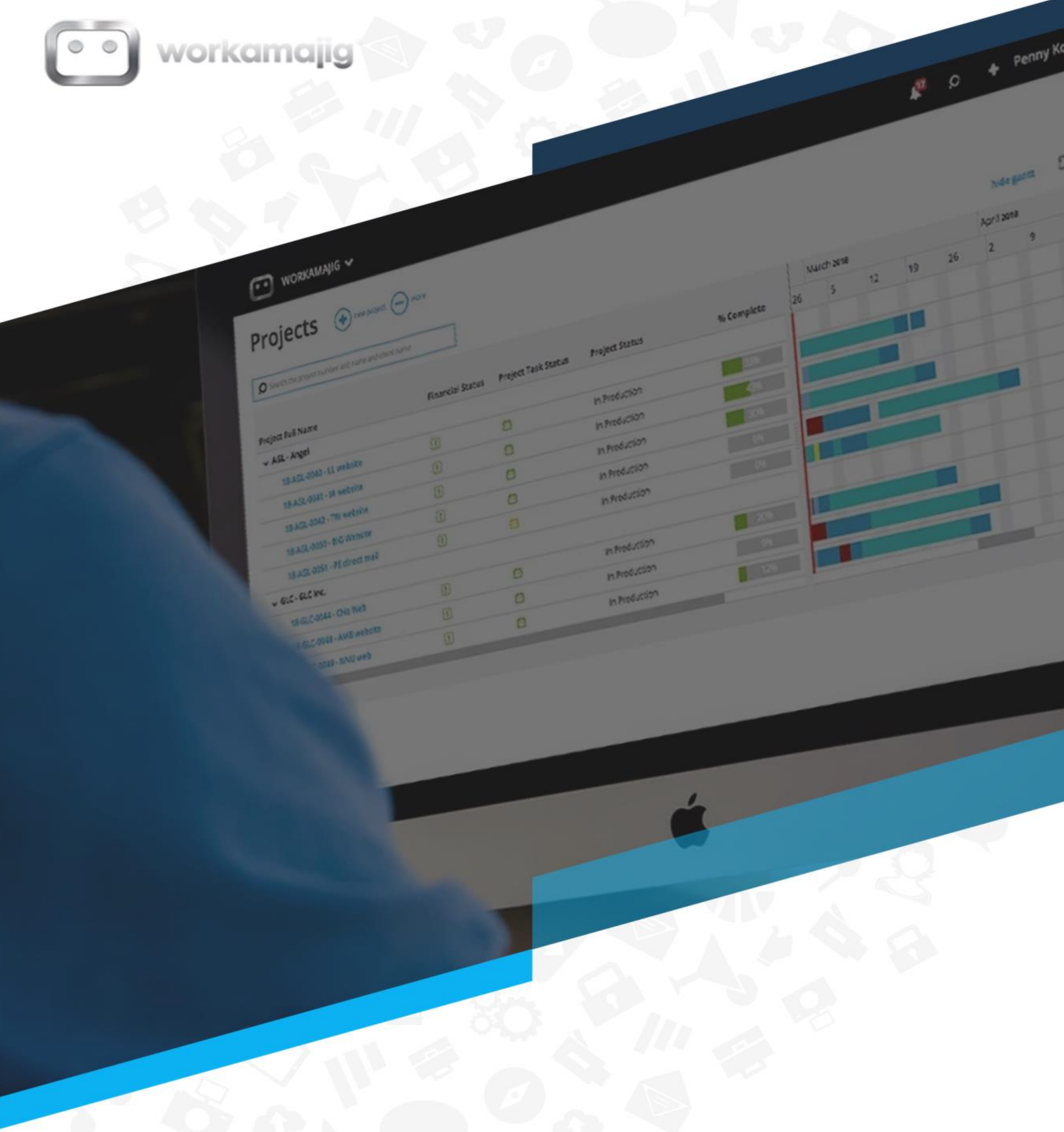
workamajig



Essential Productivity Hacks for Project Managers

Tips, tricks, and tactics to work faster, manage better, and win more projects.

Productivity: The Secret to Project Management Success

As a project manager, you have a tough job. Between managing tasks, juggling emails, and handling your own duties, you have your hands full with work.

Naturally, productivity is a key goal for project managers. An hour here, another hour there and you suddenly find yourself with the breathing room to do your job better (and reduce stress).

While there is no silver bullet to improve your productivity, there are a number of tools, tactics, and tips you can follow to run your projects better.

This eBook will share some of these tactics – or “hacks” – to help you tackle the challenges of project management.

About Workamajig

Workamajig is a project management software designed for creative teams. Workamajig helps you run better creative projects by consolidating your creative teams and giving you the insight you need to make better project management decisions.

Project Management Hacks

Every experienced project manager has at least a few "hacks" to help him get his/her work done faster. These hacks are often learned through trial and error. Sometimes, they're passed on from mentors and seniors to their younger colleagues.

In this section, we've compiled some of these hacks to help you ace your project management responsibilities.

1. Use Green-Yellow-Red Color Codes to Visualize Priorities

So much of a project manager's work depends on making sense of information. Delayed tasks, on-schedule projects, busy resources - you have to keep track of them all and take appropriate steps.

One way to make your job easier is to use simple color codes to visualize work priorities. The Green-Yellow-Red (GYR) code is both easy to understand and widely used.

As per this code:

- Red signifies 'alert', i.e. items that are behind estimates.
- Yellow signifies 'watch-out', i.e. items that are at a high risk of falling behind estimates.
- Green signifies 'good', i.e. items that are on track to meet expectations.

You can use the GYR code for virtually anything - tracking tasks, budgets, etc. If the project is in danger of overshooting its budget, you'd mark it in red. If a task is on-track, you'd color it green.

GYR makes project management easier by forcing you to focus on high-priority items (i.e. red and yellow items). It also emphasizes the positives in the project (i.e. green items).

As Anthony Tjan writes in *Harvard Business Review*:

> *"We are in an era where we are overwhelmed with information and underwhelmed with insight. GYR encourages a discipline of high-quality communications defined by simplicity, relevancy, frequency, and transparency — the path to insight"*

2. Limit Status Reports to One Page

Creating project status reports is something you'll do countless times in your project management career.

However, project managers far too often make the mistake of creating status reports that are *too detailed*. You might think you're helping stakeholders by giving them as much information as they need.

In reality, you're adding to their information overload by burdening them with data they neither need nor want.

A solution to this problem is to limit all status reports to a single page.

This artificial limit forces brevity. It also compels you to use more visual methods to represent data. If you know you're limited by space, you'll find creative ways to say what you have to say.

Try the following:

- Use graphs, charts and color coded lists (like the GYR code) to represent tasks and priorities.

- Follow an 'inverted pyramid' model where you share the most important information at the top of the report, the least important at the bottom.

3. Turn the Project Plan into a Presentation

The project plan is among the most "sacred" of all project management documents. But its importance in the PM hierarchy often means that project managers are afraid to tinker with it.

As a result, many managers end up creating project plans that are too detailed and cumbersome for busy stakeholders. It's good to have every idea on paper, but do you really expect senior executives to read a 25-page PDF?

One way to make everyone's life easier is to turn the project plan into a presentation.

This has several advantages:

- Executives are usually very comfortable with presentations.
- Presentations are, by default, visual. This makes the plan easier to follow.
- You can upload presentation to Slideshare to make sharing easier.

Creating a presentation is just one approach. The goal should be to use a format that both you and your stakeholders understand. This can be a presentation, a mindmap, or even a video.

An informal document people actually *want* to read is better than a formal document no one wants to follow.

4. Use the RACI Matrix in All Projects

One of the biggest reasons for derailed projects and delayed tasks is poor insight and communication within the project team. If team members don't know who owns a task, who has been consulted on it, and who all are already working on it, it can lead to conflicts and miscommunication.

Solve this problem by using a RACI matrix in all your projects.

The RACI matrix identifies the following four roles for every task or activity:

- **Responsible**: The person responsible for getting the work done. This is usually one person whose job is to ensure that the work gets completed on time and as per specifications.

- **Accountable**: The person accountable for ensuring successful completion of the work. The person responsible (above) reports to this person to get approval.

- **Consulted**: All the people who have been or are being consulted for the work. Anyone you have two-way communication with regarding the project would fall under this category.

- **Informed**: All the people who have been or will be informed about the status of the task. These are usually people you have one-way communication with, i.e. you inform them about the project, but they do not offer their own input.

RACI Matrix	Functional Manager(s)	Scrum Master	Product Owner	Scrum Team	Project Manager
Ensure consistency of Scrum practices across teams	I	C	C	I	R/A
Provide vision and goal for the product	I	I	R/A	I	I
Provide resources with the right skills and mind-set	R/A	I	I	C/I	C
Prioritize and manage the product backlog	I	F	R/A	C	F
Remove impediments	R	R	R/A	R	R
Manage the release train	I	I	C	C	R/A
Make sure Scrum practices are used and improved within the team	R	R/A	C	R	F
Create, apply, and continuously improve the definition of done	C	F	R	R/A	F
Report on time to management	I	F	R/A	I	F
Define acceptance criteria	I	F	R/A	C	F
Write acceptance tests	I	F	C	R/A	F
Ensure quality of the product	R	R	R/A	R	R
Manage risks	C	C	R/A	C	R
Approve user stories (user stories meet the acceptance criteria)	I	F	R/A	C	F
Decide on release date and goal	I	I	R/A	I	I

An example of a RACI matrix

To use the RACI matrix:

1. Identify all the roles involved in the project (such as 'Project Sponsor', 'Project Analyst', etc.)

2. Make a list of all tasks involved in the project.

3. Assign each specific designation from the above four (RACI) for each task to each project role.

5. Automate Regular Check-ins

What's the easiest way to make team members feel more involved and improve their performance?

Regular check-ins.

A wide-ranging study by Deloitte found that when managers checked-in regularly with employees, they reported better work-satisfaction and performance.

Another study of remote workers feel "left out" if their managers don't check in with them regularly.

Both these studies reached the same conclusion: the frequency of check-ins isn't important. What's important is their consistency. Team members need to know that you will check-in with them daily/weekly/bi-weekly/monthly. This helps them feel involved. It also ensures that they stay on top of tasks knowing that someone is watching.

Normally, you'd do these via daily/weekly stand-ups. But since we're all about productivity in this guide, we want to automate as much as possible.

The easiest way to do this is to use a project management software with automated check-ins. Workamajig, for example, supports daily/weekly team reviews and check-ins. Once you've set them up, the assigned team members will get an email or notification at the scheduled time to check-in.

6. Use Mind Maps Instead of Templates to Capture Ideas

Project managers swear by their project management templates. While these work wonderfully well, they're not ideal for every situation. Templates usually have three problems:

- They need specialized (and bloated) software such as Excel, Word or PowerPoint.
- Using the software to edit the template requires technical skills.

- Templates are often text heavy and lack visual punch

For documents such as work breakdown structures, project plans, etc., a mind map will perform better than a template. Mind maps are visual, easy to create, and help you organize complex workflows.

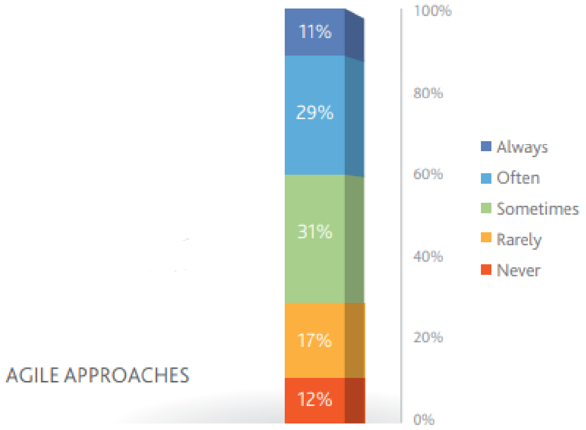
This makes them perfect for project and communication plans. Use them to visualize hierarchies and relationships between tasks and stakeholders.Here are some useful mind mapping tools:

- Coggle.it
- XMind
- Bubbl.us
- Mindomo

7. Adopt Agile Methodologies

Although you have lots of project management methodologies to choose from, there is an overwhelming trend towards small, incremental builds using Agile.

In PMI's 2017 Pulse of the Profession survey, for example, 71% of respondents said that they'd adopted Agile approaches in their projects. More importantly, 55% of top performers used Agile versus only 24% of under-performers.



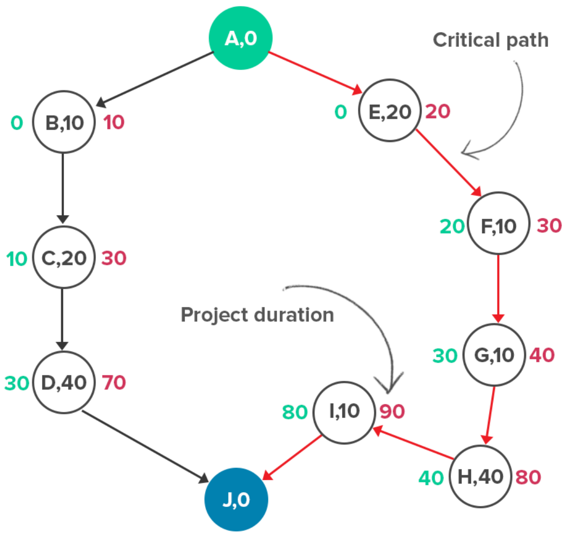
Agile adoption has skyrocketed in the last few years

The Agile approach requires a radically different approach to project management. Instead of upfront planning, it demands rapid execution and review. This approach is inherently faster and gives you room to accommodate changes easily.

There are productivity benefits as well since Agile doesn't need in-depth planning. You can get started much faster and focus on the execution. Since the product gets into the stakeholdes' hands earlier, you also get better, and faster feedback.

8. Use the Critical Path Method for Personal Tasks

Few ideas hold more sway in project management than the [critical path method](). By calculating the longest sequence of activities in a project, you get a better idea of task deadlines and priorities.



The critical path method in a project management setting

But the critical path method isn't just for project tasks; it is equally useful for managing your own work - personal and professional.

For example, there are tasks in your work and personal life that a) don't require outside resources, and b) are inflexible. Major deadlines, birthdays, etc. would fall under this category.

There are also tasks that are both flexible and require outside resources. Setting up an interview date, fixing a fitness class would be examples of this category.

By using the critical path method, you can organize your work day in a way that the most important (and inflexible) tasks take up the most important hours in your day.

Schedule any time left over for flexible tasks.

For tasks that require outside resources, set up a shared calendar that aligns with the resource's schedule. Pencil them in when you are enough room in your calendar outside the critical tasks.

Leave any time left over for flexible tasks that are entirely under your control, such as personal projects.

Essentially, you're mapping the "critical path" of your daily tasks. This can help you schedule your work much better.

9. Pre-Populate Templates

If you manage enough projects, you'll find that you repeat a lot of data across templates.

Instead of entering all this data from scratch, you can adopt this productivity hack:

- Ask the enterprise PMO to create boilerplate templates
- Ask department PMOs to pre-populate these boilerplate templates for their department

This ensures that the enterprise PMO and department PMOs are in sync. It also gives department PMOs an "approved" template for each project. Project managers can use these pre-populated templates to get a head start on every new project.

But what if you're running a smaller agency and don't have a PMO?

In that case, you can:

- Review final templates for all successfully completed projects
- Make a note of all information that was repeated across templates
- Pre-populate templates with this information to save time

10. Automate All Procedural Tasks

There are a lot of activities that demand your attention - scheduling meetings, emailing stakeholders, delegating tasks, etc.

But there are also a lot of activities that are procedural in nature. Think deadline reminders, status updates, check-ins, etc. These don't require any input from you; they're just a way to collect data.

Automating all these tasks will save you a ton of time.

For example, you can automatically email meeting participants the meeting's agenda instead of doing it manually. Or you can instruct your project management tool to notify team members when a task is assigned to them or when a deadline is looming.

Automation should be your top priority if you want to maximize productivity. The more procedural tasks you can automate, the more time you'll have for work that actually needs your attention.

11. Cut Down on Non-Essential Meetings

Before you schedule any meeting, ask yourself: is this meeting truly necessary? Could I accomplish the meeting's goals over a more convenient communication channel?

Much of a project manager's time is spent (or rather, wasted) in irrelevant and unnecessary meetings. If you want to get the status of a project, you don't always need a meeting; an automated email query will suffice.

Similarly, if you want to get a couple of stakeholders to leave their comments on a new design, you don't have to organize a meeting. You can use an online collaboration tool to get their feedback easily.

Try the following system:

- Automate all meetings that involve gathering information (such as status updates, task reminders, etc.)

- Use online collaboration tools in place of meetings that involve gathering feedback.
- Use online chat/video calling tools in place of short meetings (such as daily/weekly stand-ups).

Under this system, you'd hold a meeting only if you have at least 30-60 minutes of work on the agenda. For everything else, stick to online tools.

12. Use the 'Top 3 Things' Framework

As a project manager, there are about a gazillion things you can focus your attention on each day. What you choose to prioritize will have a big impact on the project's success.

The 'Top 3 Things' framework gives you a system for prioritizing your attention and measuring your effectiveness.

Here's how it works:

- At the end of each day, make a list of all tasks that need your attention tomorrow.
- At the beginning of the next day, pick the top 3 things that will help you push the project forward the most.
- Delegate the rest of the tasks or move them to the next day.
- At the end of each day, ask yourself: "did I move the project forward today?". A 'yes' or 'no' answer signifies whether the day was a success or not.

This system works because of its simplicity. Instead of complicated tracking tools, it uses a simple 'yes/no' system to track your effectiveness. By cutting down your workload into the top 3 things, it also helps you focus on the most important tasks.

Communication Hacks

As veteran project managers like to say, project management is 90% communication. Being more productive at this crucial part of your job will have a profound effect on your efficiency and effectiveness.

Let's look at some communication hacks to help you maximize your communication productivity.

1. Use "Canned Responses" in Gmail

Did you know that there's a productivity superweapon sitting right in your Gmail inbox?

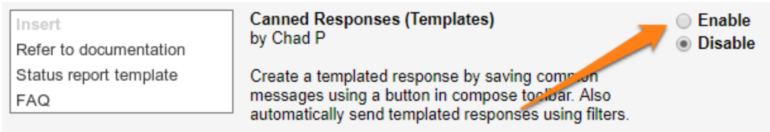
This superweapon is called "Canned Responses" and it can save you hours each month.

Canned responses are essentially email templates. You can create as many of these templates as you want. Instead of writing emails from scratch, you can insert one of these templates into the email to save time.

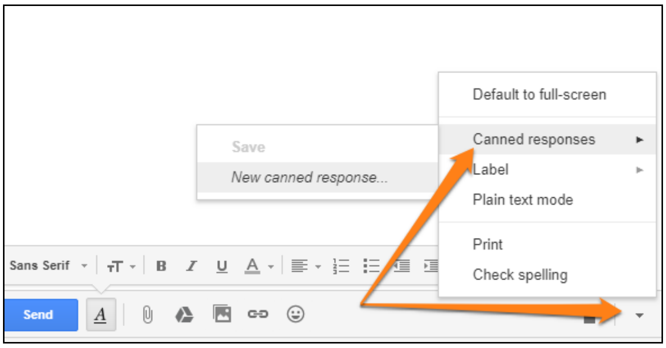
Think of any email that you send out on a regular basis - status updates, check-ins, etc. Turning them into templates will save you the trouble of writing them from scratch each time.

To use Canned Responses, log into your Gmail account and go to *Settings > Labs*.

Enable "Canned Responses" from the menu.



Now when you compose a new email, you'll see an option for *'Canned Responses'* in the options menu in the bottom right.



Use this to save an email as a template. Select a canned response the next time you have to send a similar email.

2. Use Boomerang to Automate Email Follow-ups

Sent out an email to a stakeholder but forgot to follow-up? Need to send a recurring status report email to team members?

[Boomerang](), a Gmail plugin, can do all this and more. For project managers dealing with a ton of email (which is practically *every* project manager), it's a serious time saver.

Boomerang returns emails to your inbox (i.e. it "boomerangs" them). You can instruct it to return emails:

- After a specific number of days
- In case there is no reply/open/click
- On a recurring basis

There are plenty of use cases for project managers. You can boomerang emails to remind you to follow-up, send recurring emails to team members, make sure that stakeholders open important emails, etc.

Most project managers rely on spreadsheets and their memories to do this; Boomerang makes it easy, faster, and more efficient.

3. Limit Issues to 3 Minutes

Have you ever been in a meeting that seemed to go on and on?

Of course you have. Meetings overshooting their scheduled time is one of the biggest wastes of time for project managers.

One way to resolve this is to schedule 3 minutes for each issue in any status meeting. This forces you to find solutions quickly instead of wasting time in unfruitful discussions.

Here's a blueprint to use this approach:

- Sort issues by priority. Only include top priority issues that can fit within scheduled meeting time. For instance, if you have 20 issues but the meeting time is only 30 minutes, you should fit in 10 of the highest priority issues.
- When tackling an issue, quickly describe its current status, in-progress actions, and what help you need to resolve it. This lays the foundation of the discussion to follow.
- Use a timer to keep every issue to 3 minutes. If you exceed this time limit, discuss it after the meeting instead of letting the meeting overrun.

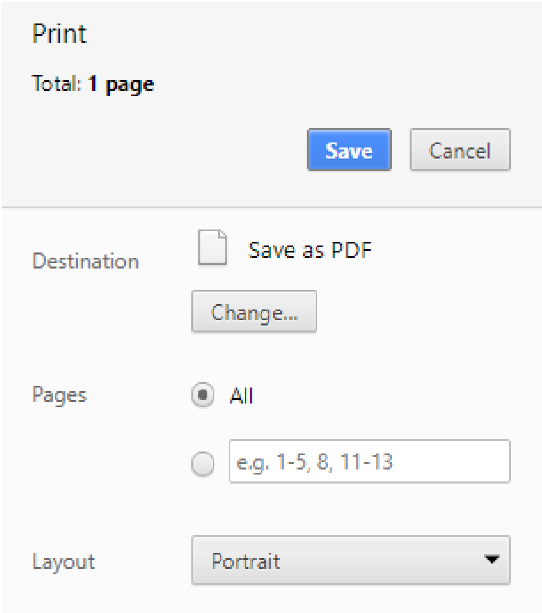
4. Print Important Emails to PDF

Starring, archiving, labeling - these are all great tactics for saving important emails. But despite your best efforts, you can still lose emails in the inbox.

Solve this problem by taking your emails out of the inbox altogether.

The easiest way to do this is to save the email as a PDF.

Hit the 'Print' button in your email tool and select "Save as PDF" to do this.



Saving important emails as PDFs can help you find them later

This helps in two ways:

- Saved PDFs are searchable and can be uploaded to a shared document repository.
- You can create a folder with all important emails in a project and share them as PDFs with the entire team.

5. Use SMART Communication Goals

One of the biggest reasons for the failure of communication plans is that they're too subjective. "Better communication" is a good goal to have, but unless you can define what makes communication "better", you won't have a way to measure your success.

Solve this problem by using the SMART framework for your communication goals as well. That is, your goals should be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-related.

For example, instead of "better communication", you could measure communication success by:

- Calculating the average number of emails it takes to resolve issues
- Calculating average time it takes to respond to queries

By quantifying communication, you make it easier to measure your effectiveness.

6. Follow the "Four Emails, Then Call" Rule

The easiest way to lost track of issues - and your sanity - is to keep replying to unending email threads. Email is simply unsuited for multiple threads.

Solve this problem by following the "Four Emails, Then Call" rule.

As per this rule, as soon as any email thread hits over 4 messages, it's better to take the communication elsewhere - a phone call, a Skype chat, or a Slack thread.

You'd have a chain of communication as follows:

- Original email
- Response to original email
- Clarification of issue
- Response to clarification
- Call/Skype/Chat

Personal Productivity Hacks

As a project manager, your day is filled with fighting distractions and managing dozens of tasks. A few personal productivity habits can help you stay sane and get work done.

We'll step away from project management-focused tactics to some personal productivity hacks in this section.

1. Manage Notifications to Reduce Distractions

Disruptions hurt your productivity.

You already know this, of course. But the magnitude of their impact will surprise you.

According to a University of California-Irvine study, workers on average take 23 minutes and 15 seconds to get back to work after a disruption.

Further, such disruptions cause workers to be work faster to make up for lost time. This makes them more stressed and liable to make mistakes.

You can't always stop colleagues from interrupting your work. But you can control how notifications, pop-ups, and other digital distractions affect you.

- Switch off Slack notifications by going into 'Do Not Disturb' mode when you're working on critical tasks.
- Switch off email notifications on your smartphone.

- Switch to 'Do Not Disturb' setting on your phone. On Android, you can tap the 'Settings' icon to allow high priority calls to come through.

2. Limit How Often You Check Your Email

How often do you check your email?

If it's more than 3 times a day, you're likely hurting your productivity, not 'keeping on top of things'.

A study at the University of British Columbia found that people who checked their emails as often as they could were more stressed and felt less in control over their day.

The reason is simple: switching from one task (such as 'checking email') to another (such as 'delegating work') has a cognitive load. The brain takes a while to adjust to the new task. If you switch between tasks too frequently, you can essentially 'overload' your brain.

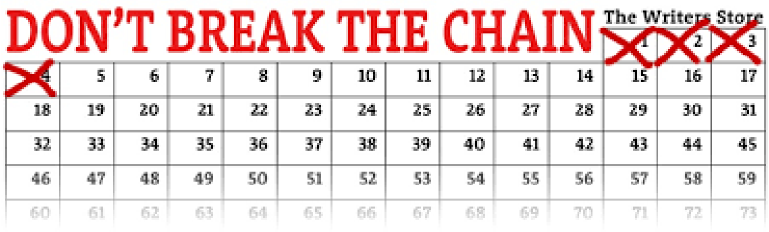
Solve this problem by limiting how often you check your email.

- Have a fixed schedule for checking into your inbox (say, at the start of the day, before lunch, and at the end of the day).
- Let everyone on your team know your inbox check-in times so they know when to expect a response.
- Include your email check-in times in your email signature.

3. Use the "Seinfeld Method" to Develop Habits

Besides his eponymous TV show, Jerry Seinfeld has another contribution to modern culture: the 'Seinfeld Method' of building habits.

This method involves creating a monthly calendar for every habit you want to develop. If you practice the habit on a particular day, cross it off on the calendar. Once you have a few string of crosses, you feel compelled to carry on the chain.



Creating "chains" of productive days can help you build better habits

There are several apps that will help you do this as well:

- [Momentum.cc]() (iOS and OS X)
- [Chains.cc]() (iOS and web)
- [HabitTracker]() (Android)

4. Use the GTD Method to Organize Your Tasks

If you've ever read anything about productivity, the name 'David Allen' would be familiar to you.

David Allen created the ever-popular 'Getting Things Done' productivity method. This is a system for organizing your to-dos in a way that makes work more manageable.

The core tenets of this system are:

- **Capture** all the information you need to plan your work in a dedicated notebook or app.
- **Clarify** what you need to do by breaking it down into smaller, more manageable tasks.
- **Prioritize** each task. Skip low-priority tasks altogether and delegate anything you can't immediately handle.
- **Review** your to-do list regularly and find tasks that you have the energy and time to do at any particular moment.

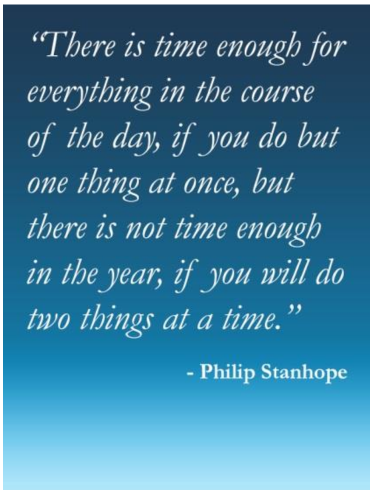
You can read the 'Getting Things Done' book for more information. For a shorter primer, check out LifeHacker's 101 guide.

5. Stop Multi-Tasking

What's the best thing you can do for your productivity right now?

Doing just one thing at a time.

There is an overwhelming amount of evidence to show that multitasking is a myth. Despite its dominance in our cultural discourse, scientific studies show that the brain is incapable of doing two things simultaneously.



In one study at the Vanderbilt University, brain fMRI scans shows that when confronted with multiple tasks, the brain runs into a "response selection bottleneck". Instead of working on a task, the brain spends energy deciding the priority of each task and organizing it into a serial order.

Switching from one task to another causes the brain to rearrange its priorities. The end result is a "task switching penalty" as the brain adjusts to the new task.

If you do this over and over again, you essentially tax your brain under a massive cognitive load. This affects your productivity negatively.

The prescription to this problem is simple: stop multi-tasking. Instead, adopt the practice of "single-tasking" - devote your complete attention to a single task.

6. Take Scheduled Breaks

The more you work, the more you'll accomplish, right?

New scientific findings challenge this conventional wisdom.

A recent study published in the journal *Cognition* found that brief diversions can "vastly improve" cognition.

The brain, the study concluded, is like a muscle that needs time to "relax" and recover from sustained periods of focus.The easiest way to follow this advice is to include breaks into your work schedule.

There is no fixed prescription for how long each break should be; every person and task is different. You can, however, try the following:

- Work for 25 minutes, followed by a 5-minute break (i.e. the 'Pomodoro Technique')
- Work for 50 minutes, followed by a 10-minute break (i.e. 'Double Pomodoro')
- Work in 15-minute bursts of intense activity followed by short, 2-3 minute breaks.
- Work for 90 minutes followed by a 30-minute break (especially for creative work).

Think of the work you're doing before choosing a break schedule. Anything that requires you to get deeply involved with a task - such as writing - should have longer but less frequent breaks.

7. Automate Common Tasks Through IFTTT and Zapier

Want to save all your starred emails into a separate spreadsheet? Or send all saved bookmarks to Dropbox?

Instead of doing these manually, save time by letting IFTTT and Zapier do it for you.

IFTTT (If This Then That) is a "bridge" app that connects two services (such as Google Sheets and Gmail) together. You can use IFTTT "recipes" to automatically transfer data from one service to another.

For example, you can use instruct IFTTT to sync your Amazon Alexa to-dos with your iOS reminders. Or you can create a Spotify playlist with all YouTube videos you like.

IFTTT can automate simple tasks and save you hours each month

Zapier works exactly the same way, except it focuses on more complex tasks and business services.

Combined, Zapier and IFTTT can be a massive time saver - both for your work and for your personal tasks.

8. Track Your Productivity Automatically with RescueTime

How many hours did you spend last week on YouTube? Was your productivity higher or lower than the average person's yesterday?

RescueTime is a free app that helps you find answers to questions like these.

RescueTime installs as an app on your laptop and tracks your computer usage. It logs every website you visit and app you open, as well as how much time you spend on each. You can classify different websites as "productive" or "unproductive".

This gives you unprecedented insight into your computer usage. If you've been slacking off on Reddit, RescueTime will show you. If your productivity has been lower than your peers, you'll know that as well.

As Peter Drucker said

> *"If you can measure it, you can manage it"*

RescueTime makes the first part - measurement - much easier.

9. Follow the "4Ds Rule" To Deal With Email

There are few things more stressful than the sight of an inbox filled with unread emails. One study even concluded that people who checked their inboxes frequently reported much higher stress than their peers.

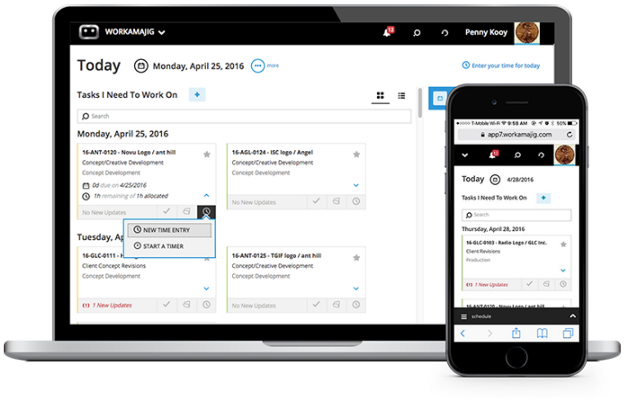
A time-tested tactic to deal with bulky inboxes is to use the '4D' rule:

- **Delete** unimportant emails
- **Do** emails that need under 2 minutes of your time
- **Delegate** emails that can be tackled by someone else
- **Defer** emails that don't need your immediate attention or need more time to respond to.

Boost Your Productivity with Workamajig

All these productivity hacks can help you be in the top 5% of project managers. But you still need a robust project management system to keep track of everything.

Workamajig was built from the ground up for large creative teams.



Whether you're a small agency or a large corporation managing an internal creative team, you can benefit from Workamajig's creative-friendly project management features.

Click the button below to request a demo today.

Request a Demo