



The art of efficiency

Don't leak your time and resources. Put them to work.

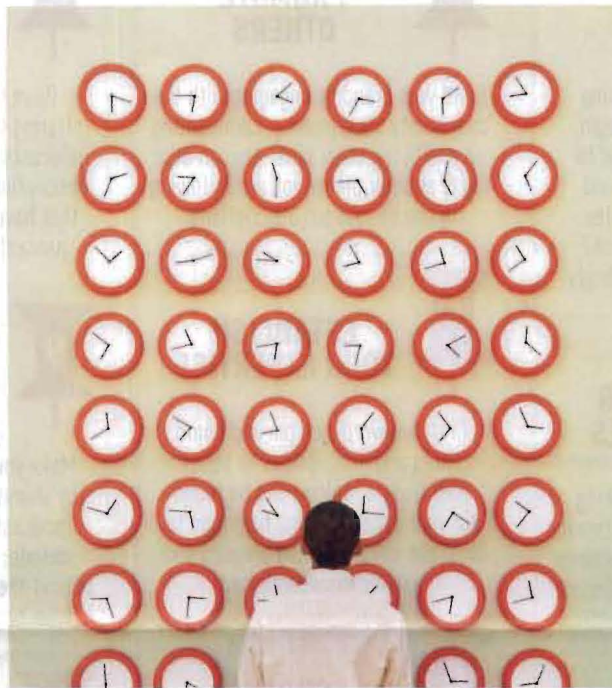
We live in an age when we work more hours and feel more stress trying to get more done. Technology, meant to simplify our lives, saps our attention and steals our time. Has the need for a more efficient operation ever been greater?

Thankfully, we can learn to become more efficient at work, individually and collectively. Management consultants and business professors have long debated the relative merits (and even the definition) of efficiency as it pertains to the business world. In highly simplified terms, efficiency concerns the cost of input for the output produced—in other words, the best use of resources and the least waste of time and effort.

One of the areas where efficiency can be optimized is the work force, through increasing individual productivity—defined as the amount of work (products produced, customers served) an employee handles in a given time.

In addition to making sure you have invested in the right equipment, environment and training to ensure optimal performance, you can increase productivity by encouraging staffers to put an end to a modern-day energy drain: multitasking. Studies show it takes 25 to 40 percent longer to get a job done when you're simultaneously trying to work on other projects. To be more productive, says Andrew Deutscher, vice president of business development at consulting firm The Energy Project, "do one thing, uninterrupted, for a sustained period of time."

To help achieve maximum productivity for clients such as Google, Facebook and Green Mountain Coffee, The Energy Project relies on a wealth of physiologi-



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—Andrew Deutscher, The Energy Project

cal data about the basic human need for rest. The Yonkers, N.Y.-based consultancy teaches that the key is a biological cadence known as the ultradian rhythm, which commands energy levels to rise and dip roughly every 90 minutes.

"At that 90-minute mark, you have to think about some sort of renewal, to put fuel back in your tank before you start the next cycle," says senior vice president of facilitation and programs Annie Perrin. She recommends encouraging workers to reach for a healthful snack, go for a short walk, listen to music or just push back from their desk, close their eyes and breathe deeply.

Collectively, more productive workers can contribute to a more efficient workplace. On the macro level, companies can become more efficient by fine-tuning the methods of the so-called lean movement,

spawned from Toyota's highly collaborative and famously efficient production system.

The healthcare industry is one that has made great strides in workplace efficiency through lean management. Craig Vercruyse—COO for California Pacific Medical Center, part of Sutter Health, an extensive network of doctors and hospitals—says some Sutter facilities have rearranged their medication rooms to cut the time nurses need to gather supplies. "If you save a minute for every nurse, and multiply that by the number of times the nurses go into the medication room, now it's material," Vercruyse says.

But lean, efficient management is about more than incremental savings. "Lean is kind of a culture and philosophy," says Klaus Lemke, managing principal with Minneapolis-based Lean Project Consulting,

who preaches new ways to generate efficiencies. In the construction business, for example, lean could mean getting the subcontractors on a project—architect, electrician, plumber, landscaper, etc.—working as a team to complete the job more quickly. Hiring a standard contractor based solely on the lowest bid could result in a project that goes over budget or past schedule—and this can affect a business's reputation and long-term performance.

"When lean is working correctly," Lemke says, "it focuses on the value stream." Efficiency at its best.

—Christopher Hann

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