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## Busy, but not burdened

**Workers waste two hours a day on average. Here are ways to get more done - and still go home on time.**

**By Marilyn Gardner** | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

Daniel Decker has always thought of himself as a productive worker. He starts his day with a to-do list and a goal sheet. But sometimes Mr. Decker, who works for the Jon Gordon Companies in Jacksonville, Fla., finds himself reaching the end of the day with less done on his to-do list than he had planned.

The culprit? What he calls "the interruption problem" - a time-consuming combination of e-mail and phone calls.

"I finally end up staying late, coming by the office on weekends, or just going in at night after my children go to bed so that I can get some uninterrupted time to complete tasks," Decker says.

Staying late and working longer. It's a pattern affecting growing ranks of employees. It's also a habit more people should kick, says Laura Stack, a productivity expert who is spearheading a movement called Leave the Office Earlier. By developing efficient work habits, she says, employees can accomplish more in less time, freeing extra hours to spend on themselves and their families.

The average American wastes more than two hours a day at work, according to a survey released last week by Salary.com and America Online. Those lost hours cost employers a whopping \$759 billion a year as employees surf the Internet, socialize with colleagues, and conduct personal business.

Similarly, a recent international survey by Microsoft finds that workers average only three productive days a week. Americans spend 5-1/2 hours a week in meetings, even though more than 70 percent think those meetings are unproductive. They also receive an average of 56 e-mail messages a day.

As firms downsize, fewer people are left to do the work. "They're all stretched to the limit when it comes to their time," says Bob Miller, a sales trainer in Atlanta. "Productivity is the name of the game."

Time-management experts point out that everyone has the same 24 hours a day to use. Making the most of those hours involves scheduling, prioritizing, and setting goals. That includes figuring out the three, four, or five things that produce the greatest results, and concentrating on those.

"The No. 1 thing that keeps people from being productive is a lack of focus," says Mr. Miller. "They don't know how to prioritize their activities. They let their day run them rather

than them running their day."

Many people tell him they work 10, 12, or even 14 hours a day. But when he has them track their time, they realize they are putting in five hours a day of actual work that could be considered productive.

"Simply being 'busy' isn't being productive," says Leslie Yerkes, president of a consulting firm in Cleveland. "To be productive means doing the things that matter most."

Yet too often people focus on things that matter least.

"We let the small stuff get in the way of the big stuff," says K.J. McCorry, author of "Organize Your Work Day in No Time."

She finds that having a way to track things on one calendar makes it easier to plan and concentrate on the big things.

"People have to become more proactive with their time and less reactive," Miller says.

### **Attacking bad habits**

Sometimes the desire to achieve more requires a major overhaul of work habits. Other times, even small changes make a difference.

Jenny Corsey, a publicist in Atlanta, practices what she calls the two-minute rule.

"If something takes two minutes or less to do - filing something, making a quick call to get some information, deciding to toss or keep a piece of mail - I do it right then and there," she says. "This cuts down on paper clutter on my desk and helps eliminate the distraction of a towering In box."

For his part, Decker has devised a few simple solutions to control technology. He turns off the audible e-mail "ding" so he doesn't feel compelled to open each message when it arrives. He schedules specific times to read his e-mail - in the morning, just after lunch, and at the end of the day.

He also relies on caller ID. When he is working on a project, he does not answer calls from unfamiliar phone numbers. He lets the call roll over to voice mail and deals with it later.

"Interruptions cost a lot of time," Decker says. "Not only the time from the actual interruption, but also the time it takes you to get back on track and get your mind back into whatever it is that you were previously doing."

Other time-wasters working against productivity include procrastination, ineffective meetings, a lack of clear communication and direction, and office chatter. As one measure of the international scope of the issue, Ms. Stack's book, "Leave the Office Earlier," has been translated into Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Italian.

Stack, president of a time-management consulting firm in Denver, finds that women are slightly more productive than men. They are also more interested in productivity training.

### **Productive vs. unproductive**

In observing men and women on the job over the years, Stack has found that productive people are prepared and focused. "Unproductive people don't have their goals set. They aren't ready for the day when it starts."

She notes other differences. Productive people are able to reduce time-wasters. Unproductive people allow others to interrupt them at whim. They get bogged down in trivial, time-wasting details.

Productive people are orderly. Unproductive people waste time looking for things. They don't have good filing systems.

Productive people are disciplined. Unproductive people tend to do what they feel like doing, rather than what they should be doing. They procrastinate.

Productive people have a level of calm, knowing they are making the best use of their time. Unproductive people may feel concerned that they will never catch up.

Productive people concentrate well. Unproductive people tend to get easily distracted.

In addition to helping people develop better work habits, Stack recommends improving the workplace.

Higher partitions in offices can help. So can noise-canceling headsets. Some employees find that listening to an iPod with their favorite music improves concentration. Others use white noise machines on their desk.

Even telecommuting can increase productivity.

"Many employers are allowing people to work at least one day a week at home, recognizing that when we're at work, there's a lot of socializing and meetings," Stack says.

Working more productively is even the subject of a new magazine called *Worthwhile*. It is aimed at readers who want "a deeper, more meaningful connection to their work."

### **The antislacker**

The July issue advocates working less to achieve more. It criticizes the corporate model that measures work in hours.

"If you want to reduce your hours, you're more likely to be branded a slacker than to be rewarded for discipline," writes Margaret Heffernan in the magazine. "Employees who work eight-hour days continue to outpace their overworked, exhausted, and unfulfilled colleagues."

It's an approach Stack applauds. Last month she organized the first Leave the Office Earlier Day. About 10,000 people across the country pledged to leave work on time that day. Next year Stack hopes to increase that number to 25,000. In a survey by Accountemps, one-third of executives said that 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. is the least productive time of day for employees.

"It's not how many hours you were in your seat," Stack says. "Just because you're there, and just because your mouth is moving and your fingers are moving or you're in your chair, it doesn't mean you've produced."

Describing productivity as a friend, she says, "It makes a space in your life for all the other things you want to do other than work."

As summer sunshine streams through office windows, beckoning workers to turn off their computers and call it a day, Ms. Yerkes offers this advice: "Never forget, you are the master of your time. Time is not your master."

### How to work smarter

Time-management experts offer these suggestions for improving productivity:

- Get to work early, before phones start ringing and distractions begin.
- Keep your desk clear of papers other than those related to your current projects.
- Make lists, but focus on the five most important items.
- Don't postpone decisions. Deal with papers promptly.
- Avoid "wallpapering" your computer monitor with Post-it notes.
- Leave at the end of the day with all important calls and e-mail answered.

### Productivity: By the numbers

0.94 Hours that human resource managers assume employees will waste each workday.

1.60 Hours that those managers suspect employees actually waste.

2.09 Average number of hours workers admit to wasting.

759,000,000,000 Number of dollars lost each year as a result of workers goofing off.

44.7 Percentage of employees who say using the Internet for personal use is their the top time-wasting activity.

3.9 Percentage of workers who list spacing out as their top time-wasting activity. It's the fourth most popular time waster, after Internet surfing, socializing with co-workers, and conducting personal business.

33.2 Percentage of workers who said they didn't have enough work to do, making it the top excuse for wasting time. Other popular excuses: being underpaid for amount of work they do, and being distracted by coworkers.

3.2 Average number of hours employees in Missouri admit to wasting per day, making it the top time-wasting state.

2.5 Average number of hours wasted each day by insurance employees - the top industry for wasting time.

*Source: Web survey by America Online and Salary.com*

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