your productivity

Takeaway: There are two types of distractions and interruptions that derail our productivity—those we can't control, and those we can. We should proactively deal with the distractions we have control over, and change how we *respond* to those interruptions we can't control.



Every distraction or interruption that derails your productivity can be sorted into one of four categories, depending on whether the distraction is annoying or fun, and whether or not you have control over it. In stepping back from my own distractions and interruptions, I've come up with different tactics for how to deal with these four types of productivity hijackers.

Here are the four types of distractions that derail your productivity, and how to deal with them!

FOUR TYPES OF DISTRACTIONS / INTERRUPTIONS

	ANNOYING	FUN
NO CONTROL		
CONTROL		

Distractions we can't control

It's helpful to realize there are distractions we *can't* control—ones that are both annoying (office visitors, loud colleagues, required meetings), and those that are fun (your coworker asking if you'd like to join the team for lunch).

The key to dealing with these derailments isn't to prevent them from happening—their very nature prevents you from doing so. Instead, it's up to you to change how you respond—quickly getting back on track after annoying interruptions, and enjoying any fun interruptions that happen to arise.

FOUR TYPES OF DISTRACTIONS / INTERRUPTIONS

	ANNOYING	FUN
NO CONTROL	DEAL WITH, GET BACK ON TRACK	ENJOY!
CONTROL		

Distractions we can control

Thankfully, the list of distractions we *can* control is much longer—it includes emails, phone calls, audible and vibrating alerts, text messages, social media, news websites, and the internet.

The solution to dealing with these distractions is simple: eliminate the interruptions ahead of time. If you frequently stumble into productivity potholes while on the internet, disconnect while doing your most important work. If checking email is eating away at your productivity, or email alerts are preventing you from focusing on your work, disable those beeps and bloops, and turn off the new message notifications that pop into the corner of your screen as you're working. Schedule a few windows throughout the day to intentionally check your email, instead checking it habitually.

FOUR TYPES OF DISTRACTIONS / INTERRUPTIONS

	ANNOYING	FUN
NO CONTROL	DEAL WITH, GET BACK ON TRACK	ENJOY!
CONTROL	DEAL WITH AHEAD OF TIME	

Most distractions are easier to deal with in advance than they are to resist as they come up. The reason we often fall victim to fun (or stimulating) distractions is simple: in the moment, we see distractions as more alluring (albeit less productive) compared to what we ought to be doing. Clearing these distractions ahead of time gives us the focus needed to stay on track.

The next time you get distracted or interrupted in your work, ask this question: was the interruption within or outside your control? Next time, can you deal with the interruption ahead of time in order to reclaim some productivity? Can you change how you deal with the distraction the next time around, or get back on track quicker?

Not all workplace distractions and interruptions are within your control—but many are. It's worth dealing with them accordingly.

10 ways to sharpen an axe

Takeaway: For every minute we spend planning, we save several in execution—like sharpening an axe before chopping down a tree. Here are 10 of my favorite ways to do this: learn to meditate; tame distractions before working; single-task; know your most productive tasks; set intentions *constantly*; start a Maintenance Day ritual; exercise; eat foods that burn slower; don't compromise on sleep; and work around your energy levels.



There's a quote misattributed to Abraham Lincoln that goes, "give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe." Even though he never said it, I love this idea, particularly as far as productivity is concerned. The message is this: for every minute we spend planning and preparing, we save

several in execution. This is true only up to a point, of course—it's impossible to be productive when we don't do the work—but once we do, planning means our actions are more thought out, and we're able to work more deliberately and intelligently.

Here are 10 of my favorite ways to plan and prepare before getting to work.

1. Learn to meditate

Meditation is hard, but that's exactly what makes it worthwhile. In meditation, you focus on just one thing—this act takes tremendous willpower and it trains you, over time, to focus deeper on what's in front of you in any given moment. On average, we spend only 53% of our time focusing on what's in front of us—our mind is wandering for the remainder.

The time it takes to learn meditation will more than pay for itself as you master your attention and focus. (If you need help to get started, here's a simple guide I wrote to introduce you to the practice.)

2. Tame distractions ahead of time

Here is a simple truth about distractions and interruptions: they're near-impossible to resist after they come up, but are actually pretty easy to tame ahead of time.

Take stock of the distractions and interruptions that derail your productivity, examine which ones you can deal with ahead of time, and then do just that. This takes a few minutes, but will save an incredible amount of time throughout the day.

3. Do one thing at a time (even if only for a few minutes)

We can only consciously focus on one thing at a time. When we try to work on too many things in the moment, we spread our attention thin, and accomplish a lot less because we do a mediocre job on everything. This is what makes multitasking inefficient.

One of the best ways to become more productive is to single-task. Work on just one thing at a time in order to immerse yourself in that task. This leads us to a hyperfocused state, where we're totally engrossed in our work. This is easier said

than done (though this tactic is infinitely easier after you tame the distractions around you), but it's worth the effort for the productivity benefits you'll reap.

Start with single-tasking for 20 minutes—after you finish, reflect on what you were able to accomplish in that time. Chances are you'll want to continue with this tactic because of how much more productive it will make you.

4. Know your most productive work tasks

We often start working without first knowing the most productive tasks in our day—the consequential tasks through which we accomplish a disproportionately large amount.

If you haven't done so already, step back from your work to find your most productive tasks. This will take a few minutes, but will give you an incredible amount of insight into what's most important in your work.

5. Set intentions *constantly*

The more you set intentions, the more deliberately and productively you work.

Through the Rule of 3 (which I probably write about too much on this site) I set intentions every year, month, week, and day.

While this may sound obsessive, I also keep a running list of intentions on the giant whiteboard in my office. The more often you set intentions, the more productive you become.

6. Do all your maintenance tasks at once

Maintenance tasks at home—like taking out the trash, cutting your nails, preparing meals, and cleaning up—can be a pain. By lumping them together and doing them all at once, you free up time, attention, and energy for more meaningful and productive work throughout the week.

This can take a few minutes of planning at first, but you'll feel the positive effects of having a Maintenance Day ritual throughout the week.

7. Exercise

It's pretty simple: when you exercise, you have more energy. In writing an article like this one, it's easy to fall into the trap of preaching about the wonderful science of exercise and the cocktail of endorphins it releases, but I'll resist this trap.

Exercise gives you more energy—and energy is the fuel you burn in order to become more productive. It can take dedication and energy to show up at the gym, but like the other tactics on this list, that time investment will more than pay for itself.

8. Eat food that burns slower

What you eat has a huge impact on your energy levels, and thus your productivity.

There are two kinds of food: food that's highly processed and burns fast, and food that's natural and burns slower. If you look back to the meals that have provided lasting energy, chances are they weren't highly processed. Natural food—food that's still in nature's packaging, like fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts, meats, and so on—burn super slow in your body, and offer a lasting amount of energy over time.

9. Don't compromise your sleep

I see sleep as the process through which we exchange our time for energy. And the exchange rate is pretty damn good.

For every hour of sleep you miss, you lose even more productivity the next day. Getting the proper amount of sleep not only provides more energy—it also makes you more productive.

10. Work around your energy levels

Figuring out when in the day you have the most energy means you can align your work with how your energy naturally fluctuates.

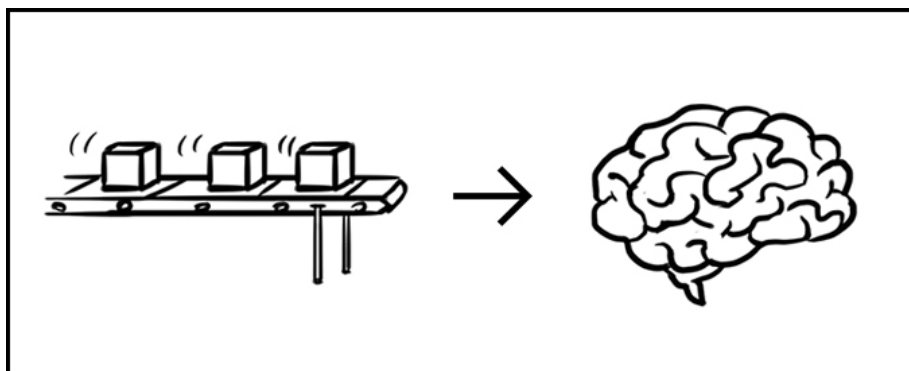
Since we're more productive during high-energy periods, we should schedule our most demanding tasks during these times. Similarly, our least taxing tasks should happen when we have lower amounts of energy. Working around our energy

levels means we can work smarter and more deliberately.

How to measure your productivity

Takeaway: Productivity is all about accomplishing what we intend to—that’s why we should measure our productivity against our intentions.

A shift occurred several decades ago that completely uprooted what being productive meant: we started doing knowledge work with our brains, rather than assembly line work with our bodies.



Productivity meant something very different with assembly line work. If we were **efficient** and produced a ton of widgets during our shift, we were productive. This definition doesn’t work today. It’s easy to be efficient on the wrong things—like if we were to follow 10,000 people on Twitter, and become ultra-efficient at keeping up with every one of them.

In a similar way, a lot of people equate productivity with **getting more done**. But simply getting more done doesn’t make us more productive. If one day you have four pointless meetings, hop on two conference calls to update your boss on your quarterly budget, read every news story, and catch up with the unimportant email you’ve received, you’ve gotten a lot of stuff done, but it didn’t necessarily move your work forward in a meaningful way.

Another productivity definition that comes close, but just misses the mark, is

getting more important stuff done. This idea works most of the time. But what if the most productive thing you could do one day is totally step back from your projects, so you're able to recharge and work with more energy later on? Or what if it's the weekend, and the most meaningful way you could spend your time is to disconnect and spend time with your family?

I'd argue that none of these definitions work well today.

With the knowledge-based work we do today, we are productive when we accomplish what we intend to.

My favorite word in the English language is intention. Working with intention is all about focusing on what's important—and doing so with purpose. When we live with intention outside of work, we create a more meaningful life for ourselves at home.

Intention is also what makes us human. Other animals can't step back from what they're doing, imagine several potential futures, and then choose the most productive and meaningful path. This intention-based definition of productivity also accounts for the fact that energy and focus are a critical component of productivity—and recognizes that sometimes doing nothing at all is key to recharging so we can become more productive later on.

To measure your productivity against your intentions, you need to carve out intentions for yourself in the first place.

We're the most productive when we work and live intentionally. As a result, intentions are the meter stick we should measure our productivity against.



Written by Chris Bailey

When I graduated University a while back, I received a few full-time job offers, but decided to decline them to dedicate a full year of my life to exploring my weird passion: productivity. For a full year I did anything and everything to become more productive. That included conducting dozens of **productivity experiments** on myself, like living in total isolation for 10 days, only using my smartphone for an hour a day, waking up at 5:30am every morning, and working 90-hour weeks. Today, I'm on a mission to share my more human approach to productivity on this blog, in my **talks**, and in my book **The Productivity Project**.

To learn more [visit my website](#).