

Staying in the ZONE...Creating the right environment and mindset to maintain focus during difficult times...

Practical tools and habits to maintain productivity, improve focus and increase adaptability

How to get in the zone and stay in the zone so you can thrive on the other side

This article is the third in a series that considers **10 Habits of Highly Productive People** and explores how to adjust your old habits to create new ones that will serve you better in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We all have to work and live differently now and it's critical to maintain focus so we can get through these difficult times and set ourselves up to thrive on the other side.

So how to become indistractable and prepare for the new normal?

Let's turn our thoughts to how we can adopt new ways of thinking and working. It would be amazing if we can carry forward some of the positive changes that can come of these incredibly challenging times.

Strengthening our mindsets

The ability to be **adaptable** is more critical than ever as we find ourselves working and living in vastly different conditions.

The ability to be **flexible** enables us to be nimble and adjust to the new conditions more quickly.

The ability to be **resilient** will enable us to bounce back once this global crisis has passed.

The ability to be **indistractable** enables us to connect fully with every experience so we can mindfully maximise our productivity and joy!

The ability to be indistractable is more important now than ever before and will provide an absolute competitive advantage in both the current working environment and moving forward into the future once the pandemic has passed.

Good productivity habits

I developed this list of the 10 habits of highly effective people as part of the work I do as a productivity coach, although I do think of myself as an accidental productivity coach. I covered habits 1 and 2 in the first article in this series; habits 3 through 7 in the second article; and I cover habits 7 through 10 in this article.



10 habits of highly productivity people

1. Be disciplined about the basics
2. Maintain a healthy body and positive mind
3. Ruthlessly prioritise
4. Focus on what is important, remove the unimportant
5. Allocate time for the important things
6. Use every minute
7. Allocate time for rest and rejuvenation
8. Get in the zone and stay in the zone
9. Create the right environment
10. Good enough is good enough

If you want to read further on developing good habits and maintaining focus then my two current recommendations are –

1. [Atomic Habits – Tiny Changes, Remarkable Results](#), James Clear, Penguin Random House, 2018
2. [Indistractable – How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life](#), Nir Eyal, Bloomsbury, 2019

How to build great habits and become indistractable

Allocate time for rest and rejuvenation – you may think that pushing yourself to work long, unbroken hours is the best way to be productive, whereas it actually leads to stress, burn out, disengagement, poor quality and poor performance. Limiting working hours; getting regular, sufficient sleep; and having regular short breaks improves productivity and focus. As you'll see below, the impairment to cognitive ability of going 24 hours without sleep, or a week of sleeping four or five hours a night is quite alarming.

Get in the zone and stay in the zone – understanding your own personal rhythms is important to ensuring you stay in your peak zone of productivity. Routines and regular short breaks provide the scaffolding for productivity and also increase creativity and problem solving skills. One primary technique is to set a consistent start time for work every day. Other great techniques include time boxing and scheduling regular short breaks throughout the day.

Create the right environment – it is important to create a dedicated work zone that is free of distractions if you want to maximise your productivity. For office workers this is as easy as going to work, but with more people working regularly from home, the need becomes even more important. If space allows then a dedicated room or corner is ideal, somewhere you can set up an ergonomic workstation with an external monitor, keyboard and mouse for your laptop. A good office chair is also important to reduce strain on the body. When you move into the work zone your entire physiology prepares itself for work.

Good enough is good enough – I work with a lot of lawyers who are perfectionists. The legal profession attracts those with a higher propensity towards perfectionism and the nature of legal education reinforces this. Doing things well and meeting or exceeding the quality expectations of your boss or your clients is a great thing, whilst over crafting that causes delays, budget blowouts or fee write offs is not. There is a fine balance between the positives of striving to do better and the negatives of striving for perfection. I recommend applying the concept of “good enough is good enough” whereby you expend sufficient time and energy to create an outcome that is fit for purpose.

Work less and sleep more

In a previous article [“Would you go to work drunk everyday”](#) I shared the following summary of key findings across many studies related to sleep and productivity –

1. Getting less than 6 hours sleep per night over an extended period significantly reduces reaction speed, short term and long-term memory, ability to focus, decision making capacity and cognitive speed. It's the equivalent to staying awake for 18 consecutive hours.
2. Cutting sleep back to five or six hours a night for several days in a row, and the accumulated sleep deficit magnifies these negative effects
3. The impairment to cognitive ability of going 24 hours without sleep, or a week of sleeping four or five hours a night is quite alarming. In studies it has shown that it induces an impairment equivalent to a blood alcohol level of 0.1%. This is twice the level of the legal limit of blood alcohol levels allowed for driving in my state.

“Sleep is a mystery”

“Sleep loss in humans degrades health, safety and productivity and increases the risk of errors and accidents. It has a profound impact on individuals and society.”

Taken from Washington State University's website on 15 February 2020 <https://labs.wsu.edu/sprc/>

Also from the same article, I shared some useful insights provided by Meg Selig in her article posted on Psychology Today on 18 April 2017 - How do work breaks help your brain? 5 surprising answers –

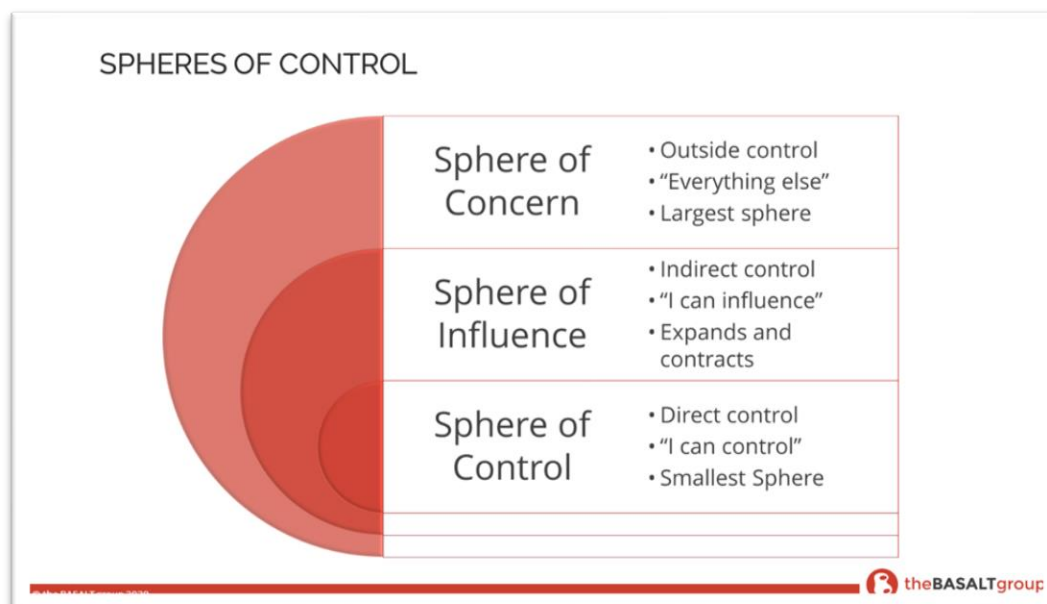
1. **“Movement breaks” are essential for your physical and emotional health.** The benefits of taking brief movement breaks have been well-researched. Just a 5-minute walkabout break every hour can improve your health and well-being.

2. **Breaks can prevent “decision fatigue.”** the need to make frequent decisions throughout your day can wear down your willpower and reasoning ability, and it can also lead to procrastination.
3. **Breaks restore motivation, especially for long-term goals.** For challenging tasks that requires our sustained attention, research shows briefly taking our minds off the goal can renew and strengthen motivation later. This is when those Important and Non-urgent tasks, that I cover in Module 1 of my Personal Productivity Tools Online Course, can be progressed before going back to the Important and Urgent tasks.
4. **Breaks increase productivity and creativity.** Working for long stretches without breaks leads to stress and exhaustion. Taking breaks refreshes the mind, replenishes your mental resources, and helps you become more creative.
5. **“Waking rest” helps consolidate memories and improve learning.** Scientists have known for some time that one purpose of sleep is to consolidate memories. However, there is also evidence that resting while awake likewise improves memory formation.

What you don’t focus on is MOST important

The notion of spheres of control and influence has its origins in Gestalt Theory and was brought into coaching and leadership theory by Stephen Covey in his book 7 Habits of Highly Effective People (1998) where he discusses two circles – 1. your circle of concern and 2. your circle of influence. The basic premise is that when you have a positive energy, coupled with a proactive focus then you will expand your circle of influence, and when you have a negative energy coupled with a reactive focus then you will contract your circle of influence.

I find the original three circles model from Gestalt Theory to be more easily applied and therefore more effective.



Sphere of control –these are elements over which you exercise complete control, for example your personal choices.

Sphere of influence – these are elements that you can influence, you may have some indirect control over these but only through influence of others, for example the actions and decisions of family, friends or colleagues.

Sphere of concern – sometimes known as the sphere of interest or the sphere of everything else. These elements are completely outside your control or influence, for example the weather or traffic conditions.

This framework is commonly used by coaches and therapist to assist clients to focus on their sphere of control in order to prioritise where thoughts and energies are being directed. It is often applied in a therapeutic setting to support those suffering from anxiety and excessive negative thinking.

It has more broad application in coaching and personal reflection to support focus and prioritisation, which in turn increases productivity.

If you are spending too much time considering actions or situations that are outside of your control or influence, then you are wasting your time.

Maintain focus, maximise productivity and reduce stress by concentrating 80% of your effort and time on activities and situations that are within your control and 20% of your time on activities or situations that are within your influence, often these can be reframed so that you have more control than originally perceived.

Stephen Covey proposes that individuals exhibiting high levels of stress and frustration at work are often spending too much time complaining about, or paying attention to, things that are outside of their control. It is common in these situations for coaches to recommend a simple exercise of considering your thoughts, actions and complaints and categorising them into the 3 spheres of concern. Then discuss and reflect on each list in order to redirect the majority of focus and energy to the sphere of control.

Become indistractable, reduce overwhelm and increase productivity by focussing ALL your energy on a smaller number of things that are under your control, or that you can change.

Other concepts that support this framework relate to personal prioritisation. I shared a tool in the previous article called the **Personal Prioritisation Matrix**. Once again, we can effectively apply the 80/20 rule and ensure we spend 80% of our time on the Most Important and Urgent activities and 20% of our time on the Most Important and Not Urgent Activities.

By ruthlessly prioritising and deciding what NOT to do, you can achieve massive improvements in focus and productivity

About the author...



This article was written by Therese Linton, Founder and Principal Consultant of The BASALT Group® encompassing The Positive Lawyer® and the Academy of Legal Leadership®. She is a global leader in the field of Legal Project Management and literally wrote the book. She also has unique expertise in Legal Process Improvement, Legal Portfolio Management, Legal Transformation and Legal Operations.

As a leading global expert in Legal Project Management, she has worked with thousands of lawyers to develop their capabilities and skills. As part of this work, she supports lawyers to improve their personal productivity and create habits that underpin their success.

Next steps...

If you're interested in my free Personal Productivity Tools Checklist and a massive discount on the Personal Productivity Tools Online Course to support everyone dealing with the changes brought about by COVID-19 then [click here](#).

My aim is to inspire you to achieve great things and I look forward to joining you on your journey! Cheers....T

