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ARTICLE **PRODUCTIVITY**

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by Ron Friedman

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In recent years, work has become infinitely more complex.

Technological innovations have led to round-the-clock work schedules and mounting expectations. Our assignments have grown more collaborative, requiring more coordination, conference calls, and meetings. We now face an endless barrage of distractions, from the vibrations and alerts on our smartphones to the breaking news stories and viral videos awaiting us at our desks.

Now, more than ever, we need strategies for being productive. But where do we start?

Earlier this year, as part of [an online summit](#) taking place in January 2016, I invited 26 bestselling science and productivity writers to share their insights for achieving top performance. Here are nine overarching themes that encapsulate their advice for navigating a rapidly accelerating informational landscape and achieving peak performance at work.

1. Own your time. Our most satisfying work comes about when we're playing offense, working on projects that we ourselves initiate. Many of us know this intuitively yet continue allowing ourselves to spend the vast majority of our days playing defense, responding to other people's requests.

Many of the experts I interviewed believe that top performers take steps to ensure a favorable offense-to-defense ratio. Tom Rath, author of [Are You Fully Charged?](#), recommends blocking out time to work away from email, programming your phone to only ring for select colleagues, and resisting emails first thing in the morning until you've achieved at least one important task.

2. Recognize busyness as a lack of focus. There's a satisfying rush we experience when there's too much on our plate: we feel needed, challenged, even productive. And yet that pleasurable experience is an illusion. It robs us of our focus and prevents us from making progress on the work that matters most.

[Sociologist Christine Carter](#), Ph.D., an expert at UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center, put it this way: "Busyness is not a marker of intelligence, importance, or success. Taken to an extreme, it is much more likely a marker of conformity or powerlessness or fear." Instead of viewing busyness as a sign of significance, top performers interpret busyness as an indication of wasted energy.

3. Challenge the myth of the "ideal worker." Far too many of us continue to believe that an "ideal worker" is one who works constantly, often at great expense to their personal life, but there's overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Being productive requires recognizing that you can't work for extended periods of time and maintain a high level of performance. As humans, we have a limited capacity for focused attention. And yet, as [Brigid Schulte](#), journalist and author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Overwhelmed*, points out, we have been seduced into thinking that if only we try harder and work longer, we can achieve anything.

Top performers take a different approach. They recognize and honor their physical limitations by getting plenty of exercise and sleep, cycling between [90-minute bursts of focused work](#) and short restorative breaks, and taking time to disconnect from email for some portion of their off-hours.

4. Intentionally leave important tasks incomplete. We often race to finish assignments quickly so that we can move on to the next item on our list. But Wharton professor and [psychologist Adam Grant](#) believes resisting this urge can actually make us more productive.

“I used to sit down to write and not want to get up until I was done with a chapter or an argument,” Grant told me. “Now I will deliberately leave sentences just hanging in the middle and get up and go do something else. What I find when I come back is that I don’t have to do a lot of work to finish the sentence, and now I also have a bunch of new ideas for where the writing should go next.” (Note: [Hemingway followed the same strategy.](#))

What both Grant and Hemingway are leveraging is the human tendency to ruminate over unfinished tasks, otherwise known as the [Zeigarnick Effect](#). If you start a project and leave it unfinished, you’re bound to think about it more frequently than after it’s done.

Instead of aiming to complete important tasks in one sitting, try leaving them incomplete. Doing so will encourage you to continue thinking about your work in different settings and, in the process, position you to uncover creative solutions.

5. Make a habit of stepping back. In a knowledge economy, productivity requires more than perseverance — it requires insight and problem-solving. [Research indicates](#) quite clearly that we are more likely to find breakthrough ideas when we temporarily remove ourselves from the daily grind. This is why the best solutions reveal themselves when we step into the shower, go for a run, or take a vacation. Top performers view time off not as stalled productivity but as an investment in their future performance.

6. Help others strategically. High achievers, Grant argues in his 2013 book [Give and Take](#), tend to be Givers — those who enjoy helping others without strings attached. While giving can certainly help you succeed, Grant’s data also reveals that helping everyone with everything is a recipe for failure.

So how do you do it right? Top performers, Grant argues, avoid saying yes to every helping opportunity. Instead, they specialize in one or two forms of helping that they genuinely enjoy and excel at uniquely.

7. Have a plan for saying no. The more commitments we agree to take on, the more likely we are to experience what author and consultant [Rory Vaden](#) calls “priority dilution.” This is when the sheer number of obligations we’ve committed to prevent us from doing the work that matters most.

One method of counteracting priority dilution involves [having a strategy in place for saying no](#) in advance, so that you don’t have to stop and think about how to phrase your response each time you need to turn someone down. Create an email template, or write out a script that you can use when doing it in person.

When dealing with a manager who is asking you to take on more than is reasonable, think outside the yes/no paradigm. Consultant and writer [Greg McKeown](#) recommends having a conversation with your manager and listing all the projects you’re currently working on. Indicate which items you think

are priorities and invite your supervisor to share his or her opinion. It's a way of illuminating the constraints you're under without ever saying the word "no."

8. Make important behaviors measurable. To make progress toward any goal, it helps to track our behaviors. Bestselling author [Gretchen Rubin](#), an expert on happiness and habits, sees monitoring as one of the keys to behavior changes, saying, "If you want to eat more healthily, keep a food journal. If you want to get more exercise, use a step counter. If you want to stick to a budget, track your spending."

[Marshall Goldsmith](#), the well-known CEO coach, agrees. Every evening, he reviews a 40-item spreadsheet consisting of every important behavior he hopes to achieve. Among the items: the number of words he wrote, the distance he walked, and the number of nice things he said to his wife, daughter, and grandchildren.

9. Do things today that make more time tomorrow. A final theme to emerge is that top performers look for ways to automate or delegate activities that are not a good use of their time. Vaden suggests asking yourself, "How can I use my time today in ways that create more time tomorrow?" Evaluating your to-do list through this lens makes it easier to commit to activities that are not immediately enjoyable, like automating bill paying or creating a "how to" guide for other team members to help you delegate repetitive tasks more easily.

All of these suggestions are useful individually, but they also highlight an important trend.

In the 1990s, being productive mainly required good time management. Ten years later, the advent of email led to an expanded workday and productivity requiring you to [manage your energy, not just your time](#).

Over the last few years, we have entered a new age in which managing your energy and time is not enough. Today, the magnitude of information rushing toward us from every direction has surpassed our capacity for consumption. No matter how much time and energy you have at your disposal, you can't be productive without mastering the art of attention management.

Resisting the lure of busyness, having a plan for saying no, maintaining a relentless focus on self-directed goals that only you can achieve — these are the skills we need to cultivate in ourselves to succeed, both at work and in life.

To watch the interviews highlighted in this article, visit [The Peak Work Performance Summit](#) and register.

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