The Pomodoro Technique®

Staying Focused Throughout the Day

Do you find that your productivity fluctuates from one day to the next? Some days, you fly through your tasks in no time. But other days just drag and, no matter how many hours you put in, you just can't seem to get things done.

It's a common misconception that long hours and busy days add up to high productivity. A 2008 University of Illinois study showed that being tethered to your desk for long hours actually reduces your productivity, while regular short breaks help to keep you focused and energized.

What's more, numerous studies suggest that sitting at your desk for a long time can be detrimental to your health. It has long been understood that extended periods of inactivity are associated with obesity, heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and a higher overall risk of death. But, until recently, experts believed that this risk could be offset by regular, vigorous exercise. However, research by Swedish sports scientist Dr Elin Ekblom-Bak, published in 2010, shows that, while exercise is vital for good health, only regular breaks from your desk can reduce these health risks.

This article explores the Pomodoro Technique®, a simple method that improves your productivity and protects your health by encouraging you to schedule regular short breaks into your day.

About the Tool

The Pomodoro Technique was developed by Francesco Cirillo in the 1980s. His best-selling book of the same name was updated and revised in 2013.

"Pomodoro" is Italian for tomato. The technique works by getting you to structure your work in 25-minute sessions, each separated by a short break. Cirillo took the name from the tomato-shaped kitchen timer that he used to manage his time as a university student.

The method is remarkably simple. Each 25-minute session is one "pomodoro." When you complete one, take a five-minute break before embarking on the next. When you have completed four "pomodori," take a longer break to rest and recharge.

At first, it might seem counter-intuitive to take so many breaks throughout the day. But research shows that this can actually enhance your focus when you return to the task you're working on.

How to Use the Pomodoro Technique

Follow the steps below to start using the Pomodoro Technique.

Step 1: Check Your Schedule

Your first step is to check your schedule. Look at your to-do list   or action plan and think about what you need to do today.

Estimate how long each task should take you, in terms of the number of pomodori (25-minute sessions) you will need to complete it. Now, timetable your tasks so that they fit comfortably with your other commitments for the day.

Also schedule in time for your breaks: five minutes for each session completed, plus a longer 20- to 30-minute break at a natural stopping point (for example after you've completed a particular task, or after four pomodori).

Note:

Cirillo recommends working in 25-minute slots, but you may wish to experiment with durations. For example, research on our daily biological cycles (called ultradian rhythms) says that we can focus for 90-120 minutes before we need a rest. Dr Ekblom-Bak, however, recommends that, for health reasons, people take a break from their desks every 45 minutes.

Step 2: Set Your Timer

Before you start, make sure that you have everything you need to begin on your tasks, as well as a notepad and pen (more about this later). Set your timer for the work period you've settled on. For this example, we'll stick with Cirillo's 25 minutes.

You can use whatever sort of timer you like. A traditional kitchen timer is ideal if you work from home, but, if you work in an office, try to be considerate of your colleagues, who would probably find the noise disturbing.

All sorts of online timers are available. You can even get a Pomodoro timer for your iPhone® or Android™ device.

As you set your timer, make a commitment to work only on the task at hand. Remember, you have a limited time in which to focus your attention on it. Then, in your rest break, you can return phone calls or chat with colleagues.

With this in mind, do what you can to minimize interruptions before you begin. Shut your office door, turn off your phone and email/chat alerts, and let your colleagues know that you don't want to be disturbed.

Step 3: Work on Your Task, and Only That Task

Devote all of your attention to the task at hand for the duration of the session.

Don't allow yourself to become distracted if ideas or thoughts about other tasks pop into your head. Write these down on your notepad and then set them aside for later. If necessary, you can adjust your schedule to work on them in the next session but, for now, stick with what you should be doing.

If you complete your work before your time is up, use the remaining time for routine activities, or for other short tasks. It's a good idea to make a note of how many pomodori each scheduled task takes you, so that you can use this for future planning – or to compare productivity levels as time goes on.

Step 4: Take a Short Break

When your timer goes off, take a five-minute break. You should do this even if you're "in flow" because these breaks are your time to rest and "recharge your batteries."

You may worry that interrupting your work for a break loses time, but regular breaks will restore your energy and improve your productivity to levels that more than make up for any lost time. Cirillo argues that energy levels are far more important than time. The Pomodoro approach works by maintaining your energy, so that you don't need to waste time working on tasks when your concentration levels are low.

For maximum benefit, use your breaks to get away from your desk. Move around, take a walk, and get some exercise. Even if you just make a cup of coffee, fetch a glass of water, or collect documents from the printer in the next room, the activity is sufficient to avoid the ill-health issues that arise when your large muscles are inactive.

While you take your break, avoid thinking about what you've been working on so far. This is your brain's chance to absorb what you have learned, so don't do anything that requires too much thought!

Also, resist the urge to use your breaks to catch up on social media, email or surf the Web. According to The Vision Council, 70 percent of U.S. adults strain their eyes by looking at electronic displays for too long.

Use the time to do something else instead. Tidy your desk, meditate, shred some old documents, or chat with another team member. If you work from home, you could even put on the laundry.

Step 5: Continue Your Work Sessions and Take a Longer Break

When your break is over, reset your timer for the next session and continue your work. When you've completed four pomodori, take a 20- to 30-minute break. Use it to go for a walk, eat a healthy snack, have lunch, read a book… anything, so long as it takes you away from your desk for a while and clears your mind of what you were doing before.

Remember, the important thing here is to replenish your energy levels. Just because the guidelines say to work until the end of the session, or to complete four pomodori before taking a longer break, don't feel that these rules are set in stone.

It is important to listen to your body. If your mind starts to wander or you start to feel tired, don't push through to the end of the session. Remember, your body rhythms naturally follow 90- to 120-minute cycles, and it's hard to know what stage of your ultradian rhythm you were at when you began your task.

You might want to experiment with this. It may be that three pomodori followed by a 20-minute break suits you best, or that five sessions followed by a 30-minute break is better.

You may also find that you can concentrate for longer in the mornings and then need more frequent breaks in the afternoon. Once you have found your ideal pattern, you'll be amazed at what you can achieve in a working day.

Pros and Cons of the Pomodoro Technique

There are several benefits of using the Pomodoro Technique to manage your time.

Using it to break tasks down into shorter, highly focused work sessions helps you manage your time more effectively, and makes large projects seem less overwhelming.

It also encourages you to minimize distractions, while discouraging multitasking and procrastination – which can drain your focus and productivity – because you only have a limited time in which to work.

Research confirms that regular short breaks are good for your health and improve your concentration, which raises productivity levels. Cirillo points out that the method is especially suitable for people with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD).

Also, because frequent short breaks give your mind a chance to assimilate information, you will have more opportunities for those "lightbulb moments" when ideas seem to come together.

Taking time to rest and recharge throughout the day also helps you to pace yourself, so you feel less tired in the afternoon.

However, the method may not suit everyone. Some people might find regular short breaks too distracting – especially if they come at times when inspiration is flowing.

It can also be difficult to stick to a disciplined schedule of pomodori if you work in a fast-paced organization or experience frequent interruptions from colleagues or customers.

The inflexibility of working for fixed periods may also have a negative effect on productivity. For example, if you have a meeting scheduled in less than 25 minutes' time, you might be tempted to put off starting a new pomodoro in the meantime.

To conclude, the Pomodoro Technique is simple and easy to implement. It requires little more than a timer and a "can do" attitude, and could improve your health and your productivity. Try it, and see if it works for you!

Key Points

The Pomodoro Technique was developed by Francesco Cirillo in the 1980s, and published in his book of the same name.

The technique uses a timer to divide your work into 25-minute sessions called "pomodori." After each session, you take a five-minute break. When you have completed four pomodori, it's time for a longer break of 20 to 30 minutes.

It's a simple technique, it's easy to use, and it could have big benefits for both your productivity and your health. Frequent breaks enhance your ability to concentrate on a task, which improves productivity. They also help your body fight the negative effects that come from prolonged periods of physical inactivity while sitting at your desk.