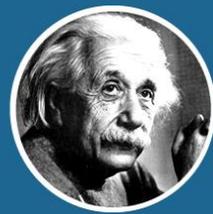
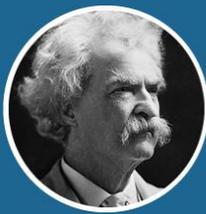
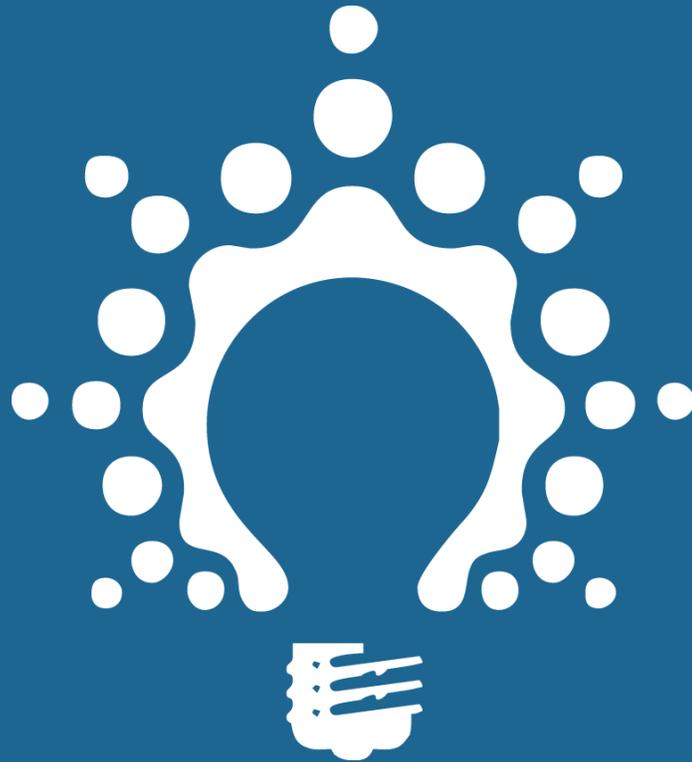


Habits of genius



How 5 amazing people crafted their days to stay productive
and realize their best work — and how you can, too

By Brian Meyer and Team Scrubly

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Introduction

Find Your Own Genius

Three of them are dead and two are comedians.

How relevant can they possibly be to your own life?

Well, when you start wondering how to:

- get started on a hard project
- create an effective schedule
- foster teamwork
- build a habit, or
- solve a problem

These people have some timeless — and encouraging — words for you.

Disclaimer. You won't be as smart as Albert Einstein. You won't be a polymath like Ben Franklin or a storyteller like Mark Twain. You won't be as funny as Tina Fey or Jerry Seinfeld.

The good thing is that you don't have to be.

This short little book isn't about what those wonderful people *did*, it's about *how* they did it. It's about the prosaic daily habits that helped each of them realize their gifts, face their fears, and have a lot of fun.

It turns out that the "how" doesn't change all that much. It's not about technology. In fact, Seinfeld and Fey, who have the universe of tech before them, preach techniques that are delightfully old-school.

This isn't about genius per se. It's about the habits that will help you find *your* genius.

What follows below are some ideas about where to begin.

Good luck!

Oh, if you have a minute, let us know how it's going.

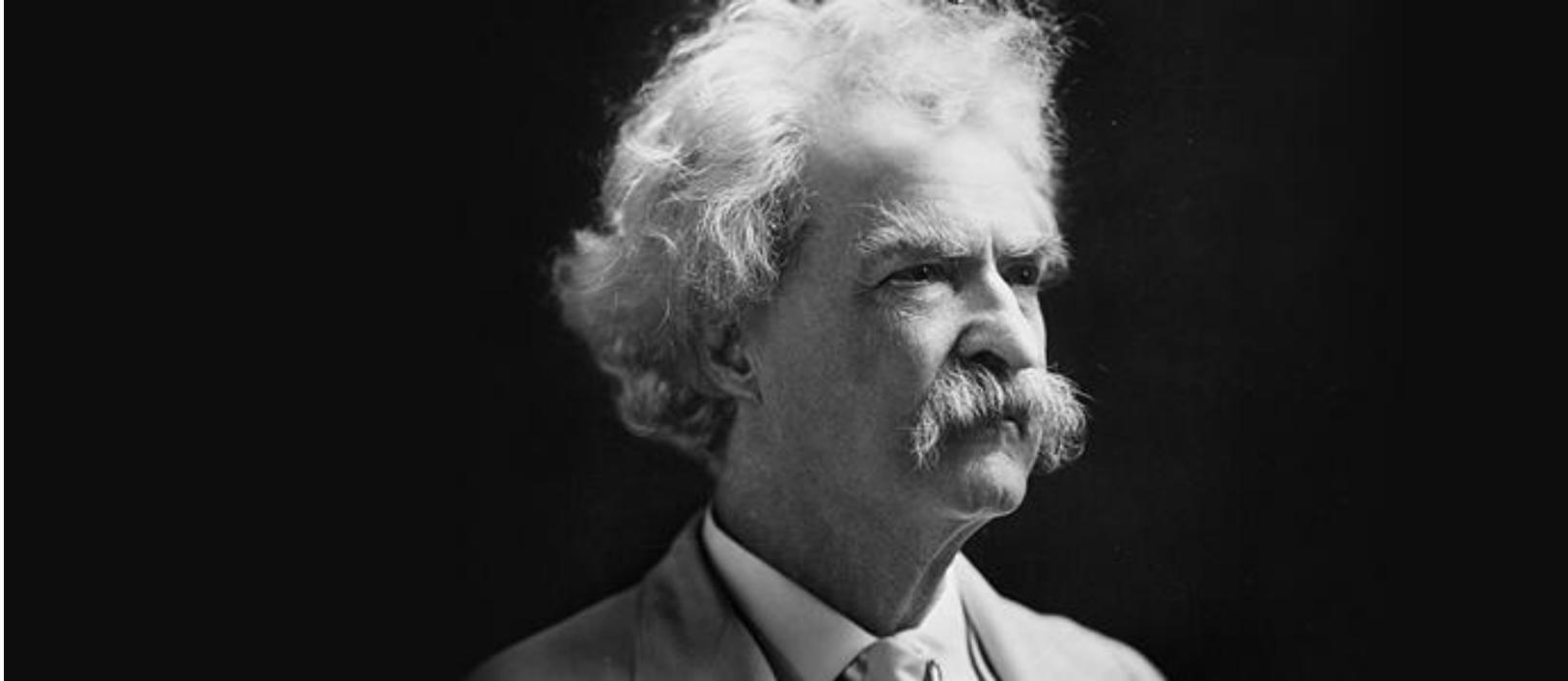
Thanks,

— Brian Meyer and Team Scrubly

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PS. If you want to read more about habits, tips for managing your contact lists, and suggestions for decluttering, check out our blog at www.scrubly.com/blog



Mark Twain

Just Get Started

Just about any picture you find of Mark Twain will have him in one of several poses. The first is one of furtive reflection as he wears his signature white linen suit and most likely smokes a cigar. The second pose is a much more intense, straight-into-the-camera look that gives you a view into how he attacked life. And sometimes he's squinting into the distance, likely about to skewer some tomfoolery.

Both types of pictures speak to the man born as Samuel Langhorne Clemens. He believed in relaxation, but only as a reward for his hard work and productivity.

Twain is easily one of the most quoted, misquoted, and prolific literary figures in American history. We can learn a few solid tips about productivity from him.

Get started

No matter what methodology you follow or what tips you find inspiring, getting started is better than all of them.

Most people have great ideas and big plans, but never take the first steps to get them started. Remember, an object in motion stays in motion, so getting started on a task gets the momentum going and will help you get more done.

Don't try to be perfect

Too often, people try to make things perfect the first time around. There are some professions in which this is a good thing, but unless you're a surgeon, you're going to misspell a few words, file a few documents incorrectly, and royally screw a few things up from time to time.

Understand that these things will happen and don't let it stop you from moving forward with the tasks at hand. It's easy to procrastinate when you don't think you can finish a task perfectly, but in reality it's a lot easier to finish something with a lot of mistakes and then go back to fix the mistakes.

Do the hardest work first

If there's a terribly difficult or unpleasant task on your to-do list, the best way to not only get it done but get the rest of your work done is to do the worst task first.

As Twain put it, "If you eat a frog first thing in the morning, the rest of your day will be wonderful."

While most of us don't have frogs to eat in the morning, the idea still holds true. Do the worst task you have first thing in the morning and the rest of your day will be better.

Understand that habits take time

Good or bad, no habit is formed in a minute. It takes time to build a habit — whether you're talking about a good one or a bad one.

Build good habits by taking small steps every day until you have a quality set of productive habits. Same thing if you want to break bad habits: Take small steps every day.

It's easy to get discouraged when you aren't immediately good at something or when you just can't seem to stop doing a bad habit, but remember: Both take time. Take that one minute every day to work on that habit and soon enough you'll be there.

Keep better company

If you want to keep a productive, positive attitude then you need to surround yourself with like-minded people. Mean-spirited or little people will try to knock you down to their level when you succeed.

So how does this affect productivity? Well, imagine how much it means to talk to someone who is positive and not fake, but excited about what he or she is doing. Now, think about how it feels to talk to someone who doesn't have that productive spark.

Keep better friends and talk to better people at work and you'll see how big a difference it can make.

Twain counted among his friends presidents, artists, industrialists, and royalty. Not only did this help keep him productive, but it elevated his thinking.

Know when to stop

Knowing when to stop is a skill few people have. Many writers and speakers will ramble, artists will over-work their projects, and managers will micro-manage.

If you over-work a person or project, you're wasting time that could be used in a much better way.

Do the work you need to, but no more.

Twain knew when it was time to stop. And on that note, so shall we.



Tina Fey

Adapt and Advance

Comedy is work. Take Tina Fey. She's a comedian; screenwriter; TV star; film star; New York Times bestselling author; winner of multiple Emmy, Golden Globe, SAG, and Writers Guild awards; and the second-best Sarah Palin (after Sarah Palin) in the world.

She's got talent, sure, but also a hell of a lot of grit. Tina Fey's secret? According to Tina Fey: "Bitches get stuff done."

Bossy pants

Bossy pants, Fey's bestseller, covers a lot of Fey's life, and brilliantly. Here, sample away

If you retain nothing else, always remember the most important rule of beauty, which is: Who cares?

Don't waste your energy trying to educate or change opinions; go over, under, through, and opinions will change organically when you're the boss. Or they won't. Who cares? Do your thing, and don't care if they like it.

To say I'm an overrated troll, when you have never even seen me guard a bridge, is patently unfair.

When people say, "You really, really must" do something, it means you don't really have to. No one ever says, "You really, really must deliver the baby during labor." When it's true, it doesn't need to be said.

In most cases being a good boss means hiring talented people and then getting out of their way.

Throughout the book, one part stands out: Fey's discussion of improv.

Improv is all about adapting to the moment and advancing the scene. When it's done well, there's a flow and a wholeness that make it hard to believe it's not scripted. But there's an unconscious intelligence at work.

Same with business.

You can plan all you want but once you're deep in the doing, you need to be able to adapt in the moment, while still advancing the project.

Fey's "four rules for improv" also apply to business.

Rule 1: Say "Yes"

When Fey wrote this first rule, she meant it to be about building a scene by agreeing with whatever the other actor says. Disagreeing with the other improviser will kill your scene. If your scene partner says "Freeze! I've got a gun!" you don't say, "That's only your finger!" You reply in a way that affirms it.

At work, the analogue is that not everything has to be a turf war. Even if you don't agree with what someone says, you can affirm the experience behind it. This doesn't mean you need to agree with everything, but rather just respect other ideas and work with them.

Rule 2: Say "Yes, and ... "

If an improv scene starts with, "I can't believe it's so hot in here," and you block it with something like, "Not really," you kill the scene. Or at least injure it severely.

But, if you answer with, “What did you expect? We’re in hell,” you've moved the scene forward.

Do the same thing with your co-workers.

If you’re in a project-planning meeting and someone makes themselves vulnerable with a bold suggestion, jump in and amplify it. See where it goes without worrying about the result just yet. (If you’re working for a company that stifles that kind of collaboration, get out fast. The world needs your talents.)

Saying “Yes, and ...” applies to our own productivity systems, too.

Too often we find methods for productivity or working better and try our best to follow those to a T. The productivity method that worked for someone will most likely not fit you perfectly. Take what you need, add your own ideas, and make it better.

Rule 3: Make statements

Once you’re full swing into an improv scene, you try not to ask too many questions, which puts a burden on your scene partners. Instead, make statements. Endow them with characteristics, motivations, relationships, locations. Suddenly, the scene takes on a richness.

At work, you have permission to make your own answers. It’s easy to sit at your desk and ask, “Does my boss expect me to work till midnight to finish this?” or “Why was my coworker such a jerk in this email?”

But there’s a victimhood implied in these questions. Try thinking in statements. Then express yourself to the people in question. “Help me understand the best way to prioritize my work” or “By the tone of your email, I’m feeling that you’re angry with me and I wanted to check it out.”

Rule 4: There are no mistakes, only opportunities

If you're in an improve scene and you think you're driving a car and the other actor decides you're dancing, guess what? You're dancing now. Maybe it's the new “steering wheel” dance and it's sweeping the nation and this is the big dance contest.

At work, stuff happens. It's how you roll with it that matters. A problem in your day is a great way to derail a productive streak with anger and stress, but when you keep an attitude of adaptation, many problems will solve themselves — or lead you off in interesting new directions.

Bitches get stuff done

Tina Fey had to learn how to stay productive and get things done on deadline mainly because of her work on SNL. When a show is done weekly there's no time for fooling around with work. There's no such thing as being a day late when a show airs live at the same time every week — you get it done.

And keep in mind, as Fey said, "You can't control things by being nervous about it."



Images in this post courtesy of Wikipedia and the Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin.

Benjamin Franklin

Make a Schedule

Benjamin Franklin was so busy being productive that he didn't have time to be president.

There's humor and truth in this statement — something Franklin would appreciate. The founding father and polymath was a scientist, writer, inventor, and all-around productive man. Not to mention being the most famous kite-flier who ever lived.

Franklin taught himself to read French, Spanish, Latin, and Italian. He experimented with electricity, and his “single fluid theory” led to the electron theory in 1900. He was a master of many things, including getting things done.

Here are seven of his best productivity tips.

1. Use lists

What was true in Franklin's time is true today: Lists help productivity.

Without a good list you have no way to measure how much you've achieved or how far you have to go until you're done. A good list will translate the tangle of ideas and tasks in your brain into a simple, easy-to-follow list of necessities.

Never leave that till tomorrow which you can do today.

Franklin not only used lists to follow his daily tasks, but he also kept a list of 13 virtues he attempted to improve upon weekly. He would go down the list of virtues, focusing on one each week for 13 weeks, then repeat the cycle all over again four times per year.

Franklin started his list with "temperance." For his temperance week he made sure not to overindulge in food or drink. He felt that if he could overcome those urges, the rest of the virtues would be easier to achieve.

Every night he would review his list and mark off the items that he completed that helped strengthen those virtues. This act of reviewing the day is a great way to learn from mistakes and become a better person in small steps. Without nightly review he would have never seen the progress he made in working towards his virtue of the week.

Franklin's schedule:

| | | |
|---|----|--|
| The morning question, What good shall I do this day? | 5 | Rise, wash, and address <i>Powerful Goodness</i> ; contrive day's business and take the resolution of the day; prosecute the present study; and breakfast. |
| | 6 | |
| | 7 | |
| | 8 | |
| | 9 | |
| | 10 | |
| | 11 | |
| | 12 | |
| | 1 | |
| | 2 | |
| | 3 | |
| | 4 | |
| Evening question, What good have I done today? | 5 | Put things in their places, supper, music, or diversion, or conversation; examination of the day. |
| | 6 | |
| | 7 | |
| | 8 | |
| | 9 | |
| | 10 | |
| | 11 | |
| | 12 | |
| | 1 | |
| | 2 | |
| | 3 | |
| | 4 | |

2. Don't fear mistakes

Not everything that Franklin tried was a complete success, and this was completely fine with him. Instead of becoming worked up and getting off-track, he accepted his mistakes, learned from them, and moved on.

One of the reasons Franklin reviewed his list each day was so he could see what went wrong and learn from those missteps.

Fearing mistakes is a great way to become paralyzed by preparation. When a mistake is your biggest fear, you'll spend too much time thinking and not enough time doing and learning.

3. Small steps lead to big results

Productivity starts with the small steps, not the big ones.

Take action on the small items and the larger ones will be dealt with step by step. Just like you can't fell a large tree with a single hit of an axe, you can't deal with a large problem or project with one entry on your to-do list.

Take small actions and you'll accomplish great things. By planning out smaller steps you can see your progress and get through even the biggest of tasks. It is this idea that drove Franklin to create his list and work on one virtue per week. He realized that he couldn't just write a huge task like "be a better person" and expect to get it done.

4. Get up early

Sleeping in feels great, but not as great as getting things done. Franklin started at 5 a.m. every day.

He that reset late, must trot all day, and shall scarce overtake his business at night.

Instead of getting up and walking straight to his desk to start working, he would take some time to wake up, think about what he wanted to get done that day, eat a good breakfast, and just prepare himself for the day so that when he started to work at 8 a.m. he was already three hours into his day. Those three hours of preparation and mental readiness gave Franklin an edge that most people lacked.

Starting early means less rushing for you, which translates into more productivity when you do start working. Make getting up early a habit. You'll be glad you did.

5. Have a schedule

Franklin's daily schedule was a thing of beauty. Most of us have a schedule we keep, but how many of us schedule in lunch and reading? What about sleep or reflecting on the past day?

"Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time."

If it was important to Franklin, he scheduled it. This included sleep and preparing for the day. He adjusted this daily schedule over time and didn't mind when life got in the way and he had to alter it. Take the basic idea of his schedule for yourself and set a time you get up every day which is a few hours before you have to start work.

Make sure to schedule in other important things like reading, checking social media, and reflecting on the day. Follow the schedule as best as you can and you'll be surprised what it can do for you.

6. Work hard

Franklin believed in hard work, and felt that glory came from it. He worked tirelessly as a printer in Philadelphia, creator of "Poor Richard's Almanack," civil servant, inventor, diplomat, and more. He basically worked his butt off throughout his entire life, for which he's justly honored today.

"No man ever was glorious, who was not laborious."

Hard work pays off.

7. Time is Benjamins

"You may delay, but time will not."

One of the themes of Franklin's autobiography is that time is the great equalizer. While others may have more skill, resources, or support, everyone has the same 24 hours in each day to get

things done. What matters is what you do with those 24 hours and how productive you are in them.

Working hard is one thing, but you also need to assess whether something is worth your time based on what your time is worth to you. This is a cliché, but not when it's radically applied to ideas about where you live (high-maintenance house vs. easy-to-clean apartment), how you spend your evenings (TV vs. learning a new skill), and what you eat (junk food that will drain your energy vs. healthy food that will help you be more productive).

The only thing separating you from Benjamin Franklin is hard work and dedication to getting things done. And maybe a kite.



Jerry Seinfeld

Trudge Your Ass In

“One day I was watching these construction workers go back to work. I was watching them kind of trudging down the street. It was like a revelation to me. I realized these guys don’t want to go back to work after lunch. But they’re going. That’s their job. If they can exhibit that level of dedication for that job I should be able to do the same. Trudge your ass in.”

– Jerry Seinfeld, in “Comedian”

Before Jerry Seinfeld was a TV star, he was a famous stand-up comedian selling out nightclubs. Before he was selling out clubs, he was a beginner, like anybody else.

So how did Seinfeld the beginner become Seinfeld the genius? By trudging his ass in every day. And how did he do that?

He used a simple, beautiful system. You can, too. All you need is a calendar and a fat red magic marker. It applies whether you want to improve your comedy, read more, learn to code, start a business, or anything else.

Don't break the chain

Years ago, Seinfeld promised himself that he would write jokes every day. Not all of them would be gold, but by doing it every day he got his brain into the mindset of being creative. He turned writing into a habit, instead of a chore.

I was the best man at the wedding. If I'm the best man, why is she marrying him?

Saying you'll do something every day and actually doing it are two different things, which is why he created a system for making sure he got his writing in every day. He got himself a big wall calendar with the entire year showing on one single page and hung it on the wall where he could see it every day. Next, he got a fat red magic marker and every day he wrote he drew a big red X on that day.

As the days went on, the calendar became filled with red X's, forming a chain with each X being a new link. The idea is to never break the chain, since it would stick out for the rest of the year.

Once a few weeks were done like this without missing a day, he would try even harder to not break the chain.

How it works

Not only does this method work great for reminding you to get your own work done — whether it be cleaning your house, doing the dishes, or exercising — but it forces you to find those little bits of time you'd otherwise overlook.

For example, if your chain is reading every day, you'll find the extra 20 or 30 minutes, time you would ordinarily spend playing on your phone or watching TV. Without the chain, that time will pass you by without your even noticing it.

Dogs are the leaders of the planet. If you see two life forms — one of them's making a poop, the other one's carrying it for him — who would you assume is in charge?

The chain works because you don't want to explain the missing link to friends or family members. Once you get on a roll, Newton's first law of motion kicks in: An object in motion will stay in motion unless an external force acts upon it.

Make the system your own

Seinfeld used the chain system just for writing, but you can adjust it to work for multiple daily tasks, too. For example, you could schedule out an hour of every day to work on three separate tasks. Use 20 minutes each day to clean part of your home, 20 minutes to read, and 20 minutes to learn to code.

*Why do they call it a “building”? It looks like they’re finished.
Why isn’t it a “built”?*

Now you have to do each of the three tasks to earn your big red X.

If you’re busy you could schedule out 30 minutes daily and do 15 minutes of reading and 15 minutes to exercise.

Men don’t care what’s on TV. They only care what else is on TV.

If that’s too much time, you can start with just a single minute. (For more information, see our short guide, *The 1-Minute Habit*.)

Whatever your method, figure it out now and start your own chain. Don’t wait till Monday, New Year’s Day, or any other landmark. Start now and you’ll see those red X’s start add up.

And don’t worry about starting small — it’s the best way to make big change.

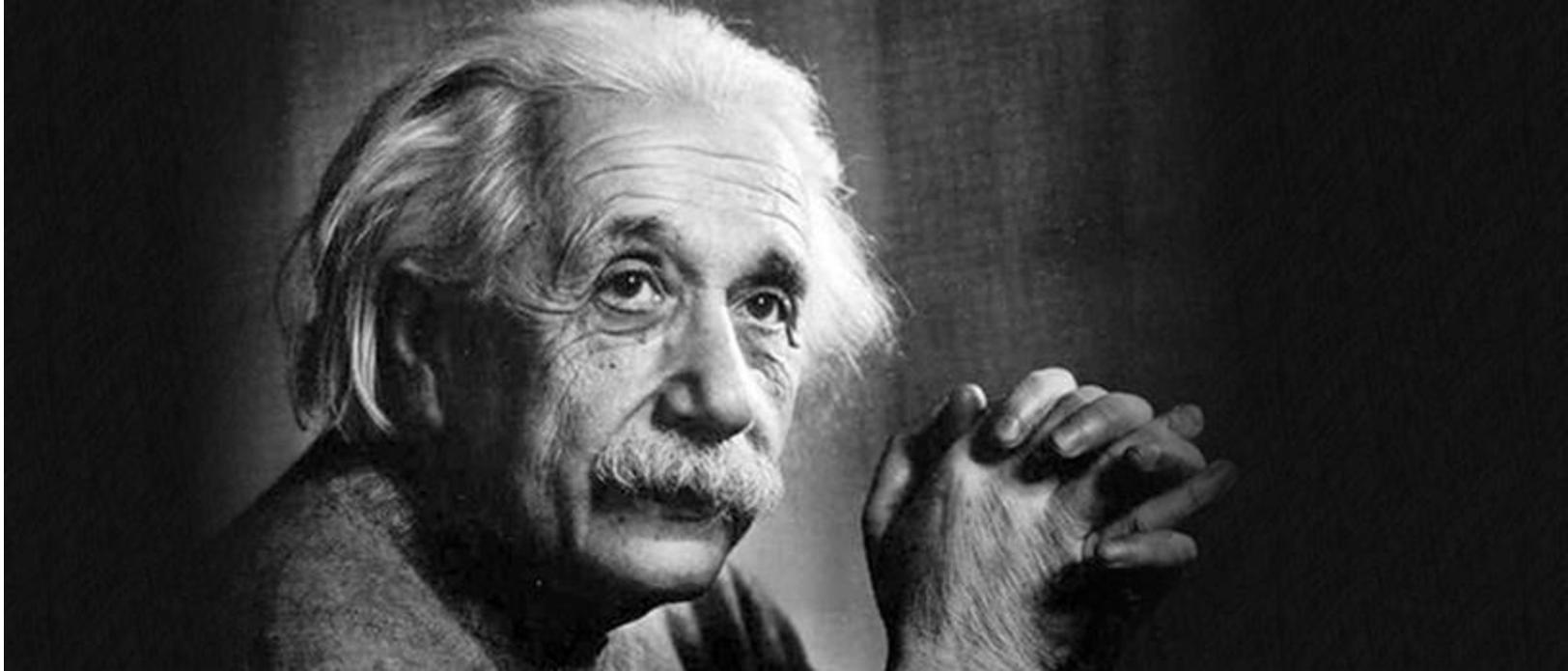
Get that wall calendar

It’s easy to skip a day of working out or reading if you don’t record that day anywhere. It’s even easy to skip a day if you’re using a monthly or weekly calendar because once that month or week is gone, so is that visual reminder.

Somebody just gave me a shower radio. Thanks a lot. Do you really want music in the shower? I guess there’s no better place to dance than a slick surface next to a glass door.

The fact that you can see that one day out of an entire year that you skipped your daily task for the rest of the year is a pretty big motivator. You can add in social support to this idea as well and take a picture of the calendar monthly and post it online for your friends and family to see. If you missed a day you’re sure to hear about it from them.

Trudge your ass in.



Albert Einstein

Keep it Simple

"We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."

When most people try to be productive they generally ignore this piece of advice from one of the greatest minds of our time. But by keeping the same mindset that says, "Get more done faster," you're keeping yourself from being truly productive.

The idea isn't to learn how to work more; it's to learn how to get more out of the time you work. Einstein published five papers in 1905. Three of them were merely groundbreaking. A fourth won him a Nobel Prize. He did all this while working six days a week at the patent office in Switzerland.

Einstein had a few other things going on during that time as well:

- He married Mileva Marić.
- He and his wife had a daughter, Lieserl.
- As well as a son, Hans Albert.
- He played each week in a string quartet.

Einstein also didn't have access to a public library to read other scientific papers and studies. And, of course, he didn't have a computer or the internet.

While Einstein was smarter than the rest of us, he had the same number of hours in every day that we do; he just knew how to make more out of them than we do.

How did he do it?

1. Less is more

“We are most productive when we focus on a very small number of projects on which we can devote a large amount of attention.”

This idea is hard to swallow in a world of multitasking, but doing more isn't always better. Most people feel that they have to have five or six plates spinning at one time to feel productive, when, in actuality, multitasking actually slows them down.

Einstein believed in focusing on a select few ideas and only working on one at a time until it was completed. Devote your time to the task at hand and give it your best. Remember, it's impossible to pay attention to more than one thing at a time. At best you're switching between them very rapidly, which is unproductive.

2. Clutter can actually help

“If a cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind, of what, then, is an empty desk a sign?”

Most productivity experts will tell you that you need to have a clean desk to be truly productive. The idea makes sense on the surface, but there's more to it.

A report in the Journal of Consumer Research found that a messy desk actually helps a brain to focus more amidst the chaos of the workspace. This is an idea that Einstein had long before any research was done on the matter.

The argument against a cluttered desk is that a disorganized and cluttered workspace leads to a mind that follows suit. The truth is, however, that the visual clutter actually makes the mind focus on the problem at hand more and tricks the brain into finding the clearest and least-cluttered solution possible, as to not add to the clutter any more.

Einstein wasn't the only genius to practice the messy desk policy, Steve Jobs as well as Mark Twain kept desks that would make the today's minimalists howl.

Want to be more productive and creative? Let your desk be messy.

3. Keep it simple

"Everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler."

The world's most famous equation, $E=MC^2$, is simple, but the idea behind it is world changing. By keeping things simple in your own life, you can get more done.

There are hundreds of productivity apps out there for time management, to-do list organization, and daily planning, but in all this mess the core idea is lost. Instead of having a detailed system for everything and expecting that to make you productive, keep it simple and focus on the things that matter and everything else will fall into place.

Einstein didn't have an iPhone with a to-do list on it or an Outlook calendar to keep his appointments in order. He had a pen and paper. By not allowing himself to be bogged down by additional fluff, he stayed on task and got things done.

Keep things simple in your daily actions, but only as simple as they should be.

4. Define your problems

"If I had an hour to solve a problem I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and 5 minutes thinking about solutions."

If you define the problem or task clearly, you can come up with far better solutions and ultimately spend less time doing the work. For example, Einstein's work with the photoelectric effect that won him his Nobel Prize was started by just thinking about light and how it looks and interacts with the world. In other words, before he ever started to do math equations to try and solve the apparent paradox that is light, he thought about how light works and what needed done to solve the problem.

Without this thinking, he may have never realized that light is actually made of photons instead of continuous waves.

Solve a problem too quickly and you'll likely need to solve it again later.

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