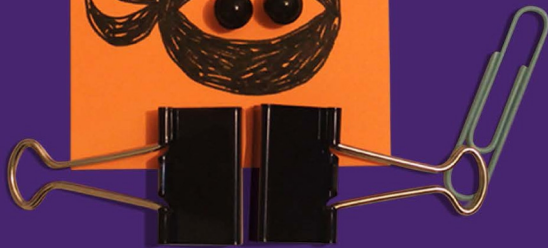


HOW TO BE A

# PRODUCTIVITY NINJA



GRAHAM ALLCOTT

**1. THE WAY**  
**OF THE**  
**PRODUCTIVITY**  
**NINJA**



*'Being busy does not always mean real work. The object of all work is production or accomplishment and to either of these ends there must be forethought, system, planning, intelligence and honest purpose, as well as perspiration. Seeming to do is not doing.'*  
– Thomas Edison

Ever thought you should get better at managing your time? Have you spent ages wondering how some people seem to be able to get so much more done than you, or how you can learn to cope with the endlessly growing volume of emails and other things that need to be done? Do you wonder why there just never seem to be enough hours in the day?

It's often thought that good 'time management' is the key to productivity, success and happiness. There are hundreds of books on time management, mostly written by 'guru' types who seem to have it all so perfectly and succinctly summarized: prioritize the right things, start the day with a list of what you need to do and then systematically tick them off, from the most important at the start of the day through to the least important at the end. File things away, make short-term, medium-term and long-term goals, organize the clutter around you and manage complex projects with long but perfectly written project plans. It all sounds so easy and so perfect, doesn't it?

Well, let's get one thing clear straight away. I am not writing this book because I'm some kind of time management guru. I'm not one of those naturally organized people. In fact, my natural style of work is quite the opposite: flaky, ideas-based, more comfortable at the strategic level than the 'doing' level, allergic to detail, instinctive, crazy-making and ridiculously unrealistic about what's achievable in any given time period. All of these characteristics are, in their own way, among what you could call my strengths, and have made me successful in things I've done. They're part of who I am. I play to these strengths and also recognize them as the crippling weaknesses that they are. Changing my own bad habits and developing strong, positive new ones gave me the ability to help others do the same. But in grappling with my own unproductive demons and working hard to become more productive

and gain more control in my work and in my life, I've come to an important conclusion: time management is dead.

## TIME MANAGEMENT IS DEAD

Somewhere along the line, the game changed. We now live in an age of constant connection and information overload. We are bombarded with new information inputs – and from several different sources at the same time – in a way that would have been staggering to comprehend even ten years ago. In the old time management books, dealing with new inputs was simple enough: they came in the form of paper letters, delivered to the office first thing every morning and perhaps again first thing in the afternoon if you were really popular. Dealing with and reacting to the new was a self-contained, limited activity that would take no more than an hour a day. According to the old time management principles, this left you free for the rest of the day to get on with the 'real work', which could be planned out early in the day via a simple daily to-do list and 'ABC' priority system.

Today, such systems seem archaic: it's a big challenge to create the time and attention needed to get anywhere near our real work because we're buried under 24–7 email, social media, voicemails, instant messenger, texts, intranets, conference calls, collaboration tools and the burden of staying connected. Ever got to 5pm and found you're still staring at a full to-do list, wondering where the day went? Me too.

Quite apart from the ever-increasing volume of information in our work, there are so many other reasons why time management theories of old no longer cut it. Work is more complex now than it ever has been, and yet our roles are less defined and the work itself more free-flowing: the emphasis is less on rigid management hierarchies and more on each member of the team taking personal responsibility – the pace of communication has increased dramatically and we're expected to reply or at least be 'in the loop' constantly. Not only that, but working hours are becoming longer and more flexible, catering to the needs of working parents as well as colleagues across continents.

All of this means you have to come to terms with one important thing: you will never get everything finished.

## YOU WILL NEVER GET EVERYTHING FINISHED

Ask yourself this: if you've ever made a to-do list with priorities on it (for example, 'A', 'B' and 'C' priorities), did you manage to get to the 'C' listed items before more 'A'-grade opportunities or potential disasters presented themselves? Of course you didn't. And if you *did* get to those 'C' listed items, chances are you got to them because they suddenly started to rise up the ranks, becoming the more urgent 'A' and 'B' items because they were previously left unattended.

Think back to a moment in your working life when there was *nothing* more to possibly do that day. It's probably very hard to think of one in recent times; there's always a bit more business development, a bit of clearing the decks, a bit of catching up on reading or housekeeping. You're probably casting your mind back to one of your first jobs, where perhaps you worked in a bar and at the end of a long shift you could all mop down the floors, close down the bar and sit down with a beer, rejoicing in a good night's work and the satisfaction of completion. Completion is a great feeling, isn't it? The satisfaction that you've achieved something, and that it's completely done and gone, is psychologically thrilling.

The other reason completion is satisfying is that it naturally gives way to clear space. Psychologically, clear space helps provide perspective, a brief recovery from the frenetic pace of life and time to re-evaluate our priorities.

The trouble is, the modern work paradigm gives us so little sense of completion or clear space that it feels like we're constantly straining to see the light at the end of a long, long tunnel. And when the light at the end of the tunnel finally approaches, you realize it's just some nasty bloke with a torch bringing you more work to do.

## LONG LIVE ATTENTION MANAGEMENT

Don't worry, though – there's a new game now, with completely new rules. Put simply, skilful *attention* management is the new key to productivity, and how well you protect and use your attention determines your success. There are some mortal enemies standing in your way, though: stress, procrastination, interruptions, distractions, low-value commitments, annoying work practices – and you need to learn to overcome these obstacles to focus on what really matters. It's time to think like a Ninja.

## THE WAY OF THE PRODUCTIVITY NINJA

*'We must be willing to get rid of the life we've planned so as to have the life that is waiting for us.'*  
– Joseph Campbell

This book is about developing a Ninja mindset and then applying it to every area of your working life – and even beyond. It is about how we turn information from new inputs or vague distractions into

completed and celebrated outcomes. It is about our relationship with information at work, and how we *are* ultimately in control and how we do ultimately have enough hours in the day to get the important stuff done. (You'll notice I didn't just say get 'everything' done.)

In this chapter, I'll introduce you to the main behaviours – the way of the Ninja – that will boost your productivity, reduce your stress levels and change the way you think about your work. Necessarily, the way of the Productivity Ninja is about how we think about our work, not how we 'do' our work. Rather than being focused on specific skills, talents or tools, it is an approach to work, from which systems and frameworks can then be easily developed. I will show you how to develop those in the coming chapters, but first let's talk about the underlying principles and mindset. In the later chapters, we will apply this mindset to your everyday situations at work: your email, to-do list, projects and meetings.

## ***DECISION-MAKING IS OUR WORK***

By 9.15am on an average day in the information age, we've received more information inputs than most old-school time management theorists would have received in a week! Our work has changed so much that, for most of us, how we deal with new opportunities and new threats is what makes the difference. We no longer think about our work: thinking *is* our work. Successful careers happen for those who make the best decisions. If you want to climb the ladder in your organization, realize that your ability to react and be responsible are what you'll be judged on. The higher you go within an organization or career, the truer this is. The art of decision-making, our ability to make space for the 'quality thinking time' we need, and how we react on our gut instincts (especially when such time for thinking isn't available) defines us at work.

## ***RESPONSIBLE VS. RESPONSE-ABLE***

How quickly do you react to change? And I don't mean just realizing that things are changing, but actually digesting, understanding and responding with an appropriate action? It's long been thought that the more people get paid or achieve, the more responsible they are. If you're climbing a corporate ladder, it stands to reason that you take on more responsibility the higher you go.

But simply being 'responsible' these days isn't enough. It's become popular for footballers or managers to come out with statements like, 'I hold my hands up and say I'm responsible for my part in our embarrassing defeat'. While admitting responsibility is better than not doing so, honour in defeat still ultimately equals defeat. And in the information age, things move quickly. As a society we value those who are comfortable with positions of responsibility, but we rarely explore responsibility as something proactive and dynamic. 'I don't want the responsibility', we say, as if it's a term full only of burdens and without corresponding joys. Yet being in a position of responsibility usually also means influence. The nature of responsibility is that it should also



bring reward – the ability to make an impact, create wealth and success for your organization, for society, for your family or for you. By viewing responsibility as inherently troublesome, we view it as the price to be paid for this success. We see it as a trade-off. It shouldn't be this way.

To be response-able, therefore, means you have the ability to define in the moment the actions you need to take to overcome and enjoy any new challenge. This book will give you the tools to work on your response-ability and be more response-able in three important ways:

▶ **Response-able now**

We often choose not to respond with definite actions. We procrastinate and we seek to delay things if we're feeling lazy, tired, unsure or worried about the results. The way of the Ninja will help to challenge your thinking and develop new habits so that you're proactively looking for ways to respond, rather than for ways to avoid and defer.

▶ **Response-able later**

You don't want to worry about what could go wrong on all the other projects that you're not working on right now. We'll set up systems so that you always know what your next move will be on any given project and so that you know that these systems will keep things under control for you.

▶ **Response-able if the crap hits the fan**

When you have to drop everything to deal with a crisis, it's much easier if you have a sure-fire way of knowing or remembering what you've dropped. The systems and techniques in this book will make it easier to respond when such moments come along, ensuring full focus on the job at hand.

## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PRODUCTIVITY NINJA

*'Simplicity is the ultimate  
sophistication.'*  
– Leonardo da Vinci

What follows are the key characteristics that make up 'the way of the Productivity Ninja'. As we look at each of these in turn, you may begin to picture some of the ways these approaches can influence how you currently operate. As we go through the later chapters, I'll show you the specific tools and techniques to achieve Ninja-level productivity.