

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

WORK LESS, ACCOMPLISH MORE

Nano Tools for Leaders® are fast, effective leadership tools that you can learn and start using in less than 15 minutes — with the potential to significantly impact your success as a leader and the engagement and productivity of the people you lead.

Contributors: Margaret H. Greenberg and Senia Maymin, PhD, executive coaches and authors of *Profit from the Positive: Proven Leadership Strategies to Boost Productivity and Transform Your Business*.

THE GOAL:

Improve your productivity by working less.

NANOTOOL:

Working smarter, not harder, is not a new insight, but we've lost touch with the ability to put it into practice. In the mid-1920s, Henry Ford reduced his factories' workweek from six days to five, and 48 hours to 40, after discovering that productivity returns steadily diminished after eight hours of work a day for five days a week. Almost a century later, a United Nations study reveals that 85.8 percent of American males and 66.5 percent of females work more than 40 hours per week. Americans work 137 more hours per year than Japanese workers, 260 more hours per year than British workers, and 499 more hours per year than French workers, according to the International Labor Organization.

What are we getting for all of those hours? A study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that greater productivity isn't a benefit. Greeks are some of the most hardworking in the OECD, working 2,000 hours a year on average. Germans work about 1,400 hours each year — but their productivity is about 70% higher. Instead of resulting in greater output, longer hours lead to stress, a significant cause of both physical and mental health issues.

Improving productivity, then, doesn't mean putting in more time at work. This "productivity paradox" is countered by research that shows overwhelmingly that scheduling downtime actually makes you more productive. In addition to taking short breaks, there are three other steps you can take to increase productivity while working fewer hours.

ACTION STEPS:

Being more productive while working less is a mindset that can be learned. Specifically, you can:

- 1. Replace "just do it" with "just plan it."** The Nike mantra "just do it" is often mistakenly believed to be the path to greater productivity. Yet although you may have a bias for action that is highly valued, creating a brief plan before diving into work actually makes you more productive. Carve out just 10 or 15 minutes at the start of your workday to plan it.
- 2. Trick yourself into getting started.** We often procrastinate because a project seems overwhelming and inertia sets in. Instead, use the Zeigarnik Effect to your advantage. Start a project, but don't finish it in one day. One small step on the project is all you need. The next morning, you will have something ready to jump start your day. It could



be as simple as writing an email in the afternoon, but leaving it to reread and edit before sending the following morning. Or planning for a potentially uncomfortable meeting but not acting on it until the next day. Or writing the first paragraph of the quarterly report you've been putting off. The effect, named for psychology researcher Bluma Zeigarnik, works by having you jump into a project knowing that you don't need to complete it right away.

- 3. Set habits, not just goals.** Although goals are worthwhile, you'll achieve some of them faster if you turn them into habits and routines. Think of habits as outsourcing yourself: your more routine, less complex, and repeatable tasks can be easier to get through if you do them at the same time and in the same place. Check emails at four designated times a day, set aside ten minutes before you leave the office to clean off your desk, or choose a time and place for working on a big project in short, manageable chunks. For major goals, it can help to set aside the first hour of your day — before checking your email — to work on the project. This habit will ensure that you get the most important things accomplished before the daily deluge flows in.

HOW COMPANIES USE IT:

Here are three ways companies are helping their employees to resolve the productivity paradox by making it easier for them to reap the benefits of downtime.

- Sony Pictures Entertainment boosts employee productivity by teaching them how to avoid burnout. The company has trained employees at all levels in ways to renew their energy by cultivating specific habits or rituals such as disconnecting from email during certain periods of the day to focus on an important project or task, taking a mid-afternoon walk, and going to the company gym during work hours. Among employees who participated in the training, 88 percent believe it has made them more productive and focused, and 84 percent believe they are better able to manage the demands of their jobs. Although you cannot attribute company performance solely to this training, Sony's leaders believe it has contributed to their continued strong performance despite difficult economic conditions.
- Aetna chairman and CEO Mark Bertolini implemented an optional mindfulness and yoga program at the company, and over 3500 employees have participated since 2010. The third largest health insurer now offers this program as part of its well-being service to help its customers lower healthcare costs. A mindful employee is not only more productive, but also healthier.
- Groups in several North American offices of the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) were asked to cut back work from five days a week to four for a research study. The consultants were required to take "predictable time off" and were not allowed to check email or voice mail at certain hours. As a result, the consultants streamlined their work and accomplished as much or more in four days than they did in five. Communication between consultants improved, and some clients reported better customer service.

See the Additional Resources below for more examples and research findings.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- [*Profit from the Positive: Proven Leadership Strategies to Boost Productivity and Transform Your Business*](#), Margaret H. Greenberg and Senia Maymin, PhD (McGraw-Hill, 2013). Provides an actionable roadmap for increasing productivity, collaboration, and profitability using simple yet powerful tools from positive psychology.
- [*Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*](#), Martin Seligman (Atria Books, 2012). The founder of the modern positive psychology movement and University of Pennsylvania professor identifies five factors that can help individuals thrive: positive emotion, engagement with what one is doing, good relationships, a sense of meaning, and a sense of accomplishment.

- *Scrum: The Art of Doing Twice the Work in Half the Time*, Jeff Sutherland (Crown Business, 2014). Offers a roadmap for improving the productivity of any team, upending traditional project management models.

ABOUT NANO TOOLS:

Nano Tools for Leaders® was conceived and developed by Deb Giffen, MCC, director of Custom Programs at Wharton Executive Education. *Nano Tools for Leaders®* is a collaboration between joint sponsors Wharton Executive Education and Wharton's Center for Leadership and Change Management. This collaboration is led by Professors Michael Useem and John Paul MacDuffie.