Not enough time? Here's 5 scheduling strategies to maximize your productivity

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When you have plenty of tasks on your to-do list, you may feel overwhelmed, and find it a struggle even to get started. But having a routine provides structure to your day and allows you to get more done in less time.

People spend more than 40 percent of their time at work unproductively, according to a study. Effective scheduling does not just mean filling your days with important tasks – you need to consider how mental and physical factors affect your productivity and use that knowledge to your advantage when you are planning your days.

The Most Important Task Method (MIT)

Once you determine your 1-3 most important tasks, they are scheduled first in your day. You then make progress on essential items before you get bombarded by distractions. You can use this in conjunction with the time blocking method, saving your initial hours for the most important tasks. Email, phone calls, and meetings come later after you've completed your essential tasks. By focusing obsessively on your most important tasks, every day is productive. You never have a day where you waste time on meaningless tasks.

The MIT method is all about focusing on what is essential. Rather than writing out a massive to-do list and trying to get it all done, determine the 1-3 tasks that are absolutely essential and then relentlessly focus on those tasks during the day. It is not that you never do more than three tasks in a day, but that you don't do anything else until you've completed the three essential tasks.

The Pomodoro Technique

The Pomodoro Technique is a relatively simple scheduling method that can work alongside most of the other ones here. A "Pomodoro" is a 25-minute block of uninterrupted work where you focus on a single task, followed by a five-minute break. The goal is to string together three to four Pomodoro "sessions" before taking a long break to recuperate.

When it comes to how to make a schedule with the Pomodoro Technique, you can schedule them into an open slot. For example, if you have a block of free time after lunch from 1 p.m.–3 p.m., you can dedicate that to Pomodoro sessions. At the start of the session, choose four tasks you will focus on and then start your work timer. What's great about this method is that it helps you focus intensely without burning out.

Saying No to Tasks that Do Not Contribute to your Goals

Constantly accommodating other people's requests makes it nearly impossible to effectively manage your schedule since you spend too much time reacting to irrelevant tasks as opposed to working on the projects that drive your success. You may be hesitant to say no because you fear damaging professional relationships, however, if you decline requests politely, the risks of negative impacts are small and well worth it.

The Chatfield Method

One of the biggest challenges of any scheduling method is that we're notoriously bad at knowing how long a task will take to complete even if we've done it in the past.

But this is the cornerstone of time management. If you do not properly estimate your time, you'll always be behind on tasks and playing catch-up. Most of us have tasks that repeat each day or week. And this method lets you dig into how long they actually take to do.

If you want to automate this process, use a tool like RescueTime to automatically track your time in apps, websites, and even specific projects. For example, if you want to see how long you spent reading this article, you can look at my Activities Report in RescueTime and see.

Schedule Time to Enjoy and Reflect

Organizing your schedule around your brain's peak times is an effective way to boost your productivity; however, to perform your best, you need to schedule times to engage in reflection and enjoyable, non-work activities. Researchers found that people who pursue hobbies perform 15% to 30% better than those who don't regularly engage in activities they enjoy doing. This is because engaging in fun activities is relaxing, thus lowering stress levels. This can improve focus and decision-making abilities. Additionally, research has found that employees who spend fifteen minutes each day reflecting on the lessons they learned perform 23% better than those who don't. Reflecting has such a huge impact because it enables you to quickly learn from the mistakes you made so you can move on from them. Though it may be challenging to fit these leisurely activities into your schedule, the performance benefits outweigh the need to push back non-urgent tasks.