Nerd Productivity

15 Powerful Productivity Habits for entrepreneurs, nerds and creatives

This book is a collection of hacks, frameworks and tools that will boost your focus and skyrocket your productivity.

In these 15 Habits we will cover how to:

1. Capture tasks and commitments
2. Process and organise these tasks into well categorised and manageable action steps
3. Prioritise and schedule our most important work using powerful, time-tested frameworks
4. Strategise for execution and actually getting work done
5. Use tools to block distraction and mindsets to create focus.

- Nishant Kapoor
  Nerd Productivity

Unlike the generally misunderstood definition, productivity isn't actually about getting more done. True productivity is about achieving desired outcomes with less effort.

A good productivity system should get you working on the right things, while minimising overwhelm and anxiety.

Having studied and tested multiple productivity books and systems over the last decade of my entrepreneurial career, I've compiled a list of the 15 most powerful productivity habits that have significantly improved my productivity.

I've bundled these 15 concepts into 4 buckets, which can be thought of like phases that tasks move through.

Productivity Workflow - Phases

1. Capture

2. Process

3. Plan

4. Do
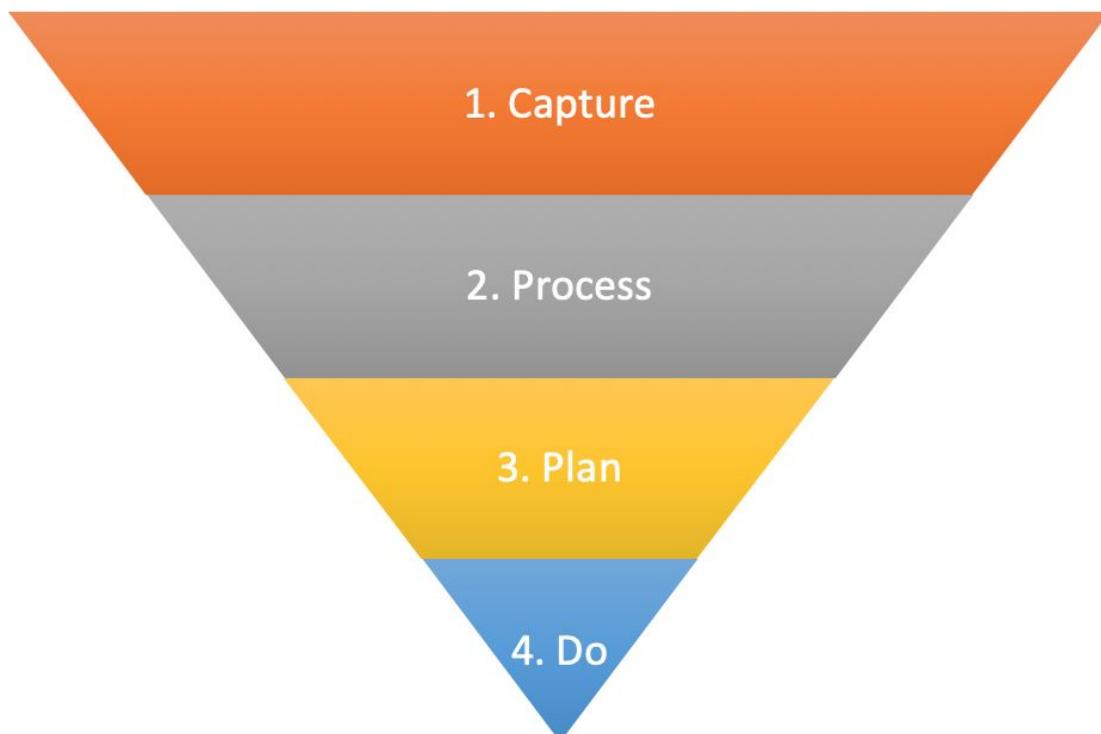
I've depicted these phases like a funnel. The idea is that not all tasks captured in the system need to be worked on.   Tasks drop out, get delegated, de-prioritised or postponed so the tasks you actually spend time working on are a select few.

When it comes to spending time in each of these phases however, you need to invert the triangle.   The maximum amount of time needs to be spent in the 'Do' phase, then the 'Plan' phase and so on.

15 Habits across 4 Phases

Phase 1 - Capture

1. Universal Capture
2. Block and filter

Phase 2 - Process

3. The 4 Ds
4. The 2 minute rule
5. Organise - A place for everything
6. Inbox Zero

Phase 3 - Plan

7. Prioritise - Opportunities vs Problems
8. Prioritise - Important Vs Urgent
9. MITs or Rocks
10. Time Allocation

Phase 4 - Do

11. Batching
12. Pomodoro Technique
13. Index Card Method
14. Single Tasking
15. Monk Mode Morning

These are not hacks. These are universal concepts or habits, which, if diligently applied, can help you reclaim your time, sanity and focus and multiply your output.

Phase 1 - Capture

1 - Universal Capture

Ideas and tasks can pop into our head anytime. They can be inspired by articles or books we read, conversations we have or they could just pop into our heads in the shower rather inconveniently.

> *"Your head's for having ideas, not for holding them."*
> *— David Allen*

Having a quick and easy way to capture an idea or task reduces the psychological strain of having to remember the task.

Knowing that the idea is captured safely allows us to dump it from our conscious mind and reduce anxiety levels.

Your universal capture system could be a small notebook you carry around with you all the time, or an app on your smartphone. An effective system should minimise the friction between something popping into your head and capturing the thought into the app or notebook.

> *"Write down anything that distracts you - google searches, random thoughts, new ideas, whatever. The point is, if you write them down, they'll stop bubbling up when you're in the zone."*
> *— Steven Corona, Lead Principal Architect at Bigcommerce, Author*

2 - Block and filter

We are constantly bombarded with emails, messages and social media feeds. Blocking and filtering are tools to minimise this incoming overload that our minds need to process.

A good universal capture system can also quickly drown you in hundreds of tasks. I'm not kidding. Some of my to-do lists run into hundreds of items.

Precisely because an entrepreneur's life can be so overwhelming, it's important to filter incoming at source - so what ends up in your multiple inboxes is worth your

time. If not, we could easily spend the next 30 years of our productive lives trying to keep up with our inboxes.

To minimise incoming we need to ruthlessly unsubscribe from all newsletter emails. Only emails that make it through our ruthless filtering and blocking mechanisms deserve to go into the inbox.

Notifications related to online shopping, banking etc can automatically be filtered out into the right folder - they'll always be there when you need them. We shouldn't waste a precious second of waking time on glancing at such emails, let alone filing them. Any system generated email that doesn't need action from you shouldn't even be allowed into your inbox. As far as possible, emails coming into your inbox should be from real people.

All notifications on your phone and computer need to be disabled at all times, more so during productive work hours.

One of the best tools to automatically filter your email is [Sanebox](#). I use Sanebox to automatically filter and organise my email and make sure only important emails show up in my inbox.

Phase 2 - Process

3 - Processing - The 4Ds

Delete, Defer, Delegate, Do

There's no point capturing thoughts and tasks in a system if you're not going to be reviewing and possibly acting on these at some point. If your subconscious mind doesn't trust your system, it won't let these tasks go. They'll lurk just beneath the surface of your conscious mind and bubble up just when you can't do anything about them - generally raising stress and anxiety levels throughout your day.

I spend 15-20 minutes every day going through all my inboxes and to-do lists and deciding what to do with each item, as follows:

1. **Delete** tasks that don't seem either urgent or important
2. **Delegate** tasks that someone else can do - even if they can't do it as well as you can
3. **Defer** tasks to a later day - put important but not urgent tasks on your calendar

4. **Do** Now that you have a shorter, more impactful list of tasks you can start 'doing' these tasks.

4 - The 2 minute rule

As you run through your lists of tasks deciding what to do with each of them, **any task that takes less than 2 minutes should be done right away.**

This is a very powerful principle, also from [Getting Things Done](#) by David Allen.

If a task takes less than 2 minutes, it's not worth the effort of adding the task to a to-do list, or even delegating it. Spending 2 minutes now, getting it done, is way more effective than having the burden of one more task on a to-do list.

Just this one rule can help you knock off a boat-load of mini-tasks while processing your inboxes.

5 - Organise - A place for everything

'A place for everything and everything in its place'

-   *Benjamin Franklin*

Also from [David Allen's GTD](#) - this concept applies to both physical and digital spaces.

Before I read David Allen, all my important papers were scattered across boxes and files. Now I have a box-file system, with categories such as utility bills, kids' school, car papers, financial docs etc. Easy to file and find the right papers.

For digital filing I use [Evernote](#). All research, interesting articles, bills, drafts, correspondence etc is dumped into evernote. [Scannable](#) is a very useful app from Evernote that saves cleaned-up versions of my photo-scans directly into Evernote.

Filing applies to email too. Every client, area of work and area of life has its own folder or tag, setup with an automatic filter. Most transactional email gets automatically filed before even popping up in my inbox.

I also categorise my tasks. Each task has a home in a list such as 'personal finance', 'home errands', 'work - marketing', 'work - technology', client ABC', 'client XYZ' etc. I use [Asana](#) as my preferred personal task management system.

I pre-allocate blocks of time during a week to each of major areas of life and work. At the allowed time slot for a particular project or area of work, I go through each list and work on the tasks I need to, and follow up with team members. This is discussed in more detail below in concept *10. Time Allocation'*.

6. Inbox Zero

Clear your inbox and your head at the same time. It feels good to have an empty inbox. But be mindful that cleaning your inbox isn't necessarily the best use of your productive time. Rather than blindly applying productivity mantras such as Inbox Zero it's better to understand the 'why' behind them.

Inbox Zero is important for two reasons.

Your inbox is not your to do list

First, and this is the key idea behind inbox zero, is that your email inbox should not be your to do list, since it isn't controlled by you. You are better off taking control of your own to do lists - processing them and prioritising them to work for you, rather than allow the rest of the world to set your priorities.

A big messy inbox creates overwhelm and anxiety.

Processing your inbox quickly uses a process called *Triaging* which works as follows:

1. Emails to act on go into your to-do list (or an action folder).
2. Emails to read or refer later go into a read-later folder or a project specific folder or get archived.
3. Emails that take 2 minutes or less to deal with should be replied to right away.
4. Remaining emails are just meant to be ignored and they should get deleted or archived.

Ultimately nothing should be left in your inbox.

I personally rarely ever make it to inbox zero though. I've made peace with having 5-10 emails still in my inbox after I'm done processing. Anything more than that causes anxiety.

You can reply to emails quicker by writing short rapid replies - no more than [five sentences](#) per email.

Phase 3 - Prioritise

7. Prioritise - Opportunities vs Problems

Now that you have your tasks processed, inboxes cleared and anxiety under control, it's time to figure out what to do when.

The biggest factor in achieving your desired outcome is figuring out the right priorities to work on.

For an entrepreneur, almost everything seems like a top priority. How do you determine what you should spend your best hours when everything seems urgent and important?

> *It is more productive to convert an opportunity into results than to solve a problem – which only restores the equilibrium of yesterday. Effective executives concentrate on the few major areas where superior performance will produce outstanding results.*
>
> *Peter F. Drucker, [The Effective Executive](#)*

As business owners we can end up spending a significant part of our day problem solving. But if we carve out a portion of the day to work on opportunities, and do that consistently every day, two things will happen:

- We'll start making real progress towards our business goals
- Over time, lesser problems and emergencies will pop up. We would've prevented most problems from showing up by consistently working on opportunities.

The point is not that we ignore problems. Unfortunately, no business is without problems and they need to be solved. The point is that we consistently make time to work on opportunities.

8. Prioritise - Important Vs Urgent

What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important.

- Dwight Eisenhower

The most common prioritisation framework is the [Eisenhower Matrix](#), which asks you to look at tasks across 2 criteria - urgency and importance.
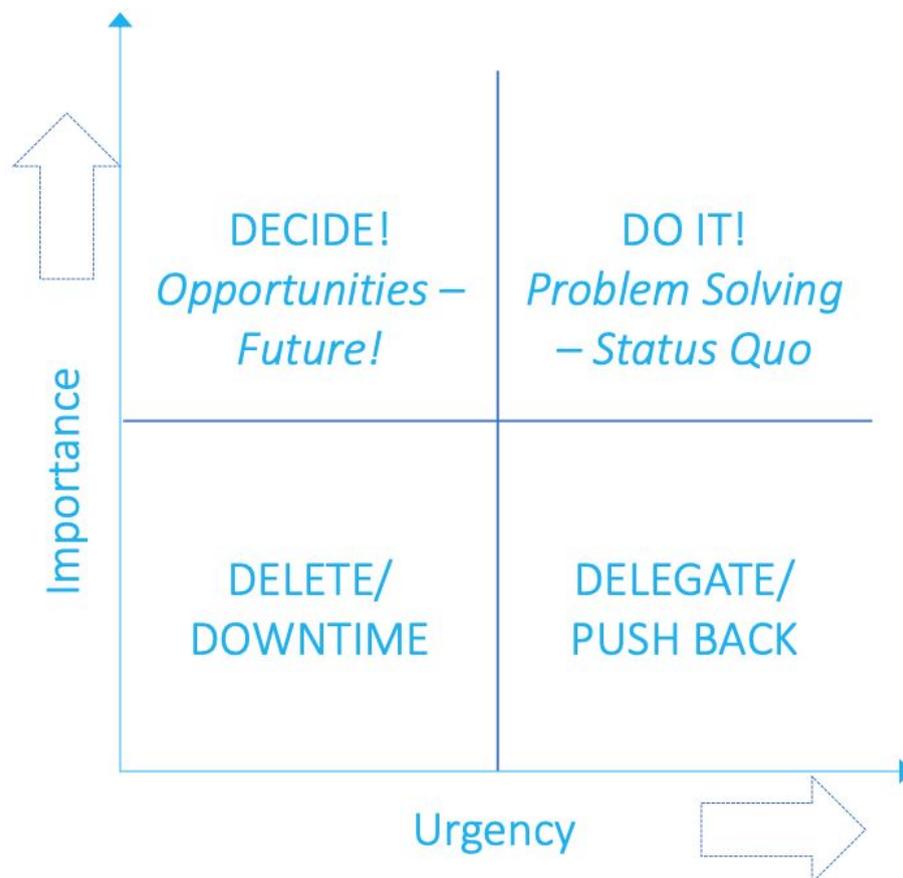
'Urgent' is easy. These tasks are time sensitive tasks that have some sort of negative implication if not done on time, and will compel you to act, quite often to the detriment of the truly important tasks.

'Most of us spend too much time on what is urgent and not enough time on what is important.'

Stephen Covey

But how do you figure out truly important tasks that aren't really urgent? By asking these 5 questions:

1. Does this task move me closer to my big goals?

2. Ask Gary Keller's "Focusing Question" from his book 'The One Thing':

   "What's the ONE Thing I can do such that by doing it everything else will be easier or unnecessary?"

3. Is this task critical to any of my ongoing, current projects? In other words, is it creating a bottle-neck in any of my projects? Will doing this task allow my team members to move forward faster?

4. Can this task be done by anybody else at least half as well? Am I the only one on my team uniquely suited to do this task?

5. Will this task take time? Do I need to spend 1 to 2 hours to make progress on this one?

Tasks that have a '*yes*' answer to most of these questions are the important tasks you need to prioritise.

If you struggle with prioritisation see this post for more frameworks to help you figure out what is truly important.

9. MITs or Rocks

Leo Babauta in his blog Zen Habits, and book Zen to Done talks about MITs or 'Most Important Things'.

> *'It's very simple: your MIT is the task you most want or need to get done today.'*
> *Leo Babauta*

Stephen Covey, author of The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People refers to the really important things in your life as the big Rocks.

> *'If the big rocks don't go in first, they aren't going to fit in later.'*
> *Stephen Covey*

Based on most popular prioritisation frameworks, your MITs or Rocks are tasks that:

- represent big opportunities
- are critical to your long term goals
- are critical to one or more ongoing projects

- you are uniquely suited to do, which can't be effectively delegated
- are difficult and time consuming.

There won't be too many tasks that fit these criteria - and these should be your most valuable tasks.

> *We often assume that productivity means getting more things done each day. Wrong. Productivity is getting important things done consistently. And no matter what you are working on,* **there are only a few things that are truly important.**
> - *James Clear*

10. Time allocation

As a startup entrepreneur what is more important - Marketing or Customer service? Product or Technology? Hiring or fund raising? As a husband and a father, what is more important - time with my family or working on my business?

When you look at a task list that includes tasks from across the spectrum of all areas of your work and life it is almost impossible to prioritise. Trying to prioritise tasks from across multiple projects is guaranteed to overwhelm you.

I struggled with this for years. The aha moment came when I was reading Steve Jobs' [biography](#). Steve Jobs would spend one day with the product team, one day with the marketing team, one day at Pixar etc. Elon Musk spends two days a week at Tesla, two days at Solar City, and a day at SpaceX . Twitter and Square CEO Jack Dorsey [splits his day in half](#), spending his mornings at Twitter and afternoons at Square.

The exact facts aren't important - but the concept '*[Time allocation before task prioritisation](#)*' is very useful for entrepreneurs, CEOs or anyone who has to manage multiple projects or departments. Even more so for entrepreneurs with family and kids.

Look at the big picture – which parts of your life do you want to focus your energy and time over the next week.

I'm a freelance consultant with 2-3 active clients or projects at any time. For me the split could look like:

- Project # 1 – 25%
- Client # 1 – 15%
- Project # 2 – 10%
- Client # 2 – 10%
- Networking/ business development – 15%

- Personal admin/ finance/ family stuff – 15%
- Business admin/ replying to emails etc – 10%

Depending on your nature of work, this split could be across marketing, finance, customer support, HR, business development, product, technology etc. This split is not static. It should change from month-to-month or even week-to-week as priorities evolve.

I allocate 2-3 blocks of 2-3 hours per week, to each major project or area of life, and schedule them in my calendar. Another term commonly used for this is [time blocking](#). These blocks aren't fixed every week. I'm very open to switching them around if something interesting or urgent pops up.

Here's how I could split this work across my week:

- Monday for Project #1 and a bit of networking,
- Tuesday for Client # 1 and get some business admin out of the way
- Wednesday for Client # 1 and Client #2,
- Thursday is for Project #2 and Project # 1
- Friday for personal and family stuff, and some spillover from the week's client or project work

Task prioritisation becomes much easier within these pre-allocated time blocks. When it's time to work on a project, I review tasks that I've dumped into this project list when I was processing my inboxes. As I'm doing this review, new ideas pop into my head. Once I'm working within the confines of this one project, I'm way more creative and productive.

Phase 4 - Do

11. Batching

Batch processing is the grouping of similar tasks that require similar resources in order to streamline their completion.

- *Michael Hyatt*

Batching is an important concept, particularly for mundane, low value tasks that just need to get done and you can't afford to hire for or delegate yet.

Doing similar administrative tasks such as replying to emails, paying bills, updating accounts or organising paperwork at one time gets them done much faster.

12. Single tasking

Every time we become distracted, it takes an average of 15 minutes to regain complete focus.

- *Michael Hyatt*

A 2014 study in the Journal of Experimental Psychology found that interruptions as brief as two to three seconds were enough to double the number of errors participants made in an assigned task.

Multi-tasking divides your focus. Multi-tasking prevents you from going deep, getting into flow.

Multi-tasking increases time spent refocusing at the cost of productive time. Multi-tasking results in mistakes and poor quality work.

Single tasking is the 'only' way to work through complex problems.

Do one thing at one time with complete focus.

13. Index card method

Silicon Valley venture capitalist [Marc Andreesen](#) has the following advice:

Each night before you go to bed, prepare a 3x5 index card with a short list of 3 to 5 things that you will do the next day.

And then, the next day, do those things.

- *Marc Andreessen*

Seems deceptively simple. Just focus on these 3-5 things. Forget about everything else. Try and strike off everything on this list.

Limiting the number of tasks forces you to pick tasks that are either very urgent or

very important, and focuses your daily effort on high impact work.

In combination with Pomodoro Technique this can be a very powerful technique.

14. Pomodoro technique

Another seemingly simple technique:

> *Set a timer for 25 minutes and devote that time to a task, or to a group of similar tasks. Take a 5 minute break. Begin another block of time or "pomodoro."*
>
> *After completing 4 pomodoro sessions, take an extended 20 minute break.*
>
> - *Michael Hyatt*

Here's my checklist for applying the pomodoro technique to my work:

- Set a timer (25 to 50 mins)
- Put phone on airplane mode
- Wear headphones – pick from 1 or 2 'focus' playlists to listen
- Sign out of all chat apps and disable all notifications
- Block out distracting websites using apps like Freedom
- Work on ONE *'cognitively demanding'* task
- Take a short 5 minute break when the timer goes off

You can switch off airplane mode now and quickly check slack, WhatsApp email etc. After a short break, repeat this process.

Try and do at least 3-4 such pomodoro sessions every day. Your output will go through the roof!

15. Monk Mode Morning

This is a concept from Cal Newport's the author of Deep Work.

Cal Newport has written about the Monk Mode morning in his blog.
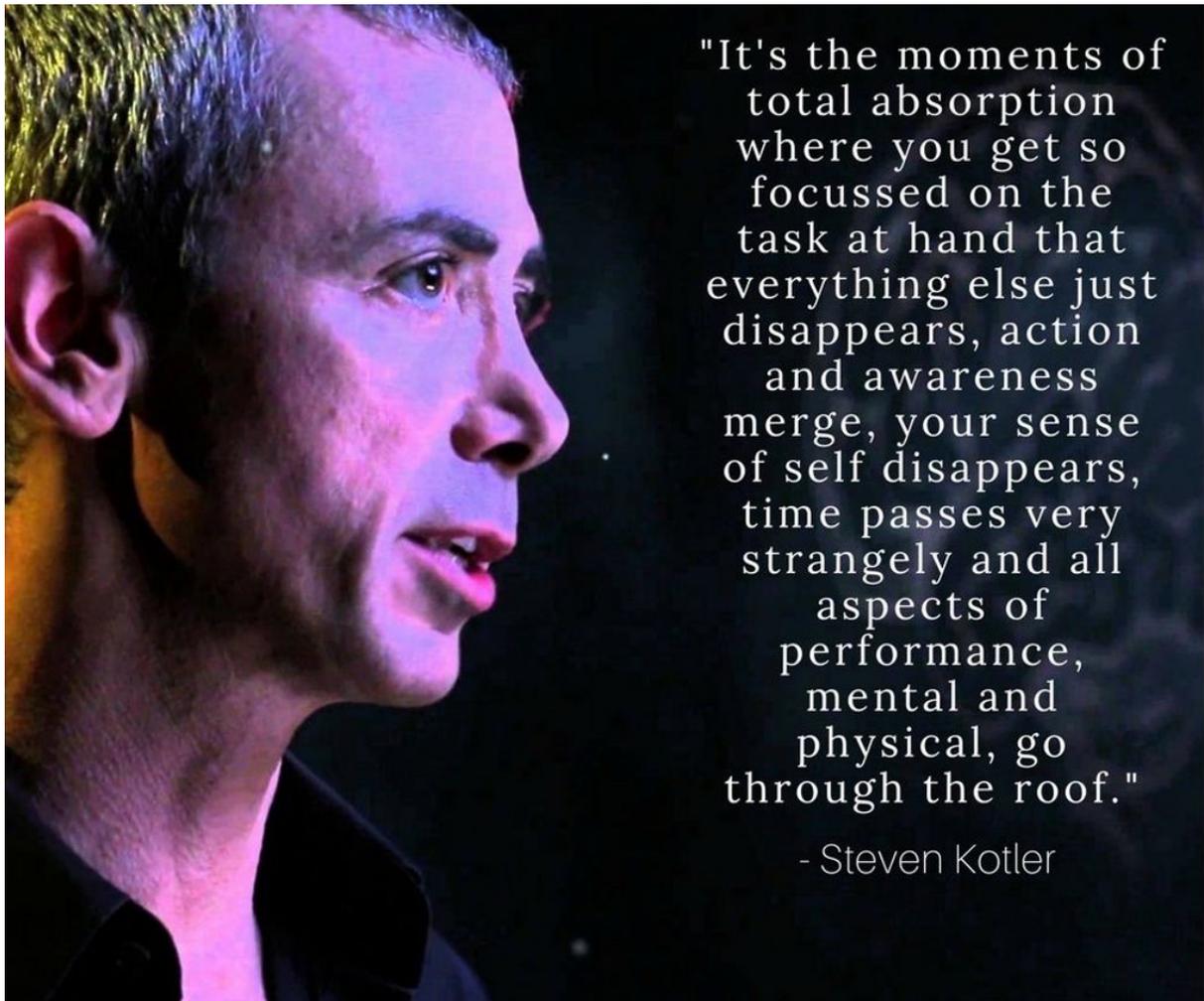
> *Between when you wake up and noon:*
> *No meetings, no calls, no texts, no email, no Slack, no Internet.*
> *You instead work deeply on something (or some things) that matter.*
> - *Cal Newport*

What does one do during '*Monk Mode*' - How does one work 'deeply'? By focussing and concentrating one one important priority, over a period of 1-2 hours till your head hurts.

The initial 5-10 minutes are tough - but once you start focusing, without distraction, you get into the 'zone'. And that is where the magic happens.

"It's the moments of total absorption where you get so focussed on the task at hand that everything else just disappears, action and awareness merge, your sense of self disappears, time passes very strangely and all aspects of performance, mental and physical, go through the roof."

- Steven Kotler

Research shows people working in a state of flow are five times more productive than they'd otherwise be.

These 15 habits have the power to change your life by making you at least 5 times more effective and productive.

So put your phone on airplane mode, switch off your wi-fi, and get to work!

> *Don't be on your deathbed someday, having squandered your one chance at life, full of regret because you pursued little distractions instead of big dreams.*
>   *Derek Sivers, [Anything You Want](#)*

About Nishant Kapoor

Nishant runs an ecommerce and growth marketing [consultancy](#) based in London, UK.

He has built and exited two ecommerce startups, and helped many consumer brands go to market as a consultant.

Nishant is also a former consultant from Ernst & Young and an MBA from INSEAD.

He is also an obsessive productivity nerd and blogs about productivity at [Nerd Productivity](#).