

10 ways to boost your productivity

STEPHANIE WHITTAKER

Special to The Gazette

Saturday, May 31, 2008

Productivity is not just about doing more. It's about working smarter to get more things done. But to be really efficient, it takes effort and practice. Here are a few tips to help you learn to get more out of each and every day

"What have I accomplished today?"

If you have ever asked yourself that question at the end of yet another gruelling workday, it might be because your productivity is not what it could be.

"Productivity isn't just about working more. It's about working smarter," said Ann Searles, a corporate productivity coach and president of the Canada-Caribbean arm of the Institute for Business Technology.

And getting more done.

There are several steps you can take toward becoming more productive. Here's some advice from experts:

1. Make a choice. Pick what you want to be productive at.

"This should be a no-brainer but it isn't, and the reason it isn't a no-brainer is because our brains are infinite," Searles said.

"I often see clients who are in trouble with their productivity, not because they're lazy or unwilling, but because they see infinite possibilities. The brain has no limits, and this is wonderful, but at some point, you have to channel your energy to what matters."

Choosing the stuff that you want to be most productive at can narrow down the infinite field, she said.

2. Focus on three goals and visualize meeting them. "A lot of people fall into a routine," said Stephen Goldberg, a business coach with Optimus Performance. "Choose three goals

that you need to reach to succeed in your work and remind yourself every day of those goals."

A marketing manager, for instance, might create such concrete goals as: develop a new look for a brand, expand market share of the brand to upstate New York and develop a Web presence for the brand, Goldberg said.

At the beginning of each workday, he advises, write three things you can do toward meeting the goals.

"Visualize yourself meeting your goals. When you do this, you tap into a powerful part of yourself, the emotional centre. Then, your logic will help you formulate strategies to help you achieve the vision."

3. Get clarity. It's impossible to boost your productivity unless you're clear on what's expected of you, Goldberg said. If you're self-employed, you might need to do some soul-searching to decide what you expect of yourself. If you work for an employer, find out from your boss what is expected of you in your job.

4. Block off time. Once you've set your goal, set time aside in your agenda to work on it, Goldberg said.

"You might decide that during two hours you will focus exclusively, as the marketing manager, on analyzing the market for your product in upstate New York," he said.

"Adding the big goal stuff to your agenda may mean that you drop some of the smaller stuff on your to-do list."

5. Have a don't-do list. Your don't-do list contains all the things you will not do any more because they do not move you closer to your goals.

"People are always astounded when I ask them to draft a don't-do list," Searles said.

"They have no trouble writing to-do lists but they have no idea what they don't want to do."

The don't-do list, she added, is full of activities that keep you away from the important stuff.

"Ask yourself what takes your time and energy away from meeting your goals.

"One woman I coached was training someone in her workplace. He would pop up every 15 or 20 minutes to ask her questions. She was distracted by it and decided what she would no longer do. She told him to save his questions for the lunch-hour and she would meet him for lunch and discuss them.

"When he asked the easy questions, she would say: 'I don't know,' which forced him to find the answers himself. She taught him to find solutions and it allowed her to focus on her goals."

6. Manage your toys. Technology can simplify life but it can also draw one's attention away from focusing on goals.

"We have so many electronic interruptions: email, cellphone, Skype, BlackBerry. Turn off the notification of email and everything that dings, blings and sings," Searles said.

Refrain also from answering email first thing in the morning, she said.

"Instead, do something important at that time. If you open email first thing, you're a gofer, because you'll be immersed in it all morning and come away from it at 11 a.m. and wonder where the time went."

7. Put a price on your "yes." "Most people cannot say 'no' and the people around them don't want to hear 'no,'" Searles said. "So if you're going to say 'yes,' make sure there's a price on your 'yes.'"

"For instance, you're asked to sit on yet another committee and instead of saying yes, you might want to say: 'Yes, I'll help you to find someone for your committee. Please give me a description of what the work entails.' Chances are, you won't hear anything else."

Fending off tasks that eat into your time can help boost productivity, she said.

8. Curb the urge to multi-task. Productive people tackle one thing at a time.

"If you multi-task, you'll be a gofer all your life," Searles said, citing one of the most astonishing displays of multi-tasking in the history of American political campaigns.

"Consider the incident in which Republican presidential candidate Rudy Giuliani answered his cellphone to his wife while delivering a speech to members of the National Rifle Association.

"Let me ask you something," Searles said. "Is Giuliani still running for the presidency?"

"No. He said he wanted to be president and then answered a phone call during a speech. You may have to multi-task. We all do. But there's a time to multi-task and a time not to."

It's impossible to be productive about everything, she added, so it's best to narrow the list of things where you want to be productive.

9. Measure your results. A productivity program should always be evaluated once it's under way.

"You can do this daily or weekly," Goldberg said. "Ask yourself if you have met your goals for today and for the week. You're striving for continuous improvement and if you do things the same way as you usually do them, you're not improving."

Taking stock will enable you to see if your actions really are making you more productive, he said.

"You're applying personal kaizen," he said, referring to the Japanese corporate concept of continuous improvement.

10. Reward yourself. Little rewards for productivity improvement will keep you on track.

"This is how we motivate ourselves. Allow yourself to do something fun for 15 or 20 minutes during the day," Goldberg suggested. "Watch a movie clip, listen to music or sleep in the next day."

© The Gazette (Montreal) 2008