

The Importance of Productivity, Focus, and Measurement

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was in school, I would study at least a couple of hours each day in the library. While there, I noticed that the best students were always very focused. They were not distracted like poorer students were. A poor student looks around and looks up frequently. The poor students try to start conversations, make jokes, and laugh at things going on in the library.

When I was studying with the best students, I could feel their energy and focus. They blocked out external stimuli and their study time was extremely productive. In fact, just about every good student had the ability to focus extremely well. I noticed this same thing when I was a law professor. You could spot the best students, because they were always the most focused.

The best students made sure their study time was productive and focused. They were able to exclude other things, and to get a lot done with their time. This is something not limited to studying; it is part of every profession. The people who do the best in every profession have the aptitude to focus and use their time productively. Your ability to focus and be productive with your time--right now--is something that will have a major impact on your long-term success or failure. You need to be as productive and focused as possible in every move you make when it is related to your job.

A good portion of my workday involves supervising others who are at work. I know who is being productive and who is not being productive. Every decent manager out there has a good understanding of the people who are most and least productive. In most companies there are statistics used to measure productivity. Sales people have quotas. Attorneys bill for their work by the hour. The boss watches who leaves early and who stays late. Many people are required to clock in. There are tallies in various organizations to see who has done more of this or more of that.

Employees everywhere try to avoid measuring of their productivity. I have seen this most of my career. In fact, the entire work world involves a struggle between employers trying to get as much productivity out of workers as they possibly can. There are always a few employees who resist this accountability. For example, one of the most contentious issues in recent years has been merit-based pay for teachers, which is measured by the test scores of students. Many teachers have long resisted this, preferring to simply get paid for showing up for work. Teachers unions all over the United States threaten to strike over any plans to institute merit pay.

The best thing you can do though, is to work in a job where your productivity is measured. Personally, I have always loved working in places where productivity has been measured. An employer who measures your productivity is giving you the tools to easily win and also to keep your job. I remember one of my first jobs when I was around 15 years old - I was signing people up for credit cards over the phone. I would report to work each night around 5:30, and work until 9:30 p.m. calling people. Most of the other kids I worked with would sign 2 or 3 people up for credit cards per night. I generally would sign up well over 50. I got so good at this that the company relocated me to a private (read: my own) office in a call center of 100+ employees because they did not want anything to disturb me. I loved being measured. When I practiced law, everything was about billing as many hours as possible. I knew if I billed a lot of hours, I had employment security. I loved this as well.

You *want* to work for employers who measure your productivity. If the employer does not measure your productivity, this is dangerous because the company is likely not going to be productive itself and will have problems. Any decent company needs a way to measure the differences between the people working there because without these measurements, nobody would know what is happening, and who is productive and who is not. Finally, if you are not being measured, you can potentially lose your job in an arbitrary way. Your job security could be related more to who you are friends with at work, or who likes you more, than your actual productivity.

Nevertheless, in most instances, if you think your boss does not know when you are and are not being productive, you are wrong. Almost every boss knows who is being productive and who is not being productive. Regardless of whether your job is to sweep floors, or managing the finances of a giant corporation, the boss knows who is being productive, or not. (Additionally, your boss's boss knows whether *any of you* are being productive.)

People at the very highest levels of most professions are paid for their ability to focus and be productive with their time.

- A highly skilled surgeon typically earns much more money than a regular doctor, simply because the duties of his or her profession require more focus.
- A patent attorney typically earns more money than a litigation attorney because his job often requires more focus than the other.

When you are more focused, you are more productive with your time. Society and the work world values people who are able to bring a high degree of focus to any situation at hand in the workplace.

There is nothing more important in any job than your productivity. You will lose direction in your career and even in your life if you are not being productive. You will also lose direction if you are not measuring your productivity.

Over the years, I have spoken to hundreds of people who are [looking for jobs](#). I have found that a large percentage of people dream of a job and of a life without a lot of pressure. Ideally, many people look forward to retirement or not having to work at all because of wise money management or luck. But the less focus and productivity you give to society, the less you are rewarded in terms of money, prestige, and more.

Productivity is rewarded by society. There is generally no free ride available. We must always be productive in one form or another. We must be able to produce. You must produce in every job you have. What you produce must have a much greater value than what you take. You must consciously (in every job you have, or any job you are seeking) create tremendous value. You must develop personal statistics and goals that showcase your value, even if none are provided to you by your employer. If your employer is not measuring your productivity, it is often a smart thing for you to measure your

own productivity. When you show your employer what you have achieved throughout the week, as the end of the week draws near, it will be clear to the employer who is doing what, and which employees stand out as more valuable.

Several years ago, I hired a very talented attorney to work for me on a contract basis. This was when our company was much younger, but growing. The attorney was in his late 40s at the time, and he was pretty seasoned when I hired him. Something about him stands out in my mind; something he did really impressed me. He would send a detailed report to me each week about what he had accomplished in his job. This report went over everything he had done in considerable detail, and was always very well written. While he eventually left to start his own law practice, he was somebody I really valued. I can say with absolute certainty that he'd never have lost his job if he had stayed on with the company. He was productive with his time, and he showed me on a weekly basis. I appreciated that, because at the time I had no methods for measuring the productivity of the people working for me.

When I hired his replacement, I requested a weekly report, but the replacement resisted. The replacement was someone who did not use their time wisely, wandering around a good part of the day gossiping and so forth. This is not productive behavior. Over the course of the past several years of hiring people, the best employees continue to be the ones who document what they do every single week. My best employees do this, and no one has ever lost their job when they document their work to me every week. I highly recommend doing this. Your superiors want to see productivity, and if you document what you are doing, it shows them exactly how you are spending company time. And if you do solid work, this can become a tool for making yourself virtually indispensable. It may result in more raises, better job security, and frequent promotions. Employers respect those who document their work.

About six years ago or so, an employee of mine was in my office, telling me about how someone they knew had just gotten a large inheritance. "He'll never have to work again," my employee observed. I thought about this and realized the person I was speaking to was also interested in "never working again," and that their entire goal in life was seemingly to find a situation that would allow them to get rich, and never have to return to a job.

This is not something I have ever been at all interested in. The idea of not having to work simply does not appeal to me. To work is to contribute to society and provide value. To work is also to be engaged and to have a purpose in your life each day. There is nothing more important than working and making sure you are doing the job you are best at, contributing every single day.

I have been reading many recent articles about people who have been laid off. Certain people are having a difficult time finding jobs. But I have witnessed this for many years. In the legal profession, for example, people traditionally have a difficult time [finding a new job](#) after getting laid off. Many law firms with openings demand that recruiters only submit people who have not been laid off. There is a strong interest in the legal profession and other professions in avoiding people who have been laid off. One article I read recently titled *Only the Employed Need Apply* in the *Wall Street Journal* discusses the fact that many employers avoid the unemployed when hiring:

With unemployment at 9.4% and rising, it's a buyer's market for employers that are hiring. But many employers are bypassing the jobless to target those still working, reasoning that these survivors are the top performers.

"If they're employed in today's economy, they have to be first string," says Ryan Ross, a partner with Kaye/Bassman International Corp., an executive recruiting firm in Dallas. Mr. Ross says more clients recently have indicated that they would prefer to fill positions with "passive candidates" who are working elsewhere and not actively seeking a job.

The reason the unemployed are avoided is because there is the presumption that they are not as productive as the people at their firms who were *not* let go. The idea is that companies and firms *keep* their most productive people, and this has been understood in hiring circles for as long as I can remember. If you are productive and do really good work, in most cases employers will do what they can to hold on to you because you provide more value than you take. If you are not productive, and you are seen as more of a taker than a producer, your job will always be in jeopardy. This is a horrible position to be in; ideally you should never have to worry about keeping your job. You need to be productive and focused, and you must constantly *prove your value* to your employer. *Even if your employer is not measuring.*

THE LESSON

You must hone your ability to block out external stimuli and focus solely on the work you provide for your employer, not what you can take from the company. High focus leads to high productivity, which in turn leads to high value. Attaining such a high degree of focus will make you much in demand in the business world and in society at large. Productivity should be measured either by you, or by your employer, and the most successful companies are usually those who prioritize keeping track of their employees' productivity.

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