

PRODUCTIVITY POTHOLES



If you've heard it once, you've heard it a million times: "Where has the week gone?" or "I feel like I didn't get anything done today," or "I can't seem to get ahead!" After vacations and business trips, it's even worse. It's time for "catch up" or as one of my clients phrased her office absence: "Prepare, leave, recover."

Leading productivity expert David Allen says in his book, *Ready for Anything*, "A paradox has emerged in this new millennium: people have enhanced the quality of life, but at the same time they are adding to their stress levels by taking on more than they have the resources to handle." He states that what's necessary to cope is a "ready state" of the martial artist. "More and more it will be a required condition for high-performance professionals who wish to maintain balance and a consistent positive output in their work," he writes.

HOW TO STEER CLEAR OF TIME-WASTING DISTRACTIONS

So what does it cost you when you're not ready for anything? There can be many consequences when things spin out of control. It can cost you:

- Time to "clean up" during evenings or weekends when you would rather be doing something else
- Money, if you've missed out on some lost checks or late fees
- Lost opportunities, such as new clients, new programs or new profitable projects that could have progressed but instead have stalled
- Peace of mind and a sense of well being
- Your sense of accomplishment and the feeling that you are on top of things
- Your reputation, if you let a department or a team down after failing to produce your part of a project on time

However, it is possible to get into the frame of mind where you're ready for anything. It requires changes in commitments, systems, routines and habits and your habits, good or bad, determine your future.

Following are the six biggest potholes that most professionals commonly fall into that keep them from being "ready for anything." If you recognize yourself in any of these, then here's your chance to do something about it and turn your day and your results around.

Pothole 1: **SPEEDING THROUGH YOUR DAY**

There are reasons why we have speed limits on roads and highways. I wish there were some in the work place, too. What my clients have done in the past is what many people do all the time: they receive information, but avoid taking the time to decide its purpose or usefulness when they receive it and they don't stop and determine where it will go next.

Ever the optimists, professionals who consistently let things build up are thinking that they'll use this information some day. And more often than not, that's where it ends.

Unfortunately, all these great ideas build up and clutter an office or, in the case of electronic information, clutter an inbox or a hard drive. When that happens, it makes it harder to find and stay on top of your real priorities. It can become a burden just to know it's there and you have to address it again at some point. So why not just alleviate that entirely?

Solution: Stop and think. Make decisions quickly and regularly, as soon

as something shows up. Force yourself to give it the 60 seconds it needs for you to think about what it is and what you can do with it. How is it useful to you? Do the same questioning with everything: e-mail, snail mail, voice mail, whatever.

Even if you think it's not important, which is the worst kind of trap, stop and think. Then you can file and toss right away and stop the circulation of messages in your head that say, "I'm not doing enough. I've got too much to do. I don't have time for all of this!"

If the only thing you do is say, "I don't have time for this" and you promptly move on, then you're falling into a pothole. Skip that and go right into decision-making mode. Focus. If you don't make this decision now, then you'll have to address it later. If you don't have time for it the first time around, you definitely don't have time for it a second time when you have to address the pile that has accumulated.

Pothole 2: **NO TRUSTED FILE SYSTEMS**

Even if you are making some decisions on your new information, there's a good chance that you don't have anywhere to put things or you don't know what to do with it next. It's important to have trusted systems in place to handle all of the information and responsibilities that you juggle throughout your day.

One of my clients referred to her credenza, including the file drawers, as the "black hole." She had been VP at this company for three years and she hadn't even looked in there or taken the time to clean it out so that she could use it for her information.

Another client in a successful financial firm worked out of an old Victorian house that had been converted into offices. Whether it was for aesthetic rea-

sons or a misunderstanding about how much paper and files she really had, no file cabinets existed in her personal office space. As a solution, she bought three, five-drawer, vertical file cabinets and almost everything on her desk and on the floor went into these file cabinets or in the trash. A very small portion of the remaining papers and files were considered active, staying out on the desk in a vertical sorter.

If you have a great piece of information that you know you would like to reference later, but you don't have trusted physical file or e-file system in place, then you can't very well file it and know that you'll find it again.

Solution: Create or obtain plenty of file space, physically and electronically; organize it and maintain it. Executives too often are sorely lacking in physical file space. So clean out some drawers. Get rid of anything you don't need, use, want or love.

If you lack physical file cabinets, wait before buying anything. Do the sort and purge process first and then see what's left. Then get the appropriate file space to house it all.

Pothole 2: **NO ONE E-TASK LIST**

This is one of the other big potholes that professionals find themselves in regularly: not having a comprehensive to do list in one place – another important trusted system.

A single e-task list is important to have. Without it, how are you comparing and contrasting all of things you need to do or want to do? Without it, how do you know if you're spending time on your most important goals and objectives, both long term and short term? Are you sure that how you're spending your day is connected to your goals?

You won't effectively be able to decide what's most important if everything is spread out on post-it notes, on

legal pads, in your head, on the computer, in your calendar, or visible in the paper and files on your desk as reminders. It can cost you lots of time to repeatedly review all these sources of information all day when all you need to do is get them all together in one place – a place you trust and maintain, always.

One government client and I unearthed 12 legal pads in her office that were full of notes and to do lists and she went through every single one of them to determine if the tasks were still viable and the notes were still useful. She put all the current tasks on her new task list in Outlook and tossed all the pads.

Solution: Create one single e-task list, using the task list available in your e-mail system. Put all your papers, file, scraps of paper, pads of paper, files, etc., in one pile, or leave everything where it is, and start by picking up one document or file at a time and ask yourself what your next action step is with that paper or file. Then type that task into your list with a target date for doing it. As you begin answering yourself, you'll start to see where everything should go and you'll start to see whether or not you really have any actions on the things around you.

Ideas and big plans that aren't ready for action should go on a separate e-list and not this daily list.

You may be surprised at how much does not belong in your office or on your desk. Many things can be filed for future use and in most cases, you can start to toss the post it notes and little scraps of paper once everything is on an e-task list. You'll see far less paper on your desk and a more focused approach to your day. You'll also see how much easier it is to reprioritize your tasks from day to day in the computer than it is on a paper list.

Pothole 4: **NOT PROTECTING YOUR TIME**

Do you protect uninterrupted time for yourself each day in order to get things done? No? Well, you can. You should. It's important for you to shut your door a little bit each day so that you can focus on a few priorities without getting pulled away a thousand times before you finally finish.

Typically, executives say they say they don't take this time for themselves. They spend every day with an open door, which is fine 80 percent of the time, but it is important to protect that last 20 percent without having the

at a glance

Are you guilty of falling into these six productivity potholes?

1. **SPEEDING** Slow down and take time to process information when it arrives. Don't assume you'll have time later.
2. **PAPER ANYWHERE AND EVERYWHERE** Create or obtain plenty of file space, physically and electronically; organize it and maintain it.
3. **TOO MANY LISTS** Create one single e-task list, and toss the paper scraps.
4. **UNPROTECTED TIME** Protect one to two hours each day. Don't let anyone or anything interrupt you during this time.
5. **UNFINISHED BUSINESS** Don't start on something new until you bring closure to your tasks and projects.
6. **LACK OF DAILY MAINTENANCE** You've taken the time to slow down and create systems. Now support the systems and processes that support you.

phone or people walking in to interrupt them. The biggest offender is e-mail, but guess what? That's only because a person lets e-mail interrupt them.

Solution: Protect one to two hours each day. Some professionals can decide at the last minute when to shut their door. Others need to plan in advance based on deadlines or other constraints. Either way is fine as long as you do it.

Prepare the people around you so they know when you'll be available again. Direct your calls into voice mail or let assistants know what to do with your calls. Be clear that you wish not to be interrupted and define any exceptions that may apply. Don't tolerate offenders if you've been crystal clear. Help them learn what's acceptable and what's not or they'll keep interrupting you.

Also, turn off your e-mail alerts so that those distractions stop occurring. You can check e-mail again after you've gotten a few things checked off your e-task list.

Pothole 5: **NOT FINISHING WHAT YOU START**

The way some folks do their laundry can be a good illustration of not finishing what you started. If you haven't folded and put away the dryer loads, you're not finished doing your laundry process. If you keep feeding the washer with loads of laundry, but let the resulting dryer loads pile up in baskets on the living room floor, you're not done.

In the business world, I see professionals fall into this pothole all the time. They process almost all of a project, but never bring closure to the project. They let these open loops pile up all over the office and before they know it, they're buried.

Solution: When you are finished with a client file, project or program, don't pick up another file or project to work on it until you bring closure to the original project. Stop and review the final file, clean it up and file it. Or hand it off to the proper person to file for you. Get it out of your office, out of your way and then focus on the next task at hand. You'll find that bringing closure to your files and projects can free your desk and free your mind for new creativity.

Pothole 6: **LACK OF DAILY MAINTENANCE**

Let's imagine that you have a new

file system together, a great task list, a workable calendar, an organized and categorized contact list, an organized e-file structure, a huge reduction in e-mail and the paper in your office has disappeared.

OK, so now what?

Well, now you need to build some time into each day to make sure you keep making decisions on your information and maintain the systems you've created. If not properly maintained, your office and your workday could turn into a huge pothole.

This is where people have the most difficulty. I sometimes hear that this part is "boring" or it's "not the job" or it's "not important." Well, it is important, because if you don't follow through on this part, you'll be right back at square one when you were losing money, losing opportunities and losing sleep.

Solution: Support the systems and processes that support you. This is part of your job. Without the proper maintenance, you're risking the quality of your work and quality outcomes.

Here are a few things you can do to maintain your systems and stay productive:

- Never stop making decisions about incoming information.
- Make new files when you need them, both electronically and in your file cabinets.
- File things right away, physically and electronically, where you do have a file already set up.
- Prioritize and reprioritize your e-task list all day, every day.
- Add contacts to your system when they show up on a business card or in e-mail.
- Process notes from meetings and conferences right away.
- Capture actions on your e-task list as soon as they appear.
- If things start backing up, clear the calendar and make time to get caught up right away. The more you do it in little tiny pieces, the easier it is to stay productive.

So take some time to focus on avoiding these six common potholes that professionals commonly fall in to. I challenge you to make some changes in your habits and your day-to-day processes so that you will get to your next level of success faster and easier. Then you'll be on your own road to peak productivity – free of potholes.

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