

Productivity Positive Constraints

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Today's post will be short, but show you three positive constraints that I guarantee will make you more productive at work.

No Desk for Creativity

This positive constraint works for anyone who spends far too much time in front of their computer. I constantly have to remind myself that spending hours on the computer does NOT equal productivity.

The environment we live in is constantly giving us emotional cues. Whether we listen to Bach or Megadeath, whether we can smell lavender or gasoline, whether we stand or sit at a desk will have an influence on our mood and thence the work we do.

I associate desks and computers with Work. That's Work with a capital "W" because it's stressful Work, Work that feels like Work: chasing emails, answering queries and junking spam. I needed somewhere I could escape.

But how? My default "relaxing" hobby was to flop down in my nice swivel chair and drag the mouse around the computer screen for an hour or so. I had to disrupt this mindless habit. So I built a No Desk desk, a desk that folds flat against the wall.

With a permanent unfolding desk, my computer was always out and the opportunity to work was always there. A folding desk gives me an alternative. Now, whenever I fancy a change of scenery or a break (and *always* at the end of the day), I clear the desk and fold it down.

Folded bliss! There's my sofa on the right, ready for leg stretching creativity. Note also the plants: greenery is good for mind relaxation too.

The critical point is that *I can't work on a desk that isn't there*. The computer goes on a shelf and I can sit on my sofa and relax. That relaxed state is where we find day-dreaming, imagination and creativity.

It's like an off-switch for my work-related stress and an on-switch for creative thinking. It has transformed my working day and I love it.

What you need: Two strong hinges from a hardware shop or online (mine were £26 for two), a flat piece of wood for the desk (mine's varnished), a couple of wall batons and some screws (all recycled). The build took me about two hours. If you have a bigger house than me, then separate your working space from your relaxing space – and make sure you spend time in both!

No Phone against Distraction

When I'm working, I put my phone away into a drawer, with the ringers off. This is surprisingly simple, but devastatingly effective. The old adage "out of sight, out of mind" is no less true for being ancient.

After my experiment with No Phone, I am now acutely conscious every time I check my phone. I know that, when I leave my phone on my desk, I will check the thing. It doesn't matter whether it's gone off or not, I still check it, several times an hour.

These are called microchecks and they are toxic to our focus. Every time you look at your phone, you are distracting yourself from the task you were engaged in. Every time you distract yourself, it takes an average of 25 minutes to regain your focus. By which time, you're checking your phone again...

Putting my phone into a drawer when I'm working is a really simple way to safeguard my focus.

What you need: A drawer, a bag or a different room.

No Computer for Writing

I often write using my Neo Alphasmart instead of my laptop. The Neo is a full size keyboard with a four line screen and a memory for hundreds of thousands of words. That's all.

There's no internet connection to distract me. There's no hunching over an eye-straining glowing screen. There's no clunky weight to carry around or rest on my knees. There's no power cable because there's hardly any technology to power so the batteries (3xAA) last for years.

This is a great example of what I mean by minimum viable technology. I could use a pen and paper to write; that would certainly be less tech than even a glorified typewriter like the Neo. But I type much faster than I handwrite, so this glorified typewriter is a more viable technology for the task of writing than pen and paper. (For me.)

The Neo does the job of writing better than anything else. Even so, I still habitually turn to my laptop, with all its distractions and discomforts. I have to remind myself to leave the desk or the house, with the Neo in tow and rediscover writing purity, just me and the typing machine.

A computer can do a million things, but when combined with human distractability that's a weakness, not a strength. The Neo does only one thing and that means more writing, less Tetris.

What you need: A Neo Alphasmart (~£50 second hand from the US), or any other more basic technology. Hats off to you if you can manage with just pen and paper.

So there you have it. Three dead simple positive constraints that you could get working with today.

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