

How to be a Productivity Ninja



Time management is a myth!

“Time management” doesn’t work. Instead, the Productivity Ninja concentrates on self-management – of their attention, focus, energy, actions, habits, choices and motivation. The 9 Characteristics of the Productivity Ninja help generate awareness of unproductive and ingrained habits, and introduce corresponding Ninja tactics to implement and build new productive behaviours. Use the Productivity Ninja mindset to review and rethink the way you approach your work, and create playful, productive momentum.



1. Zen-like Calm

Many of us are overwhelmed with the amount of information and potential distraction we face in our working and lives. The Productivity Ninja is calm and prepared, but also skilled and ruthless in how they deal with the enemy that is information overload. Calmness and clarity underpin all aspects of Productivity Ninja practice.

- **Download your brain**
Information overload is a major challenge to being productive. Remember, “Your brain is for having ideas, not for holding them” – David Allen, GTD.
- **Workflow, not lists**
The Lists metaphor is demoralising (a continuing growing pile of work that never gets smaller). Instead, Workflow is about making the best choices re: “What’s the next action?”.
- **Pining for the cake factory**
Ever wish your work had the clarity and simplicity of putting cherries on cakes? Knowledge work (what we do) isn’t like that of course, but the Ninja pines for the cake factory, and looks to re-establish some of its better aspects.
- **Simultaneously boss and worker**
Separate thinking and doing. Constantly re-juggling work requests and deciding priorities reduces your capacity to concentrate in the moment. Separate traffic control from execution with weekly and daily reviews.



2. Ruthlessness

Ninja ruthlessness takes multiple forms. Ruthlessness with our choices and what we commit to – or don’t . Ruthless (but positive) honesty with others about what’s realistic. Ruthlessness with ourselves when we fall prey to distraction. Ruthless control over our attention and how our work environment effects it.

- **Reality check: lower your expectations**
Realise you’ll never get everything done. That’s not the game anymore. Instead we need to make the best choices about where to deploy the capacity and energy we have, to get the best results.

- **Pareto's peas**
Do more of what's working. Change or eliminate what's not. It really is fine to say "no" – as long as you can justify to yourself and others why! Use 80/20 impact thinking (<http://is.gd/yzohkD>). Simplify, automate, outsource.
- **Nurture your attention**
Attention is as delicate as an egg. Easily broken, very hard to put back together. But look after it and it'll grow and thrive. What can you do to create more focus, attention and momentum (and protect what you already have)?
- **Know your enemy**
Even when what's to be done is clear, distractions (whether self-created or from outside) are a major threat. As well as the time for the item itself, it can take up to 15 minutes to find your place again and get 'back in the zone'.
- **Silence those pings**
Turn off all visual and audio "you have new mail" notifications, on your desktop or mobile devices. You did know that's possible (and allowed) didn't you? The ping is far too addictive and tempting – you'll want to go and check.
- **Defend your sanctuary**
Use do not disturb signs (either virtual or real). Phone set to silent. Mark as busy on shared calendars. Home workers: make sure others know you are at work, and when you'll be home.



3. Weapon-Savvy

The Ninja is skilful on their own right, but knows that using the right tools makes them even more effective. There's a lot of options to choose from, but even a few key tools used well can create an impressive Ninja armoury. And once you've found something that works well, don't be tempted to keep changing to the latest fad or shiny toy.

- **A Ninja has a second brain**
The 'second brain' is the Ninja's trusted system to store information, actions, tasks and project. There are many options, including many digital and mobile ones – but a spreadsheet or paper and pen can work just as well.
- **Get it out of your head**
This reduces distraction and preoccupation. Having a complete picture allows for better choices, proper planning and more effective execution. Let a trusted system remember stuff for you, and prompt you when appropriate.
- **You've got way too much mail**
Get to know how to use rules, filters and folders to triage your mail for you. Review lower importance/value email ('Bacon') less frequently, and give your proper attention to the messages that really matter.
- **Stop checking**
Instead process your mail – then get back to doing your actual work. As Merlin Mann (who coined the term 'Inbox Zero') says: "Stop taking orders and make the sandwiches!".
- **Move it out**
"Your inbox is only for stuff you haven't read yet" (Merlin Mann). Once processed, delete/archive (the default choice), or move to a folder 'needs action/reply', 'reading material', 'waiting for' etc.
- **Extract the goodness**
When processing mail, extract the 'payload' value: i.e. convert into task/action items, planner entries, calendar appointments/reminders, download attachments, etc. The remaining empty 'container' can be archived/deleted.

- **Email is not a to-do list**

But so many people use it as one! There are far more appropriate tools for that, and using one 'built for purpose' will reduce the temptation to keep your mail client open all the time, increasing its power to distract.



4. Stealth and Camouflage

Sometimes the Productivity Ninja needs to employ a bit of old-fashioned stealth and camouflage – sneaky (but ethical) ways to boost performance. Striking the right balance between availability and solitude can be tricky (especially for managers), but is crucial to getting your best work done and delivering what's expected.

- **Tactical hiding: “going dark”**

Working near other people can be motivating, but also very distracting. Making yourself less available sometimes is totally allowed. Work from home, in a café, in the park, or perhaps swap desks with a colleague on another floor.

- **Unplug!**

Only be online for tasks that absolutely need online access (e.g. communications, research etc.). Whenever possible get unplugged and offline, especially when you need to fully concentrate on being creative etc.

- **Don't login yet**

Don't fire up email as the default first task of the day – you'll be dragged down the rabbit hole. Plan your day first, e.g. 3 MITs (<http://is.gd/raE278>), then adjust only if really justified by the new information.

- **Email when you choose**

Rather than automatically complying the instant it nags you to, e.g. 5-10 minutes at the top of every hour, or longer 20 minute sessions 3 or 4 times per day. Process mail in dashes, with plenty of space to do other work in between.

- **Meetings for one**

Don't just use your planner for meetings and deadlines. You also need to schedule in when your actual work is going to happen. Block out these (especially cyclical activities) a month/week/day ahead etc. during reviews.



5. Unorthodoxy

What's important is the end result. It doesn't matter if you use the conventional route to get there. Be willing to question everything. Don't get stuck in a rut – challenge the status quo, innovate and experiment. Find inspiration in unusual (as well as usual) places. The Ninja dares to do things differently. Oh, they don't take themselves too seriously!

- **Unorthodox inspiration**

Seek fresh perspectives and new ideas from outside your immediate field. Ask yourself: how would a revolutionary, a parent, an artist, a designer or an entrepreneur approach this? What apparent 'rules' can actually be broken?

- **Challenge and experiment**

Shake things up. Challenge expectations. Try new, perhaps mischievous approaches. Chief Ninja Graham Allcott ran a series of 'extreme productivity' experiments (<http://is.gd/1LFybr>) to explore what works (and what doesn't).

- **Trick yourself into working**

Especially on repeatedly procrastinated tasks. Available tactics include “Eat That Frog” (<http://is.gd/K3yhSA>), personal “Power Hours” (<http://is.gd/byfzFn>) or team-wide “Guilt Hours” (<http://is.gd/evU1iB>).

- **Gamification**

We all love games. They can motivate, create momentum – and they're fun! What could you do to turn parts of your work (either solo activities, or as a team) into a game? Let the competition commence (<http://is.gd/RkgnW8>).

- **Work in dashes**

Break up larger tasks into smaller less overwhelming units, then take a break / reward, e.g. the multi-purpose "Pomodoro Technique" (<http://is.gd/gDTZs>) or Merlin Mann's "10+2x5" (<http://is.gd/nZY3iW>).



6. Agility

A Ninja needs to be light on their feet and able to react appropriately to what is going on around them – but must also ensure that they are not constantly being dictated to by events around them. When the plan is working, stick to the plan. When the unexpected happens, adapt, deal with it and regroup.

- **Firefighters**

The workplace can often be unpredictable. Some days are routine, and on others the truly unexpected happens, both for good and ill. Ninjas train hard to be ready to use their skills in the heat of battle.

- **The 2 minute rule**

When processing, if an email or task only requires an action that can be done in less than 2 minutes (e.g. a 2 line reply, forwarding to a colleague, sending a file etc.) do it right there and then. Help keep those lists small.

- **Context is King**

Categorise your tasks by 'Context' i.e. where you need to be, or what you need to have to hand to do them. That way you can be productive even if the internet goes down, when travelling etc.

- **Sequential monotasking (not multitasking)**

Yes, we know this one's controversial. But we believe that one thing at a time is the way to go: one task, then the next, then the next ... repeat.

- **Batching**

Batch small or alike tasks (that need the same mindset/skillset) together e.g. save all invoicing till Fridays. Use technology to assist with batched tasks – e.g. RSS readers for checking websites, network activity feeds etc.

- **Mix and match**

Including variety in your day will help maintain momentum and stave off fatigue. Match task selection to energy and mood – there's a time for being creative, and a time for housekeeping.



7. Mindfulness

A Productivity Ninja thinks just as much about the way in which they are doing their work, as they do about the work they have to do. They repeatedly reflect on and review systems, tools, habits and choices to ensure they are managing their energy, concentration and motivation in a sustainable way – and getting the best out of their Ninja efforts.

- **Know yourself**

Identify factors reducing your productivity and take action as needed. Know your vulnerabilities, and adapt your work environment, style and systems accordingly to compensate.

- **Lizard brain**

The amygdala is the primitive part of our brain that tries to keep us out of trouble. But as a side effect it can create resistance to change, fear and especially procrastination. The Ninja knows that sometimes bravery is needed.

- **Fix bad habits**

Home workers: start your morning like you used to when you commuted to an office – wake up properly, (exercise?), eat, wash etc., and then start work. Otherwise you'll get sucked in and still be in your pajamas at noon.

- **'Big Rocks' first**

The Ninja has strategy in mind ahead of tactics. Set out larger and more critical tasks first ('Big Rocks'). Smaller tasks (pebbles and sand) fit in around these (but leave capacity for new incoming stuff). <http://is.gd/oiH1Kh>



8. Preparedness

The Productivity Ninja knows that success in battle requires planning and preparation. We want to replace constant firefighting and confusion with a purposeful structure and plan. Use specific tools, habits and grounding routines to ensure that you can carry out and meet the demands of your busy schedule.

- **Proactive not reactive**

Get away from constantly firefighting, being helplessly caught up in the daily torrent, and wondering "Wow, where did the day go?" and "What did I actually achieve today?".

- **Set up the scaffolding**

Create structure to your week, month and quarter, especially for repeating tasks. Mark these in advance on planner/diary as "hard landscape", just like you would meetings (and treat them as such).

- **Weekly review**

Don't get caught in the trap of always being too busy to take stock and plan ahead. Make a weekly review (with a checklist) a central and regular part of your Ninja productivity approach – you'll reap the rewards many times over.

- **Sleeping lions**

Preparedness isn't just planning and organizing, but also resting and regrouping. Just working more and more hours only leads to rapidly diminishing returns. For the research to back this up see: <http://is.gd/MHV0ZG>



9. Human, not Superhero

Finally, a Productivity Ninja is not a superhero. It's not about perfection, but about being human and working to maximize our strengths and embracing what we can learn from our mistakes. We need to recognize our limits, and know that (counterintuitively) sometimes the most productive thing to do is **STOP** working and rest.

- **Get a have done list**

Concentrating on what you have done, rather than what's still left to do creates a sense of progress and is motivating. Tracking your achievements helps with future planning.

- **Fuel up, do your maintenance**

Attention, concentration and creativity are all serious brain work. Brains (and bodies) need looking after. Remember to attend to food, drink, fresh air, exercise, play, sleep.

- **You're only human**

Take breaks (lunch is not for wimps). Regularly working late into the night or at weekends isn't worth it – again, the law of diminishing returns. Rest, regroup and pick up the next day when refreshed.

- **Rest your brain, refresh your mojo**

Over connected? Try screen free weekends (<http://is.gd/yp6N33>), or if you dare ditch TV altogether? Get a hobby, play with the kids, feed your chickens, learn the piano – anything that completely stops you thinking about work.

- **Remember to stop**

Especially for home workers: create real and/or psychological divides between at work and not at work modes, e.g. different PCs (or different logins), 'mock commute' etc. And do stop.

- **Shut it down**

For as much time as you dare. Yes, I really did say that. For those of you who are worried the world might end if you did that, I promise it's quite safe. For a strident reminder that rest is good see: <http://is.gd/1YiX9w>



Your productivity action plan

Select at least 1 tip for each of the 9 Ninja Characteristics that will have an impact on your productivity and wellbeing. Decide how you'll implement them so they'll work for you. Review progress after 1 week, 2 weeks, 1 month, 3 months – perhaps with a work colleague who is also honing their Ninja skills. Which habits have stuck, which need more work?



Like what you've heard today?

- **Get the book**

Today we've given a small taste of the attitude, skills and tactics of the Productivity Ninja. If you're ready for more then we recommend Chief Ninja Graham Allcott's book "How to be a Productivity Ninja": <http://is.gd/YAVjg4>

- **Sign up for our monthly productivity tips mailer**

Each month we pick a particular theme, and assemble a digest of useful, actionable Ninja-style productivity tips. This is explicitly opt-in so use the sign up form on our website at www.thinkproductive.co.uk

- **Attend a public workshop**

We run public workshops in various cities around the UK. For more information on locations, topics and dates, please head to the Public Workshop page of our website: <http://www.thinkproductive.co.uk/public-workshops>

- **Bring our in-house workshops to your workplace**

Talk to us about bringing our range of productivity workshops in-house to your team and your workplace. As well as this session we provide: "Getting Your Inbox to Zero", "Email Etiquette", "Stress Less, Achieve More", "Making Meetings Magic" and individual coaching options. Full details of each can be found on our website.

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