Productivity Tips for the Entrepreneur

Ten simple changes to transform your business

business culture advantage

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How to prioritize the tasks that will have the greatest impact on your business

Tip 1:

Be intentional with your week

So many entrepreneurs wake up in the morning and immediately check their email and social media, continue to check their inbox and social feeds throughout the day, and then check their phone—just one more time—before going to bed.

Sound familiar?

In today's screen-centric society, it's easy to feel the pressure to be constantly accessible. But do you really think that making your response time under 5 minutes is going to improve your bottom line?

The real issue is that you are reacting to what's happening to you rather than acting based on your own priorities.

Here's my recommendation: Set your own priorities first— for the entire week.

Instead of being driven by what other people want or need, figure out what's most important for you to do and focus on that.

Spend 30 mins each Sunday evening planning the week ahead. Ask yourself: what are the one or two most important things I could do this week? Then, block out time on your calendar over the coming week to do those things which will move your business forward.

Don't be afraid to shuffle some of the stuff that's already blocked out on your calendar. What you're inserting are the most important things for the week, so, by definition, they should take priority over whatever might be there.

For your daily priorities, see Tip 2.

Tip 2:

Be intentional with your day:

Choose 1-3-5

Do you get to the end of the day and wonder where your day has gone?

As entrepreneurs, we have to wear so many hats that it's easy to get whip-lash as we move from one role to an-other. The entrepreneurial life is a busy one, but if you follow tip number one, you now have a general framework for the week. But how do you decide what you're going to try and get done each day?

Here's what I suggest: Spend a few minutes at the beginning of each day selecting things off your to-do list (you do have one, right?).

In order to feel good at the end of the day, it's important to not over-com-mit—especially to yourself. As a gen-eral guideline, **I recommend the following rubric:**

Select one LARGE task (about an hour), three MEDIUM tasks (15-20 mins) and five SMALL tasks (<5mins).

These numbers can be adjusted up or down to take into account how much discretionary time you have in a partic-ular day. For example, if you are in back-to-back meetings for most of the day, it may not be reasonable to attempt a large task, but maybe you'll have time for more smaller tasks between meet-ings.

Tip 3: Break projects into tasks

It's easy to become overwhelmed by the number and size of the projects on a to-do list. But, when you think about it, you can't actually DO a project, you can only do tasks.

David Allen, author of <u>Getting Things Done</u>, defines a project as anything that takes more than one action. When you scan your to-do list for the next task to tackle and find a project on the list, you naturally stop and think about all the actions you'll need to take to complete it. Your brain protests, and instead of picking one action and making some progress, you just move to the next item on the list—and that project continues to just sit there.

Here's my recommendation: Instead of adding projects to your to-do list, make a separate list of projects.

Be sure you maintain this list in a place that you will check at least weekly to be certain none of the important projects are being neglected.

For each project, ask yourself: "what does done look like?" and "what is the very next physical activity I need to do to move this project forward?" Is it a phone call, some research, maybe an email, something else? That's something you can do—that's a TASK.

Put that TASK on your to-do list. Once that task is complete, then you can look back at your project list and decide on the very next action to continue to make progress toward your goal. Now add that to your to-do list. Slowly, but surely, you'll make progress, and your projects will be complete.

Tip 4:

Dedicate an extra 15 minutes to a special project

Do you have a special project that requires extra focus or attention, but you just can't find time during your regular day because of competing priorities?

Many entrepreneurs have a seemingly endless supply of great ideas; perhaps there's a special project that will really move your business forward, but you just don't have time to tackle it because it's not aimed at current revenue. You know it will make a significant difference in your business in the future, but you can't sacrifice current revenue to work on it. Or perhaps it isn't mainstream to your current business. Maybe it's something else entirely.

Here's what I recommend: Get up 15 mins early every day and spend that time on your special project.

You'll get 90 mins every week of completely uninterrupted time – that's about 75 hours for the year. If you get up 20 mins early, you'll get nearly 100 extra hours in a year! Just think how much progress you can make in that amount of time.

How to take control of your email—without it controlling you

Tip 5:

Avoid the morning inbox check

Do you look at your email first thing when you wake up—only to look up and realize that a whole hour has passed, and you're still doing email?

The trouble with looking at email before you set your intentions for the day is that it puts you in "reactive" mode from the very start. Instead of focusing on your priorities, you are allowing other people to dictate what you work on by reacting to their emails. See also, Tip 2.

Here's what I suggest: Do NOT open your email until 10:30-11 in the morning.

Work on your own priorities while you are fresh and have peak energy. If you are really concerned about this delay in your response time, consider creating an auto-response, indicating that you only respond to emails a couple of times each day. Suggest that for emergencies they call or text, whichever is likely to get immediate attention.

"But," you say, "my business is different!" Perhaps you have a business in which there are true emergencies, and you want to be able to filter through those emails quickly. Consider setting an alert that buzzes your phone ONLY for those certain emails (either based on subject or sender). You can also color code those emails so they appear in a special color in your inbox.

This is similar to the next tip...

Tip 6:

Filter your non-critical emails

Many entrepreneurs get overwhelmed by the sheer volume of email they receive on a daily basis.

If every time you open your email—which you are now doing later in the morning because you're following Tip 5—you find that a good portion of your new emails are from predictable sources, but not critical to your business, DO NOT leave them in your inbox. If you leave them unprocessed, then every time you come back to your inbox, you will once again need to make that decision not to deal with them.

Here's my solution: Create a filter for your incoming emails that puts those less important messages into a folder.

Handle these as a batch later on. This way they won't distract you when you open your inbox.

These might be email newsletters, minutes from meetings you need to review later, or emails from networking partners. In Outlook, this is called a "rule"; in gmail it's called a filter. Here's where to find these actions in each respective email service:

Automatically filter these emails in a "to be processed today" or "non-critical inbox items" folder, so you know where to

go when you have a block of time to look at them. The goal is to get your inbox to ZERO every day or at least once a week.

This way, you are confident that all important emails will be dealt with in a timely manner...
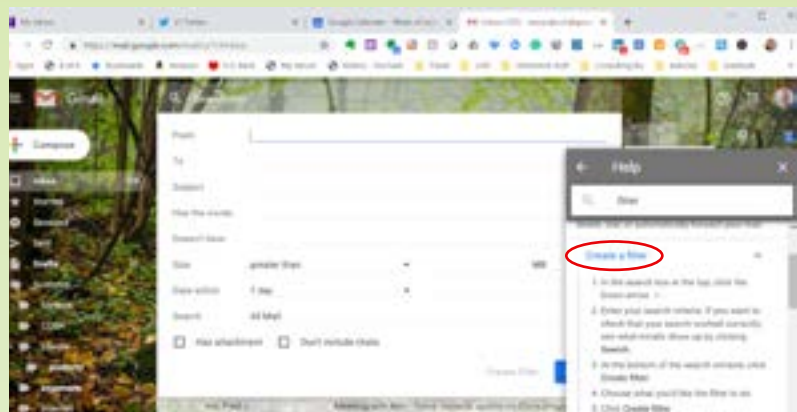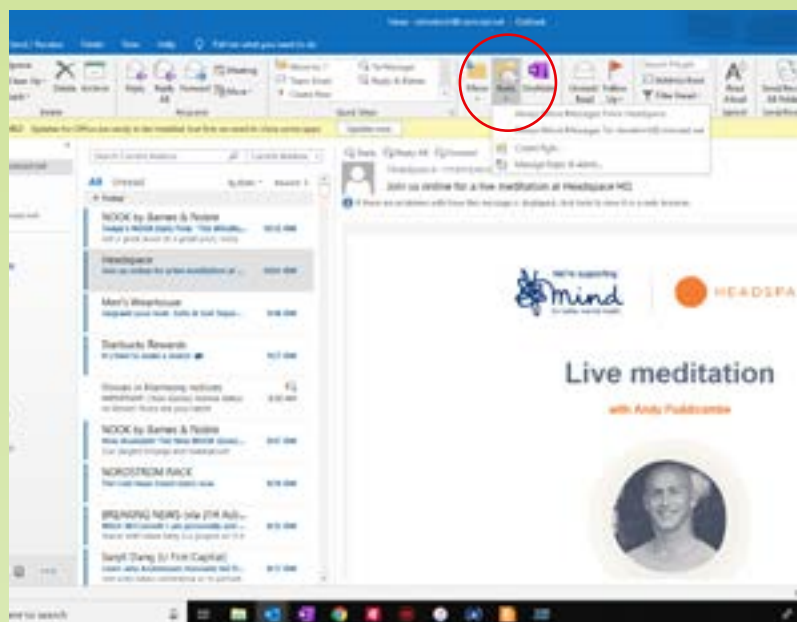
Tip 7:

Process your email in blocks

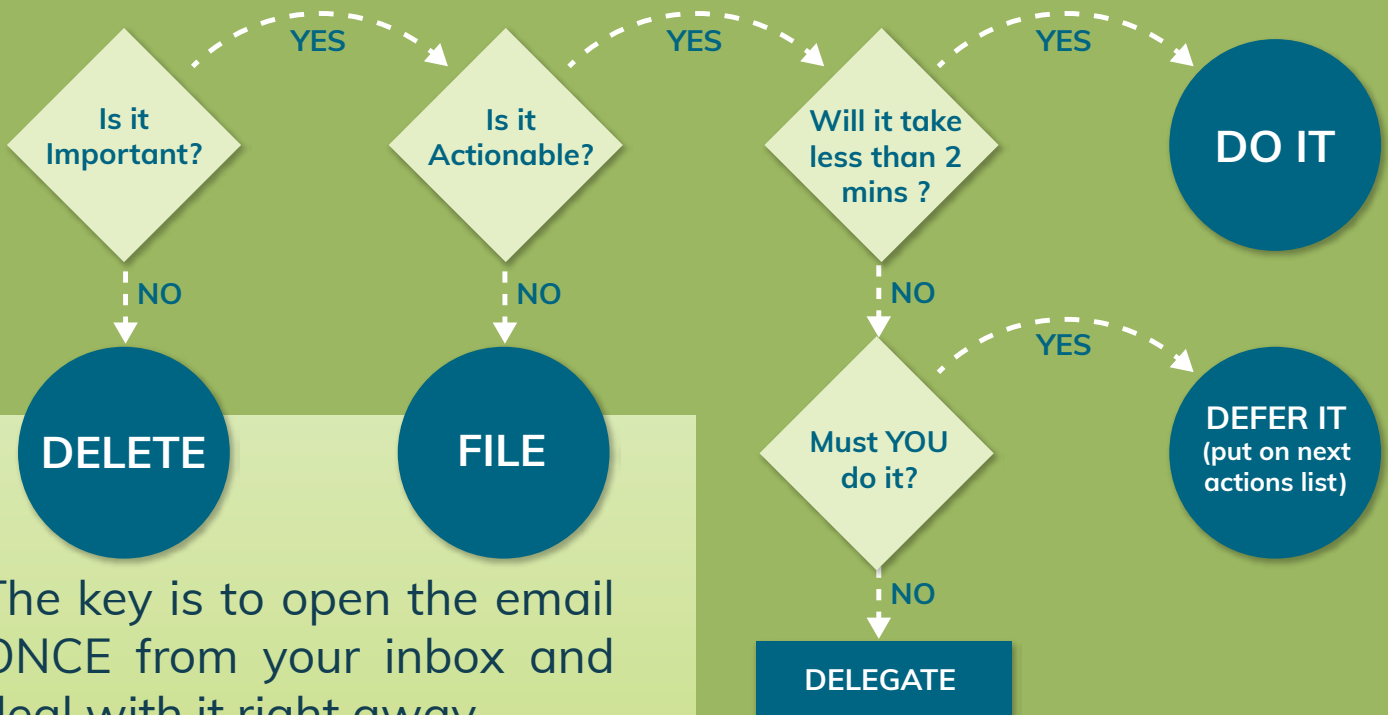Do you find yourself constantly checking your email inbox?

The business world likes to perpetuate the myth that we must answer every email within minutes of receipt or somehow we will miss the next big opportunity. The truth is that it's pretty unlikely that the person who sent the email is sitting by their computer or looking at their phone waiting for a response.

When we go on vacation for a week or even longer, somehow the world seems to keep going even in the absence of immediate email response from us. Consider an auto-response that indicates when during the day you will be more likely to respond and urge an alternative communication technique for "emergencies."

My recommendation: Process incoming email in blocks instead of addressing each one as it comes.

Set aside two or three 30-minute blocks each day to deal with what has come in during the past few hours.

Here's a simple flowchart to help you quickly process these emails:

```
Is it Important?  --YES-->  Is it Actionable?  --YES-->  Will it take less than 2 mins ?  --YES-->  DO IT
     |NO                         |NO                           |NO                                      
   DELETE                      FILE                       Must YOU do it?  --YES-->  DEFER IT (put on next actions list)
                                                               |NO
                                                            DELEGATE
```

The key is to open the email ONCE from your inbox and deal with it right away.

Tip 8: Reduce the distraction of alerts and notifications

Are you often interrupted by pings and beeps for every new email or social media post?

The average entrepreneur is so concerned that something will be missed and that any delay will mean the loss of an opportunity.

But the reality is that your clients are probably not sitting idly at their computer or staring at their phone waiting for your reply. And, if you are focused on doing what's most important for you and your business at the moment, this ping could cost you anywhere from five to twenty minutes of focused productive time.

Here's what I recommend: Reduce distraction by reducing the number of alerts you get during the day.

One method for this is to put your phone in "do not disturb" mode when you are working on a critical project. But it's

even better if you can reduce alerts overall: with any mobile device, you have the ability to determine which of those notifications come through.

You can choose to turn off ALL the notifications or just allow certain individuals to interrupt what you are doing. You should certainly stop all notifications for email and generic social media updates—on your computer and your mobile devices.

You can select certain individuals or groups to have special status regarding notifications and then allow only some alerts to come through. In our family, we use text messaging for items that need immediate response and Facebook messenger for informational messages that don't need attention right away. This makes it easy for me to set up my notifications correctly and only allow those true emergencies to interrupt what I'm doing.

Tip 9:

Use the Pomodoro Technique to make consistent progress

Sometimes it just feels like you can't make progress on a critical project.

This often feels like procrastination—and maybe it is—but every time you sit down to work on this particular item, something happens to distract you from making impactful progress.

Sometimes this is because the project is just too large and you feel overwhelmed or just don't know where to start. Other times this is because you just don't feel like doing it (but you know it needs to be done).

Here's what I recommend: Try the Pomodoro Technique.

This technique was invented by Francesco Cirillo and is named for the tomato-shaped timer found in every Italian kitchen ("pomodoro" means "tomato" in Italian).

Set a timer for 25 minutes (yes, there's an app for that) and FOCUS on your specific task for those 25 mins. Turn off ALL DISTRACTIONS and focus. When you get to the end of the 25 minutes, take a five minute break. This is one "pomodoro." You might be surprised both at how much you have accomplished and how fast the time went.

The complete Pomodoro Technique includes putting four pomodoros (pomodori?) back-to-back and then taking a longer break (15-20 minutes), but I find that often just doing one or two is sufficient to break the logjam and get the project going.

Tip 10:

Give yourself a surge of energy when you hit a lull

You might know when your best, most productive time is—this is your Biological Prime Time (BPT). If you aren't sure, you might find it interesting to plot your energy level throughout the day. Set up an Excel spreadsheet and a calendar alert or alarm for each hour. Note your energy level (from 1-10) at each hour for a week or two. A pattern will emerge.

My BPT is in the morning, generally first thing after I wake up. It's one of the reasons I find it extremely challenging to sleep in—once the brain is going, it's hard to shut it off.

I start my day with a few yoga stretches, the 5 Minute Journal, my daily meditation, and then set my intentions for the day (see Tip 2). Most days, I will include some reading or learning time, but that is schedule-dependent. Then, after breakfast, I focus on my most important task for the day.

After lunch, however, I often hit a real dip in my energy level. I just can't seem to focus on those hard-to-complete tasks that take extra creativity. That's one of the reasons I put my coffee meetings in the afternoon; I get the pick-me-up of the caffeine, and it's okay if I'm not in my most productive state.

My recommendation: Get the blood flowing to restore your energy when you hit a lull.

Neurologically, we can restore some zip by taking a nap (just 20 mins is enough) or getting the blood flowing back to the brain through exercise, like cardio or strength-training. The bottom line is that just sitting down and trying to slog through your lull is probably not going to help you be at your productive best.

You should find that you'll have another surge in energy after your nap or exercise; perhaps not as good as your BPT, but still good enough to produce some excellent results.

BONUS Tip:

Take care of YOU.

When entrepreneurs work all day, every day, after a while the grind gets to them.

Even if you are doing something you truly love, you can't keep it up indefinitely without taking proper care of yourself.

What I recommend: Take care of your mind, your body, and your spirit to help you have consistent energy day after day.

Dr. Stephen Covey called this Habit 7: Sharpen the Saw. Just like your heart can't beat just once a day or once an hour, and you can't eat just once a day (well, maybe some of us could – ha!), your body, mind, and spirit need constant renewal.

For your body, you need adequate sleep. We don't really understand all that sleep does for us, but most experts recommend at least 7 hours/night. Mythbusters showed that sleep deficit eventually becomes as severe as being legally drunk.

We also need adequate exercise. Some say walking 10,000 steps each day is sufficient. That's a good start, but beyond that, getting your heart rate up through aerobic exercise has also been shown to have significant health benefits.

Finally, we all know we need to eat properly. Eating a balanced diet of less processed foods—not things that come out of a box—has been shown to have great health benefits, too.

For your mind, try to learn something every day. I try to spend 20-30 minutes reading each morning.

It's also important to learn to relax. According to Tim Ferriss, nearly everyone who is successful meditates every day. This could be for the mind or for the spirit—who's to say?

Finally, take time to connect with people. Don't sit alone at your desk every day. Get out and interact with other people. Build relationships. It will help your spirit and your business.