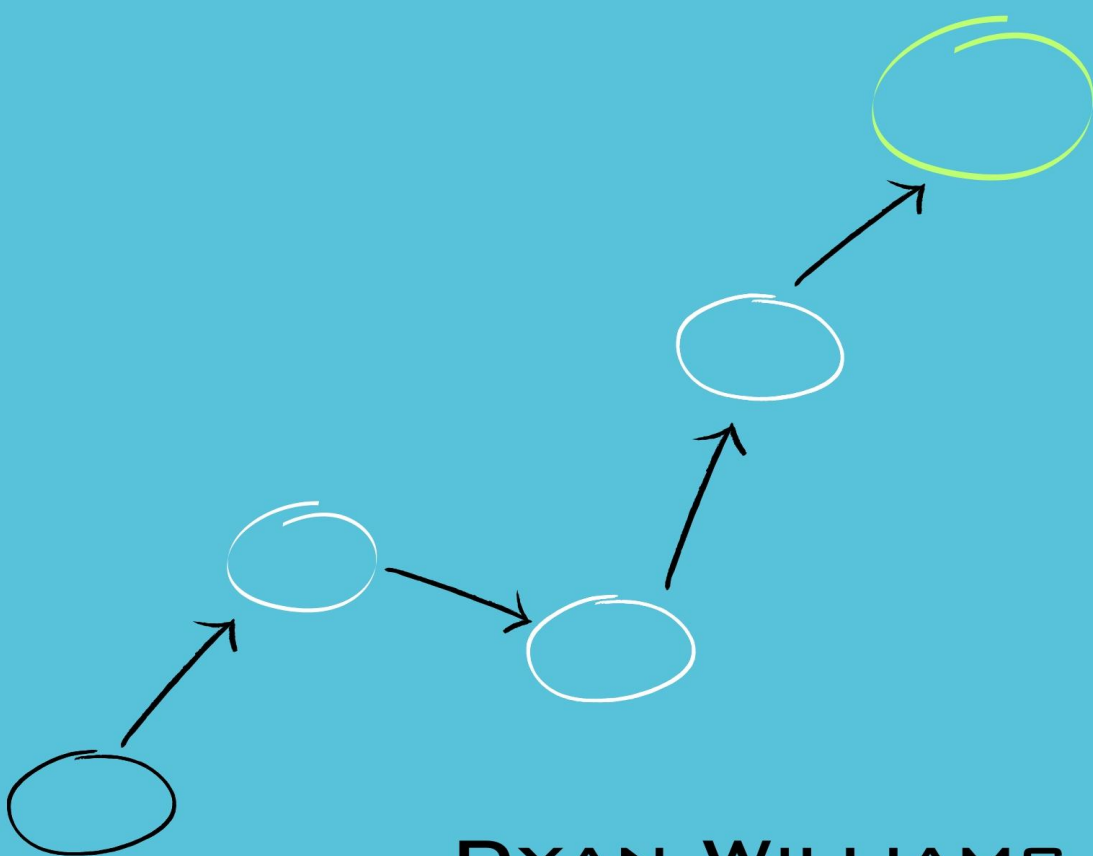


THE INCREMENTALIST

A Simple Productivity System to
Create Big Results
in Small Steps



DYAN WILLIAMS

The Incrementalist

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For E.B.

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Introduction

With multiple projects to start and goals to meet, we often default to working longer and harder at the expense of our personal health, well-being, and innermost values. Even when we do pause and slow down to get the break we need, we might hear an inner voice saying we're not doing enough or achieving enough.

Cramming more things into our day to get all the things done is a mediocre stopgap at best. Both our mind and body need to rest for us to stay in flow, do amazing work, and match our actions with our priorities. When you account for sleep, nutrition, exercise, recreation, hobbies, family, relationships and all the other areas of a well-lived life, you really have an average of up to 2 to 6 hours, each day, for cognitively demanding or creatively challenging work.

Piling on the busywork often leaves you with 1 hour or less to do the core stuff that makes a lasting and positive impact. If your work day typically stretches out for more than 8 hours, you end up with increased fatigue, dulled thinking and diminishing returns on output. When there is overload, the cost of your input outweighs the value of your output. Your time and efforts will be wasted if you do not optimize your hours and move at the right speed.

Nonetheless, there might be pressure to work 10 to 12 hours a day or 50 to 60 hours per week to meet goals, objectives and deadlines. Time-based productivity can be suitable for short-term gains and true emergencies. But it's not enough to create desired results in long-term projects that require creative thinking and focused efforts.

Besides the tendency to engage in busywork, there is also the propensity to delay action when we feel pulled in different directions. Decision-heavy days and lack of margin will drain your energy and tax your willpower to do important things.

Ill-fated attempts to do it all and have it all done - at once - result in overwork and overwhelm. You end up working frantically for long hours or barely making progress, except to respond to some emails, messages and telephone calls.

These productivity problems have little to do with lack of time. They have more to do with fixating on the wrong goals, striving for too much, failing to realistically plan your day, not knowing where to start, and putting off what's most important. External factors such as your work environment and constant interruptions, as well as your personal circumstances and season of life, also affect the pace at which you can make and manage things.

A shorter work week (like 4 days or 32 hours per week) brings its own challenges. If the work demands remain the same, you could be forced to work harder and more intensely to meet requirements in a shorter time frame. Thus, to avoid the busyness trap or to get out of the procrastination rut, you must define your real priorities, take daily action on the essentials, leverage your skills, and let go of the rest. Being able to separate what's important from what's not is the most crucial step to take, but this is hard to do when we're in reactive mode.

With the simple productivity system I refer to as Incrementalism, you figure out how to prioritize, make tasks more doable and enjoyable, maximize your time, and channel your focus on what really matters. You create a more purposeful life and turn what used to be distant goals into reality.

You also learn that making radical changes and ditching your current life altogether aren't always necessary. While bold leaps can bring exciting and massive improvement, they can also destroy stable parts of your life that you care deeply about. By making small, deliberate and ongoing adjustments, you're able to unleash the best version of yourself and create your ideal lifestyle without the side effects of too much change, too soon.

INCREMENTALISM: A SIMPLE PRODUCTIVITY SYSTEM TO DO BIG THINGS AND CREATE BIG RESULTS IN SMALL STEPS

This book will show you how to become an INCREMENTALIST to make big changes, in small steps, without relentlessly pushing yourself too far beyond your comfort zone, burning out, and feeling inadequate. You can do great work and stretch your limits, gradually and slowly.

As an Incrementalist, you get to implement your big idea or finish a big project regardless of your limited time, energy, resources, skills, motivation and, perhaps most of all, courage. The idea or project may relate to your work, your family, your relationships, a creative endeavor, or any other domain of life.

Big successes are created over time and not overnight. “Big” doesn’t mean it has to be noticeable to others, like building a million-dollar business, winning first prize in a major competition, attracting a large social media audience or becoming a best-selling author. Rather, I define “big” as something that is truly meaningful to you: it deeply aligns with your core purpose and strengths, fosters vitality and presence, adds significant value, makes your day count, and gives you more freedom to design the life you want.

Through my productivity coaching and law practice, and dealing with my own struggles and setbacks, I have found that Incrementalism fuels positive transformation through consistent, low-resistance progress.

The Incrementalist approach includes 5 core principles:

Principle 1: Define your most important projects. Too many options and indecisions keep you stuck. Decide what your highest priorities are and commit fully to them. When a task or project languishes on your to-do list for days, weeks, months or even years, you need to decide whether to drop it or get moving on it. Lack of momentum saps your energy and reduces the likelihood of moving from idea to action to done.

Principle 2: Break down your project into a step-by-step process. Make each step as detailed and easily accomplished as possible so there's no friction and doubt on what to do next. Put each actionable step on a short to-do list for the day. Gradual steps that involve small tweaks are much easier to take than giant leaps that require dramatic changes. As you build your focus muscle and your ability to follow through, you can then tackle bigger chunks at a time.

Principle 3: Make time to take the necessary action steps. Stay on track with high-priority projects by blocking time in your day to do them. Defer what does not have to be done now, delegate what is better done by someone else, and delete what does not have to be done at all. Make use of time pockets and work in short bursts if you don't have huge blocks of time to get the steps done.

Principle 4: Find your natural rhythm and work with it. Each day, you will face priorities that compete with each other. Do you reply to the email from your top client that hit your inbox last night? Do you call back the prospect inquiring on your service? Do you write the weekly article for your lead generation blog? Or do you tackle the big report that is due in a few days? When you synch with your natural rhythm, you consider the time of day and your energy level in choosing what to do and what to put off.

Principle 5: Rest and recharge. Although taking regular breaks throughout the day or taking extended breaks (such as a vacation or sabbatical) might seem to be the opposite of work, they are integral to your productivity. When you have prioritized your projects, broken them down into small steps, and blocked the optimal time to start or finish them, you will perform at a higher level. Do not fill the margins with more work or pseudo breaks like mindlessly scrolling through the Internet. Engage in offline breaks that restore your physical energy, fuel your creativity, and sharpen your mental focus.

HOW I'VE USED INCREMENTALISM TO CREATE (MY) BIG THINGS

I'm an Incrementalist by nature and by practice. I focus more on the progress and gains, and less on the goals and gaps. I cautiously take risks that change the trajectory of my life. Here are a few examples:

During my undergraduate years in college, I minored in Speech Communication because I thought I was going to work in public relations after I graduated with my bachelor's degree. The problem was I had a deep fear of public speaking.

I took an introductory course in speech communication and discovered I could develop the skills to present to and interact with an audience, even if there was underlying anxiety. By the time I was done taking more courses in the field, I had enough credits to earn the minor. I continue to apply this foundation to presentations and talks I give in my profession.

When I first learned about the profound benefits of a yoga practice, I so wanted to learn how to do a headstand. But I was terrified that I could injure my neck and spine while trying to get it right.

So, I enrolled in a beginner level ashtanga yoga class. By the third session, my teacher gave me a simple instruction and, with a very micro-adjustment, I was finally in a headstand. With daily practice, I could hold headstands for more than a minute.

I went on to complete a 230-hour yoga teacher training and certification program. Although I did not become a yoga teacher or open a yoga studio, the experience prompted my incorporation of mindfulness and breathwork into stressful situations.

Using the Incrementalist approach, I established what is now a reputable law firm (with a global reach) from my home office in October 2014. My venture into solo practice in U.S. immigration law and legal ethics took me out of my comfort zone, but not too much because I had spent 10+ years at two other firms honing my professional craft.

During my last two years as an “employed” lawyer, I negotiated flextime and worked remotely two days of the week before I became self-employed. By the time I launched my own business, I was used to staying focused and productive while working from home.

In the first week of my business, I started out with one client in my local area. I then grew my client base bit by bit, with a focus on high-demand areas where I had a deep interest and unique expertise. Within months, I started having hundreds of people – from all over the world and across the United States – reach out to me each year to help them solve their problem.

With a steady stream of ideal clients, my tiny firm permits me to do my best work, provide essential services, be financially independent, and limit my average workweek to 20 or 25 hours, depending on the season. I built a successful business without accumulating overhead expenses and stretching myself too thin.

Having my own business gives me more autonomy, which was my main driver for going solo. To run my business from home with young kids around, I learned to block time for work based on my natural rhythm and personal circumstances.

In my first four years as a solo lawyer, I juggled parenting my first child with my law firm responsibilities. She was then a toddler and next a preschooler. By the time she started kindergarten, my second child was born.

During these years, my first time block for deep work was in the early morning (5 to 7 am). I had quiet time when no one else in the home was awake. The second time block was in the afternoon when my younger kid took a nap and when my older kid was doing a solo activity or still at school. The third time block was in the evening (6 to 7 or 8 pm), after my husband got home from work.

I have since tweaked my focus blocks to match changes in life. Both my children are now old enough to give me quiet solitude (leave me alone) when I’m in deep work mode. I stopped waking up before

7 am just to get work done. I usually begin the day around 7 am and ease into it with morning rituals, like drinking tea, reading a book, or doing yoga. Then I have my first focus block. On some days, it starts with an 8 am scheduled call with a prospective client. On other days, it starts later around 10 am, usually for a research or writing project. I typically put in three hours of deep work before I take a lunch break with my kids (who are currently homeschooled) and my husband (who now works from home), post-2020. I have my second focus block in the afternoon, typically between 2 and 4 pm or 3 and 5 pm.

On average, the work shifts add up to about 5 hours per day. Depending on work demands and other responsibilities, I alternate between a 4-day/20-hour work week or a 5-day/25-hour work week. There are days when I work longer, such as when I have a due date fast approaching, I'm on a roll with a project, or I have a vacation coming up. But the maximum is 8 hours per day or 40 hours per week, and this upper limit is the exception.

I can move around my focus blocks and change my work schedule to fit my priorities, life circumstances and preferred lifestyle. What's constant is that I cap my work hours at all times. Even if you have less autonomy, flexibility, and control over your schedule, you do have some power to live and work by design, rather than by default. The 5 Incrementalist principles will help you tap into and harness it, no matter how small or hidden it might be.

I have found that I am just as productive, if not more so, than when I worked more than 8 hours per day (40+ hours per week) in my pre-parenthood days. I don't mean I always get MORE things done faster. I mean I get more of the RIGHT things done with deeper focus, more creativity and sharper precision. This true productivity leads to better results and greater satisfaction. If I gain very little and often lose a lot by working longer hours, there's no use engaging in this behavior. Plus, when my day doesn't go according to plan, Incrementalism reminds me to appreciate the small progress and apply the lessons learned.

Being an Incrementalist has given me more time to enjoy creative projects. I not only published the 1st edition of this book in April 2020, but also started a podcast in January 2021 and a YouTube channel in December 2021, called *The Incrementalist - A Productivity Show*. Through these projects, I am developing my writing, editing, speaking, project management, videography, and podcast/video production abilities. These ancillary skills add to my existing skillset, which lead to clearer focus, a calmer state, and better decision-making.

The book you are now reading culminated from a decade of my writing content for my blog and other platforms as a productivity coach and lawyer. It is far less daunting to write an article of 1,000+ words than to finish a book of 50,000+ words. Although writing a book is a creative endeavor, it is also a very solitary effort that involves hours, days, weeks, months and sometimes years of focused work.

My past micro-writing projects gave me valuable content and a solid framework to complete the 1st edition of *The Incrementalist* in about a month. I have since made updates to correct typos and grammatical errors (that were found), flesh out ideas, and reflect changes in how I apply the Incrementalist system. But the 5 core principles have remained the same.

Through small steps, I was able to finally hit the “publish” button on self-publishing services - beginning with Lean Publishing (lean-pub.com), which is perfect for in-progress books. In the writing and editing process, I often asked myself, *what’s the point?* There are so many other productivity books already out there or waiting to be released - many by big publishing houses.

Why would anyone - who is struggling to make big changes - read or buy *The Incrementalist* from a self-published author? Isn’t it enough to have books from James Clear, BJ Fogg, Michael Hyatt, Nir Eyal, Greg McKeown, Cal Newport and other authors who dominate the personal productivity, self-development space?

I am glad I overcame that psychological hurdle and emotional roadblock. It's been three years since I put out the first, imperfect edition in 2020. Over time, I have received positive feedback and sold enough copies to inform me that *The Incrementalist* is worth being in the productivity arena.

This 2023 edition is still not perfect. But it's good enough to explain the principles I use to operate a tiny but mighty law firm, complete many writing projects, host two podcasts and YouTube channels (one for productivity coaching and the other for legal issues), manage a happy home with my husband, parent two lovely children, enjoy creative hobbies, mentor and coach others, nurture relationships and friendships, and explore what makes life worthwhile.

HOW INCREMENTALISM WILL HELP YOU

There are many productivity systems from which to choose. Among the most well-known are David Allen's Getting Things Done (GTD), Ryder Carroll's Bullet Journaling (BuJo), Toyota Company's Kanban, and Brian Tracy's Eat the Frog method. There is no one right way to be productive. And what works now might not work in the future.

Even though I refer to the Incrementalist approach as a productivity system, it is more like a mindset, a philosophy, a perspective, or a way of being. No matter who you are, what you seek to accomplish, and which season of life you're in, you can use Incrementalism to create big impact in tiny steps. It is structured but flexible enough for you to adjust to your preferences, needs, and circumstances. It is a reliable and repeatable process to sustain peak performance and true productivity, which is doing the right things at the best times, even when you have multiple things calling for your attention. It does not require any special apps, digital tools, or productivity software. A simple notebook or planner with pen or pencil will do.

I've applied every single principle I outline in this book and experienced the massive difference they make. Whether you're a

lawyer, a business owner, a project manager, a working parent, or a knowledge worker who struggles with overwhelm, you will experience positive changes with the Incrementalist approach.

One of the most helpful things you can do to reach a big goal is to take small steps, build upon each one, and keep moving forward until you get to where you want to be (or until it's time to pause, quit or pivot). By using the Incrementalist approach, you make sustainable progress toward your target with simple habits that are supported by regular routines and deliberate rituals. Incrementalism is especially useful when you're cautious and risk averse or do not have limitless wealth and infinite resources to keep testing new ideas.

The term *Incrementalism* was coined by political scientist Charles E. Lindblom in the mid-1950s and was discussed in his 1959 essay titled *The Science of Muddling Through*. Lindblom outlined the benefits and methodologies for making small, incremental public policy changes, rather than huge, wholesale changes. Incrementalism has also been used to describe implementing continuous improvement in large-scale projects.

In the context of productivity, Incrementalism means taking small steps and making incremental progress – yearly, monthly, weekly and, preferably, daily – to create life-enhancing transformation and results. Through a series of tiny ordinary successes rather than by a single ambitious effort, you reduce backlog, gain traction, and maintain focus on important work and transformative goals.

Being an Incrementalist does not mean you keep your goals small or you don't dream big. Rather, you implement revolutionary ideas and chart your own course by breaking down overwhelming projects into achievable parts that move you closer to your desired destination. Your present self develops a closer relationship with your future self.

Through intentional choices instead of huge leaps, you avoid diluting your attention, draining your energy, and wasting precious

time. You also appreciate, learn from and savor the journey a whole lot more. You stay curious throughout the process, rather than attach too tightly to the big goal or desired outcome. You accomplish more, with greater ease and comfort, in incremental steps.

By applying the 5 Incrementalist principles I describe in this book, you will move forward on the things that really matter, at a healthier pace and at the ideal speed. You will have a flexible productivity system that guarantees purposeful action, synchs with your natural rhythm, builds in deliberate breaks, and reduces resistance to change.

Whether you seek to pursue a cherished hobby, nurture fulfilling friendships, create a happier home, make high-quality deliverables, launch a product, or establish a new business, this book is for you. You can take incremental steps to make big changes and do big things – all without losing steam, exhausting yourself, and completely ditching the comfort zone that is there for good reason.

Habits, Routines, Rituals

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