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Quick and easy IT productivity wins

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Big tech projects can provide huge long-term payoffs in IT efficiency, but sometimes it's the little things that have the biggest impact on productivity. After all, it's often those details -- meetings, email, menial tasks -- that keep you from tackling the important issues right away.

We talked to several tech pros and came up with eight quick ways to boost IT productivity without investing tens of thousands of dollars or six months of resources.

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Some you can implement right now. Others may take time, but rest assured, each will pay off handsomely in the long run -- so what are you waiting for?

IT productivity win No. 1: Break the meeting habit

According to recent surveys, IT staff spend nearly six hours a week in meetings that more than 70 percent say is time wasted. It's little wonder then that for many organizations "meeting" is a four-letter word.

Of course, face-to-face sit-downs can't always be avoided, but you can minimize their productivity drain by changing your meeting habits.

Meetings are about making decisions, not about sitting around waiting for everyone to say their piece. The quicker you reach consensus, the faster you can get back to doing real work.

Step No. 1: Remove all chairs from meeting rooms, suggests Patrick Srail, director of product management at News Corp./Myspace. Being forced to think on your feet will bring meetings to a head much more quickly.

Srail's other secrets? "Cancel all meetings that don't have an agenda, and repeat all action items at the end of each meeting," he says. "Meetings without action items are basically status updates, and those don't need to be in the form of meetings."

Instead of convening in a conference room, get status updates via email or chat, run slide presentations and product demos remotely using services like GoToMeeting or WebEx so people can view them without leaving their desks, and replace some in-person face time with video chat. That will save the time you waste schlepping to the conference room and waiting for laggards to roll in.

"Visual information communicates so much more than voice-only, your meetings will move more fluidly," adds Aaron Charles Sylvan, president of Sylvan Social Technology, which helps small businesses develop viral websites. "Also, since it compels both parties to pay attention, calls are brief and to the point -- instead of one person rambling while the other starts checking their email."

Another, seemingly paradoxical, way to reduce the number of pointless meetings is to increase the availability of places to meet, advises Rick Brenner, principal of Chaco Canyon Consulting.

"One of the drivers of periodic team meetings is the need to reserve conference rooms well in advance," he says. "Some teams meet even when there is little real need to meet, just because 'Tuesday at 10 is our regular meeting.' Having plenty of conference rooms eliminates the need to have meetings unless they're justified by the situation."

IT productivity win No. 2: Kill your email

Remember when email and IM were a productivity godsend? Fire off a question and get back to work while somebody else fetched the information you needed.

Those days are over, thanks to the deluge. According to the Radicati Group, the volume of email, IM, and spam is increasing by 20 to 25 percent per year. Managing all those messages is getting in the way of real work.

Rule No. 1: Turn off alerts for new messages so they don't distract you, says Stever Robbins, productivity expert and author of "9 Steps to Work Less and Do More." In other words, check your messages when you want them, not when they want you. Second, close your email and IM clients periodically throughout the day, and let everyone know you're off the electronic leash during those hours.

"You'll give yourself interruption-free brain cycles while still keeping in touch with colleagues as needed," Robbins says. "People can still call you if something's an emergency. And tell people in your email signature, 'I only check email 3 times a day, at 10 a.m., 1 p.m., and 4 p.m. Call if you need something more urgently.'"

People also tend to overuse email when other tools are more appropriate. Need to share large files with coworkers? Use a [cloud storage service](#) like [Box.net](#) or OfficeDrop, or a utility that syncs online storage across various devices such as [Dropbox](#) or SugarSync. They'll send you an alert when files are added or updated. Need to collaborate on a document or a presentation? Google Docs or [SharePoint](#) are far preferable to shuttling new versions back and forth via SMTP.

And when you finally check messages, actually deal with them, adds Alexander Pasik, CIO of the [IEEE](#). He suggests having no more than 30 messages in your inbox at any time, and keeping only those requiring action items. Instead of laboriously filing each message in the proper folder, keep them in one place and use search tools to find messages as you need them.

"Many professionals have adopted bad habits such as allowing their inboxes to contain hundreds if not thousands of emails, many of which are unread," he says. "Simple email management can greatly increase productivity."

IT productivity win No. 3: View more, print less

It's no secret that the less time you spend switching between email, browser, spreadsheets, and your line-of-business software, the more you can get done. The productivity gain from being able to see all of them at once more than offsets the costs of a larger or a second monitor, says Pasik.

"The weakest link that diminishes productivity in the flow of information is the 'last two feet' -- that is, the distance between the monitor and the user," he says. "Humans can process far more information that can be effectively displayed on small screens. If users are given large monitors, they can see their emails, calendars, Web browsers, and other productivity tools simultaneously."

Instead of one huge display, Michael Bogobowicz, a consultant with Citrix Systems, uses two -- one stacked on top of the other.

"Having multiple monitors can greatly improve the amount of work done when in the office because more info is visible, and less time needs to be spent searching around windows," he says. "My preferred setup is actually two vertically stacked monitors as there's less visual distance between information than in a horizontal setup."

Another benefit: Being able to display, say, your entire calendar or every column in a large spreadsheet means you're less likely to print it out, says Pasik.

"Deploying large monitors is an incentive for giving up printers," says Pasik. "You'll print less, contributing to a greener environment."

That means you'll also spend less time going to the network print station to get your printouts, hassling with paper jams or toner issues, and filing or recycling paper. Your help desk people will thank you too; according to IDC, IT departments spend 15 percent of their time on [printer-related issues](#).

IT productivity win No. 4: Free up your help desk

Help desk techs spend a lot of time fixing the same obvious problems. The more no-brainer stuff you take off their plates (like [password resets](#) or [printer maintenance](#)), the more time they can spend on real productivity killers.

For example, every two weeks, Richard Casselberry, director of IT operations for networking vendor Enterasys, meets with his internal help desk department to review the questions they get and brainstorm solutions. One quick fix: Increase the number of incorrect passwords users are allowed before they're prevented from logging onto the network. Gartner Research estimates that password resets alone are responsible for 20 to 50 percent of all help desk calls. By boosting failed attempts from 3 to 12, Enterasys was able to slash support calls without adversely affecting security.

Don't sweat small stuff like printer repair, suggests Pamela Morin, customer communications specialist for managed print services provider Reliable Technologies. If a printer fails, have a replacement ready to go on a rolling cart you can plug in immediately, then send the broken one out for maintenance. That will keep the business customers happy and free up IT pros from time-consuming mechanical problems below their pay grade.

And while remote access utilities like GoToMyPC or LogMeIn can allow your techs to ferret out problems on end-user machines without time-sucking phone calls or email, sometimes it's actually more productive to make a "house call" to the user's desk, says Matthew Podowitz, consultant at The IT Value Challenge.

Many end-user problems are more about business processes than technical issues, he says -- things you can't see by rooting around someone's hard drive. A quick in-person discussion can often streamline the support process.

This is especially true when it comes to supporting C-level executives and their personal assistants. Offering top management concierge-level support will raise the perception of IT's value, which can result in productivity gains down the road, thanks to increased funding.

"The fastest and easiest way for an IT department to increase the perception of its productivity with those who control the budget is to provide them with direct and highly responsive service," Podowitz says. "Give the C-suite concierge service and the perception of productivity will inevitably rise, and often generate support for the staffing and projects IT needs to actually increase its productivity."

IT productivity win No. 5: Write it down, get it done

It may sound too simple for words, but writing down the little things can not only make you more productive, it can also free brain cycles for bigger-picture thinking.

Mark A. Gilmore, president of strategic consulting firm Wired Integrations, says he keeps a notebook listing all of his daily tasks and reminders so that he can quickly whip through to see where he's at.

"I have found that with the hectic schedule most IT shops keep, they often forget what they were doing two hours ago, let alone two days or two weeks ago," he says. "Keeping a simple notebook will resolve that issue and improve both communication and productivity within their department and company as a whole. It may seem simple, but you would be amazed at how few people actually do it."

It doesn't have to be an actual notebook. Online task managers like Remember the Milk and Microsoft Exchange Tasks make it easy to create to-do lists you can access from any Web-connected device, while software like [Evernote](#) and [Microsoft's OneNote](#) allow you to organize disparate but related files like Word docs, Web pages, photos, email messages, scanned business cards, and other materials in one place.

"I offload the job of remembering tasks to software," says Bogobowicz. "It's better at remembering than I will ever be, and it exists on phones, tablets, and computers, so I always have the lists available whenever a task comes up or gets completed. Categorization allows the same software to run different aspects of my work and life at the same time, so I don't have to mix them together or learn different systems."

IT productivity win No. 6: Stop micromanaging

If you can't get your work done each day, there's a good chance it's because you're busy doing someone else's job, says Chaco Consulting's Rick Brenner. Inexperienced managers in particular are often guilty of taking their old jobs along with them to their new assignments, which leads to micromanaging and a host of other problems.

There's no [quick fix for micromanaging](#), but there is a fast way to figure out if this is your problem. Start by making a list of things you're doing that you shouldn't be doing, then list the parts of your job you don't get to each day. As you winnow the first list, the second one will also shrink, when you realize all of the other things you should be doing but aren't.

"You've got to ask yourself, 'What is my job?'" Brenner says. "With most of my clients, part of their job is to develop the people who are working for them. When I ask them, 'What did you do today to develop someone else's skills?' the answer is usually, 'Nothing.' They're not doing their jobs."

Stepping in and doing the job for your reports only makes the problem worse, Brenner adds. The key is teaching your staff the skills they need to stand on their own. That may require outside training, allocating more resources, or finding ways to reward productive workers without necessarily promoting them into management.

IT productivity win No. 7: Get social

Giving employees free reign to spend all day on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube is not the path to productivity. But encouraging them to use Web 2.0-style enterprise collaboration tools can be.

For example, the IT staff at direct marketing firm InfoCision uses SharePoint blogs to distribute information, says Doug Backus, senior manager for enterprise architecture.

"We have an IT group of 100-plus individuals with vast amounts of knowledge on multiple topics," he says. "In an effort to share that knowledge more effectively, we've begun to push the use of team and personal blogs. We have SharePoint, so this is a very easy site to create. Even without SharePoint, though, there are free tools available via the Web Platform Installer that make it easy for any organization to disseminate its knowledge."

[Enterprise social networks](#) like Yammer, Spigit, and Clearvale allow employees to collaborate on projects and create a common corporate culture, no matter where they may be physically located. For example, employees at gaming network IGN Entertainment's U.S., U.K., Australian, and Canadian offices use Yammer internally to critique each others ideas, says Greg Silva, vice president of people and places for IGN.

"Yammer gives our leadership team the opportunity to see which employees are consistently contributing ideas and adding to the conversation," he says. "And because we operate in multiple locations worldwide, it gives our employees the opportunity to engage in any discussion, no matter where it started."

Bienvenido David III, CEO at Java development company TeamEXtension, uses Harvest Co-op, a Twitter-like tool that allows his team to track in real time what anyone is doing at any time.

"We use it more for keeping track of resources instead of keeping track of projects or tasks," he says. "If someone is working on something that's not planned and might affect a project -- like side requests from bosses, miscommunicated tasks, or work delays -- we catch that immediately. We all think about our day before we start, then enter our agenda into Co-Op for that day. This extra communication channel helps get everyone in sync and improves our productivity."

IT productivity win No. 8: Dream a little

The last productivity booster doesn't sound like one at all, but it can provide the greatest long-term benefits: Keep yourself open to the next great idea.

"Spend time being geeky," advises Enterasys's Casselberry. "We try to get folks to spend 10 percent of their time just looking for new stuff. Many times these geeky new tools end up making something you do way easier and save you more time overall. It's like exercising: If you find the time to do it, you actually end up being more productive (or so my doctor keeps telling me)."

Likewise, Srail says he encourages News Corp.'s software engineers to devote 20 percent of their time to "doing their thing."

"This is an idea borrowed from Google, but definitely applicable," he says. "It stimulates that little creative part of the brain everyone's got, keeps engineers happy, and has often resulted in better ideas than the product team could think of. Also, it's important to acknowledge that 20 percent will probably be about 10 percent most of the time, but that's far better than the zero percent that weighs down so many great ideas."

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