

50 Tricks to Get Things Done Faster, Better, and More Easily

By Dustin Wax

We all want to get stuff done, whether it's the work we have to do so we can get on with what we want to do, or indeed, the projects we feel are our purpose in life. To that end, here's a collection of 50 hacks, tips, tricks, and mnemonic devices I've collected that can help you work better.

1. **Most Important Tasks (MITs):** At the start of each day (or the night before) highlight the three or four most important things you have to do in the coming day. Do them first. If you get nothing else accomplished aside from your MITs, you've still had a pretty productive day.
2. **Big Rocks:** The big projects you're working on at any given moment. Set aside time every day or week to move your big rocks forward.
3. **Inbox Zero:** Decide what to do with every email you get, the moment you read it. If there's something you need to do, either do it or add it to your todo list and delete or file the email. If it's something you need for reference, file it. Empty your email inbox every day.
4. **Wake up earlier:** Add a productive hour to your day by getting up an hour earlier — before everyone else starts imposing on your time.
5. **One In, One Out:** Avoid clutter by adopting a replacement-only standard. Every time you buy something new, you throw out or donate something old. For example, you buy a new shirt, you get rid of an old one. (Variation: One in, Two Out — useful when you begin to feel overwhelmed by your possessions.)
6. **Brainstorming:** The act of generating dozens of ideas without editing or censoring yourself. Lots of people use mindmaps for this: stick the thing you want to think about in the middle (a problem you need to solve, a theme you want to write about, etc.) and start writing whatever you think of. Build off of each of the sub-topics, and each of their sub-topics. Don't worry about whether the ideas are good or not — you don't have to follow through on them, just get them out of your head. After a while, you'll start surprising yourself with really creative concepts.
7. **Ubiquitous Capture:** Always carry something to take notes with — a pen and paper, a PDA, a stack of index cards. Capture every thought that comes into your mind, whether it's an idea for a project you'd like to do, an appointment you need to make, something you need to pick up next time you're at the store, whatever. Review it regularly and transfer everything to where it belongs: a todo list, a filing system, a journal, etc.
8. **Get more sleep:** Sleep is essential to health, learning, and awareness. Research shows the body goes through a complete sleep cycle in about 90 minutes, so napping for less than that doesn't have the same effect that real sleep does (although it does make you feel better). Get 8 hours a night, at least. Learn to see sleep as a pleasure, not a necessary evil or a luxury.
9. **10+2*5:** Work in short spurts of 10 minutes, interrupted by 2 minute breaks. Use a timer. Do this 5 times an hour to stay on target without over-taxing your physical and mental resources. Spend those 2 minutes getting a drink, going to the bathroom, or staring out a window.
10. **SMART goals:** A rubric for creating and pursuing your goals, helping to avoid setting goals that are simply unattainable. Stands for: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely.
11. **SUCCES:** From Chip and Dan Heath's book, *Made to Stick*, SUCCES is a set of characteristics that make ideas memorable ("sticky"): sticky ideas are Simple, Unexpected, Concrete, Credible, Emotional Stories.
12. **Eat the Frog:** Do your most unpleasant task first. Based on the saying that if the first thing you do in the morning is eat a frog, the day can only get better from then on.
13. **80/20 Rule/Pareto Principle:** Generally speaking, the 80/20 Principle says that most of our results come from a small portion of our actual work, and conversely, that we spend most of our

energy doing things that aren't ultimately all that important. Figure out which part of your work has the greatest results and focus as much of your energy as you can on that part.

14. **What's the Next Action?:** Don't plan out everything you need to do to finish a project, just focus on the very next thing you need to do to move it forward. Usually doing the next, little thing will lead to another, and another, until we're either done or we run into a block: we need more information, we need someone else to catch up, etc. Be as concrete and discrete as possible: you can't "install cable", all you can do is "call the cable company to request cable installation".
15. **The Secret:** There is no secret.
16. **Slow Down:** Make time for yourself. Eat slowly. Enjoy a lazy weekend day. Take the time to do things right, and keep a balance between the rush-rush world of work and the rest of your life.
17. **Time Boxing:** Assign a set amount of time per day to work on a task or project. Focus entirely on that one thing during that time. Don't worry about finishing it, just worry about giving that amount of undivided attention to the project. (Variation: fixed goals. For example, you don't get up until you've written 1,000 words, or processed 10 orders, or whatever.)
18. **Batch Process:** Do all your similar tasks together. For example, don't deal with emails sporadically throughout the day; instead, set aside an hour to go through your email inbox and respond to emails. Do the same with voice mail, phone calls, responding to letters, filing, and so on — any routine, repetitive tasks.
19. **Covey Quadrants:** A system for assigning priorities. Two axes, one for importance, the other for urgency, intersect. Tasks are assigned to one of the four quadrants: not important, not urgent; not important, urgent; important, not urgent; and important and urgent. Purge the tasks that are neither important nor urgent, defer the unimportant but urgent ones, try to avoid letting the important ones become urgent, and as much as possible work on the tasks in the important but not urgent quadrant.
20. **Handle Everything Once:** Don't set things aside hoping you'll have time to deal with them later. Ask yourself "What do I need to do with this" every time you pick up something from your email list, and either do it, schedule it for later, defer it to someone else, or file it.
21. **Don't Break the Chain:** Use a calendar to track your daily goals. Every day you do something, like working out or writing 1,000 words, make a big red "X". Every day the chain will grow longer. Don't break the chain! That is, don't let any non-X days interrupt your chain of successful days.
22. **Review:** Schedule a time with yourself every week to look over what you've done that week and what you want to do the next week. Ask yourself if there are any new projects you should be starting, and if what you're working on is moving you closer to your goals for your life.
23. **Roles:** Everyone fills several different roles in their life. For instance, I'm a teacher, a student, a writer, a step-father, a partner, a brother, a son, an uncle, an anthropologist, and so on. Understanding your different roles and learning to keep them distinct when necessary can help you keep some sense of balance between them. Make goals around the various roles you fill, and make sure that your goals fit with your goals in other roles.
24. **Flow:** The flow state happens when you're so absorbed in whatever you're doing that you have no awareness of the passing of time and the work just happens automatically. It's hard to trigger consciously, but you can create the conditions for it by allowing yourself a block of uninterrupted time, minimizing distractions, and calming yourself.
25. **Do It Now:** Fight procrastination by adopting "do it now!" as your mantra. Limit yourself to 60 seconds when making a decision, decide what you're going to do with every input in your life as soon as you encounter it, learn to make bold decisions even when you're not really sure. Keep moving forward.

26. **Time Log:** Lawyers have to track everything they do in the day and how long they do it so they can bill their clients and remain accountable. You need to be accountable to yourself, so keep track of how much time you really spend on the things that are important to you by tracking your time.
27. **Structured Procrastination:** A strategy of recognizing and using one's procrastinating tendencies to get stuff done. Items at the top of top of the list are avoided by doing seemingly less difficult and less important tasks further down the list — making the procrastinator highly productive. The trick is to make sure the items at the top are apparently urgent — with pressing deadlines and apparently large consequences. But, of course, they aren't really all that urgent. Structured procrastination requires a masterful skill at self-deception, which fortunately bigtime procrastinators excel at.
28. **Personal Mission Statement:** Write a personal mission statement, and use it as a guide to set goals. Ask if each goal or activity moves you closer to achieving your mission. If it doesn't, eliminate it. Periodically review and revise your mission statement.
29. **Backwards Planning:** A planning strategy that works from the goal back to your next action. Start with the end goal in mind. What do you have to have in place to accomplish it? OK, now what do you have to have in place to accomplish what you have to have in place to accomplish your end goal? And what do you have to have in place to accomplish that? And so on, back to something you already have in place or can put in place immediately. That's your next action.
30. **Tune Out:** Create a personal privacy zone by wearing headphones. People are much more hesitant to interrupt someone wearing headphones. Note: actually listening to music through your headphones is optional — nobody knows but you.
31. **Write It Down:** Don't rely on your memory as your system. Write down the things you need to do, your schedule, anything you might need to refer to, and every passing thought so you can relax, knowing you won't forget. Use your brain for thinking, use paper or your computer for keeping track of stuff.
32. **Gap Time:** The little blocks of time we have during the day while waiting for the bus, standing in line, waiting for a meeting to start, etc. Have a list of small, 5-minute tasks that you can do in these moments, or carry something to read or work on to make the most of these spare minutes.
33. **Monotasking:** We like to think of ourselves as great multitaskers, but we aren't. What we do when we multitask is devote tiny slices of time to several tasks in rapid succession. Since it takes more than a few minutes (research suggests as long as 20) to really get into a task, we end up working worse and more slowly than if we devoted longer blocks of time to each task, worked until it was done, and moved on to the next one.
34. **Habits:** Habits are as much about the way we see and respond to the world as about the actions we routinely take. Examine your own habits and ask what they say about your relation to the world — and what would have to change to create a worldview where your goals were attainable.
35. **Triggers:** Place meaningful reminders around you to help you remember, as well as to help create better habits. For example, put the books you need to take back to the library in front of the door, so you can't leave without seeing them and remembering they need to go back.
36. **Unclutter:** Clutter is anything that's out of place and in the way. It's not necessarily neatness — someone can have a rigorously neat workspace and not be able to get anything done. It's being able to access what you need, when you need it, without breaking the flow of your work to find it. Figure out what is "clutter" in your working and living spaces, and fix that.
37. **Visualize:** Imagine yourself having accomplished your goals. What is your life like? Are you who you want to be? If not, rethink your goals. If so, then visualize yourself taking the steps you need to take to get there. You've got yourself a plan; write it down and do it.

38. **Tickler File:** A set of 43 folders, labeled 1 – 31 and January – December, used to remind us of tasks we need to do on a specific day. For instance, if you have a trip on March 23rd, you'd put your itinerary, tickets, and other material in the "March" folder. At the start of each month, you move the previous month's folder to the back. On March 1st, you'd transfer your travel information into the "23" folder. Each day, you move the previous day's folder to the back. On the 23rd, the "23" folder will be at the front, and everything you need that day will be there.
39. **ToDon't List:** A list of things not to do – useful for keeping track of habits that lead you to be unproductive, like playing online flash games.
40. **Templates:** Create templates for repetitive tasks, like letters, customer reply emails, blogs, etc.
41. **Checklists:** When planning any big task, make a checklist so you don't forget the steps while in the busy middle part of doing it. Keep your checklists so you can use them next time you have to do the same task.
42. **No:** Learning to say "no" – to new commitments, to interruptions, to anything – is one of the most valuable skills you can develop to keep you focused on your own commitments and give you time to work on them.
43. **Unschedule:** Schedule all your fun activities or personal life (the stuff you want to do) first. Fill in whatever time's left over with uninterrupted blocks of work. Write those into your schedule after you've completed them. Reward yourself after every block of quality, focused work.
44. **Purge:** Regularly go through your existing commitments and get rid of anything that is either not helping you advance your own goals or is a regular "sink" of time or energy.
45. **One Bucket:** Minimize the places you collect new inputs in your life, your "buckets". Ideally have one "bucket" where everything goes. Lots of people experience an incredible sense of relief when everything they need to think about is collected in one place in front of them, no matter how big the pile.
46. **50-30-20:** Spend 50% of your working day on tasks that advance your long-term, life goals, spend 30% on tasks that advance your middle-term (2-years or so) goals, and the remaining 20% on things that affect only the next 90 days or so.
47. **Timer:** Tell yourself you will work on a project or task, and only that project or task, for a set amount of time. Set a timer (use a kitchen timer, or use a countdown timer on your computer), and plug away at your work. When the timer goes off, you're done — move on to the next project or task.
48. **Do Your Worst:** Give yourself permission to suck. Relieve the pressure of needing to achieve perfection in every task on the first run. Promise yourself you'll go back and fix any problems later, but for now, just run wild.
49. **Make an Appointment with Yourself:** Schedule time every week or so just for you. Consider the state of your life: what's working? What isn't working? what mistakes are you making? what could you change? Give yourself a chance to get to know you.
50. **[This space left intentionally blank]:** This is a big list, sure, but it's not an exhaustive one. The last space is left for you to fill in. What works for you? What would you like to share with the rest of the lifehack.org community? Let us know in the comments — or write your own list and link back to us!

<http://www.lifehack.org/articles/featured/50-tricks-to-get-things-done-faster-better-and-more-easily.html>