



A Guide to
**Purposeful
Productivity**

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Hiya!

I'm a designer, website developer, Apple Mac addict, app maniac and creative entrepreneur. I live in Johannesburg, South Africa where I publish content on our blog www.thevisionboard.net, hoping to help entrepreneurs like you do their best creative work.

For over a decade I have designed user experiences, built content management websites, developed and integrated online marketing strategies and consulted on e-commerce and productivity.

Born with a love in all aspects of design and a super power to understand technology quickly has fueled my love of mobile apps and how they can improve my lifestyle, productivity and personal branding even Sam my Golden Retriever loves the extra time I can now spend with him :-)

In 2017, we started our blog as a place where we could highlight our favorite mobile apps and native software tools which are proven to be the best but however not necessarily the latest.

The goal of this guide is to help you get the most out of your time, energy and attention. I want to help you find the right mindset, tools and resources for the job so that you can become more productive and efficient and then get back to what matters to you most.

The category that people gravitate to the most when searching for apps is productivity, time management and focus. They want to be as efficient as possible in order to make the most of their time and attention.

What you'll find in the following chapters is a series of thoughts, ideas and reviews on the processes that I use daily .

This guide is here to serve you by giving you a jump-start on productivity.

Enjoy!

Paul vd Merwe



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Productivity

One of the most persistent and popular strategies in productivity is the notion of tackling your most important thing first thing in the morning when your willpower is at its strongest.

The willpower is self-evident. Our days are increasingly filled with distraction and unexpected disruptions. If you make a point of doing one important thing before exposing yourself to the onslaught you can ensure that you make continual progress on things that matter.

I'm in charge of design, development, administration, customer support, marketing, content strategy, and to mention, actually doing the work of writing and publishing.

*I could spend hours every day on email and other admin tasks.
Or, I could spend hours every day on my most important tasks to create something.*

If true productivity is doing that which is the most important, then it means that productivity is not ultimately based on efficiency, but rather vision and values.

This is why having a life vision and life goals are so powerful.

With them, you can define what it looks like to actually be productive - not just busy.

It is in the area of work that this fight to be meaningfully productive is perhaps the most difficult. Our workplace, workflows, bosses, and meetings all center around the act of being busy with little in place to recognise or reward productivity.

Productivity "hacks" and "tricks" that promise real and lasting change apart from a foundation of personal values, vision, and integrity are merely skin deep.





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The foundation of productivity is having values (*purpose*), vision (*priorities*), and the personal integrity to walk them out.

Ask yourself this:

- What is most important to you in life?
- What are your most valuable relationships?
- What are the values you most want to impart to others?

Answer those questions and you've got a strong foundation to direct how you spend your time and energy. Because now you can measure your tasks against your vision and values and use them to define meaningful productivity for your life.

Your daily time-management schedule

Consider this with your current schedule.

- Do you feel content, balanced, and rested?
- Is your schedule simple enough that you control it?
- At the end of the day, when you look back at how you spent your time, do you feel content? Or do you feel frustrated at all the things you didn't do and all the fires you had to react to and put out?
- Did you spend your time on things that matter most to you in more than just one area of your life?
- Is there an area of your life that dominates your schedule and causes other areas of your life to get out of balance?
- At the start of your day, do you feel rested and prepared to do awesome things? Or do you feel behind before you even begin?

Your answers to these questions can help you determine if there is any extra time in your schedule.

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When we have extra time in our schedule...

Imagine waking up in the morning and being able to spend time doing what you want to do.

Being able to go for a run, make a healthy breakfast and still have time to prepare for work and begin your day doing the things that are the most important.

Extra time in your schedule means your day has breathing room.

That breathing room means two things:

1. You can set aside time for doing the things that are most important;
2. There is space to account for the unexpected.

That's what extra time is all about!

Sabotage

Our environment has a tremendous impact on our happiness, focus, and productivity, but most of us just accept our surroundings the way they are.

Do you know people who “don't have time,” who are “so busy?”

I used to think that the busier I was, the more important I was.

The more people who wanted me to do stuff for them, the more meetings I attended, the more design projects I was in charge of – all of it was proof that I was important.

There's a difference between having a full schedule and being busy.

My schedule is still super full, but it's full of all the things I am choosing to do.





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Breathing room

Does your mind have breathing room?

Do you have a strong distaste for distractions?

I totally get it!

You're sitting down to work on a project, but lets say after fifteen minutes you hit a wall.

What then?

Do you instinctively reach for your phone to check Facebook?

Do you switch over to the Twitter app or check your email inbox?

Or do you stay focused?

When you are trying to focus on deep creative work, don't give up after 15 minutes.

Stick with it for at least an hour.

It's not easy to maintain breathing room in your schedule, especially at the beginning, when you need time change from your old habit and establish a new one.

So if you're not sure where to start, here goes...

Just **say no** to the next request that doesn't resonate with you or line up with what's most important to you!



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Creative work

Once you've carved out the time you need to work when you do sit down to focus, do you know what it is that you're going to work on?

Are you able to spend an hour or more of your time working without interruption?

For me I've set aside three hours in my day, to do my most important creative work, without interruption.

- I put my iPhone in Airplane mode.
- I set the vacation responder on in Gmail - *With a polite message and*
- Put on some awesome tunes.

Having a set my time for deep creative it's liberating.

The days when I know I'll have those hours of uninterrupted time are the days I look forward to the most.

Not only do I look forward to the task and process themselves, but I also love the creativity and productivity that is produced during the session.

"The people who achieve extraordinary results don't achieve them by working more hours. They achieve them by getting more done in the hours they work." – Gary Keller



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Just checking in!

For the times I do want to use my iPhone when I'm waiting in line, I've come up with a few alternatives to just checking my social media channels.

- Open up Evernote and continue adding content for my next post
- Review Todoist to check what task is possible to accomplish during the downtime
- Check into Asana for any updates by my team on projects I'm working on
- Access my Gmail Inbox app to respond to any urgent emails
- **And sometimes I don't take my phone out at all**

The whole point of having these alternatives is so that we don't merely default into the passive consumption of meaningless content.

Take advantage of those downtime moments, and allow your mind to rest for a bit. Or, engage by doing something productive which you can use the next time you've scheduled your deep creative work time.



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Read

I generate content around productivity apps, apps to help you with time management and efficiency, apps for social media engagement, apps that streamline business processes and enhance your personal branding, however, an app does not have to reside and function only in the digital arena but could also be a physical object which can provide you valuable insight into business productivity and processes, social engagement and personal branding.

One of my favourite downtime activities is visiting my favourite book stores (Exclusive Books / Skoobs) and trolling through the productivity/business section, and just having the option to sit down and read without the need to purchase, however 99% of the time I get the book anyway!

There is something to be said about books.

Books are tools, an app in physical form. Use them as you see fit.

- If there's something you like, highlight it.
- If there's something you hate, scratch it out.
- Dog-ear the pages if you want to come back to them.
- Deface them!

Add them to your downtime!

I dare you?

Try going a whole week with no television, no news, and no social media.

If that's too radical for you lets start off with perhaps a whole weekend with no email.

Or even a whole day without any social media at all.

I dare you!



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App Recommendations

From Mac and iOS apps, to books, paper and pencil, these I use daily!

- Evernote
- Todoist
- Grammarly
- Pushbullet
- LastPass
- Zapier
- The One Thing



www.evernote.com

Evernote

This has to be the most used app in my productivity suite. I use it for all manner of notes from quick on the fly notes to detailed in-depth research, website project development notes and of course my blog where all my thoughts and app reviews are stored. I love the fact that UI is so flexible and open, linking notes to notebooks, sharing, screen grabs, Google Drive and Dropbox file integration, reminders, task scheduling, the list goes on...

Evernote has long been a leader in the note-taking and note-syncing space, though the company has taken its fair share of criticism in recent years for adding excessive features without polishing core ones, and most recently, changing its pricing and tiers of service.

A free account will let you use Evernote locally on only two devices, plus in any browser. It's by far the biggest limitation of using the free account, and it seems all the more severe for longtime users, give that Evernote historically always gave free members unfettered access across all their devices.

There are some great features on the free account, including the ability to search any text found in images. Imagine taking a photo of a whiteboard or a page of a book and being able to search for the words on it. It's superb.

Evernote is one of those applications that you either get or struggle to understand. It's so flexible and open that when you first start using it, you can easily get blank-page syndrome.

On the company's blog, you can find tips and use cases about Evernote, which can help you understand the service's value.

In brief, Evernote is a place to record and save all your thoughts, notes, photos—whatever you upload—in the cloud so that you can get to all of it from your computer, smartphone, tablet, or anywhere you have an Internet connection and a browser.



www.todoist.com

Todoist

This one's the business! And has to be in everyone's arsenal of productivity apps. Praised as a life-changing app by The Guardian, USA Today, the New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Forbes, Lifehacker and more, it needs to be said upfront that Todoist is such a versatile and in-depth app that I will not 'To-do-ist' justice in just one review. That was weak !-)

This simple, clean and functional app can be used to manage tasks and projects anywhere. At home. At school. At work. Online. Offline. And best of all it works on every device or platform you can think of!

Todoist Premium Account offers more useful features than any other to do service, so what I am going to do over the following months is add to this review with how-to's, video references and related news covering the following powerful features:

- *Subtasks - Achieve more by breaking big tasks into smaller sub-tasks (multi-level)*
- *Subprojects - Manage complexity by breaking big projects into smaller sub-projects (multi-level)*
- *Share and collaborate - Share projects, delegate tasks and discuss details - on any device or platform*
- *Notifications - Get notified when important changes happen via emails*
- *Intuitive dates - Easily add due dates using normal language, such as "monday at 2pm"*
- *Powerful recurring dates - Create repeating due dates naturally like typing "every friday at 8am"*
- *Multiple priorities - Focus on what's important using Todoist's color-coded priority levels*
- *Reminders - Get reminded via email, push notification or SMS. Also, receive location-based alerts when on-the-go*
- *Comments - Add as many details as you want using task comments. Or attach PDFs, spreadsheets or photos*
- *Labels and filters - Put tasks into contexts via labels, a great way to become even more organised. Create custom filters that fit your workflow.*

Shoo, that's a lot!



www.grammarly.com

Grammarly

All through my design career, I have been renowned for my spelling, punctuation and grammar errors.

Sean a colleague I work with regularly supplies feedback in hilarious Asana notes on my spelling when working on my plethora of web development projects. Sometimes I feel I should purposefully create mistakes just to get a reply back to lighten up my day.

I'm not sure how I came across the Grammarly extension but what a gem it has been since installing, I've never looked back, however, I have started to receive fewer hilarious notes from Sean.

The service goes beyond the basic spell check and grammar check built into the word processor, as Grammarly can identify correctly spelt words that are used in the wrong context and helps me write mistake-free in Gmail, Joomla, Twitter, LinkedIn, and anywhere else I write on the Web.

Once installed there's no opening the application it just performs seamlessly in the background and lets you know when there is an error. The free browser extension for Chrome is also available for Firefox and Safari. If you're working on Mac OS X there is a native app for your desktop and Windows MS Office.

Once you register your new account, you will start to receive weekly emails with personalised insights and performance stats (one of our most popular new features). Working on a large project, an essay, or a blog post? No sweat. You can create and store all of your documents in the online editor.

The Free Account works adequately for my needs yet with most online services you can upgrade acquiring additional superpowers.

Their Twitter and Facebook Channels are alive with great content and writing references and are well worth following!



www.pushbullet.com

Pushbullet

So I'm reading this fascinating article posted by proto.io on my iPhone around why designers need to incorporate design sprints. A reminder comes through from Todoist giving me a nudge in something which I need to do right away.

So what do I do?

Not wanting to come back to reading the article on my phone, I simply share the link and push it to my browser on another computer at the office where I can finish reading the post... Pushbullet

Pushbullet connects your devices, making it easy and automatic to share almost anything between them. The app is simple, effective and powerful and can be installed on Chrome, Firefox and Opera as well as your Android and iPhone device! Not only can you push from your phone to your computer desktop, but you could also push data in the reverse direction: from your desktop to the phone. Or from one device to many others. Or even from your device to friends!

Pushbullet also has its own Channels you can subscribe to that will send you updates.

These are a bit like custom RSS feeds, but instead of being consolidated in a reader app, they go straight to your notification shade.



www.lastpass.com

LastPass

As a designer and website developer I have a plethora of online accounts for services, software and not to mention my top mobile business apps that I use daily.

Having to remember all my passwords was a tedious task.

Now you may ask why not use the same password for everything?

Using the same password for all of your accounts is really dangerous as it's like having one key that unlocks every door in your life. What would happen if that key got lost? When you share login information on multiple websites, even the best protected websites become only as secure as the weakest site that uses your same login information. On top of which some sites require special characters, uppercases and numbers in a single password. Writing them down in a little black book or storing them in Evernote or any doc management app will now be a thing of the past.

Enter LastPass, this nifty web browser and mobile application stores your usernames and passwords when you create accounts online. So when you return to the site to login Lastpass remembers your sign up credentials and logs you in automatically. The accompanying mobile application does the same so you will never have to remember or search for passwords again.

The browser and mobile app interface is beautiful and easy to use with features to categorise passwords into folders. A password generator to create super strong passwords. The ability to share login credentials with other LastPass users and everything you save is synced automatically, so your passwords are available everywhere you need them.

What more can I say, get started today for free and join the millions managing their passwords - you'll wonder how you lived without it!



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www.zapier.com

Zapier

Now let's have a little fun with some automation.

For non-technical people, this could be a way of showcasing your secret programming skills to your colleagues and keep them wondering "how the hell are they doing that?"

Zapier is simply an online tool that helps you connect Gmail, Google Docs, Evernote, Google Calendar, Dropbox, Asana, Google Drive, MailChimp, Trello, Twitter, LinkedIn and Freshbooks to name a few and carries out automated functions.

You don't need to know how everything works, but for conversational purposes here goes. The automation works basically on "triggers" and "actions" well in laymen's terms an "if this happens, then do that" function.

An example of a "trigger" that you could set up in Zapier might be receiving an email in Gmail from a certain address, an "action" might include receiving an SMS notification. Therefore this Zap will send you an SMS notification every time you receive an email from a certain client in your Gmail account.

That's pretty cool hey!

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www.the1thing.com

The One Thing

*One of my favourite books is **The One Thing: The surprisingly simple truth behind extraordinary results** by Gary Keller and Jay Papasan*

It's the first book on time management that has worked for me.

*The book starts off with a beautiful Russian Quote -
"If you chase two rabbits, you will not catch either one".*

Then the topics, resources and practical advice focuses on how to be productive and concentrate on "The One Thing" during your day.

I just love this saying by Gary Keller, which is repeated throughout the book. I've given it a slight tweak and use it as my morning mantra:

**What's the one thing I can do (today)
such that by doing it
everything else will be easier or unnecessary**

This book is a must read for anyone who feels overwhelmed by too many distractions and is stressed out by the barrage of emails, text, tweets, messages, meetings and the expectation to respond instantly.

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Celebrate Creativity

How would you define a successful creative career?

There are two important elements: creative freedom and financial stability.

So, let's define success as having the ability to do creative work we're proud of and to keep doing that work.

It's different for each person and changes with all sorts of factors like skills, passion, and even geographic location. It is important to define creative success in such a way that it doesn't require a particular location, vocation, or paycheck.

However, there is more to it than creative freedom and financial stability.

Something else is also critical to our long-term journey of doing our best creative work

We need a healthy inner work life.

Our emotional and motivated state is just as important as our finances, tools, work environment, and overall creative freedom.

When our emotional and motivated state – our inner work life – is strong and positive, then we are most likely to be at our best in terms of creativity and productivity.

Our lives are ever-changing. As are our interests, priorities, and availability.

It's worth the effort to take a look at our systems and tools to make sure they are still the ones serving us and not the other way around.

