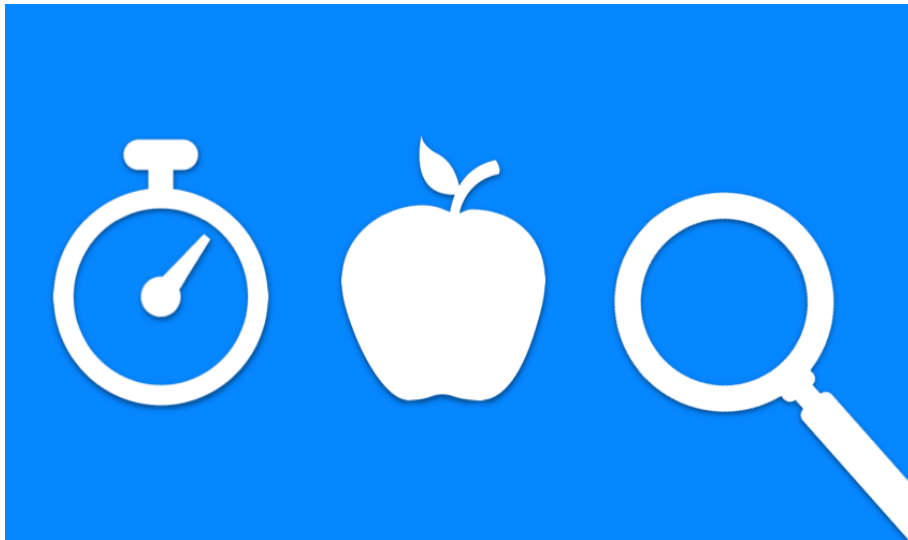# 100 TIME, ENERGY, AND ATTENTION HACKS

TO BE MORE PRODUCTIVE

CHRIS BAILEY

100 time, energy, and attention hacks to be more productive – A Life of Productivity

When I graduated University with a business degree last May, I received two incredible full-time job offers, both of which I declined because I had a plan.

For exactly one year, from May 1, 2013, through May 1, 2014, I would devour everything I could get my hands on about productivity, and write every day about the lessons I learned on A Year of Productivity.

Over the last 12 months I have conducted countless productivity experiments on myself, interviewed some of the most productive people in the world, and read a ton of books and academic literature on productivity, all to explore how I could become as productive as possible, and then write about the lessons I learned.

One year, 197 articles, and over one million hits later, I've reached the end of my year-long journey, but not before going out with a bang.

To close out my year of productivity, I have assembled a collection of all of the biggest things I've learned over the course of my year-long journey to become as productive as possible. Below are my 100 favorite effective time, energy, and attention hacks that will let you get more done on a daily basis, and I also put together an article on the top 10 lessons I learned about productivity over the last year. I know you'll get a ton out of both articles.

This article's a long one, but it's pretty skimmable!

Without further ado, let's jump in.

Moving forward, I'm going to continue to run productivity experiments on myself and research the heck out of productivity, albeit at a smaller scale as I tackle other projects at the same time. To continue to follow along with my journey, visit my new little corner of the Internet at A Life of Productivity.

Toward the end of my year of productivity, I realized that every single article I wrote for A Year of Productivity could be classified into one (or more) of three categories: how to better manage your **time**, how to better manage your **energy**, and how to better manage your **attention**.
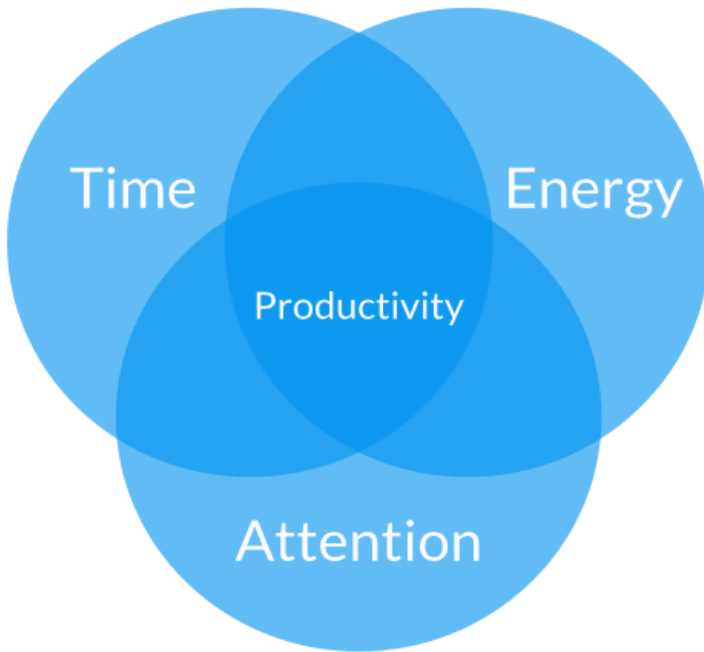
How you manage your time is a huge contributor to how productive you are, but all three ingredients are absolutely essential if you want to be productive on a daily basis. That's why there are a bunch of tactics that cover all three areas in this article. You absolutely need all three ingredients to be productive.

To kick things off, here are a number of my favorite time hacks to both:

- Get more time
- Spend time on the right things.

Hacks to get more time

1. Schedule less time for important tasks. This seems counterintuitive, but it isn't in practice. When you limit how much time you give yourself to work on important tasks, you force yourself to expend more energy over less time so you can get the tasks done faster.

2. Quit watching TV. If you're average, you'll spend 13.6 years of your life watching TV—time you could spend doing much higher-leverage tasks.

3. Keep a time diary. When you track exactly how you spend your time, you can see how much time you're wasting, which helps you reclaim lost time, and reflect on how to better spend your time in the first place.

4. Say no to commitments that zap you of your time, energy, and attention. The best way to get more time is to not introduce unproductive activities into your life in the first place. Run more interference against taking on low-return B.S.

5. Remember that "perfect is the enemy of good." Your house will never be exactly 100% clean—something will always be out of place. Particularly with low-leverage activities, know when to stop.

6. Start a maintenance day. Group all of your "maintenance tasks" (laundry, groceries, cleaning, watering plants, etc.) together on one day of the week so you have more time to focus on higher-level tasks the rest of the week.

7. Work no more than 35 hours a week. Studies show that to be the most productive and creative, you should work 35 hours a week. Working longer hours can make you more productive, but only in the short run.

8. Keep all of your emails five sentences or less**, and make a note of it in your signature.** Using this hack I've blown through my inbox like crazy, and most people don't mind when you keep your emails short and to the point.

9. Tame your inbox with The Email Game **if you use Gmail.** The Email Game is a completely free web app that hooks into your Gmail account and gamifies answering your email.

10. Register for Unroll.me if you have a Gmail, Yahoo, or Outlook.com account. Unroll.me rolls up all of your subscription emails into one convenient, daily email. I highly recommend it.

11. Stop organizing your email into folders. Searching your email client for emails has been shown to be way faster than filing email into folders.

12. Learn to touch type**.** The average typing speed is about 40 WPM, and touch typing can boost that to 60–80 WPM—a 50% to 100% increase. The time you save will add up very quickly.

13. Track how you spend your time on the computer with RescueTime (Mac, PC, Android; free). You may be surprised by how much time you waste.

14. Save a higher proportion of your income. This allows you to cut decades off of your working life, because you prioritize working less and retiring early over living a fancier life.

Hacks to spend time on the right things

15. Determine your highest-leverage activities. Make a list of all of the activities you're responsible for in your work, then ask: if you could only do three of those activities all day long, which ones would you pick? These are the three activities you should invest 80–90% of your time into.

16. Shrink how long you'll do something until you no longer feel resistance to it**.** This is a great way to integrate new habits into your life. "Could I meditate for 15 minutes? No, I feel resistance, I'm not gonna do it. Okay, what about 10? Still too long. Okay, five? Huh, I don't feel resistance to that. I feel like I can sit for five." Boom.

17. Work on tasks that are important, but not urgent. Every day, do at least one task that is important but not urgent, so you can make sure you advance on your goals and not just put out fires all day.

18. Work on Pomodoro time. The "Pomodoro Technique" is a time-management technique where you work on just one activity for 25 minutes, then take a five-minute break. It's incredibly effective.

19. Make a procrastination list**.** Make a list of high-leverage activities you can do the next time you procrastinate. This will let you stay productive while your mind wants to push away the things you have to do.

20. Live by the two-minute rule. The two-minute rule (from David Allen's Getting Things Done system) says that when a task will take you less than two minutes, just do it—don't add it to your to-do list or capture it for later.

21. Schedule your free time. That might sound backward and something you don't want to do, but adding more structure to your free time has been shown to make you happier and more motivated.

22. Determine the very next thing you need to do by looking out for four things: the context you're in (work, home, cottage, etc.), how much time you have, how much energy you have, and what your highest-leverage tasks are.

23. Be *mindful* of how you spend your time. Constantly check and reflect on how you spend your time (and energy and attention) throughout the day. I often do this by setting an hourly alarm on my phone.

24. Schedule time when you completely disconnect from your work. When you completely disconnect from your work, your mind continues to process your work, but in the background while you do other things.

25. Spend more time planning. For every minute you plan, you save five minutes in execution. When all you do is execute and you never step back from your work to plan, it's difficult to work smarter.

26. Know what people are really saying when they say, "I don't have time for that." When someone says they don't have time for something, it's not a statement about their quantity of time, but how important a task is to them.

27. Wait a bit before sending important emails/messages. Give your mind time to collect and form thoughts, so you have time to make what you say more complete, valuable, and creative. The world won't fall apart, and you'll be able to get your point across much more strongly.

Energy is the fuel you burn throughout the day to get things done. There are a plethora of factors that influence how much energy you have on a daily basis, but every variable that effects your energy either affects your body or your mind.

Here are several tactics to get more physical and mental energy—both essential ingredients in how much you get done on a daily basis.

Body hacks

28. Exercise. In my opinion, working out is the single best way to get more energy. And it doesn't just energize you; exercise also combats disease, brightens your mood, and helps you sleep better. (Source.)

29. Eat better**.** What you eat has a huge effect on your energy levels. The worse you eat, the quicker you'll burn out, and the less energy you'll have to get stuff done.

30. Stop drinking caffeine habitually. Caffeine begins to lose its effects when you drink it as part of your routine, but it's very effective when you drink it strategically (like when you need an energy boost or need to focus).

31. Consume caffeine intelligently. Drink caffeine over a longer period of time, drink water alongside caffeine, stay away from sugary energy drinks, eat very well when you consume caffeine, don't drink caffeine on an empty stomach, and wait before consuming a second coffee/tea.

32. Stop drinking caffeine four to six hours before you sleep. According to the FDA, caffeine "usually reaches its peak level in your blood within one hour and stays there for four to six hours" afterward.

33. Drink more water. Water boosts your energy, fires up your metabolism, helps you think, acts as an appetite suppressant, helps your body flush out toxins, reduces the risk of many diseases, clears up your complexion, and even saves you money!

34. Drink 16oz of water right after you wake up. Right after you wake up every morning, drink at least 16oz (500mL) of water. Your body just went eight hours without any fluids, and is likely dehydrated.

35. Keep a food diary. People who keep a diary of the food they consume tend not to overeat, and "usually eat up to a third less food than people who don't."

36. Get enough sleep**, even if that means sleeping in**. Sleep boosts your concentration, attention, decision-making skills, creativity, social skills, and health, and decreases mood fluctuations, stress, anger, and impulsiveness. There's also "no difference in socioeconomic standing" between early risers and night owls.

37. Say no to that nightcap. Drinking alcohol before bed lowers your sleep quality, which provides you with less energy the next day. Drink something else, or consume alcohol earlier in the evening.

38. Set your office thermostat between 70º–72ºF (21–22ºC). This is the temperature that will make you the most productive.

39. Set your thermostat to 65ºF (18.5ºC) overnight**.** Most studies recommend you set your thermostat to about 65ºF (18.5ºC) while you sleep, and think of your bedroom as a cave: cool, dark, and quiet.

40. Nap. If you find your energy waning, or that it naturally dips at a certain time every day, take a short nap. Napping improves your memory, makes you more attentive and alert, prevents burnout, and boosts your creativity.

41. Constantly reflect on how much energy you have, and act accordingly.
When you constantly ask yourself how much energy you have, you can make adjustments to either recharge when you're low on energy, or take on bigger, badder tasks when you have a lot of energy. You'll also start to notice trends after a while.

42. Calculate your "Biological Prime Time" (the time of the day you're the most productive) by charting your energy levels every day for a week.

43. Smile! Smiling boosts your immunity, makes you happier, helps you deal with stress and focus on the bigger picture, makes others trust you more, and of course, feels great.

44. Paint your office the right color. Science says you should paint a room blue to stimulate your mind, yellow to stimulate your emotions, red to stimulate your body, and green to stimulate a sense of balance.

45. Limit your exposure to blue light **before bed.** Exposing yourself to too much blue light (from your smartphone, tablet, or computer) before bed is detrimental to your sleep.

46. Expose yourself to more natural light. Natural light helps you sleep better, reduces your stress levels, increases your energy levels, and allows you to focus better.

47. Download f.lux. F.lux red-shifts your computer's screen colors after the sun sets in your location, which lets your body release more melatonin, making you sleep better.

Interlude! 10 productivity experiments from my year of productivity

10 of my favorite experiments from my year of productivity, in no particular order. Just click on any picture to visit the experiment's article.

The top 10 lessons I learned from A Year of Productivity

Mind hacks

48. Make changes automatic through habits. I think making new behaviors automatic is the key to making them stick. Here's my interview with Charles Duhigg, author of The Power of Habit, on how to form new habits.

49. Invest in stress relief strategies that actually work, like: exercising, reading, listening to music, spending time with friends and family, getting a massage, going for a nature walk, meditating, and spending time on a creative hobby.

50. Take more breaks**.** Breaks let you step back from your work, recharge, come up with better ideas, slow down, reflect on your work, and ultimately make you a lot more productive.

51. Start very small**.** I think one of the keys to becoming more productive is to simply make one small change at a time. The smaller the change you try to make to your life, the more likely you'll actually make it.

52. Be mindful of when you're needlessly hard on yourself. According to David Allen, who wrote Getting Things Done, 80% of what you say to yourself in your head is negative. Watch out for when you're needlessly hard on yourself, so you can have fun on your journey to become more productive.

53. Make more friends at the office. Office friendships increase your job satisfaction by an average of 50%, make you seven times more engaged at work, and make you 40% more likely to get a promotion!

54. Look back through your calendar to see who you've met with over the last few months. Which meetings gave you the most energy, motivation, happiness, and drive afterward? Schedule more meetings with those people.

55. Lower your expectations**.** This may sound like strange advice, but lowering your expectations makes you more confident, and lets you relax, have more fun, and not worry about proving yourself to others.

56. Realize that nobody cares. When you realize that most people don't care about your success, money, clothes, house, or car, you realize that you're freer than you originally thought. You can take more risks because your life isn't set in stone, and you feel a lot freer to follow what you're passionate about.

57. Eat mindfully. Mindful eating "lets your brain know that you will soon feel full and satisfied," which prevents you from overeating—a huge drain on your energy.

58. Use visualizations to become more productive. My favorite visualization: Imagine you have just received an emergency message and you have to leave town tomorrow for a month. What would you make absolutely sure that you got done before you left? Whatever your answer, go to work on that task right now.

59. Seek out conflict **instead of pushing it away.** You are the most productive when you have a moderate amount of conflict and stress—not a low or high amount.

60. Download Coffitivity (web, Android, iPhone, iPad, Mac). The ambient hum of a coffee shop has been proven to boost your productivity and creativity. Coffitivity simulates that same vibe on your computer.

61. Every day, recall three things you're grateful for. This trains your brain to "retain a pattern of scanning the world not for the negative, but for the positive first," making you more energetic, happier, and more productive.

62. Every day, journal one great experience you had. "Journaling one positive experience you've had over the past 24 hours allows your brain to relive it," which energizes you and makes you more energetic and happy.

63. Let the air out of your tires **every once in a while.** No one is a robot, and you shouldn't take becoming more productive too seriously. You'll probably even find that you become even more productive when you let the air out of your tires.

The third and final piece of the productivity puzzle is how well you can manage your attention. Managing your attention is one of my favorite ways to become more productive, and I think the "attention" piece of the productivity puzzle has two parts:

1. How well you can manage your attention
2. What you actually direct your attention toward

Here are some tactics to help you get better at both!

Manage your attention

64. Meditate. Meditation is the art of continually bringing your attention back to a single object, which in my opinion works out your "attention muscle" better than any other activity. Meditation also calms your mind, increases blood flow to your brain, increases the amount of grey matter in your brain, makes it easier to achieve "flow," battles procrastination, and has even been shown to boost your test scores. Here's a guide I wrote on how to get started.

65. Quit multitasking**.** Multitasking is terrible for your focus and productivity, and it makes you more prone to errors, affects your memory, and even adds stress to your life.

66. Capture all of the open loops in your head**,** like things you have to do, things you're waiting on, and other ideas and commitments that are weighing you down. This will give you more mental space to think about bigger and better things.

67. Keep a list of everything you're waiting on, to make sure nothing slips through the cracks, and so you can worry a lot less about the people and things you need to stay on top of.

68. Start a mind capture ritual. Shut everything off, set a timer for 15 minutes, and lay down with a blank notepad and a pen. Then capture all of the open loops in your head, to clear away your mental clutter.

69. Consume foods that boost your focus and concentration. Nine of my favorites: blueberries, green tea, avocados, leafy green vegetables, fatty fish, water, dark chocolate, flax seeds, and nuts.

70. "Clear to neutral." Whenever you finish an activity, clean up to reduce the friction to starting it the next time. E.g. clean the kitchen when you finish cooking, or set aside your running gear for your run tomorrow morning.

71. Slow down. It is fairly easy to switch your mind to autopilot and then bounce around from one distraction to the next. Slow down and do things deliberately to manage your attention better and become more productive.

72. Completely disconnect from the Internet **when you have to get something done.** 47% of your time online is spent procrastinating. If you want to get something big done, unplug from the Internet.

73. Resist temptation by rehearsing how you'll act ahead of time. To focus on the long-term instead of short-term temptations, rehearse a situation in your head ahead of time (e.g. not stopping at McDonald's on your way home).

74. Use your smartphone less. Your smartphone sucks up your attention, distracts you a lot more than you think, dilutes your interactions with people, and is a very low-leverage activity. I used my smartphone for only an hour a day for three months, and haven't seen it the same since.

75. Put your smartphone on airplane mode between 8pm and 8am. This ritual

makes you more mindful, helps you fall asleep faster, reduces your exposure to melatonin-blocking blue light before bed, and forces you to focus on higher-leverage activities before and after you wake up.

76. To get into a flow state (that magical place where you're completely absorbed in what you're doing), do activities that pose a challenge roughly equal to your skill level.

77. Do less. When you spread your attention, energy, and time over fewer activities, you bring more to everything you do, and achieve a whole lot more.

78. Look at pictures of cute baby animals. Looking at pictures of cute baby animals has been shown to boost your cognitive and motor performance because it narrows the breadth of your attentional focus.

Focus on the right things

79. At the start of every day, define three outcomes you want to accomplish (not to-dos; actual outcomes). When you limit yourself to just three outcomes, you force yourself to prioritize and focus on what's actually important.

80. Instead of focusing on doing more things, focus on doing the *right* things. Find tasks that are aligned with what you care about, so you know *why* you want to accomplish the things you're doing.

81. Develop a "growth mindset." According to research, the main quality that separates successful people from unsuccessful people is whether they think their intelligence and abilities are fixed.

82. Get in touch with your future self. People often think of their present and future selves as completely different people. Combat this trap by creating a future memory, sending a message to your future self, or imagining your future self.

83. Create a "mindless list." Accumulate a list of the mindless activities you do (laundry, cleaning, etc.), and do them all at once while listening to something productive (an audiobook, TED talk, etc.).

84. Ask yourself for advice. Advice is cheap, but often the advice you should pay the most attention to is the advice you can give yourself.

85. Make your goals S.M.A.R.T.er. If you want to set better goals, make sure your goals are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time based. This will make it much easier for you to define and achieve them.

86. Stop tracking progress on your goals. Tracking progress on your goals makes you less likely to achieve them. The fix: view your actions as evidence that you're committed to a goal, and remind yourself why you want to achieve a goal in the first place.

87. Don't set traditional goals, set "process goals." A process goal is what you will actually have to do to achieve a larger goal (e.g. instead of winning a boxing title, you might set a goal to keep your hands up for an entire match).

88. Quit surfing the Internet mindlessly. The Internet can be a huge attention suck. Practice surfing the Internet mindfully by taking more breaks, slowing down, and focusing on what you intend to accomplish.

89. Shut off pointless email alerts. Email alerts don't cost you a ton of time, but they cost you a lot in attention—every time you receive one, the alert hijacks your attention away from what you're working on.

90. Declare an email holiday. When you need to hunker down and work on a project for a day or two, set up an auto-responder (with your phone number in it for emergencies), and then tackle whatever you need to get done.

91. Respond to your email in batches. Schedule a few times throughout the day to deal with email instead of dealing with messages as they come in. This compartmentalizes email into a few chunks of time in your schedule.

92. When you meet with someone in person, shut off your phone completely. This is a great way to show someone they they're important to you, and that you're ready to give them 100% of your attention.

93. Identify your keystone habits. Keystone habits change and rearrange your other habits as you integrate them into your life. A few examples: cooking, developing relationships with your partner/friends, and waking up early.

94. Make bad habits more expensive by making a pact with someone to introduce financial penalties for habits that are bad for you both. This helps you focus on the costs of your bad habits, instead of their rewards.

95. Reward yourself. Adopting new behaviors and habits is difficult, but providing yourself with rewards for following through with new behaviors has been shown to help you solidify new habits.

96. Anticipate obstacles to new habits. When you integrate new habits into your life, make sure you look out on the horizon for any obstacles or commitments that might get in the way of you forming new habits.

97, Keep distractions more than 20 seconds out of your reach. By keeping distractions more than 20 seconds away, you can keep an appropriate amount of temporal distance from an object for it to be less of a distraction.

98. Practice active listening. By completely focusing on what someone has to say, you develop deeper relationships, become a better judge of people, avoid misunderstandings, and have more meaningful conversations.

99. See your life as a series of "hotspots." Every day you invest your time, energy, and attention into seven hotspots: mind, body, emotions, career, finances, relationships, and fun. See your hotspots as a portfolio to make sure you don't overinvest in some areas and underinvest in others.

100. Always work with a specific purpose in mind. Intention behind your actions is like wood behind an arrow, and when you continually question the purpose of what you're doing, you can make sure your actions are aligned toward a purpose that's meaningful to you.

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