The Productivity Guide

For A Computer Geek

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Tux Geek

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Why an eBook about Productivity?

Every day of our lives, sometimes even on weekends, we have to work. And because many of us can't keep up with the increasingly faster pace of life, our ability to interact with other people and spend time with family and friends is greatly reduced. This, unfortunately, can lead to big problems, and it is extremely important to learn how to maintain a balance between work and everything else.

And how can you keep both sides happy? Being productive means you finish your work faster and get more time for yourself, family, friends and hobbies. It means you'll be relaxed and ready for a new day. The gratification of a job well done is also not to be forgotten, and your boss will surely notice the improvement.

In this eBook we're going to cover some tips for becoming more productive in this new world - where distractions await at every computer or portable device. Everything in this eBook is from my own experience, balancing time allocated for school work, a part-time job as a writer, my girlfriend and my other friends. Believe me; it's extremely easy to fall into extremes.

Concentration

The internet, while it's a huge resource for information, and a great productivity tool which enables collaboration between peers around the world or cubicle, it's an incredibly huge time waster. And believe it or not, everyone is plagued by this, from system administrators surfing the web aimlessly using StumbleUpon, to programmers reading Wired stories and photographers playing with Google's image matching website.

Even people who love their jobs sometimes find it necessary to focus on non-job-related activities. However, most employers either don't know or choose to ignore that a good portion of the day is wasted. Recent research shows that HR professionals assume that employees will waste around 1 hour each day. Employees admitted to wasting around two hours a day.

It's hard to decide who is affected most by this behavior. On one hand, the employer pays for zero productivity work hours. On the other hand the employee might get the boot if he continues wasting time. In the grand scheme of things, it is believed that the economy loses around 11 billion pounds every year in the United Kingdom.

If you need to get work done, turn off the internet. If you know you can't resist opening the browser, even for a short flash game, remove the Ethernet cable or disconnect from the wireless network. Sometimes, all it takes me to get started writing is just switching off the computer and working with a pen and a piece of paper, writing what I think; without the ability to go fact checking some other thing or an IM window popping up.

- *Turn off the TV, radio, iPod, Xbox, blinking lights and hide the PSP. If you need to take a break, don't play Max Payne and instead go to the window or outside and grab some fresh air for 5 minutes.*

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Productivity Mistakes

You wouldn't believe how many mistakes you can make when it comes to productivity. Some of them can turn to full-blown catastrophes. Like you, I encounter these types of situations daily, be it at school, at home or working as a part-time writer.

The worst mistake you can make is losing your temper with your peers, and especially people higher in the hierarchy. Even if the demand sounds absurd, inacceptable or impossible to accomplish, you shouldn't have a nervous breakdown. Instead take out a piece of paper and create a logical argument that stands by your position. Afterwards, present it to same peer, or if that doesn't work, directly to the boss. If that doesn't work, there's always plan B: do whatever you can and present the result. Doing nothing or starting screaming is not going to help anyone. If you're expected to produce 500 words out of a 5 word sentence – just because – sit down in front of the computer, pour some coffee, brainstorm ideas and don't stop until you're at least at 400 words. Analyze, deconstruct, give examples, launch your own opinion, and even digress on something interesting. That's what I do.
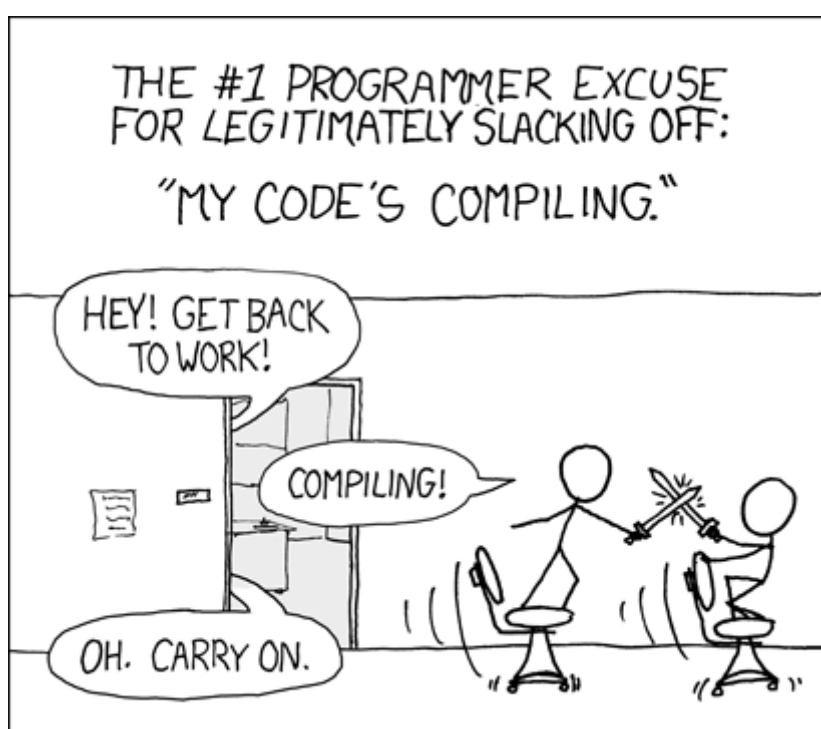

Image courtesy of XKCD [http://xkcd.com/303/]

The second worst thing you can do is waste time. There's always something you can do – watching leafs move doesn't count. If you're done with a project and still have time on the clock, start on the next one, read a book or ask your boss to leave you to go home. Time is something you can't get back, so why would you want to waste it? Clean your desk, help a colleague, have a conversation with that girl in the next cubicle – just don't watch old Simpson episodes on Hulu.

Which brings us to the biggest productivity killer ever invented – the Internet. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the list goes on and on. The number of places you can visit on the internet is ever increasing and the tools that help you waste time, always updated.

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StumbleUpon, Delicious, Digg, Reddit, all want your attention and energy. You should have the strength within you to abstain.

 If you can't use the *Force*, like Luke Skywalker, I recommend you use the following instructions to edit your **hosts** file. By adding a simple line to this file you will be effectively unable to access the website you desire while still being able to access anything else relevant to your research. When you want access back – just delete the line.

- Navigate to **%SystemRoot%\system32\drivers\etc\.** For other operating systems, locations of the hosts file are available on [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hosts_file].
- Open the file names **hosts** using WordPad.
- For example, add to the end of the document "**127.0.0.1 facebook.com**". This will redirect any requests for Facebook back to the loopback adapter – your own computer instead of the server. A blank page will appear instead of Facebook.
- Save and click OK on the UAC prompt.

Another thing you might want to try if you check your email every 30 seconds is the Email Addict add-on available for Gmail. Click on the green icon on the top right of your window and scroll down to find it.
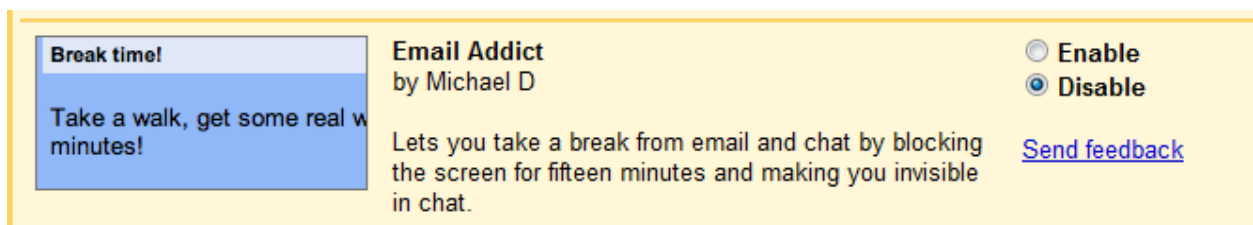
There's also a great add-on for Firefox that "blocks those time-wasting sites that can suck the life out of your working day. All you need to do is specify which sites to block and when to block them." Read more about LeechBlock here [http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/5-tools-to-track-how-you-spend-time-online].

The above link point to our article on "5 Tools to Track How Much Time you Waste while Online". In the same post there is another useful addon to monitor your internet usage, it's called MeeTimer. It will also warn you when you try to open a new tab or link.

Finally there a program called ManicTime that keeps detailed stats on everything you do when working on your computer. It can help you understand where does your time go, how much of it is wasted and what is that distracting you most. Check out ManicTime [http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/manage-and-monitor-your-application-usage-with-manictime].

If you're looking for an add-on to monitor your internet usage, check out MeeTimer from [http://getmeetimer.com]. It will also warn you when you try to open a new tab or link.

Lastly, it's of outmost importance to have a balance between work, family and fun, and the best way to achieve that is to separate the activities accordingly. Doing math while listening to Nightwish doesn't work, and adding a beer to that equation is equally disastrous. Instead, organize your morning so you finish work in time, work and then enjoy some quality time with friends.

Coffee: Good or Bad?

Is going for coffee affecting productivity? Some say it does, citing the time it takes to run out of the office and get back as well as the cost – not exactly pennies for Starbucks. It can also interrupt your work flow - killing any momentum you had before you left.

Photo credit: Wikipedia Commons. Licensed under Copyleft. [http://en.wikipedia.org/…]

On the other hand, clearing your mind for a bit can help you see what you are missing and ultimately help you find a solution. The trip for coffee can also be a routine, which is okay if you're used to getting to work after.

There are conflicting studies regarding the health impact of coffee and its relation to productivity. Studies funded by mineral water companies say it increases anxiety and because caffeine is a diuretic, it increases the number of times you have to go to the bathroom – leaving your desk.

Caffeine is a stimulant, having the effect of temporarily warding off drowsiness and restoring alertness. Various beverages containing caffeine, such as coffee, tea, soft drinks and energy drinks are very popular. Caffeine is the world's most widely consumed psychoactive substance but unlike many other psychoactive substances it is legal and unregulated in nearly all jurisdictions. In North America, 90% of adults consume caffeine daily. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration lists caffeine as a "Multiple Purpose Generally Recognized as Safe Food Substance".

From my own experience I can say that coffee helps me concentrate. After I drink my mug, I'm ready to start working. I actually can't sit and do nothing after I drink my coffee – I feel like I need to do something. However, drinking more than 3 cups has a disastrous effect. I lose focus, concentration and get easily irritated by every mistake I make. Balance, like in all things, is the key.

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Improve your typing skills

For many, touch typing (typing without looking at the keys) is a skill learned long ago on an IBM Selectric or Apple IIe, but its importance is often overlooked. Many of us, though, still employ the self-taught, "hunt-and-peck" approach, finding keys using our own unique methods. While this approach might get the job done, it doesn't achieve the same speed or ease of typing that touch typing offers. Knowing how to touch type can free your mind to focus on the writing task at hand, rather than hunting for keys, and lets you compose emails, reports, and memos more quickly. Learning to touch type can greatly increase your productivity.

Photo credit: opie. [http://www.flickr.com...]

 A typing speed of 40-60 words per minute (wpm), about 3-4 times faster than an average handwriting speed, is a common workplace standard. Some employers hiring for positions that involve a good deal of typing require even higher speeds. Accuracy, too, is important in speedy and effective typing—the fewer mistakes you make, the less time you have to spend correcting your work.

Check out following articles reviewing different websites and programs helping you to practice your typing skills and learn touch typing.

Learn Touch Typing (both web and desktop apps)

* TypingWeb [http://www.makeuseof.com/dir/typingweb-learn-quick-typing-online]
* Keybr [http://www.makeuseof.com/dir/keybr-learn-typing]
* Bruce's Touch Typing Wizard [http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/learn-touch-typing]

Practice Touch Typing

* 10 Fast Fingers [http://www.makeuseof.com/dir/10fastfingers-test-fast-type]
* TypeRacer [http://www.makeuseof.com/dir/typeracer-improve-typing-skills]
* Typing Games [http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/want-to-type-faster-no-touch-typing-courses]

Setting Up Your Workspace

It is extremely important to avoid awkward postures and position your body comfortably. Not only can this improve your overall productivity, it may help you avoid various diseases caused by extended use of computers (MSDs).

Photo credit: lactose [http://www.flickr.com/...]

While behind a desk you should consider following these rules:

- Use a chair that supports your lower back.
- Place your keyboard and mouse at elbow level.
- Adjust your work surface and chair height to assume a comfortable position.
- Position the top of the screen at eye level.
- Use a footrest if your feet aren't comfortable directly on the floor.

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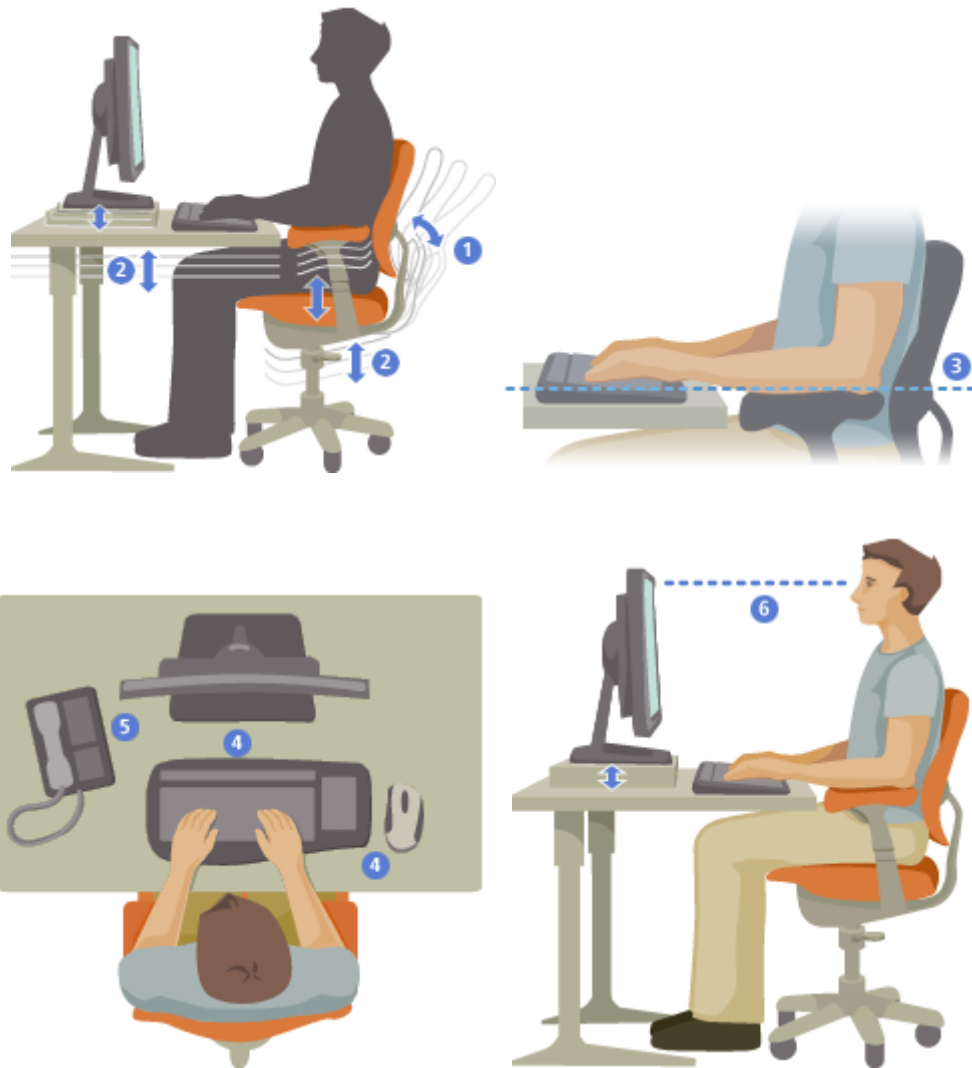
Having a good place to work can play a huge role in increasing productivity. There are many types of people, some like to have everything on the desk, others prefer everything tucked neatly out of sight. I, for one, prefer having lot of things on my desk. Most of the things I need to work with are in close reach this way.

Messy desks can provide inspiration – especially for writers – but they can also be distracting for a programmer. He might only want a coffee mug and a stress ball. Whatever you end up deciding with, make sure the environment in which you are working is comfortable and suits your personal tastes.

Scheduling

In order to get things done I've found that to-do lists and schedules –even self-imposed – can be an invaluable resource. On a piece of paper, notebook or sticky note, write everything you need to accomplish. Next to each item, set an arbitrary date at which you want to finish that assignment. If the first time all your tasks are jumbled, you can now copy the tasks onto another piece of paper in order.
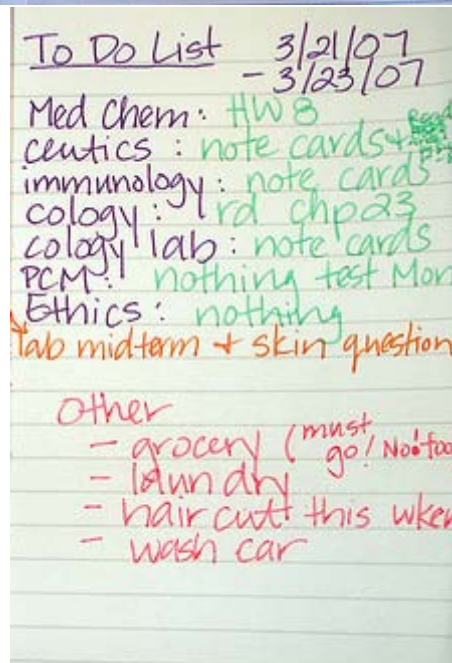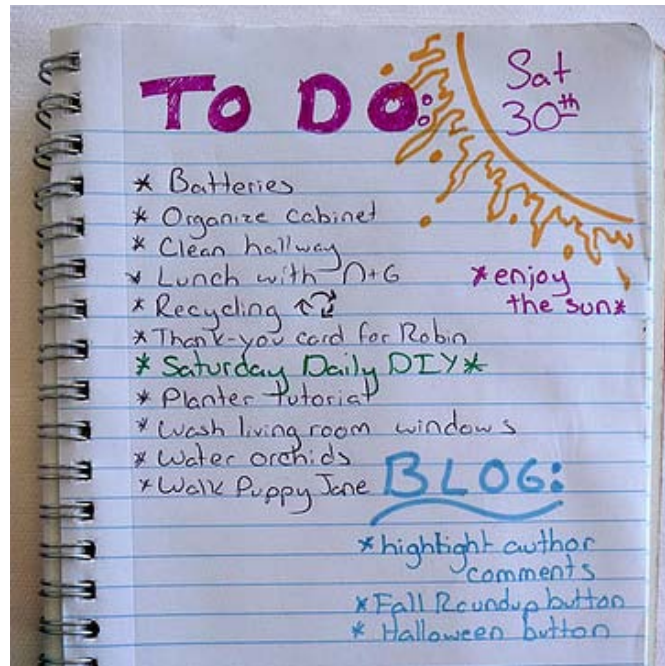
Photo credit: Only One Thing [http://www.flickr.com/...] and Awayawayaway [http://www.flickr.com/...]

Keep that schedule on the desk, input it into Outlook or Google Calendar, but try to stick to it no matter what. Imagine you are your boss and you must complete the task at the specified

time. This method works miracles – even if I'm tired after a day of work I still make time to accomplish the other tasks.

I highly recommend you to check out **PocketMod** [http://www.makeuseof.com/dir/pocketmod/]. Pocketmod is a handy application that can be used to convert plain A4-sized paper into all-purpose, wallet-sized, disposable booklets (organizers). Just run the application, specify what you want on each booklet page, print it out, and fold it into a booklet.

You should also try to schedule all the important tasks in the morning. Programming, writing, anything that's essential should be done before one o'clock. Many studies have shown that human metabolism – a process that determines how 'fresh' you are – slows down considerably after this point. In the morning you have the best chance to complete your task faster and better. Schedule non-essential, repetitive or otherwise non-intellectually intensive tasks in the afternoon.
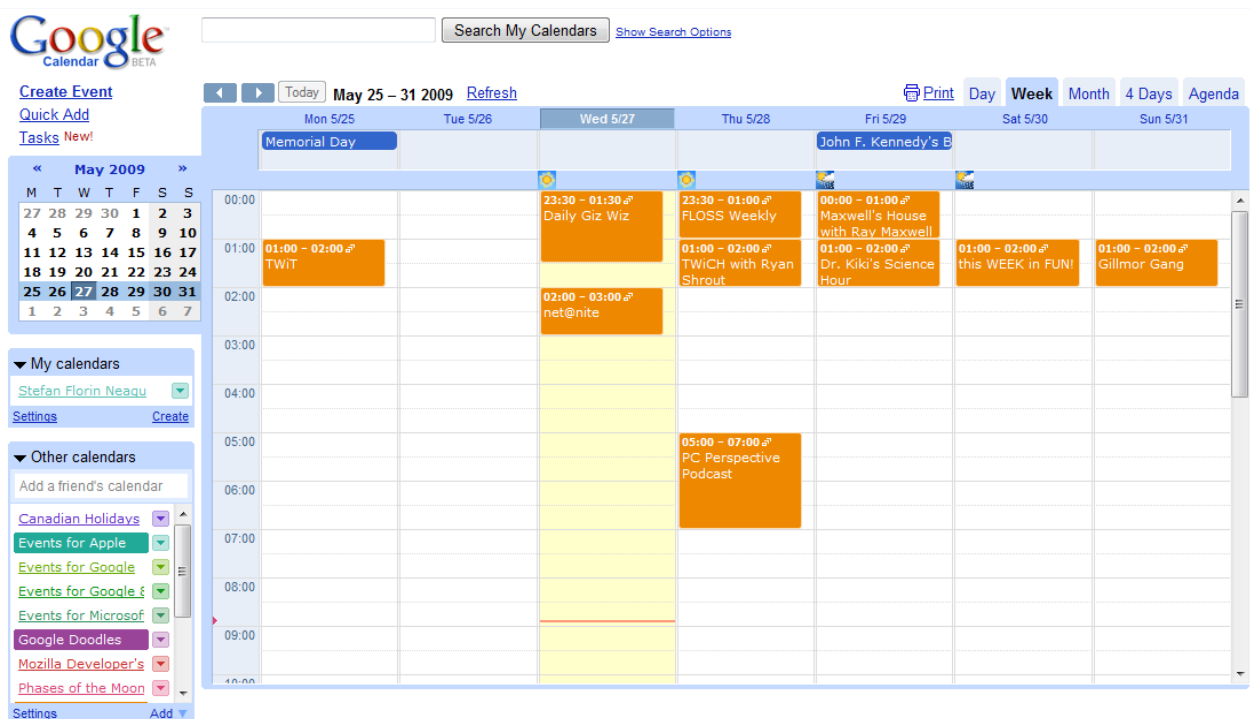
Using Google Calendar is very easy and has many advantages:

- You've got it with you anywhere you go; it's online and completely free unlike Outlook.
- Expandable; you won't run out of paper and ink.
- Subscribe to other people's calendars and share appointments.
- Multiple viewing possibilities. Syncs with Outlook and many other calendaring applications. Can also export in the standard .ics format.
- Reminders via SMS and email for free.

For simpler alternatives, see MakeUseOf articles related to scheduling, organization and reminders [http://www.makeuseof.com/tags/reminder]

Motivation

Motivation – the force that drives us everyday – that makes us want to be alive and work is a complicated beast. While most psychologists study for years, we've got to get the essential knowledge in just a couple of paragraphs. Let's start with a canonical definition:

- The psychological feature that arouses an organism to action toward a desired goal; the reason for the action; that which gives purpose.
- The reason or reasons for engaging in a particular behavior, especially human behavior as studied in philosophy, conflict, economics, psychology, and neuropsychology.

Photo credit: [http://www.flickr.com/...] A picture is worth a thousand words – an excellent piece of art.

You need motivation in order to succeed. And even if you're doing a boring job at the moment, think that if you're excellent at what you do your boss will eventually promote you. The key here is to never lose hope. Everyone goes through rough patches in life, just keep it together. Everyone should have goals, which provide an excellent motivator. Even if they seem incredible hard to reach, they serve to keep you on track, focused, doing your best.

Like every journalist on this planet I'd love to work for the New York Times, Wall Street Journal or be an evangelist for FSFE (Free Software Foundation). And every day I wake up and start writing. Every day I try to improve my style and approach to topics.

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Essential Tools

To finish up, this is what you'll find on me – or where you'll find me on – a lot of the time, some essential tools that help me in my productivity.

- Small hard-back notebook which goes everywhere with me, pen (use the above mentioned PocketMod to create wallet sized booklets).
- Sticky notes – I've got them everywhere – on my desk, on my computer and even in my notebook.
- Shortcuts, Shortcuts and Shortcuts. You should really learn keyboard shortcuts for your Operating System (Windows or Mac OS X) and favorite programs. You can get yourself a cheat sheet from here [http://www.makeuseof.com/makeuseof-downloads]
- Google Calendar, Gmail, iGoogle and Google Reader. Google Calendar syncs with Outlook on my computer which syncs to the calendar application on the iPod Touch. See [http://www.google.com/support/calendar/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=89955]

Recommended Reading

MakeUseOf [http://www.makeuseof.com]

LifeHacker [http://www.lifehacker.com]

ZenHabits [http://www.zenhabits.net]

"Productivity is never an accident. It is always the result of a commitment to excellence, intelligent planning and focused effort." – Paul J. Meyer

Credit: Microsoft Hardware, Wikipedia, thinkexist.com, Princeton.edu

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