

## Relax, Don't Worry: The Brain Science of Productivity

Everyone you meet these days is overworked and out of time. In our tech-enhanced world, we have more timesaving helpers and systems than ever before.

So, why isn't there enough time to juggle our work, home and health responsibilities? We have an enhanced quality of life, but we're also adding to our stress levels by taking on more tasks than we have resources to handle.

Many people are stressed – out of patience and out of time. Neither advanced educations, nor time-management models, nor the variety of available organizing tools have given us a sustainable means for managing 21st-century demands.

It doesn't matter which we use: Microsoft Outlook, a Day-Timer, PDA or iPhone. They're inadequate to handle the speed, complexity and changing priorities of today's work environment.

There's a tremendous need for new methods, systems and, above all, habits to keep us on track.

## Information Fatigue

The consequences of these problems are serious: Our productivity and creativity are impaired.

We're allowing huge amounts of information and communications into our brains. We're generating an equally large volume of innovative ideas and integrating them with our preexisting knowledge. We continuously process and formulate new concepts, making split-second decisions on how and with whom to communicate.

In this information age, we know we have choices—but there are way too many. We must sort through options and triage them to determine which receive our attention.

You've probably already discovered that whichever system or calendar you're using to track projects and priorities is important, but limited. As management



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guru Peter Drucker explains:

“In knowledge work...the task is not given; it has to be determined. ‘What are the expected results from this work?’...is the key question in making knowledge workers productive.

“And it is a question that demands risky decisions. There is usually no right answer; there are choices instead. And results have to be clearly specified, if productivity is to be achieved.”

We haven’t been taught to think deeply about our work before we undertake it. Thinking in a concentrated manner to define desired outcomes is something few people do. But outcome thinking is one of the most effective methods available for creating successful realities.

## The Left- Versus Right-Brain Battle

Your ability to be productive and successful at home and work is closely tied to your ability to relax and think clearly. Only when you’re well organized and your mind is clear can you unleash your true creative potential.

Success depends on freeing up your mind to be more relaxed. But no one can relax when the time-oriented, linear left brain is nagging the free-flowing, creative right brain about impending tasks.

What’s needed is a trustworthy system to manage everything we must remember. The more we can download our to-do lists into a reliable system, the more brain space we free up. With a clear mind, you can think about other important items and enjoy greater productivity.

## Brain Clutter

Many of us have experienced working in the “zone,” where creative processes flowed and we lost all sense of time. This happens when we use our right brain hemisphere. Right-brain thinking is essential for innovation. It functions like an artist, concerned only with the present moment.

In contrast, the left brain supplies logic and linear thinking; it’s concerned with time and numbers. It reminds us of tasks left undone, prior experiences we need to consider and future deadlines. It functions more like a banker than an artist.

Our government, schools and businesses prefer to operate in left-brain mode, with an emphasis on laws, rules, logic, accounting and calendars. But we cannot create novel solutions without our right brain’s creative powers.

Instead of allowing our minds to perform optimally, many of us fill our brains with daily life’s mundane details and rules. Worse, we spend endless hours repeating the tasks and projects we’re trying to juggle.

It’s far more effective to employ a reliable system to handle all of these routine details and clear our minds to creatively solve important challenges.

Instead of learning to do more, we must develop strategies to think more clearly and achieve greater relaxation to obviate stress. You cannot be creative if you’re constantly worrying about incomplete details and mind-numbing numbers.

You need a functional system to hold these details until the appropriate time, when you can systematically tick off as many tasks as possible to clear your mind again. Writing things down on a to-do list is a good first step, but it’s not enough.

## What’s Wrong With To-Do Lists?

Why is there so much on our minds?

As we struggle to multitask, we find there are too many things that are out of alignment with our current sense of reality. To cope, we put them on “the list,” which can grow to gargantuan proportions. Often, this list is nothing more than names of pressing projects written on numerous pieces of papers, often kept in several discrete places:

- Speak with So-and-So about this.
- Discuss project x.
- Decide who’s on committee y.
- Delegate z to So-and-So.
- Plan the presentation to the board.

Here’s what’s missing from our lists:

- A clearly identified intended **outcome**
- A specific **next-action step** to be taken
- **Reminders** of outcomes and action steps in a **reliable system**

Some people keep multiple to-do lists of undone tasks. There are notes in their Day-Timers, computer calendars, PDAs, iPhones and all of the other common organizing tools to which we cling. When we write something down and place it on a list, we assume we have a surefire way to remember it.

## Open Loops

But the problem is more complex than keeping multiple lists. The left brain keeps its own list

and tends to be untrusting. It will continually issue reminders and incessantly interrupt your most creative moments. In response, you will write down the task yet again, blocking mind from thinking clearly and creatively.

Until these thoughts have been clarified, you make a decision, and you enact a system you know with certainty you can trust and review regularly, your brain will work overtime to nag you.

All of the tasks for which you haven't formulated desired outcomes and decisions remain active in what scientists call "open loops." They will haunt you, sapping your energy and creative powers. It's the way our mind is wired to work. These loops will control you until you control them.

## Manage the Mind to Manage Action

**N**ow, for the good news: You can train like an athlete to be faster, more responsive and more focused on your work. You can learn to think more creatively and effectively, with greater ease and control. You can minimize loose ends and open loops, leading to increased productivity with decreased effort.

That said, you can't have more time. You can't stop the deluge of incoming information. You can't manage priorities; you can only have them.

The answer lies in managing your actions: what you do with your time, your information, and your mind, body and focus. You must decide how to allocate your limited resources. You must answer the question: How do I make appropriate choices regarding what to do at any given point in time?

We get stuck when we fail to define our next steps. The real problems are lack of a clear vision and an inability to define what a project truly entails, as well as its corresponding future action steps.

## No Defined Steps

**O**n its face, this problem is an obvious hurdle to progress. But most people haven't adequately determined next actions in their commitments and projects. They leave key steps undecided and vague.

Most of us think the major issue is lack of time. In reality, we haven't adequately defined our project's scope and specific requirements.

## A Bottom-Up Approach

**M**any people think the most appropriate way to tackle productivity should be from the top down:

- First, uncover personal and corporate missions.

- Next, define critical objectives.
- Finally, focus on the details of implementation.

But productivity expert David Allen, author of *Getting Things Done*, says otherwise:

"...The trouble is that most people are so embroiled in commitments on a day-to-day level that their ability to focus successfully on the larger horizon is seriously impaired. Consequently, a bottom-up approach is usually more effective."

Start with the most mundane, ground-floor level of current activity and commitments. Catch up by taking control of your in-basket and your mind – right now. You will unleash creative, buoyant energy that supports your attempt to reach new heights. Your confidence will increase as you more effectively handle the spoils of your newfound creativity.

You will experience an immediate sense of freedom, release and inspiration. These rewards come naturally to those who roll up their sleeves, dig in and take care of the little things.

As your in-basket empties, you'll find yourself better equipped to handle the big picture and higher-level thinking.

## Empty Your Mind

**T**here's no real way to achieve control if your mind is racing. If it's stuffed with worries, to-do lists and generalized anxiety, you'll never be as productive, innovative or successful as you desire.

"The art of resting the mind and the power of dismissing from it all care and worry is probably one of the secrets of our great men." –Captain J.A. Hatfield

Most of the stress we experience comes from inappropriately managed commitments we make or accept. Even those of us who aren't consciously "stressed out" can experience better focus, greater relaxation and increased energy when we learn to more effectively control the open loops of our lives.

Anything that's pulling at your attention is a source of stress, which distracts from your ability to be innovative and productive. You must identify and gather up all of the stressors that plague you.

Next, plan how you will handle them, using outcome thinking and writing down next-action steps. This may seem like a simple task, but in practice most people don't do it in a consistent way.

## Basic Requirements for Managing Commitments

Here are some basic activities and behaviors you can implement to free up your mind and be more productive:

1. Empty your mind. Anything you consider unfinished must be captured in a trusted external system. This “collection bucket” must be reliable, and you must return to it regularly to sort through it.
2. Clarify exactly what your commitment entails, its desired outcome and what you have to do to make progress toward fulfilling it.
3. Once you’ve pinpointed all of the next-action steps you need to take, keep reminders of them organized in a system you can review regularly.

Employing next-action decision-making results in clarity, productivity, accountability and empowerment. When you hold yourself to the discipline of identifying the real results you want, you will obtain them.

Things that have **your attention need your intention**. Here are some questions to regularly ask as you go over your list:

- What does this mean to me?
- Why is it here?
- What do I want to be true about this?
- What’s the successful outcome?
- How do I make this happen?
- Which resources must I allocate to make it happen?
- What’s the next action?

Everything you experience as incomplete must have a reference point for “complete.” Your life and work are composed of outcomes and actions.

When your newly adopted behaviors help you organize everything that comes your way, a deep alignment will occur. Wondrous things will emerge. You will become highly productive, achieving your desired outcomes with minimal stress and maximum results.



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