More Streamlined, Less Stress — 4 Essential Processes for Greater Efficiency

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Every CEO is familiar with the saying, “Time is money,” and the philosophy that wasted time impacts the bottom line. With this in mind, business owners often strive for maximum efficiency, evaluating every wasted minute, every redundant task and every distraction that hinders growth.

The problem is that most strategies that aim to increase efficiency neglect one critical aspect: that people are humans, not robots.

The best productivity approach doesn’t simply optimize time and speed — it works with human nature. That is, our natural tendencies to get distracted, be forgetful and feel unmotivated.

Time blocking and automation tools help, but they aren’t the full solution. Here are some human-focused processes to increase your productivity that actually work.

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1. Set your goalposts

Tasks can feel demotivating if they aren’t tied to a tangible, meaningful outcome. Setting goalposts for what you’re looking to accomplish, in what timeframe and for what reason will help

you stay motivated to achieve the end result.

Think about it: Your New Year's resolution to work out more likely wasn't driven by a desire to clock in at the gym but to achieve your goal weight, feel healthier, reduce pain, etc. Similarly, the work tasks on your to-do list likely emerged with the thought of achieving specific goals in your business.

To improve productivity, tie each of your activities to a desired outcome, whether that's generating new business, reducing overhead costs, saving time, improving product quality, etc. Then, any task that isn't tied to a tangible outcome may be a viable candidate to be cut from your list of priorities.

2. Create a distraction-free zone

There are many reputable studies that analyze the correlation between work environment and productivity. For instance, a study conducted by researcher Miikka Palvalin found that changes in work environment can negatively affect one's ability to focus and be productive.

On the flip side, a distraction-free workspace helps facilitate focus, productivity and better time management.

Now, whether you work from home, at remote locations or at an office, there are likely a few ways that you create a distraction-free zone. Even small adjustments – like minimizing clutter, controlling noise or setting boundaries with coworkers and/or family – can have a substantial impact on your ability to perform at your best.

It can be helpful to create a designated work area (especially if working from home) to signal to your brain that it's time to focus. Opting for an ergonomically sound setup can help mitigate physical discomfort, which can also be distracting. Also, some studies suggest that plants and natural lighting

can improve mood and focus!

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3. Get honest about repetitive time wasters

A significant source of stress for entrepreneurs is not using time efficiently and then running out of time to complete the tasks that matter. We're all vulnerable to getting caught up in "busy work" – repetitive, time-wasting tasks that add little value and distract us from our bigger goals.

The key to overcoming this challenge is recognizing where your time is being wasted and taking deliberate steps to eliminate, delegate or automate those tasks.

First, do an "audit" of your time, tracking your daily activities and how long they take to complete. I like using a tool like Toggl to log my time throughout the day. You'll be surprised how much time is spent on miscellaneous tasks, unnecessary meetings and checking emails.

Next, take stock of which tasks are consuming the most time, whether these tasks move you closer to your goals (or not) and whether they are better off being delegated or automated.

This ties into the Pareto Principle, wherein you identify the 20% of tasks that drive 80% of your results – and then cut out the rest. If a task doesn't require your direct involvement or input, it may be delegated to someone else on your team, batched and automated or eliminated completely.

4. Don't overcomplicate, automate

Today's business owners have more tools than we know what to do with when it comes to streamlining business processes, automating tasks and freeing up time. While it may require

some ramp-up time to put the system in place, doing so will save you loads of time in the future.

If you're not a process person, I highly recommend tasking someone on your team (or hiring a consultant) to build the system for you. It's well worth the investment.

You first need to determine what can (and should be) automated. Map out your current workflows, identifying the tasks required, the tools or team members required and any inefficiencies in the process. It can be helpful to create a visual flowchart of each process in your organization.

For example, say you want to streamline the lead intake process, which previously relied on the manual effort of your sales team (to call, record and follow up with leads). A new, automated process might look like:

- A visitor lands on your website and fills out a contact form
- This triggers an automatic lead capture in your CRM
- The system assigns a lead score and segments the prospect
- This sends a personalized follow-up email
- Your sales team is notified if the lead meets high-value criteria

In this way, you all but eliminate the need for manual effort by you or your team, all lead information is effectively captured, and no opportunities slip through the cracks.

There are many ways to reduce stress and increase efficiency in your business, just so long as you identify the gaps, set realistic goals and depend on the strength of your team. This gives you more time to focus on the work that matters and

strike that enviable work-life balance.

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