

Until You Have Productivity Skills, Productivity Tools Are Useless

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Back in the days of paper based planners, I depended on mine to help me stay on top of my to-do list and commitments. Making the switch to electronic tools was difficult and disruptive, and initially I didn't want to do it. But once I had, I realized how much the software and gadgets helped me to kick my productivity into high gear.

But the truth is, it wasn't the tools alone, it was also the [workflow management process](#)—or methodology—I applied to the tools. This is an important point that is often overlooked when people try new productivity tools, and when organizations introduce new tools to employees.

A workflow management process keeps the focus on the big picture while offering a structure in which to organize and manage the details.

So when people ask me for advice about choosing software to improve productivity for themselves or their organizations, I ask them this question: "How will the software fit into the existing workflow management process?" And often, we quickly uncover the real problem: there is no workflow management process.

To illustrate the problem, let's use sports as an example. Have you ever heard of "Racquet lessons?" "Club lessons?" How about "Stick lessons?" Probably not. But I'm sure you've heard of tennis, golf, and hockey lessons. In all cases, learning to use the tool is a by-product. The real goal is to learn to play the game. I don't play golf, but I understand how to swing a club: I know that I am supposed to hold the grip end and swing the flat end. But this doesn't mean I'm a great golfer. Continuing the analogy, if Jason Day or Dustin Johnson were forced to play his next tournament with a random used club he bought at a thrift store, he wouldn't play up to the standards of a PGA pro. What's necessary is both the skill, *and* the right set of tools.

Productivity, similarly, is also a combination of skill and tools, for both organizations and individuals. Regardless of the software, apps, and gadgets that a company invests in for its employees, those tools aren't going to make the employees more productive unless they are also [taught](#) a solid methodology with which to use those tools.

Yet most companies roll out software with only technical training, intending for that software to improve efficiency and ultimately, productivity. There's instruction on the various menus, and where to click to achieve certain tasks. This training only serves to make employees proficient in the software, but not necessarily more productive. Thus the new software often isn't used, or if it is, it doesn't solve the problem.

The same is true for individuals who go in search of the latest and greatest app or the fancy new software, hoping it will be the magic bullet to solve their time management challenges. My clients tell me they install the program, test it out for a day or two, but then never open it again. I know this isn't

because the tool is bad, it's simply because they didn't have the framework of a workflow methodology. They bought the clubs, but it didn't make them golfers.

A better approach is to focus first on the methodology before the tool itself. When you have the methodology, the requirements for the tool become apparent.

If individuals and organizations as a whole have good workflow methodologies, often new software isn't needed. But either way, a process for getting the desired results will solve the problem using existing tools, or illuminate the requirements for new software, or both. If you are considering purchasing new software or switching from one to another in an effort to improve productivity—either for yourself, or for your organization, first ask the following questions:

- What specifically are the problems the software is expected to solve?
- What is currently being done? For example, in the case of personal productivity, ask “How is the workload being managed now?” If you think you might need a project management tool, ask “How do individuals currently track tasks related to projects, and how do project leaders set timelines and track projects currently?”
- If there is no discernable workflow management process, the software will not provide one, and that is the first problem to be solved. If there is one, ask “How will this new tool support the existing process?”
- If you're a leader and you have employees who excel in the area where you perceive a problem, examine their process, and ask what they need in a tool.

There is no question that technology can improve knowledge worker productivity. But when investing your own or your company resources into technology tools, remember that fancy clubs alone won't turn users into PGA pros.

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