

TECH SPECIAL REPORT

**WANT TO BE  
MORE PRODUCTIVE?  
STEP BACK, TAKE A  
DEEP BREATH, AND**

**GET  
STUFF  
DONE**

BY LEIGH BUCHANAN  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY HVASSGHANNIBAL

**THERE'S  
AN APP FOR THAT**  
The high-tech  
productivity secrets  
of Box, Indiegogo,  
Birchbox, and more

## Productivity Resolutions for 2018

A CEO's role comprises many big-picture responsibilities not easily crossed off a to-do list. Some ways to think about productivity in the top job:

### View delegation in terms of employee development

The most important productivity booster is delegating. But don't just shove things off your plate; rather, consider how bestowing specific new challenges helps employees along their career paths.

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### Be the master of no

Be choosier in accepting invitations and requests to participate in projects. Require inviters to explain why your presence will make a difference.

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### Conduct periodic employee and customer satisfaction surveys

Think about productivity in terms of what you should be doing to get the best possible responses from your most important constituents. If they are happy, then you are likely expending your energies wisely.

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### Get comfortable with the long term

Sure, today matters. But you should be just as focused on what your company needs to do this year—and how you will get it there.

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### Help employees get productive

Push down decision making, or limit meetings and attendees. Host an occasional brown-bag lunch to discuss tools and tactics.

—L.B.

**I****N 2006, AFTER I'D WRITTEN** an article about outsourcing R&D, I received a reader email seeking sources for a book on mobile lifestyles. My correspondent, a guest lecturer at Princeton, wanted to know whether I was aware of any “employees who have ‘outsourced’ themselves to create more time in their lives? In other words,” he wrote, “have you heard of any employees who have paid a freelancer to perform their job function unbeknownst to the boss?”

I had not, and I wasn't able to help this unknown person. Some guy named Tim Ferriss.

A year later, of course, Ferriss shot to fame with *The 4-Hour Workweek*, his have-your-cake-and-eat-it-ideally-on-a-beach-in-Aruba best-seller about upending the relationship between time and work. The book resonated powerfully with entrepreneurs, famously made twitchy by the word *delegate*.

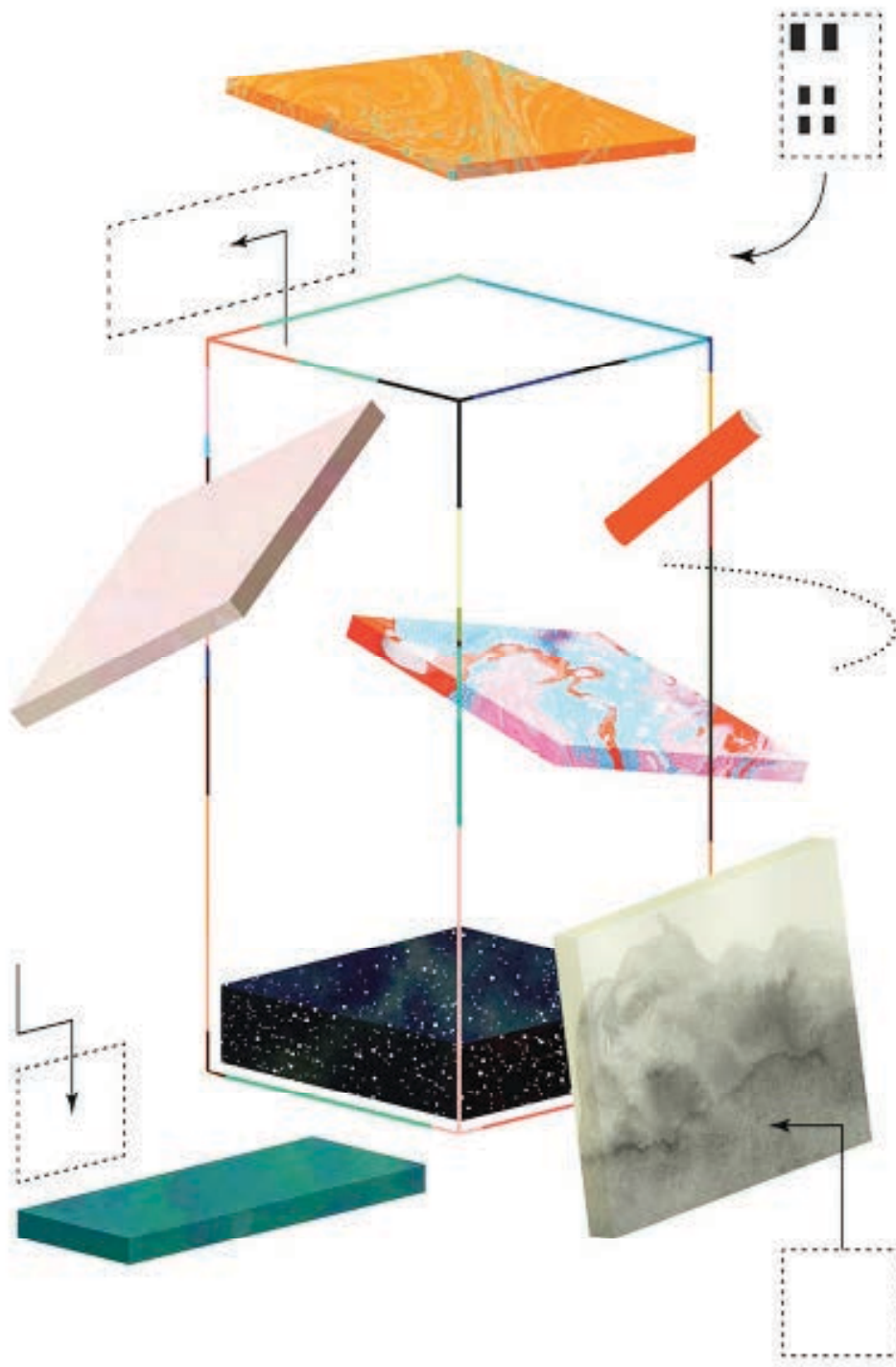
Back then, startup entrepreneurs typically had no one to delegate to. Today, founding teams are no bigger: In fact, a growing number of companies have no employees. But now there exists a slew of devices, services, and platforms eager to unburden the core competency that is you. Productivity tools organize you, facilitate tasks, or—thanks to the gig economy—lift whole responsibilities off your plate. The dividend they pay is time.

In Ferriss's philosophy, freed time should be used for living: ideally buff and large. But for many CEOs, time—like profits—is best plowed back into

the company. More time enables entrepreneurs to work, as the saying goes, *on* the business rather than *in* the business. As the company scales, that freed time creates opportunities to concentrate on complex, open-ended issues such as strategy, innovation, culture, motivation, and vision.

The earlier, blocking-and-tackling stage of entrepreneurship lends itself to traditional productivity measures. Many tasks required to launch a company typically fall under what Reb Rebele, a professor of people analytics and applied positive psychology at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, calls “decomposable problems.” Such problems “are best solved by breaking them down into constituent parts and tackling those parts one by one,” says Rebele. “A lot of productivity tools are built around that.”

By contrast, the high-level work of CEOs is less decomposable. Does that mean leaders pursuing the big picture must think differently about productivity? Yes and no, say the experts.



**W**HEN AN ENTREPRENEUR acts alone or as part of a tiny team, her individual productivity is essentially the same as the company's productivity. In a business's early days, the metrics are straightforward: "Today, I followed up on 10 sales leads and talked to three bankers and negotiated a lease for an office." It's a way of working that suits many entrepreneurs, says Peter Shankman, author of *Faster Than Normal: Turbocharge Your Focus, Productivity,*

*and Success With the Secrets of the ADHD Brain.*

Shankman is an entrepreneur himself—he is the founder of Chicago-based HARO, which matches journalists with sources. The connection between attention deficit hyperactivity disorder—Shankman characterizes the condition as having a "faster brain"—and entrepreneurship is well documented. (Many founders claim it as a badge of honor.) "An entrepreneur's mentality is 'I can do everything! I can run everything!'" says Shankman. "And it works, because they have 12

## TAME YOUR EMAIL

Stop getting sucked into your inbox, says Jocelyn K. Gleib, author of *Unsubscribe*.  
—Kate Rockwood

### ⌵ Inbox When Ready

This Chrome extension allows you to temporarily hide your inbox with the click of a button, so you can handle all your email-related tasks without getting distracted by new messages.

### ⌵ Batched Inbox

Checking email just a few times a day makes you more productive, research shows. Batched helps by hiding incoming emails in a separate folder until predesignated times each day.

### ⌵ Sende.rs

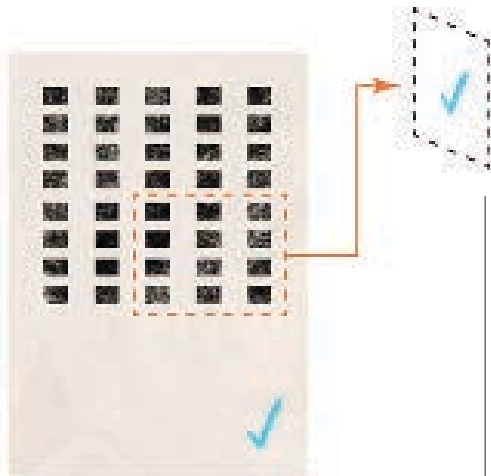
When a stranger's email pops into your inbox, Sende.rs vets the sender and sticks a summary at the bottom of the email with quick stats (LinkedIn job title, recent tweets, etc.).

### ⌵ Boomerang

Prewrite Gmail messages and schedule them to be sent later, or use Boomerang to temporarily clear messages out of your inbox to return at a time and date you specify.

### ⌵ Calendly

Kill the back-and-forth scheduling emails with a booking tool that syncs to your calendar.



## STREAMLINE BASIC HOUSEKEEPING

Whether you're signing paperwork, tracking passwords, or just organizing your day, these apps are a good start. —K.R.

⬇️ **Track your time**  
You can't maximize your minutes if you can't collect data on how they get devoured. Toggl lets you (or a team) track every second and assign that time to specific projects.

⬆️ *"The Toggl timer forces me to think twice before multitasking, which makes me more focused. Because the reports flow into my billing system, I've been able to cut my invoicing time in half each month."*

**KIM GROTTO**  
President of Grotto Marketing and Now Swim

⬇️ **Never waste time resetting a password again**  
Who has time to use distinct passwords for every site and app you visit? With Dashlane, you do. The secure password manager tracks all of your logins and automatically enters your credentials as you surf your computer or mobile device.

⬇️ **Automate everything**  
Stop doing the same manual tech tasks repeatedly. You can set up automation "recipes" with IFTTT (If This, Then That). For example, every time someone tags you in a Facebook photo, the image can be saved to Dropbox; or every time you reach your Fitbit goal, a few bucks can be transferred to a special savings account.

⬇️ **Sign faster**  
HelloSign lets you review and sign documents right from your smartphone.

⬆️ *"I like to review big agreements, and I'm the only person with final signing authority for a lot of them. But no one has time to print, sign, and scan—let alone be tethered to that equipment."*

**DAVID MANDELBROT**  
Chairman and CEO of Indiegogo

## RETHINK YOUR TO-DO LIST

Some entrepreneurs keep it in their head, others on their phone. But maybe there's another way. —K.R.



**Prioritize like crazy**  
"OmniFocus is a place to dump all the ideas and tasks that pop up—in a meeting, in the shower, on a walk. Each week, I review my projects and reprioritize them, so I'm sure I'm focusing on what needs to be done first."

**CAMERON SMITH**  
COO of Kodiak Cakes

**Share your brain with an assistant**  
"Todoist frees me up to know that everything is organized in one place. It syncs across all of my devices, and every morning I prioritize my tasks with colors. I really like that you can share it with someone, so you're not wasting precious time on a chaotic day updating a colleague on what needs to get done."

**KEN PLASSE**  
CEO of Fishpeople



**Save that stray thought for later**  
"I'm a late adopter but a total convert to Evernote. I used to leave little notes here and there, but then I would never be able to put my hands on them when I needed them most. Searching the app takes two seconds, if that."

**LEIGH RAWDON**  
CEO of Tea Collection

plates spinning in the air at one time."

Entrepreneurs—like most people—also thrive on completion. "Checking things off a list creates dopamine in your brain," says Shankman. "You get a little rush. 'Excellent! I finished that!'"

As a business scales, however, the nature of the job changes. The founder's personal productivity no longer equals the company's progress. Instead, the founder must internalize the company's goals as her own. Those goals are bigger and take longer to achieve, and progress toward them is often harder to measure than anything one person can accomplish. Imagine putting a check mark on your to-do list beside "develop culture" or "formulate vision."

The slower, more deliberative approach that's required may appeal less to entrepreneurs, says Shankman. Fast-brained people, he says, "have two types of time: now and not now." Tasks that unfold over long periods with no defined deadlines qualify as "not now," and that can devolve into "never." Shankman recommends doing something—anything—to turn far-horizon responsibilities into present-moment work. "Open up a document and put down some words," he says. "It's a start. And you need to get something done and get that feeling of completion."

**E**NTREPRENEURS ARE also big on control. That impedes their ability to delegate—among the greatest determinants of CEO productivity, says Robert C. Pozen, a senior lecturer at MIT's Sloan School of Management and the author of *Extreme Productivity: Boost Your Results, Reduce Your Hours*. The CEO "may in fact be the best person to do a certain function, which makes it hard to give it up," says Pozen. "But it is no longer productive for the company or for them if they do it." The best question the leader can ask himself: "What can only you, as the CEO, do?"

At the same time, delegating means dealing with people, "and that is inherently messier than doing it yourself," says Pozen. In some cases, managing someone you're delegating to can itself take a toll on your productivity.

Pozen suggests that, rather than look to completed tasks, the CEO internalize indicators of his company's success as metrics for his own performance. "Is the company able to recruit and retain good people? That says a lot about how you are doing personally," says Pozen.

Once they have established their own productivity practices, CEOs should turn their attention to the practices of their employees. "Things like



## STOP THE BRAIN SWIRL

Whether you want to meditate, zone out, or focus, these apps aim to up your inner peace. “I’ve worked with some amazing leaders, and the most productive ones know when to take a breath,” says Shan-Lyn Ma, co-founder and CEO of Zola. “Pencil in time for myself has helped me unlock a new passion for my work.” —K.R.

### ⬇️ Make time to meditate

“A couple of years into Birchbox, I took a meditation class, and I was blown away by how much I got out of the experience. I began using the Headspace app; it doesn’t take hours or setting up some sacred space, and it allows me to recognize that there’s always time to calm the mind.”

**KATIA BEAUCHAMP**  
Co-founder and CEO of Birchbox



### ⬇️ Minimize office noise

“We recently took down the inner walls at my company, which makes it easy to get distracted. I use Focus@Will to get in the zone and absorb information more deeply. It’s a music app that uses neuroscience to play sounds that are neither too relaxing nor distracting.”

**CARYN SEIDMAN-BECKER**  
CEO of Clear

### ⬇️ Listen and learn

“My commute is the only part of my day that’s completely mine, so I like to clear my head with podcasts. *The Tim Ferriss Show* is in a class of its own, full of ideas on how to be more productive. I love learning new time-management tricks and tips on sleeping or mindfulness hacks to help me focus, and I think part of being productive is staying open to new ways of doing things.”

**JEETU PATEL**  
Chief product and strategy officer of Box



no emails between this hour and this hour, and this is the maximum number of people who should be invited to meetings,” says Dan Ariely, a professor of psychology and behavioral economics at Duke University, and co-founder of the productivity startup Timeful, since acquired by Google. “The job of the leader is to make people better than they are naturally,” says Ariely, “and that includes helping them with this.”

**IF PRODUCTIVITY WERE** a comic strip, the supervillain would be distraction. More has been written about managing email and social media than about the meaning of life. A whole category of productivity tools corrals wandering attentions.

CEOs are certainly not immune to the social siren. But some suffer from the opposite problem. They are so consumed by their companies—their creations—that they become hyperfocused while the world around them recedes. And that can be detrimental. Great leaders have lively minds: They are curious and empathetic. Engaging widely with the world, not bound by an agenda, they think the big thoughts that produce genuine change.

In the ’90s—before the universe coalesced at our fingertips—I visited a library-supply company in Wisconsin whose CEO practiced something he called “universal scanning.” Staff members regularly pulled intriguing articles from a vast array of publications and pinned them to the walls of a room. Periodically, the CEO would enter and spend an hour or so simply browsing through the headlines. The practice, he said, broadened his frame of reference, inspired unexpected connections, and heightened his creativity. Distraction—or exposure, as he thought of it—made him better. “The enemy of productivity is that the world is really interesting,” says Ariely. “Having lots to do and think about is a blessing.”

And, yes, technology can create space to indulge that blessing. My onetime correspondent Ferriss’s research on outsourcing eventually morphed into chapter eight of *The 4-Hour Workweek*, in which he recommends that employees hire remote personal assistants to handle scheduling, research, and online errands. Having someone in India handle the grunt stuff, he says, is not an expense but rather an investment, as it “frees your time to focus on bigger and better things.”

There’s another advantage to this tech-enabled outsourcing for any founder. The ability to “manage (direct and chastise)” your virtual aide, writes Ferriss, “is also a litmus test for entrepreneurship.”

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