Human Processes

Keith Harrison-Broninski
CTO Role Modellers (www.rolemodellers.com)

khb@rolemodellers.com

Hyper-productive Working Practices

I've written before about *Hyper-productivity* for BP Trends, for example in the eponymously titled Column of May 2008, where I discussed efficiency and effectiveness, and described a number of techniques that have been shown on multiple occasions to double knowledge worker productivity.

Regular readers will know of my belief in the principles of **Human Interaction Management** (HIM),[i] that go further than time management practices such as **Getting Things Done** (GTD)[ii] by eliminating the need to manually organize your responsibilities and tasks. A Human Interaction Management System such as HumanEdj groups all your current, past and future work into structured, cross-boundary Plans that remove the chaos from normal workplace collaboration.

However, in this Column I'd like to step away from HIM and present some recommendations that you can use whether or not you also use HIM, GTD, etc. The advice below applies however you work, and whatever you work on.

The Cost of Interruption

First, an example scenario that will be familiar to most readers.

You've got a fixed number of days to create a document (or other deliverable) for a client, using techniques and technology with which you are not fully familiar. No-one is available full-time to hand-hold, so you'll need to work solo for much of the time.

With a learning challenge of this kind, the brain muscles will hurt for the first few days. It will require both concentration and staying power to get through.

An hour or so into day 1, you get a call from a colleague asking for advice on an area in which you are expert. What a relief! Back on familiar territory. You gladly help him or her out for, say, 20 minutes, then return to the original task. But now it's back to square 1, since you've lost your focus, your concentration, and even your place in the work.

Effectively, that 20 minute chat will undo most of the morning's work so far. And then you get another call...

This is why Basex found that knowledge workers lose 28% of their working time to interruptions (see below) - and the most senior people lose the most time, since more people depend on them and ask them for advice.

Given here are 2 simple methods that allow you to regain your lost productivity and more. I wouldn't be surprised to find that readers of this column who follow the advice below became over twice as productive as usual.

Reflective Practice

Reflective practice is a critical factor in efficient and effective knowledge work:

"The cultivation of the capacity to reflect in action (while doing something) and on action (after you have done it) has become an important feature of professional training programmes in many disciplines"[iii]

A simple technique to ensure reflective practice is to communicate twice daily with your manager(s) as follows.

Each day on starting work, send each manager by email a summary of what you hope to achieve that day.

Each day on completing work, send each manager by email a summary of:
1)   What you achieved that day;
2)   Any problems you encountered;
3)   Where you need help from the manager.

These communications are not a means of demonstrating hours worked. Rather they are a simple means of ensuring that you deliver an improved service to your manager(s) by thinking about *how you are doing the work*, as opposed to only thinking about the work itself.

Avoidance of Interruption

Unplanned interruptions account for an average loss of productivity of nearly one-third:

"Interruptions now consume 28% of the knowledge worker's day, based on surveys and interviews of high-level knowledge workers conducted by Basex in 2005 … lowering concentration levels, making it difficult for people to follow complicated trains of thought, lowering innovation levels, …"[iv]

A simple technique to reduce interruption is as follows.

First, set up a non-intrusive means of communication. Leave running on your computer at all times during the working day a Voice-Over-IP/chat program (for example, Skype). When you need to speak at length with a colleague or colleagues, do not interrupt them without warning, but rather send them a chat message requesting a conversation either in person or via Voice-Over-IP – and ask them to do the same for you. When you receive such a chat message, respond in your own time but taking into account the needs of your colleagues.

Second, take control of the most intrusive object in your life – your mobile phone. Each day on starting work, turn off your mobile phone completely, only turning it on again:
1)   During one morning period of more than 15 minutes;
2)   During a mid-day period of no more than 1 hour;
3)   During one afternoon period of more than 15 minutes;
4)   On completing work that day;
5)   When requested by a manager;
6)   In case of personal emergency.

You will be amazed at the sense of freedom that these simple measures provide, and how they permit you to experience a sense of **flow**:

"the mental state of operation in which the person is fully immersed in what he or she is doing by a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and success in the process of the activity"[v]

Take away

The techniques describe here cost nothing, require no technology or other tools, can be implemented by anyone, and will make a dramatic and immediate improvement to your productivity. Why wouldn't you use them?

They are only the first step on a road that ends in HIM. However, as Lao-tzu wrote, "a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step"[vi] – or in this case, 2 simple steps.

Author

Keith Harrison-Broninski has been regarded as an IT and business thought leader since publication of his book "Human Interactions: The Heart And Soul Of Business Process Management" (Meghan-Kiffer Press, 2005 - "a must read for Process Professionals and Systems Analysts alike", BPM Group). Building on 20 years of research and insights from varied disciplines, his theory of Human Interaction Management (HIM) provides a new way to describe and support collaborative human work.

Conference organizers around the world regularly invite Keith to give keynote lectures to business, IT and academic audiences at national conferences, most recently in Poland, India, the Netherlands, the UK, Finland and Portugal.

Keith is CTO of Role Modellers, whose mission is to develop understanding and support of human-driven processes - the field that Keith has pioneered. Role Modellers' software product, HumanEdj, leads the industry in computerized support for innovative, collaborative human work.

Keith stays active as a business consultant and software architect, via which activities he continues to refine and extend HIM theory.

More information about Keith and his work is available online (http://keith.harrison-broninski.info).

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[i] http://human-interaction-management.info
[ii] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Getting_things_done
[iii] http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/reflecti.htm
[iv] "Information Overload", Spira J. & Goldes M., Basex, March 2007
[v] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flow_%28psychology%29
[vi] "The Way of Lao-tzu", Lao-tzu (604 BC - 531 BC)