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Improving Your Daily Productivity

One of the biggest challenges for small business owners is productivity. It is a constant battle between putting out fires and addressing the urgent demands, and the important tasks that in the end, will make you money and grow your business. I'd bet that you often get to the end of your day and wonder where the time went, feeling like you didn't get nearly accomplished what you had hoped and feeling like the really important stuff didn't get done. I'd bet that there are times when it feels like you don't really have a handle on the status of all your projects, and that occasionally it feels like things are spinning slightly out of control. And, I'd bet there are times when you wonder what you might be overlooking – what might be falling through the cracks. Customers that didn't get followed up on, projects that are stalled because someone's forgotten to take the next step, things on your "to do" list from weeks ago that never got transferred to your current list. Customer Relations Management (CRM) software is an option, but for the small business owner it can be very expensive, and takes significant time and training to get set up. I have discovered three online tools that are very cost-effective and can really be valuable in increasing small business productivity.

Managing Your Time

Do you know what things are wasting your time each day? Do you know how you are spending your time, and whether you are allocating enough time to the right things? Do you have trouble disciplining yourself to stick to certain tasks when others are more interesting? With the thousand interruptions you face every day, it can be really challenging to get a handle on how you spend your time. Enter Rescue Time. This downloadable software tracks exactly how you spend your time and on what. It provides alerts that let you know when you've spent more than a specified amount of time on a certain task or activity (social networking for example), tracks time spent on certain documents or on the internet, and even has a team version where you can track how your entire team manages their time. It even allows you to "stop the clock" when you are in meetings, and tracks those as well. At \$6 to \$9 per month for the solo version, it's a bargain if their claim of recovering almost four hours of time per week is true! A two week trial is offered on their website so you can try it out before you commit. (www.rescuetime.com)



Managing Your Projects

If there's one thing small business owners know – it's how to juggle! Projects that is. So many things on the go, so many people involved, and so many deadlines and targets to meet. Smartsheet is an inexpensive project management software that keeps track of all your projects online. It is totally customizable (although it comes with plenty of templates if you like). It allows you to continually update the status of projects you are involved in, so at any moment in time, you can see at a glance where you're at. You can have multiple users so it's great for your entire team to keep each other updated. It manages many aspects of your projects - track sales, track marketing, set goals, manage HR (recruitment, interviews, performance evaluations). It also has a 30 day free trial, and the basic version is only \$10 per month, with the advanced version (more than most small businesses will ever need) is only \$30 per month. I tried it and found it easy to use and very effective. This small investment could save you hours of time and aggravation, and improve your productivity almost overnight. (www.smartsheet.com)

Managing Your Contacts

For many small businesses, large CRM programs are costly. I found one called Big Contacts that is effective, easy to use and great value. Imagine that you were able to better manage your contact information, integrate email notices, have mobile access to your data at any time and online file and data storage. Streamline your operations by more effectively managing your tasks, creating better reports and automating your workflow. Finally, use webforms and lead capture, automated email marketing and mass emails to increase your sales. Import and export files, store important data and photos, track meetings and events through the calendar, and customize the entire system for your business. Big Contacts also has a 30 day trial and can cost as little as \$15 per month. Great value for all that organization! (www.bigcontacts.com)

For the small business owner it's always about finding cost-effective ways to do business and increase sales. These three programs will help you do that. All three are downloadable and internet-based. All three provide inexpensive solutions to three common business challenges, and all have a free trial so that you can try before you buy. What have you got to lose? Start improving your productivity today!

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Ways to Motivate Your Sales Team

Sales people are wired differently than the rest of the world. While many people are completely satisfied to do their work and collect a predictable paycheck at the end of the month, sales people are never satisfied unless they can do better next time. They are always looking forward, looking up,

trying to find ways to sell more, make more money, and achieve higher goals. They are a strange and dying breed. I know, because I recently tried to hire one – and they are becoming more and more difficult to find. I had a lot of people tell me they could "do" sales, and chances are, they could quite adequately, to a certain degree. But there were very few who demonstrated that hunger, that gleam in the eye when they asked how much they could "potentially" earn based on their sales skills. A truly great sales person is motivated differently than your average salary-based employee, and incentives are a huge part of how they are motivated. Most great sales people would prefer to challenge themselves to earn more than they could on salary. As an employer, you need to know what those motivators look like and how to tap into their natural sense of competition. At the same time, you need to find something that fits within your capacity to deliver on those incentives. According to sales expert, Demir Barlas, here are a few ideas and the pros and cons of each.

Cash Bonus

Pro: Naturally enough, money is the best reward for most salespeople.

Con: Salespeople may see a cash bonus as part of an overall compensation package, not as a special sales incentive. Also, small businesses may lack the financial resources to make this system feasible.

Merchandise

Pro: Sometimes people are more excited by a hot item than by the equivalent amount of money. If you are in an industry where you can barter to get your hands on some big ticket or popular items, or get them at good discounts, this may be a way to offer big incentives for not a lot of money.

Con: Finding the right item that will appeal to everyone can be tricky. Men and women's preferences differ, as do people in different age ranges. You have to acquire an intimate knowledge of your sales force, or else be flexible enough to offer a wide range of merchandise from which they can choose.

Getaways or experiences

Pro: Offering someone an experience (an all-expenses paid vacation, a day at the spa, a plane trip, or a hot sports ticket) can create memories that last forever.

Con: As with merchandise, choosing the right experience demands a thorough knowledge of your salespeople. This type of incentive can also be expensive for you to underwrite, unless you have relationships with vendors in those industries upon which you can rely to get great deals.

Recognition

Pro: Taking the time to recognize a leading performer with a plaque, cake or special lunch doesn't require much in terms of expense.

Con: Although everyone appreciates recognition, salespeople may expect more than this kind of gesture, no matter how thoughtful it is.



Workplace perks

Pro: It's free. Giving top performers the right to work from home one day a week, their own office, the ability to take a class, regular time off for child-care or any other kind of workplace flexibility costs nothing - but can be very valuable to employees. It can also motivate salespeople to look up to you for trusting them.

Con: None. Salespeople, like all employees, like to negotiate workplace privileges.

These motivational methods are not mutually exclusive; in fact, many successful organizations employ a mix of sales incentives.

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Writing an Effective Business Case

You've been running your business for a while now. You're following your business plan, reviewing it regularly, and ensuring you're not getting off track. Why on earth would you need to write a business case? The most common reason for putting together a business case is to justify the resources and capital investment necessary to bring a business change or project to fruition. It means something has come along that is outside of your business plan, and you're trying to decide whether to invest, launch, produce, or do something new. A business case includes the financial, market and human resources required to deliver on the change or project, and factors in implementation strategies.

The business case should be viewed as your team's story. Therefore, everyone on the team should contribute to its development. This does not mean that everyone will write a section of the business case. In fact, only one or two people should actually write the final document, however, all of the information used in the business case should come from team members themselves. The business case is the one place where all relevant facts are documented and linked together into a cohesive story. It typically answers the what, when, where, how and why questions.

- Why is the project needed (issues & opportunities)?
- How will the effort solve the issues or opportunities facing the organization?
- What are the recommended solution(s)?
- How does the solution address the issues or opportunities (benefits)?
- What will happen to the business if this effort is not undertaken (the do nothing scenario)?
- When will the solutions be deployed?
- How much money, people, and time will be needed to deliver the solution and realize the benefits?

The purposes of a business case

Knowledge capture – a synthesis of all the information the company needs – past, present, and anticipated future - to understand whether it can or should move forward with the project or change.

Financial implications – an understanding of the implications of what the desired outcome of the change will be, what the outcome might be if the change is not undertaken, and whether the funds required will justify those outcomes. The business case is also used to secure funding from an outside source if it is required to move forward with implementing the project or change.

Communication - the provision of a consistent message with a high level view of the entire project that enables all organizations affected by the effort (customers, management, operations, research & development, service, sales, accounting, finance, etc.) to be knowledgeable about the project.

Tips for an effective business case

Your business case should have the following components (use this as your outline for writing the plan):

- *Executive Summary* - operational and financial highlights of the business case.
- *Introduction* - motivation for proposed project.
- *Solution Description* - the proposed actions along with scope and time frames.
- *Benefits Discussion* - the expected financial and operational benefits.
- *Costs Discussion* - all costs, in financial and operational terms of the project, both initial and on-going.
- *Risk Management Discussion* - the risks associated with the proposed project and the approach for managing these risks.
- *Value Creation Discussion* - in financial terms, the value created by the proposed solution.
- *Alternative Solutions Discussion* - benefits, costs, risks, and valuation of alternatives to the proposed solution.
- *Value Measurement Plan* – description of the means you will use to measure success and value of the proposed project



While one of your primary goals may be to get funding, your chances of success will be greater if you make it interesting, clear and concise, and communicate all the facts as part of the overall story. Minimize conjecture, except where it applies to your anticipated success in terms of sales and market share. Create a picture so that the reader can clearly see how the proposed changes will unfold, as well as the final result. Demonstrate the value the project brings to the organization, customer and financial bottom line of the company.

At the end of it all, you may decide that based on your research, the change or project is not viable, does not have adequate market share, and will not be financially sustainable. Regardless of the decision you make in the end, you will be glad you went through the exercise. Either you will discover that the idea is not sustainable, saving you lots of time, money and energy in moving on a project that in the end could not succeed. Or, you will have the foundation to move forward and implement the idea with a much higher degree of success because you've done your homework.

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Appreciative Inquiry

A New Way of Looking at Organizational Change

If you've ever felt stuck; if you've ever wondered whether there was a better way to do what you are doing; if things are not going the way you want them to and you need to take your business in a different direction but don't know where to begin; if you want a new way to look at strategic planning and organizational change – then the Appreciative Inquiry process may be something for you to look at. I recently went through this process with an organization I was an employee of, and it completely changed the way we looked at our company. In fact, I took the same process and implemented it on a board on which I am a director. In both instances, it was a positive, high energy approach to organizational change and one that I think could be successfully used in any small business looking to make a change, or trying to determine long term business strategy.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a facilitated approach to organizational planning and change that asks, "what is working well around here and how do we build on it?" It's based on the assumption that in every group or organization, something works well. Developed by David Cooperrider and his colleagues at Case Western University, it has been used by both the not-for-profit sector and private industry. AI is positive and affirming. People discover and then build on the root causes of success rather than dissecting problems and this can be a powerful stimulus to change. The AI process has four stages:

1. Discovery - "The best of what is"

In the first stage, a question is asked to stimulate the discovery of excellence and achievement in an organization. For example, AI expert, Sue Hammond, suggests something like, "Think back through your career or involvement in this organization. Locate a moment that was a high point, when you felt effective and engaged. Describe how you felt, and what made the situation possible". Participants work individually to map out their stories. Then, they share their stories in pairs and ask probing questions such as "If you had to pick one thing that made your experience truly memorable, what would it be? What skills helped you? What was its key to success?" Groups then identify the common themes from these stories. These could be anything from core practices, structures, assets, values, customer service, technology, or capacities such as leadership.

2. Dreaming – "What could be"

Next, a Future Vision is developed based on the common themes that surfaced through the examination of past excellence. The group develops a picture of the ideal future by asking, "What could the world look like if our moments of exceptional success were the norm?"



3. Design – "What should be"

Through consensus, short and long-term goals are developed to achieve the dream based on what Cooperrider and his followers call a "provocative proposition". Examples of provocative propositions are "Our association will do whatever is necessary to build a school, and have a full primary cycle within two years." or "In eight months we will have a fully functional membership database that is fully accurate and is the key to tracking, managing and forecasting superior customer service needs." The provocative proposition should involve some dimension of "stretch" for the organization. If it's too easy, it's not provocative.

4. Delivery – "Action plan and execution"

Strategies and plans are put in place to meet the goals of the provocative proposition, and roles and responsibilities are assigned. It also involves monitoring, evaluation and feedback. Unless you have a plan to follow through, the experience will have done nothing more than make people feel good, rather than build a roadmap for positive change.

For some business people, AI can sound too "touchy feely", however, current research is showing that AI is a highly successful tool that contributes to team building, and discovers, expands and sustains the best of what an organization can offer. The key is a good facilitator. Do some research online. Find someone in your community who can facilitate this process and consider using AI to guide you through your company's next big change.

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Five Tips to Increase Small Business Efficiency

A few weeks ago I was flipping through the TV channels in search of something interesting to watch, when I came upon a professional juggler on a variety show. He started by spinning one small plate in the air – then added another, and another. Then he had his assistant throw a ball into the mix of spinning items, and then another. I was amazed by the number of things thrown at him that were smoothly incorporated into the circle of items he was juggling. I thought to myself, "That's what running a small business is like!" Every small business owner I know is spinning dozens of things in the air while at any moment, being prepared to have something else thrown at them. The juggler could keep all those things spinning as long they had his full concentration, but it would have been difficult for him to eat a sandwich or make a phone call while he was juggling. Similarly, small business owners can be so focused on keeping all the balls in the air, that they don't realize inherent in the task of keeping everything running, is the inability to step back and see whether they are being managed efficiently. Sometimes it's necessary to stop and look at all the things you're trying to juggle. Could two of those balls somehow be combined to make room for another? Can any of them be taken out entirely? What is necessary to keep the business running smoothly AND efficiently? Here are a few things to consider when you're looking at increasing your business efficiency.

Increase employee motivation and buy-in

We've all heard that people are our greatest business asset, but do you really believe that, and do your business practices reflect it? If your employees are happy, they will automatically

improve business efficiencies. Satisfied employees are less likely to take overly long breaks, waste time on non-business related activities, and will focus on the things that are important to growing your business. They are more likely to be collaborative with their team, and come up with creative ways to increase your business efficiency. Do you know whether your employees are happy? Do you know what motivates them and are you doing those things? Do you know what might be missing for them in terms of job satisfaction, and do you have systems in place to address those things. You might be surprised by the impact of increasing employee satisfaction on the efficiency of your business.

Eliminate unproductive travel and waiting times

There are a lot of hours in a week that are spent in unproductive ways. Driving to and from meetings, waiting to get in for appointments, waiting in line-ups – at the bank or at the doctor's office. Technology has come a long way and there is no reason that any time in your day needs to be unproductive. Smartphones now assist with catching up on emails or internet research while you are waiting. Some even have productivity applications that allow you to finish that spreadsheet or report for you to upload when you get back to the office. Many have the capacity to download ebooks so that you can read while you wait. Or, use the time to take stock of all the things that are rattling around in your head and sort them out on a "to do" list. Listen to motivational CD's in your vehicle when you're driving. Continued learning sharpens your mind and fills you with new ideas that will help you be more productive in your business.

Facilitate greater collaboration

Smooth collaboration between employees, partners, suppliers, and customers is a sure-fire way to boost efficiency while also reducing costs. Interactive calendaring, videoconferencing, online project sharing and streamlined online communications, are just a few of the technologies that can create easy collaboration. The easier it is for people to share information with each other, the faster things get done, the less errors there are, and the greater your productivity.



Manage customer communications

Delivering fast, knowledgeable service is the best way to keep customers satisfied. Whether you implement a customer relations management (CRM) software in order to accomplish this, or simply have systems in place that facilitate immediate feedback and response to customer problems and enquiries, your link to your customers is critical to business efficiency. Knowing what your customers want, what they think of your service, where they would like to see improvements, and being able to respond quickly to them is the key to keeping them happy and ensuring their continued loyalty.

Use your team to help you evaluate inefficiencies.

Your team is on the ground every day, working to help you grow your business. They are the best people to help you examine where your inefficiencies lie. Set aside some time to specifically look at your systems and processes. Advise them ahead of time that you are looking for ways to streamline and make your operation more efficient. Ask them to look at their own tasks and processes, and to look at the areas where they overlap with other team

members, and come to the meeting prepared with their suggestions. You will find this to be an energetic process that builds team spirit, and provides you with the best evaluation of your business you can get. Be prepared not only to gather ideas, but implement the good ones, and to acknowledge the contributions from your team. This leads to greater employee motivation and buy-in, which is where we began.

Take a moment to stop juggling, and start looking at the things you need to do to become more efficient. It will improve your bottom line, and likely reduce the number of things you have to pick up when you're ready to start juggling again!

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