

5 Mental Mistakes That Kill Your Productivity

If you're sometimes frustrated about how little you accomplish during your work day, you're not alone. [Research indicates](#) that only 26% of people often leave the office having accomplished the tasks they set out to do. It's common to feel as if you've been busy but haven't done anything important. Of course, life isn't about being a productivity robot in which every second is optimized. But most of us do want to feel well-organized and efficient in pursuing key goals and solving critical problems. A good first step is to understand the mental mistakes that typically prevent us from focusing on and finishing meaningful work. Here are five common ones:

1. You overestimate how much focused time you have in a typical day.

Long-term creative projects, strategic thinking, and skill- and relationship-building require big blocks of concentrated attention. It's easy to optimistically think you've got all day, or even several hours, for that type of work and subsequently plan your priorities based on that assumption. However, for many of us, meetings, email, Slack, phone calls, and "quick questions" take up a considerable portion of our time in the office. Aggregated data from the [time-tracking app RescueTime](#) suggests that people have as little as one hour and 12 minutes of uninterrupted time in their day.

If you acknowledge the limited time you'll have for focused work, you can more ruthlessly select your absolute top priority and protect yourself from distractions for certain periods. When you do have 60 to 90 minutes available, try to focus on your bigger-picture goals (as tempting as it might be to focus on more time-sensitive routine work). Remember, too, that even those complex and important projects usually have some admin tasks associated with them (e.g., hunting down a reference when writing a book) that don't require as much focus or creativity. As a workaround for having limited time for the harder work, identify those to-dos and slot them into that spare 15 minutes you have between meetings or those longer free periods during which you suspect there will be interruptions.

2. You overlook proven, sustainable methods that seem too boring or too simple.

If you consume a lot of productivity self-help material, you're probably familiar with many core concepts from cognitive-behavioral psychology. For instance, if you form "implementation intentions" you're more likely to follow through. This involves planning when and where you'll do a task and [how you'll overcome obstacles you'll encounter](#). Likewise, you might've previously read about how shrinking the number of decisions you make in a day will reduce your mental fatigue and improve your willpower. And, you might know that when you make any task easier, for example by ensuring you have the needed materials on hand, you're more likely to begin. However, once we've heard these principles, we often write them off as "old news" even when we haven't fully implemented them or tried them at all.

For each of your important projects, have your [next action](#) defined and everything you need to complete it handy and ready to go. For instance, if you want to video yourself rehearsing a big speech, set up the space you plan to use, do a test recording for a minute, and make sure you have enough free space on your recording device. If you remove these types of practical barriers to getting started, they won't eat into your focused time.

If you like to see yourself as a special or unique individual, you might find that simple solutions don't sit well with that, since you don't like to see yourself as being like everyone else. This is a trap. Make sure you're employing boring, but easy and proven-to-work, strategies in all the ways you could be. Get better at creatively applying simple ideas rather than searching for complex ones.

3. You think about change in an all-or-nothing way.

We often suspect that a certain habit change would help our productivity but feel psychologically resistant to doing it. For instance, you might believe that getting more sleep would help your productivity but you're a night owl and bristle at advice about going to bed early. Instead of perseverating on what you feel resistant to, look for changes you're willing to make that don't feel like a big deal. Automating your house lights to dim (or turn red), using blue light filters on your devices, or spending the last 30 minutes of your work day planning the following day (creating a transition), might help you effortlessly shift the time you *want* to go to sleep 10-15 minutes earlier. However, if you think you have to make a two-hour change to your bedtime or nothing, or you're only focused on the fact you don't want to give up sleeping with your phone, you won't make any changes at all. Collect the easy wins that don't trigger your psychological resistance. When you successfully make a low-key change, your willingness to make other changes will probably naturally expand.

4. You forget how to do recurrent but infrequent tasks.

If you do a task daily, you likely have an efficient process for getting it done. If you do it once or a few times a year, you might not. In *The Healthy Mind Toolkit*, I wrote about how every time I needed to clean my printer drum, I would spend at least 10 minutes finding the instructions online for how to do it. Now I have those instructions saved in an email to myself under the subject line "how to clean printer drum" so I no longer have to go through all the steps of finding my printer's model number and Googling it.

After you've finished any process that you'll need to repeat in the future, write yourself instructions for the most efficient way to do it and save those in an easily searchable place.

5. You underestimate the costs of small time/energy leaks.

Spending a little bit of time most days on your [important but not urgent](#) big-picture projects and/or improving your skills is often enough to dramatically enhance your overall outcomes compared with spending no time. On the flip side, small time and energy leaks can have a bigger negative impact than people perceive. That ten minutes you spend searching for keys or responding to an email that didn't need an immediate reply, is inconsequential in and of itself. However, many of

these instances can disrupt your flow, reinforce a negative sense of identity, and generally sap your energy. When you create systems (e.g., reducing unnecessary decisions, streamlining and simplifying tasks, batching, automating, outsourcing, or using checklists) that address small time/energy leaks, you'll experience mental clarity benefits from doing so that far outstrip the time savings.

While the tips in this article won't solve all your productivity problems, they can give you a better shot at getting the most important things done.