

*Become more productive and
successful at work*

by Rough Guider

This is the third book in the 'Rough Guide to Success' series in which the author shares from first-hand experience ways to be productive and successful at work. Tried and tested techniques are explained and can be readily implemented in the workplace. As always this is a personal view on how to be productive and you should ensure that the practical no-nonsense suggestions and recommendations make sense in your particular work environment.

Part 1: How to be more *productive* at work

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Introduction

In this book, I have put a list of ways to become more productive together. The list reflects the experiences I have gained in the work environment over the last 25 years.

You should of course feel free to learn, ignore and challenge the wide range of suggestions that I have put before you. Every work environment is different, and every person has a different set of pressures exerted upon them at work and by themselves. As a result, I ask you to think carefully about which recommendations would be most impactful for you. I desire positive outcomes for each and every one of you!

Efficiency versus effectiveness

It is important that you understand the difference between these two terms. In my mind efficiency is doing something as fast as possible without making mistakes. For instance, you build a quality ladder as fast as possible, using the right tools, right materials and right workforce. Effectiveness is doing the right thing, also as fast as possible, without making mistakes. Let's take the example further. Once you have completed the ladder you remember that you need to use it in the garden to pick apples. However, you have assembled it in your upstairs bedroom. As a result, you will now have to dismantle it and start again outside. You can see that you may have been efficient in terms of the speed by which you put the ladder together, but because you didn't plan the activity properly, you were ineffective in achieving your ultimate goal of having the ladder completed in the right place at the right time.

This is a very simple example, but when applied to the workplace, it is surprisingly common how often individuals are being efficient but to one extent or another ineffective.

Therefore, the first and most important learning is to understand why you are doing what you have been asked to do. Once you have completed your task ask yourself whether you have achieved the goal that was set. Indeed, is there a more effective way of achieving your goal? Challenge yourself to

visualize the final product of your task and double check that the outcome is the desired one.

Below you will find the list. Everyone will have their own view on the relative order (and of productivity ideas I've missed altogether) so please accept this as my humble and personal view.

1. Know your job

Without doubt, there is no substitute for learning your role inside out. Therefore you should invest time to ensure you fully understand your role, the key tasks, how your performance is measured, how your work impacts others and how your output is used by others. Once you know your role really well, you will command respect and be seen as the expert in that area of the business. The expertise you have gained may relate to the processing of expenses, sales calls, facilities management, recruitment or any other area of your company's undertakings. This concept applies to every type of role, throughout your career.

2. Learn from your peers (boss)

In many jobs your peers will already have the answers to a lot of your questions. Your boss may have all the answers as well, but asking your boss for help is the most obvious step for each of us to take. Also, nobody likes to inundate their boss with questions.

Therefore, depending upon the structure of your department and/or business, you could dramatically increase your productivity by leveraging the skills and knowledge of those around you. Particularly in the early days of your role your peers may be able to point out various potential pitfalls.

3. Make sure that your output is used

Before we even get to 'planning' you should think about how your output is going to be used. At work we are often asked to complete tasks and assignments, but we infrequently question why we have been asked to perform them.

One thing I strongly suggest that you do is reach out to those that receive your reports, data and/or other information and obtain their confirmation that the output is being used in a way that adds value to the business. You should do this regularly, perhaps on a quarterly basis.

My team at work has taken this approach very seriously and as a consequence has cut out a significant number of unproductive tasks and procedures. Perhaps to their surprise, recipients of information are happy to acknowledge that, on occasion, what they produce ends up in the recycle bin. A large percentage of people complain about information overload, so if you can cut that down they will surely be appreciative.

4. Know the value of your tasks

Take time to understand what tasks and procedures are essential (for compliance, statutory and other 'must do' purposes), those that add some value to the business and those that are performed as a matter of routine, with no obvious value. You should question (diplomatically) why you are undertaking the tasks that do not add value, to understand better how they help you achieve your annual objectives, your department's objectives and those of the business as a whole. It may be that you are not aware of the value of the task that has been assigned to you, or you do not have sight of how it fits into the overall scheme of things. If after this 'questioning' it is clear that the task does not add value to the business, you should discuss it further with your boss. The bottom line is that you should understand the relative value of all the tasks within your remit.

5. Invest time in learning the skills

I have included below some examples of how individuals can become far more productive by having the necessary skills:

1. Do not add up figures manually but use spreadsheets. Be trained on how to use them properly. The usefulness of spreadsheets will depend

upon the role you have at work, but it is amazing how such software can be used to save you a significant amount of time.

2. The next stage is to use (by way of example) Pivot Tables, Look-Up Tables and ultimately, where appropriate, macros. One example I have is a finance team that produced manual bank reconciliations, checking that cash book amounts agreed to what was recorded on the bank statements on a manual basis. Given there were hundreds of transactions each month, and seven bank accounts, this took about 21 hours of elapsed time each month. The team introduced a macro that automatically matched the relevant items to reduce processing time to less than 15 minutes. What a saving! The key here is to learn the tools of the trade and become proficient at those that allow you to become more productive. If you are searching for data, summarizing data, organizing data or merging data (and so on!) rest assured that there is a simple cost effective way of doing these.

Spreadsheets are a prime example given how many people use them as a tool at work. However, the same methodology applies to word processing software, presentation software and indeed bespoke software. Learn the tools of the trade inside out and the payback should be meaningful.

6. Plan

You cannot get away from it. Planning is so very important and is something that we are taught about at school but many still fail to plan adequately when at work. From junior to senior staff we so often see the impact of poor planning on the productiveness of individuals.

Before undertaking any significant tasks spend time planning out what you want to achieve and determine the best 'effective' way of achieving it.

Through planning and the sharing of your plan with others, while also asking for feedback, you will no doubt find that you are better placed to achieve the desired results.

7. Prioritize

You were no doubt expecting this to be near the top of the list, and hopefully you are not disappointed. Once you know what you should be doing, and you know what you are doing adds value and is being used by others, you can prioritize in order to get to those higher value tasks first.

There is a whole host of time management courses you can go on in order to hone those time management skills (and so much on the web as well). What I ask is that you ensure that every task you work on creates value (someone really needs it to be done) and that those that are most important are done first. By this I do not mean that you should continually ignore what you perceive as less valuable tasks, but rather ensure that the timelines for completing them are properly communicated to those that need to know, so that you can manage their expectations. In fact, the reason why many managers feel let down in this regard is not the fact that they doubt that you are working on the most important stuff but that they were not aware that some of the other tasks, perhaps lower priority ones, had been put on the back burner. By managing their expectations you are solidifying and supporting your list of priorities.

8. Clear and timely communications

Projects, assignment and tasks often fail to deliver the required outcome or do so after much noise, disturbance and correction due to poor communication from the project manager or task setter.

If you are responsible for setting tasks/projects for other staff remember to communicate early, clearly, concisely and 'buy' them into the process.

The worst run projects are often those where the objectives and expected outputs are altered mid-term, as the person managing the process has not been clear about the requirements from the outset, or has failed to communicate them in a timely manner. The result is mayhem, often leading to the imposition of 'all hands to the pump', with significant additional pressure exerted on team members as well as the general disillusionment that accompanies such pressure.

I can't emphasize enough how important it is to consider those around you as early as possible in the process, to ensure that, at the end of the day, they work effectively for you.

Put another way, have you ever wondered why some people manage projects that appear to run smoothly, to time and on budget whereas others seem to be playing catch-up continually, changing the goal-posts and absorbing more and more time of those on the team?

9. Automate

There are so many ways to automate workflow. This varies widely, industry by industry, department by department and role by role.

The general rule is that if there is a task or procedure that you undertake regularly and which takes up a fair proportion of your time, then think about automation.

Examples of automation are clearly visible within manufacturing companies. Many service companies have also automated many of their routines, eliminating mundane activities. However, my challenge to you is to review the tasks and procedures that you undertake day in day out and produce a short-list of those that potentially can be automated. You may need to seek assistance from your team members and staff with the IT department. If the cost of automation is less than the savings made through automation you may be on to a winner.

10. Identify road-blocks

Productivity can be hampered by road-blocks. There may be people you rely on who are not fulfilling their part of the bargain or inputs you require that are not available or forthcoming. There may also be people that you rely on to distribute your output to the relevant stakeholders that are not performing to the required standard.

If you come across a person or group of people that are creating a road-block (this can often be unintentional so please tread carefully), you should discuss this with your boss in order to resolve. Alternatively you may want to discuss the issue in a diplomatic fashion with those that are causing the blockage. Be careful not to damage any relationships but do pursue as it is your productivity at stake.

11. Challenge the status quo

Do not immediately accept things as they are as there may be a better, more effective way of completing a task or procedure. When you inherit the role of your boss or peer, if you assume that there are a number of inefficiencies and ineffective aspects to the role, your mind will be open to making the job more productive. Too often we assume that the predecessor knew exactly what they were doing and had ironed out unnecessary tasks and procedures, stream-lining work to ensure productivity was maximized.

When we move on to new pastures, we should endeavor to check that workflow has been left in the best possible order, with the most effective set up.

12. Let things hit your desk once only

Perhaps it would be great if tasks came across your desk one by one with you having sufficient time to complete each before the next arrives. However, that is not realistic. However, it is realistic to deal with very small but essential tasks in the moment. If the job to be done is very small, and it would take twice as long to 'drop it' and 'pick it up' later, then my advice is to proceed with it immediately. This also prevents paperwork building up on your desk, documents being mislaid and confusion arising.

13. Do things right the first time

If you do something wrong, the chances are that you will have to do it again. So my recommendation is to think carefully about what you are doing before you take action. We are not talking about efficiency or effectiveness per se but rather doing the right thing the first time. More speed and less haste.

14. Seek the paperless office

In my book, as a general rule, less paper means greater efficiency. You cannot avoid retaining documents for legal and compliance purposes, but, beyond that, there are not that many good reasons for storing and filing hard copy paperwork.

I recommend that you eliminate paperwork and store information electronically where possible. By making sure that your electronic records are stored in a logical and methodical fashion you can have ready and speedy access as the need arises.

If you are in doubt about the requirement to retain hard-copy documents, contact the relevant expert within your company who should have the answer.

15. Think laterally

Before you undertake a task, it is worthwhile spending some time working out how it can be completed in the most productive fashion. The most obvious route for resolving an issue or completing a task may not be the most effective or efficient.

Therefore, I recommend that you take time to think laterally in order to establish whether there is a much better way of achieving your objective. Perhaps you can re-purpose a document you had put together previously, one that was constructed for a similar purpose. Perhaps there is an easier

and more efficient way of pulling the data you require from the data warehouse, or perhaps there is a smarter and more effective way to put the presentation together.

One thing is for sure. If you have completed the same tasks year in year out, there is probably a better way to re-engineer the workflow to make productivity improvements. That has been my experience!

16. Take breaks

Simply put, when you are tired you are less productive. For that reason, you should make sure that you build appropriate breaks into your daily working life. A break may be defined as taking the time to grab a coffee from the kitchen, or it may be you leaving the office for a few minutes to breathe in some fresh air. Intuitively we all know that when we are tired we perform at a sub-standard level. We do not always have the opportunity to take breaks as and when we feel that they are necessary. However, for most people there is normally scope to ensure that you have sufficient down-time during the day, so that productivity is maximized during up-time.

17. Use a second pair of eyes

Why not ask a team member or peer to review the work you have done to establish whether there is any scope for you to act more effectively or efficiently. A second pair of eyes cast upon the procedures and tasks you carry out every day can be a great investment of time. No-one is perfect, so it is fair to say that a fresh look at your area of work could be to your advantage. If the reviewer is able to stream-line or re-engineer one or more of your daily tasks, productivity will increase. If that person has some special skills (for instance spreadsheet skills) they may be able to make significant enhancements to your speed of work.

18. Liaise with the experts

There are often people in the business that have specialized skills to help you be efficient and effective. For instance, if your computer breaks down then you should probably contact IT rather than resolve yourself. This may sound obvious, but there are also less clear examples of where experts can help. For instance, if you have a human resources issue you should probably seek guidance from the HR/Talent department before taking action yourself to ensure that you do not take inappropriate action. The wrong action may be disruptive, eating into your time schedule, that of your boss and that of HR, reducing the level of productivity all round. When you do not have the expertise, find someone who does and let them guide or resolve for you, so that you can spend more time on the 'day job'.

19. Avoid time stealers

'Time stealers' is a well known phrase. It refers to an uninvited person coming over to talk to you about non-business matters when you are trying to get on with your work and remain productive.

Be firm (not rude) with time stealers and develop some techniques for closing the conversation down so that you can continue with the job at hand.

20. Identify 'incrementalists'

As you embark upon your career, you will no doubt come across those that are less organized and productive than yourself. On occasion, you may be asked to complete a task (say you are producing a sales report about sales persons in the US) only to be asked to run through the same exercise again (you are now running the same report for the UK). You may then be asked to run the report again for another country. By the end of the day, you have run (perhaps) 5 or so reports which could have been generated at the same time had you in fact known the full scope of the request at the outset.

The key is to identify 'incrementalists', those that come back to you time and time again placing similar requests in a drip feed fashion, and make sure

that you fully thrash out their requirements from the start. Confirm with them the nature and scope of their request before undertaking it to ensure that you have teased out exactly what they require. This can be a great time saver.

21. Be content with short meetings

How often is it that you have set up a meeting for (say) an hour and you realize part way through that you do not need all the time set aside to discuss the issues at hand? This can happen more frequently with regular catch-ups or check-ins where the agenda may be a little looser and time in the diary fixed weeks or months in advance.

My advice to you is to be ruthless with your time management, and if the meeting looks like finishing early be confident about returning the remaining time back to the meeting participants. They will probably thank you for it.

22. Streamline

Streamlining is about cutting unnecessary steps out of a process. If you can get from 'A' to 'C' without having to pass through 'B' then you have saved yourself some time. Take a look at your tasks and processes and establish whether they are in fact as efficient and effective as possible. If you find that you are spending significant amounts of time on parts of the process that add little or no value, then you have probably identified a prime candidate for streamlining.

23. Check that you're on track

One way to maintain high productivity levels is to track your progress on a regular basis. If you are falling behind in a task, procedure or project you should find ways to speed things up or, if necessary, speak to your boss or the project sponsor about the potential push back of the target date.

Regular checking allows you to have ongoing, clear and precise conversations about your ability to meet the various objectives that have been set for you. If you do not have a feel for how you are progressing, then you won't be able to raise issues and discuss them in a timely manner.

24. Be healthy

By eating a balanced diet and exercising regularly you can certainly impact your cognitive powers of awareness and ensure that you remain more alert in the workplace. Indeed, having sufficient uninterrupted sleep is without doubt very important too. Where you can control these factors you should work hard to ensure that they benefit your performance when at work. If you feel that these factors are out of your control, step back and see what you can do about it. Often you have more power than you realize to alter your daily routines in order to benefit from a healthier and fitter existence.

25. Learn to say "no"

If you earn a reputation of being the point person for each and every new task, you may sink very quickly in your role. Clearly you wish to add value, undertake exciting tasks and demonstrate to your boss (and beyond) that you're a key player within the team. However, make sure that you manage your workload effectively and where appropriate make it clear that by taking on additional tasks other work may be delayed. Saying "no" sounds very abrupt. I recommend that you prioritize your tasks and demonstrate that you either have time for the additional work or that it will impact on other important tasks that you are undertaking for your boss. Transparency, honesty and openness are normally the best way forward.

The danger of course of never saying no is that you become overloaded with work. Your boss may not even be aware of the issue and hence may not be able to empathize or work with you to resolve the issue.

26. Make use of a mentor

As well as learning from your boss, peers and team members you may be able to gain valuable knowledge and experience from other senior staff throughout the organization. These senior players have often 'been through it' before and have learnt the skills of the trade to succeed in business. They are also removed from your daily tasks and as such can see 'the wood through the trees', being able to help you with issues and resolve problems using lateral thinking skills. Also, they can stop you from making some of the mistakes they may have made when rising through the ranks.

27. Run meetings effectively

Think hard before the meeting about the specific agenda items and the length of time each topic requires. Ensure that the time set aside for discussion is sufficient. From my experience meetings often overrun and if they do not you still find that there was insufficient time to discuss some of the agenda items. It is your job to ensure that this does not happen. After all, others may have prepared thoroughly about a topic that is very important to them. They will be disappointed and may not see you in a good light. So what are the tips to ensure a meeting runs on time?

1. Be clear about the rules on timing. If a discussion looks as if it will be blown out of all proportion then it is probably best to take it 'off-line' and have the relevant individuals (perhaps a sub-group) look into it further. If you are tight on timings those involved in your meetings become better with their own conciseness.
2. Allow enough time for a topic to be discussed. Do not tag on an extra item at the base of the agenda with a 10 minute slot if it is clearly going to last longer. In fact, spend some time making sure that the time slot available for each agenda item is sufficient and where possible make sure that you get buy-in from those presenting.

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