

Productivity:

A Brief Guide on How to
Do More in Less Time



James Clear

Productivity Guide

10 Things This Guide Will Teach You

Table of Contents

The Only Productivity Tip You'll Ever Need	4
Warren Buffett's "2 List" Strategy: How to Maximize Your Focus and Master Your Priorities	9
How to be More Productive and Eliminate Time Wasting Activities by Using the "Eisenhower Box"	13
The Physics of Productivity: Newton's Laws of Getting Stuff Done	19
You Get 25,000 Mornings as an Adult: Here are 8 Ways to Not Waste Them	28
How to Be Motivated Every Day: Lessons Learned from Twyla Tharp	32
3 Time Management Tips That Will Improve Your Health and Productivity	36
Time Assets vs. Time Debts: A Different Way of Thinking About Productivity	41

The Only Productivity Tip You'll Ever Need

Ernest Hemingway woke each morning and began writing straight away.

He described his daily routine by saying, “When I am working on a book or a story I write every morning as soon after first light as possible. There is no one to disturb you and it is cool or cold and you come to your work and warm as you write.”

Hemingway’s routine — along with hundreds of other prolific authors, artists, and scientists mentioned in Mason Currey’s book, [Daily Rituals: How Artists Work](#) — hints at the most productive strategy I have found for getting things done and making daily progress in the areas that are important to you.

Let’s talk about the only productivity strategy you’ll ever need, why it works, and what holds us back from using it consistently.

Productivity, Simplified

No need to draw this out. This productivity strategy is straightforward: Do the most important thing first each day.

Sounds simple. No one does it.

Just like Hemingway, who produced an remarkable volume of high-caliber work during his career, you can make surprising progress each day if you simply do the most important thing first.

Why It Works

We often assume that productivity means getting more things done each day. Wrong. Productivity is getting important things done consistently. And no matter what you are working on, there are only a few things that are truly important.

Being productive is about maintaining a steady, average speed on a few things, not maximum speed on everything.

That's why this strategy is effective. If you do the most important thing first each day, then you'll always get something important done. I don't know about you, but this is a big deal for me. There are many days when I waste hours crossing off the 4th, 5th, or 6th most important tasks on my to-do list and never get around to doing the most important thing.

As you'll see below, there is no reason you have to apply this strategy in the morning, but I think starting your day with the most important task does offer some additional benefits over other times.

First, willpower tends to be higher earlier in the day. That means you'll be able to provide your best energy and effort to your most important task.

Second, in my experience, the deeper I get into the day, the more likely it is that unexpected tasks will creep into my schedule and the less likely it is that I'll spend my time as I had planned. Doing the most important thing first each day helps avoid that.

Finally, the human mind seems to dislike unfinished projects. They create an unresolved tension and internal stress. When we start something, we want to finish it. You are more likely to finish a task after starting it, so start the important tasks as soon as possible. (Just another reason why getting started is more important than succeeding.)

Why We Don't Do It

Most people spend most of their time responding to someone else's agenda than their own.

I think this is partially a result of how we are raised by society. In school, we are given assignments and told when to take our tests. At work, we are assigned due dates and given expectations from our superiors. At home, we have tasks or chores to perform to care for our kids and our partners. After a few decades of this, it can become very easy to spend your day reacting to the stimuli that surround you. We learn to take action as a reaction to the expectations, orders, or needs of someone else.

So naturally, when it comes time to start our day, it doesn't seem strange to open our email inbox, check our phone, and look for our latest marching orders.

I think this is a mistake. The tasks assigned to us by others might seem urgent, but what is urgent is seldom important. The important tasks in our lives are the ones that move our hopes, our dreams, our creations, and our businesses forward.

Does that mean that we should ignore our responsibilities as parents or employees or citizens? Of course not. But we all need a time and space in our days to respond to our own agenda, not someone else's.

Not a Morning Person?

Does the word morning make you mourn? Does the morning sun remind you of the The Eye of Sauron? Can you think of nothing worse than rays of golden sunshine streaming softly onto your pillow?

No worries, night owls.

As I scanned the daily habits of hundreds of authors, artists, and musicians in Daily Rituals, I noticed an important trend: There was no trend.

There is no one way to be successful. There are just as many night owls producing fabulous work as there are early birds. But no matter what their particular routine looked like, every productive artist embraced the idea of protecting a sacred time each day when they could work on their own agenda.

I find morning to work best. Your mileage may vary.

The phrase “Do the most important thing first each day” is just a simple way of saying, “Give yourself a time and space to work on what is important to you each day.”

Warren Buffett's "2 List" Strategy: How to Maximize Your Focus and Master Your Priorities

With well over 50 billion dollars to his name, Warren Buffett is consistently ranked among the wealthiest people in the world. Out of all the investors in the 20th century, Buffett was the most successful.

Given his success, it stands to reason that Buffett has an excellent understanding of how to spend his time each day. From a monetary perspective, you could say that he manages his time better than anyone else.

And that's why the story below, which was shared directly from Buffett's employee to my good friend [Scott Dinsmore](#), caught my attention.

Let's talk about the simple 3-step productivity strategy that Warren Buffett uses to help his employees determine their priorities and actions.

The Story of Mike Flint

Mike Flint was Buffett's personal airplane pilot for 10 years. (Flint has also flown four US Presidents, so I think we can safely say he is good at his job.) According to Flint, he was talking

about his career priorities with Buffett when his boss asked the pilot to go through a 3-step exercise.

Here's how it works...

STEP 1: Buffett started by asking Flint to write down his top 25 career goals. So, Flint took some time and wrote them down. (Note: you could also complete this exercise with goals for a shorter timeline. For example, write down the top 25 things you want to accomplish this week.)

STEP 2: Then, Buffett asked Flint to review his list and circle his top 5 goals. Again, Flint took some time, made his way through the list, and eventually decided on his 5 most important goals.

Note: If you're following along at home, pause right now and do these first two steps before moving on to Step 3.

STEP 3: At this point, Flint had two lists. The 5 items he had circled were List A and the 20 items he had not circled were List B.

Flint confirmed that he would start working on his top 5 goals right away. And that's when Buffett asked him about the second list, "And what about the ones you didn't circle?"

Flint replied, "Well, the top 5 are my primary focus, but the other 20 come in a close second. They are still important so I'll work on those intermittently as I see fit. They are not as urgent, but I still plan to give them a dedicated effort."

To which Buffett replied, "No. You've got it wrong, Mike. Everything you didn't circle just became your Avoid-At-All-Cost list. No matter what, these things get no attention from you until you've succeeded with your top 5."

The Power of Elimination

I believe in minimalism and simplicity. I like getting rid of waste. I think that eliminating the inessential is one of the best ways to make life easier, make good habits more automatic, and make you grateful for what you do have.

That said, getting rid of wasteful items and decisions is relatively easy. It's eliminating things you care about that is difficult. It is hard to prevent using your time on things that are easy to rationalize, but that have little payoff. The tasks that have the greatest likelihood of derailing your progress are the ones you care about, but that aren't truly important.

Every behavior has a cost. Even neutral behaviors aren't really neutral. They take up time, energy, and space that could be put toward better behaviors or more important tasks. We are often spinning in motion instead of taking action.

This is why Buffett's strategy is particularly brilliant. Items 6 through 25 on your list are things you care about. They are important to you. It is very easy to justify spending your time on them. But when you compare them to your top 5 goals, these items are distractions. Spending time on secondary priorities is the reason you have 20 half-finished projects instead of 5 completed ones.

Eliminate ruthlessly. Force yourself to focus. Complete a task or kill it.

The most dangerous distractions are the ones you love, but that don't love you back.

Thanks to my man Scott Dinsmore for sharing this story with me. His original post on Buffett's strategy is here.

How to be More Productive and Eliminate Time Wasting Activities by Using the “Eisenhower Box”

Dwight Eisenhower lived one of the most productive lives you can imagine.

Eisenhower was the 34th President of the United States, serving two terms from 1953 to 1961. During his time in office, he launched programs that directly led to the development of the Interstate Highway System in the United States, the launch of the internet (DARPA), the exploration of space (NASA), and the peaceful use of alternative energy sources (Atomic Energy Act).

Before becoming president, Eisenhower was a five-star general in the United States Army, served as the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe during World War II, and was responsible for planning and executing invasions of North Africa, France, and Germany.

At other points along the way, he served as President of Columbia University, became the first Supreme Commander of NATO, and somehow found time to pursue hobbies like golfing and oil painting.

Eisenhower had an incredible ability to sustain his productivity not just for weeks or months, but for decades. And for that reason, it is no surprise that his methods for time management, task management, and productivity have been studied by many people.

His most famous productivity strategy is known as the Eisenhower Box and it's a simple decision-making tool that you can use right now. Let's talk about how to be more productive and how Eisenhower's strategy works.

The Eisenhower Box: How to be More Productive

Eisenhower's strategy for taking action and organizing your tasks is simple. Using the decision matrix below, you will separate your actions based on four possibilities.

1. Urgent and important (tasks you will do immediately).
2. Important, but not urgent (tasks you will schedule to do later).
3. Urgent, but not important (tasks you will delegate to someone else).
4. Neither urgent nor important (tasks that you will eliminate).

The great thing about this matrix is that it can be used for broad productivity plans ("How should I spend my time each week?") and for smaller, daily plans ("What should I do today?").

Here is an example of what my Eisenhower Box looks like for today.

THE EISENHOWER BOX

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	DO <i>Do it now.</i> Write article for today.	DECIDE <i>Schedule a time to do it.</i> Exercising. Calling family and friends. Researching articles. Long-term biz strategy.
NOT IMPORTANT	DELEGATE <i>Who can do it for you?</i> Scheduling interviews. Booking flights. Approving comments. Answering certain emails. Sharing articles.	DELETE <i>Eliminate it.</i> Watching television. Checking social media. Sorting through junk mail.

*"What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important."
-Dwight Eisenhower, 34th President of the United States*

The Difference Between Urgent and Important

What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important.

-Dwight Eisenhower

Urgent tasks are things that you feel like you need to react to: emails, phone calls, texts, news stories. Meanwhile, in the words of Brett McKay, “Important tasks are things that contribute to our long-term mission, values, and goals.” [1]

Separating these differences is simple enough to do once, but doing so continually can be tough. The reason I like the Eisenhower Method is that it provides a clear framework for making the decisions over and over again. And like anything in life, consistency is the hard part.

Here are some other observations I’ve made from using this method.

Elimination Before Optimization

A few years ago, I was reading about computer programming when I came across an interesting quote:

“There is no code faster than no code.”

–Kevlin Henney

In other words, the fastest way to get something done — whether it is having a computer read a line of code or crossing a task off your to-do list — is to eliminate that task entirely. There is no faster way to do something than not doing it at all. That’s not a reason to be lazy, but rather a suggestion to force yourself to make hard decisions and delete any task that does not lead you toward your mission, your values, and your goals.

Too often, we use productivity, time management, and optimization as an excuse to avoid the really difficult question: “Do I actually need to be doing this?” It is much easier to remain busy and tell yourself that you just need to be a little more efficient or to “work a little later tonight”

than to endure the pain of eliminating a task that you are comfortable with doing, but that isn't the highest and best use of your time. [2]

As Tim Ferriss says, "Being busy is a form of laziness — lazy thinking and indiscriminate action."

I find that the Eisenhower Method is particularly useful because it pushes me to question whether an action is really necessary, which means I'm more likely to move tasks to the "Delete" quadrant rather than mindlessly repeating them. And to be honest, if you simply eliminated all of the things you waste time on each day then you probably wouldn't need any tips on how to be more productive at the things that matter.

Does This Help Me Accomplish My Goal?

The Eisenhower Method isn't a perfect strategy, but I have found it to be a useful decision-making tool for increasing my productivity and eliminating the behaviors that take up mental energy, waste time, and rarely move me toward my goals. I hope you'll find it useful. One final note: it can be hard to eliminate time wasting activities if you aren't sure what you are working toward. In my experience, there are two questions that can help clarify the entire process behind the Eisenhower Method.

Those two questions are...

1. What am I working toward?
2. What are the core values that drive my life?

These are questions that I have asked myself in my [Annual Review](#) and my [Integrity Report](#). Answering these questions has helped me clarify the categories for certain tasks in my life.

Deciding which tasks to do and which tasks to delete becomes much easier when you are clear about what is important to you.

The Physics of Productivity: Newton's Laws of Getting Stuff Done

In 1687, Sir Isaac Newton published his groundbreaking book, Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy, which described his three laws of motion. In the process, Newton laid the foundation for classical mechanics and redefined the way the world looked at physics and science.

What most people don't know, however, is that Newton's three laws of motion can be used as an interesting analogy for increasing your productivity, simplifying your work, and improving your life.

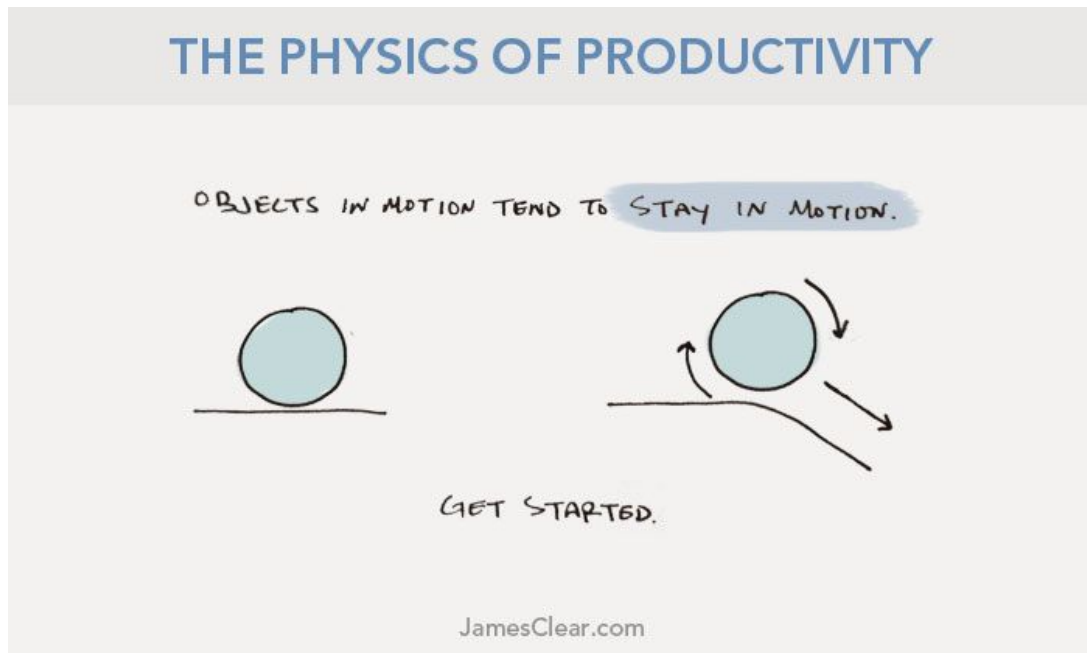
Allow me to present this analogy as Newton's Laws of Productivity.

Newton's First Law of Productivity

***First Law of Motion:** An object either remains at rest or continues to move at a constant velocity, unless acted upon by an external force. (i.e. Objects in motion tend to stay in motion. Objects at rest tend to stay at rest.)*

In many ways procrastination is a fundamental law of the universe. It's Newton's first law applied to productivity. Objects at rest tend to stay at rest.

The good news? It works the other way too. Objects in motion tend to stay in motion. When it comes to being productive, this means one thing: the most important thing is to find a way to get started. Once you get started, it is much easier to stay in motion. [3, 4]



So, what's the best way to get started when you are stuck procrastinating?

In my experience, the best rule of thumb for getting started is the 2-Minute Rule. [5]

Here's the 2-Minute Rule adjusted for productivity: **To overcome procrastination, find a way to start your task in less than two minutes.**

Notice that you don't have to finish your task. In fact, you don't even have to work on the primary task. However, thanks to Newton's first law, you'll often find that once you start this little 2-minute task, it is much easier to keep moving.

Here are some examples...

- Right now, you may not feel like going for a run. But if you put your running shoes on and fill up your water bottle that small start might be enough to get you out the door.
- Right now, you might be staring at a blank screen and struggling to write your report. But if you write random sentences for just two minutes, then you may find that useful sentences start to roll off your fingers.
- Right now, you might have a creative block and be struggling to draw something. But if you draw a random line on a sheet of paper and turn it into a dog, then you might get your creative juices flowing.

Motivation often comes after starting. Find a way to start small. Objects in motion tend to stay in motion.

Newton's Second Law of Productivity

Second Law of Motion: $F=ma$. The vector sum of the forces on an object is equal to the mass of that object multiplied by the acceleration vector of the object. (i.e. Force equals mass times acceleration.)

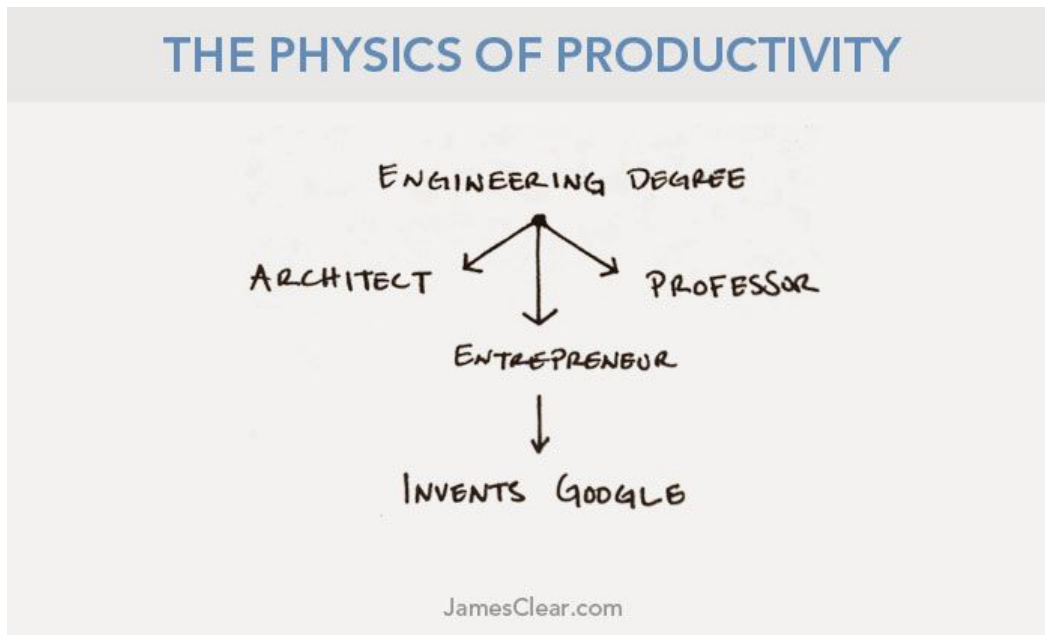
Let's break down this equation, $F=ma$, and how it can apply to productivity.

There is one important thing to note in this equation. The force, F , is a vector. Vectors involve both magnitude (how much work you are putting in) and direction (where that work is focused). In other words, if you want to get an object accelerating in a particular direction, then the size of the force you apply and the direction of that force will both make a difference.

Guess what? It's the same story for getting things done in your life.

If you want to be productive, it's not merely about how hard you work (magnitude), it's also about where that work is applied (direction). This is true of big life decisions and small daily decisions.

For example, you could apply the same skill set in different directions and get very different results.



Note: the idea for this image came from artwork created by my friend, Oliver Emberton, in his wonderful post titled, "[Life is a game. This is your strategy guide.](#)" Thanks Oliver!

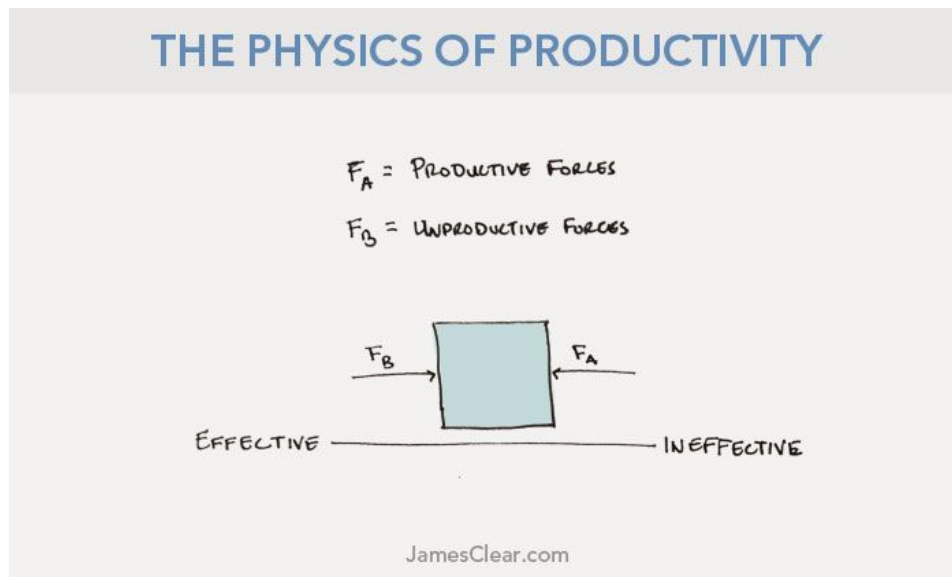
To put it simply, you only have a certain amount of force to provide to your work and where you place that force is just as important as how hard you work.

Newton's Third Law of Productivity

Third Law of Motion: *When one body exerts a force on a second body, the second body simultaneously exerts a force equal in magnitude and opposite in direction on the first body. (i.e. Equal and opposite forces.)*

We all have an average speed that we tend to perform at in life. Your typical levels of productivity and efficiency are often a balance of the productive and unproductive forces in your life — a lot like Newton's equal and opposite forces.

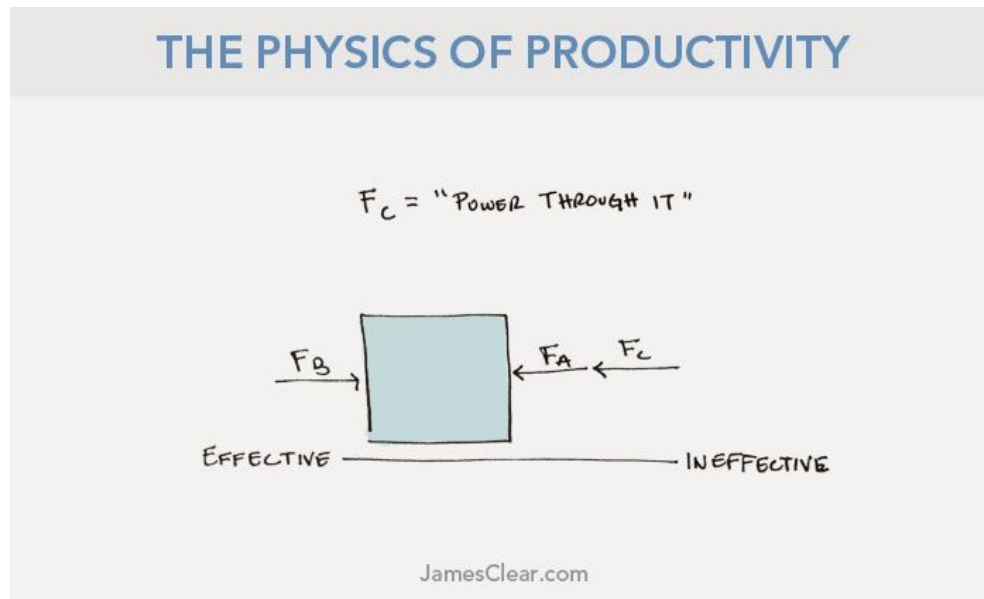
There are productive forces in our lives like focus, positivity, and motivation. There are also unproductive forces like stress, lack of sleep, and trying to juggle too many tasks at once.



If we want to become more effective and more productive, then we have two choices.

The first option is to add more productive force. This is the “power through it” option. We gut it out, drink another cup of coffee, and work harder. This is why people take drugs that help them

focus or watch a motivational video to pump themselves up. It's all an effort to increase your productive force and overpower the unproductive forces we face.

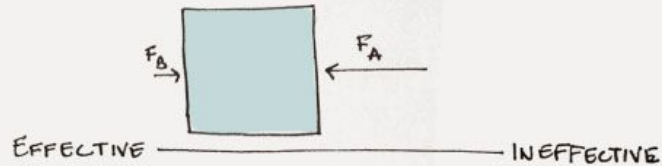


Obviously, you can only do this for so long before you burn out, but for a brief moment the “power through it” strategy can work well.

The second option is to eliminate the opposing forces. Simplify your life, learn how to say no, change your environment, reduce the number of responsibilities that you take on, and otherwise eliminate the forces that are holding you back.

THE PHYSICS OF PRODUCTIVITY

SIMPLIFY & ELIMINATE
OPPOSING FORCES



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If you reduce the unproductive forces in your life, your productivity will glide forward naturally. It's like you magically remove the hand that has been holding you back. (As I like to say, if you eliminated all of the things distracting you from being productive, you wouldn't need tips on how to become more productive.) [6]

Most people try to power through and hammer their way past the barriers. The problem with this strategy is that you're still dealing with the other force. I find it to be much less stressful to cut out the opposing forces and let your productivity naturally flow forward.

Newton's Laws of Productivity

Newton's laws of motion reveal insights that tell you pretty much everything you need to know about how to be productive.

1. Objects in motion tend to stay in motion. Find a way to get started in less than 2 minutes.
2. It's not just about working hard, it's also about working on the right things. You have a limited amount of force and where you apply it matters.
3. Your productivity is a balance of opposing forces. If you want to be more productive, you can either power through the barriers or remove the opposing forces. The second option seems to be less stressful.

Thanks to Rob Norback for sharing the idea behind the “third law of productivity”, which sparked this post. And to Sir Isaac Newton for being a man ahead of his time and for being a bold mofo who owned his rockstar hair.

You Get 25,000 Mornings as an Adult: Here are 8 Ways to Not Waste Them

You'll wake up for about 25,000 mornings in your adult life, give or take a few.

According to a [report](#) from the World Health Organization, the average life expectancy in the United States is 79 years old. Most people in wealthy nations are hovering around the 80-year mark. Women in Japan are the highest, with an average life expectancy of 86 years.

If we use these average life expectancy numbers and assume that your adult life starts at 18 years old, then you've got about 68 years as an adult. ($86 - 18 = 68$) Perhaps a little less on average. A little more if you're lucky.

$(68 \text{ years as an adult}) \times (365 \text{ days each year}) = 24,820 \text{ days.}$

25,000 mornings.

That's what you get in your adult life. 25,000 times you get to open your eyes, face the day, and decide what to do next. I don't know about you, but I've let a lot of those mornings slip by.

Once I realized this, I started thinking about how I could develop a better morning routine. I still have a lot to learn, but here are some strategies that you can use to get the most out of your 25,000 mornings.

8 Ways to Get the Most Out of Your Morning

Here are the strategies that I've found to be most effective for getting the most out of my morning.

1. Manage your energy, not your time. If you take a moment to think about it, you'll probably realize that you are better at doing certain tasks at certain times. For example, my creative energy is highest in the morning, so that's when I do my writing each day.

By comparison, I block out my afternoons for interviews, phone calls, and emails. I don't need my creative energy to be high for those tasks, so that's the best time for me to get them done. And I tend to have my best workouts in the late afternoon or early evening, so that's when I head to the gym.

What type of energy do you have in the morning? What task is that energy best suited for?

2. Prepare the night before. I don't do this nearly as often as I should, but if you only do one thing each day then spend a few minutes each night organizing your to-do list for tomorrow. When I do it right, I'll outline the article I'm going to write the next day and develop a short list of the most important items for me to accomplish. It takes 10 minutes that night and saves 3 hours the next day.

3. Don't open email until noon. Sounds simple. Nobody does it. It took me awhile to get over the urge to open my inbox, but eventually I realized that everything can wait a few hours. Nobody is going to email you about a true emergency (a death in the family, etc.), so leave your email alone for the first few hours of each day. Use the morning to do what's important rather than responding to what is "urgent."

4. Turn your phone off and leave it in another room. Or on your colleagues desk. Or at the very least, put it somewhere that is out of sight. This eliminates the urge to check text

messages, Facebook, Twitter, and so on. This simple strategy eliminates the likelihood of slipping into half-work where you waste time dividing your attention among meaningless tasks.

5. Work in a cool place. Have you ever noticed how you feel groggy and sluggish in a hot room? Turning the temperature down or moving to a cooler place is an easy way to focus your mind and body. (Hat tip to Michael Hyatt for this one.)

6. Sit up or stand up. Your mind needs oxygen to work properly. Your lungs need to be able to expand and contract to fill your body with oxygen. That sounds simple enough, but here's the problem: most people sit hunched over while staring at a screen and typing.

When you sit hunched over, your chest is in a collapsed position and your diaphragm is pressing against the bottom of your lungs, which hinders your ability to breathe easily and deeply. Sit up straight or stand up and you'll find that you can breathe easier and more fully. As a result, your brain will get more oxygen and you'll be able to concentrate better.

(Small tip: When sitting, I usually place a pillow in the small of my back. This prevents my lower back from rounding, which keeps me more upright.)

7. Eat as a reward for working hard. I practice intermittent fasting, which means that I eat my first meal around noon each day. I've been doing this for almost two years. There are plenty of health benefits, which I explained in great detail [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

But health is just one piece of the puzzle. I also fast because it allows me to get more out of my day. Take a moment to think about how much time people spend each day thinking, planning, and consuming food. By adopting intermittent fasting, I don't waste an hour each morning figuring out what to eat for breakfast, cooking it, and cleaning up. Instead, I use my morning to work on things that are important to me. Then, I eat good food and big meals as a reward for working hard.

8. Develop a “pre–game routine” to start your day. My morning routine starts by pouring a cold glass of water. Some people kick off their day with ten minutes of meditation. Similarly, you should have a sequence that starts your morning ritual. This tiny routine signals to your brain that it’s time to get into work mode or exercise mode or whatever mode you need to be in to accomplish your task. Additionally, a pre–game routine helps you overcome a lack of motivation and get things done even when you don’t feel like it.

For more details about why this works, read this: [How to Get Motivated](#).

25,000 Mornings: The Power of a Morning Routine

Just as it’s rare for anyone to experience overnight success, it’s also rare for our lives crumble to pieces in an instant. Most unproductive or unhealthy behaviors are the result of slow, gradual choices that add up to bad habits. A wasted morning here. An unproductive morning there.

The good news is that exceptional results are also the result of consistent daily choices. Nowhere is this more true than with your morning routine. The way you start your day is often the way that you finish it.

Take, for example, [Jack LaLanne](#). He woke up each day at 4am and spent the first 90 minutes lifting weights. Then, he went for a swim or a run for the next 30 minutes. For more than 60 years, he spent each morning doing this routine. In addition to being one of the most influential people in fitness in the last 100 years, LaLanne also lived to the ripe old age of 96.

This is no coincidence. What you do each morning is an indicator of how you approach your entire day. It’s the choices that we repeatedly make that determine the life we live, the health we enjoy, and the work we create.

You've got 25,000 mornings. What will you do with each one?

How to Be Motivated Every Day: Lessons Learned from Twyla Tharp

Twyla Tharp was born in Indiana and was named after the local “Pig Princess” at the Annual Muncie Fair, who went by Twila.

It wasn't the prettiest of starts, but Tharp turned it into something beautiful.

She is widely regarded as one of the greatest dancers and choreographers of the modern era. She has toured across the globe performing her original work. She is credited with choreographing the first crossover ballet and she has choreographed dances for the Paris Opera Ballet, The Royal Ballet, New York City Ballet, Boston Ballet, and many others. Her work has appeared on Broadway, on television, and in films. In 1992, she was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, often called the “Genius Grant”, for her creative work.

To put it simply: Twyla Tharp is prolific. The question is, how does she do it?

The Power of Ritual

In her best-selling book, [The Creative Habit](#), Tharp discusses one of the secrets of her success:

I begin each day of my life with a ritual; I wake up at 5:30 A.M., put on my workout clothes, my leg warmers, my sweatshirts, and my hat. I walk outside my Manhattan home, hail a taxi, and tell the driver to take me to the Pumping Iron gym at 91st street and First Avenue, where I workout for two hours. The ritual is not the stretching and

weight training I put my body through each morning at the gym; the ritual is the cab. The moment I tell the driver where to go I have completed the ritual.

It's a simple act, but doing it the same way each morning habitualized it — makes it repeatable, easy to do. It reduces the chance that I would skip it or do it differently. It is one more item in my arsenal of routines, and one less thing to think about.

Let's talk about what makes Tharp's morning ritual so important and how we can use it to master our own habits.

The Surprising Thing About Motivation

If you have trouble sticking to good habits or fall victim to bad ones, then it can be easy to assume that you simply need to learn how to get motivated or that you don't understand how willpower works.

But here is the surprising thing about motivation: it often comes *after* starting a new behavior, not before. Getting started is a form of active inspiration that naturally produces momentum.

You have probably experienced this phenomenon before. For example, going for a run may seem overwhelming or exhausting just to think about before you begin, but if you can muster up the energy to start jogging, you'll often find that you become more motivated to finish as you go. In other words, it's easier to finish the run than it was to start it in the first place.

This is basically Newton's First Law applied to habit formation: objects in motion tend to stay in motion. And that means getting started is the hardest part.

I often find this to be true with my articles. Once I begin writing, it's much easier for me to power through and finish. However, if I'm staring at a blank page, it can seem overwhelming and taxing to take the first step.

And this, my friends, is where Twyla Tharp's morning ritual comes back into the picture.

Rituals Are an On Ramp for Your Behavior

The power of a ritual, or what I like to call a pre-game routine, is that it provides a mindless way to initiate your behavior. It makes starting your habits easier and that means following through on a consistent basis is easier.

Habits researchers agree. Benjamin Gardner, a researcher in the Department of Epidemiology and Public Health at University College London recently published a paper in the *Health Psychology Review* that covered how we can use habits to initiate longer, more complex routines:

A 'habitual' bicycle commuter, for example, may automatically opt to use a bicycle rather than alternative transport (so automatically enacting the first behaviour in a superordinate 'bicycle commuting' sequence, such as putting on a cycle helmet), but negotiating the journey may require higher-level cognitive input.

In other words, getting started with a simple ritual like putting on a helmet or checking the air in the bike tires makes it easier to follow through on the bigger behavior (making the commute). If you focus on the ritual, the next step follows more automatically.

Twyla Tharp's morning routine is a perfect example of this idea in practice. Naturally, there are going to be days when she doesn't feel like getting out of bed and exercising. There are bound to be times when the thought of starting the day with a two-hour workout seems exhausting.

But her ritual of waking up and calling the taxi takes the emotion, motivation, and decision-making out of the process. Her brain doesn't need to waste any energy deciding what to do next. She doesn't have a debate with herself about what the first step should be. She simply follows the same pattern that she always does. And once the pattern is in motion, the rest of the sequence follows more easily.

The key to any good ritual is that it removes the need to make a decision: What should I do first? When should I do this? How should I do this? Most people never get moving because they can't decide how to get started. Having a ritual takes that burden off your shoulders.

The Idea in Practice

Here are some other examples of how you can apply ritual and routine to your habits and behaviors:

- **Exercise more consistently:** Use the same warm up routine in the gym
- **Become more creative:** Follow a creative ritual before you start writing or painting or singing
- **Start each day stress free:** Create a five-minute morning meditation ritual
- **Sleep better:** Follow a "power down" routine before bed

Whatever it is, make it your own. Use your ritual as an on-ramp for the bigger behavior and habits you want to build into your life. When you master the ability to mindlessly initiate the

tasks that are important to you, it's not necessary to rely on motivation and willpower to make them happen.

Where can you use a ritual or routine in your life? What behaviors do you want to do more consistently and automatically?

3 Time Management Tips That Will Improve Your Health and Productivity

Time management can be tough. What is urgent in your life and what is important to your life are often very different things.

This is especially true with your health, where the important issues almost never seem urgent even though your life ultimately hangs in the balance.

- No, going to the gym today isn't urgent, but it is important for your long-term health.
- No, you won't die from stress today, but if you don't get it figured out soon, you might.
- No, eating real, unprocessed foods isn't required for you to stay alive right now, but will reduce your risk of cancer and disease.

Is there anything we can do? If we all have 24 hours in a day, how do we actually use them more effectively?

And most importantly, how can we manage our time to live healthier and happier, do the things that we know are important, and still handle the responsibilities that are urgent?

I'm battling with that answer just like you are, but in my experience there are three time management tips that actually work in real life and will help you improve your health and productivity.

1. Eliminate half-work at all costs.

In our age of constant distraction, it's stupidly easy to split our attention between what we should be doing and what society bombards us with. Usually we're balancing the needs of messages, emails, and to-do lists at the same time that we are trying to get something accomplished. It's rare that we are fully engaged in the task at hand.

I call this division of your time and energy "half-work."

Here are some examples of half-work...

- You start writing a report, but stop randomly to check your phone for no reason or to open up Facebook or Twitter.
- You try out a new workout routine. Two days later, you read about another "new" fitness program and try a little bit of that. You make little progress in either program and so you start searching for something better.
- Your mind wanders to your email inbox while you're on the phone with someone.

Regardless of where and how you fall into the trap of half-work, the result is always the same: you're never fully engaged in the task at hand, you rarely commit to a task for extended periods of time, and it takes you twice as long to accomplish half as much.

Half-work is reason why you're able to get more done on your last day before vacation (when you really focus) than you do in the 2 weeks previous (when you're constantly distracted).

Like most people, I deal with this problem all of the time and the best way I've found to overcome it is to block out significant time to focus on one project and eliminate everything else.

I pick one exercise and make it my only focus for the entire workout. (i.e. "Today is just for squats. Anything else is extra.")

I carve out a few hours (or even an entire work day) to deep dive on an important project. I'll leave my phone in another room and shut down my email, Facebook, and Twitter.

This complete elimination of distractions is the only way I know to get into deep, focused work and avoid fragmented sessions where you're merely doing half-work.

How much more could you achieve if you did the work you needed to do, the way you needed to do it, and eliminated the half-work, half-wandering that we fill most of our days with?

2. Do the most important thing first.

Disorder and chaos tend to increase as your day goes on. At the same time, the decisions and choices that you make throughout the day tend to drain your willpower. You're less likely to make a good decision at the end of the day than you are at the beginning.

I've found that this same trend holds true in my workouts as well. As the workout progresses, I have less and less willpower to finish sets, grind out reps, and perform difficult exercises.

For all of those reasons, I do my best to make sure that if there is something important that I need to do, then I do it first.

If I have an important article to write, I grab a glass of water and start typing as soon as I wake up. If there is a tough exercise that I need to do, then I do it at the beginning of each workout.

If you do the most important thing first, then you'll never have a day when you didn't get something important done. By following this simple strategy, you will usually end up having a productive day, even if everything doesn't go to plan.

3. Reduce the scope, but stick to the schedule.

I've written previously about the importance of holding yourself to a schedule and not a deadline. There might be occasions when deadlines make sense, but I'm convinced that when it comes to doing important work over the long-term, following a schedule is much more effective.

When it comes to the day-to-day grind, however, following a schedule is easier said than done. Ask anyone who plans to workout every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and they can tell you how hard it is to actually stick to their schedule every time without fail.

To counteract the unplanned distractions that occur and overcome the tendency to be pulled off track, I've made a small shift in how I approach my schedule. My goal is to put the schedule first and not the scope, which is the opposite of how we usually approach our goals.

For example, let's say you woke up today with the intention of running 3 miles this afternoon. During the day, your schedule got crazy and time started to get away from you. Now you only have 20 minutes to workout.

At this point, you have two options.

The first is to say, "I don't have enough time to workout today," and spend the little time you have left working on something else. This is what I would usually have done in the past.

The second option is to reduce the scope, but stick to the schedule. Instead of running 3 miles, you run 1 mile or do five sprints or 30 jumping jacks. But you stick to the schedule and get a workout in no matter what. I have found far more long-term success using the this approach than the first.

On a daily basis, the impact of doing five sprints isn't that significant, especially when you had planned to run 3 miles. But the cumulative impact of always staying on schedule is huge. No matter what the circumstance and no matter how small the workout, you know you're going to finish today's task. That's how little goals become lifetime habits.

Finish something today, even if the scope is smaller than you anticipated.

Time Management Tips That Actually Work

There are thousands of time management apps and productivity gadgets. You'll find more calendars, reminders, and task lists than you know what to do with. But in my experience, the most effective and practical time management approaches are simple.

When it comes to living a healthy and productive life, I do my best to focus on three things...

1. Eliminate half-work and focus deeply.
2. Do the most important thing first.
3. Stick to your schedule and build the habit, no matter how small the accomplishment.

How have you managed your time better and accomplished more at work, at home, or in the gym?

Time Assets vs. Time Debts: A Different Way of Thinking About Productivity

Late in his career, Steve Jobs famously drove his car without a license plate.

There were all sorts of theories about why Jobs decided to drive without tags. Some people said he didn't want to be tracked. Others believed he was trying to make a game of avoiding parking tickets. Jon Callas, a former computer security expert who worked for Apple, revealed a different reason.

According to Callas, Steve Jobs discovered a loophole in the California vehicle registration laws. Anyone with a new car had up to six months to get a proper license plate for their new vehicle. During the first six months, however, you could simply drive the vehicle without a license plate.

Once he realized this, Jobs arranged a special leasing agreement with his Mercedes dealer so that every six months he would drop off his current car and receive a new Mercedes SL55 AMG to replace it. This meant that he never drove a car older than six months and he never had to go to the Department of Motor Vehicles to get a license plate. [7]

After hearing the story, many people responded by saying something like, "I guess that's what you do when you have a lot of money." And, to be fair, it is true that this license plate strategy isn't reasonable for most people on the planet. If you look deeper, however, you'll notice that something else was happening: Steve Jobs was building a Time Asset.

Time Assets vs. Time Debts

Most productivity strategies focus on short-term efficiency: how to manage your to-do list effectively, how to get more done each morning, how to shorten your weekly meetings, and so on. These are all reasonable ideas.

We often fail to realize, however, that there are certain strategic choices that impact our time on a larger scale. These choices can be categorized as Time Assets or Time Debts, which are two concepts I learned from Patrick McKenzie. [8]

TIME ASSETS are actions or choices you make today that will save you time in the future.

Software is a classic example of a time asset. You can write a program one time today and it will run processes for you over and over again every day afterward. You pay an upfront investment of time and get a payoff each day afterward.

The car leasing system that Steve Jobs developed is another example of a time asset. It took him some time to find a loophole and arrange a repeatable leasing system, but his process rewarded him with additional time and less hassle every 6 months.

TIME DEBTS are actions or choices you make today that will cost you additional time in the future.

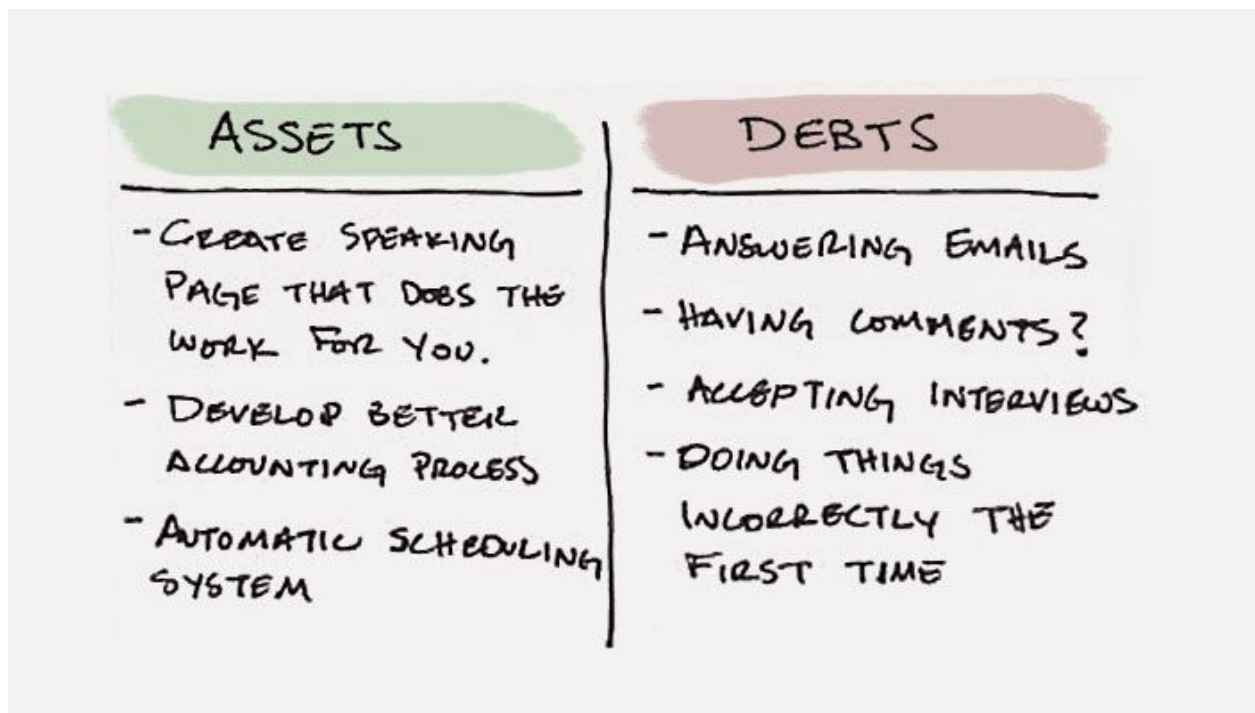
Email is a time debt that most people participate in each day. If you send an email now, you are committing to reading the reply or responding with an additional message later. Every email you send creates a small debt that you have to pay back at a later time.

This is not to say that all time debts are bad. Perhaps you enjoy serving on your school committee or volunteering with a local organization. However, when you make these

commitments, you are also creating a time debt that you will have to pay at some point. Sometimes the debts we commit to are worth sacrificing for, many times they are not.

Time Assets in Real Life

I wrote down a short list of time assets and time debts for my business. Here are a few I came up with...



Assets

- Speaking. I can create a speaking page on my website that answers common questions and qualifies the right kind of people. This could include a descriptive Frequently Asked

Questions section or a better sign up form. The goal of the system is to set clear expectations and answer common questions that I usually have to answer via email.

- **Accounting.** By setting clear rules for my bookkeeper and accountant, we can develop a system for automatically tagging certain expenses and transactions each month, which minimizes the need for me to manually approve repeated transactions.
- **Scheduling.** Booking calendar appointments, calls, and interviews requires a lot of email. Using software like [ScheduleOnce](#) eliminates this problem and lets people choose from a pre-selected list of available times.

Debts

- **Email.** The more email I answer, the more email I generate.
- **Comments.** I like the comments on my site and I don't plan on removing them. (I love hearing from you!) But every time I publish an article with a comments section, I'm creating a time debt that I have to pay back by approving and moderating comments.
- **Interviews.** At first, I said yes to every interview that came my way. Today, I typically do 3 to 5 every week. Saying yes to every interview has become a time debt.
- **Low quality work.** If you don't edit your article now, you'll have to fix the grammar later. If you write sloppy code now, you'll have to debug it later. If you create a poor product in the beginning, you'll have to service customers and process refunds later. Every low quality piece of work is a time debt that you have to pay back. To quote John Wooden, "If you don't have time to do it right, when will you have time to do it over?"

A System For Your Time

Systems are more important than goals, and Time Assets are a perfect example of why this is true. Each Time Asset that you create is a system that goes to work for you day in and day out.

If your schedule is filled with Time Debts, then it doesn't matter how hard you work. Your choices will constantly put you in a productivity hole. However, if you strategically build Time Assets day after day, then you multiply your time exponentially.

Driving a car without a license plate might seem like an extreme way to save time, but it is also a level of strategic thinking that most people never embrace. This isn't an approach that only works for Steve Jobs. It works for all of us.

Time Debts need to be paid. Be careful how you choose them. Time Assets pay you over and over again. Spend more time creating them.

Sources

1. Thanks to Brett McKay at [The Art of Manliness](#) for his post on the Eisenhower Box.
2. The term “highest and best use” is a real estate concept for finding the most valuable use of a piece of property. My friend Mark Heckmann is a fan of using the phrase for personal time management and I like it too. Thanks Mark!
3. Psychology studies have also revealed that it is easier for us to stay in motion once we have started. Actually, what the studies show is that our human brains have a strong urge to finish tasks that we start. We don’t like leaving things unfinished or partially done. This is a widely research phenomenon known as the Zeigarnik Effect, named after the Soviet psychologist Bluma Zeigarnik.
4. After writing this post, I found out that Stephen Guise has also written about the idea of “objects in motion, stay in motion” in his book, [Mini Habits](#).
5. The 2-Minute Rule originally comes from David Allen’s best-selling book, [Getting Things Done](#).
6. This idea of analyzing supporting and opposing forces, which is sometimes referred to as a Force Field Analysis, was first thought up by Kurt Lewin. This is the same man who is responsible for [Lewin’s Equation](#).
7. [“Mystery solved: Why Steve Jobs’ car never had a license plate”](#) by Aayush Arya. October 27, 2011.

8. The idea for Time Assets and Time Debts originally came from Patrick McKenzie, a programmer and friend of mine. You can read his great productivity post on the concept [here](#).