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**Managing Yourself**

## 4 Ways to Get More Done in Less Time

by Amantha Imber

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**Summary.** Ever come out of a 12-hour workday feeling exhausted, yet not productive enough? We spend our days trying to tick things off our to-do list, and still, it feels like we haven't done enough, or worse, haven't been efficient. How we can be more productive in ways that... [more](#)

Fun fact: 96% percent of people check their mobile phone within one hour of waking up in the morning (and a whopping 61% take a peek within the first five minutes).

While it may seem harmless, checking our phones as soon as we open our eyes sets us up to have a “reactive” kind of day.

Think about it.

If the first thing you do when you roll out of bed is open your email, read your texts, or listen to your voicemails, you are essentially putting yourself second. Whether good, bad, or no news awaits, you are letting other people set your mood for the day.

Most of us are guilty of this, and it inevitably affects our productivity.

I spend most of time thinking about just that: how we can be more productive in ways that feel manageable and good. Over the past three years, I’ve interviewed people in every field — from publishing and entertainment to the corporate world — to figure out how we can proactively structure our days to get more out of them.

Through these discussions, I’ve heard time and again, that you can’t let other people’s priorities determine the course of your day. Rather, you must be deliberate about how you wake up, organize your time, and fit work into your schedule.

Here are four tips from highly productive people that have stuck with me — and that I hope will work for you too.

**1) Align your most important work with your chronotype.**

Your chronotype is just a fancy way of saying “your body clock.” It refers to the natural 24-hour sleep-wake cycle we all experience. Everyone has a unique chronotype and it influences the peaks and troughs of energy we feel throughout our days.

Around 10% of people are stereotypical *larks*, who feel most energetic in the mornings. At the other end of the spectrum are the 20% of the population who are *owls*, or people who do their best work at night. Most of us lie somewhere in middle, and experience peak alertness before noon, an energy dip after lunch, and a second wind in the late afternoon.

Dan Pink, author of *When: The Scientific Secrets of Perfect Timing*, told me that paying attention to your chronotype and structuring your tasks around your energy peaks can help you get a lot more done in less time.

“On days I plan to write, I do it in the mornings, when I’m most alert,” he told me. “I set myself a word count and I won’t do anything until I hit it. I won’t bring my phone into the office with me. I will not open up my email. Once I’ve hit my goal, I’m free to do other things.” Pink takes full advantage of the energy he feels upon waking by using his mornings for deep, focused work — and avoiding any and all distractions.

When he has an energy dip in the mid-afternoon, he tends to stick with easier tasks. “I’ll spend that time answering emails, filing and scanning things,” he said. “Then, when I get my second wind, and come out of the trough around three or four o’clock, I do tasks that don’t require me to be locked down and vigilant, like interviews. During this time, I feel more mentally loose, creative, and open to ideas.”

As a result of sticking to this schedule, *When* was the only book Pink submitted to his publishers on time.

**Pro Tip:** To plan your workday better, start the process of restructuring your day by assessing your chronotype here. Align the work that requires your most intense brain power with your energy peaks.

## 2) Plan your day the night before.

A productive day doesn't just happen. It requires planning. When we write down what we intend to do — and when and where we intend to do it — we are far more likely to achieve our goals.

Google's executive productivity advisor, Laura Mae Martin, told me that she plans her day the night before. To start with, she writes down her top three priorities on The Daily Plan template she created. "Underneath the first priority, it says, 'Until this first task is finished, everything else is a distraction.' So that's my one thing I need to get done."

She then uses the same template to plan her day at a micro-level, hour-by-hour. "Even just writing down that I plan to work out between 7 am to 8 am makes me more likely to do that." Martin's process also includes what she refers to as "snack sized to-dos," which are tasks she can do in between meetings as they only require a few minutes, like making a phone call or replying to emails.

**Pro Tip:** Take control of your day with some meticulous planning. Try Martin's Daily Plan template for one week. The ideal time to fill it out is at the end of your workday so that whatever needs to be tackled tomorrow is still fresh in your mind.

## 3) Develop different rituals for different types of work.

Being deliberate about where you work from is another way to add structure to your day. Consider doing what Georgetown University Professor and author of *Deep Work*, Cal Newport does, and deliberately link different locations with different types of tasks.

"When I'm trying to solve a theoretical computer science proof, the rituals I use almost always involve various walking routes around my town," Newport explained.

But when doing writing work, you'll find Newport approaching this in a completely different way. "In my house, I had a custom library table built that was reminiscent of the tables at the

university library where I used to work as an undergraduate. It had brass library lamps next to the dark wood bookcases. When I sit there, writing, I have a bright light shining right down on the desk, and it's just me and my computer.”

Think about the main categories of work that you do, and start to create rituals around them. The rituals might involve your physical location or the time of day you complete a certain task. For example, you may prefer clearing your inbox while sitting outside on a sunny porch, and prefer doing your Zoom calls in the quiet of your bedroom.

**Pro tip:** Practice these rituals for at least a couple of weeks. It takes time to get into a flow, but when you do, it will become easier and happen more quickly the more you practice. Your brain will begin to associate cues — like your physical environment and the time of day — with certain types of work.

#### **4) Avoid being 100% booked.**

It's easy to assume that the most productive people are booked solid for 100% of their day. However, most of the people I've spoken to have said quite the opposite.

Darren Murph, the head of remote work at GitLab, the world's largest all-remote company, told me that being booked a 100% of the time is a huge risk.

“If you have your entire day blocked with meetings, it leaves no room whatsoever for real life to happen. If your child stubs their toe, for example, and you need to address that even for eight minutes of your day, it can have a catastrophic negative impact on your mental health and on the schedules of other people,” Murph said.

When you have no free time on your calendar, you leave little room for yourself to have serendipitous conversations, or moments of creativity and inspiration.

**Pro Tip:** A fully blocked day can give you a false sense of productivity. If your calendar looks full, deliberately schedule time to do nothing. You can use this time as a buffer time for things that run over or unexpected tasks that crop up during the day. Or you can even use it for planned spontaneity – times for unexpected ideas to be sparked.

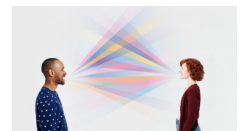
Productivity isn't about how many hours you work, or how many to-do's you're able to cross off your list. It's about doing what you need in order to work in an efficient and time effective manner. And that starts with being intentional about your day. Don't leave it to chance — use the tips above to get started.

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

## Recommended for You

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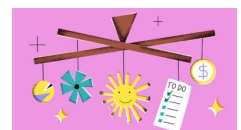
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