Beitrag von Fabian Dablander (Juni 2017): "How to stop being busy and become productive"
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HOW TO STOP BEING BUSY
AND BECOME PRODUCTIVE

With the rise of social media, potential distractions have risen to unseen levels; they dominate our daily lives. Do you check Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, or Email on a constant basis? Do you have an embarrassing relationship with your alarm clock's snooze button? Do you pass on social invites, telling other people that you are too busy? As a generation, we have lost the ability to focus sharply on the task at hand; instead, we work on a multitude of things simultaneously, lamenting that we do not achieve what we seek to achieve.

In this post, we share useful tips, tricks, and tools for you to stay on top of your day and move quickly from task to task, accomplishing the things that matter. In addition to linking to further resources, we suggest a three stage actionable program for you to go through in order to stop being busy and start being productive. As we (Fabian and Lea, the authors of this post) have experienced first hand, making the jump from being busy to being productive — from workaholism to strictly separating work and play, from social exclusion to social inclusion — has the promising potential of increasing quality time spent with friends and family, accelerating the pace of skill development, avoiding burnouts, and leading to increased subjective well-being.

Challenges in the 21st Century

Why would one want to become more productive? In additional to personal reasons — leading a more happier, more accomplished, more balanced life — there are societal reasons. The 21st century presents us with unique challenges, and the way we tackle them will define the future of our species. The three most important challenges are the exploitation of the Earth (including climate change), income inequality (including world poverty), and the "rise of robots" which includes digitalisation and its impact on work. In this post, we want to focus on the latter and make the argument that, in order to stay lean, one needs to cultivate what Cal Newport calls *Deep work habits*, enabling one to quickly adapt to changing work environments. Additionally, these habits also increase the effectiveness with which we can tackle the three challenges.

Take data science as an example. Few fields move as fast as data science. In its current form, it didn't even exist fifteen years ago (for a very short history of the field, see this). Now "data scientist" has become the "sexiest job of the 21st century".

The job market will change dramatically in the coming years. It is predicted that many jobs will fall out of existence, being taken over by machines, and that new jobs will be created (see this study and these books). Humanity is moving at an incredibly fast pace, and each individual's challenge is to stay sharp amidst all those developments. To do so requires the ability to quickly learn new things, and to spend time productively — the two skills which make you most employable.

Being busy vs being productive

Every day, week, and month we have a number of tasks and obligations we need to address; the way we organize the time spent on getting these done differs strongly among individuals. It is here that the distinction between being busy and being productive becomes apparent.

When thinking of someone who is busy, usually we picture someone who tries to complete a task while in the same time thinking about some other task, checking social media, email, or conversing with other people. The splitting of attention on multiple things at once, while claiming to be working on a really important task, is a dead giveaway. This causes the task at hand to take forever to be completed. Oddly enough, the extensive time this task takes to be completed need not bother a busy person. On the contrary, it provides an opportunity to talk a lot about being busy, having so much to do, having so many exams, etc. This leads to cancellations of social plans and less time for leisure activities. Too many things to do, not enough time. One gets more and more frustrated.

On the other hand, a productive person is a responsible person with a focus on setting clear, few priorities and thinking of measurable steps how to achieve her goal. While working, an intense focus and undivided attention is directed on a single activity. Keeping track of progress gives a clear idea of what has been achieved during the day and what is left for tomorrow.

The distinction between being busy and being productive is at the core of this blog post. Table 1 below gives an overview of what distinguishes these two states.

Being busy	Being productive
Have poorly-specified goals	Have clearly specified goals
Have multiple priorities, engage in multitasking	Have clear priorities, focus on single tasks
Say "yes" to most of the things (impulsive "yes")	Say "no" to many of the things (thoughtful "yes")
Talk a lot about being busy, having so much to do, having so many exams, etc.	Let their results speak for themselves
Immediately respond to any given task	Schedule tasks
Talk a lot about how they will change	Take steps towards achieving the change they want to achieve
Talk about how little time one has, pass off social invites for work	Take time to do the things that matter
Want others to value effort	Want others to value results

Table 1. Describes the difference between being busy and being productive.

Learning how to learn

In addition to personal productivity, which will be the focus of the remaining sections, being able to monitor one's learning progress and learning new things quickly is another very important skill. Barbara Oakley and Terrence Seijnowski have designed an online course over at Coursera called "Learning How To Learn" in which they discuss, among other things, the illusion of competence, memory techniques, and how to beat procrastination. It is the most popular, free course on Coursera and we highly recommend it.

Tips, tricks, and tools

Note that these are personal recommendations. Most of them are backed by science or common sense, but they need not work for you. This is a disclaimer: your mileage may vary.

Manage your time. Time is your most important commodity. You can't get it back, so consider spending it wisely. To facilitate that, we highly recommend the Bullet Journal. It is an "analog tool designed for the digital world". All you need is a notebook — we use a Leuchtturm1917, but any other would do, too — and a pen. Here is a video explaining the basics. It combines the idea of keeping track of your time and obligations while providing a space for creativity.

Schedule tasks & eat your frog first. Write down what needs to get done the next day on the evening before. Pick out your most despised task — your frog — and tackle it first thing in the morning. If you eat your frog first, there is nothing more disgusting that can happen during the day. Doing this mitigates procrastination and provides a sense of accomplishment that keeps you energy levels up.

Avoid social media. Social media and email have operantly conditioned us; we get a kick out every notification. Thousands of engineers are working on features that grab our attention and maximize the time we spent on the platforms they build (see also this fascinating interview). However, checking these platforms disrupts our workflow and thought process. They train us to despise boredom and instill in us the unfortunate need of having something occupy our attention at all times. Therefore, we recommend having fixed time points when you check email, and not spend too much time on social media before late in the afternoon or evening, when energy is low. More important tasks require attention during the day when your mind is still sharp.

We feel that quitting social media altogether is too extreme and would most likely be detrimental to our social life and productivity. However, we did remove social media apps from our phones and we limit the number of times we log onto these platforms per day. We recommend you do the same. You will very soon realize that they aren't that important. Time is not well spent there.

Stop working. There is a time for work, and there is a time for play. We recommend setting yourself a fixed time when you stop working. This includes writing and responding to emails. Enjoy the rest of the day, read a book, learn a new skill, meet friends, rest your mind. This helps your mind wander from a focused into a diffuse mode of thinking which helps with insight problems such as "Thiss sentence contains threee errors." If you do this, you will soon realize a boost in your overall

creativity and subjective well-being. Cal Newport has structured his schedule according to this principle, calling it <u>fixed-schedule productivity</u>.

Build the right habits. Being productive is all about building the right habits. And building habits is hard; on average, it takes 66 days to build one, although there is great variability (see Lally et al., <u>2009</u>, and <u>here</u>). In order to facilitate this process, we recommend *Habitica*, an app that gamifies destroying bad habits and building good habits; see Figure 1 below.
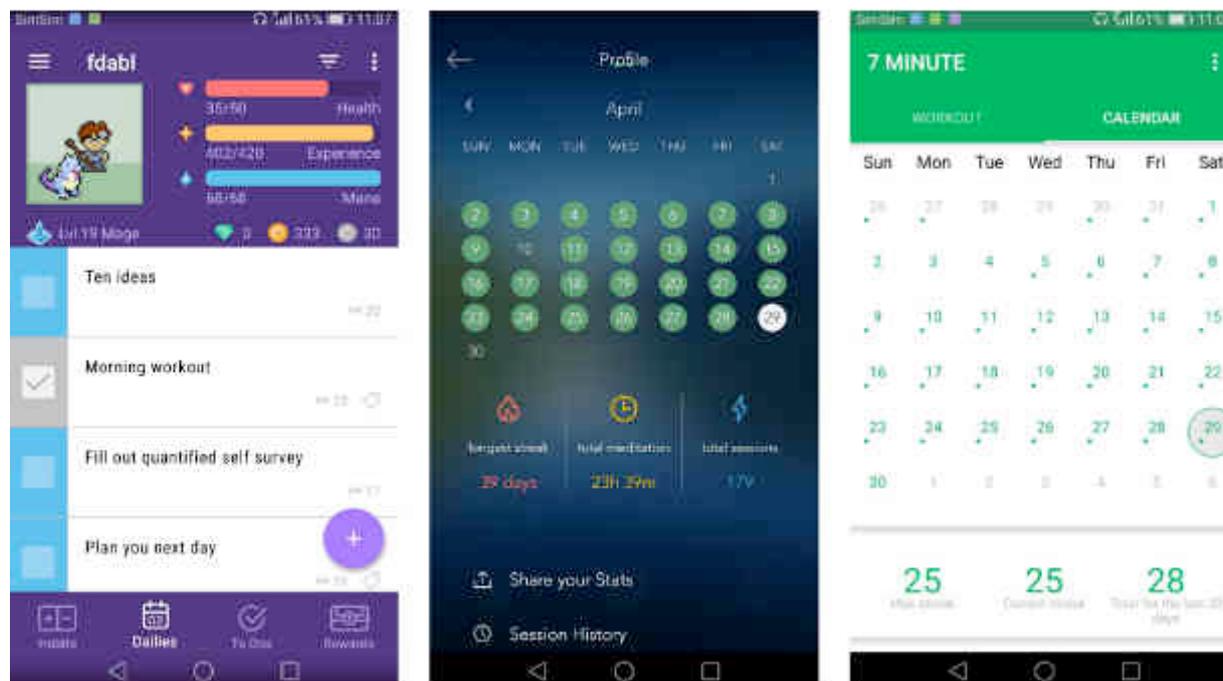
Figure 1. From left to right, shows the apps Habitica, Calm, and 7 Minute. The important thing is to not break the chain. This creates a psychological need for continuation. Note the selection bias here. It took me over a month to get to level 3 in Habitica. Don't expect miracles; take small, consistent steps every day.

Workout. In order to create high quality work, you need to take care of your body; you can't really be productive when you are not physically fit. Staying fit by finding an exercise routine that one enjoys and can manage is one of the best things we do, and we can only recommend it. Being able to climb stairs without getting out of breath is just one of the many rewards.

Meditate or go for a run. In order to increase your ability to focus and avoid distractions, we recommend meditation. For this purpose, we are using Calm, but any other meditation app, for example Headspace, yields similar results. (Of course, nothing beats meditating in a Buddhist centre.) This also helps during the day when some stressful event happens. It provides you with a few minutes to recharge, and then start into the day afresh. Going for a run, for example, does the same trick.

> *Someone asked a Zen Master, "How do you practice Zen?"*
> *The master said, "When you are hungry, eat; when you are tired, sleep."*
> *"Isn't that what everybody does anyway?"*
> *The master replied, "No, no. Most people entertain a thousand desires when they eat and scheme over a thousand thoughts when they sleep."*

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Powernap. This is one of the more unconventional recommendations, but it has worked wonders for our productivity. In the middle of the day, take a short power nap. It provides a boost of energy that lasts until bedtime (for more, see this).

Process versus Product. For starting to work, focusing on process rather than product is crucial. Set yourself a timer for, say, 25 minutes and then fully concentrate on the task at hand. Take a short break, and start the process again. In this way, you will focus on bursts of concentrated, deep work that bring you step by step towards your final outcome, say a finished blog post.

This approach is reminiscent of the way Beppo, the road sweeper, works in Michael Ende's book *Momo*. About his work, he says

> *"…it's like this. Sometimes, when you've a very long street ahead of you, you think how terribly long it is and feel sure you'll never get it swept. And then you start to hurry. You work faster and faster and every time you look up there seems to be just as much left to sweep as before, and you try even harder, and you panic, and in the end you're out of breath and have to stop — and still the street stretches away in front of you. That's not the way to do it.*
>
> *You must never think of the whole street at once, understand? You must only concentrate on the next step, the next breath, the next stroke of the broom, and the next, and the next. Nothing else.*
>
> *That way you enjoy your work, which is important, because then you make a good job of it. And that's how it ought to be.*
>
> *And all at once, before you know it, you find you've swept the whole street clean, bit by bit. What's more, you aren't out of breath. That's important, too."*

This technique is sometimes called the "Pomodoro", and apps help achieving that abound. Although you need no app for this, apps are nice because they keep track of how many Pomodoros you have finished on a given day, providing you with a direct measure of your productivity. We can recommend the *Productivity Challenge Timer*.

Write down ten ideas. This recommendation comes from James Altucher, who wrote Reinvent Yourself which is an entertaining book with chapters such as "Seven things Star Wars taught me about productivity" and "The twenty things I've learned from Larry Page". The habit is simple: write down ten ideas every day, on any topic. The basic rationale behind this is that creativity is a muscle, and like every other muscle, training it increases its strength. Most of the ideas will be rather useless, but that doesn't matter. Now and then there will be a really good one. This habit probably has strong transfer effects, too, because creativity is required in many areas of life.

Read, Read, Read. There's a saying that most people die by age 25 but aren't put into a coffin until age 75. Reading allows your mind to continuously engage with novel ideas. We recommend Goodreads to organize and structure your reading.

Reflect on your day. Take a few minutes in the evening to reflect on your day. Keep a gratefulness journal in which you write down five things you are grateful for each day (this might also increases your overall happiness, see, e.g., here). Summarize your day in a few lines, pointing out the new things you have learned.

Does it work? Quantifying oneself

It is important to once in while take a cold, hard look into the mirror and ask: What am I doing? Am I working on things that matter, am I helping other people? Am I progressing, or am I stagnating in the comfort zone? Am I enjoying my life?

A useful habit to build is to, every evening, reflect on one's behaviour and the things that have happened during the day. To achieve this, I (Fabian) have created a Google Form that I fill out daily. It includes, among others, questions on what I have eaten during the day, on the quality of my social interactions, on what the most important thing I have learned today; see Figure 2 below. It also asks me to summarize my day in a few lines.

Figure 2. Quantified Self questions. Every evening I reflect on the day by answering these questions. You can create your own, adapting the questions to your needs.

I have not done much with the data yet, but I know that just the process of answering the questions is very reflective and soothing. It is also valuable in the sense that, should there be too many days in which I feel bad, this will be directly reflected in the data and I can adjust my behaviour or my environment. I can wholeheartedly recommend this tiny bit of quantified self at the end of the day.

Incidentally, there is a whole community behind this idea of quantifying oneself. They go much further. As with most things, it is all about finding the right balance. It is easy to become overwhelmed when engaging with too many tools that measure your behaviour; you might end up being busy and chasing ghosts.

A 3 Stage program

In order to succeed in whatever area of life, commitment is key. Reading a blog post on productivity is the first step in a long journey towards actual behaviour change. In order to help you take this journey, we suggest three "stages". Note that they are not necessarily sequential; you can take ideas from Stage 3 and implement them before things listed in Stage 1. The main reason behind these stages is that you should avoid being overwhelmed. Take small steps and stick to them. The first two stages will probably take one or two months, while the latter will take a bit longer.

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Stage 1

Stage 1 is about getting started. It is about you becoming clear of your motivation; why do you want to be productive? What are the issues that plague or annoy you in the way you currently work? We recommend that you

- Figure out and write down your motivation for why you want to be productive
- Become aware of your social media use
- Enroll in and complete *Learning How to Learn*
- Start using the *Pomodoro* technique
- Create an account on *Habitica*, adding habits you want to build or destroy
- Uninstall social media apps from your phone
- Set yourself a time point after which you will not check email nor social media

Stage 2

Stage 2 is about staying committed and developing a healthier and more consistent lifestyle.

- Stay committed to your habits and review your motivation
- Review what you have accomplished during the last months
- Develop a consistent sleep–wake cycle
- Develop a morning ritual
- Eat healthy food, not too much, mostly plants
- Start to exercise regularly (at least 3x a week)
- Start a *Bullet Journal*

Stage 3

Stage 3 is about exceeding what you have accomplished so far. It is about figuring out your goals and the skills you want to develop. It is about not staying in your comfort zone, about building a habit of reading a variety of books, and becoming more engaged with others. It is from other people that we can learn the most.

- Stay committed to your habits and review your motivation
- Review what you have accomplished during the last months
- Figure out what skills you want to develop
- Read *Deep Work* and figure out a Deep Work routine that suits you
- Engage with others and exchange ideas and practices
- Find mentors for the skills you want to develop (e.g., writing, programming)
- Create an account on *Goodreads* and organize your reading
- Read at least two books per month

Conclusion

We have started this blog post discussing the future of work. But it's not really about work. Sure, applying the ideas we have sketched will make you more productive professionally; but it's not about running in a hamster wheel, meeting every objective at work or churning out one paper after another. Instead, it's about finding the right balance of work and play, engaging in meaningful activities, and enjoying life.

If you take anything from this blog post, it should be the following three points.

If you work, work hard. If you're done, be done. This means sharply separating work from play. It is important for avoiding burning out, for creating an atmosphere in which creativity and novel ideas flourish, for enhancing your life through spending time with friends and family, and, overall, for increasing the amount of play in your life. After all, play is what makes life joyful.

Never be the smartest person in the room. This is about learning from others. Identify the skills you want to develop, and seek out mentors for those skills; mentors will rapidly speed up your learning. Additionally, hang out with people with different backgrounds. This exposes you to ideas that you would not otherwise be exposed to. It is the people who we barely know that have the capacity to change our lives the most.

Be relevant. This is the culmination of the whole post. It is about helping others and having a lasting impact. This might entail donating to the world's poorest; being there for a friend in dire times; pushing people to expand their horizons; helping them develop in the direction they want to develop in; working on projects that have a lasting positive impact. It is about doing the things that matter.

Recommended Resources

– 80.000 hours
– Learning How To Learn
– Deep Work (or How to Become a Straight-A Student)
– Cal Newport's fixed-schedule productivity

This post was written together with Lea Jakob and is based on a workshop we have presented at the 31st EFPSA Congress in Qakh, Azerbaijan in April 2017 — twice. The feedback we got from participants was extremely positive, and so we decided to write up the main points. This post will also act as a reminder to ourselves should we ever be lead astray and fall back into old habits.

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