WORK PRODUCTIVITY: TRAPS TO AVOID

By Claire Tompkins

What is productivity, really? It's not just clearing off your desk or ploughing through your email inbox. Stop, take a breath and make sure you're getting the important stuff done.   Obviously, productivity involves producing. Producing widgets, events, reports, sales. The more producing you do, the more money you have and the greater success your company has. Right? It's not that simple. It doesn't matter how many widgets you produce if no one buys them. It doesn't matter how many reports you produce if they're irrelevant. So, productivity must be tied to a worthwhile goal.

This is a simple concept, but one that is easy to forget in the hustle and bustle of the day. It's easy to be fooled into thinking you're productive when you answer emails and phone calls and get paper off your desk. They clamor for your attention. The trick is to handle them or keep them at bay while you spend time on the things that actually are important, that are quietly waiting for you to get to them.

Eight productivity traps:

1. **The "I can do it all" Trap.** Newsflash: you can't do it all, and you'll never be able to do enough. There will always be more you could have done. This is the perfectionism trap. Solution: decide when enough is enough. What is the ROI on your time for a particular project? If you're talking about getting a contract that will be half your profits for the year, spend a lot of time on it. If you're talking about figuring out how to save $40 a month on supplies, spend an hour or less on that.

2. **Picking a system and then not using it consistently.** Stick with certain ways of doing things. Keep your to do list in the same spot and create items for it with similar language all the time. This allows your mind to concentrate on the content rather than being distracted by the form. Let the form be the holder for the content; something to bring it to you efficiently and invisibly. Each form has its own good qualities, so you just need to pick one. What if phone book entries were all written differently? Some with the first name first, some the last name, some the address first, some the phone number first? Can you see how much harder it would be to look through a book like that and find what you need?

3. **The "But we've always done it that way" Trap.** Take time to look at what you've been taking for granted and see if its efficiency or productivity can be improved. This can be anything from regular meetings to how your desk is set up to how you get to work in the morning. Anytime you hear yourself saying "we always (fill in the blank)," question that statement. Do you "always" for a good reason? A good reason two years ago may not be applicable anymore. Is it necessary? Could it be done faster or piggybacked onto another task? Sometimes just thinking carefully of the steps involved in a particular project can spur a brainstorm to improve it.

4. **The "I don't know what to do next" Trap.** Be your own boss, and your own employee. When you're the boss, you formulate and set goals and figure out ways to get there. When you're the employee, you get down to work on those tasks. By separating these functions, you don't second guess yourself as much. Your boss has already decided, for example, that a new brochure needs to be created and it should have certain elements and be ready in 3 weeks. As the employee, you start writing the new copy; you don't waste time worrying about whether the old copy really needs changing, or if 3 weeks is a realistic deadline.

If new information comes up while the project is in progress, the plan may change. But, again, trust that the decisions you make as the "boss" are the best you can make with the information available, and then let your "employee" act on them.

5. **The "I just can't focus on what I have to do" Trap.** Most of us thrive on novelty. We crave variety. The latest thing almost always can get our attention. So you need to figure out some tricks to make your existing project seem new again. Tackle it from a different angle. Ask a colleague for advice and see it from his or her point of view. Break it down into components and then work a little on each one so you don't get burned out on any one element. Pack up your materials and do some work elsewhere; a conference room, your kitchen, a café.

6. **The "I need more information first" Trap.** This is a variation of #1. You must control your options. People generally confuse having lots of options and choices with getting the best possible result. Fewer choices might mean that the best one was left out. But, lots of choice can induce paralysis. There's an infinite number of questions to ask and conditions to satisfy to determine which choice is the best. And as long as you're stuck on that task, you aren't getting to the doing of the project. Have some simple criteria to judge options, gather them quickly and move forward. What really matters is getting the house built, not making sure you had the world's best hammer to do it with.

7. **The "Everything seems equally important" Trap.** There's no way you'll get everything done. If you ever did, you can be sure more things would crowd in the door behind them. You must set up criteria for what the important things to do are. In addition, identify things that don't meet that criteria and consciously decide not to do them. Be clear about what you're not doing. Why? Because if you don't, those items will remain on a phantom to do list, forever undone and forever bugging you. Even though you're not doing them, they suck energy away from the important things.

8. **The "Everything seems equally important" Trap, part 2.** If you can't get everything done, and you don't set your own criteria for what's important, that means that someone else is setting it. Your boss, your mother, whoever. So think of this not as having to give things up, but regaining power over how you spend your time.

The payoff is having clarity about what you are doing, which makes you more productive and efficient. The way to avoid these traps can be as simple as maintaining a regularly reviewed to do list and remember to ask yourself, "why am I doing this?"