

Working Hard, Hardly Working or Actually Productive?

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Have you ever noticed that some of your staff are just a lot more productive than others? At first blush, there seems to be an equal amount of “activity” coming from each member of the team. Yet, upon further examination, one person is getting real results while the others seem to be just “spinning their wheels”.

I am reminded of a time when my then 10-year-old son was playing basketball. To the uninitiated, he appeared to be giving solid effort and was playing basketball. He was running up and down the court with the rest of the players, yet he never seemed to be contributing points, rebounds and steals. In essence he was just going through the motions, making little effort to get into the action. It was the first (but not the last) time that I told him, “Don’t confuse activity with results.”

I recently came across an e-book from Fast Company that detailed the [67 Habits of the World's Most Successful People](#). I have taken the liberty to highlight a few of the productivity habits that really resonated with me.

PRODUCTIVE PEOPLE...

1. FOCUS ON WHAT MATTERS

At Catapult, we utilize the [Traction EOS](#) process to define what matters. We develop a company-wide roadmap which graphically illustrates our priorities for this quarter, next quarter, the year, 3 years etc. We know that nearly all our initiatives and projects are aligned with the company goals. Goals are cascaded down to the department and to the individual level. Whenever someone suggests a new project, our first words are “Which organizational priority does that support?”

2. THEY KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN “IMPORTANT” AND “URGENT”

Productive people don’t get sidetracked by unimportant urgent issues. They recognize that you can easily spend all your time fighting needless fires instead of getting done what matters. HR leaders are particularly vulnerable in this area. We frequently get embroiled in juicy employee relations issues rather than executing a well-designed performance management or succession planning process.

3. THEY PLAN THEIR DAYS and SALVAGE WASTED TIME

To stay on track, productive people typically write down tomorrow’s game plan today. Often, that involves a ‘to-do’ list. Items are crossed off as they are completed. Any tasks that go uncompleted are automatically transferred over to the next day’s list. To-do items are addressed between appointments and meetings. This is one way to ensure you are focusing on the important things.

Those 10 minutes before your next meeting can be great for your productivity. When you keep a list of things that need to be done, you can quickly scan it and pick out the actions you can take in the time you have. Without the list, you will likely be sucked into whatever is currently on your mind.

Speaking of salvaging your time, among the biggest wasters of time is the frequent flyer that comes into your office just to shoot the breeze, gossip or complain. Without even noticing it, they will rob you of 15-20 minutes in the blink of an eye. Once they have found you to be a willing participant, they will return time and time again. Quick tip to address this: Stand up, walk towards the door and let them know you are getting on a call.

4. **THEY ONLY ATTEND MEETINGS WITH PURPOSE**

Poorly planned meetings are often an utter waste of time. How often have you sat in an ill-prepared meeting and said to yourself, “There is an hour of my life I’ll never get back.”? While it may be politically incorrect or awkward, you may need to make conscious decisions about which meetings to attend and which to skip. If you have a recurring “agenda-less” meeting that rehashes the same things week after week, perhaps you are better served by asking the following:

- What is the purpose of the meeting?
- What is this week’s agenda?
- And, if you decline to attend:
 - Can you share the minutes from the meeting?
 - Can you record the Zoom meeting for me?

5. **THEY AREN’ T PERFECTIONISTS**

Winston Churchill famously stated that “Perfection is the enemy of progress”. Unless you are either a heart surgeon or a NASA engineer, the quest for perfection often can be counterproductive. While there is certainly a need for perfection in many roles, productive people understand a 90% solution today is better than prolonging things.

The problem with perfectionism is that time will continue to slip by as you finesse your plan repeatedly. Various stakeholders will poke holes in your plans to get it just right. Each time you make changes to satisfy someone and bring it back to the drawing table, only to hear a different set of concerns. To paraphrase George Patton, *A good plan assertively executed right now is far better than a perfect plan executed next week.*

6. **THEY LEAVE GAPS IN THEIR SCHEDULE**

Highly productive people leave some room in between meetings. When you’re too tightly scheduled you run the risk of cluttering your brain. Back-to-back-to-back meetings prevent you from effectively and critically digesting what was discussed. This is because once you have shifted gears to the next meeting topic you leave the previous meeting in the rear-view mirror. It is better to give yourself time to sort through the issues, write down your key takeaways, and put your follow-up tasks on your handy to-do list.

Closing:

The opportunities for non-productive time are all around you. Much of the daily distractions which rob you of productive time are simply out of your control. Productive people are only able to withstand these interruptions because they routinely carve out time for themselves. Simply put...you can plan your day, or the day can plan you.

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Prior to joining Catapult, Tom served as the Director of Talent Management and Acquisition for The Pantry, a Fortune 500 convenience store and restaurant chain. Previously, Tom served as the Director of Talent Acquisition for Rite Aid, a Fortune 500 retail pharmacy chain.

Tom holds a B.A. from Loyola University in Maryland and an MBA in Organizational Development from Drexel University. In addition, Tom is certified as a Senior Human Resources Professional.