

Productivity Isn't About Time Management. It's About Attention Management.

"Time management" is not a solution — it's actually part of the problem

A few years ago during a break in a leadership class I was teaching, a manager named Michael walked up looking unsettled. His boss had told him he needed to be more productive, so he had spent a few hours analyzing how he spent his time. He had already cut his nonessential meetings. He couldn't find any tasks to drop from his calendar. He didn't see an obvious way to do them more efficiently.

"This is going to sound like a joke, but it's not," he confessed. "My only idea is to drink less water so I don't have to go to the bathroom so many times."

We live in a culture obsessed with personal productivity. We devour books on getting things done and dream of four-hour workweeks. We [worship at the altar of hustle](#) and [boast about being busy](#). The key to getting things done, we're often told, is [time management](#). If you could just plan your schedule better, you could reach productivity nirvana.

But after two decades of studying productivity, I've become convinced that time management is not a solution — it's actually part of the problem.

For most of my career, the most frequent question I've gotten is: "How do I get more done?" Sometimes people ask because they know I'm an organizational psychologist, and productivity is one of my areas of expertise. More often they're asking because they've read in a [New York Times](#) article or a [popular book](#) that I get a lot done.

But the truth is that I don't feel very productive. I'm constantly falling short of my daily goals for progress, so I've struggled to answer the question. It wasn't until that conversation with Michael that it dawned on me: Being prolific is not about time management. There are a limited number of hours in the day, and focusing on time management just makes us more aware of how many of those hours we waste.

A better option is attention management: Prioritize the people and projects that matter, and it won't matter how long anything takes.

Attention management is the art of focusing on getting things done for the right reasons, in the right places and at the right moments.

O.K., sure, but why shift our focus?

According to conventional wisdom about time management, you're supposed to set goals for when you want to finish a task. I decided to try it for this article. The target was 1,200 words, so I sat down at 8 a.m. and gave myself three hours, which would allow me to write at the leisurely

pace of six words per minute. I then spent the next six minutes writing a grand total of zero words, staring at a flashing cursor. The only task I completed was a Google search of whether the cursor was named in honor of all the writers who have cursed it. (Yes, I know you're mocking me, you poor blinking excuse for a rectangle.) Then I wondered how many words I actually type per minute and took a typing test. I wasn't happy with my score, so I took another ... and another.

Eventually I got frustrated and shifted to attention management. E.B. White once [wrote](#): "I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve (or save) the world and a desire to enjoy (or savor) the world. This makes it hard to plan the day." But in my [research](#), I've found that productive people don't agonize about which desire to pursue. They go after both simultaneously, gravitating toward projects that are personally interesting and socially meaningful.

So instead of focusing on how quickly I wanted to finish this article, I asked why I agreed to write it in the first place: I might learn something new when synthesizing the research; I'd finally have somewhere to point people when they ask about productivity; and it might help some of those people. That led me to start thinking about specific people who might read this, which reminded me of Michael. Boom.

Often our productivity struggles are caused not by a lack of efficiency, but a lack of motivation. Productivity isn't a virtue. It's a means to an end. It's only virtuous if the end is worthy. If productivity is your goal, you have to rely on willpower to push yourself to get a task done. If you pay attention to why you're excited about the project and who will benefit from it, you'll be naturally pulled into it by intrinsic motivation.

But how do I stay on task if I'm not worried about time?

Attention management also involves noticing where you get things done. I grew up in Michigan, and when I went back there for grad school, I tried to convince a friend from the West Coast to join me.

"It's too cold and gray," she said after a visit during a snowstorm. She then went off to Stanford. That next Michigan winter was the coldest, grayest season I could remember, and I have never been more productive. There was nothing to do but work!

Sure enough, a [series of studies](#) led by Julia Lee (now at Michigan) show that bad weather is good for productivity because we're less likely to be distracted by the thought of going outside. Researchers found that on days when it rained, Japanese bank employees finished transactions faster, and on days when the weather was bad in America, people were more efficient in correcting spelling errors in an essay. With that in mind, I deliberately waited to start writing this article until the day after a snowstorm, when the melting slush outside my window was not appealing.

My favorite part of attention management is the *when*. Most of our productivity challenges are with tasks that we don't want to do but that we need to do. For years, I thought the way to handle those tasks was to do them right after the most interesting tasks so the energy would spill over. Then my colleague Jihae Shin and I ran a [study](#) in a Korean department store and found that when employees had a highly interesting task, they actually performed worse on their most boring tasks.

One possible reason is what's called [attention residue](#): Your mind keeps wandering back to the interesting task, disrupting your focus on the boring task. But in an experiment with Americans watching videos and then doing a dull data entry task, we found support for a different mechanism: contrast effects. A fascinating or funny video makes the data entry task seem even more excruciating, the same way a sweet dessert makes a sour vegetable taste yuckier. So if you're trying to power through a boring task, do it after a moderately interesting one, and save your most exciting task as a reward for afterward. It's not about time; it's about timing.

Of makers and managers

I'm guessing your goal is not just to be more productive — you probably want to be creative, too.

The stumbling block is that productivity and creativity demand opposite attention management strategies. Productivity is fueled by raising attentional filters to keep unrelated or distracting thoughts out. But creativity is fueled by lowering attentional filters to let those thoughts in.

How do you get the best of both worlds? In his book "[When](#)," Dan Pink writes about evidence that your circadian rhythm can help you figure out the right time to do your productive and creative work. If you're a morning person, you should do your analytical work early when you're at peak alertness; your routine tasks around lunchtime in your trough; and your creative work in the late afternoon or evening when you're more likely to do nonlinear thinking. If you're more of a night owl, you might be better off flipping creative projects to your fuzzy mornings and analytical tasks to your clearest-eyed late afternoon and evening moments. It's not time management, because you might spend the same amount of time on the tasks even after you rearrange your schedule. It's attention management: You're noticing the order of tasks that works for you and adjusting accordingly.

Paying attention to timing management also means thinking differently about how you plan your work. I love Paul Graham's [suggestion](#) to divide the week into "maker days" and "manager days."

On manager days, you hold your meetings and calls. On maker days, you block out time to be productive and creative, knowing you'll be free from distractions that would normally interrupt your [flow](#). Unfortunately, few of us have the luxury to manage every week that way, which means we need to find ways to carve out maker moments.

Time management says we should eliminate distractions altogether — not just [interruptions from other people](#), but also the times when we interrupt ourselves. If you're getting sucked into social media, you'd need to stop cold turkey. Attention management offers an alternative: Be thoughtful about the timing of those distractions.

When I was in middle school, I lost a whole Saturday to watching TV and I felt pretty disgusted with myself afterward. But I didn't give up TV. I made a rule: I would only turn on the TV if I already knew what I wanted to watch. I've adopted the same policy on social media: In times when I could be working, I only log in to share content. I save scrolling for windows when I couldn't be getting anything done, like waiting for a flight to take off or cooling down after exercise.

Most of the writers I know wait for maker days to start writing, believing they need at least four or six hours to dig into a big idea or a complex problem. But there's [evidence](#) that binge writers actually get less done than people who write in shorter bursts. You can make meaningful progress in surprisingly small intervals: When graduate students were [trained](#) to write in 15-minute intervals, they finished their dissertations faster.

If you're trying to be more productive, don't analyze how you spend your time. Pay attention to what consumes your attention. I've just looked at the clock for the first time since I thought of the story about Michael. It's 10:36 a.m., and I've gone about 500 words over my target. I'll leave it to you to decide whether the past 156 minutes were a good use of my attention — and whether the past few minutes of reading this were a good use of yours.

Which brings me to one more thought: I'm pretty sure there's an eighth habit of highly effective people. They don't spend all their time reading about the seven habits of highly effective people.

[Adam Grant](#), an organizational psychologist at Wharton, is the author of "[Originals](#)." For more on building your career and connections, listen to [WorkLife with Adam Grant](#), a TED original podcast on the science of making work not suck. You can find WorkLife on [Apple Podcasts](#), or on your favorite podcast platform.