In a busy work environment, a lack of clarity and a solid working plan can lead to errors big and small – and miscommunications can impact working relationships. Consider the complex relations between the United States and Russia. In 2009, US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton met with her Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov to discuss the breakdown in communications and deteriorating relationship between the two states. Things were not working and a reset was needed. We can all relate to that feeling – a working environment where stress, anxiety and miscommunications permeate and important things are not getting done. In a gesture to mark a symbolic reset of their relationship, Clinton had a surprise gift, a red button with the Russian word “peregruzka” printed on it.

Pushing the reset button on our own practices gives us the chance to rethink how we spend our limited attention, time and resources at work. A life outside of work also deserves your best efforts. My most satisfying days are when I come home feeling confident that I have had a productive work day and largely on top of things; now I can now focus all of myself to my life outside of work. When I can do that, I’m happier, can enjoy dinner, engage in meaningful conversation, and generally be in the moment and recharge. But of course, these good intentions need a working plan to become a reality.

**Understanding how the mind works gives insight into planning a productive day**

An effective working plan begins with a basic understanding of the mind. Over the last 150 years, cognitive psychologists have learned a lot about how the mind works through cognitive processes like attention, memory and learning. We can leverage these findings to get our minds into the best shape possible to handle our daily challenges and optimize workflows.
How long can you sustain attention on focused work? After an hour (or less) of focus on a cognitively demanding task, most of us drop our attention levels to 60%. The longer we spend time on a demanding task, attention and motivation levels can drop rapidly. At some point, there will be diminishing returns on our investment of time. But that report, presentation or analysis has to get done. If the bad news is that human minds naturally wander, the good news is that cognitive resources can be restored. There are many things you can be doing right now (including clicking on a blinking email icon and watching a funny video or meme that is taking over the internet), but the deal you make is to single-task during this deep work period. To the extent it is possible for you to eliminate the distracting practice of multi-tasking, you will eliminate the costs of splitting limited cognitive resources. At the point where attention precipitously drops (and individual results will vary), you can strategically schedule a mini-break for a few minutes and be rewarded with a fun distraction. This part is important. The ideal mini-break is not a switch to another cognitive task, but rather a true break so attention and motivation levels can become refreshed. When you return, begin again. After a few of these deep work sessions, you have earned a bigger break. Examples include taking a real lunch break away from your desk, going for a brisk walk, and socializing with others (while not talking about work). Looking ahead to the long game, a growing body of research shows that the usual suspects of quality sleep, exercise and healthy eating are not only good for your body, but also for your over-worked mind.

Let’s take a closer look at one study. Researchers asked students to study a weeks’ worth of university course material. In an Exercise-breaks condition, the students studied the material, but took 3 strategically scheduled 5-min breaks to engage in high-intensity interval exercises like jumping jacks and burpees. The Non-Exercise-breaks condition took the same scheduled breaks, but switched from studying (one cognitive task) to another, playing video games. In the Hero condition, learners studied straight with no breaks.

Researchers measured attention levels of students during the first half and second half of this long study period. As expected, the students in the Hero condition showed a characteristic drop in attention as the study session proceeded. Interestingly, the students in the Non-Exercise-breaks group (who switched from studying to playing video games) showed no benefit from these breaks. The exciting finding was that the Exercise-breaks group stayed alert and on task throughout the study periods.

Researchers also wanted to know if these differences in paying attention made any real difference in learning. Yes, they did. Those in the exercise breaks group outperformed the other students in a comprehension test given immediately after the study period. This advantage continued when all students

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returned two days later to complete a second comprehension test suggesting that exercise breaks promoted an increase in long-term retention of information. This type of research gives us exciting insight into how we can better design workplaces, meetings and breaks to maintain focus on the job at hand.

Making a workplace more organized and productive is a team sport

Unnecessary emailing is a rampant problem that disrupts workplace productivity. When John emails Sebastian and asks “Do you have any paperclips?”, it imposes a disruption to Sebastian’s work flow. This email may have taken seconds to send off, but places an imposition on the recipient. The situation can be made worse with the use of messaging systems that are expected to be constantly monitored. Is Sebastian supposed to always be available by email and prioritize this task over his own deep work? Before you send an email, ask yourself if it is really necessary, and if so, send a succinct email that sets up the recipient to take action.

Being productive at work and respecting deep work periods is an approach that needs buy-in from everyone to work. It’s the difference between a crowd of individuals on a random walk bumping into each other and getting in the way and a cohesive team, moving together towards a common goal – whether it is providing the best customer service, producing quality research, or building a better app. With everyone on board, we design a context for productivity in which structures and workflows make problem solving an efficient process.

There will always be tasks that are urgent and important that require our immediate attention. A last-minute request for an order from your top customer or an equipment failure halting production – these fires need to be put out right now. Ideally, we also want to spend at least some of our time working on tasks that are important for the long game, but not necessarily screaming urgency. This strategic planning helps our business grow, improves workflows, and makes life better. The last thing we want to devote our limited time and attention to are tasks that are unimportant (whether they advertise as being urgent or not).

Digital tools can help to minimize and eliminate redundant tasks

You’re not alone in your efforts to get home on time. Digital tools can also be a helpful player to move toward this goal. These tools can help to minimize your resources devoted to tasks that seem urgent but
are not important and can nevertheless dominate your day. These tools take redundant and menial tasks and do some of the heavy lifting so you don’t have to reinvent the wheel each time. For example, if you ever find yourself re-typing the same phrases on emails to different clients, consider perfecting the phrase once, then using an app like TextExpander (for Mac) or PhraseExpress (for PC) to assign a short-cut key to quickly paste in the phrase. Over a day, this simple tool can measurably save minutes and even hours. [see figure on page 5 for other handy tools to use]

**Getting things done starts with a plan**

To understand the limits and capabilities of the mind, is to understand that we are all human. We have limits on attention, motivation, and energy. This knowledge can inform better designed workspaces, practices and a culture of productivity so we can spend less time on menial tasks and more time on deep work and strategic thinking. Implementing a working plan takes that good intention of work-life balance from theoretical to practical. Because we all deserve to have a life outside of work where we get to pursue the truly important projects.

As Clinton presented the “re-set” button to Larov, she remarked, "I would like to present you with a little gift that represents what President Obama and Vice President Biden and I have been saying and that is: ‘We want to reset our relationship, and so we will do it together.’”

“IT should be ‘perezagrutzka’ [the Russian word for reset],” said Lavrov. “This says ‘peregruzka,’ which means ‘overcharged.’” This embarrassing gaffe has an important lesson: the best of intentions need to be executed properly. Thinking about improving our organization and focus is a start, and executing a solid working plan can be the difference between a reset and being overcharged.

# HANDY TECHNOLOGY FOR PRODUCTIVITY

## TAKING NOTES

**Evernote** is a widely used tool for taking your notes and syncing across all your devices. Below is a handy template to use for meeting notes:

| TITLE AND DATE: |
| ATTENDEES: |
| BACKGROUND / REFERENCE: |
| NOTES: |
| ACTION ITEMS FOR ME: |
| ACTION ITEMS FOR OTHERS: |

## SHORTCUTS

- **TextExpander** (mac) and **PhraseExpress** (PC) allow you to create keyboard shortcuts for commonly used phrases (and even macros).
- **LastPass** is a web-based password manager – you just need to remember one password to access all your individual passwords for website logins. **IFTTT** connects just about any web service with another in automated elegance. **Tinyurl** replaces a long url with a tiny one.

## SCHEDULING

**Doodle** is the go-to app for scheduling upcoming meetings with team members. **Calendly** is a tool for setting up regular blocks of time in a week in which individual team members can sign up for an appointment in your calendar.

## PROJECT MANAGEMENT

- **Team Colony** replaces the daily "stand-up" huddle meeting where everyone reports on what they are doing. At the end of each workday, your team receives an email with 3 short questions to answer. Team members reply directly to the email as part of their shut-down routine. The next morning, the whole Team receives a digest email of everyone's replies. Below is a sample:

  3 short questions to answer by replying to this email with a few words.

  1) What did you work on today?
  2) Did any roadblocks, challenges or insights emerge?
  3) What is the one important task you plan to do tomorrow?

- **Trello** is a powerful task manager based on a Kanban board that provides a visualization of your work. Each project is a new card which moves from one stage to final completion. This tool can be used by individuals or Teams for collaboration.
- **Things**, **Wunderlist**, **Evernote** and **To-Doist** are examples of task managing apps that act as an Inbox for all your to-dos and can be synced across your devices.