

# **How Timeboxing Works and Why It Will Make You More Productive**

by Marc Zao-Sanders

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**Summary.** In a recent survey of 100 productivity hacks, timeboxing — migrating to-do lists into calendars — was ranked the most useful. Timeboxing can give you a much greater sense of control over your workday. You decide what to do and when to do it, block out all... [\*\*more\*\*](#)

Five years ago I read Daniel Markovitz’s argument for migrating to-do lists into calendars. Since then, my productivity has at least doubled.

That momentous (at least for me) article describes five problems with the to-do list. First, they overwhelm us with too many choices. Second, we are naturally drawn to simpler tasks which are more easily accomplished. Third, we are rarely drawn to important-but-not-urgent tasks, like setting aside time for learning. Fourth, to-do lists on their own lack the essential context of what time you have available. Fifth, they lack a commitment device, to keep us honest.

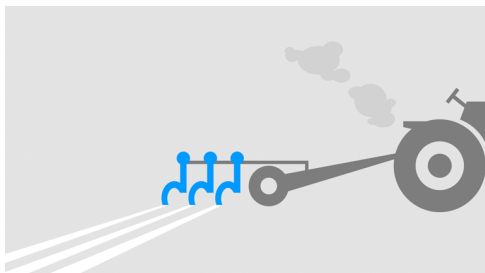
This was enough for me. I converted from my religiously observed to-do list (daily work plan) to this calendar system, also known as timeboxing (a term borrowed from agile project management). All five of Markovitz's criticisms of to-do lists have manifested for me. In a study we conducted of 100 productivity hacks, timeboxing was ranked as the most useful. And over the last few years, I have also discovered several additional benefits of timeboxing, which I would like to share.

First, timeboxing into a calendar enables the relative positioning of work. If you know that a promotional video has to go live on a Tuesday and that the production team needs 72 hours to work on your copy edits, then you know when to place the timebox. In fact, you know *where* to place the timebox: it's visual, intuitive, obvious. Working hard and trying your best is sometimes not actually what's required; the alternative — getting the right thing done at the right time — is a better outcome for all.

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Second, the practice enables you to communicate and collaborate more effectively. If all of your critical work (and maybe just all of your work, period) is in your calendar, colleagues can *see* it. So not only are you more likely to plan your work to accommodate others' schedules (the paragraph above), others are

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the way.

Third, it gives you a comprehensive record of what you've done. Maybe you get to the end of a blistering week and you're not even sure what happened? It's in your calendar. Or a performance review looms — what were the highs and lows of the last six months? It's in your calendar. Or you're keen to use an hour to plan the following week and need to know what's on the horizon. It's in your calendar. Just make sure you have your own personal (i.e. not exclusively employer-owned) version of this data, or someday it won't be in your calendar.

Fourth, you will feel more in control. This is especially important because control (aka volition, autonomy, etc.) may be the biggest driver of happiness at work. Constant interruptions make us less happy and less productive. Timeboxing is the proper antidote to this. You decide what to do and when to do it, block out all distractions for that timeboxed period, and get it done. Repeat. Consistent control and demonstrable accomplishment is hugely satisfying, even addictive. This is not just about productivity (largely external), this is about intent (internal, visceral) and how we feel.

Fifth, you will be substantially more productive. Parkinson's law flippantly states that work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion. Although it's not really a law (it's more of a wry observation), most of us would concede that there is some truth to it (especially as it pertains to meetings). A corollary of this observation in practice is that we often spend more time on a task than we should, influenced by the time that happens to be available (circumstantial) rather than how long the work should

able to check that your work schedule works for them. Shared calendars (with attendant privacy options) are the norm in the corporate world now, with Microsoft and Google leading

really take (objective). Disciplined timeboxing breaks us free of Parkinson's law by imposing a sensible, finite time for a task and sticking to that. Although it's hard to precisely quantify the benefits of any time management or productivity measures, this is clearly enormous. Just take a commonplace example: do you habitually take two hours (cumulatively, often drawn out over multiple sessions) to complete a task that really could have been done in a single, focused, time-boxed hour? If the answer is yes, then your personal productivity might be double what it is right now.

The benefits of calendarized timeboxing are many, varied, and highly impactful. The practice improves how we feel (control), how much we achieve as individuals (personal productivity), and how much we achieve in the teams we work in (enhanced collaboration). This may be the single most important skill or practice you can possibly develop as a modern professional, as it buys you so much time to accomplish anything else. It's also straightforwardly applied and at no cost. Box some time to implement a version of this that works for you.

**Marc Zao-Sanders** is CEO and co-founder of [filtered.com](https://filtered.com), which develops algorithmic technology to make sense of corporate skills and learning content. Find Marc on LinkedIn [here](#).

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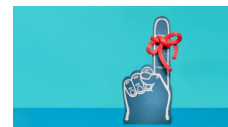


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