



HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR DAY

What to do while you're taking a work break

1. **Move:** There are plenty of exercises you can do, even in an office. There are apps that will give you some useful suggestions. Some can even sense when you've been sitting still for a while and launch a desk to workout for you to follow.
2. **Eat and drink:** A small nutritious snack plus some water can make a big difference to your energy levels. Nuts, apples, cheese, meat, fish, or a boiled egg can all be great.
3. **Take a walk:** get outside and breathe some fresh air. It will clear your mind. Vitamin D can make for a better mood which helps concentration too.
4. **Talk to colleagues:** Research suggests that socialising at work promotes rapport, trust and good relations. All these support effort.
5. **Tune out briefly:** Short bursts of relaxation and meditation can provide useful mental refreshment. But, interestingly, it seems that even looking at cute pictures of cats or dogs can function to support small intervals of energy renewal! Find a few things that work for you.

The endless challenge of getting things done!

On our goal setting programs and in a first meeting with coaching clients, there are a few quite specific 'frequently asked questions'. These reflect common challenges that tend to be shared by professionals, whatever their sector or organisation. One of these questions is often, "What can I do to be more productive, despite the complexities and pressures of my role, and given I can't manufacture any more hours in the day?"

In general, our clients have already got what might be termed 'the basics' in place. Their colleagues are competent and reliable. They're doing work they find meaningful. They have a reasonably sound grasp of time management essentials. But they want to know what else they could add to the mix to lift their performance one notch more. If this sounds like your situation too, then the evidence-based suggestions in this briefing might be worth trialling.

Your concentration is like a muscle

No-one is capable of being 100% productive all day. Even if you start your morning fully intending to make the most of every single minute, it simply isn't humanly possible. Concentration, researchers remind us, is like a muscle. It needs rest, if it's to function well. Otherwise, you risk overusing the muscle, such that it burns out.

These days, especially for knowledge workers, being 'productive' means a focus on meeting expectations and achieving agreed results, rather than just clocking the hours put in. The old 'time card' paradigm, where employees clocked on and off, doesn't fit in an era where the emphasis in healthy organisations is much more on flexibility, accountability and trust. In recent studies about how work gets done, researchers tend to ask employees themselves how they would define being 'productive'. The definition generally involves making satisfying progress on meaningful tasks, despite pressing deadlines or tricky circumstances.

In this context, regular breaks turn out to be vital not optional, if you want to sustain concentration and stay productive. Being productive (not just being present) requires hard focus, then real rest.

What do the findings tell us?

The designers of the time-tracking app, DeskTime, collect 5.5 million logged records each day. This gives them plenty of data about what users themselves consider productive and what they do to support that. They took a sample of 36,000 users and analysed what they do in some detail. They were interested in looking closely at what exactly the top 10% did that might be different. They made some surprising discoveries. What these highly productive

people had in common was an ability to take effective breaks. They worked in bursts of around 52 minutes, followed by a 15 to 17 minute break, before diving back into their next task.

A sprint then a rest

According to Julia Gifford of DeskTime (the report author), the reason this pattern supports high productivity is that the top performers treat each work period as a sprint. She commented, "They make the most of those 52 minutes by working with intense purpose, but then they rest to be ready for the next burst."

The 100% dedication rule

Gifford stresses that highly productive people throw themselves into what they do. During a work period, they dedicate themselves 100% to making progress and getting things done. Then, during a rest period they remove themselves from tasks and rest entirely. She calls it the 100% method. Whatever you are doing, dedicate yourself 100%. If you're working, focus 100% on what you need to do. If you're relaxing, then relax 100%. In other words, don't check your emails every few minutes when you're on a break. And don't check Facebook or indulge in some other 'time out' site surfing, while you're working. Some researchers call this 'purposeful working'.

In fact, this isn't a new idea. In the 1980's, Italian philosopher Francesco Cirillo developed a time management technique based on the idea of breaking work into intervals, separated by short breaks. The underlying principle is the same. Focus hard on a task for a relatively short period, without succumbing to distractions, from outside or self-inflicted.

The box at the side will give you some ideas about what to do on a break.

Adjusting to suit your circumstances

The ratios of work to rest will vary by profession, context and even the particular day. For instance, when you look at your schedule for the coming week, you may see already places where you won't be able to function in this iterative way, oscillating between energy expenditure and energy renewal. But it's likely there are other times when you could trial this method and see how you might adapt the general principles to something you can use at least some of the time.

Many of our clients are finding a highly focused burst of 45-50 minutes, followed by a 10 minute break enables them to remain fully charged and highly productive over the course of a working day. Even setting aside 5 to 10 minutes for a complete break can help renew your focus and sharpness.