

10 Ways to Be More Productive

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by David B. Burns

In company after company I work with, I hear the same refrain: “We are forced to keep doing more with less.” As much as you might wish it wasn’t so, the business world of today is only going to keep adding to this pressure to produce more with less, especially in tough economic times. These 10 tips won’t get rid of all your problems, but they will go a long way toward making your workday more productive and less stressful.

1. **Plan Ahead** – Planning ahead gives you a broader perspective, allowing you to more easily sort out the trivial from the important. Planning ahead also helps minimize interruptions – both those that come from others and those that you create yourself. Some people literally say to me, “I don’t have time to plan, I’m too busy.” One of the reasons they are too busy is that they don’t plan. When you don’t plan, the rest of the world is in charge of your agenda. To put yourself more in charge, make planning ahead one of your new habits.
2. **Have Clear Goals** – Working hard does not guarantee you will accomplish much, or that you will accomplish the right things. You can spend lots of energy, work hard all day, and at the end of the day feel like a hamster on a wheel. You used lots of energy, you are tired, spent, and exhausted, but you got nowhere. There is a line from the writer Anton Chekhov that sums up this tip perfectly: “If you cry “forward,” you must make plain in what direction to go.”
3. **Work from Lists** – Lists, especially daily to-do lists, serve as anchors that keep bringing you back to what you committed to do. All day long they work to remind you about what is important, about what your plans and goals are. When the inevitable distractions and interruptions come your way, they help you to stay on track and return to your focused, high-priority tasks.
4. **Have a Not-to-do List** – Just as important as your to-do list, a not-to-do list reminds you to avoid your self-inflicted interrupters - things like mindless surfing of the web, checking e-mail every two minutes, or simply daydreaming. Take a mental journey through your day and put two wasteful activities on your not-to-do list. Stop doing them today.
5. **Reduce Multi-tasking** – Multi-tasking is a prominent part of today’s workplace. In almost every job description I read, somewhere “the ability to multi-task” is listed. Often the added qualifier - under pressure - is added. While the need to multi-task is not going to go away, you will increase your productivity by minimizing it whenever and wherever you can. Here’s why.

Every time you change from one task to another, you are creating a switching cost. A switching cost is the time and energy it takes to change from one task to another. Think of a time when you were “in the zone,” tuned into a task and really functioning at a high level. Then you got interrupted. After handling the interruption, were you able to instantly return to that same high level? No. You had to ramp yourself back up to where you were. Sometimes these costs are small and sometimes they are large, but they are always there. The more of them you allow in your day, the less productive you are. Take a look at your workday. Where can you do work in “chunks” – fully focusing on one task at a time? Reducing your multi-tasking even a little will pay you big dividends in getting things done.

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6. **Maintain Focus** – Maintaining focus is a powerful behavior that will make you more productive in reaching both your short- and long-term goals. It is the opposite of multi-tasking. In the short-term, clearly directed focus allows you to manage interruptions and prevent your energy from being wasted on low-payoff tasks. In the long-term, strong focus keeps you working in the right direction, even on those days when you just don't feel like it
7. **Learn to Delegate Well** – There are three main benefits of delegating well. The first, and obvious one, is that work gets done. The second is that while the work is getting done, the people to whom the work is given are gaining experience and improving their skills. The third, and least obvious one, is when tasks are delegated to team members, you, as the manager, are freed up to work on high-level tasks that only you have the ability to handle. Explaining all the details that go into successful delegation is too broad for this article, but the following are four main points: clearly define the goal, give specific deadlines, explain why and how this assignment fits into the “big picture” of your organization, and check-in along the way.
8. **Learn to Say No Well** – If you can't say “no” well, your agenda is controlled by everyone else – the last person to walk through your door, the last person to call you, the last person to e-mail you. When you can say “no” well, you are more in charge of your agenda. Also, the ability to say no gives you the freedom to say “yes” to the important things, the high-payoff things that you are uniquely qualified to do.
9. **Work on Yourself** – In today's rapidly changing workplace, the habit of continual professional development will keep you ahead of the curve. Your company may help with your development by providing in-house training, or send you off-site for training, or have some online development in place, but ultimately you are in charge of your professional development. No one can do it for you. If organizational changes eliminate your job, you can't take the company computer with you, but you can take your skills and knowledge. All the skills and knowledge you gained from developing yourself will make it much easier to find that next position, and it might just be better than the last one!
10. **Do it Now** – Get started with at least one of these 10 tips today. Pick one and do it now. Do not put it off until tomorrow, next week, next month or next year. Don't wait around. When you waste money you can always go make more, but when you waste time it is gone forever. So start today to improve your productivity by managing your time more effectively.

David travels the country working as a business trainer, speaker, and consultant to organizations ranging in size from micro-businesses to Fortune 500 firms. He brings diverse training and knowledge to every presentation, including a degree in Education, advanced degrees in multiple martial arts, and the practical hands-on experience of running his own businesses since 1980. With his trademark optimism and sense of humor, he shares his experience in terms everyone can relate to, put into practice, and benefit from immediately.

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