

# PRODUCTIVITY GUIDE

## **12 Ways you wasted time this week** *...and how to fix them.*

**By Jeff Doubek**  
Day-Timer Spokesperson  
[jeff.doubek@daytimer.com](mailto:jeff.doubek@daytimer.com)

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## About the Author



Day-Timer Spokesperson Jeff Doubek shares tips, methods, and secrets to better productivity at work and at home each week on the Day-Timer blog at: <http://www.daytimer.com/blog>.

### Popular posts include:

- [Mix Outlook with a Paper Planner for a Productive Day](#)
- [Four Quick Tips to Stay More Focused at Work](#)
- [Take Action and Achieve Your Goals](#)
- [Improve your Note Taking System and Increase Work Productivity](#)

Have a question about this article or general comments about your own productivity? Please feel free to send Jeff an email at [jeff.doubek@daytimer.com](mailto:jeff.doubek@daytimer.com).

## Contacting Day-Timer

Day-Timer is the most recognized name in personal productivity and organization. Incorporating proven time management principles, Day-Timer helps individuals achieve their personal and professional goals, prioritize the activities that matter most, and balance their work-life commitments.

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## Introduction

Sure, you're getting important work done. In fact, this past week probably left you worn out and weary. But, you also have a list of things that you wanted to get done but just didn't have the time.

Rest assured, most people have the same list.

That frustration you likely feel stems from the realization that you could have done more, but aren't quite sure how.

The following guide will show you the twelve common ways you may have wasted time this week and the fixes for getting more done. Once you've identified the specific, but often overlooked areas where you can stop wasting time, I am certain you will enjoy the satisfaction of having more tasks crossed off your to-do list each week.

### 1) You were victimized by the "silent thief"

We're going to begin your healing by facing the elephant in the room. Procrastination is most obvious pain in most people's lives, yet few are able to come to grips with it.

What few also realize is that procrastination isn't always as blatant as daydreaming out your office window. Typically, it comes in the form of avoiding an important task by doing another task with less importance. I call this the "silent thief" -- it steals time without you knowing it. You may not be overtly goofing off, but you're still avoiding your priorities. It's like you're stealing time from yourself.

Any time you spend on the less important activities detracts from you taking a step toward your goals. Many times, you end up taking a step backward when especially time-sensitive goals are concerned.

***The Fix: Give your priorities some teeth.***

- Don't just take time to put them in order, make yourself understand why it is important to you and reaching your goals. This makes it much easier to stay disciplined and follow through.
- Use Time Boxing, a reliable time management practice that consists of scheduling your tasks in fixed time segments, or boxes.
- When you tell yourself what you should be doing and when, it reduces the intimidation factor of having large projects and open spaces of time.

On the top of the next page, I have provided an example: a presentation project that needs to get done this week.

Here's how I would use Time Boxing to complete my project:

<b>Time Boxing Example: Presentation Project</b>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Break my project down into actionable steps, the first being "create a presentation outline"
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	I set aside 45 minutes to complete this task: 11-11:45am today.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Write this into my day planner schedule, or create an appointment in Outlook
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Create a similar box of time from 2-2:45pm today to complete the next task: "research 2010 statistics for presentation," and another box for the next task tomorrow
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	When it's time to do the task, I focus on my work without distraction until the time is up.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Create other boxes of time for other tasks and routine activities throughout my day, including lunch.

You can create time boxes using your day planner, on Outlook, or by simply setting an egg timer and working until it rings.

The clear-cut benefit to Time Boxing is that it creates structure with your time. It defines when to begin a task and when to move on to something else. This established timeframe provides an appealing set of instructions in your mind about how your time is best spent.

## 2) You joined the email monopoly

It goes without saying that you have too much communication flooding your email inbox each day. And, despite your best efforts to control spam, unwanted e-letters, and other unnecessary messages, your time is consumed by email-related activities. Some people spend 10 minutes every hour reading, responding, forwarding and deleting messages. You may spend even more.

Email activities monopolize your time. There's never any set task time. The inbox rings, we answer. Truthfully, the only thing that should require this much care and feeding is a baby.

***The Fix: Create a reliable routine for email that you repeat each day.***

- Control your time better by putting specific email tasks on your schedule
- Commit to processing your inbox twice a day for just 20 minutes

- Important messages requiring extensive time should be turned into a separate task, or possibly delegated to a co-worker

One of the best fixes is to turn off your new message pop-up notification. It's like an alarm that derails your plans. This is a simple four-step process that takes 20 seconds.

1. In Outlook, open your "Tools" menu and select "Options"
2. Choose "Email Options..." button, then the "Advanced Email Options..." button
3. Uncheck all of the choices under "When new items arrive in my Inbox"
4. Select "Ok" to close all open windows

Or, you can skip all these steps by closing your email program altogether, and opening it only when you need it.

### 3) Your downtime was lost

The key thing about downtime, is that it's still time. So use it. The time you spend waiting in line at the bank or coffee shop doesn't have to include staring idly at the wall in growing resentment over the time you're wasting. The reality is that you can be happy with this productive time.

We all know that waiting lines occur, traffic happens, elevators stop on other floors, appointments get delayed, and people can be late. So set yourself up for success and prepare for these moments.

***The Fix: Use downtime to your productivity advantage; these pockets of time can be productivity boosters.***

- Keep a book with you at all times, digital applications such as Kindle and iBook make it possible to read from your mobile phone or highly-portable e-book
- Print out a weekly industry report and keep handy in your purse or bag
- Review your weekly goals on your day planner
- Make a phone call, keep a list of customers and friends you can have 15 minute chats with
- Brainstorm your next great idea on a pocket notepad

Personally, I save interesting blog posts that I come across during my workday to a web-based application called Instapaper, which syncs them to my iPhone and iPad for later reading. With this, I stay current with all my industry news and commentary when downtime occurs while on the go.

#### 4) You commuted in the "dead zone"

Along the lines of the previous item, is the fact that people don't create productive commuter time. Instead, they choose to listen to random music, redundant talk radio, or even worse: nothing. This creates a "dead zone" of time where the mind wanders aimlessly and often creates unmanageable stress.

***The Fix: Spend less time commuting and more time doing things.***

- Call someone you need to talk to; Bluetooth headsets make phone calls on the go quite convenient, not to mention the safety benefits
- Listen to an industry podcast, a tremendous amount of half-hour discussions are available online for download to your MP3 player or mobile phone through sites such as iTunes
- Learn from an enriching audio book, available for MP3 download from most online booksellers, or by CD format at your local library
- Create much-needed balance in your life by calling a family member, or by listening to a radio show that meets your values and goals.
- If you've made it a priority to relax on your commute by listening to music you enjoy, then make sure this routine is in-fact serving its purpose.

The best part about commuting is that you know how long it will take. It's planned time, so schedule something productive. Whatever you choose to do, just don't let this time go idly by. You'll never get it back, and you'll actually find that it makes your commute time seem shorter. That's a win/win situation -- who wouldn't want that?

#### 5) You took redundant errands

I know a successful hockey coach who once described to me how he taught young goalies to take the fewest amount of skate-steps necessary to cover their goal. He called this "economy of movement." I can relate this lesson to many aspects of productivity, and running errands is a perfect example. All too often people make trips that cross over tracks they just made.

***The fix: Make a time-saving game plan.***

- Never run to the grocery store without considering what other stops you can take along the way. The post office? The DMV? The craft store?
- Combine your school pick-up with a series of other trips

- Do your shopping run on the way home from work. It's not a hardship when you consider what else you'll do later with the time you've saved

People have become lazy and excessive with their car use, taking for granted that they can run back out later if they forget something. It's wasteful of their time and harmful to the environment.

Don't leave home without a plan. You'll save time and money on your fuel costs.

## 6) Your TV/Web/social media use had no agenda

In the 60s, television was once deemed a "vast wasteland," and today it has neighbors.

Don't get me wrong. There is a limitless value in the World Wide Web, its social media sites, and even from your good ol' TV. But, the problem lies in how people use them in a mindless daily routine.

Sure, entertainment has a place in our lives, but it must be balanced with other pursuits or we'll find ourselves happily entertained, yet undereducated, under-enriched, uninspired, and lacking quality in our family experiences.

**The Fix:** Put yourself on an entertainment diet.

- Be aware of the constant presence of the web or TV in your life; flat screens, Wi-Fi, mobile devices, and satellite signals have all made sure of that
- Allocate specific time limits to your TV use each day; begin by estimating your current daily use and then cut back by 30 minutes each week;
- Set long-term goals – for example 30 minutes each day should allow you to remain entertained, and informed
- Before you log on to the internet, do a mental check of your goals and values and see where this activity falls -- if it's mindless entertainment, then you're probably wasting important time
- Set time limits to "entertainment browsing," 30 minutes each day should more than adequate to peruse Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube

## 7) You're an interruption magnet

It's time to admit that you may have a problem. Do you find yourself just getting to work on a priority task only to be quickly interrupted by a passing co-worker? It's possible that you are inviting this type of occurrence into your world, like a magnet.

This is common. It's a form of procrastination, it's a form of not following through on your priorities, and it's a waste of your time. When you allow yourself to be freely open to the needs of others, you push anything of importance to you and your time to the back seat.

***The Fix: Learn to close your door both physically and figuratively.***

- Each day, choose two separate "task hours" where you can close your office door
- Identify important tasks where undivided attention is a priority
- Communicate your limited availability to your co-workers by email or sign on the door; specify options for reaching you with urgent matters during this time
- Shut off your phone's ringer, create a custom voicemail greeting that details your availability
- Close your email client to avoid the temptation to check-in
- Unplug from the internet -- shutting down any potential distractions
- Once you've found success, try adding a third task hour to your routine

I call this the "Tommy Approach" in homage to the 70s rock opera by the band The Who. The lead character of Tommy was an awesome pinball player despite being deaf and blind, mostly because he could block out any and all distractions and focus his whole being on the pinball machines.

Learning to discipline yourself to stay on-task this way doesn't always come naturally. When you prioritize specific tasks as high-importance, you're giving yourself permission to shut yourself off from interruptions.

## **8) You "winged it" and looked like a fool**

There was a time in my life when I would get lost while driving. A lot. For a while I thought I was a hopelessly directionally-challenged individual. But, then it dawned on me that all too often I was just "winging it." I was setting off without a plan or direction.

Whether you're driving around or working on a task, the outcome can be the same: you circle around aimlessly trying to find your desired destination, often fruitlessly. You'll see this quite often with tasks where one spends hours searching for information in all the wrong places.

Many mistakenly choose not planning as a means of saving time. Typically, you then find yourself doing unnecessary work, reinventing the wheel, wasting a lot of time. This foolish exercise is obvious to your boss, your co-workers, and even your clients.

***The Fix: Take time to explore and outline all of the steps, no matter how obvious, that will get you to your destination.***

Ask yourself:

- Where do I start?
- What steps do I take to proceed?
- Who might help me?
- What is my outcome?

Always prepare for success -- even if it means scribbling a few steps on a lunch napkin. It's better to have any plan than no plan at all. Almost without exception, you will find yourself accomplishing your task in a fraction of the time.

## **9) You attended a mystery meeting**

Meetings are an important way for us to plan and communicate the business of our lives. There are committees, project teams, community groups, parent organizations, and even family meetings, and the one thing they all have in common is that they are often a huge waste of time.

Why? Because often the meeting's true purpose is a mystery to all those who attended. Usually the biggest premeditation given to a meeting is choosing a date and time that everyone can agree to. This can result in up to 5 hours wasted from the typical business work week!

***The Fix: Plan your meetings like you plan your day, with detailed goals, schedules, and prioritized tasks.***

- Why are you meeting?
- What is its purpose?
- What are the expected outcomes?
- What will attendees be required to contribute?
- How long will it take?

If these questions aren't sufficiently answered then a meeting shouldn't take place. You will likely spend most of your meeting time fumbling over these questions instead of moving forward.

If you're invited to attend a meeting, it is your responsibility to ask purposeful questions of the organizer before you attend. They should thank you for caring enough to get involved.

## 10) You over-yes yourself

If your neck is hurting right now it may be because you spent the entire week nodding your head to the requests of others. It's a very common ailment in today's job economy, where workers are trying to please their employers, and businesses are relying heavily on smaller staffs.

Constantly saying yes to others makes it impossible for you to focus on what is important to you with your time. You're only hurting yourself, which in-turn hurts your productivity, which in-turn hurts your employer. The same goes of requests from friends, family and neighbors, who hopefully wouldn't want you to sacrifice your own important personal needs.

***The Fix: Make time choices based on what is important to you as defined by your goals and values, and not your emotions.***

- Be prepared to discuss your current tasks, your schedule, and where the new task fits into your priorities
- Learn to say "no" tactfully, show your schedule and provide specific timing as to when you may available, or provide an alternate suggestion for delegating the task
- If part of your role in your business involves assisting and accommodating others, be sure you have the following two items identified:
  - a) Clearly-defined expectations about what you can accomplish each week for yourself and your boss. Tracking your hours each week is a good way to begin.
  - b) Time mapped-out each day where you can focus on yourself and your own work, sans distraction.

Save yourself from the pain of over-commitment. Try this simple 4-second exercise: move your head from left to right, and repeat. Remember: if your time doesn't mean more to you, it certainly won't mean much to others.

## 11) Redundant grocery store runs

"I forgot the milk!" The process of wasteful errands is covered under item #5, but this particular time waster deserves its own mention for emphasis. Countless trips to the grocery store are huge wastes of time, fuel, and money.

***The Fix: Make a plan and organize your trip based on what you expect to eat and drink in the coming week.***

- Employ a two-list system for better organization
- First list your staples such as milk and eggs that is consistent each week
- Take inventory of staples currently in your kitchen
- List the extras that go into your planned meals, such as chicken and vegetables

This system will ensure that nothing is forgotten on your weekly trip, and that everything you buy has a purpose. Please see our Ultimate Grocery Store Planning Guide for details on creating a time saving and money saving grocery shopping system.

## 12) You're a great firefighter

If it feels like you spend your days jumping from one fire to the next then you've got some serious time issues. Very often people put themselves in the "putting out fires" mode because it makes them feel useful, other times it's because there is an intrinsic lack of planning in their work or home environment.

Regardless of its reason, it's a big waste of time.

What happens is that you get so bogged down by crisis tasks that the important "big picture" is all but lost from your time choices. It's more than difficult to pursue your goals when you're busy chasing down a lost shipment or dropping off a forgotten school lunch. It's impossible.

***The Fix: First, you've got to discipline yourself and draw the line in the sand.***

- Set daily priorities for tasks and activities based on what you've deemed important
- Let go of the idea of being the constant "hero," remember that other work suffers when you don't follow priorities
- When crisis calls, measure it against the important priorities in your current task list and consider alternative responses
- Create routine plans for delegating commonly occurring crises, such as last-second errands

Fight for your time. Always consider that better planning will prevent a lot of the "fires" in your day.

## Summary

The great news for you is that more time awaits you. Spend some time considering how the above twelve time wasters affected your time last week, and how you can incorporate the fixes into your daily routines. More time for you means a more happy and productive life.

I hope you found this Day-Timer Productivity Guide useful. If you have questions or comments about these tips and advice, please email me at [jeff.doubek@daytimer.com](mailto:jeff.doubek@daytimer.com). For more useful knowledge on personal productivity, time management, and work-life balance, be sure to visit our website at [www.daytimer.com](http://www.daytimer.com).

Enjoy your time!