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September 21, 2017

6 Counterintuitive Productivity Tricks

When you're in the middle of an all-consuming project, your first instinct is likely to hunker down for hours at your desk so you can get it done. Turns out, strategies that go against the routine may help you be more productive and creative.

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For the busy executive, downtime feels like an indulgence. After the typical long workdays, the weekends become an extension of the week. This lack of downtime, however, may come with a price—working long hours may backfire on productivity.

Several years ago, a colleague and I were working on a rush, intensive project that required complete focus for three sleep-deprived, caffeine-fueled days. As we raced to the finish line on the final day, she stopped me in the middle of a task and forced me to go on a 10-minute walk around the block. I considered any break a luxury, but it turned out my colleague knew what she was doing. The brisk walk and fresh air acted like a reset button for my exhausted brain.

Taking a break in the middle of a busy day may feel counterproductive, but mental breaks, like naps and meditation, are a proven [productivity](#) booster, and walking can be beneficial to creativity. Here are some other counterintuitive strategies that may infuse fresh energy into your day, help you refocus and improve productivity.

1. Change the scenery.

A tip oft-cited as a remedy for writer's block, a change in the environment disrupts the routine. The idea is similar to modern advice for college students to vary their study environment when they prepare for a test.



Waiting until you're close to a deadline may create the kind of determination and focus you need when you're stuck.

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Try an area with natural light, if available. Natural light can improve attention, cognitive performance and alertness, according to [research](#) published in 2016 in the International Journal of Advances in Chemical Engineering & Biological Sciences. But if you don't have natural light, even a simple change such as temporarily switching desks may be enough to stimulate the brain and revive focus.

2. Set up office at a coffee shop.

A variation on the change-of-scenery strategy, taking your work to a coffee shop adds one more benefit: ambient noise. While a high level of noise may be distracting, a 2015 study by researchers at the [University of Ontario](#) found that moderate volumes may enhance creativity.

Freelancers and [remote workers](#) may be proof that this works. Whether attracted by the subtle energy of the space, the change of scenery or the background hum, these knowledge workers can be frequently found setting up office for a few hours at their neighborhood coffee shop.

3. Listen to music.

Although studies about the music's impact on productivity are inconsistent, this strategy is worth an experiment. Some people find that listening to music helps them concentrate better than complete silence. One explanation may be related to the impact of ambient noise, as certain types of music can create a similar effect.

Music positively impacts mood because it elevates the levels of dopamine, the chemical that regulates emotional response and helps control the brain's pleasure center. This, in turn, could help reduce stress, indirectly boosting productivity.

Try different types of music. For some, it's better to have familiar tunes, as they are easier to drown out. For others, classical or instrumental music is less distracting.

4. Work against a deadline.

It sounds not only counterintuitive but scary, yet waiting until you're close to a deadline may create the kind of determination and focus you need when you're stuck. If you thrive under a certain amount of pressure, a looming deadline creates just enough urgency to jolt the creative juices into action.

This strategy beats sitting unproductively in front of a blank screen or creating artificial distractions such as getting coffee or checking emails. The trick is to give yourself a realistic time block; otherwise you may achieve the opposite result and create unnecessary stress.

5. Stop multitasking.

In the age of multiple screens and short attention spans, [multitasking](#), on the surface, presents itself as a solution for achieving more in less time. Yet it's tough to argue with science. The human brain doesn't handle multitasking well, according to various studies, [including one](#) 2016 study by researchers at University of California Irvine, Microsoft and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

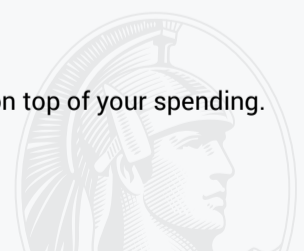
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Multitasking can be detrimental to productivity because in reality it is back-and-forth task switching, and it takes time to refocus on the main task. The impact is negligible while watching TV or working out and browsing social media at the same time. But in a more focused setting, it's likely to be a time waster.

6. Unplug one day a week.

Like multitasking, being connected all day, every day could be a tough habit to break. And, despite working longer hours than the average American, one in 10 CEOs wish they could work even more, according to a [2015 poll of 256 CEOs](#) by CEO.com.

If work-life balance is a losing proposition, try this smaller-scale strategy. Turn off all work-related communication every Saturday or Sunday. Just like that 10-minute walk around the block in the middle of peak deadlines, disconnecting for an day can go a long way to restore brain power and replenish energy.


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