

# How work environment impacts productivity

Making your environment work for you

Harold L. Taylor



HAROLD L TAYLOR

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# **HOW WORK ENVIRONMENT IMPACTS PRODUCTIVITY**

**MAKING YOUR ENVIRONMENT  
WORK FOR YOU**

How work environment impacts productivity: Making your environment work for you

1<sup>st</sup> edition

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# 1 ADVICE FOR THOSE WORKING WITHOUT AN OFFICE

## 1.1 THE VALUE OF STRUCTURE

For most managers and entrepreneurs, an office is still a physical place of work such as a fully equipped room, a cubicle or a desk in a fixed location. But for more and more people, the office has been replaced with a digital handheld device, which goes with them wherever they go. They feel it's no longer necessary – or in some cases they no longer have the opportunity – to have a specific place to work. And many workers no longer have a hardcopy planner, paper documents and files, a landline telephone or regular face-to-face interactions with business associates.

For these people, work is no longer a place to go to, but a state of mind. There is no limit to the length of a workday. The 9-to-5 day is being replaced by the 24-hour day. There is no beginning or end to work – just as there is no single location where the bulk of the work gets done.

In days gone by, when we all had structure in our lives, we scheduled breaks, lunch hours, and time to rejuvenate. When he did work at home, it was said to be “on our own time.” Normally, the time after 5 PM was spent at home with family and friends or going to a ball game or for a walk in the park or kicking a soccer ball with the next-door neighbor's kids. And in spite of spending two thirds of our time away from work, we managed to hold down a good job or build a successful business, drive a nice car, and maintain a decent level of productivity.

I'm not saying the old way of working without technology was better, only different. We increased productivity in those days by taking time management seriously and utilizing most of the working portion of the days getting the important things done. This required that we set goals, establish policies and procedures, increase efficiency, focus on priorities and learn to say no. We had to overcome both procrastination and perfectionism, cooperate with our coworkers, and generate new ideas through team effort. We did not work in isolation. The result was quite astounding considering that we had limited technology and limited work time.

Just think what today's workers could accomplish with today's technology, flexibility and unlimited access to information if they were also able to add structure to their lives, control the technology, and work efficiently in this ever changing environment.

It's a lot easier to add structure with a specific desk and work area, and I advise mobile workers to have a "home base" when they can at least hang their hat and access information and work undisturbed on priority tasks at certain times of the day.

The June, 2016 issue of *Mindful* magazine mentioned that an estimated 105 million people will be "mobile workers" by 2020, getting their work done with flexible office situations. And a U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics survey found that 24% of all workers work at home at least part of the day.

How does one stay productive in an environment that may change from week to week or even day-to-day? Well to start, we can apply those time-tested strategies that will still work regardless of the environment. These would include setting specific goals for the week, developing personal policies or guidelines, planning our week, and making specific commitments as opposed to simply working from "to do" lists.

Many of these strategies have been lost as we scurry to keep up with the quickening pace of life. We have been playing "rushing roulette", gambling that the next email opened might not be a waste of time. I recommend you quickly check your email in the morning if you feel less stressed doing so, and then limit yourself to checking email at 90-minute intervals throughout the rest of the day.

## **1.2 CHOOSE A "HIGH PERFORMANCE" WORK AREA.**

You could add additional structure to your week by selecting at least one high-performance work area where you are more self-disciplined and focused, and spend at least part of each day there. Your high-performance area is a place where you have the most energy and get your best ideas. This could be a coffee shop or a room at home or a table on the patio. For instance, I like to spend a good hour and a half working on priority tasks at a coffee shop immediately following a brief walk. Being a morning person, I am most mentally alert and creative at that time. Also the coffee shop is well lit with natural lighting and a soothing hum that tends to mask noises and encourage creativity. This is not meant to be a coffee break but rather a work break – free from text messages, email or phone calls. So turn off or silence your devices while working in your high-performance area.

Once we add structure to our lives, the other strategies become easier to apply. I suggest that you:

- a. Set boundaries for your workday. It doesn't have to be 9 to 5 but be specific. For many people this currently varies greatly from day-to-day – even extending into weekends, family time and vacation time. Structure is essential because if you have 24 hours to complete your priority tasks, it may take 24 hours to do so as Parkinson's Law kicks in. So define your workday.
- b. After deciding in advance what your workday will consist of, roughly allocate time for the important projects, tasks and activities that are currently on your plate. This requires the use of a planner or other tool that matches your style. I prefer a hardcopy planner in which I block off times for the important activities – both discrete tasks and ongoing projects. Block project times at least a week in advance.
- c. Develop routines and habits for those ongoing important repetitive activities that you identify. This conserves energy, saves time, and makes it easier to get things done on time.

Depending on the nature of your job and the degree of control you have over your physical work environment, you will have varying degrees of success applying the information in this book. Without a regular place of work, you will have to rely more on self-discipline, willpower and working strategies and less on such things as office décor, layout, window views or the presence of plants and other accessories.

### **1.3 YOUR WORK ENVIRONMENT CAN HELP COUNTERACT LOW SELF-DISCIPLINE**

People struggle with a lack of self-discipline and impulsive behavior. In a way, the *marshmallow experiment*, described in the book, *The marshmallow test* by Walter Mischel, was an exercise in self-discipline. It was conducted at Stanford University back in the 60s. A group of four-year olds were given a marshmallow and promised another, but only if they could wait 20 minutes before eating the first one. Some children could wait and others could not. The researchers then followed the progress of each child into adolescence, and demonstrated that those with the ability to wait were better adjusted and more dependable and scored an average of 210 points higher on the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Those who gave into temptation early on were more likely to be lonely, easily frustrated and stubborn. They didn't cope well with stress and stayed clear of challenges. Yale University later conducted research on adults and found similar results.



The brain skills needed to wait for the greater reward are known as the “executive function” or “self-regulation.” They include inhibiting impulses, sustaining attention, planning, prioritizing and finding and carrying out strategies to stick to plan. These skills mainly reside in the prefrontal cortex – the most involved part of the brain. They take about 20 years to fully develop so it’s no wonder almost half of today’s children have poor self-regulation by the time they get to school.

Weakness in these executive skills may explain why we have such a difficult time concentrating in our office and are so vulnerable to interruptions and are so easily distracted. But we might learn a lesson from those few four-year-olds who obviously had very weak executive skills, and yet were able to resist temptation and wait for the second marshmallow.

In examining the tapes many years later, researchers noticed that those children used strategies that allowed them to resist temptation – strategies that we could use ourselves in order to manage ourselves more effectively. They all changed their environment in some way to offset their natural inclination to devour the marshmallow right away. Some put the marshmallow out of their line of sight by sitting under the table or by facing away from the marshmallow. Others sang a song or hummed a tune, focusing their attention on something other than the marshmallow. They did something to avoid having to face the temptation.

Applying similar strategies to the business office environment, you can position your desk so you’re out of the line of sight of other workers and not staring out an open doorway. You could also turn off your cellphone, engage voicemail, turn off email alerts and close your office door at specific times while you work on your priority projects. You could remove all clutter and other potential distractions from your immediate work area – including any in-baskets, and remove family photos or memorabilia from your line of sight.

## **1.4 MANAGE YOURSELF AS WELL AS YOUR OFFICE**

You could also work on projects for a maximum 60 or 90 minutes at a time. If you find even that’s too long to postpone the urge to interrupt yourself, shorten the work sessions. You could always increase them gradually later. Between sessions you could check email, return phone calls and grab a coffee. Work in short sprints rather than attempt marathons. Research shows that it takes a lot of energy to practice willpower. You can do a lot to conserve energy by making your office or “high performance area” worker-friendly.

Do what you can to develop a work environment that makes it easier to resist the temptation of interrupting yourself or others, checking email constantly, grabbing for your smartphone whenever there’s a call or being distracted by other things. It takes self-discipline. But adding structure to your day will make it much easier – since you will have fewer distractions to resist.

## 2 OVERCOMING PRODUCTIVITY KILLERS

### 2.1 ARE DISTRACTIONS DEPLETING YOUR ENERGY?

Distractions affect your short-term memory and reduce your ability to make purposeful decisions. For example, if listening to your car radio, you could miss your turnoff, and if watching TV, you could nibble your way through 1000 calories.

Willpower or self-control is a limited resource. If you use much of it to cope with stress in your life, for instance, you could more easily slip back into old habits that waste time, such as procrastination, perfectionism, packrat tendencies and so on.

Self-control requires energy that can easily be depleted if you are involved in a lot of decision-making, multitasking, problem solving, interruptions or mentally taxing projects. It can be replenished by such things as sleep, relaxation, exercise, regular breaks and a balanced diet. It can also be boosted in the short term by simply standing up and stretching, having a coffee or munching a sweet. Munch in moderation however.

Rather than drain your current energy, you should protect it by choosing a suitable working environment whenever possible, adopt policies that eliminate continual interruptions, and maintain a work pace that does not create stress or put an unrealistic demand on your brain. This might be achieved by limiting work sessions to a maximum of 90 minutes without a major break, and alternating between mental work and physical or emotional work throughout the day.

Distractions in particular are energy drainers because they involve multitasking – switching mentally to and from the interruptions – in an attempt to address those new challenges while maintaining a degree of focus on the project at hand. That's why it's important to build a habit of turning off cell phones, engaging voicemail, ignoring email, and having a workplace devoid of visual distractions while you focus on your priority work.

As mentioned, habits and routines consume less energy since your brain switches them to autopilot. For more information on energy management, refer to my e-book, *Manage your personal energy*, published by Bookboon.com, 2016.

## 2.2 WHY ISN'T PRODUCTIVITY INCREASING?

If we take credit for the productivity increases due to technology, yes, our personal productivity could be increasing. But take away technology and compare our current productivity to what it was before the digital revolution, and we are less productive. This is due to the fact that most of us work less efficiently, expose ourselves to more interruptions, get less sleep, endure more stress and have trouble maintaining focus.

In fact, in spite of technology, extended working hours and 24/7 connectivity, productivity in Canada is still falling. And yet, according to a recent article in the *Toronto Star* (Why Canada's productivity keeps falling, June 14, 2012), as our workforce shrinks, we must become more productive to sustain our high standard of living.

I believe a major factor in decreasing corporate productivity is the decreasing personal productivity of the workers. For example, the May 23, 2012 issue of the *Globe and Mail* reported on a survey of 65,000 people over the past decade that revealed the number one complaint was being distracted by the speech level while working at office cubicles. Not only are distractions increasing, we are becoming more vulnerable to distraction as our brains are being bombarded by digital technology.

We are losing control. We are becoming more reactive than proactive and becoming slaves to technology. Worse still, we are accepting distraction as the norm and forming habits that keep us on a treadmill – working faster and longer but reaching fewer of our personal goals.

## 2.3 NINE TO FIVE IS NO LONGER AN OPTION

The habit that most employees have of checking e-mail in the mornings, evenings and on weekends has not gone unnoticed by employers. In fact they are more lenient on lateness as a result. But the scales tip in favor of the employers since 80% of those interviewed in a new study felt they could call employees at home at night.

Mozy Inc., a U.S. – based company surveyed 500 employers and 500 employees in France, Germany, Ireland, UK and the USA. The bottom line is that along with the technology and the flexibility of the workday comes the expectation that employees are “open for business” during off-hours.

What employees thought was an option has now become the new norm. It would appear that if you want to be a member of the team, you will keep your smart phone in readiness and say goodbye to the good old nine to five workday. For those who live by the “To Do” list, your entire life may become a “To Do” list – an endless one that keeps expanding your working day and shrinking your personal life. A new game requires new rules.

These new rules include getting structure back into your life, gaining control of your time, setting boundaries, managing technology, managing your energy, getting adequate sleep and exercise, and maintaining balance in your life – all of which have been covered in my other e-books. But it also should include the environment in which you work. Your environment influences, not only your personal productivity, but your energy level, emotions, cognitive development, creativity, and even your physical and mental health and overall well-being. The following chapters will explain how your working environment has an impact on such things – and how you can modify your environment to your advantage. Although these suggestions are directed at those who have an office at a fixed location, mobile workers can also benefit from many of the ideas.

## **2.4 BOOSTING PERFORMANCE IN YOUR OFFICE AND WORK AREA**

Office environmental factors such as noise level, lighting, office decor, colors and greenery all have an impact on productivity and creativity. It's also important to have an organized office to minimize distractions, boost efficiency, lower stress, conserve energy and increase personal comfort while working on your priority tasks.

Choose an adjustable chair that allows you to rest your feet on the floor while maintaining your eyes at about 30 inches from the computer screen with the top part of the monitor slightly below eye level. You may need a cushion to support your lower back as well.

Organize your desk and surrounding area so that frequently used materials and supplies and equipment are within reach. The less frequently you use materials, the farther away they should be stored. For example, your stapler, paper clips, writing materials might be on your desk. An organizer tray in your most accessible drawer could contain such items as elastic bands, sticky notes, scissors, tape, batteries and staples. Another drawer could contain envelopes, stamps, return address labels, forms, invoices, and so on.

If you frequently refer to hardcopy files, house them in hanging folders in your desk's filing drawer or a freestanding filing cabinet within reach. Action files such as next week's meeting material, invoices to be paid, information for an article being written or items to be reviewed can be held in a vertical step file device on your desk. But otherwise keep your desk as clear as possible to accommodate your current project.

Whenever possible, store your supplies where they are used – printer paper, ink cartridges etc. near the printer, copier supplies near the copier and so on.

These organizing principles apply to your digital files and forms as well. Have frequently used documents such as your weekly blog articles, tweets, monthly reports etc. in a folder on your desktop. Avoid having to click through five or six levels of document folders every day or week to reach the materials you need.

Less frequently used files can be several levels down in your main “Documents” folder. For instance, you might have to click through Associations, NAPO, Conferences, and Exhibits each year to reach the Product List file.

Don’t allow your computer desktop to be cluttered with folders and individual documents. File newly created documents in the proper folder as you create them. Temporary storage easily becomes more permanent and slows the retrieval process.

Have a bookcase within reach for more current books that you refer to frequently for research while writing articles, writing proposals for clients or developing training programs. Once they are referred to less frequently and replaced by more current books, move them to your larger bookcases farther from your immediate working area.

Try to keep books on the same or similar topics together. Choose categories that suits your particular situation. I have categories such as general management, time management and organization, brain, ADHD, etc. I affix a colored self-adhesive label to the lower part of the spine – a different color for each category. If you do this at the time you buy the book, it takes only a few seconds. This allows you to place the book on the correct shelf to keep the topics together. You can also quickly spot a book that has been misfiled or moved. I cover this in more detail in the next chapter.

Remove all clutter and other potential distractions from your immediate work area – including the in-basket if you have one on your desk. Hopefully you have already decided what you will be working on each day and don’t need additional distractions. Any in-basket should be outside your office or at least as close as possible to the doorway. If it’s a crisis, it won’t need an in-basket anyway.

Don’t have family photos or memorabilia in your line of sight. These could initiate the brain’s impromptu trip down memory lane. A window view is okay as long as it’s a view of nature and not a school playground.

Although it seems I am trying to glue you to your desk for the day in the name of efficiency, read this in context with the rest of this book. Remember the standing desk, 90-minute works sessions, frequent breaks, walking sessions and stand-up meetings. You don’t want to remain sitting; but you do want to remain productive during those 90-minute work sessions.

## 3 GETTING ORGANIZED HELPS REDUCE PRODUCTIVITY KILLERS

### 3.1 WORK AT A DESK, NOT A BED, SOFA OR RECLINING CHAIR

A major productivity killer is using your bed instead of your well-organized office desk to get work done.

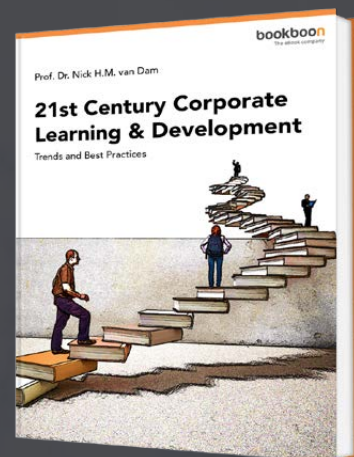
An article in the November 17, 2012 Toronto Star reported on a survey by *Infosecurity Europe* in London that found that 70% of the workers surveyed spent at least a half hour a day working in bed. An *Angus Reid/Vision* poll reported in the January 26, 2013 issue of the *Toronto Star* found that one third of wired Canadians use Internet-ready digital devices before getting out of bed in the morning.

Another survey by *Good Technology* revealed that half of the office workers polled were answering emails while in bed. The trend is encouraged by suppliers who are offering everything from pyramid pillows to laptop trays designed specifically for bed workers. This practice is proving to be neither efficient nor healthy.

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And for what it's worth, the authors of the book, *Neuroscience for leadership* (2015), even claim that we should not be sleeping with our smart phones or other handheld devices next to us due to the effects of Wi-Fi and 3G or 4G signals on our brain waves.

A study of over 200 students at the *University of Rhode Island* found they were losing an average of 45 minutes of sleep each week because of their cell phones. (Source: *Toronto Globe & Mail*, November 22, 2011). We should be getting from 6 to 8 hours of sleep each night, although this does vary from person to person. Most people think they need less than 7 hours sleep a night; but according to the *American Academy of Sleep Medicine*, only 1 to 3 percent of the population actually needs less than 7 hours of sleep a night. The rest are sleep deprived.

Research reinforces the belief that insufficient sleep can precipitate stress disorders and other ailments. A study published in the *National Academy of Sciences*, reports that even an hour or two less sleep a night can negatively impact more than 700 genes required for repairing cell tissue.

Brain science research conducted as recently as 2012 studied how the brain cleans itself of toxic waste by-products while we sleep. Failing to get enough sleep may prevent the brain from being able to remove these neurotoxins, which could have an influence on disorders such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's.

A bed is for sleeping, a kitchen table is for eating, and an office is for working. Confuse the three and both your personal productivity and your health will probably suffer.

### **3.2 GETTING ORGANIZED ADDS MEANING TO LIFE**

Organizing your office and home not only helps you to find things quickly and reduces distractions, it evidently helps you to discover your purpose in life as well. According to research reported in the July/August, 2015 issue of *Scientific American Mind*, an ordered life lays the groundwork for the pursuit of larger goals, purpose, and significance.

Getting organized, maintaining a tidy office, keeping a daily schedule, having weekly dinners with friends and other routines all add meaning to your life, according to Samantha Heintzelman, a University of Missouri psychologist. Although most people may think routines bring boredom, they bring richness to the mundane, while saving time and mental energy to invest in higher pursuits.

Mehmet Oz and Mike Roizen, authors of *YOU: On a Diet*, claim that visual clutter slows down the brain. They say that's why clusters of road signs double the chances of missing the one you're looking for. It also explains why website designers aim for simplicity. So clearing clutter from your desk, office and home and leaving more wide open spaces also helps to clear your mind so it will be more productive.

Few people balk at the morning routine of taking a shower, getting dressed, brushing their teeth and so on before starting their day. It's necessary groundwork upon which to launch their significant activities. Neither should they question the validity of planning their day, dispensing with email, making their calls, and working on their significant projects in chunks of time throughout the day.

For maximum office productivity and achievement you should first invest the time in organizing your office or work area. Set up your electronic and hard copy file systems, your follow-up system, the location of your inventory and office supplies, the layout of your desk and bookshelves, and so on.

If you use a paper planner, choose a good one that displays all seven days at a glance, segmented into 15-minute or half hour increments from early morning until late evening so you can schedule both work and personal activities. Develop the habit of scheduling time for the priorities of the day well before the day's activities begin. Relegate the less important tasks to your To Do list, preferably on the same week-at-a glance planner page.

You must manage your energy as well as your time. Routines require less energy, leaving plenty for creativity, decision-making, and the mental demands of your significant projects and tasks.

### **3.3 COLOR ME ORGANIZED**

Since people recognize color faster than they can decipher text, for your action folders it is usually a good idea to color code the various categories. Use different colored manila file folders and hanging folders to house the paperwork for different projects and categories. You might have red for action items, blue for payables, yellow for follow-ups, and so on. Of course the tabs should be clearly labelled as well; but eventually you won't even have to refer to the tab to identify the folder.

To store inventory and supplies you could paint shelves different colors so you would know that cleaning supplies are on the green shelf, paper products on the white shelf and safety and first aid supplies on the red shelf.



Color provides instant identification among similar items, and if you file by color, anything filed in the wrong place can be quickly spotted. I particularly like the idea of color-coding books according to topic.

### **3.4 BOOKS, BOOKS AND MORE BOOKS**

If you are an avid reader – or heaven forbid, a “collector” like me – you may have trouble locating specific books quickly. I have never needed a sophisticated filing system for books. In fact I rarely search for a specific book anyway. I am more interested in a specific topic, not a specific book or author when I write an article or develop a training program or speech or want to know how to better promote my career.

I think it's more practical to be able to quickly locate all the books on one topic. So for my thousand or more books I decided to keep the topics together and use a color coding method to quickly spot the different topics – and any that had wandered from their assigned spots on my shelves.

I applied small self-adhesive labels to the bottom of the spines, a different color for each topic. For example, orange for those dealing with the brain, dark green for business, red for technology, blue for meetings, and so on. When the book covers in depth more than one topic, I would add a label for the other major topics as well, always keeping the predominant topic label at the bottom. It would be filed in that section.

Since I have a habit of buying more books than I can possibly read, I don't apply a label until I have at least skimmed through the book. If you have many topics of interest you could easily run out of colors. But you can always vary the size, shape or shade of the label so they are easily distinguishable. For example I use dark green for business and light green for self-development.

When removing a book from your library shelves, move the one next to it a few inches so it protrudes from the rest. Then you can quickly return it to its proper space later.

## 4 ORGANIZING YOUR DESKTOP HELPS ORGANIZE YOUR MIND

### 4.1 ORGANIZE YOUR ELECTRONIC FILES

Just as a messy desk wastes time, so does a messy computer desktop. Although a cluttered desktop may not look as physically cluttered as a messy closet, basement or garage, it can be just as great a time waster. With the proliferation of emails, downloads, documents, articles and e-books, time is easily wasted accessing the various items on file – especially if you have filed them in haste or left them on your desktop.

Rather than try to organize your current filing system, it is better to start from scratch. After working with your current filesystem for several years, you should have a good idea of the major categories (folders) and topics (sub-folders) that you will need, and you're in a better position to give them more descriptive titles. You will also know which topics need further breakdowns. So drag all the existing folders and into a folder labeled "OLD FILES," – with the date range included, and start a new filing system. Whenever you have to search through your old files for a document, transfer that document to your new organized filing system once you find it. Probably 90% of your old files will remain untouched.

From now on take the time to file your documents at the time they are created, received or downloaded. Don't leave documents on your desktop, even temporarily. The "do it now" habit works for filing as well as for tasks. If you have to take action on something before filing or deleting it, save it temporarily in an "ACTION" folder. This becomes your electronic "To Do" folder. When placing anything in this action folder, it should be listed on the "To Do" section in your planner as well so you will be reminded to take action at the right time.

If necessary, rename any documents that you receive so they will be properly identified and able to be found quickly. This especially applies to email since many people fail to identify the topic with an adequately descriptive header – if they use a header at all. Also, when you prepare revised copies or final versions of anything, be sure to delete the ones they are replacing.

Keep your desktop free of icons and shortcuts for programs you rarely use. Drag them into a "Programs" folder and leave visible only those that you use on a recurring basis. While you're at it, uninstall any programs you never use.

You might also have a Friday afternoon or Monday morning “cleanup” session where you choose a folder and delete any documents that you haven’t referred to in a few years or are unlikely to do so.

## 4.2 YOUR ELECTRONIC FOLDERS MUST IDENTIFY THEIR CONTENTS

Unlike hard copy folders and labels, electronic folders all look the same and reveal nothing of their contents – without reading the heading. They are all uniform in size, color and appearance. Your brain’s ability to associate – those that trigger memory – tend to be useless in the digital world. Too bad the operating systems don’t allow colored icons or graphics or something else that could be used as memory hooks.

You can alleviate this somewhat by making the document names look physically different. By including capital letters or numbers or symbols on folders that you want to stand out. And you can use more detailed sub-folders so you can zero in more quickly on the file you are looking for. Another level or two of folders won’t slow the search very much.

Be sure to take the time to label the folders and documents with adequate descriptions when you file the material. Make retrieval as easy and as fast as possible. And if you don’t think you’ll ever have to retrieve something, don’t file it in the first place. When it’s essential to file a document in more than one location, file a shortcut rather than make a copy. Not only does it take less space on your computer, but you avoid the possibility of later revising one copy but not the others.

## 4.3 ORGANIZE YOUR MIND

It’s more important to organize your mind than your desk or house. You can always walk away from your desk or house; but you can never walk away from your mind. We must first accept the fact that time is not life, as many of us in the past may have suggested; it is merely the medium through which life passes. And life, as you experience it, is not something that happens *to* you, but something that happens *because of* you. You create the life you will experience – good, bad or indifferent – by what you believe, how you think, and what you do.

To create the life that you want, you must first organize your mind. You might do this by clearing it of all the worldly clutter that keeps it preoccupied and constantly distracted. One way of doing this is to engage in a 15 or 20-minute mind-clearing session each morning after you get up and are fully dressed. Don’t do it while you are still in bed and half asleep. This is too important. It will determine how the rest of the day goes. And life takes place in a series of days.

Complete your morning ritual of breakfast, getting the kids off to school, putting out the garbage or whatever your morning routine entails. Then sit comfortably in your favorite chair, and without trying to rid your mind of the random thoughts that will invariably invade it, do the following six things in succession.

1. Relax, close your eyes, breathe deeply, and just be aware of the miracle that is you.
2. Give thanks for all that you have and have had in the past. Don't rack your brain trying to think of everything – just those that come to mind quickly.
3. Forgive anyone who has hurt or offended you.
4. Offer up ten-second prayers, blessings or good wishes for at least three other people each day.
5. Think positive thoughts about all your future plans, opportunities and endeavors,
6. Decide and confirm how you will spend the next hour of your life. This may already be scheduled in your planner or you may choose something different.

The reason for doing these six things will be explained below; but the reason will probably become clearer to you as you progress through each day.

Whether you call this session meditation, mindfulness, or “being in the now” is immaterial. What is important is that you continue to do it each day, modifying it as you go along, until it becomes your unique morning routine. And how you spend the next hour of each day will eventually create the life that you will lead.

#### **4.4 CLEARING THE CLUTTER FROM YOUR MIND**

Anger, aggression, irritation, frustration and disappointment are all emotions that interfere with enjoyment of the present and planning for the future. This clutter from the past can be swept away by focusing on the moment. When you clean house you are not concerned about where the dust, black marks and grime came from; you are focused on getting rid of them. When meditating, your mind is the broom that can sweep these corrosive emotions from your brain. What's past is past and cannot be changed; but you can build a new foundation for a happy, productive and self-fulfilling future.

By being in the “now” you are releasing the past and beginning a new day. Giving thanks for all that you have today acknowledges your assets and resources, whether physical, emotional or spiritual, and provides a positive mindset. Forgiving others releases any hold they may have on you and frees your brain to follow your mind’s directions. Your brain is the body’s computer and it cannot be user-friendly while it is bogged down by malevolent viruses. Your mind is the organizer directing your morning meditation and determining the day’s plans. You are not your brain; you are your mind.

Each day is a new day, and how you spend the first hour will set the tone for the hours to follow. Start with your priorities. If your top priority is health, your first scheduled activity after a healthy breakfast might be a hearty walk. Or you might schedule a walk or other exercise later in the day. The important thing is to schedule the important things – those things that add meaning to your life and achievement to your goals. Actually getting them done is a function of the brain. The mind can control the brain.

## 5 AN OFFICE IS FOR WORKING, NOT SITTING

### 5.1 DON'T REMAIN CHAINED TO YOUR DESK

Most Canadians spend at least half their waking hours sitting – and for business people most of this takes place in their office. According to research, spending this much time sitting can increase the risk of health issues. Tom Rath, in his book *Eat Move Sleep*, even claims that sitting more than six hours a day greatly increases the risk of an early death.

An article aptly titled *Killer chairs*, which appeared in the November, 2014 issue of *Scientific American*, provides statistics based on 18 studies reported during the past 16 years, covering 800,000 people. Among the findings:

- Those sitting for over four hours a day watching TV had a 46% increase in deaths from any cause than those spending less than two hours a day.
- Sitting for more than half the day doubles the risk of diabetes and cardiovascular problems.
- Obese people sat 2.25 hours longer than their lean counterparts every day, and expended 350 fewer calories.

If you think your self-discipline in keeping your bottom glued to a chair and focusing on work for six hours a day's increases your productivity, think again. For years it has been known that standing up can improve performance. Research at the *University of California* long ago showed that people digest complex facts better and make quicker decisions when standing. Some actually absorbed information 40% faster.

A study reported by CNN suggested that standing desks could boost productivity for some employees by 46%. Researchers studied the productivity of employees at a call center for a pharmaceutical company over a six month period. Within one month of getting standing desks, employees were 23% more productive than those using traditional desks. Within five months productivity had increased 53%.

More recent studies reported in the August 27, 2016 issue of *Toronto Star* show that giving kids standing desks in school helps them burn more calories and improves behavioral classroom engagement.

So it's not simply health benefits that should prompt you to get out of your chair more often. I wouldn't expect you to improve productivity by 50% – but even a 5% boost would be a bonus, considering the health aspects of standing up.

Sitting at a desk five days a week could compress your spine, degenerate your muscles, and according to at least a few reports, even cause depression or cancer. One 2013 Australian survey of 63,048 middle-aged men found that those who sat for more than four hours a day were more likely to have a chronic disease like high blood pressure and heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.

## 5.2 WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?

The surprising thing is that neither Tom Rath nor the other authors and researchers seem to be suggesting jogging or marathon walks to remedy the problem, but rather to simply get out of your chair. Get up and move around, as we were created to do, rather than lead a sedentary life. Walk around while you talk on the phone, work at a stand-up desk, have stand-up meetings, take the stairs instead of the elevator, walk to the local mall instead of taking the car – are the type of recommendations these authors seem to be supporting.

Tom Rath claims that as soon as you sit down, electrical activity in your leg muscles shuts off, the number of calories you burn drops to one per minute, and enzyme production, which helps to break down fat, drops by 90%. And after sitting for two hours your good cholesterol drops by 20%.

Simply standing increases your energy, and walking increases energy levels by as much as 150%. Take the stairs and you could increase energy by more than 200%. Stand, stretch, move, walk – anything that will get you out of that killer chair.

Dr. Mark Benton, creator of the *Stand 2 Learn* school desks, claimed his studies showed that all moving, even if it's just squirming, is actually having an effect on health.

John Griffin, a professor of the Fitness and Health Promotion Program at *George Brown College* in Toronto, claims that by integrating physical activity (sitting less) into our daily lives we can overcome the detrimental health effects of sitting.

In the office you might consider alternating between a stationary desk and a standing desk. Experiment to see what type of work is best done sitting, standing or while walking around the office. Working on your desktop or laptop, as well as work involving physical skills such as art work or drafting is probably done best while sitting, problem solving, planning, decision-making and other mental tasks might be done best while standing or walking.

And don't forget the advantage of spending time in another location altogether, such as at a picnic bench or in a coffee shop. The short walk will do you good.

### 5.3 FOR CREATIVITY, TAKE A WALK

In the book, *Neuroscience for leadership*, by Tara Swart, Kitty Chisholm and Paul Brown, the authors mention a colleague who would walk in the woods and let his mind dwell on the beauty of his surroundings instead of his job and the answer to what he wanted to do. A creative new idea would invariably pop into his head.

In the January, 2017 issue of *RealSimple* magazine, Erin Stutland claims that some of history's greatest thinkers from Charles Dickens to Steve Jobs all have used walking to tap into their creativity. She says that walking helps you get out of your head and connect more to your body and intuition.



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My habit over the past twenty years or more was to go for a walk in the morning with my writing tools tucked inside a computer bag, thinking along the way about the article I was to write that morning. When I reached my destination – a coffee shop about twenty minutes from my home, I would take out my pad and pen, and amazingly I would complete the article without difficulty in the span of 30 minutes or so. It had almost written itself in my mind as I had been walking.

I originally thought it was the fresh air, relaxed state of mind, and the free time available to think about the topic that made the ideas and thoughts flow so easily.

But it was actually the body movement. Our creative ability is enhanced by walking, exercise or even simply gesturing. An article on creativity in the July/August, 2016 issue of *Discover* magazine claims “a nice walk, especially in the great outdoors, can help us solve problems.” As expressed by Sean Beilock in her book, *How the body knows the mind*, (Atria Books, 2015) “moving the body can alter the mind by unconsciously putting ideas in our head before we are able to consciously contemplate them on our own.”

Moving your body can actually change how you think. Whether you are an actor rehearsing lines, a speaker memorizing a speech or a student memorizing facts, when you include motion either physically or in your mind during the memorizing process, it makes memory and recall easier.

## 5.4 THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

You have no doubt heard the expression “thinking outside the box” when talking about creativity. Well, researchers at Cornell University actually had volunteers sit *inside* a huge box while solving problems. They were outperformed by others walking freely outside the box. So resist the impulse to sit at your desk when solving a problem. And don't sit around a boardroom table when brainstorming new ideas in your company. Research appears to substantiate the wisdom of stand-up meetings from more than simply a time management perspective.

The neurotransmitter, dopamine, which declines with age, plays a role in creativity, and exercise helps to slow or prevent this decline. So keep active your entire life; because if you're idle, your mind may become idle as well. By managing your body, you are helping to manage your brain; because the body and the brain work in tandem.

This doesn't mean you won't get ideas while working at your desk as well. Ideas could flash through your mind and then disappear while you are busy working on an unrelated project. It's a good idea to capture those thoughts immediately – either in a journal, smart phone or booklet – something more substantial than a scrap of paper that could itself disappear.

For example, we have a “Back Burner” page at the back of our *Taylor Planner* where we can quickly jot down those fleeting thoughts before continuing with the task at hand. Our *Daily Priority Pad* also has a section for these ideas. Creativity frequently happens when you're busy doing something else. You can see both of these items at our website, [taylorintime.com](http://taylorintime.com).

You should at least schedule “creativity breaks” every day or two to give your brain an opportunity to make connections between the various bits of information you've been absorbing during the week. This is particularly important if you find it impossible to leave your office to go for a walk or visit a coffee shop.

According to some neurologists a good time for a creativity break is in the late afternoon when your brain is sluggish and relatively inactive. A study from *Thinking and Reasoning* shows that both morning people and night owls did better on creativity tests in the evenings. You could have a structured session with yourself or others or simply let your mind wander as you mull over a topic or idea. You could prime the pump by rereading an article you set aside earlier.

By the way, I still take that walk – sometimes varying the route and the coffee shop. I still write the article, or book chapter or whatever using longhand (cursive writing) – perhaps from habit – but I do believe it is also good exercise for the brain. Then I dictate it to my computer when I get home – using voice-activated software.

## 6 IMPROVING PERFORMANCE WITH OFFICE GREENERY

### 6.1 INCREASING PRODUCTIVITY CAN BE A WALK IN THE PARK

We are all aware of the physical benefits of walking; but it has been shown that a 40 minute walk in a forest results in lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol than an equivalent walk in the laboratory – plus improved mood and feelings of vigor. It also lowers blood pressure, and improves sleep.

There is little doubt that trees, plants, grass and other vegetation affects us both physically and mentally. In order to increase the performance of students and workers alike, Ratey and Manning, in their book *Go wild*, recommend designing buildings with greenways, open space, landscaping and potted plants. And as reported in an issue of *Scientific American Mind* (January February, 2015), even staring at pictures of outdoor scenes has been linked to pain relief, stress recovery and mood improvement.

A more recent issue of *Scientific American Mind* (May/June, 2016), linked exposure to natural settings with many health benefits, from reduced rates of depression to increased immune functioning. For example, patients in hospital rooms with a window view require less pain medication and spend less time in the hospital. Recent studies found that urban green spaces, such as plants and gardens, also improve cognitive development.

An old clipping on the environment that I found buried in my files from some 20 years ago, and attributed to the *National Wildlife Foundation*, claimed that one large sugar maple can remove as much airborne lead as the city's cars emit by burning 1000 gallons of gasoline. City planners in Los Angeles had said that by the year 2000, trees would remove some 200 tons of dust and smoke from the region's air each day. I have no way of checking the accuracy of that prediction; but one article I came across recently states that according to the *U.S. Forest Service*, the trees around the world removed about one third of fossil fuel emissions annually between 1990 and 2007.

## 6.2 AN OFFICE IN THE COUNTRY

Mounting research suggests that city living is not conducive to mental or physical health. A July, 2012 issue of *chatelaine.com* suggested we're more disconnected with nature than ever – exchanging outdoor activities for playing video games or using social media indoors. An item in the March 17, 2016 issue of *telegraphJournal.com* reported that on a global scale, it is estimated that the transportation sector is responsible for approximately 5.8 million deaths per year: 3.2 million from physical inactivity; 1.3 million from vehicle related collisions; and 1.3 million from outdoor pollution. And a string of studies from all over the world suggest that common air pollutants such as black carbon, particulate matter and ozone can negatively affect vocabulary, reaction times, and even overall intelligence, according to a report in the November/December, 2009 issue of *Scientific American Mind*.

In a blog article I talked about my decision to move my office to the condo's solarium, add plenty of greenery on the balcony visible from my desk, take advantage of natural lighting, and even hang a picture or two of scenery. I did find an improvement in my overall mood and productivity, although that was an extremely subjective observation. A few months before writing this book, I went the extra mile – or more accurately 1500 miles – and moved to a small town in New Brunswick. Thanks to the digital world in which we live, the move (from a business viewpoint) was seamless. And after almost a lifetime spent in the city of Toronto, I expect the impact on my well-being and productivity to be quite significant. It's certainly more relaxed.

## 6.3 HOW NATURE CAN IMPACT PRODUCTIVITY

Recent studies have found that urban green spaces improve cognitive development in children, and those close to park land had better memory development, attentiveness and creativity. As for productivity in an office environment, potted plants, white noise, music, natural lighting, air circulation, physical organization, windows facing the outside world, the ability to feed off the energy of others, and even a cheerful office decor with scenic pictures on the walls can increase productivity as well as improve mood and personal well-being.

Take plants for example. Plants not only give off oxygen, they are able to absorb environmental chemicals and transport them to the soil, rendering them less harmful. Researchers have found that plants act as vacuum cleaners removing pollution from the air.

NASA evidently used plants to keep their astronauts healthy while working in enclosed places constructed of synthetic materials. Exposure to indoor and outdoor pollutants in both home and offices has been linked to anxiety, depression, irritability, fatigue and short and long-term cognitive decline among other afflictions. Potted plants have reduced indoor pollutants by at least 75%.

One study involved new computers, which had been shown to give off chemicals into the air. When a batch of new computers were hidden behind a divider, cognitive testing showed it reduced performance and increased errors by those workers closest to the hidden computers.

So in choosing our office and decor, we should not overlook the possibility of merging more with nature. The more we gravitate toward the cities and hole up in our offices, the more we withdraw from nature and its largely unrecognized or unappreciated benefits. Studies have shown that the presence of potted plants, for example, improves productivity, creativity, performance and learning ability. In the case of schools, the presence of plants improved scores in mathematics spelling and science between 10% and 14%.

## 6.4 CAN COLORS ACTUALLY IMPACT PERFORMANCE?

I mentioned that the presence of potted plants in offices improves productivity, creativity, performance and learning ability. One of the reasons given was that plants and trees act as vacuum cleaners, absorbing the indoor pollutants that have been linked to anxiety, depression, irritability, fatigue and cognitive decline.

But that's not the whole answer. If it were, why is it that that people with windows facing the outside world are more productive, healthier, and maintain a higher level of concentration than people with windowless offices? And why did researchers find that the more green space that residents can see out their windows, the less aggression and violence they reported at home? And why did researchers find that university students with mostly natural views from their dormitory windows score better on tests of working memory and concentration than college students who lived in the same dorm but with views of other buildings?

We have a definite link with nature, and the human brain is influenced by our environment – what we see, smell, hear and feel. The book, *How the body knows its mind*, by Sion Beilock reported that city dwellers are at a 20% increase risk for developing anxiety disorders and a 40% increased risk for mood disorders compared with people who live in less populated areas. And in the book, *Your brain on nature*, by Selhub and Logan, the authors state that research has shown that emotions of pleasure and happiness are elevated with an increase of tree density – even in urban settings.

It's more than simply pollution at play. Japanese researchers have noted increases in the number of natural killer cells and increases in the amount of intracellular anticancer proteins after spending time in a forest. And natural chemicals secreted by evergreen trees have been associated with improvements in the activity of the frontline immune defenders.

And what about the impact of the various colors on our mood and performance? Is it a coincidence that blue and green – the colors most frequently found in nature – have also been found to be the most effective in stimulating personal productivity? Selhub and Logan point out in their book that recent studies show that the blue portion of the light spectrum stimulates the areas of the brain that involve attention and memory. Blue enriched light has been shown to improve mood, performance, alertness, irritability and evening fatigue. Blue is known as an excellent color for productivity as well as having a calming effect on employees. It stimulates the mind and increases productivity. Ravi Mehta, an assistant professor at the *University of Illinois*, believes that a blue background screen on your computer also improves performance when working on a creative tasks, while a red background is better with more detailed oriented tasks.

Green has also been associated with calm and well-being. One study found that 95% of the university students questioned associated the color with positive emotions. Deep greens can excite and motivate staff. Melanie Feltham, social media community manager at *Upwork*, claims we feel at ease in blue and green rooms because of their relationship to nature.

You may want to experiment with colors. A national survey of 1000 office workers found blue to be their preferred hue. One researcher suggested a mixture of blue-green with accents of motivating soft red. Some workers are more productive in rooms painted in bright colors while others find it overwhelming.

It has been suggested that you use a lighter color on your desk since reducing the amount of contrast between your computer screen and desk will reduce eyestrain. Alternatively, you could use a large blotter or desk calendar.

Avoid beige or white. A *University of Texas* study found that grey, beige or white offices induced feelings of sadness and depression – especially in women. Yellow can give you a burst of energy; but it can cause irritability and induce fatigue faster. Red tends to increase heart rate and blood pressure and should probably be used only to draw attention to something – like stop signs, fire hydrants or fire engines.

It would appear that sticking to the colors found in nature – blue skies, blue water, green trees, green grass and fields – is the best choice for efficiency, focus and a lower stress level. It's hard to improve on nature.

# 7 HOW BACKGROUND NOISE CAN BOOST PRODUCTIVITY

## 7.1 THE POWER OF MUSIC TO CALM AND HEAL

I'm not sure whether music soothes the savage beast, but I am convinced that the power of music can soothe our body mind and spirit and have a positive impact on productivity. According to an article in the May/June, 2014 issue of *Scientific American Mind*, a study at our *Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center* in Baton Rouge discovered that ambient music therapy had a positive effect on recovery after surgery. It improved pain management and decreased the negative effects of environmental noise. The same article reported that exercising in rhythm with music uses less energy.

A column on health by Dr. Anthony Komaroff, appearing in the March 15, 2016 issue of *TelegraphJournal.com*, claimed that controlled clinical trials of people having various surgeries revealed that those who listened to music before their procedures had reduced anxiety and a reduced need for sedatives. Those who listened to music in the operating room reported less discomfort during their procedures.

Music has been found to reduce the side effects of cancer therapy and the anxiety associated with chemotherapy. It helps relieve depression and improves the quality of life for dementia patients. Most of us have probably experienced how music can recall memories from the past, and how residents in nursing homes have been able to sing the words of songs even though they may have little recollection of anything else.

Jo Marchant, in her 2016 book, *Cure: A journey into the science of mind over body*, mentions someone who listened to his favorite songs because it put him into a calm, thoughtful frame of mind. She also describes an interesting case involving the role of music in the placebo effect.

There appears to be a link between music and our brain-based executive function, and Sylvain Morino, a scientist with the *Rotman Research Institute*, was able to produce a 14-point increase in IQ in preschoolers by exposing them to a computerized music program for 20 days.

## 7.2 MUSIC'S IMPACT ON CREATIVITY AND PRODUCTIVITY

Background music in the office can also increase creativity and improve reasoning skills. Sound itself is not necessarily a distraction. It can enhance learning and higher brain function and even improve memory performance. Background music, especially classical, has been shown to reduce stress, lower blood pressure and even help focus attention and improve concentration.

An item in the January, 2017 issue of *RealSimple* magazine suggests that music helps creativity because the rhythm jolts the brain into a different thought pattern.

So from a holistic time management standpoint, it might be wise to experiment with different types of music to relieve stress, activate creativity and increase personal productivity. There are websites that can offer free background music on your computer while you work. *AccuRadio* is one that has over 50 genres including classical, blues, contemporary, Christian, country, and dance. You might check it out at [Accuradio.com](http://Accuradio.com). I find that soft music, without any words to distract me, works best.

In his book, *This is your brain on music*, Daniel Levinson says that for most of human history, music making was as natural an activity as breathing and walking, and some of the oldest physical artifacts found in human excavation sites are musical instruments.

We also know that white noise and offices in the ambient noise of coffee shops have been used for many years as a positive environment for creative thinking and performance. Music can motivate, reduce fatigue, and make both exercise and boring jobs feel more like leisure and less like work.

But sounds other than music can also boost productivity.

## 7.3 ADVANTAGES OF WORKING AT COFFEE SHOPS

According to the February, 2010 issue of *Scientific American Mind*, background noise at home, work or school can not only disrupt a person's concentration, it can also increase stress levels and conditions such as high blood pressure, coronary disease, peptic ulcers and migraine headaches. But researchers have found that adding white noise to a classroom can be just as effective as drugs at aiding the learning among ADHD pupils. All background noise is not bad.



Recent research carried out at the University of Illinois on the effects of background noise on creativity found that the level of noise experienced in a bustling coffee shop enhanced performance and even helped people concentrate. And according to a peer-reviewed study out of the University of Chicago, “A moderate level of ambient noise is conducive to creative cognition.” So a little distraction actually helps you be more creative.

There are advantages to working at coffee shops. Coffee shops are opening earlier. Most are equipped with wireless Internet. There are no trophies or family photographs to distract you. There are few interruptions; no water cooler gossip or morning sports updates. And with a little self-discipline you can ignore e-mail and silence your smartphone.

Some coffee shops even have better lighting than offices. And a *University of Michigan* study showed that people with windows facing the outside world are more productive, healthier and maintain higher levels of concentration. People in windowless offices such as the common cubicle layout, daydream more.

#### **7.4 BAD HABITS MAY NOT FOLLOW YOU TO A COFFEE SHOP**

If you find it difficult to focus on certain tasks in your current environment, try changing your environment. It is possible that simply being in your office, where you may have built a habit of checking email, staring out the window or twisting paper clips, prompts these distracting habits to recur. That’s why it’s easier to start a new behavior in a new location, as reported in the March/April, 2012 issue of *Scientific American Mind*.

Two things experienced together will become associated with each other in our mind. This is known as the *law of contiguity*, and is used to advantage when memorizing something. Things or events that occur close to each other in space or time tend to get linked together in the mind. If you think of a cup, you may think of a saucer; if you hear a song, you may recall events that happened when that song was popular. When you see again the house that you were born and raised in, you are flooded with memories of things that happened at that time. When you see the ocean, it may remind you of a time you almost drowned there. And so on. This can work against you as well. Your office may become associated with procrastination or anxiety or daydreaming or other timewaster just as your bed becomes associated with sleep.

More and more people seem to be using their local coffee shop as an effective place to work. Although loud noises are distracting, the steady hum of a busy coffee shop with its mixture of espresso machines running and customer conversation seems to provide just the right level of “white noise” to stimulate creativity and concentration. (Researchers also found that adding white noise to a classroom can be as effective as drugs in aiding learning among ADHD pupils.)

Entrepreneurs are even beginning to capitalize on this trend by turning coffee shops or restaurants into co-working spaces. Susan Johnston, writing for *FastCompany.com*, mentioned that *CoworkCafé* and other entrepreneurial companies are renting out after-hours space in coffee shops, complete with desks, lockers, Wi-Fi and food vouchers.



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The majority of my articles, segments of my books, and countless newsletters were written in coffee shops. I find I am alone while not alone, with complete anonymity, yet able to feed off the energy of others. It's an excellent time to silence your iPhone or other devices and work undisturbed. Wi-Fi is available, lighting is normally good, and any inefficient work habits seem to remain back at the office. If you need to make the odd call, your voice is muted by the ambient noises. And as an added bonus, a cup of coffee stimulates creativity as well. I write longhand since it further increases my concentration and allows me to edit as I go along. Using voice activated software, I can quickly dictate the results to my laptop when I get back to my home office.

If you can't make it to a coffee shop, you can always go to *coffitivity.com* and bring the sounds of a coffee shop to your computer while you work. Back in 2013, *Coffitivity* was launched when its founder realized the benefits of re-creating the ambient sounds of a coffee shop to boost people's creativity and help them increase their performance.

It seems that a moderate noise level is the sweet spot for creativity. It doesn't distract us as loud noises tend to do. It doesn't seem to matter whether it is in the form of ocean waves, chatter or music. In the case of music, there is a link between music and executive function. That's why Sylvain Marino, mentioned earlier, was able to increase in IQ in preschoolers through music. If you like to work with music in the background, choose a genre such as classical or blues that works best for you. You can do this by having music from *accuradio.com* or other websites playing on your computer in the background as you work.

As I write this section of the book, I am at a coffee shops during the morning rush hour. I'm not sure if I'm any more creative, but I find I can get a lot more accomplished, and the walk to and from my home provides me with a much needed 30 minutes of exercise. Besides, coffee is thought to improve both your memory and your energy level as well.

## 8 SOCIAL INTERACTION IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER

### 8.1 DON'T WORK IN ISOLATION

The practice of isolating yourself in a home office all day to get your work done can have a negative impact on both your effectiveness and your health. You need the periodic energy, experience and input from others in order to perform at an optimum level. The Internet and social media will not compensate for a lack of personal interaction with others.

30 years ago most managers had private offices with floor-to-ceiling walls and a closed door to protect them from needless interruptions and socializing. But without the benefit of even the Internet, and only rare interactions with others, their output was limited to what they could accomplish with their own limited experience and learning.

Later, the open-office concept with cubicles as offices allowed more input from the outside world, and although this included needless interruptions, even those incidents added the change of pace so necessary for optimum brain performance and creativity. The real advantage was a healthy and beneficial relationship with other people who had different experiences, viewpoints and ideas.

Several years ago some companies eliminated even the cubicles and replaced them with tables and unassigned seating so the more mobile workers could come and go according to their flexible working hours. Although the main reason was to save money on office space and equipment, in one company, email traffic decreased by more than 50%, and decision-making accelerated by about 25%. This was due to the fact the staff were able to meet informally instead of shooting emails back and forth. Another company claimed that 48% of their work was being accomplished in off hours and off the premises.

It seems that for 50 years or more we had been trying to avoid the people-interruptions and isolate ourselves in our quest for maximum productivity. Yet many of these interruptions were actually opportunities in disguise and afforded a chance to form social relationships.

Our brains are designed to associate unrelated information and ideas to form novel and creative solutions to difficult problems. With limited input from others, we have limited creativity. We would not have been created with mirror neurons, which allow us to emphasize and communicate more effectively with others, if we were meant to spend most of our day in isolation. And as Matthew Lieberman claims in his book, *Social: Why our brains are wired to connect*, research has shown that our brains are wired to connect with other people.

## 8.2 SOCIAL INTERACTION AIDS BOTH PRODUCTIVITY AND WELL-BEING

Hard work usually results in maximum value only when it is enhanced by social connections with others. An article in the September/October, 2012 issue of *Psychology Today* claimed that “the strength of your friendship is as critical for your health as the lifestyle choices you make.”

Joshua Wolf Shank, writing in the January, 2017 issue of *RealSimple* magazine, claims that most innovation is a result of extraordinary partnership as opposed to solitary ideas. He suggests that most people will benefit from taking a social risk.

If you do have to work in isolation, be sure to keep in contact with associates, get out to a coffee shop periodically during break periods, keep in touch with others on social media, and build quality relationships away from the job.

## 8.3 SOCIAL MEDIA IS NOT A REPLACEMENT FOR ONE-ON-ONE CONTACT.

More and more, people tend to be stealing time from personal relationships to spend on Internet relationships. The amount of time spent using social networking sites is growing three times the rate of overall Internet usage. The sheer volume of time people are spending on the Internet has to be taking time away from communications in the real world.

Dr. Mike Dow, in his book *The brain fog fix*, says human beings have an innate need to feel supported, connected and loved. He further states that loneliness and anxiety go hand-in-hand and that there is a link between loneliness and depression. It is no wonder that the amount of time spent using social networking sites is growing three times the rate of overall Internet usage. It does help combat loneliness. However, online communication doesn't have the emotional support of personal one-on-one relationships, and more time spent on social media could leave less time for personal interaction. According to Susan Greenfield, in her book, *Mind Change: How digital technologies are leaving their mark on our brains*, we used to spend six hours a day in face-to-face interaction and four hours a day on electronic media. By 2007 this proportion had reversed, with nearly eight hours spent socializing on social media and only two and a half hours spent in face-to-face social interaction.

At least one study revealed that time spent on social networks lowers academic performance. And when the topic of handheld devices starts to surface in sessions on marriage counselling, you know it is having a negative impact on everyday social relationships.

Michael Harris, in his book *The end of absence*, referred to the results of 72 studies between 1979 and 2009 that indicated today's youth were scoring 40% lower levels of empathy than their earlier counterparts. No doubt a dozen hours of screen time a day will equip youth to deal more efficiently with the digital world. But what is it doing to equip them with reality, and with live, personal one-on-one relationships?

Leaders of the future will be those who can master some of the more useful technology that becomes available while maintaining their interpersonal relationships and people skills. Not only will they be able to work efficiently, they'll be able to relate to other people, negotiate, gain consensus, close deals, network effectively and motivate and inspire others.

#### **8.4 SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS BECOME EVEN MORE IMPORTANT AS WE AGE**

A major cause of health problems after retirement is the loss of social connections with co-workers. A 2013 London-based report suggests that retirement can cause depression, mobility issues, diabetes, hypertension, and decreased mental abilities. People who don't retire completely are generally better both physically and mentally.

According to the book *Neuroscience for Leadership* by Tara Swart, Kitty Chisholm and Paul Brown (2015), social relationships are important to both mental and physical health. Isolation in old age is correlated with stress and a compromised immune system. And there is evidence that taking an active part in a network of friends and neighbors or in groups with a common interest or activity is protective against Alzheimer's.

People who feel lonely are twice as likely to develop Alzheimer's, and according to John Ratey, in his book *Spark: The revolutionary new science of exercise and the brain*, depression also increases the risk. Researchers at the *Mayo Clinic* say that having friends can increase your sense of belonging and purpose, boost your happiness, reduce stress, improve your self-worth, and help you cope with traumas such as divorce, serious illness, job loss or the loss of a loved one.

Interaction with people provides greater brain stimulation than either a computer monitor or a TV set. And for the elderly, it might be wise to associate with younger people. According to the November/December, 2012 issue of *Scientific American Mind*, research now suggests that caring for the young produces higher levels of antioxidants – proteins that protects against neurodegenerative diseases. So if you're up to it, you might babysit for your friends and neighbors.

Lifelong learning is important for everyone, but especially for older people since it also involves relationships. Our chance of developing Alzheimer's drops 17% for every year of education beyond high school, according to John Ratey, co-author of the book, *Go wild: free yourself from the afflictions of civilization*. It's not the education, it's the forced thinking – so commit yourself to lifelong learning. According to a Mayo Clinic researcher lifelong learning could delay the onset of cognitive impairment by 3 to 8 years.

According to an article in the January, 2015 issue of *Reader's Digest*, longevity is about 30% DNA and 70% other factors such as lifestyle choices. By caring for both your body and your brain, you increase the likelihood that both will survive to a ripe old age.

For optimum health and well-being, as well as for personal performance, it would appear that we should cultivate social relationships both at and away from work.

## 8.5 THE POWER OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

In her 2016 book, *Cure: a journey into the science of mind over body*, Jo Marchant emphasizes the power of friendships – even to the point of extending your lifespan. She referred to an older study of residents of Tecumseh, Southeast Michigan, showing those people reporting fewer social relationships and activities were about twice as likely to die over the next decade. Social isolation is a health hazard. An article in the September October, 2012 issue of *Psychology Today* claimed that the strength of your friendship is as critical for your health as the lifestyle choices you make.

Even the presence of other people seem to have a positive effect on your mood and productivity. You may find that when you work among others at a coffee shop for instance, you can feed off their energy – without the concomitant interruptions. Even the background noise of a coffee shop has been shown to increase creativity. So if your work involves working alone in an office, a periodic “work break” at a coffee shop might be a productivity booster. It is also an enjoyable change of pace – and David Rock, in his book, *Your brain at work*, suggests that insights occur more frequently the more relaxed and happy you are.

## 9 FRIENDSHIPS AND PRODUCTIVITY GO HAND IN HAND

### 9.1 LISTEN TO WHAT YOUR BRAIN IS TELLING YOU

According to an article in the Harvard Business Review, research shows that workers are not only happier in their jobs when they have friendships at work, they build trust and foster collaboration. One study mentioned in *FastCompany.com* showed that friendships at work can forge a closeness that makes workers more collaborative, productive and accountable.

Strong friendships give both your physical and mental health a boost. The February, 2014 issue of *Scientific American Mind* reported on a quantitative review of numerous studies, concluding that having few friends is the mortality risk equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day. People with a close friend at work are more productive and more innovative. Strong social connections are the biggest predictor of happiness in general – and happiness has been linked to an increase in longevity.

According to an article in the May/June, 2016 issue of *Scientific American Mind*, not only are close relationships good for your health, there is also evidence that the absence of friends – or loneliness – can be toxic for your health. It can lead to increased mortality, depression, aggressiveness, poorer sleep and elevated blood pressure.

A bad mood is contagious, according to Gary Lewandowski, Jr., associate professor of psychology at Monmouth University. You unknowingly pick up other people's nonverbal behaviors and tend to mimic them – similar to yawning. (It is more common when the person yawning is someone close to you.) Similarly you can pick up their high energy or low energy, positivity or negativity, enthusiasm or lethargy.

And as if having to cope with the hazards of secondhand smoke isn't bad enough, it's now found that secondhand stress can be hazardous to our productivity and health as well. The suggestion that stress can be contagious, and that we are influenced by the actions and emotions of others is based on research that suggests a class of brain cells called *mirror neurons* that appear to reflect the actions & feelings of others.



Our mirror neurons fire regardless of whether we or someone else is performing a specific action. That enables us to relate to the person to the degree that we even have a fair idea of why they are performing that action. This empathy with others includes emotions. So if you cringe at the sight of someone else getting hurt, empathize with your friend who is grieving and feel uncomfortable when a coworker is upset and anxious, blame it on these specialized brain cells. No wonder our mothers warned us to stay away from obnoxious people, surround ourselves with positive friends, and be polite to people.

When mother said, “This hurts me as much as it hurts you,” she wasn’t fibbing. Studies show that the pain we feel when others get hurt activates the same regions of the brain that are activated when we actually get hurt ourselves. And there is thin line between being physically hurt and emotionally hurt. In her book, *How the body knows its mind*, Sian Beilock reports that a daily dose of Tylenol diminishes the hurt feelings that often accompany being socially teased, spurned or rejected.

Not only does this make sense of the fact that we sometimes get “bad vibes” from people we meet, it also proves that we can have a positive influence on others – whether family, friends or business associates – by being kind, caring, compassionate and cheerful.

Choose carefully those with whom you associate; because you can pick up their bad moods as easily as you can pick up good moods. Avoid toxic people whenever possible. And don’t ignore your intuition or gut feelings when you transact business with someone.

Your brain could be telling you something.

## 9.2 PERFORMING ACTS OF KINDNESS

Performing acts of kindness refers to a holistic time management strategy; but it could just as well refer to Acts 20:35, which quotes Jesus as saying, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Study after study seems to come to the same conclusion – giving to others reaps a happier, healthier, more successful future for the giver.

And the amount of the giving doesn’t seem to matter – except when you’re giving of yourself. In 1999, for instance, scientists tracked 2025 Californians aged 55 and older, for five years and found that those who volunteered for two or more organizations were 63% less likely to die during the study than those who didn’t volunteer. And those who volunteered for only one organization lowered their mortality rate by 26%.

An article in the November 30, 2014 *Toronto Star* reports on the above study and several others. Canada sits in sixth place on the *World Happiness Report*, (Statscan) and 84% of Canadians donate money to charity every year. 68% of volunteers agree that volunteering has made them feel physically healthier.

There appears to be a definite link between giving and volunteering and happiness, and another link between happiness and health and longevity. Dr. Lissa Rankin, in her 2013 book, *Mind over medicine*, admits that unhappy people are less likely to eat well, exercise, and enjoy healthy sleep patterns, but insists there is more to it than that.

She goes on to describe the “nun study”, which gave the opportunity to follow the nuns in a controlled environment for the balance of their lives. 90% of the most cheerful nuns were still alive at age 84, compared to only 34% of the least cheerful. (Rankin goes on to explain how, with functional MRI machines and electroencephalography; it is now easier to study the science of happiness.)

There is much evidence to support the role of happiness in healthy populations but there is still disagreement as to whether happiness – or attitude, fighting spirit, or positive thinking for that matter – can actually cure diseases. But studies do show an improvement in recovery rates.

Since holistic time management includes strategies that will help us lead a happier, healthier, longer more productive and fulfilling life, we must include the habit of giving and volunteering among these strategies.

### **9.3 FRIENDSHIPS CAN EXTEND YOUR LIFESPAN**

You should not work and live in isolation; friendships can extend your lifespan. And how you interact with others – communicating, networking, delegating, socializing and collaborating – all impact your success in managing time.

Although we tend to blame our time problems on others, including socializing at work, interruptions and meetings, the higher the quantity and quality of your relationships, the longer you live. That’s the message we get from examining the research in that area. Strong relationships lengthen your life, boost your immune system and cut the risk of depression.

An article in the January, 2015 issue of *Reader’s Digest* mentioned a Grant Study of Harvard undergraduates conducted by psychiatrist George Vaillant. The study revealed that those who thrived into old age were ones who figured out how to love and be loved. Vaillant suggested that it was the capacity for intimate relationships that predicted flourishing.

Data collected from *Brigham Young University* showed that people with active social lives were 50% less likely to die of any cause than their non-social counterparts. Low levels of social interaction evidently have worse effects than being obese or not exercising.

Research by Sheldon Cohen of *Carnegie Mellon University* suggests that the more social connections you have, the greater your ability to fight infection. A *University of Michigan* study of 3500 people revealed that the more time spent with friends was associated with higher scores on memory tests. And interaction with people provides greater brain stimulation than a computer monitor or TV set.

Researchers at the *Mayo Clinic* say that having friends can increase your sense of belonging and purpose, boost your happiness, reduce stress, improve your self-worth, and help you cope with traumas such as divorce, serious illness, job loss or the loss of a loved one.

And most people will agree that being among friends is a lot more fun than being alone – especially during special occasions such as Thanksgiving and Christmas.

## 9.4 BE MINDFUL OF PEOPLE

There is a common expression concerning mindfulness that suggests “wherever you are, be there.” In this age of technology, we should add, “And whomever you are with, be with them.” It’s interesting to observe the number of people and their companions who seem to be more interested in their devices than each other. Whether in restaurants, commuter trains, shopping malls or walking, it’s astounding to see how little communication is actually going on between partners.

The sheer volume of time people are spending on the Internet has to be taking time away from communications in the real world.

There are many studies showing that social relationships are good for your health and well-being. None of these studies seem to refer to social networking. There is no doubt a benefit, but it couldn’t possibly approach the benefits derived from the more intimate one-on-one relationships with those you can actually reach out and touch?

It may be time to trade a few hundred friends on Facebook for a few more hours of quality time with those you really love.

## 10 CLOSING REMARKS

This book should be read in tandem with my e-book *Manage your personal energy*, also published by Bookboon.com, since the more you conserve and increase your energy, the more productive you will become.

Batching, proper nutrition, stress reduction, adequate sleep and rest, health and other energy boosters mentioned in the energy book may not have anything to do with working environment, but can certainly aid in the quest for greater personal productivity.

I recommend you take a good look at where and how you get your work done, and make changes where possible to introduce such things as greenery, sunlight, standing desk, background music, color and paintings – in addition to organization – to your work environment. Also consider a “high performance area” where you can work undisturbed, whether that is in a coffee shop where you rub shoulders with other people or a secluded section of the balcony or country garden.



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Experiment a little. Try increasing the frequency of your breaks, batching similar items together when you work, checking email less frequently, increasing the amount of sleep you get – anything that might reduce stress, stimulate creativity, improve your health and well-being, and of course have a positive impact on your personal productivity.

The oft-used phrase “work smarter, not harder” is not a useless bromide. It is definitely possible to get more done in less time with less stress with fewer demands on your energy, health and general well-being.

All this can be done, not at the expense of the traditional time management and organizing suggestions, but in addition to them. Getting organized and managing your time will in themselves boost your productivity immensely. But don't stop there.

I wish you every success.

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## 12 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Harold Taylor, CEO of *TaylorInTime*, has been speaking, writing and conducting training programs on the topic of effective time management for over 40 years. He has written more than 20 books, including a Canadian bestseller, *Making Time Work For You*. He has developed over 50 time management products that have sold in 38 countries around the world. His monthly Time Report has been published for twenty-five years and he has had over 250 articles accepted for publication.

A past director of the National Association of Professional Organizers, Harold received their Founder's Award in 1999 for outstanding contributions to the organizing profession. He received the CSP (Certified Speaking Professional) designation in 1987 from the National Speakers Association. In 1998 the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers inducted him into the Canadian Speaking Hall of Fame. And in 2001, he received the Founder's Award from the Professional Organizers in Canada. The award has been named in his honor.

Prior to his speaking and writing career, Harold held management positions in industry for twelve years and was a teaching master in the business division of Humber College in Toronto for eight years. He has been an entrepreneur for forty years, incorporating four companies during that time. Since 1981, when he incorporated the time management company, *Harold Taylor Time Consultants Inc.*, he has presented over 2000 workshops, speeches and keynotes on the topic of time and life management.