How to be a Productivity Ninja

Time management is a myth!

“Time management” doesn’t work. Instead, the Productivity Ninja concentrates on self-management – of their attention, focus, energy, actions, habits, choices and motivation. The 9 Characteristics of the Productivity Ninja help generate awareness of unproductive and ingrained habits, and introduce corresponding Ninja tactics to implement and build new productive behaviours. Use the Productivity Ninja mindset to review and rethink the way you approach your work, and create playful, productive momentum.

1. Zen-like Calm

Many of us are overwhelmed with the amount of information and potential distraction we face in our work and lives. The Productivity Ninja is calm and prepared, but also skilled and ruthless in how they deal with the enemy that is information overload. Calmness and clarity underpin all aspects of Productivity Ninja practice.

- Download your brain
  Information overload is a major challenge to being productive. Remember, “Your brain is for having ideas, not for holding them” – David Allen, GTD.

- Workflow, not lists
  The Lists metaphor is demoralising (a continuing growing pile of work that never gets smaller). Instead, Workflow is about making the best choices re: “What’s the next action?“.

- Pining for the cake factory
  Ever wish your work had the clarity and simplicity of putting cherries on cakes? Knowledge work (what we do) isn’t like that of course, but the Ninja looks to re-establish some of its better aspects.

- Simultaneously boss and worker
  Separate thinking and doing. Constantly re-juggling work requests and deciding priorities reduces your capacity to concentrate in the moment. Separate traffic control from execution with weekly and daily reviews.

2. Ruthlessness

Ninja ruthlessness takes multiple forms. Ruthlessness with our choices and what we commit to – or don’t. Ruthless (but positive) honesty with others about what’s realistic. Ruthlessness with ourselves when we fall prey to distraction. Ruthless control over our attention and how our work environment effects it.

- Reality check: lower your expectations
  Realise you’ll never get everything done. That’s not the game anymore. Instead we need to make the best choices about where to deploy the capacity and energy we have, to get the best results.
• Pareto’s 80/20 rule
  Do more of what’s working. Change or eliminate what’s not. It really is fine to say “no” – as long as you can justify to yourself and others why! Use 80/20 impact thinking. Simplify, automate, outsource.

• Nurture your attention
  Attention is as delicate as an egg. Easily broken, very hard to put back together. But look after it and it’ll grow and thrive. What can you do to create more focus, attention and momentum?

• Know your enemy
  Even when what’s to be done is clear, distractions (whether self-created or from outside) are a major threat. It can take up to 15 minutes to find your place again and get ‘back in the zone’.

• Silence those pings
  Turn off all visual and audio “you have new mail” notifications, on your desktop or mobile devices. The ping is far too addictive and tempting – you’ll want to go and check.

• Defend your sanctuary
  Use do not disturb signs (either virtual or real). Phone set to silent. Mark as busy on shared calendars. Home workers: make sure others know you are at work, and when you’ll be home.

3. Weapon-Savvy

The Ninja is skillful on their own right and knows that using the right tools makes them even more effective. A few key tools used well can create an impressive Ninja armoury. And once you’ve found something that works well, don’t be tempted to keep changing to the latest fad or shiny toy.

• A Ninja has a second brain
  The ‘second brain’ is the Ninja’s trusted system to store information, actions, tasks and project. There are many options, including many digital and mobile ones – but a spreadsheet or paper and pen can work just as well. For more info... [http://bit.ly/2nd_brain](http://bit.ly/2nd_brain)

• Get it out of your head
  This reduces distraction and preoccupation. Having a complete picture allows for better choices, proper planning and more effective execution. Let a trusted system remember stuff for you.

• You’ve got way too much mail
  Get to know how to use rules, filters and folders to triage your mail. Review lower importance email (‘Bacon’) less frequently, and give your proper attention to the messages that really matter.

• Stop checking
  Instead process your mail – then get back to doing your actual work. As Merlin Mann (who coined the term ‘Inbox Zero’) says: “Stop taking orders and make the sandwiches!”.

• Move it out
  “Your inbox is only for stuff you haven’t read yet” (Merlin Mann). Once processed, delete/archive (the default choice), or move to a folder ‘needs action/reply’, ‘reading material’, ‘waiting for’ etc.

• Extract the goodness
  When processing mail, extract the ‘payload’ value: i.e. convert into task/action items, planner entries, calendar appointments/reminders, download attachments, etc. The rest can be archived/deleted.
• Email is **not** a to-do list
  But so many people use it as one! There are far more appropriate tools for that, and using one ‘built for purpose’ will reduce the temptation to keep your mail open all the time, increasing its power to distract.

4. **Stealth and Camouflage**

Sometimes the Productivity Ninja needs to employ a bit of old-fashioned stealth and camouflage – sneaky (but ethical) ways to boost performance. Striking the right balance between availability and solitude can be tricky (especially for managers), but is crucial to getting your best work done and delivering what’s expected.

• **Tactical hiding: “going dark”**
  Working near other people can be motivating, but also very distracting. Make yourself less available. Work from home, in a café, in the park, or perhaps swap desks with a colleague on another floor.

• **Unplug!**
  Only be online for tasks that absolutely need online access (e.g. communications, research etc.). Whenever possible get unplugged and offline, especially when you need to fully concentrate.

• **Don’t login yet**
  Don’t fire up email as the default first task of the day – you’ll be dragged down the rabbit hole. Plan your day first, write 5 not negotiable tasks on a post it note to keep you focused.

• **Email when you choose**
  Rather than automatically complying the instant it nags you to, process mail in dashes, with plenty of space to do other work in between.

• **Meetings for one**
  Don’t just use your planner for meetings and deadlines. You also need to schedule in when your actual work is going to happen. Block out these a month/week/day ahead during reviews.

5. **Unorthodoxy**

What’s important is the end result. It doesn’t matter if you use the conventional route to get there. Be willing to question everything. Don’t get stuck in a rut – challenge the status quo, innovate and experiment.

• **Unorthodox inspiration**
  Seek fresh ideas from outside your immediate field. Ask yourself: how would a revolutionary, a parent, an artist, a designer or an entrepreneur approach this? What apparent ‘rules’ can actually be broken?

• **Challenge and experiment**

• **Trick yourself into working**
  Especially on repeatedly procrastinated tasks. Available tactics include “Eat That Frog”, personal “Power Hours” or team-wide “Guilt Hours”.
• **Gamification**
  We all love games. They can motivate, create momentum – and they’re fun! What could you do to turn parts of your work (either solo activities, or as a team) into a game? Let the competition commence.

• **Work in dashes**
  Break up larger tasks into smaller less overwhelming units, then take a break / reward, e.g. the multi-purpose “Pomodoro Technique” or Merlin Mann’s “10+2x5”.

  **6. Agility**

A Ninja needs to be light on their feet and able to react appropriately to what is going on around them – but must also ensure that they are not constantly being dictated to by events around them. When the plan is working, stick to the plan. When the unexpected happens, adapt, deal with it and regroup.

• **Firefighters**
  The workplace can often be unpredictable. Some days are routine, and on others the truly unexpected happens, both for good and ill. Ninjas train hard to be ready to use their skills in the heat of battle.

• **The 2 minute rule**
  When processing, if an email or task only requires an action that can be done in less than 2 minutes (e.g. a 2 line reply, forwarding to a colleague, sending a file etc.) do it right there and then.

• **Context is King**
  Categorise your tasks by ‘Context’ i.e. where you need to be, or what you need to have to hand to do them. That way you can be productive even if the internet goes down, when travelling etc.

• **Sequential monotasking (not multitasking)**
  Yes, we know this one’s controversial. But we believe that one thing at a time is the way to go: one task, then the next, then the next ... repeat.

• **Batching**
  Batch small or alike tasks (that need the same mindset/skillset) together e.g. save all invoicing till Fridays. Use technology to assist with batched tasks.

• **Mix and match**
  Including variety in your day will help maintain momentum and stave off fatigue. Match task selection to energy and mood – there’s a time for being creative, and a time for housekeeping.

  **7. Mindfulness**

A Productivity Ninja thinks just as much about the way in which they are doing their work, as they do about the work they have to do. They repeatedly reflect on and review systems, tools, habits and choices to ensure they are managing their energy, concentration and motivation in a sustainable way – and getting the best out of their Ninja efforts.

• **Know yourself**
  Identify factors reducing your productivity and take action as needed. Know your vulnerabilities, and adapt your work environment, style and systems accordingly to compensate. For more info... http://bit.ly/mindfulpost
• **Lizard brain**
  The amygdala is the primitive part of our brain that tries to keep us out of trouble. But as a side effect it can create resistance to change, fear and especially procrastination. Sometimes bravery is needed.

• **Fix bad habits**
  Home workers: start your morning like you used to when you commuted to an office – wake up properly, (exercise?), eat, wash etc., and then start work. Otherwise you’ll still be in your pajamas at noon.

• **‘Big Rocks’ first**
  The Ninja has strategy in mind ahead of tactics. Set out larger and more critical tasks first (‘Big Rocks’). Smaller tasks (pebbles and sand) fit in around these (but leave capacity for new incoming stuff). For more info... [http://bit.ly/bigrocksblog](http://bit.ly/bigrocksblog)

### 8. Preparedness

The Productivity Ninja knows that success in battle requires planning and preparation. We want to replace constant firefighting and confusion with a purposeful structure and plan. Use specific tools, habits and grounding routines to ensure that you can carry out and meet the demands of your busy schedule.

• **Proactive not reactive**
  Get away from constantly firefighting, being helplessly caught up in the daily torrent, and wondering “Wow, where did the day go?” and “What did I actually achieve today?”.

• **Set up the scaffolding**
  Create structure to your week, month and quarter, especially for repeating tasks. Mark these in advance on planner/diary as “hard landscape”, just like you would meetings (and treat them as such).

• **Weekly review**
  Don’t get caught in the trap of always being too busy to take stock and plan ahead. Make a weekly review (with a checklist) a central and regular part of your Ninja productivity approach – you’ll reap the rewards many times over. For more info... [http://bit.ly/wkly_rev](http://bit.ly/wkly_rev)

• **Sleeping lions**
  Preparedness isn’t just planning and organizing, but also resting and regrouping. Just working more and more hours only leads to rapidly diminishing returns.

### 9. Human, not Superhero

Finally, a Productivity Ninja is not a superhero. It’s not about perfection, but about being human and working to maximize our strengths and embracing what we can learn from our mistakes. We need to recognize our limits, and know that (counter intuitively) sometimes the most productive thing to do is STOP working and rest.

• **Get a have done list**
  Concentrating on what you have done, rather than what’s still left to do creates a sense of progress and is motivating. Tracking your achievements helps with future planning.

• **Fuel up, do your maintenance**
  Attention, concentration and creativity are all serious brain work. Brains (and bodies) need looking after. Remember to attend to food, drink, fresh air, exercise, play, sleep.
• You’re only human
  Take breaks (lunch is not for wimps). Regularly working late into the night or at weekends isn’t worth it—again, the law of diminishing returns. Rest, regroup and pick up the next day when refreshed.

• Rest your brain, refresh your mojo
  Over connected? Try screen free weekends (http://bit.ly/scl_med_blog), or if you dare ditch TV altogether? Get a hobby, play with the kids, feed your chickens, learn the piano—anything that completely stops you thinking about work.

• Remember to stop
  Especially for home workers: create real and/or psychological divides between at work and not at work modes, e.g. different PCs (or different logins), ‘mock commute’ etc. And do stop.

• Shut it down
  For as much time as you dare. Yes, I really did say that. For those of you who are worried the world might end if you did that, I promise it’s quite safe.

Your productivity action plan

Select at least 1 tip for each of the 9 Ninja Characteristics that will have an impact on your productivity and wellbeing. Decide how you’ll implement them so they’ll work for you. Review progress after 1 week, 2 weeks, 1 month, 3 months—perhaps with a work colleague who is also honing their Ninja skills. Which habits have stuck, which need more work?

Like what you’ve heard today?

• Get the book
  Today we’ve given a small taste of the attitude, skills and tactics of the Productivity Ninja. If you’re ready for more then we recommend Chief Ninja Graham Allcott’s book “How to be a Productivity Ninja”: http://thinkproductive.com.au/shop/

• Sign up for our monthly productivity tips mailer
  Each month we pick a particular theme, and assemble a digest of useful, actionable Ninja-style productivity tips. This is explicitly opt-in so use the signup form on our website at www.thinkproductive.com.au

• Attend a public workshop
  We run public workshops in various cities around Australia. For more information on locations, topics and dates, please head to the Public Workshop page of our website: http://www.thinkproductive.com.au/public-workshops

• Bring our in-house workshops to your workplace
  Talk to us about bringing our range of productivity workshops in-house to your team and your workplace. As well as this session we provide: “Getting Your Inbox to Zero”, “Email Etiquette”, “Stress Less, Achieve More”, “Making Meetings Magic” and individual coaching options. Full details of each can be found on our website.

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