

Harvard Business Review

What Super Productive People Do Differently

By Amantha Imber

December 08, 2020

Summary.

Being productive is not about doing more, but about doing things in an efficient manner.

- To understand how some people manage to get a lot more out of their day than the average person, Amantha Imber interviewed them to learn more about their routines, rituals, practices, and work hacks.
- During her conversations, four practices stood out: 1) Batch your meeting; 2) Avoid using the mouse; 3) Nudge your way to better behavior; 4) Read your work out loud.

In 2018, I came across a meme that was going viral on the Internet. It read, “You have the same number of hours in the day as Beyoncé.” I doubt that anyone became more productive or achieved greater heights as a result of these words, but it made me wonder: Do high achievers approach their days and their work differently than most people? How do they become so efficient and productive?

To explore this question, I set out to interview a number of rock star authors, musicians, entertainers, entrepreneurs, and business leaders for my podcast, How I Work. I spoke to them about their routines, rituals, practices, and work hacks to understand how they get so much more done (even during the pandemic) than your average person.

Four tips especially stood out.

1) Batch your meetings.

Batch checking emails has become a common productivity tip. The idea is that you only look at your inbox two to three times a day or pause notifications for a period of time so that you can focus on work without distractions.

Batching meetings, calls, or virtual events can be equally effective. Research from Ohio State University has shown that when we have a meeting coming up in the next hour or two, we get 22% less work done compared to when we have no upcoming meetings at all.

Think about it. What do you find yourself doing before a Zoom call with your professor, a virtual team update, or a one-on-one meeting with your boss? You’re most likely thinking

about what you're going to say, deliberating questions, or rehearsing some kind of a presentation. It's hard to get into flow when you know you have a major interruption around the corner.

Wharton Professor Adam Grant told me he's found a way around this. "On a teaching day, I hold all my office hours in the same general time frame," he said. "I schedule a five-minute buffer between each just to catch up on email and to have a safety net in case a meeting runs long. Other days, I have no meetings at all and can really focus and be productive."

Consider creating rules around your own schedule. If you are most alert in the mornings, try to schedule your most demanding tasks and meetings early on, and leave the afternoons open for some quiet work hours.

2) Avoid using the mouse.

A study by [Brainscape](#) found that most people lose an average of two seconds per minute of work by using their mouse instead of keyboard shortcuts. That's eight days a year! The benefits of learning keyboard shortcuts can be enormous for your productivity.

Fortunately, most software shares the same shortcuts, meaning the more you learn, the faster you will become across the board. Here are [a few](#) to get you started.

"I almost never ever touch the mouse," Rahul Vohra, founder of [Superhuman](#) (an email software that claims to provide the fastest email experience in the world) told me. "And that's a rule that I abide by, not just for how we built Superhuman, but in almost every piece of software I use," Vohra said.

3) Nudge your way to better behavior.

If you're trying to set better work habits, Matt Mullenweg, the co-founder of WordPress and Automattic, told me that small behavioral hacks can lead to the biggest payoffs. "If what is closest to my bed when I wake up is the Kindle and not the phone, I'm more likely to read," said Mullenweg. "But if the phone's on top of the Kindle I'm more likely to look at the phone."

In other words, consider what habits you want to change and think about how you can alter your environment to influence those behaviors. For instance, you've probably heard that turning off your phone or putting it on airplane mode will help you stay more focused on work. In the same way, making small alterations to your surrounding can inspire you to act on things that you've been avoiding or don't naturally want to do.

If you want to read more, lay a stack of books in every room. If you want to cut out junk food, hide your sweets beneath the apples in the fruit bowl so that every time you have a craving, you're presented with a healthier option first. If you want to check social media less often, delete or offload those apps from your phone. If you want to avoid checking emails all day, pause your inbox so you're not distracted by every new notification.

You get the idea.

4) Read your work out loud.

Whether you like it or not, we are all writers. Every day, our success at work or at school is in part determined by how well we can communicate our thoughts through email, reports, projects, and perhaps even articles or books. If you're a student, for example, a big part of your success is defined by how you get work done, and by communicating clearly and precisely. That's half the battle won.

"Nearly everything I write of significance, I will read out loud," New York Times best-selling author Dan Pink told me. "To me, it's a test of does it sound right."

Even though it's time consuming and laborious, Pink says the process helps him better craft his. He suggests looking out for words that are clunkers or difficult to read and replacing them with simpler language so that your writing is easier to digest and understand.

Reading work out loud also allows you to proofread more accurately. You can identify sentences that don't add value and find the optimal rhythm and pace for your work. If you stumble over your own words while reading, you know it's not working. If it's not working for you, it won't work for someone else either, which could lead to a miscommunication that ends up taking up even more of your time to resolve. I found Pink's tip especially helpful. While it can feel tedious, reading my work out loud helps me make my writing more clear, concise, and ultimately more impactful.

Being productive is not about doing more, but about doing things in an efficient manner. Starting now, invest time in these simple strategies and make small changes to get more out of your day.

Dr Amantha Imber is the founder of behavioral science consultancy Inventium and the host of How I Work, a podcast about the habits and rituals of the world's most successful people.