hyper modern writing

36 Secrets the Productivity Gurus Won't Tell You (But Our Heretics Will)

This post
· receives inbound links regularly, despite being over a year old
· was the official 'first post' of a new blog that received more than 1,000 readers in its first month of operation
· was tweeted, linked to and otherwise promoted by the 36 experts who contributed tips

Productivity advice is never universal. We each think, create and act differently and our routes to productivity reflect that fact. **More often than not, what works for us, goes directly against what we're told should be the ideal way to do things.**

We asked the people below to give us their productivity advice — what they do that works for them, no matter what productivity gurus might say. We got a wealth of responses. Some even contradict each other. But this list proves that each of us must find our own route to being procductive. You'll certainly find some tips here that will get you thinking about how you organize your day and what you may want to change — there's advice ranging from brushing your teeth backwards to working on the worst day of your life. They're loosely broken up into the categories of communication, creativity, balance and planning.

Communication

The ability to communicate seems to be key to the ability to actually accomplish anything. These insights can shine some light on the many different ways to make your communications work for you.

1. Chris Guillebeau, of The Art of Non-Conformity

Everyone always lays on these guilt trips about email. Never check email in the morning, outsource "unimportant" messages, blah, blah, blah. Meanwhile I've structured my business in a way that relies on me actually interacting and engaging with people. The business hasn't suffered because of this; it's grown. If email stresses you out, fine, figure out a way to do it less. But if someone takes the time to send you a relevant message, why not take the time to write back to them promptly? Surprise: you might become more productive that way, not less.

2. Naomi Dunford, of IttyBiz

Get a VA or a coach. Tell them they won't get paid if you don't hate them or yourself by the end of their first week. In my experience, you want one of two things:

1. Someone who is paid to harass the shit out of you and has thick enough skin to withstand the hatred and abuse you throw back at them. (Basically, Charlie Gilkey.)

2. Someone who is so nice and adorable that you can't stand to disappoint her by not finishing the to-do list she so lovingly created for you. (Basically, Marissa Bracke.)

Concurrently, stop answering your own email. Bonus points if you stop reading your own email.

3. Cody McKibben, of Thrilling Heroics

I suppose I might be a little unconventional in that I actually try to keep myself very hard to get ahold of. The biggest obstacle for me when it comes to being productive—for any busy business owner or freelancer—is that people are constantly wanting to eat away at your time, and it's your job to keep from getting sidetracked with other people's agenda for how you spend your time, and to invest your time & attention in your top-priority tasks.

I don't use a business phone number on my sites online, so if someone wants to call me, they have to get to know me well enough to get my personal mobile #. And even still, I'm fond of ignoring the phone if it's just not convenient. Try to look at the phone as more of a tool for you to reach others or find information when you need it, rather than a tool for other people to interrupt your life whenever they want to. Keep it on silent or turn it off while you're plugging away at work, in the 'zone', and especially when you're at dinner with your family or your friends. Seems like common sense when you really think about it, but so many of us have forgotten to pay attention to the people and the tasks right in front of us in this 24/7 connected world.

I also use services like AwayFind, which lets new folks who've never emailed me before know that I only check my email inbox occasionally and responses can take several days. This helps me feel more comfortable breaking the bad habit of checking the inbox dozens of times throughout the day. And frankly, if there are requests that rub me the wrong way, or it's obvious that someone is just going to be a tire-kicker or time-waster without providing any kind of value in return, then I've gotten much more comfortable simply hitting the 'delete' button.

4. Daniel Scocco, of Daily Blog Tips

I am not sure if this goes against "conventional" advice, but I sure don't see too many people doing it. The tip is to unplug from the Internet when you are trying to complete a task that doesn't not require it (e.g., writing an article, conceptualizing a website or product and so on). By "unplug" I mean to literally remove the ethernet cable from your PC, or to turn your wireless router off if you use one. Unless you physically unplug, you'll be tempted to open your browser sooner or later.

5. Dave Navarro, the product launch manager at TheLaunchCoach.com

You don't have to respond to everything when you're flying solo. I know that this is going to ruffle a few feathers, but you can't really scale your microbusiness and respond to every email (or at least I can't, and I'm a pretty productive fella).

Sometimes emails come in where people make requests of you that are either inappropriate for the moment (like a pushy JV proposal when there's no existing relationship) or high-maintenance ("I loved your blog post, can you give me detailed answers to these ten drama-laced questions I have even though you don't know me?").

It's never easy hitting delete, but for sanity's sake, you have to in some cases. The very act of stepping back and having to tell someone "I'm sorry, this is really a request you shouldn't be making" in a way that doesn't hurt their feelings can be emotionally draining. And that drained time and energy robs the people you are really focused on serving from what I call the "best of you."

I want to emphasize that I'm not saying be callous or have the "you're not worth my time" attitude – far from it. I'm saying that as a business owner, your time is very valuable because you can help people who really need help (and are willing to compensate you fairly for it) in a very targeted fashion. If you get caught up in answering every time/emotional-intensive email that comes your way, you just won't be able to serve people the same way (and everybody suffers).

I will say this, though – if someone I don't know emails me and shows they are respectful of the non-existing relationship (like saying "I know you don't know me, but I just had this one quick A-or-B question" or "Can you please direct me to someone who can help?"), I'll generally make time for those requests because they are quick and easy. But the random requests of "promote this for me please" or "fix all my problems please" generally get deleted on the spot without a response.

Productivity really comes down to asking "how can I best serve my target audience?" And in reality, that means you have to have a strong layer of filtering when you're a solo-preneur. If you have an assistant helping you with email they can field these requests, but until you do, you've got to keep your eye on the people who are keeping the roof over your head. Because it's hard enough keeping up with email from those (incredibly appreciated!) people.

6. James Chartrand, of Men With Pens

Working online full time and owning a major blog, managing my email is a major productivity issue. Well, it used to be, at least. I thought I had it all figured out, with labels and filters and stars and all kinds of organization going on to help me shuffle things around and put everything where it belonged.

It worked – for a time. Until it got to the point that I had more unactioned items than I needed, and I felt overwhelmed by the mountain of little things I had to take care of. The result is that I found myself only answering what I felt was urgent (clients, of course!) and letting a lot of other emails slide. They weren't as much of a priority, they weren't a rush, they could wait.

Wait they did, until Gmail advised me that I'd reached my space capacity for storage. A friend on Twitter mentioned he'd never even thought that exhausting Gmail's allotted storage was possible. It was. I frantically ended up running through my archives (boring) and throwing out as much old email as I could. And that helped— until it happened again.

I realized that I was working too hard on organizing my emails so I could get things done

that I actually wasn't getting that much done at all. If I actioned emails quickly, I could throw them out and live in inbox heaven. Instead, I'd started to procrastinate. I opened emails several times and do nothing but close them again, and generally spent more time stressing about how to organize this mountain of email versus actually taking care of each contact.

So I made a rule — I challenged myself. I made a goal of making sure that every day, I had no more than 10 emails in my inbox, and that anything over ten HAD to be taken care of before it could be tucked away in a folder. The organization? It could wait. It wasn't important or urgent.

The first week was difficult. Each email that came in required action — but after day three, I really liked having all that free space and a clean inbox. By day seven, I felt like I only had to deal with email two or three times a day – and I had more spare time to work on other tasks, like writing copy or developing an ebook.

And now it's been over a month – and I'm happily habituated. Each morning, I cut new email down to 10, actioning as much as I can, and I repeat that process once or twice until day's end – where I'm still at 10 emails (or less!)

The moral of the story? Sometimes all the gadgets and tools in the world don't help you get more done. The best solution is often just to do it – and be DONE with it, once and for all!

7. Allyson Kapin, of Women Who Tech and Rad Campaign

Limit how much you check email. Check email 2 to 3 times a day only — once at 10:30 AM, 3:30PM and 5:30PM. And don't take on more then you can handle. You set you and your clients up for failure. And lastly delegate well.

8. Shonali Burke, of Women Grow Business and Waxing Unlyrical

Put away the smartphone except for when you really, really need it. I don't care how cool your iPhone or BlackBerry is, one of the worst things you can do is to make it your de facto computer. You'll lose all your sense of rhythm if you're constantly emailing back and forth from it. When I was chained to my BlackBerry, I found myself constantly trying to keep up with myself. I wasn't necessarily working better, just crazier. Sure, there are times when it comes in very handy, like emergencies, or when you're not going to have access to your computer for a significant period of time. But otherwise, treat it for what it is; a device that can help you stay in touch when you need to, not one that starts dictating to you.

Creativity

While there's plenty of advice on how to knock that office memo off your to-do list, creativity is a little harder to fit into a box. Your ability to handle creative projects may require a very different approach to productivity than you'll find in the average self-help book.

9. Charlie Gilkey, of Productive Flourishing

When it comes to creative work, "beginning with the end in mind" may not be the best way to begin. This is especially true when a) you're really motivated to create something and b)

that something is full of creative details. When that particular type of creative spark hits you, it's best to start before you plan.

For instance, you may wake up with a particular scene that's running through your mind and driving you crazy. Rather than trying to figure out what the scene relates to and what its end expression will be, it's best just to capture the scene in all its creative, detailed glory. You can figure out later whether it's a short story, chapter, or song, but if you don't capture it, you'll never figure it out.

Plans merely help us bring something into reality, but when you don't need a plan to do that, start first and plan later.

10. Scott Belsky, of Behance

The notion of acting quickly on something — whether it is building an idea or speaking up without thinking — defies the conventional wisdom to think before you act. But for the creative mind, the cost of waiting for conviction can be too great to bear. Waiting builds apathy and increases the likelihood that another idea will capture your fancy and energy. What's more, if you were to build lots of conviction after much analysis, it might leave you too deeply committed to a single plan of action and unable to change course when necessary.

Traditional practices such as writing a business plan — ultimately a static document that will inevitably be changed on the fly as unforeseen opportunities arise — must be weighed against the benefits of just starting to take incremental action on your idea, even if such early actions feel reckless. Taking action helps expose whether we are on the right or wrong path more quickly and more definitively than pure contemplation ever could.

11. Jonathan Fields, of JonathanFields.com

Take a Brain Break. Create a daily attentional training practice (meditation, biofeedback, mindfulness, etc) every day, sometime between 3 and 4pm for 20 minutes. There's a growing body of research that shows serious gains in cognitive function, creativity, problem solving and productivity from these practices in as short as 4 days.

12. Jessie X, of Hometown Columbia

When I'm stuck emotionally/energetically, intellectually, one of the best things to break the stagnation is to do something in a different manner than I typically do it. For example, if I have but a few minutes and am indoors, I might brush my teeth with my left hand. (I'm right-handed.) Or if the weather is lovely and I have space, I might hula hoop and hoop in the opposite direction than what is most natural for me. Or perhaps I walk backward. Something physical to get my brain engaged in ways that are not in a rut.

13. Nora Dunn, of The Professional Hobo

My biggest unconventional productivity tip is to leave your desk! When I'm swamped with work, I could sit in front of my computer for hours on end and not feel like I've accomplished much of anything. On these days, I make sure I force myself to get up from my desk and go for a walk, cook something, or otherwise give my brain a rest. It helps to stimulate my

creativity (and sometimes come up with other ways to accomplish a daunting task), and I'm ultimately way more productive when I sit down to my desk again, getting a lot more done overall.

I also drink a ton of water while I work. This forces me to regularly get up and pee (and get refills), again giving me a change of scenery and refreshed perspective. Oh yeah — and it's healthy too!

14. Dan Goodwin, of Coach Creative

You know those negative voices within telling you that you're not creative, you have no real creative talent, you're not a proper artist, and that creating is completely selfish anyway? That'd be your inner critic.

But far from being the negative ogre it first seems, your inner critic says ALL of these things because it loves you. Its motivation is to protect you, to keep you safe, to avoid hurt, and pain and failure.
Once you realise this, it becomes far easier to turn round and say: "Thank you Mr IC for your concern, I really appreciate your love and that you're trying to keep me safe. But, you know what, I'm just going to get on and create the best I can create anyway."

Try it yourself. It'll break the hold that inner voice has over you, and free you up to be more creative than you've been in ages.

15. Glen Allsop, of Viper Chill

Only work when you feel like working and only work on things you're excited to work on. This is far more effective than forcing yourself to do tasks and then just churning out mediocre results. Working when you want on things you want to work on produces the best results because your enthusiasm comes through into the work.

This may sound too unrealistic, but you may also find that coming from this mode will spur you into action because it's much easier than the consequences of inaction.

16. Jay White, of Dumb Little Man

Wasting hours of your week practicing something that doesn't jive with your soul, is a colossal waste of time and energy. Stop chasing advice and stop pulling the blanket over your head. Focus on spending more time trying to identify whatever it is that makes you flow with ideas and motivation. Once you crack that code, your life, career, and relationships will dramatically improve.

Balance

Whether you're balancing work and home, your own business and a day job, or any other parts of your life that just don't seem to want to get along, there aren't always a lot of helpful solutions. After all, just telling you that you need to keep your life in balance isn't enough. Here are a few options that have more depth.

17. Johnny B. Truant, of JohnnyBTruant.com and Question the Rules

Don't feel the need to be productive all the damn time. I swear, I see articles all the time about how much people work or how much they accomplish, and it makes me feel inadequate, like I'm doing something really wrong. But I can't live for work. I work so I can live. Yes, the argument is supposed to be that the faster you get stuff done, the more time you'll have to play, but it never seems to work out that way. The compulsive productivity addicts so often just seem to be productive for the majority of their day. I say, be lazy sometimes. Do nothing with a point sometimes. Play video games sometimes, or play with your kids, or take a walk, or do something that makes you scream inside because you're just blowing everything off. You may find that when you do get back to work, you'll be so much more primed to get the important things done.

18. Miranda Marquit, of Personal Finance Corner

Get child care. I know that when you work from home, you are supposed to avoid child care. However, if you want to increase your productivity when working from home, you can pay for 4 to 10 hours of child care a week. This way, you get uninterrupted work time.

If you really feel bad about sending your child to care for a few hours a week, look into hiring a mother's helper for a few hours. That way your child is still home with you, but being taken care of by someone else for a few hours each week.

19. Deb Ng, of Freelance Writing Jobs

Set business hours. I know we are supposed to be flexible, but having somewhat strict business hours means you and everyone around you respect your time. Also, it helps to switch between work and home and put you in the proper frame of mind.

Business hours keep me focused and my business on track.

20. Dustin Wax, of DustinWax.com and Writer's Technology

I've noticed that I get the most done when I'm overbooked, when I don't have nearly enough time to do everything I want (or need) to do. It's absolutely not the way I would recommend people live — it's super-stressful, for one thing, and you may slip up on some commitments — but it does seem to get the job done. I see it as sort of a corollary to Parkinson's Law ("Work expands to fill the time allotted for it") — work contracts to the limits available for it. For instance, I know I can write 1,000 words in 20 minutes if I have to — but then why does it take 3 weeks to write a 2,000 word piece? Answer: because I don't have to do it in 40 minutes. But when I'm really busy, when I'm slammed, well then I have to, and more often than not, I do.

21. Jade Craven, of JadeCraven.com

My main piece of advice is to take as much time as you think is necessary.

I worked through exhaustion for a recent launch because I felt like I was letting people down. I worked so hard I got physically sick. I would have been better off if I took a break for two weeks and focused on recharging and giving 100% to the projects.

It can be hard to remove yourself from work when you don't have a plan. But it's totally worth it.

22. Hunter Nuttall, of HunterNuttall.com

Forget about measuring productivity by how many widgets you crank out per hour. Productivity is about picking the most important thing you can do, and then being in the moment. Work and play are no different in this regard. If it's time to write an article, then do it well. If it's time to enjoy a hot fudge sundae, then do that well. Because the ultimate goal of productivity is not the most widgets, but the most fun.

23. Diggy, of Upgrade Reality

Stop looking for productivity advice.

From my experience I have learnt that the only way to be productive is by cutting out all and any distractions that keep you from doing your work. Tv, internet, friends, parties, food or whatever it is that is keeping you from doing what you would like to do. Just sit down and work. Say no to anything that is keeping you from your work (unless it's an emergency of course). If you don't know what is distracting you, ask yourself the question, "If only x, then I could get more done".

Replace X with whatever it is that you think is standing in your way, and then do X. For example, "If only I could stop sitting on Facebook all day and actually do my work". Now that you know Facebook is your distraction, stop sitting on Facebook all day and do your work!

24. Nathalie Lussier, of Raw Foods Witch

My biggest productivity tip is one that took forever for me to learn. It is that we should not eat particular foods before or while we are trying to be productive. This means no snacking, and no heavy lunches. I know that for me and for many people I've talked to, it's easy to "propel" yourself forward by constantly eating sugar, caffeine, or carbs – because they result in a rush of energy as the sugar hits your blood stream.

However, I've tried it both ways – eating lots of sugary snacks often and getting a lot of spurts of productivity, and going for a slow burn from high fiber foods like vegetables, fruit, nuts, and seeds. Also adding healthy fats like avocado and oils has helped me feel full and stop the constant cycle of getting up to get a snack, that can turn into a procrastination pattern easily. This gives me a more stable amount of energy and also helps me keep focused for longer periods. We all know how much time it takes to context switch, so that's another added benefit.

It may not seem like the most direct way to affect your productivity, but trust me when I say that without a steady flow of energy you can't get stuff done.

25. Cath Duncan, of Agile Living and Bottom-Line Bookclub

Sleep more.

Most of us just don't sleep enough because we're juggling so many things – especially those of us who are working parents. And we don't appreciate how quickly lack of sleep negatively affects the quality of our thinking, or the positive effects of taking naps during the day. One of the areas of our thinking that is most significantly affected by sleep deprivation is our creativity, which is becoming more of a problem as most of us are moving from doing very left-brain-directed, procedural work to spending most of our time solving creative, heuristic problems in our work. When I interviewed Dan Coyle, author of The Talent Code for the Bottom-line Bookclub, he reported that his research of talent hotbeds around the world found that many of the best athletes, musicians and artists napped daily. Top performers are learning and getting better everyday and since napping allows you to integrate and "digest" new learning more quickly, napping is considered very much a part of their important, productive work hours. Want to be more creative and productive? Get more sleep.

26. Clay Collins, the creator of The Interactive Offer and the owner of Business Ideas

Say "No" to the Productivity Industrial Complex and Make Your OWN Way.

The Productivity Industrial Complex is a marriage between corporations and an entire industry of productivity companies, gurus, consultants, and solution-makers who help corporations squeeze every ounce of productivity from their workers. Organizations like The David Allen Company, for example, make the bulk of their income from corporations looking to "maximize their employee output," and it's no surprise that they have a Fortune 500-studded client list which includes Lockheed Martin, Deloitte & Touche, and the U.S. Department of Defense (see here for more of his clients).

"You and your company need to get things done – lots of things[.] You have invested heavily in the human factor — but are you getting all the results from your people that you could? Are they maximizing their output?"
- The David Allen Company

"Productivity" is an Industrial Era economics term that applies to factories, machines, and economies. When applied to people it often has a dehumanizing effect and negates both individual differences and unique talents. Most best-selling productivity gurus are working in the interests of large corporations and often advocate values and approaches that are not in the best interests of individuals. Increased productivity should result in greater carefree time, more vacations, and more time away from work. Most of the time, however, it does not.

The workforce is laboring for more hours and for less pay, taking fewer vacations, and generally burning out.

27. Robert Pagliarini, of TheOther8Hours:

Multitasking is alive and well! Everybody thinks it is counterproductive, but if you do it correctly, it is a super-productivity tool. The trick is to combine a "head" activity with a "body" activity. In other words, a mental with a physical. The problem is that we tend to try to do two mental tasks at the same time, which is counterproductive.

Planning

We all have goals, along with the occasional step-by-step plan for how we plan to achieve those goals. But just like there isn't one business plan that will work for every entrepreneur ever born, you have to go beyond the accepted methods of planning to reach your ambitions sometimes.

28. Kyeli Smith, of World Changing Writing and Freak Revolution:

I still use a pen and paper. I realize that's becoming ridiculous, but it works for me better than any online productivity site or any app I've stuck on my iPhone (and oh, there have been many). I separate my list into "to-do" and "could-do", and write it all down on paper. To-dos are high priority, and could-dos are secondary; if I finish all my to-dos, I hit my could-dos. Then, after I finish a task, I cross it off. And I'll tell ya – there's nothing quite as satisfying as scribbling a few lines through a task just finished. Ahhh.

29. Jonathan Mead, who writes about self-development:

Trying to be productive is often a waste of time. That's because "being productive" doesn't really mean anything. To aim to produce things, or accomplish things is fine, but the producing is just a container. It's not the point, and shouldn't really be something to aim for.

So in order to do what really matters, and to be useful, we have to think about about two questions:

1. What do I care about?
2. What do other people care about?

Sometimes you'll do things that only you care about. Great. Other times you'll want to do things that you care about, that others care about too. That way you create value deposits in a sort of bank that you can withdraw from.

If your actions are aligned with mostly doing what you and others care about at the same time, you've found a magical spot, and that's where you can truly be productive in a very awesome way. But at that point, being productive doesn't really matter. You're simply doing what makes you come alive. Leave it to others to decide whether you're productive or not.

30. Sid Savara, of SidSavara.com:

Give up. For too many years we've been told we can have everything we want, all the time — and right now. It's a lie. With few exceptions, to get what you really want in life you have to prioritize, pick the things you most want to accomplish — and give the rest up. Let some things fall by the wayside, so you can focus on the ones that are most important.

31. Vlad Dolezal, of VladDolezal.com:

When you finish your to-do list for the day early, DO NOT add any tasks to the list! Take the rest of the day off.

You might think that adding more tasks means you will accomplish more. But it trains your

subconscious that finishing early only means punishment – more work. So you will end up procrastinating. Instead, write a to-do list for the day, and stick to it. That way, you will be motivated to get it done quickly, because it really means extra free time!

32. Mark Harrison, of Effortless Abundance:

The first of Steven Covey's famous 7 Habits is to 'be proactive.' This is not something primarily about action but about thought. Each of us has the ability to respond to situations in a creative and planned way; we do not have to be the victims of circumstance, reacting according to learned responses. In exercising our ability to direct our thoughts in a more conscious way, we have a remarkable ability to orchestrate our experience.

Napoleon Hill wrote that everything is created twice – first in the mind and then in the outside world. Truly effective – and hence productive – people spend time on their inner world. Our experience is an echo of our inner reality. Understand – if you have a rich and fertile inner world, life will work. It's not about working harder – indeed, this can be counterproductive. To become truly proactive is almost to become a magician, achieving a great deal without much motion.

33. Andy Hayes, of Sharing Travel Experiences:

There are as many types of to do lists as there are people. If you need a to do list so you don't forget things, or if you need one just for that smug satisfaction of crossing items off of it, get one. Paper, electronic, whiteboard, whatever — it seems a lot of experts would have you believe that such things are evil. But if you're like me, there is a lot going on in your life. What's so wrong with the visual cue?

34. Kat Eden, of Body Incredible

I recently sat down and wrote a list of everything I'd achieved over the past 12 months. It's something I like to do from time to time, helps me appreciate myself (and we all know how easy it is to forget to do that). Anyway, I realised that in the past year or so I've really knocked off some of my big goals. Building a blog with content I'm proud of and a respectable readership. Finishing my book. Networking with like-minded folks on and offline. You get the drift. So what made this year so special? Truth be told, it comes down to just one thing.

Failing to complete.

I spent so much of my adult life trying to get everything done and it just didn't work for me. There's an amazing freedom in recognising that your to-do list will never be complete. So why even try to check item after item off when you're only going to add 'em back on just as quick?

Ok, so here's the catch. Obviously it's not about failing to complete everything. The point is that if – like me – you're a typical 'gotta-do this', 'should-do-that' kinda person and you work well with a list system of sorts then (I believe) you'll find it worthwhile to choose a handful of items each day that you're going to deliberately fail to complete. The way I do it is that each day I review the next day's task list, mentally highlight the important stuff, and then delete a bunch of stuff that yes, I'd like to do, but realistically I know I'm either not going to

do (and will then feel bad about it at the end of the day) or probably shouldn't really bother with as it's not that important.

And the best part? You still get that joyous satisfaction of checking items off your list!

35. Alex Blackwell, of The Bridge Maker

Do the easiest, simplest and most trivial things first and then focus on what's most important. By getting the low-hanging fruit out of the way, you will have more time to focus on what you really want to eat.

36. Farouk Radwan, of 2KnowMyself

Choose the worst day in your life and begin.

One of the main reasons people procrastinate and never become productive is that they delay tasks waiting for the right mood to come. I am sure you asked a friend before when will he start studying or exercising and then he told you that he is waiting for the right mood.

The problem the "waiting for the mood approach" is that this mood never comes. On one day you will find yourself not feeling good, on the second day you might find yourself feeling irritated and on a third day you might find yourself not in the mood because you had a fight with a close friend.

Even if the mood you were waiting for arrived who told you that it would last forever? You might start working because you are in the mood but few days later this mood you were depending on changes and so your productivity is halted.

The secret to being extremely productive is to not to try to feel good all the time but to keep working even if you are feeling bad, sad, irritated, not in the mood or even depressed. If you had a bad day then decide to start on that day because if you managed to be productive on a horrible day while you are not in the mood, being productive on all other days will be a piece of cake.

What's inspired you here? What are you going to try out? Or do you have a heretical approach to productivity that we've missed? Let us know in the comments...

10 Unusual Uses for a Dehydrator

A dehydrator is a practical tool that allows you to make the most of a variety of foods. But there are uses for dehydrators that go far beyond the culinary. With this list, you can find ways to use your dehydrator for far more than food — although for some of these projects, you may want to clean your dehydrator before you go back to preparing food.

Fire starters: If you have a fireplace or you go camping on a regular basis, you know the benefit of having a few fire starters on hand — they can make getting a new fire burning far easier than trying to catch a larger log on fire. You can purchase fire starters at the store or collect some dried wood to use as fire starters. But you can actually make some particularly good fire starters by drying large pieces of orange peel in your dehydrator. Once the peel is very dry with no remaining water, you can light it easily and you'll have a particularly good smell to your fire. The oils in the peel can burn for long enough to get a good fire going. When peeling any citrus fruit, cut the skins into strips (thicker is better) and dehydrate them until they're crispy.

Pet treats: Cleo Parker uses her dehydrator to make dog treats for her dog. Her dog has food allergies, making it tough to find treats that won't make him sick — but dehydrated sweet potatoes make for a tasty tidbit. Cleo says, "I just used my mandolin (manual slicer) to make slices and placed them on the dehydrator, just as if I were making dried apple slices." Depending on your pet's taste, you can make a variety of different treats they can eat, beyond sweet potatoes. You can purchase meat odds and ends from some butchers — pieces that humans aren't too keen on, but that will, to a pet, be a great treat after a trip through the dehydrator.

Potpourri: It's amazing what a small bag of dried herbs and flowers can do for the scent of your dressers and closets. Traditionally, potpourri was made by tying bundles of herbs together and allowing them to dry over a period of weeks. With a dehydrator, that time can be a matter of months. It's just a matter of gathering the leaves and flowers of your favorite plants and drying them in your dehydrator — there are recipes to get the most scent out of different plant combinations, along with fixative elements and essential oils. The hard part is choosing which scent you want to make.

Cassette tape salvage: Sasha Kadey and his dad recently visited friends in South Africa, taking a dehydrator along with them. The dehydrator wasn't for food — instead, it was to restore old cassette tapes. The oxide coating on old tapes separates from the tape and, to restore them, you have to 'bake' the coating back on to the tape. To do so, your dehydrator needs to reach between 130 and 140 degrees Fahrenheit. Set the tapes on drying racks and let them bake for eight hours. Once they've cooled, you'll be able to play your tapes again, at least for a few months.

Herbal teas: To make herbal teas, you steep herbs in water, which isn't too hard. Getting the

right herbs and ensuring that they'll make a strong cup of tea, though, can be a little harder. Dehydrating herbs makes for a better flavor, because it concentrates the herbs. It also allows you to save herbs for tea long after they're in season. To make the best tea, pick young and undamaged leaves or flowers from your favorite herbs and dry them completely. For some herbs, such as raspberry leaves, you may have to cure them before dehydrating them. Store your herbs in glass jars in a dark place until you're ready to use.

Dough rising: If you bake your own bread, or make pizza dough, a dehydrator can make a big difference in how long it takes for your dough to rise. Depending on the dehydrator model, you can set a bowl of dough inside, along with a shallow pan of water. At a temperature of about 115 degrees Fahrenheit, dough takes between half an hour and an hour to rise.

Paper making: For her craft projects, Jess Hartley relies on her dehydrator. She uses it to make her own paper and offers these instructions: "Make paper pulp in a blender from recycled junk mail, dried flowers, etc... drain, then spread thin on screens to form sheets." In order to dry the paper evenly, she uses her dehydrator. It allows her to dry the paper pulp gradually, at a low temperature.

Crafting supplies: Many craft projects call for everything from dried fruits to dried flowers. For instance, apple head dolls are a popular craft project. Each doll requires a dried apple, which is decorated to look like a wizened face. It's then attached to a body. Dried seeds, flowers, pine cones, seed pods and other natural craft materials can be very useful and, with a dehydrator, you don't need to wait weeks for your materials to dry.

Humidifier: A dehydrator can do double duty as a humidifier if your home seems a little dry. If you set a few containers of water inside your dehydrator and turn it on — for most models, high works best, the water will evaporate. The air in your home will become more moist, without you needing to go and buy a separate humidifier.

Camping meals: John Farless combines his dehydrator and his leftovers to make backpacking meals. He says, "I have a solid insert that goes on my dehydrator racks so I can dehydrate soups and leftovers from dinners. I put the dehydrated meals in the freezer and keep them up to six months for backpacking." John doesn't use any recipes to make meals for camping, but just checks on his dehydrator regularly. He has found that it's easier to dehydrate meals without meat in them.

I Won Science Fair with A Failed Project: The Skill of Presenting Failures

For my first three science fairs, I received a participation ribbon — no prizes, no other acknowledgment. For my fourth, I walked away with $600, a first place award from AFCEA, a Discovery Science award and the Yale Science & Engineering Association Award.

My science fair project that year wasn't any different from my past projects: I failed to prove anything, learned nothing about science, and did the project in order to receive a grade in my science class, rather than any interest in the project. The real difference was in my presentation skills. I had learned that I could present a failure just as well as success.

The fact that I could talk about my project, whether to one person or a group, gave me a head start on the competition, no matter how good their projects were. Even successful science fair participants could get flustered by a question or thrown off by shyness. They practiced their material like it was a speech — they just had to repeat it and they were done. Problem is, science fair judges ask questions in order to get a better idea of the project — it's also their chief technique for ensuring that a student did all of their own work with no help from his or her parents.

Five Questions For Presenters

When I began preparing for my presentation, I made a list of the questions that I really didn't want to answer about my project. Uncomfortable as that process was, I figured out how to answer those questions. I even felt comfortable talking about each of those points and included most of my answers in my presentation. The questions boiled down to the five below.

What went wrong?
What could I have done, in hindsight, to prevent the problem?
What parts of this project is salvageable?
Can I still meet the goals of this project? How?
What is the future of this project?

These questions have to be the focus of your presentation if you aren't able to talk about successes. It can be uncomfortable to talk about these points, especially because they tend to lead to discussions of who takes the blame for any problems, but these are the questions that your audience will be interested in.

Preparing for the Actual Presentation

Creating a good presentation, even about a bad topic, isn't just about planning what you will say. It's about taking that standard tri-fold science fair board and turning it into something

that stands out from the other three hundred boards in the gymnasium — or creating a professional PowerPoint or other presentation materials. It's about learning background material and preparing to take questions, from people who haven't ever been exposed to any of the information you're talking about, as well as people with advanced degrees in your topic. It's not any different than preparing any other presentation.

When you're preparing to talk about a project that, for any reason, just didn't work out, though, your presentation materials need to be just that much better. You have a plan for every question, too. You may not be able to answer every question, but you should be able to point towards resources or describe a way to answer it. Your presentation needs to reach a higher level if you don't have results to back up your talk. I haven't focused much on the generalities of presenting here — if you need more information about planning a general presentation, consider starting with this roundup of past posts.

How I Presented My Failure

Science fairs can be all-day propositions. I probably presented my project twenty-five times, and each time someone asked to hear about my project, I started out the same way. I admitted my failure right off the bat. I talked about what had gone wrong and shouldered my responsibility.

I found that the fact that I didn't try to explain away my failure went a long way to improving the judges' perception of my project. I was able to clearly point out what I would do differently if I was to start the project over; I knew what I could do to build on my project. Future plans were the key: I got more attention by talking about what steps I could take next than by discussing hypotheses and the scientific method.

It also helped that I didn't use my failed project as an excuse. I completed my experiment even after it was clear that the project was a dud. I still went all out on preparing my science fair presentation board and talk, and it showed.

Playing to My Project's Strengths

I know you're wondering what sort of project could obviously fail, yet win awards. The title of my project was "The Effects of Everyday Radiation of Household Objects on the Regenerative Capabilities of Planaria." My biggest award was from the AFCEA (Armed Forces Communications and Electronics Association), and I know exactly why. The judges assigned to choose recipients for the AFCEA came to see my project because my abstract mentioned that I was testing the radiation of electronic objects like televisions. They stayed because it only took a pointed question about radiation to get me talking about why such research is necessary and where it could go. I wasn't listed with the engineering projects: I shouldn't have been on their radar at all. I was able to answer their questions, though, because of the strength of the preparations I had made for my presentation.