

Work Harder or Work Smarter.

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ABSTRACT

In clinical development we are used to working hard and often too long hours. So how do we become more efficient without simply working even more? This paper will demonstrate how to structure your day for effective, concentrated work, including simple techniques to easily improve your daily functioning and therefore your productivity. It is fun to do and essential to achieving more within the same working time and least amount of effort.

INTRODUCTION

Drug development in the pharmaceutical industry is an area where people are used to working hard. Particularly in drug submissions, the work can get very intensive, as the unmovable deadline looms. The question is, once we have worked all the hours we can in a day, how can we work more effectively without increasing the time spent at work?

This paper will explain how our ability to focus can be properly understood and used so that we make better use of the work time available to us.

WILL POWER

The first thing that is vital to understand is our will power, what it is and how we use it. Take a model of our mind, which has three levels: emotional level, the mental level and will level. We are used to thinking of mind in terms of our emotions and thinking processes but we can add on top of that will power. Willpower enables us to focus on things, it is our ability to concentrate and to devote attention. People with strong will power are able to produce more in their lives. The latest science research enables us to get a much better understanding of how our will power works and how we can improve it.

It is a helpful model to consider will power like a muscle. It's something that we can train and it is something which wears out and becomes weak if we over use it. It regenerates overnight so that it is available to us strongest in the morning and depending upon our activities during the day weakest of an evening.

There are other things that use up your will power. For example: you are driving along to the office and you had the radio on. Just as you arrive at work a song has just started playing on the radio. You switch the engine off, get out, lock the door and go into the building, and then you find that the only thing in your mind is the song which was just playing on the radio. The song had not completed before you switch the radio off, and now it continues playing in your head all the time. In German there is a good word for this, it is called the earworm. Although there are many ways to develop an earworm one way is when you half hear a song and then stop. Your mind is a wonderful highly developed organ, and it loves to finish off things. So when song is only half heard, your mind wants to finish off the song and hence it keeps repeating in your head. It is your will power which feeds this, and hence this half finished task will be using up your ability to focus your mind. Unfortunately modern office life rarely enables us to complete all our tasks before the end of the day. So it can happen that we leave the office and our mind goes round and round and round thinking about all the things we have been doing at work. This takes a huge amount of effort and leaves us tired and stressed.

There are other things which use up will power. One of the most surprising ways to use of will power is in making decisions. This I found out when I moved from Germany to England. Just a simple thing like shopping in a supermarket was quite difficult. There are so many different types of food in different countries, Germany can have rows and rows of sauerkraut, whereas England has much more prepared food. Germany has fantastic bread, and England has a fantastic selection of wines. So what do you choose? Initially everything has to be a conscious choice, and this can be exhausting. Later you go round a supermarket and choose by routine that which you have chosen before. This is routine rather than a conscious decision.

Further things can affect your will power. If the glucose levels in your blood gets too low, then this can suck your will power. Also if you have too much stimulus, for example, walking down the street in a new busy city with a massive noise, people, smells, all crying out for your attention. Any hard physical exercise uses up your will power, as can times when you really have to concentrate hard on something.

HOW TO BOOST YOUR WILL POWER

If you want to run a marathon, the first thing you have to do is to train. It takes a lot of running and knowing the best way to training yourself, in order to achieve such a difficult goal. It is the same with will power. Some people have lots of it and others less. The good news is that you can train it and it's not that difficult to do.

The easiest way to boost your will power is with mindfulness. There have been many clinical studies on the effects mindfulness on the brain and its ability to reduce stress. Simply put, mindfulness is a practice of keeping your attention on simple things. The most common practice is to spend time just observing your own breathing. As you do this it will come as no surprise that your mind will run riot, as it is focused on something unusual and boring. So you have to bring your mind back to focus on breathing again and in doing so you are exercising your powers of concentration rather than your mental and emotional abilities. A further mindfulness type of exercise is the Hakalau, as described in Stress Tips and Tricks, PhUSE 2012.

Another more subtle but fun way of boosting your will power, is by performing timed movements. For example, as soon as you arrive at work, sit at your desk, take a minute and decide to touch your right knee with your left hand at 10 o'clock. Take a small amount of time to concentrate on this and picture or feel yourself doing it. Sometime during the morning you will remember the exercise and then touch your right knee with your left hand and look at the clock. What time is it? Did you make it on time or are you too late or perhaps even way too early? If you are too early, concentrate again and then return to your other tasks. If you are late, decide to perform the task at a later time for example, 12 o'clock and again concentrate and picture yourself doing this. This task is much harder than it looks and even constant clock gazing will not help you achieve the task. It takes practice. What is also useful is to set yourself a big time window. So if you want to perform an action at 10 o'clock then allow anything between 945 and 1015 to be considered a success. As you practice and have more success, then reduce your time window until eventually it is only four minutes wide. Absolute pinpoint accuracy is extremely difficult especially when your computer, telephone and watch can be showing three different times – so how was your mind to know which one is correct? This exercise is lots of fun, simple and can be easily done in the office.

CHANGE YOUR DAILY ROUTINE

One of the main difficulties in becoming more effective is being able to create effective change in your daily routine. It is by changing our daily routine that we get the biggest efficiencies in our work schedule. There are two main ways of changing our daily routine.

The first is by attaching new tasks to old tasks. There are certain things which we always do every day. Things like arrive at work, leave work, and for some people go for lunch. These are the old tasks. If you want to do something new, the best thing is to attach your new task to an old task. So if you want to have a fixed time in which to concentrate on your emails, do it when you return from lunch. You're not busy with any other sort of work, and therefore can quickly go through all the emails, which only need a small amount of attention. In a very short space of time you will be able to be very effective in reducing your inbox. This is just one example of how to attach new tasks to older ones. In this way you're able to add something new to your work routine quickly and effectively.

The second and more difficult method is the start of a brand-new task at a brand-new time point. This is much more difficult than people realize. Let us go back to the goal of being able to run a marathon. To do this you should start running every day. You need to pay attention to four things: your motivation, your ability, what triggers the action and also self-forgiveness. The larger the goal, the more important your motivation is. Then look realistically at your own ability. If you have never been running regularly you cannot run a marathon without training. The best way to start training is to run for five minutes every day. Obviously running for five minutes every day is not going to enable you to run a marathon. But doing this continually for six weeks will establish a fixed routine. Achieving this will be one of the biggest obstacles to be overcome in running a marathon. Because if you have established a routine of running five minutes every day it is very easy to change it to 10 minutes and then 20 minutes and eventually when you are strong enough for 30 minutes. And if you're running for 30 minutes every day you are halfway to being able to run a marathon. So the key here is in establishing a daily routine. And the most important thing is your action trigger. What is going to be your trigger, which will signal that you should now go running for five minutes? Nowadays we have lots of technology to help out. Simply using a smartphone with an alarm to trigger at a certain time every day would be a great help. You could also add times to your work calendar so that that also gives you daily reminders. The last thing to remember to do is allow yourself forgiveness. Sometimes you just have bad days and even running for five minutes is too much. Don't get angry or guilty about it, just you forgive yourself and look forward to your next opportunity to repeat the task.

DAY PLANNING

The key thing to planning your day is knowing when to perform which task. The most important thing you can do is to make space and time for concentrated working. For this you have to work out when is the best time to do this work and for how long you can work in any one space of time.

For myself I found that I have two moments of the day when I can really produce highly concentrated work. The first is when I first arrive at work until about 11 o'clock. The second is a period from about 5 o'clock of an evening to 7 o'clock. This I have found out through trial and error over a long period of time.

To find out how long I could work at a time, I recorded myself. I started some concentrated work and I wrote down the time when I first broke that concentration. It might be that the thought goes through my head to see what's for lunch today or to check my emails. Sometimes I would just yawn.

Here are two examples of concentrated work timings:

10:30 Start concentrated work
11:08 Yawn
11:22 Yawn, stop.

13:15 Start
14:15 Fade of concentration
14:45 Stop.

The first example of concentrated work for 52 minutes, with a yawn occurring after 38 minutes. The second is an example of concentrated work for 90 minutes with the beginnings of fading of concentration after an hour. Note that even the smallest amount of pause was noted down. A yawn or a desire to look at something else is a break in concentration. These are just two examples and it became very interesting to see just how long a concentration period could be. From a greater number of tests it became clear that a 50 minute period of concentrated activity would be a good start.

You can now do your concentrated work at the time which best suits you. Before starting you have to ensure that you will not be interrupted. Switch off your email and any messaging system you use, as well as blocking the phone. It is best that those who work with you know that this is the time when you should not be interrupted. Before you start you also need a method to automatically know when the time period is up. For example, put an alarm on your smart phone so that it vibrates after 50 minutes telling you when the time period is at an end. You then need to take a break. Best is to go outside for a walk. It does not have to be for long, five minutes could be enough, 20 minutes much better, whatever the workplace allows. You could be tempted after 50 minutes to just continue working. However, you can over use your will power and then become so tired that the quick recovery is difficult. Think like an athlete, and work out the best training to get the best performance. No one tries to run a marathon at the same speed as Usain Bolt runs 100 metres. You have to learn what combination of concentrated work and breaks works best for you. 2 to 3 periods of concentrated work, with breaks in between are enough for any one morning.

What you can also do to improve the concentrated work, is to select the correct music. A website, [Focus@Will](#), provides a variety of music which is designed to help you concentrate.

Another way you can increase your productivity is to be in good control of how you work with email. Often it is the case good people leave their email system on and receive a message when a new email arrives. In this way your concentration is broken and your focus is diverted to something else, something which you did not choose to do. Therefore it is best to be very careful how you handle emails. Try switching your email system off, and only look at new emails at set times of the day. Obviously your colleagues need to be aware that you are doing this so that they are not expecting you to be replying to their emails within five minutes. A good time for doing this is when you return directly after lunch. You should always be taking your lunch break, this is a good way to pause and give your mind a rest. After lunch, feeling refreshed, you can then tackle and read any new emails. This is also a good time period to check your to-do list. Before you focus upon any new task quickly go through your to-do list and perform any quick tasks.

Another very special time is Friday afternoons. The atmosphere in the office tends to be much more relaxed. This is a good time to tackle tasks which might not have full priority for your work but which interest you and keep you motivated. Doing these can give you a good sense of accomplishment which is a very good thing to go into the weekend with.

And lastly, design a good routine to start the day, and a good routine to end the day. When you start your day's work, make sure you have 15 minutes blocked time. In this time examine what meetings you have. Look at each of those meetings and decide exactly what you will want to achieve from those meetings and what you can contribute to the other people attending this meeting. By only spending two minutes considering each meeting, you will dramatically affect your contribution to those meetings. What you can also do is to assign yourself a maximum of three goals that you wish to accomplish that day. Write them down.

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At the end of the day. 15 minutes before you wish to leave the office. Look at your three goals – did you manage to complete them? If not then why not? Did you need the participation of others and didn't get it? Or were you overambitious in what you tried to do in the day? If you manage to complete the tasks then congratulate yourself you've done a good job. Probably no one else will tell you that you have done a good job that day so do-it-yourself. What you can also do is note down all the things that are going through your head at the end of the day. Write them on a piece of paper which you will file away safely be able to read the next day. As explained before with the “earworm” phenomena, your mind wishes to complete tasks, but if thoughts are whizzing around your head, they are probably unfinished tasks. If you leave work and go home those thoughts will continue to occupy your consciousness, making it harder to relax of an evening. Writing these thoughts down in a safe place, allows your mind to let go of these thoughts, so that you can enjoy your evening. Again this is very important, that after a days work, you get a good rest.

CONCLUSIONS

If you do not wish to work even longer hours to increase your productivity, then you need to improve how you are working. The most important basis for this is to understand how your will power works, how you can improve your will power and how you apply it effectively in your working day. You can then structure your day so that at your peak performance times you can do concentrated work taking a good break between the bouts of concentrated activity. Treating your mind as an athlete would his body, understanding that you get peak performance when you allow yourself to take breaks between your concentrated work, will increase your effectiveness. In a similar way planning your day at the beginning of the morning and finishing off your day at the end of the evening, nicely separate out the work time when you are focused, from the leisure time when you can rest. In this way you can work much more successfully.

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RECOMMENDED READING AND VIEWING

[Will Power YouTube Video.](#)

Focus, The Hidden Driver of Excellence by Daniel Goleman, Bloomsbury

The Power of Habit by Charles Duhigg, Random House

Will Power: Rediscovering Our Greatest Strength by Roy F. Baumeister, John Tierney, Penguin Books

Full Catastrophe Living by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Piatkus

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