

The Multitasking Myth: How to get everything done with the Pomodoro Technique

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I have a confession to make: I suck at multitasking, but I do it all the time. I'm the guy you see with 20 webpages open along with two email inboxes, twitter and facebook. You can guess how much actual work gets done when I'm behaving that way. Yeah, very little. So it was an amazing find for me when my friend Derek Sivers turned me on to the Pomodoro Technique. The concept is simple:

Set a timer. Focus on one task for 25 minutes without interruption

Take a 5 minute break

You've just completed 1 "pomodoro"

Repeat steps 1-2. When you've completed 4 pomodoros, take a 25 minute break.

That's it. Of course, the full Pomodoro technique adds some other interesting twists- like if a pomodoro gets interrupted, it doesn't count- you have to start the timer over again. But the core system works really well without all the bells and whistles.

There are lots of reasons why this works, but here is why I find it to be so powerful: I've tried *Getting Things Done*. I've tried using Gmail Tasks. I've tried writing down everything I have to do in a notebook. Here's the problem: These systems are great to document what you have to get done, but they don't help you do the work.

With the Pomodoro Technique, you can document what you need to get done any way you want to. Stickies on your monitor? good. Piece of scrap paper? fine. Fancy to-do software on your iPhone? great.

The Pomodoro Technique is like the duct tape of productivity systems. It's not the prettiest, but it works almost everywhere. Most of the "productivity" techniques out there are overly complex, because they rely on access to a special tool or software, a particular notebook or template, or because they have lots of fancy jargon, symbols and codes.

My problem with these systems is that I don't stick with them. The learning curve becomes a barrier to entry, and I give up before I really master it. Worse, I spend time that I should be spending on work on learning how to use a system that is supposed to help me get work done. I think that's called a paradox.

If you use a mechanical egg timer like they recommend, the sound of the timer winding up and the tick tick tick as it counts down becomes not just a comforting sound, but it literally gets you mentally into "productivity mode".

If you hear the same sound every time you are about to be super productive and focused, just hearing the sound puts you right back into the state next time. I know this is the way we train pets and sea animals at the zoo, but personally I have no problems playing mind games with myself if they lead to a positive outcome.

So, back to my multitasking issue, err...disorder. If there is one place that literally breeds multitasking, it is my email inbox. Between responding to people, clicking on links to articles, social profiles, websites, and chat, checking email is usually the launching point for a good ol' unproductive multitasking session.

But not anymore. Now, I tell myself: "Self, you have one Pomodoro (or 2 or 3 depending on how many emails I have) to respond to EVERYTHING in this inbox". Yes, I get to inbox zero regularly. And you can too.

I challenge you to give the Pomodoro Technique a try. If you don't have a true egg timer, there are several web-based Pomodoro timers, plus various smartphone apps. Be wary though, some of these apps can be way more complex than you need. Stick with simplicity and you'll be more productive. I like to use my eggtimer when I'm home, and a very simple web-based timer (like **focusbooster**) when I'm not.