

# Personal Productivity with the Project Manifesto

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Rob Newbold, April, 2019

If you've read *The Project Manifesto*<sup>1</sup>, or if you've been looking into the A<sup>5</sup> Project Management System<sup>2</sup>, you might be interested in finding ways to improve your ability to focus on your work. This corresponds to the Advance step of the A<sup>5</sup> system.

Unfortunately, focus—or lack of focus—is a team sport. And maybe the people around you don't really care about focus. Maybe you work in a job that requires constant interruptions. Maybe your job feels less like a track meet and more like a pressure cooker. What can you do? Can you improve the quality of your work life without your co-workers and managers doing the same thing?

Yes.

I'll start with two trite but important principles. First, and most important: you have to believe that you have some control over the quality of your work experience. If you believe that, you've taken the biggest step towards improving it. If you are willing to try a few things, you can build your confidence by discovering what works and what doesn't. The more you find ways to better focus on your work, the happier and more productive you'll be.<sup>3</sup>

The second principle is, trust your judgment. Experiment, learn, make mistakes. If something doesn't work, fix it, or try something else. Things that work for other people might not work for you.

You could start with the ten work standards written about in *The Project Manifesto*<sup>4</sup>. Nowadays I prefer the simpler norms discussed in *Islands of Stability*<sup>5</sup>. They're based on a simple mantra: prioritize, focus, finish. Take your highest priority work, focus on it, and get it done.

I've written below some suggestions you can try, based on those work norms. Think about how these suggestions might work in your world. Come up with your own ideas and work standards. Don't be a victim of other people's lack of focus!

## Norm #1: Prioritize.

Unless your work is completely interrupt-driven, such as answering calls in a call center or serving meals at a restaurant, you **can** prioritize your work. Establish the habit: every morning, when you arrive at work, list out the important things currently on your plate. Put a number next to each item to prioritize it. Change the priorities only when you really need to. For a more in-depth perspective on personal productivity and prioritization, read David Allen's *Getting Things Done*. I also recommend waiting to start work until the critical components are ready. This is sometimes called "full kitting."<sup>6</sup> It can minimize multitasking and save a lot of time by allowing you to focus on things you can work all the way to "done."

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<sup>1</sup> R. Newbold and W. Lynch, *The Project Manifesto: Transforming Your Life and Work with Critical Chain Values* (ProChain Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> R. Newbold, *Islands of Stability: Applying the A5 Project Management System* (ProChain Press, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Research has shown that this statement is correct. Probably the best-known researcher in this area is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who has spent many years researching what he calls "Flow." See, for example, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flow\\_\(psychology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flow_(psychology)). Also check chapter 4 of *Islands of Stability*.

<sup>4</sup> These are described in Chapter 2 and summarized in Appendix A, pp.228-229.

<sup>5</sup> See *Islands of Stability*, pp.84-86.

<sup>6</sup> This is discussed in *Islands of Stability*, pp.89-90.

## **Norm #2: Focus.**

Minimize multitasking and interruptions, especially on high-priority tasks. This is hard when people are always interrupting. But usually you have some control over whether you knock off your tasks one-by-one or skip around between them. Even with interruptions, working tasks one-by-one will improve your focus. If your work requires concentrated effort, find ways to set aside and protect blocks of uninterrupted time.

Sometimes you can't stop people from asking (or insisting) that you switch to lower-priority tasks. Still, be ready to say, "no," "not now," or "yes, but," and then explain why; maybe they'll agree that you should stay focused.

There are many ways to avoid interruptions and improve focus. You can minimize the number of meetings; turn off email, instant messaging, and phones; and find quiet places to work. I know a programmer who always wears headphones while he works, even though they aren't connected to anything. It keeps down the noise and keeps people from bothering him. I like to keep my email inbox as empty as possible; the items in it are only things that still need to be responded to. That helps me make sure to respond to things that need responses, while I don't waste time sorting through things that are no longer relevant.<sup>7</sup>

When you hit a roadblock, identify obstacles to completing your task, find solutions, and communicate with those who can help.

## **Norm #3: Finish.**

Finish the task you are working on before starting a new one. If speed doesn't seem important for your job, practice finishing things. It's always satisfying to get things done. And like a relay race runner, practice making good handoffs. Tell the relevant people that you're done, especially the people receiving the work.

I recommend reporting honest task status, in terms of days remaining, to the best of your ability. This can be hard even if you don't have project schedules and no one cares how much time remains in your tasks, because people are often given every incentive not to report honest status. For example, it's common for management to say, "You will finish by this date," without asking whether it's possible. No doubt you've seen similar situations. As a result, even when people are not being intentionally dishonest, they are often wildly optimistic. Rather than trying to teach people about honesty, I advise you to teach people about variability and ranges. Study the concept of buffers, described in *The Project Manifesto* and *Islands of Stability*.

## **Norm #4: Make success a team sport.**

There are few areas in life where you can be successful without help from other people. The A<sup>5</sup> System is designed to promote partnership; Agree and Align, in particular, virtually require it. Ironically, there are a number of ways you can be a great team member—without help from anyone else.

If you respect the value of other people's time, they will be more likely to respect the value of yours. For example, instead of assuming someone can make time for you, ask, "Do you have a minute?" or "Is this a good time?" If you need to ask questions of someone frequently, save up several questions

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<sup>7</sup> You can develop your own ideas to remove distractions and improve focus. Here's one person's take: <http://www.nowness.com/day/2011/7/26/1533/miranda-july-the-future>.

so you don't interrupt them as often. At the least, this will make you a better person to work with. And you might actually find that others become more respectful of your time.

As far as possible, have meaningful conversations with people about priorities. Provoke your supervisor or co-workers to think about what needs to finish first, and what doesn't. If you can't get them to make decisions, make your own. Maybe you're not in a position to create schedules; maybe you don't need them. But it can help to understand where your work is coming from and where it's going. How does your job fit into the greater scheme of things? Why is it important? That can help you decide on better priorities.

Find non-annoying ways to let people know what you're working on and its priority. For example, you can post a sign on your cubicle that tells people you don't want to be interrupted unless it's an emergency. You can create auto-return messages in email.

Have discussions about how to improve your work environment. Would it help if everyone were respectful of one another's time? Who knows, people might even be interested in developing and practicing shared work norms.

Ideally, your project teams will get to the point where they work together to share and recover buffer time. Even if you don't have buffers or shared safety time, you may be able to figure out what's most critical and work together to get it done more quickly. Maybe you can organize others to help. In most businesses, even if they don't have buffers, speed is good—with acceptable quality, of course.

Do you have stories or ideas to share about improving focus or running the relay race? Please let us know at [publishing@prochain.com](mailto:publishing@prochain.com).