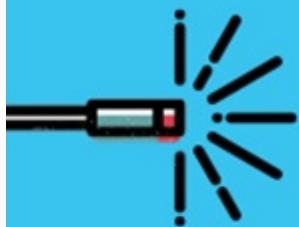


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**LAURA  
STACK**  
The Productivity Pro®

# Self-Sabotage: Five Ways to Kill Your Own Productivity



*"Whether you think you can or you think you can't, you're right."* –

Henry Ford, pioneering American automaker.

In some ways, you may be your own worst enemy—even when you don't realize it.

**Self-sabotage is a very real problem in corporate America, and I've seen many people and organizations fall prey to it** ([– click to tweet](#)). It's almost never deliberate; it's typically either due to subconscious beliefs or compulsive activities that take control of your good sense. It can happen even to those of you who consider yourself a top producer, if you let your guard down. Self-sabotage can even feed on contentment; it's one of the more destructive aspects of our subconscious minds, which can otherwise serve us so well on the productivity front.

Paralysis analysis may be the most famous form of self-sabotage. This occurs when you have so many things to do you can't choose what to do first. Some refer to it as "the tyranny of choice." But you can overcome it through draconian prioritization and delegation. But there are many other insidious forms of self-sabotage. Let's take a closer look at five, and at how you can fight them.

**1. Letting negative self-talk take control.** Remember when you were a kid, and often spoke instructions and rules out loud as you played or performed a task? Some of us still do so, especially in times of stress; but by the time you reach adulthood, the “self-talk” has mostly gone underground. Your inner monologue also consists of self-assessments of your abilities. If you consistently think of yourself as a failure, you’ll fail. So stop and think about how you think of yourself, and deliberately choose to fan the flames of the bright spots in your life. Look at your tasks and accomplishments realistically, and accentuate the positive. Bobby McFerrin’s philosophy of “Don’t worry, be happy” may not prove easy, but it’s sound advice.

**2. Fear of success.** When you get right down to it, this is really fear of change. Change almost always scares us; but as I emphasize so often, it’s those of us who embrace change as it occurs who bounce back quickest and come out on top. Stop worrying about what might go wrong. Instead, focus on what might go *right*. Yes, people and the world will change in ways you don’t expect and can’t control; it’s up to you to evolve with them, rather than give up or even slow down.

**3. Complacency.** When you get too self-satisfied, it’s easy to stay in one place and let life pass you by. You stop taking responsibility for your success, and sometimes that success goes away or plateaus. It happens constantly in the business realm: Apple almost died of it during the Gil Amelio era, and so did Nokia when they decided to focus on dumb phones rather than smart ones. Same goes for Kodak: they invented digital photography in the 1970s, but suppressed it so it wouldn’t harm photographic film sales. Errors like those just about put an end to the company that practically invented photography. Stop getting in your own way and *don’t* rest on your laurels, even when you finally achieve everything you’ve dreamed of. Instead, set new goals and start striving to reach them. Don’t be content with “good enough,” or “everything is just fine.”

**4. Letting less important things take too much of your attention.** You already know you can’t bother with work tasks below your pay grade; it’s an unproductive use of your time. Nor can you allow outside influences, like hobbies or personal interests, intrude on your work time. Keep them in their place. This may require a huge level of self-control, especially when you’re doing well enough to get by at your job to indulge yourself, but “well enough” isn’t good enough nowadays. You have the capacity for self-discipline, or you wouldn’t have achieved

what you have so far.

Side note: another common attention-hog is email (especially unimportant email!). I talk more about email and what I call “email OCD” in this short video.

**5. Dwelling on “if only.”** If only you had a million dollars. If only you’d gotten that promotion last year. If only Lake Erie was made of grape Kool-Aid. Rather than keep focusing on what could or should have been, get past it. If you want to make a million dollars, plan a way to get you there. That position you wanted is gone, but you’ll have other chances, some of which you can create yourself. And sorry, Lake Erie’s just water, and nothing short of a Biblical miracle will change that. Sometimes you just have to accept reality. The true wisdom comes from knowing the difference between what you can and can’t change—and focusing on what truly matters, right now, right in front of you, so you can move forward.

## **So Many Paths**

Humans are endlessly inventive; we *will* find ways to hurt ourselves no matter what. By no means is the list I’ve outlined here complete, but it’s a place to start when you realize you’re self-sabotaging. If you are, you’ll probably backslide a bit as you work your way out of the pit, but keep trying until you recapture your productivity. If you’re fortunate enough not to have fallen under the sway of self-sabotage, then keep your eyes wide open so you make sure you don’t. Vigilance is the eternal price of liberty, even from your own worst tendencies.

# Four Ways to Intensify Your Focus: Maximizing the Value of the Time You Have



*"You will never reach your destination if you stop and throw stones at every dog that barks."*—Winston Churchill, British statesman.

One of the characteristics of high achievers is their intensity of focus. (←Click to Tweet) High achievers know how to bury themselves in their work to such an extent that nothing can easily pull them away. It's like they're in a productivity trance. Fortunately, you CAN learn to be more focused, even if you believe you're one of the worst multi-taskers on the planet. Here are four effective ways to tighten up your concentration and intensify your focus.

**1. Keep a distraction list open.** An active mind works on many levels, some of them subconscious. Your brain may suddenly come up with an idea or reminder that threatens to derail you from your task while you chase the shiny object. It might be a great idea, and you don't want to use your mental energy just trying to remember it later. Don't bother. Instead, flip to your "distraction list" and capture the idea before you forget it. Then immediately go back to what you were doing. When you're finished with your task, you can decide whether to do it, file it, or

add it to your to-do list with the correct start date. You can use a text file, a yellow legal pad, Tasks in Outlook, or an app (such as Evernote, Todoist, or Wunderlist) as your distraction list. My father used to say, “when you think it, ink it.” Ink it, and you don’t have to think about it while you’re focused—and it won’t come back to bug you again.

Side Note: One of the ways distractions manifest themselves is in the form of “multitasking”. In this short video, I discuss the truth about just how unproductive multitasking is!

**2. Listen to music.** Non-verbal music or ambient noise (like the sound of a waterfall or a thunderstorm) may soothe you into a focus trance, if only by drowning out distractions. Listening to Black Sabbath or the Beastie Boys probably won’t help, but Bach and Beethoven may.

**3. Meditate for a moment,** or at least close your eyes and count your breaths for one minute. If you’re distracted, focusing deeply on yourself and your breathing can help you settle down, much like counting to ten can settle you when you feel irritated or angry. Since it’s super-easy, it’s worth a try.

**4. Set aside time for worry, and then let it go.** Some natural worriers can get past their need to angst over things by giving themselves a brief period each day when it’s all they do. Fifteen minutes should be enough. If you’re really beset by worries, write them down in a journal and make plans to tackle the ones you can actually change. If it’s something out of your bailiwick or ability to change, though, like a serious family medical crisis or weather woes, do what you can and let the rest go. This will almost always result in some peace of mind, letting you move forward with renewed focus.

### Raising the Bar You’ve Already Set

While the four strategies I’ve outlined here aren’t always the first to come to mind, they do work for many of us, and they’re easy to integrate into most lifestyles. Some may think they’re a little touchy-feely, but the mind is a funny thing, and the effects of emotions are real at the mental, physical, and spiritual levels.

And hey, if these ideas don’t work for you, you could always eat a piece of dark chocolate or paint your walls yellow.

# Running a Tight Ship: 4 Ways to Maximize Efficiency



Maximizing personal and team productivity requires notable efficiency. Make sure these practices get your attention:

**1. Leverage Technology.** Embrace and encourage new trends, devices, and software as they appear. Let your workers use their own devices for business purposes if they want. Why not take advantage of a productivity source you don't have to pay for? Meanwhile, provide instant "anywhere" access to workplace information. Let team members work from alternate locations with Wi-Fi when it's practical. When a member of my office manager's family is ill, it's easy to let her work from home for the day, so she can still be productive. With Wi-Fi, Evernote, and all the snazzy apps we have access to, workers can tap into work information no matter where they are. Give them a secure, reliable way to share ideas and communicate, allowing more flexibility and change-responsiveness.

**2. Set and Track Efficiency Goals.** Once you've pared your ideas down to size and established goals with your team, set specific schedules for achievement. As with any project, break goals into manageable pieces, each with its own milestones and deadlines. Once you've achieved a goal, retune and set a new one.

**3. Measure Everything.** You can better influence things when you can understand them, so keep an eye on all the metrics that matter for your team. Use an accountability system, project management software, SharePoint, a common spreadsheet on Google Docs, Outlook Task Assignments, or a scoreboarding system that tracks important team metrics. The systems you use can be off-the-shelf or proprietary; it doesn't matter as long as you use them consistently.

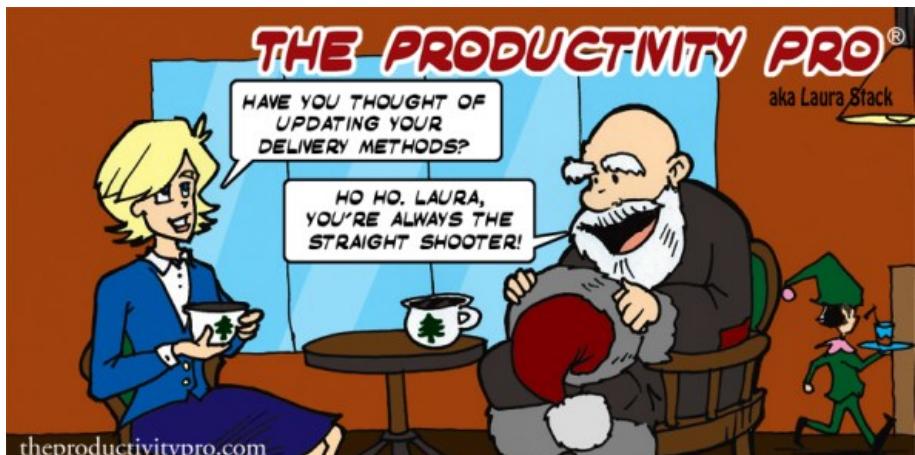
**4. Brainstorm Regularly.** Meet with your team periodically to exchange ideas on how best to achieve your strategic priorities and improve processes and procedures. Look for areas of overlap and eliminate redundancy. Discuss what your team is doing that lacks value. Remove steps that no longer apply when something changes, and make sure each person documents everything, so new people can get up to speed quickly. Remove your thought-filters and let your ideas cross-fertilize to see what kinds of interesting hybrids result. Consider concepts from other fields, and how they might apply to yours. What would you love to do if it were possible?

### **The Benefits of Consistent Training**

For your team members to be productively efficient *and* effective, they need the right tools. This is an indispensable ROI tactic. Some personnel need blazing-fast computing power; others need smartphones and tablets that let them work on the go; still others might require specialized instruments to maximize their performance. Whatever the case, *all* of them need consistent training, undertaken as often as necessary to stay ahead of the changes rolling through your field.

No one wants to spend money if they don't have to. But remember: in business, what matters isn't what you spend *now*, but how much money you make *later*. You have to make short-term investments for long-term gain. It's all about ROI. Done correctly, training produces the extraordinary levels of ROI you need to stay ahead of the game.

# Four Cases When “Working Smarter” Really Works: Getting Beyond the Cliché



*“Work smarter, not harder.”* – The advice of countless well-meaning managers over the decades.

At some point—or perhaps many points!—you’ve probably received the advice to “Work smarter, not harder.” Just about all of us have heard the phrase, to the point of it becoming a meaningless cliché and catch-all slogan. The problem here lies in the fact that most of the people who say this to you have no clue what it means. They’re just repeating what other people have told them. Bluntly ask them, “How exactly do you ‘work smarter’?” and they’ll most likely just look at you blankly.

My entire career has involved helping people find ways to get more work done in less time. That’s one definition of working smarter, and it’s composed of multiple parts, including ruthless time management, delegating, taking good care of yourself, tightly organizing and scheduling everything, taking advantage of new technology, and more.

But the truth is, **when you really want to succeed, you have to work both harder and smarter than everyone else.** Just working smarter won’t cut it,

except in specific situations. Here are four specific cases when the clichéd suggestion works best:

**1. When you've reached your physical limits.** You can only work so many hours a day; trying to work harder just brings you to the point of diminishing returns faster. After 10-11 hours a day, fatigue kicks in and it takes longer to fix your mistakes than to do the work. When you reach your physical limit, there's no choice but to multiply your efforts by working smarter—whether this means offshoring, delegating in-house, or just using a new app to cut down on production time—because you *can't* work harder.

**2. When your timeframe is limited.** When you have one week to complete a task, it's possible no amount of working harder alone will get the work done. So make your first goal sitting down and figuring out how to leverage technology, time management, and every other "smart" technique you know to complete the work on time.

**3. When the environment you're working in is hopelessly behind the times.** You may find yourself in a situation where hidebound individuals have stalled the work process. If your accountant uses old-fashioned spreadsheet paper and written notation to keep track of the company's costs rather than MS Excel or Lotus, he'll never get caught up no matter how hard he works (and yes, it's happened). I recently read of a case where a low-level newspaper manager suggested to the owner that they start publishing online. It was a hard sell, but in the end he convinced her—and it ended up saving the publication as their paper news readership plummeted. The harried employees finally settled down to a reasonable number of hours per week, because they really could work smarter, not harder.

**4. When new technology obviates the need to work harder.** Forty years ago, if you had to make even a few corrections to a paper or report, you had to retype one or more pages—sometimes the entire document. I remember my father typing his Ph. D thesis on a typewriter, using correction paper for errors, hoping the paper hadn't moved and the letters lined up on the page. Even in my first job, I had to use a typewriter! Fifty years ago, you would have had to retype another version if you just wanted an extra copy. (Carbon paper existed, but, well, it sucked). With the invention of cheap photocopiers for the latter case and word processing for the former, it became foolish to waste time working harder by doing the retypes.

Printing extra copies and corrected versions was the *smart* way to do the job, so working smarter beat working harder hands down.

### **Harder, Smarter, and Savvier**

Most of us realize that in terms of work, there's no real harder/smarter dichotomy; you put both into action to maximize performance. But sometimes, applying your mind instead of your muscles to the job makes the most sense—even if it means adopting the Tom Sawyer approach of finagling others into doing most of the work for you. How have you been able to honestly apply the “work smarter, not harder” dictum?

# Tapping Into Your SUPERPRODUCTIVITY! Five Rocket Boosters for Success



*"Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible."—Francis of Assisi, Catholic saint*

Have you ever been faced with a large task, whereupon you dismissed everything else from your mind, put your head down, and got to work? How often have you “come to” later, only to find your task is done or near-done—and hours have passed almost without you noticing?

I suspect it’s happened to you more than once. It tends to happen fairly regularly to those of us engaged with our jobs and genuinely interested in doing well. It’s kind of like highway hypnosis, except that instead of just going on autopilot, your mind and body have melded in such a way that you tap into what I call “super-productivity.” Here are five ways to enter...The Super-Productivity Zone:

**1. Stop waiting for the right mood to strike.** One clever article I recently read suggested “grumpy people” are more productive. The reason? The right mood never strikes. They’re as cranky as Grumpy the Dwarf with Grumpy Cat stomping

on his head; so instead of waiting for the right mood, they just start working. As the old saying goes, “Once begun, half done.” Keep rolling through the day focusing on the most important tasks, whether you feel like doing them or not. One hallmark of adulthood, after all, is doing what know you need to do, even if you don’t feel like it.

**2. Stop wasting your willpower!** According to psychologist Roy Baumeister in *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength* (Penguin Books 2011), we all have a limited reservoir of willpower we use up through “ego depletion.” If you use too much of your willpower on minor tasks before you take on more significant ones, your performance on those important tasks will suffer. This represents another reason to “eat that frog” earlier in the day as my friend and colleague Brian Tracy says; your full well of willpower will make the difficult easier.

**3. Bursts of attention focus your concentration better.** Like a high-tech laser, giving short bursts of attention on a project ensures better focus. When you arrange things so nothing distracts you for 30 minutes to an hour, you can get a surprising amount of work done. This is why a tidy office works best for many of us: part of your mind constantly takes in and automatically processes data coming in through your senses. If it doesn’t have anything new or subliminally exciting to distract it (like an interesting wall color), you can use more of your limited amount of attention for work.

Side note: With discretionary time harder and harder to come by, it’s important that you spend it well. You can learn more about that here: **Video - Finding Discretionary Time.**

**4. Stop fooling your mind into thinking you’re working.** No matter what you do, when you’re sitting in your office chair, your brain subconsciously thinks you’re working—even if you’ve been reading the op-ed piece in the *New York Times* or filling out a timecard. Procrastination, or even doing minor busywork or “housekeeping” chores, can seem like real work. Don’t let your mind assume whatever you’re doing is worthwhile; **train yourself to stop regularly and ask, “Hey, am I doing productive work?”** ([← click to tweet](#))

**5. Ample sleep.** You need rest to knit up the ravel’d sleeve of care, as well as to process all the new things you learned during the day. You also need time for your mind and body to recharge, and to give your subconscious mind the opportunity

to chew up ideas and knowledge, cross-fertilize, and spit out new concepts. Some will be genius, and most won't be, but it's easier to tell the difference when you're well-rested. Maintain your best sleep habits, and you'll do better work and think so much better than when you're fatigued—and you'll feel more optimistic, too.

## **A Hit of Super-Productivity**

Like the main character in *Limitless* (movie or TV, your choice), the tips above will help you tap into your maximum productive potential... without having to take a memory drug to do it. They may not always work, but they'll leave you prepared to strike productivity oil when the well comes in. As the saying goes, fortune favors the prepared. When it comes to productivity, we make our own "luck."

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### **About Laura Stack, your next keynote speaker:**

Laura Stack, MBA, CSP, CPAE is an award-winning keynote speaker, bestselling author, and noted authority on productivity and performance. Funny, engaging, and full of real life strategies that work, Laura will change mindsets and attitudes so your people can maximize productivity, strengthen performance, and get the job done right. Her presentations at corporate events, sales kick-off meetings, and association conferences help audiences improve output, increase speed in execution, and save time in the office. Stack has authored seven books, including her newest work, *Doing the Right Things Right: How the Effective Executive Spends Time* (Jan. 2016). To have Laura Stack speak at your next event, call 303-471-7401, email [email protected] com, or CONTACT US.

### **Here's what others are saying:**

"Laura Stack's session with a group of our seasoned operations managers was eye-opening. We all learned new ways to be more productive with the tools we already have. I've never seen each of our seasoned, experienced operations managers so engaged in a session. Many of our senior and mid-level leaders were wowed by what they learned and have already begun using the new techniques with their teams."

—Mary Pawlowski, Learning Design, Piedmont Natural Gas

"What I enjoyed most about your presentation was that it was not only engaging but also practical in application. I've read everything from Covey's system to

"Getting Things Done," and you presented time management in a way that is the easiest I've seen to digest and apply. Thank you for helping our system today!"  
—John-Reed McDonald, SVP, Field Operations, Pridgestaff

"Laura is an incredible speaker who takes practical information to improve productivity and efficiency and makes it interesting and fun! She has a great sense of humor and completely engaged our corporate and sales team. Laura motivated everyone to take steps to make their lives more productive and efficient.

—Molly Johnson, Vice President Domestic Sales, Episciences, Inc.

"Ms. Laura Stack's program received the highest scores in the 13-year history of the Institute for Management Studies (IMS) in Cleveland! From the 83 participants, the workshop received a perfect 7.0 for "Effectiveness of the Speaker" and 6.8 for "Value of the Content." Managers especially valued learning about task management, how to minimize interruptions, organizing with Outlook, prioritizing, effectively saying 'no,' how to set boundaries, and recognizing self-imposed challenges to time management."

—Don Gorning, Chair, Institute for Management Studies Cleveland

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# LAURA STACK, MBA, CSP, CPAE

Speaker ☺ Author ☺ Consultant



## President and CEO

Laura Stack, MBA, CSP, CPAE, is best known by her moniker "The Productivity Pro®." Laura is an award-winning keynote speaker, bestselling author, and noted authority on employee and team productivity. She is the president of The Productivity Pro, Inc., a boutique consulting firm dedicated to helping leaders increase workplace performance in high-stress environments. Laura was the 2011-2012 President of the National Speakers Association.

## Keynoter

For over 25 years, Laura's keynote speeches and seminars have helped associations and Fortune 1000 corporations improve output, increase speed in execution, and save time in the office. She is a high-energy, high-content speaker, who educates, entertains, and motivates professionals to deliver bottom-line results. Laura is a member of the prestigious *CPAE Speaker Hall of Fame*, which has fewer than 200 members worldwide) and has earned the Certified Speaking Professional (CSP) designation.

## Author

Laura is the bestselling author of seven books published by Random House, Wiley, and Berrett-Koehler, including her newest, *Doing the Right Things Right: How the Effective Executive Spends Time* (Jan. 2016). Laura's books have been published in more than 20 foreign editions, and she is a featured columnist for the American Business Journal, LinkedIn, Time Management, and Productive magazines. Laura has produced more than 50 online training programs.

## Recognized Productivity Expert

Laura has been featured nationally on the CBS Early Show, CNN, NPR, Bloomberg, the New York Times, USA Today, the Wall Street Journal, Entrepreneur, and Forbes magazine. Laura has been a spokesperson for Fellowes, Microsoft, 3M, Skillsoft, Office Depot, Day-Timer, and Xerox. Her client list includes top Fortune 500 companies, including Starbucks, Wal-Mart, Aramark, Bank of America, GM, Wells Fargo, and Time Warner, plus government agencies such as the Internal Revenue Service, the United States Air Force Academy, the Census Bureau, the U.S. Senate, and the Department of Defense.



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