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Pomodoro Technique for time management

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Pomodoro Technique for time management

Being tethered to your desk for long hours actually reduces your productivity, while regular short breaks keep you focused and energized.

I live in an old house with an old basement— old enough to have a room half filled with dirt where coal used to be kept for the furnace. My husband is afraid to go down to the basement, so I have a perfect excuse for letting it get cluttered – I'm the only one who uses it. However, a couple of times a year it begins to annoy even me and I have to clean it out. The only way I can avoid procrastination and focus on this task is to break it down. I make a commitment to go to the basement for 30 minutes each evening, and eventually it all gets cleaned up and organized. So, I was interested when I heard about the Pomodoro Technique since it's built on 25-minute chunks of time.

In my non-basement work, I've been experimenting with this old/new method of time management. I find it helps me get more done when I'm out of the classroom and at my desk all day.

Based on our Brain

A 2008 University of Illinois study showed that being tethered to your desk for long hours actually reduces your productivity, while regular short breaks keep you focused and energized.

I notice the truth of this study when I have my

"desk days" at work. I lack focus. I procrastinate. Psychologists tell us that procrastination is a mechanism for helping us cope with anxiety. There are generally three sources of procrastination: (1) pressured by others, you are doing something against your will, (2) you feel pressured to be perfect, or (3) you are afraid of making a mistake.

The problem with procrastination is that it feels like a reward. It gives us a temporary relief from stress. To counter this, the Pomodoro Technique gives a reward for focused work. After completing a 25-minute pomodoro period, there is a small break. This break gives our brains small moments of offline time which in turn allows new logical insights. Doing work in a pattern like this – 25 minutes of focused work followed by a five-minute break – provides a productive rhythm throughout the day.

Plan-Do-Check-Act

The Pomodoro Technique is also supported by the Deming-Shewhart Cycle (aka Plan-Do-Check-Act). If you are unfamiliar with this cycle, it's crucial to Lean, Continuous Improvement and Agile. You Plan by defining goals and the processes needed to reach them. You Do the new processes. You Check

(measure) steps of new processes against the expected outcomes. If the new process is an improvement, you Act by putting it permanently into the process.

You need three pieces of paper, a pencil and a timer

The three pieces of paper are titled (1) To Do Today (2) Activity Inventory (or backlog to the Agile practitioners) and (3) Records where you keep the metrics that you're currently tracking. Keep it low tech – paper and pencil – when you start. You can adapt parts of the technique later.

Francesco Cirillo in the 1980s developed the Pomodoro Technique when he was in college in order to keep his mind focused on his studies. "Pomodoro" is Italian for tomato – Cirillo used his kitchen timer that was shaped like a tomato. So find a timer. I downloaded a $2 app for my iPhone that even has the little tomatoes on it – so cute!

Write out your Activity Inventory – all the things that you need to get done in the future. Each day, move tasks to the To Do Today list and estimate how many pomodori (25 minute segments) it will take to complete them. Start your timer and work on the most important one. When the timer goes off, take a three- to five-minute break. Walk away from your work area, get a cup of coffee, gaze out the window. If you have finished the task, check it off and move on to the next one.

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Never switch tasks during one pomodoro period. If you finish before the timer rings, use that time to look over what you've done – refine it, repeat what you've learned, note new conclusions.

At the end of four pomodori, take a longer (15-20 minute) break.

Continuous Improvement

A big part of Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle is to continuously improve. As you complete your daily list, also input on to your Records sheet. What you choose to measure will depend on what you're trying to improve, for example:

1. How many pomodori you get done in one day
2. How many and what kind of interruptions happen during your day.
3. How good you are at estimating how many pomodori it takes to accomplish a task

So at the end of the day, gather your metric and adjust your Activity Inventory. Returning phone calls or emails take up their own daily pomodori.

I've found this a very effective method to help me concentrate on the task at hand. You can certainly make adjustments, but try it as I've described it for a couple of weeks before you tweak it. Now, I've got to go down to my basement. But only for one pomodoro!

Sources
Pomodoro Technique Illustrated by Staffan Nöteberg
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http://baomee.info/pdf/technique/1.pdf

About the author

BETH GIESBRECHT, BS Education, Project Management Professional (PMP), has more than 30 years of curriculum development, consulting, and computer technology expertise with a special emphasis in project management and data-bases. She excels at instructional design, involving students through simulations, and customizing training to fit customer needs. Giesbrecht has successfully directed companies through various phases of the project management process. She currently teaches Project Management, Business Analysis and Leadership courses for the Nebraska Business Development Center.

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