

The Productivity Ecosystem (Introduction for Feedback Release)

Hi! I'm Kirsten from Rethink Productivity, and this is the introduction to my upcoming book. I'm currently finalizing the chapters and exercises, and I wanted to take this opportunity to ask you for your feedback. Based on the introduction, what do you think? Do you want to read the rest? Am I missing anything you'd like to see? Could the information be presented in a more digestible format?

Please take a few moments to read and offer me your thoughts. Everyone who leaves a comment on the download page will get recognition in the final manuscript and the opportunity to buy the book at 80% off retail price when it comes out in a few weeks.

Thank you!

Kirsten Simmons



Rethink
Productivity

The Productivity Ecosystem: The Secret to Unlocking Your Strengths to Accomplish Almost Anything

What's Wrong With Productivity?

What exactly is productivity? We put it up on a pedestal, measure it in companies, worry about it when the economy hits a downturn and read obsessively about it on the thousands of productivity blogs that litter the internet. If you've read David Allen's magnum opus, you'll be familiar with the casual definition of productivity: "getting things done." If you turn to Webster, you'll get the especially useful: "State or quality of producing something ... measured by rate of output per unit of input."

Is that really it? Increase your output and/or decrease your input? Reading through the literature on the topic, it's certainly easy to get that impression. This is a selection of post titles from my "Productivity" folder in Google Reader:

- "Pick up the Pace"
- "Why Less is More and How to Achieve It"
- "Is Poor Time Management Limiting Your Potential?"
- "10 Steps to Make Some Motivation Today"
- "How to Tackle Your Crazy To-Do List"

And these are the top hits on Amazon when you search for "Productivity":

- *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*
- *Bit Literacy: Productivity in the Age of Information and E-Mail Overload*
- *Extreme Productivity: Boost Your Results, Decrease Your Hours*
- *Becoming the 1%: How to Master Productivity and Rise to the Top in 7 Days*
- *Tell Your Time: How to Manage Your Schedule So You Can Live Free*

Notice a theme? Those last few books are starting to hint at why productivity is considered so vital—it's a tool, a means to an end. And that end is to achieve your goals, whether they include spending more time with your family, starting a new career, or having control over what you do and when you do it.

But there's another problem. Let's take a look at how exactly you're supposed to go about boosting productivity. Read a few books or flip through a few articles, and you'll find conflicting information almost immediately. For example:

- "Pick Up the Pace"—do more, faster!
- "Why Less Is More"—less work will take you farther!

Everyone has their own opinions on how to be productive, and they're sure that *their* system will help to skyrocket *your* productivity, too. Although this advice is offered in good faith, the contradictions can be incredibly daunting to a newcomer. I certainly wouldn't blame you for covering your ears!

Let's take a look at one of the most common productivity tips: wake up early. You've heard that successful people get up before sunrise, right?

The Productivity Ecosystem (Introduction for Feedback Release)

The problem is that this tip is far from universal. For every person who bounds out of bed before the crack of dawn, you'll find another who thrives in the late evening, after those early risers have collapsed. Everyone has the same 24 hours each day—there is nothing magic about early morning hours.

Imagine you're one of those night owls, and you hear that getting up early is the key to productivity. Surely you can manage that, you think, so you set your alarm to go off 15 minutes earlier each week until you're hauling your ass out of bed at 5:00 a.m. It's pitch black. It's cold. You stumble through your morning routine, trying to wake up and often forgetting things you need to do because your brain isn't fully awake yet. That's not exactly the height of productivity.

Now, does that mean that you can never change your internal clock? Of course not. With enough time, dedication and (often) external pressure, it's entirely possible to go from someone who haunts the witching hour to someone who greets the dawn. Parents of young children do it all the time. But if your goal is to immediately increase in your productivity, getting up earlier is not going to work!

The legendary morning productivity boost comes from **approaching those hours with a clear head, adequate energy** and an **understanding of the goal you're trying to achieve**, along with a **decreased likelihood of being interrupted**. But you can fulfill those criteria at any point during the day. So if you're not a morning person, does it make more sense for you to change your internal clock, or does it make more sense to make smaller changes to better utilize the hours you do have?

This book is about throwing all the rules, systems and well-meaning suggestions out the window. Those rules and systems are perfect—for the person who created them. For you, they fit about as well as the clothes you'd get if you walked into a thrift shop and picked something at random from your size rack. You might get lucky and find something that fits perfectly in a color and style that flatters you, but more likely you'll end up with something that isn't quite right.

Productivity: What you get done, and when you get it done.

Productivity Systems/Techniques/Tricks/Routines: How you get what you need to get done.

Productivity Ecosystem: The web of factors in your life that influence your productivity. This includes your **internal and external influences, your goals and your personality type**.

Your productivity ecosystem is the foundation of your productivity. Your ecosystem determines which systems and techniques you should use. This book will walk you through the connections of your productivity ecosystem.

You'll learn how to make the most effective and sustainable changes to your productivity habits. You'll reach your goals faster and with less stress along the

way. We'll examine everything that influences your productivity and show you how to make informed decisions about what to keep and what to change.

The goal of this book is to help you approach your days empowered by the ability to direct your energy to achieve the end results you want.

The Value of Data

In international aid work, the best solution is one that can kill two, three, or even four birds with one stone. So one would think that the solution offered by PlayPumps International, a public private partnership, would have been perfect. The pumps were merry-go-rounds attached to village wells; as children played, their energy helped pump drinkable water into an easy to access reservoir. Children had a playground, women didn't have to spend hours pumping, and girls could go to school instead of helping their mothers pump water. The PlayPumps could even be self sustaining – the reservoirs could display advertising, the proceeds from which could go to the pump's maintenance.

There was just one small problem – PlayPumps were not nearly as efficient as traditional hand pumps. In order to meet the recommended needs of a village, the children would have had to play more than 24 hours a day.

Whoops.

PlayPumps failed as a concept not because it wasn't a good idea, or because it didn't have support from the international community. It failed due to a basic lack of data about the environment that it needed to perform in. Had the creators, investors, or anyone associated with the program gone out into the field to do impartial observations, the problems with the pump would have become immediately apparent. Those problems could have been corrected before hundreds of them were installed, and the project would have had a better shot at success.

Consider how you might hear about and apply a new productivity technique to your life. Do you hear about a concept and get excited at how shiny it sounds? Do you spend lots of time and/or money getting it set up, only to find out that it doesn't work as well as you hoped it would? Does the system sputter along while you try to get force the rounded edges into your corners, or try to smooth your corners into rounded edges?

We all know how this is going to end. You waste time and energy trying like hell to make it work, and then give up in disgust.

Pity. Things could have been so different if only you'd taken the time to gather a bit of data.

You can't enhance your productivity without knowing where you are now. As you read through this book, we'll guide you through the process of collecting and

The Productivity Ecosystem (Introduction for Feedback Release)

interpreting your data. We want you to come out of this with a system that fits you like a glove, and you can't create that without taking some measurements.

Even if you *feel* terribly unproductive, you won't be able to tell just how far you've come unless you can measure your productivity. Forget the guilt, lose the anxiety, and imagine you're a scientist studying someone named You. That's right: pretend you have no idea what it's like to be you, and just capture data on your behavior. What did you do? When did you do it? How did it go?

And then, like a good scientist, take that information and design an experiment. If you change X—where you work, for example—how does your productivity change? The only way to find out is to test it. When a test fails, you know you need to try something different. It doesn't mean that *you* failed. It just means you need to run another experiment until you hit on the right strategies and techniques for you.

“Now you know better, so you do better.” –Maya Angelou

Don't beat yourself up over what you find. Gather information, consider your options, make a decision, implement it, and repeat the process.

This book is not about changing everything in your life in the name of making you more productive. It's about understanding your world and how the pieces interact. It's about finding the small changes that have big effects.

A Bird's Eye View of Your Productivity Ecosystem

Have you ever visited a new city and picked up a tourist map from your hotel, only to find that the warren of streets and attractions has been reduced to a neat grid with a few prominent landmarks? The map may be technically usable, but if you want to get off the beaten path and truly experience the place you're visiting, you'll need to chuck the map for an in depth guide book—or, even better, a local!

The next few pages are like the tourist map of your productivity ecosystem. You'll learn how the pieces fit together and how they interact, and you may find a few ideas to test that could boost your productivity. But to truly interact with your ecosystem, you'll need to take the quiz at the end of the chapter. Your results on the personality quiz are going to serve as your local guide by suggesting how you should tackle the chapters to come.

Your Goals

What are you trying to do with your life? OK, that's a little hard for most people to answer. Let's make it smaller: What are you trying to accomplish this year?

Your goals influence everything in your productivity ecosystem because they are the reason your ecosystem exists. If productivity is a means to an end, your goals are that end. The goals you choose to pursue influence your internal influences, external influences, habits, relationships — everything except your personality type. To

illustrate this, let me introduce you to a few people. The stories are real, but the names have been changed.

Marcus is a thirty-something engineering student and fencer. Six months ago he won gold at the state fencing competitions, and he's training 5 to 6 days a week to prepare for the nationals. Jay's goals influence almost everything about his days—his classes come first, followed closely by training. His wife, family and friends know this, and they adjust their expectations of him accordingly. He keeps track of his sleeping habits and diet so as to keep himself at peak physical and mental condition, and he actively observes his mindset during training and competition to identify any beliefs or mental scripts that might be holding him back. Nationals are a still few months out, so he's not sweating the occasional fast food meal or training session skipped in lieu of time in with his wife. But as the competition gets closer, he'll certainly be clamping down on his health regimen so that he's the best he can be when he walks into his first round.

Shawna is an outdoor adventure guide, and she's looking to shift from temporary positions to something more permanent. On each temporary contract, she looks for tasks to take on that will boost her skill set and set her apart from the other guides in the field. She keeps an ear out for other jobs, but she doesn't devote regular time to job hunting. Her boyfriend of seven years is in the field with her; she enjoys the work, and since even temporary positions offer room and board, she's able to pay down her student loans and put some money aside.

Her goal—to be a strong, competent, unique adventure guide—influences her habits to some extent. She tries to eat Paleo for the consistent energy and the ability to go longer without food if she's out on a trek, but she doesn't sweat it if she grabs a donut from the staff room. She practices CrossFit regularly to be ready for anything she encounters while leading a group, but if she's already done a six-mile trek with a vertical climb, she's not going to worry about missing that day's workout. And while she definitely has some negative mental scripts holding her back, life really isn't bad enough to make the effort of identifying and replacing them worthwhile for her right now. She's young, and her jobs take her all over the world with her boyfriend by her side.

Rosa is a single mother in her late-thirties, with three children and dreams of starting a business that encourages resilient development in cities and towns around the world. She uses her ex-husband's child support to cover the essentials, and then supplements the family income with the occasional municipal client or garden design and installation. Her business grows while her kids are in school—once they come through the door, she's a mother first and a businesswoman second. And she's always willing to lend a hand to those who need her; she can often be found volunteering her time on nonprofit boards, city working groups and activities in her children's classrooms. Rosa walks the walk when it comes to her doctrine of healthy habits and conscious eating. She knows she has limiting mental scripts, but

The Productivity Ecosystem (Introduction for Feedback Release)

it's hard to find and root them out with everything else going on in her life. She tries to tackle them as they come up, but they aren't her first priority.

As you read through these stories, can you imagine see how Marcus', Shawna's, and Rosa's goals influence their commitments, habits, relationships and expectations? Marcus' friends know that he may ask for a rain check on dinner plans if he's fallen behind on school or if he's taken a blow during training. Rosa knows that her message for the world includes sustainable eating habits, so she makes a point to practice that in her own life. Shawna knows that keeping her energy and strength is important for her goals, but she's doing well enough to cheat now and again.

Your goals aren't a one-way stream of influence—your roles and commitments often alter your goals—but when you're approaching your productivity ecosystem, your goals influence everything else in the system.

External Influences

On occasion, your goals can be so all-encompassing that they overshadow everything else in your life. Someone running for national political office, for example, is going to weigh their every move through the lens of winning their race. Spending a few hours on a Saturday to help their elderly parents fix a broken window isn't going to happen—it makes much more sense to hire someone to go fix the broken window and spend the day knocking on doors. But someone whose goal is to write a thriller novel may well step away from their manuscript to head over to their parents' house—it's a good mental break and an opportunity to connect with loved ones.

Ideally, you'll have a balance between the demands of your goals and the demands of the people around you. Rosa's role as a mother may keep her business from growing as fast as it could otherwise, but she's able to balance her effort between the two and occasionally find ways for one to support the other. Trouble arises when our interactions with others stymie our goals—especially when we don't think to question those interactions.

The people around us influence our goals in three ways—through expectations, relationships, and commitments. These are all intertwined into the general category of external influences, but we'll look at them one by one to see how they can support or hinder our goals.

Expectations

Expectations come in two flavors—individual and societal. Individual expectations come from people you know: your friend on the church flower committee who pushes you to join; your mother dropping hints about settling down and creating some grandkids; your friends giving you grief about drinking water or juice at a party where there's an open bar.

Societal expectations can influence individual ones but can also stand on their own. Your mother's hints about grandkids are almost certainly derived from the societal expectation that men and women should have families, probably mixed with a healthy dose of nostalgia, empty nest syndrome and keeping up with the Joneses. But if we take another common expectation - passing standardized tests to advance in school - we find that the consequences of missing the expectation don't stem from one single person. Society has deemed that high scores are key to getting ahead in life, and these tests were created to further that expectation.

Expectations influence goals on several different levels, from siphoning your time and energy away to discouraging some goals entirely. If your goal is to compete at the Olympics, start your own business or walk from Amsterdam to Vladivostok, spending the time and money to get a college degree could be a distraction that delays the achievement of your goal. If you're a woman in a society that forbids women from leaving their homes unescorted, you may never be able to entertain a goal to become an astronaut, an actress or even a student.

The problem with expectations, at least within the lens of the productivity ecosystem, is that it tends to be difficult to push back against them when you realize that they're not serving your goals. Altering expectations can require standing up to people you've never stood up to, saying no to something you've never questioned before and risking negative reactions from people who don't understand why you're challenging the status quo. Many people choose not to challenge expectations, or only take on a select few out of the many that influence them. Expectations are not low hanging fruit when it comes to increasing productivity, but depending on the situation, the rewards can be huge. That's why it's worth knowing how expectations influence our goals—you may never act on the knowledge, but the opportunity for productivity gains never happens if you don't observe your influences and consider what may happen if they change.

Relationships

Relationships and expectations are closely related, but unlike expectations, relationships offer benefits in return for the time and energy it takes to maintain them. Adhering to an expectation when it doesn't serve your goal simply allows you to avoid something negative—anger, disappointment, or ostracism, to name a few. Negative relationships almost always swing back around to negative expectations, and in those situations both the relationship and its expectations should be up for consideration if you're trying to improve your productivity (and your mental health!)

But consider instead a relationship with a good friend. You talk to each other regularly. You act as sounding boards for each other's ideas and provide support when things don't go well. There may be a hobby you both enjoy, something that releases stress and gets you ready to take on the world again. The benefits of that kind of relationship far outweigh the time and attention diverted from your goals.

The Productivity Ecosystem (Introduction for Feedback Release)

Let's consider an intimate relationship. While it takes time to nourish, the benefits in the form of mental, physical and moral support, the release of tension and regular orgasm allow you to focus more intently, make creative breakthroughs and get more done when you do return to your goals.

Commitments

Within the productivity ecosystem, commitments are the love child of expectations and relationships. Sometimes our commitments feed our goals, like the time we commit to spend with our partners or friends. Other times our commitments emerge from expectations, and actively divert time and energy away from what we want to achieve without offering any benefit in return.

Let's look at the choice to get a pet, and the immediate commitment of time, energy and money that caring for that animal requires. Ideally, this is a commitment you would plan for, and that you would take into account when you think through your goals. But if you don't have that opportunity or your goals change after your ex skipped town and left you with the puppy, then your commitment to that animal is something that you have to consider when you think about the most efficient way to get from where you are to where you want to be.

Commitments require time and energy. You need to account for them in your plans, work around them when you decide on action steps toward your goals and consider how the people on the other end of those commitments may act to support or impede your progress. Some commitments are more disruptive than others, but understanding what yours are and how they affect your ecosystem is part of the process of arranging an environment that helps you achieve your goals.

Internal Influences

At the end of the day, there's only so much you can do to change your relationships, commitments and expectations. You control one side of that equation—yourself. Ultimately, you can't force anyone to alter his or her behavior. All you can do is control your own actions. On some level, that's such an amazing realization: you're not responsible for anyone but yourself. You owe nothing unless you choose to owe it; you give nothing unless you choose to give it; you do nothing unless you choose to do it.

When it comes to your productivity ecosystem, the internal influences are under your personal control and can result in the biggest wins when it comes to reaching your goals. We're going to briefly examine health, habits and mental scripts in relation to the productivity ecosystem; as always, remember to observe without judgment and catalog knowledge for potential change later.

Health

It's a bit of a lie that you have complete control over your health, but I do believe that there are always steps you can take to improve your health. Even if you've been dealt a crappy hand—genetic disorders, accidental injury, mental illness—there's

always something you can do to improve your energy, decrease your pain and increase your overall sense of well-being.

Before you start protesting here, let me say that this is coming from someone who manages chronic illness on a daily basis. I have a genetic disorder that causes my connective tissue to degrade prematurely, a mystery disorder that causes intense muscle spasms, and I'm dealing with ongoing tinnitus, vertigo and hypersomnia from a concussion a year ago. I use both conventional and alternative medicine to keep myself running, and I also experiment regularly with changes in my diet and exercise habits to see what leaves me feeling good.

The World Health Organization defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being." In our context, we're going to define it as "optimizing your physical, mental and social well-being." This optimization often involves conventional medicine but focuses more attention on how your day-to-day activities contribute to your well-being. How much sleep are you getting? What do you eat on a day to day basis, and when do you eat it? Do you exercise, and if so, how often and what do you do?

Habits

The previous questions encompass what many of us would consider to be habits, but not all of our habits influence our physical health. On an intellectual level, do you regularly seek out challenges and experiences that nourish your mind? Are you in the habit of reading for an hour or so before bed? Do you feel that the work you do on a day to day basis is meaningful and important to the world around you?

How do you decompress? Do you spend time with your family or friends, go exercise or play with the dogs or sink into the couch with a bag of chips and a comedy?

Are you someone who cooks for yourself or takes the time to seek out food that is organic or local? What do you snack on? What do you drink throughout the day?

When you get up in the morning, what is the first thing you do? And what is the last thing you do before turning out your light at night?

I've thrown a lot of questions at you, and you don't have to answer them now. The point is to illustrate all the little things you may do on a daily basis without thinking. Sometimes these habits support our productivity, and sometimes they don't. Sometimes changing them brings about massive progress towards our goals, and sometimes the difference isn't worth the effort.

Observing your habits gives you power; it gives you a map with which to navigate and the knowledge to change if you decide to do so.

The Productivity Ecosystem (Introduction for Feedback Release)

Mental Scripts

You may not realize it, but many of your habits are dictated by unconscious mental scripts. A mental script is a belief or idea that you assume is a truth. Sometimes these scripts are completely true and help protect us; for instance, I'll bet you never reach for a pot on the stove without a potholder, or at the very least without being ready to pull away quickly if the handle is hot. But other times these scripts are neutral or actively impede our ability to move toward our goals.

Let's say you grew up in a loud environment where you had to interrupt and raise your voice to be heard. As a kid, that script may have served you well, but if you're in a negotiation, an argument or even just a normal conversation, following that script is going to drive people away. Or let's say you were taught that children should be seen and not heard, or that women should naturally be submissive to men. If you still follow these scripts, do you think they're serving you as you move toward work on your goals?

I'm dealing with a huge script right now as I write this book—that I'm not qualified to string these ideas together and put these words on paper: "I don't have a doctorate in psychology; I'm not formally trained as a coach. I'm not good enough." If I listen to that script, that little gremlin voice in the back of my head, this book will never see the light of day.

Some people call these scripts by different names: mental trash, gremlins, the lizard brain, the resistance. But they're all one and the same. They can creep up around success, attention, money, happiness, productivity, even scheduling. Ever thought, "I'm just one of those people who rarely gets anywhere on time?"

If we don't identify these scripts, they can sabotage our goals without our awareness. We'll go into more detail on how to identify them and get rid of them in a later chapter; for now, just start turning over the idea and considering what your scripts might be.

Your Personality Type

We've talked about the elements of your ecosystem that influence what you do and when you do it. Your personality type is all about how you choose to execute the goals you've chosen and the steps you'll need to take to achieve them.

Personality infuses how you interact with the world. Your strengths and weaknesses are influenced by your personality, so it would stand to reason that you may be better suited to different techniques than someone with another personality profile. If you had an elf and a troll, and both had the goal of getting to the other side of a mountain, would you question if the elf chose to run over and the troll chose to dig through? Or, to bring this into the human realm, one personality type might choose to take the trail over and another might rig a hot air balloon and fly over. The first personality type is one that likes working within previously defined boundaries, and

the other enjoys exploring new ground and solving problems. If both ways get the person over the mountain, do the differences matter?

Unless the situation is a matter of life and death, the answer is: No, it doesn't. So why tell the explorer to confine himself to the path, or insist that the hiker invent a way to get herself over without walking? Let them each take the path that comes naturally to them, and they'll reach the finish line in comparable times, having thoroughly enjoyed themselves along the way.

How To Use This Book

I'd like you to approach this book as a guide to mapping your own unique ecosystem. It's not going to happen in one sitting, or even with several sessions of thought and analysis. There will inevitably be places where you sketch in the basic outlines to be filled out later, or even leave entirely blank with the warning, "Here there be dragons." And, like any ecosystem, yours will evolve over time and you'll want to return to revise your map on occasion.

This book is written to be your guide to setting down the basic sketch and filling in the first layer or two of detail. I'd like it to be something you return to again and again as you think through these ideas and identify factors within your ecosystem that influence your productivity. There are exercises associated with each section; please complete the ones that call to you and don't be afraid to return to redo some of them when you feel that things have changed. Many people find they benefit from keeping a journal to record their responses to the exercises and any other thoughts or emotions that might come up as you work through the book.

I want you to come out of this with something concrete, an illustration of the ecosystem you're operating in and all the wonderful contrasts and contradictions that your ecosystem includes. In that regard, don't you dare censor anything that pops into your head when you're doing these exercises. Even if it seems unrelated, like a sudden memory of that time in grade school when you sketched out plans for a rabbit hutch and tried to convince your parents to let you build it in the backyard, write it down! This process is inherently messy. You are going to flail, to thrash around and go down dead end paths. That's entirely normal—when you're flailing around, you're trying to figure out what the hell is going on. As you go through this process you *will* do things that you think are stupid. You will fail. You will say things you don't mean. You're going to set goals that you're then going to abandon. You're going to do all of this multiple times, and that's perfectly all right.

Often we think that everything happens due to chance. When events and opportunities come together in a way that you would never have expected, it's universally connected to something that you have done in the past—concepts you've studied, content you've created, goals that you've set, or ideas that you have spent time contemplating. Most everything comes back around to have significance sooner or later. There's no such thing as wasted energy—not when you are exploring yourself.

The Productivity Ecosystem (Introduction for Feedback Release)

This is a place where there is no judgment, where there is nobody watching. This is a place for you to write, to think, to toss out ideas, to really come to terms with what you're doing and why you're doing it. Sections of this book may seem repetitive, and there's a reason for that. As you go through this process, you are going to change your mind; you'll see things in a different light, and that's completely normal. Some of the exercises are purposely included twice so you can track the metamorphosis of your goals and purposes.

You'll encounter a lot of possibilities and suggestions in the coming pages; please don't feel at all compelled to try all of them! As I've mentioned before, the point of this process is to obtain a clear understanding of your ecosystem before you start trying to change it. You may come up with your own ideas that work better than anything I suggest in here. If so: go for it! Or you may consider the potential returns from a suggestion and decide that it's not worth the effort. As long as you make informed decisions, all I care about is that you come out with something that works for you.

And as part of making sure you come out with something that works for you, the order in which you go through the book is going to be different depending on your personality type. So let's get your quiz out of the way first and get you set up with the road map that's best suited for you.

Thank you so much for reading through the introduction to my book! I'd love to have your feedback. If you could go to the following website and leave me your thoughts, I'd much appreciate it. Here are some questions to consider:

Based on the introduction, would you be interested in reading the full book when it comes out?

You should have a decent idea of where the book is going – is there anything else you'd like to see? (Or if you don't have a decent idea, please tell me!)

Would you be interested in participating in some sort of mastermind group intended help you observe and identify high value changes within your productivity ecosystem, and then support you in making those changes?

Please visit <http://rethinkproductivity.com/want-to-influence-my-new-book/> and tell me what you think!