Notes on the Work Habits of Highly Successful People

A Survey of Michael Masterson's Friends and Colleagues

For this survey, respondents were asked how they organized their workday, specifically how much time they spent planning, gathering information, and taking action. These are their responses, raw and uncut...

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I don't count my general reading (newspapers, magazines, ezines, etc.) as work. If I did, that would add two to three hours per day. Almost all of that would fall into the category of information gathering. My reading for amusement (histories and mysteries) is a separate category.

Planning occupies 30 to 60 minutes per day. I try to end each day prioritizing the next day. I then begin the next day with a (short!) list of "must get dones" that day. At least once a week, I prioritize the next week and month.

And a trick I use that's similar to something you've written about. I like to have several short, easily accomplished tasks on my daily list. It's enormously satisfying to see several things scratched through in red as the day progresses. Plus, they provide a refreshing break from the longer, tougher tasks.

My biggest frustration? A lengthy list of "would be nice to get to some day" projects I haven't touched in months. One of these days I'm going to make a new resolution to work on one or two of those projects a minimum of five hours a week. Maybe even go "hunker in a bunker" for several days of concentrated effort. But don't hold your breath waiting for either to happen.

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I work about eight to nine hours a day, six days a week. Information gathering -- reading and learning, or (less common for me) pumping other people for info is probably about three hours of that. That estimate doesn't include researching and writing direct mail -- that's about three to four hours a day.

Planning in the broadest sense is probably less than an hour a day.

The rest of the time is communicating and supervising -- e-mails, phone calls, checking the progress of the eight or 10 people I interact with.

You might find it interesting that Gary Bencivenga's writing habits are about the same as mine (although not our success rates and bank accounts, alas). He says three hours a day is the maximum amount of time he can devote to writing -- pure writing, not answering e-mails, going to the toilet, and all the other stuff one has to do. And he says he spends as much time researching as he spends writing direct mail.

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For my online business, I spend an hour a week thinking about what we should do and planning it.

I spend MORE time discussing with my vendors how they will implement the tasks.

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I used to work, which I define as doing something I do for money but not for pleasure. But for the past 30 plus years, I have been on my own and do what I like to do.

My efforts include analyzing the markets each day, writing my investment newsletter, doing my hotline and trading services, reading, talking on the telephone, attending and organizing conferences, giving speeches, reading, writing academic articles and books (over 25), teaching at various schools, lecturing at academic conferences, watching TV, listening to music, traveling with my wife, children and friends, going to Broadway plays and symphonies, playing sports of all kinds, attending and participating in church and charitable activities, etc.

All this lasts all day, and I sleep about eight hours a night, and hardly ever stay awake at night worrying.

My life is pretty unstructured, so I have no idea how many hours a day I spend gathering information and how planning. I like to minimize both.

Finally, I try to avoid being "busy" and when people call and say, "Is this a good time to talk?" I usually can say, "Yes, it's always a good time to talk."

The wise Chinese-American philosophy Lin Yutang said it best: "Those who are wise won't be busy, and those who are too busy can't be wise."

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1) I usually work from 6 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., but for at least two of those hours, I'm swimming or working out... getting my daughter off to school, etc. So I'd say I actually work nine hours a day.

2) Every day I try to write copy for three hours per day. If I can do this, I know I'll write at least 10 promotions a year, and should have a successful year. The rest of the time is spent reading, researching, meeting, and working with the dozen other copywriters on staff.

3) I would say I spend an hour each day planning. Planning for the week... the month... and beyond.

Also, the way I typically do things is to know what my next project (or two) will be, in the months ahead.

So when it comes time to start my next project, I've already done several weeks worth of reading. I don't count this reading time in my "work" hours... it's what I do at night and on weekends.

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After 8 p.m. or so, I consider my "work" day done... and relax with movies, dinner out, dancing lessons, tennis... depending on the day. This is critical time and almost always scheduled.

My schedule gets squeezed when I'm on deadline for one of the books, but I try not to let anything interfere with strategic planning, preparation, working with each member of my team, writing or the time I spend with my family each day.

Also, for about 10 years, I've been loosely writing five-year goals... and keeping them updated annually. On a monthly basis at least, I take stock of where I am professionally, where we are as a business and how things are progressing with the family.

I'm also trying to learn how to take vacations.

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I maintain an elastic, accordion-like schedule in which the "major project" days can start between 6 and 7 a.m. and run through dinnertime. Lesser days may demand only a few hours of work time. On average, I spend five to six hours doing what might be described as "work." Of that, less than 20 percent is information-gathering, because clients supply basic information.

I spend no appreciable time planning. Ideas come to me in the middle of the night, and I've learned to jot them down... because otherwise the inspiration has dissolved by morning.

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As a copywriter, I spend about half the time gathering info and half writing. I used to spend a lot more time gathering info, but since I keep writing for the same markets over and over, I know the market very well and only have to gather info on the product.

I used to be so busy writing that I didn't get to spend much time planning.

Now I've broken down my days into free days, focus days, and buffer days. Buffer days are spent on planning and long-term stuff.

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Like many writers, part of my original reason for going freelance involved my inability to fit into any "9-5" routine. I'm a night owl, and have never had a regular bedtime nor wake-up time in my career. I am somewhat envious of writers who keep routines (get up at 6 a.m., write two hours, take a break, work two more hours, etc.)... but that has never worked for me.

I do NOT wait for "inspiration" -- I have trained myself to go into "writer mode" as soon as I sit at my cluttered desk, and I can reach peak creative levels within minutes. I often sit for multiple hours without a break, in a trance, writing. I don't recommend this to my students, of course, but in my case it's allowed me to be amazingly prolific.

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On Saturday I usually spend two hours on fun/interesting work-related projects (blog, oddball ideas, etc) that I don't have time for during the week.

On Sunday I spend two to four hours cleaning up last week's medium and lower priority e-mails and tasks; and planning for the coming week. Or if a big assignment is due on deadline I'll work on that here.