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Work Right: How to Improve Your Productivity

It's Monday morning. Your desk is cluttered, your to-do list is two pages long and you have 25 new voicemail messages. Maximizing your efficiency with proven productivity skills can help you clear the decks and get on with your work.

"The key to becoming more productive and efficient is to establish 'do-it-now' work habits," says Kerry Gleeson, founder of the Institute for Business Technology in Boca Raton, Fla., and author of The Personal Efficiency Program. "Dealing with something the first time you touch it can help you clear out your backlog, improve your concentration, process your work in a timely fashion and overcome procrastination, which eats up more time in the workplace than practically anything else."

These additional suggestions from Gleeson can help you further improve your productivity:

Use a calendar system to plan a week at a time

Planning on a weekly basis increases your chances of scheduling and doing your work successfully. "When it comes to planning your workload, planning by the day is too short a time frame and by the month is too long — by the week is just right for most people," Gleeson says.

Commit to a daily action plan

Each morning, devote 10 minutes to creating a daily action plan, then track your progress through the workday. To simplify your daily planning, work backward from the larger picture created by your weekly plan. Derive your daily to-do lists from a list of tasks designed to move you closer to a larger goal.

Stop shuffling through the piles of paper on your desk

When you pick up a piece of paper, deal with it by acting on it, passing it on to someone, filing it or pitching it.

Determine which assignments need to be done right away

Breaking down projects into specific tasks and entering those tasks on your to-do list over a week's time can keep you from being overwhelmed by a large project.

Make follow-up and follow-through part of the work process

Follow up with staff members on their ongoing projects; follow through by keeping your boss informed of your progress and problems with major projects.

Analyze your time

Create a time log to keep track of what you do and how long it takes. "You'll be amazed at how much time you spend on certain items and how little you spend on others," Gleeson says. "Use your analysis to delegate tasks and eliminate interruptions that waste your time."

Batch routine tasks

Return phone calls and respond to memos and e-mail messages once or twice a day. "If you perform a series of these tasks in batches or blocks of time, you'll complete them in 25 percent less time," Gleeson says.

Put routine tasks on your weekly calendar and your daily to-do list

Doing so allows you to do them, then move on. Schedule time each week for planning your workload and keeping your desk and work area organized.

Think in terms of work cycles

Each task has a beginning, middle and end. The beginning involves preparing and setting up for the task. The middle is the act of doing it. The end involves completing it, then returning files, supplies, reference materials and anything else you used to where they belong. Cleaning up as you go will help you maintain order and prepare for the next item on your agenda.

Work smarter by streamlining routine tasks

"You should spend as much time coming up with ways to do your tasks more efficiently as you do performing them," Gleeson says. "Low-value, time-consuming tasks can clog your ability to produce if you waste time completing them."

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How to Improve Your Productivity

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- Do you tend to run late to work?
- Do you seem to be struggling to get on the same page with your coworkers?
- Are you missing deadlines?
- Do you leave work worried about what's waiting for you at home?
- Do you often say, "I'll do it tomorrow"?

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