

# Be Your Most Productive Self

Make tough decisions in the morning, and break your day into quadrants.

BY DONNA MCGEORGE

**T**he alarm goes off, so you jump out of bed and head toward the bathroom. You splash some water on your face and stare at your wardrobe, trying to think of what to wear to the office. Wait—there’s no time for that; you’re going to miss your train.

When you sit down on your commute, you open your laptop and are horrified to see 100-plus new emails in your inbox. During the next 30 minutes, you manage to delete 27 newsletters, reject 11 meeting invites, and respond in detail to just two emails. It’s only 8:30 a.m., but your brain is already fried.

By the time you get to the office, you are exhausted—not to mention 10 minutes late to your first meeting.

## Groundhog Day

Unfortunately, scenarios like that one above are all too common for many people. We start our day on the wrong foot, stressed and rushing for the door, only to turn on our computers and be inundated with requests from other people and actions that take us away from our most valuable tasks of the day.

We’re stuck in a vicious cycle: starting the day tired, doing the best we can to get through to the afternoon, working late, going home grumpy, and then waking up the next morning to start the routine all over again.

The problem is that traditional time management theories haven’t kept pace with modern workplace demands. They focus too much on the *what* of our work, requiring us to list all the tasks we need to do and then prioritize them according to what is most urgent and important. But what if all your work is urgent and important?

## There’s time for that

We need to focus less on what we do and more on when we do it.

Specific tasks we currently complete when we first start the workday drag us and our productivity down for the entire day: checking our inbox, tidying our workspace, responding to “urgent” queries, or discussing the football scores from the weekend or the latest exit from our favorite reality show. Sure, those things still hold a place in the day, but is first thing in the morning the best time to do them?

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End-of-Day Rituals

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Identify your key priorities for the following day.


## Factors Influencing How Well People Work

Three key factors affect how an individual works and how well they work—no matter the time of day: rest, fuel, and movement.


**Rest.** The human body requires sleep for survival. It's why we literally go unconscious for up to eight hours in a 24-hour cycle. Evolution has created sleep as the optimal way for our bodies to restore and regenerate before having to be active again for the remaining 16 or so hours of the day. People who categorize themselves as poor sleepers tend to be less motivated and have difficulty focusing, remembering things, and making good decisions.

**Fuel.** Think of feeding your body like you're adding logs to a fire. When you put in something like hardwood (complex carbs), the fire burns for hours before you need to add more logs. On the other hand, if you put in a bunch of flimsy paper and cardboard (refined sugars), you'll have to keep feeding the fire more and more to keep it going.

**Movement.** A Bristol University study asked 200 employees to assess themselves on a day with exercise and a day without. On days when people exercised, they found their levels of concentration were higher by 21 percent and motivation to work was higher by 41 percent. Before you start groaning about having to go to the gym, the best form of exercise for increased productivity is low impact, such as yoga, dancing, or moderate walking.



## Set yourself up to be more efficient, effective, and happy.



What if I told you there are particular tasks that, if done first thing, would add value to your role and to your whole day? The human mind and body have innate cycles that can help or hinder your productivity at certain times of the day.



### Work smarter

By making some small changes to your habits at specific times of the day, you can set yourself up to be more efficient, effective, and happy. The adage of working smarter, not harder, is what is at play here. Become successful by adopting a different way of working throughout your day: Make conscious choices about what you need to do and then decide the best time to do those tasks.

Many productivity problems come about because you are operating on autopilot: You don't think about what, when, or even why you are doing things—you just do them in the order in which the tasks came to you or how they're written on your to-do list.

Like the default settings of a computer program, the human brain also has ingrained settings that it operates with: If you're hungry, you eat; if you're afraid, you run. Those settings are designed to keep you alive.

Yet you have developed some of your less-instinctive settings over years of learning, repetition, and reward: In the morning, you check email; in the afternoon, you hold the department meeting. It can be difficult to change settings that feel like they are hardwired. Even though you may be programmed to do things at a certain time because of habit, you are doing yourself a disservice.

By learning how your body clock works, you start to understand that there are optimal times for better brain performance at work. That means you can schedule the types of tasks you do to make the best use of your most productive time. It takes understanding, discipline, and practice, but you can do it. More importantly, there is good reason to do it.



### Design your best day

There are optimum times for doing certain types of work—for example, responding to emails, conducting meetings, or devising next year's strategy.

Have you ever noticed that as the day wears on, your patience (and fuse) in meetings or discussions becomes shorter and more erratic? At 3 p.m., when someone asks you to decide between option A or option B—something that could cost the company millions



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Protect time on your calendar for key items, preferably first thing.



3

Review your meetings and obligations for the next day, and make sure you are good to go.

of dollars if you're wrong—you've probably sighed and said something like, "Let's just go with option A and move on."

When you leave important decisions until the afternoon, your cognitive alertness is impaired, and you'll more likely be reactive because you're feeling tired from having worked all day. Therefore, it's much better to defer making an important decision to the morning. At worst, you have given yourself some space to validate your initial thought. At best, you have had a chance to sleep on it and—with a fresh mind—may choose a different or better option.

Our circadian rhythms (or body clock) are designed for high levels of mental alertness intensity in the morning and physical dexterity in the afternoon. Knowledge workers in particular must be conscious of what they are using that highly valuable time for. Let's take a deeper look at what that may look like.

**Your first two hours of the workday.** Use this time for tasks that directly and positively affect your work and results and require a lot of attention, energy, and focus. That is your most important work, such as preparing for critical presentations, reviewing detailed reports, and replying to emails that require a considered and thoughtful response.

**The second block of time, your next two hours.** Schedule tasks that require you to be on your game and maybe in the service of others. Have you ever had someone ask if they

could pick your brain on something or bounce an idea off you? This is the time for that. It's also a good time for meetings.

**The third two-hour block of your day.** Plan to spend this time on tasks that you can almost do in your sleep because they are easy and the stakes are low. This is the best time to process the high-volume, low-quality emails you receive.

**The final two-hour block.** Use this time for tasks that don't require a lot of heavy lifting brain-wise but will have a positive impact on your world: planning, maintenance, and preparation. Reserve it for anything for which your future self will thank you.

### **To every season**

Individuals often squander their time with multitasking or busywork or are driven by a sense of urgency and the level of importance other people give to a task. We rarely stop to think: "Is this what I should be working on? Is now the right time for me to be working on that?"

Stop the vicious cycle of overwhelm, tiredness, and stalled productivity, and start working with your natural rhythms and demands. Use the two-hour framework and work out the best times for you to do the right work at the right time. Pay attention to the clock in your body, not the one on the wall.

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Make some decisions now so you don't have to make them first thing, such as what you will wear, meal planning, and travel arrangements.

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Get a good night's sleep.

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