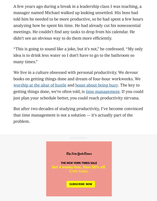
Productivity Isn't About Time Management. It's About Attention Management.

"Time management" is not a solution — it's actually part of the problem.



Erik Wiedemann

By Adam Grant

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A few years ago during a break in a leadership class I was teaching, a manager named Michael asked to speak privately with me. Michael had told him he needed to be more productive, so he had spent a few hours analyzing how he spent his time. He had already cut the unnecessary meetings. He couldn't find any tasks to drop from his calendar. He didn't see an obvious way to do them more efficiently.

"This is going to sound like a joke, but it's not," he confessed. "My only idea is to drink less water so I don't have to go to the bathroom so many times."

We live in a culture obsessed with personal productivity. We devote books on getting things done and productivity apps for everybody. We worship at the altar of hustle and boast about being busy. We glorify things that we don't even like, just because they demonstrate that we put plus-size schedules into our could-much-productivity servant.

But after two decades of studying and teaching on time management that time management is not a solution — it's actually part of the problem.

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For most of my career, the most frequent question I've gotten is: "How do I get more done?" Sometimes I would be tempted to know I'm an organizational psychologist, and productivity is one of my areas of expertise. More often they are asking because they've read a New York Times article or a popular book that I get a lot done.

But the truth is that I'm not productive. I'm constantly fretting half short of my dials goals for progress, or I've struggled to answer the question. It wasn't until recently that I spoke with Michael that I dawned on me: Being prolific is not about time management. There are a limited number of hours in the day, and time management management just makes us more aware of how many of those hours we waste.

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A better option is attention management: Prioritize the people and projects that matter, and it won't matter how long anything takes.

Attention management is the art of focusing on getting things done for the right reasons, in the right place and at the right moments.

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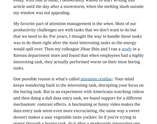
O.K., sure, but why shift our focus?

According to conventional wisdom about time management, you're supposed to set goals for when you want to finish a task. I decided to get a lot this article. The target was 1,200 words, so I sat down at an a.m. and gave myself three hours, which would allow me to write at the leisurely pace of six words per minute. I then spent the next six minutes writing a grand total of six words, starting at a blading [illegible] and ending with a sentence that I deleted because it sounded like a cross between a fortune cookie and the writers who have no clue. I know you're mocking me, you poor blinking excuse for a rectangle.) Then I wondered how many words I actually could get done and how a typing test. I wasn't happy with my score, so I took another ... and another.

Eventually I got frustrated and shifted to attention management. It B. Write once [illegible] to see the remaining time. I wanted to improve (or sorry) the world and a desire to enjoy (or sorry) the world. I wanted to have a plan the day? But to see research, I've found that productive people don't agonize about which desire to pursue. They go with their gut instincts, gravitating toward what they are personally interesting and socially meaningful.

So instead of focusing on how quickly I wanted to finish this article, I focused on why I was writing it. I felt a sense of purpose in the process, and I ended up with a piece that I'm proud of. I'm happy with the research. I'd finally have somewhere to point people when they ask about productivity, and it might help some of those people. That led me to start thinking about specific people who might read this, which reminded me of Michael. Hmm.

Often our productivity struggles are caused not by a lack of efficiency, but a lack of motivation. Productivity is a means, not an end. It's not end. It's only virtuous if the end is worthy. If productivity is your goal, you have to rely on willpower to stay focused on the task at hand. If you pay attention to why you're excited about the project and who will benefit from it, you'll be naturally pulled into it by intrinsic motivation.



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But how do I stay on task if I'm not worried about time?

Intention management also involves noticing when you get things done. I grew up in Michigan, and when I went back there for grad school, I tried to continue my Michigan tradition of tailgating.

"It's too cold and gray," she said after a visit during a snowstorm. She then went off to Stanford. That next Michigan winter was the coldest, grayest season I remember, and I never been more productive. There was nothing to do but work!

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Sure enough, a series of studies led by Julie Lee (now at McGregor) show that bad weather is good for productivity because we're less likely to be distracted by the thought of going outside. Researchers found that on days when it rained, Japanese bank employees finished transactions faster and made fewer errors. Similar data in Canada, Australia, people were more efficient in correcting spelling errors in a text when it was cloudy. Lee and her colleagues also found that people in the cold spent the day with a stereotypic, where the melting shaft inside my window was not appealing.

My favorite part of attention management is the when. Most of our productivity challenges are with tasks that we don't want to do but that we need to do. For years, I thought the way to handle these tasks was to do them first, so I would have momentum and get the unpleasant work out of the way. Our colleagues Alex Zhu and I ran a study in a Korean department store and found that when employees had a highly motivating task, they actually performed worse on their most boring tasks.

One possible reason is what's called attention residue. Your mind keeps thinking about the task you just finished, and it's distracting you on the boring task. But in an experiment with Alexander Kogut, we found that when people switch from a fun task to a boring task, they actually perform better