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ARTICLE
PRODUCTIVITY

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by Maura Thomas and Shawn Thomas

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We all have "productivity systems," whether we design them with intent or just let them grow up around us. A productivity system is simply a collection of behaviors, repeated consistently and in a particular order, plus the tools that support them.

We often hear people say something like, "I don't have a system — it would take too much time. That's time I could use to get things done." But usually this is simply confusing activity for

productivity. It's easy to always be "doing," and just "doing" is a system of its own — a reactive one. It results in being constantly busy but not always getting the right things done.

Most productivity habits develop out of necessity, without specific intention. This can leave achievement to chance, which is why there is so much interest in productivity improvement. But *changing* systems is what's really tricky.

In our experience working with clients, we've seen many people "fall off the wagon," failing to consistently follow the new productivity system they're trying to adopt, despite the fact that they are putting in the time and effort to consistently practice the new behaviors. This experience has illuminated three major factors that most commonly impede the long-term reshaping of their productivity system, which in turn impedes their ability to get the right things done:

- Even when they know their old system is inefficient, they remain convinced that certain old habits are necessary for success.
- Their environment is unsupportive of the habits they're trying to cultivate or the tools they're trying to use.
- High levels of stress cause them to overthink their system, and they choke under the pressure.

Belief in bad habits

In *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg writes that belief is an important ingredient in turning a habit into a permanent behavior. Lack of belief in an effective habit, or misplaced belief in a less effective habit, can lead us astray.

For example, most people have experienced productive periods of uninterrupted work that feel great and lead to a sense of accomplishment, and studies confirm that single-tasking is most effective and efficient. However, task-switching, or doing many things at once, *seems* like it should lead to getting more done; leaving our email open all the time *seems* like the only way to prevent it from overwhelming us; allowing constant alerts and notifications *seems* like the only way to avoid missing something important. In the abstract, studies about single-tasking seem logical. But in our own work, we tend to believe that those studies don't apply to us. The persistent belief that multitasking is good — or at least necessary — is difficult to overcome.

One reason for these internal barriers is that we undervalue the achievement and overvalue the importance of the interruption. For example, Joe, a client in one of our trainings, recently relayed a story about a time when he closed his email so that he could finish an important project, and as a result didn't respond immediately to an email from his boss about a client issue. When we asked what happened, Joe said that his boss got the information from a coworker. We asked if he got in trouble with his boss (he didn't), if he finished his important project (he did), and if the project was more important to the big picture than answering that email immediately (it was.) But he believed that he had been "beaten out" by his coworker, as if there were some ongoing competition

for who answers emails the fastest, or as he saw it, "who was the most responsive." Even Joe's boss confirming he made the right decision didn't seem to convince him.

Intellectually, the argument for single-tasking and the studies that support it make perfect sense, but deeply ingrained contrary beliefs and perspectives interfere with our ability to always be productive.

Habit-hostile environments

In *Smart Change*, professor Art Markman discusses how behaviors are triggered by physical and mental cues: when you engage in a behavior consistently, it becomes "mapped" to certain circumstances and environments. To continue with the example above, another reason it's difficult not to task-switch is that we are conditioned to distraction by our environments, from the smartphones in our hands to the computers on our desks to the open offices that are so ubiquitous today. The average professional is so steeped in distractions all day long that having an opportunity to focus starts to feel weird.

And so it's tough to change a productivity system without changing the environment; conversely, it's hard to maintain a system that was working if the environment has suddenly changed. For instance, if you switched from an office to a cubicle, you might suddenly find your "habit" of working for long, uninterrupted periods of time replaced with a "habit" of chatting with your coworkers.

It's also hard to maintain a good productivity system if you don't have a consistent environment at all. Your days may all be different. A lack of a stable routine can prevent consistent mapping, making habits harder to form and easier to disrupt. In this case, identifying some consistent cues can be useful. From your daily routine, identify those things that happen with relative consistency, and use them as anchors for new behaviors. This will reduce the likelihood that your new system falls apart.

For example, one component of the productivity system we teach is to keep a running task list that's prioritized by due date and based on the key priorities *the user* wants to accomplish, not other people's goals. Arriving at the office is the "anchor," the cue that triggers the thought to open the task list and let it dictate the morning's priorities. Then the first 30 minutes of the day are spent working on those priorities, *not* checking email. On days with early-morning meetings, arriving at the office 30 minutes earlier ensures that time is always available.

Overthinking and stress

Once a habit has been created, the need for decision making is removed and the behavior becomes automatic. However, if one of the environmental, physical, or mental cues is more intense than usual, it could erroneously signal to your brain that you're in a novel situation requiring a lot of intentional thought.

But this process is much slower and less effective than simply relying on your habits. Malcolm Gladwell calls this "choking." In his book *Outliers*, he uses the example of Jana Novotná and her 1993 match against Steffi Graf in the final round at Wimbledon. Near what should have been the end of the

tournament, the pressure became too much, and Novotná began to suffer from overthinking. Instead of relying on the muscle memory and mental habits she had developed in countless hours of practice, she began to second-guess everything. And at that level of competition, second-guessing every move is disastrous.

Work can be stressful, and under pressure you may begin to think that although your practiced productivity habits have resulted in success in the past, now perhaps they take too long or aren't appropriate for the current situation. In this case, you might begin to turn every action into a decision. But in fact, these are the times when it is most useful to rely on your system.

True productivity is about achieving *your* significant results on a consistent basis. To accomplish this, you need to be able to hone your productivity system and ensure that you rely on it consistently. If you aren't always as productive as you'd like to be, or if you're trying to increase productivity throughout your organization, consider whether any of these factors are getting in your way.

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