

TIME HACKS: LEARNINGS FROM TWO DECADES IN THE TECH START-UP WORLD



BY TOM SEERY, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

“Make time.”

Making time is my survival guide as the chief executive of a technology company that serves some of the most discerning aesthetic consumers and smartest clientele, around—plus more than 200 super talented employees. It’s exciting work that I love, but founding RealSelf and running the company for the past 12 years has given this phrase, “make time,” a much more urgent meaning.

That’s because my role has added a lot more must-do work to my roster. These days, “making time” describes a set of habits of near-existential importance, without which critical work simply would not get done.

As obligations have piled up over the years, I have done what many tech execs do: look for ways to automate, uplevel, and optimize as much of my work as possible.

According to RealSelf research, plastic surgeons spend an average of 23 hours each week performing operations. In the time that’s left over, they’re managing a host of other jobs and relationships that are part and parcel of their life as a successful doctor—and as a human being. Whenever I visit a practice, I’m astounded by the pressure on the staff to simply keep up with the ebb and flow of patients, let alone the paperwork and scheduling.

It’s a lot. And I can relate to juggling a host of priorities that simply cannot be dropped. To fit it all in, I’ve implemented a number of time-tested productivity hacks that are popular in the tech world. These entail optimizing my habits in ways that make work more profitable, time just a little more abundant, and a quality personal life more feasible.

I’m convinced that these tweaks can help you do more with your time, too. Here are four sanity-saving productivity hacks I’ve honed in my 12 years running and growing RealSelf.

TIME HACK #1: SPRINT

How is it that some of the most celebrated companies in history, including Microsoft, Adobe, and Google, are able to release innovative products year after year? Sprints.

We work in sprints, which are short “work bursts” that move rapidly toward a clear finish line, at RealSelf. Sprints

give individuals and teams autonomy over how they function and how work is assigned. I like having our people work this way, because sprints recognize that teams’ internal work styles should look different based on the project at hand, and the composition of skills and personalities on each team.

Adopting sprints has enabled our entire company to consistently design and ship great products for the doctors who rely on us. But sprints are also a time management hack that benefit me personally: by decentralizing innovation, I can focus on the vision and direction of our company, and leave the “how” to my talented colleagues.

Your practice might use sprints to encourage cross-functional teams to put their heads together and solve key challenges quickly. You can even apply a sprint mentality to your individual work: the time constraint forces you to get focused and generate ideas rapidly.

TIME HACK #2: TAME YOUR EMAIL

Realizing that email was killing my productivity was a key turning point as I endeavored to increase my working capacity.

The average business user is projected to receive 124 emails a day in 2018, according to online communications research firm Radicati. Even when the emails we receive are irrelevant to us and require no action, the mere act of checking messages to determine their relevance is a tax on our time and attention. When it’s time to return to the work that matters, we can struggle to reorient ourselves around our priorities.

It’s no wonder that I, like many of my counterparts in the tech world, have adopted the “Inbox Zero” philosophy.

When I check email, my goal is to dispatch with each message by dealing with it immediately, either by responding to it on the spot, archiving it, deleting it, or deferring it to an appropriate time in the future. Adopting Inbox Zero was a pivotal moment for increasing my productivity.

I’ve also implemented some hacks that prevent emails from ever making it to my inbox. For example, some of my favorite newsletters are automatically filtered into a “Reading” folder that I peruse during the time I have set aside to catch up on the industry.

Here at RealSelf we've implemented Slack, a total game changer for greatly reducing email for our entire team. With Slack, my colleagues and I can trade private and group messages and post alerts, information and files into "channels" that are organized by topic. Since the day we implemented Slack here, it's been a company policy that if you can Slack it, don't email it.

You'll want to be as vigilant here about patient privacy laws as you are in any other communication channel, but Slack can still be a great way to communicate about the work of running your office.

When I must send an email, I save time and promote short replies by boiling them down to three sentences or fewer (<http://three.sentenc.es/>) whenever possible.

TIME HACK #3: ELIMINATE NOTIFICATIONS

After a few business trips, I realized I was more productive on flights because I was, quite literally, in "airplane mode." Without the buzzing and beeping and reflexive email checking, my mind was able to settle into a state of "deep work" that enabled me to do some of my best thinking, writing, and problem-solving for hours on end.

Notifications have become a fact of daily life. A 2016 Deloitte study¹ concluded that the average person looks at their mobile phone 47 times each day. The problem is that even with their ubiquity, notifications aren't white noise blending into the din. To the contrary, they are engineered to engender a Pavlovian response—"check me!" they beckon—and many of us numbly oblige.

Beating notifications requires some mental fortitude, like resisting the urge to "just check" them while you're walking or waiting in line.

But they're also ripe for hacking. I took a look at my mobile phone's notification settings and turned off the unnecessary ones. When I need to optimize my environment for deep concentration, I use the "Do Not Disturb" setting to quiet all notifications for a specific period of time, my terrestrial version of airplane mode.

Notification-free time can be a boon to concentration: a 2017 study² led by Carnegie Mellon University and Telefonica Research had 30 volunteers disable notifications for 24 hours. It concluded that "participants felt less distracted and more productive" during the notification-free period. For can't-miss calls and texts, I set my very most important contacts to bypass that setting.

TIME HACK #4: DON'T DELAY

A light switch went off when I read Jon Tierney's landmark *New York Times Magazine* article about the science of decision fatigue.³ In it, Tierney unpacks the psychological research that explains how picking an outfit, avoiding your favorite cheat foods, and making grave, life-changing decisions all draw from the same finite daily stores of personal

willpower. That willpower is strongest at the beginning of the day and erodes as the day wears on, making it risky to put off hard decisions and tough tasks.

That research informed a simple yet effective productivity hack that I have adopted. Whether it's a task that I just don't enjoy doing, or an unpleasant business scenario that requires executive intervention, I go out of my way to manage and resolve tough situations immediately.

We all know from personal experience that these types of challenges only get worse when left unchecked, and that even those little needling tasks we hate doing find a way of turning into more perilous tripwires when we ignore them for too long. David Allen, author of the widely popular productivity book *Getting Things Done*, recommends the "two-minute rule:" if a task lands in your in-tray and can get done in two minutes or less, get it done right then.

You can also eliminate decision-making around those aspects of your life that tax more of your willpower than they deserve. Mark Zuckerberg famously dresses in near-identical outfits each day to take wardrobe planning off the table as a daily decision, as did the late Steve Jobs before him.

Likewise, ending your day by contouring your next day—noting time-based commitments in your schedule and must-do priorities—will free you from spinning your wheels about how you'll spend your time. What low-stakes decisions can you frontload in order to conserve your daily allotment of willpower?

LEARNING MYSELF

For me, applying these hacks was ultimately about continuously learning myself: what I find inspiring, how to manage my energy and focus as it ebbs and flows, and where I need to implement backstops.

Perhaps it makes sense, then, that having children was perhaps the biggest "hack" of all. Talk about making time. My sons are my top priority, and making time for them has been the best forcing function of my career. They are the one aspect of my life that all other priorities must be organized around, and I think identifying that for yourself is a great first step to mastering your time. ■

1. <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/technology-media-and-telecommunications/articles/global-mobile-consumer-survey-us-edition.html>

2. <https://pielot.org/pubs/PielotRello2017-MHCI-DoNotDisturb.pdf>

3. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/21/magazine/do-you-suffer-from-decision-fatigue.html>

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