



Episode 74
Productivity Tips for
Design Professionals



**Jason: [00:00]**

Hello and welcome to designer discussions with Jason, Mirjam, and Maria. Today we are talking about productivity tips for design professionals.

Intro: [00:17]

Welcome to the designer discussions podcast with Jason, Maria, and Mirjam. Tune in each week where we talk about marketing, PR, and business advice for design professionals. Are you ready to get serious about your marketing? We're opening the Designer Discussions Marketing Studio, a monthly series of in depth actionable content to guide your marketing, PR and business development. We want to help you transform your business and elevate it to work with your dream clients.

Maria: (0:45)

So productivity in a consulting industry is super important because what you're trying to do is accomplish as many of your tasks with the least amount of effort possible. But we have a lot of baggage that we have to deal with, which is like emotional baggage when a client is upset our personal stuff that's going on in our lives, and then also just having a lot of new work piling up and trying to get through all of it in a way that's sufficient. And it also doesn't drain us too much. Right? So we're going to talk about three simple techniques that can be used to manage your time better so that you can take care of yourself first and also get all that work stuff done that needs to get done off of your to do list. So first on the list is if you are not time shunking or time blocking your schedule, you're doing yourself a disservice. So I get it. I know people will say, I am such a good multitasker, and I know they are. They are excellent multitaskers. I am not a good multitasker, but if I was, I would want to be aware that whenever you multitask, you do slow down your work. So the best way to describe this is if I was to travel to the nearest big city and I was to drive there and off ramp and then get back on every time there was another town in between here and there, I would actually not get there very efficiently. Right? This would be just like getting as many connecting flights as you can because you're just trying to check cities off on a map that you visited.



Maria: (02:25)

All of those little stops, all those changes you had to slow down is actually going to be impacting your schedule. So the way that you can avoid doing this is by time chunking or time blocking. Did you know we have 168 hours a week? Everybody's got 168 hours a week, can't make more hours, and everybody's got the same amount. Right? So when you start looking at what you're trying to get done and how you're going to get it done, you should start looking at it in groups of time that you can use altogether. That will get you from where you're trying to go to where you need to be as easily as possible without making breaks and changes in your schedule. So one thing I think that's super important for interior designers to know is that architecture firms will review their workload and determine by half days how much work is left on a project. So that when they look at how much more work is left on a project or how they're going to compensate their staff, they know exactly how many more days of work and when they need to take on their next project or when they would pre load their next project is. So as interior designers, we can do the same. If you just take a sheet of paper and you write down every day of the week and you put 1 hour down for each one of those days and you circle it. And at the end of the week, you look at what your habits are telling you. Your habits are going to tell you that you like to spend a certain time of each day working on certain types of work. And if you do a worksheet like that and you do it like maybe two weeks, you'll find that you already like to time chunk or time block your work and then you can build on that and make it more efficient. Another technique you can use in a design business to help with time chunking and time blocking is return emails two times each workday. So instead of being tied to your email and responding all day long every day, you can take an aim for an 11:00 time when you check email and respond and then you do it again at 05:00 at the end of the day. And then that way that also helps you to manage the expectations of the people that you're working with.

**Maria: (04:25)**

I also believe 100% in planning your staff meetings and rep meetings on a fixed schedule so that everybody knows exactly when those are going to be. And then you place them in the right spot on the schedule so that everything works really well. So now that we have looked at our schedule, what we're trying to get accomplished and what we're doing, and we've kind of started to outline and highlight when our best times are to do certain things and how many hours we really need to work on something to move that project forward. We need to start looking at how do we brain hack our way through overwhelm that's brought on by the large tasks and especially those uncomfortable tasks that we need to do.

Mirjam: (05:32)

So there is a productivity concept that is called Eat the Frog and it's actually a book by Brian Tracy that I read many years ago. And it stuck with me because just the metaphor is very strong. Right. Apparently the idea originally came from Mark Twain. So this idea has been around for a long, long time. And it's it's very simple. It's just that first thing in the morning you tackle the most challenging, the most difficult task that you least want to do. So you get it over with. You eat the biggest frog first and just intuitively, that's not what we want to do, right? It's like maybe get up, have some coffee, and then you start reading your emails and doing all the little things and you get carried away doing all the things that are not truly that important. So if you make it a habit, it takes a lot of willpower, it's practice. But if you get up and do the most difficult thing first, you'll feel amazing afterwards. And I wish I could say I do this every day, I don't, but I love the idea and when I do it, it really works for me.



Maria: (06:25)

Another way to do this is also called the Pomodoro Technique. And if you haven't heard of it before, it's the idea of those little tomato timers that you would have sitting in someone's kitchen. You set a timer for 20 to 25 minutes and no matter how terrible the task is, or no matter how much you're not looking forward to doing it, your body will do a 20 minutes task. It will do the 20 minutes, the 25 minutes, and then you can give yourself a reward or a break for applying that window of time towards the thing you didn't want to do. So you can look up and find more information on the setting behind Pomodoro Technique and how it can help improve your mental agility and reduce the chances of you getting burnt out by those tasks that you're not interested in doing. Third and most important thing I think this is going to tie back to your time chunking and time blocking, is that you should start looking at what habits you have in place and track yourself on if you're applying them towards the items that you need to be dealing with. So I'm going to use an analogy and it's going to be the question I'm going to ask you right now is how many times do you touch your mail? And I'm talking about the stuff from the post office that we get. How often do you touch it? So you'll look at going to the mailbox, you'll get your mail, you'll look at it and you'll be like, hey, there's some items I can throw away immediately. These are some items I need to deal with. And then these are items I need to follow up with. Maybe you just got a holiday card from someone and they just change their address and you want to write that down somewhere so that you can also mail their holiday card to the right house, right? So some items that you're going to get in the mail are going to have a multi point touch. They're probably not going to get thrown away immediately. It's probably going to sit on your counter and it's probably going to get moved by you when you clean and it might get moved again and it might get moved again, right? So how many times are you touching a piece of mail? So all the times that you're touching that piece of mail are habits. And when you start looking at everything that you do in your office, you should start looking at it the same as that piece of mail.



Maria: (06:25)

Even though everything is digital now, the document you're working on with three other people's digital. The emails that you're getting are also digital. You should start counting how many times do you touch it, how many times do you handle it? And if you're touching it or handling it more than two or three times before it is completed, you should start looking at changing your habit structure around that task. Because it's the habit that the thing that you're not conscious about, that you have around that task is what is actually causing the delay in it getting completed. Once you start watching what your habits are and how are your habits in place impacting getting these items that you need to do, you can start to change the habit and shape your routine differently, and then that will influence the lifestyle and the processes around your business. I think Miriam talked a lot about this with Eat the Frog. So after we've watched what our habits are by time chunking and time blocking and writing out what we're doing during our time, after we've learned that maybe early in the morning, we can take on that bigger, harder task, and even the big things can be broken down into 20 minutes tolerable we need to start looking at what habits do we have around the task that we do accomplish.

Mirjam: (10:56)

All right, so there is something really interesting that I learned a long time ago in my corporate job at Kohler. I went to a seminar and it was about productivity. And one of the things they talked about was the Eisenhower matrix. And it's the idea it's a matrix and it has two axes. One is importance and the other one is urgency. And if we think about the tasks that we do every day, most of what we do actually is urgent but not important. So it's all these little things. There's also tasks that are urgent and important and those have to get done one way or another. That would probably be a frog, right? The frogs the urgent and important, and you have to do it. You have to get it out of the way. And then we get stuck doing all these non important things, which is really not the best use of our time. So there's two other quadrants. There's the not urgent stuff, which we actually should just completely delegate or get rid of, and then the quadrant that always gets neglected and that's actually the most important, is the one where things are important but not urgent.



Mirjam: (12:26)

And I like to use the example of PR, like for an interior design business. Everybody knows that getting media coverage is important for interior designers, but designers are so busy that it's just something they don't really get to. And so the point of this is that when you can look up the Eisenhower matrix and you'll see it pop up and you can print out a copy and you can populate the areas for yourself to see. How? Your tasks line up and how you can be more intentional about integrating some of those not urgent but important pieces in your day to day schedule. It's basically like we say, it's like you want to work on your business, not in your business. It's exactly that quadrant that's so important. So I think just from a visual perspective, this is super helpful if you can lay it out and structure it this way.

Maria: (13:27)

Another reference would be the book Atomic Habits. It's a great book if you want to read about how your habits really deeply impact your life and how shifts and changes to habits can create a large impact beyond that. So the next thing I like to talk about too is technology and how technology can actually make your life a lot easier. And I think we've talked about a million apps and a million systems and processes that you can put in place that you can buy online. But I think Jason has been doing something with his business that I would love for him to share with you.

**Jason: (14:26)**

Like you had talked about with the apps. There's a ton of apps in there, out there, from Asana to Monday to Trello to click up. And you all have heard the names. And I would say you have to start and define, like Maria said, what are your habits and then your routine? Because you need to define what do you do and how the software can help you enhance what your everyday tasks are. There's a lot of software out there. Some are more specifically aimed at certain tasking than others. So you need to define your own task, your own habits, your own routine, and that will help you choose the right application for you. What we handled on our side is we actually use one of the software. I'm not going to name it, but we actually got access to the API and I had a developer customize it for our liking. And so we were able to use it and maximize it. Because what often happens is you'll have all these software like we had talked about assign a trail, click up and whatever, but you don't use it or you only use aspects of it and you're like it's. Not really helpful. I don't like it. Actually, most of the software is usable, but it's just that it may not be exactly what you need. So you need to define your own needs, your own routine, your own habits, and then choose the software that's out there that's applicable to that. And if it's not out there, find one that's close and see if they have an API key that you can customize it to your liking.

Maria: (15:45)

I like that idea because then what you're doing is you can automate your specific processes and you can keep everybody on your team aware of what's going on and you don't have to invest. Do you have to invest as much time and energy in training your staff now that you have stuff like that in place?

**Jason: (16:26)**

yes, by far, when we were using software that was not made for us, we would still have to do things manually because that software may not have incorporated that the way we wanted it to, but when we customize it for us, it helped to not have us do things manually. We were able to automate a lot of the processes. And so now, like I said, we're using 90% of a software where before we may have only been using 20%. So it's up our productivity dramatically. And then just because we had customized the software for our liking, I'm not telling our listeners to find a software out there and customize it because that may not be applicable for you. But what I am saying is find out what aspects of your routine there are. So now when you choose the software, you're actually looking at the features to match up with what you do, because there may be a software out there that 100% matches up with your day to day routine. We didn't have that, so we had to customize it. But like I said, that's not for everybody. But there may be software out there for you, but I don't want to recommend one because there's a lot of dozens out there. But you need to find out what your routine, what your habits are and then find a software that's applicable and if need be, you may have to customize it.

Maria: (17:45)

All right, so remember, as individual business owners and as solopreneurs, we got to pull away from the freelance brain and work as freelancers in our businesses and try to do some systems and put those things in place so that we are working on our businesses. There are tools out there to help us overcome some of our productivity issues and there are systems that we can use to also improve. But like Jason said, our number one tool is learning what we need and then looking at ourselves and seeing which habits are in place and how many touch points you need to have in that item before it's completed. And I do think that Jason's change to his software has taken his touch points on those pieces of mail down from like five or six touches down to something that's automated. And I think that there's a huge difference in what we can see and how businesses can be run. Miriam, do you have any final thoughts or books that you would recommend on productivity? I know you're my productivity guru.



Mirjam: (18:26)

Well, I've tried a lot of things. And I've read a lot of books. One thing that I wanted to share that I do find helpful, and it's not from a book. It's actually from a program that I was part of. And it's like whenever you learn something, it's like you don't use everything, but you take certain things with me. And one thing that I took with me when it comes to eating the frog and tackling, the things that seem so overwhelming when you're paralyzed, and you just end up doing nothing at all, because just the thought of tackling it is so overwhelming. So a good strategy is to choose three committed actions every week, and they're very granular. So it's like baby steps. But you choose three baby steps every week and you commit to them. And they have to be achievable, they have to be manageable. They can't be so difficult that the thought of accomplishing them overwhelms you. So you do those three things and then you celebrate. It's actually an approach that I use in my design, PR insider membership. And it's very rewarding because you feel like you've accomplished something. And if you keep doing this week after week after week, it's small steps, but you'll get to your big goal much faster than you think. And it's like you have to take action. That's what it comes down to. It's like if you don't do anything, the task is too big. You're never going to do it. It's never going to happen. If you split it up into 50 small steps, you'll have it done. What is that? Within two to three months. So it's a strategy that really works well.

Jason: (20:39)

So we hope all these habits have been beneficial to you, and we want you to know that we're here to help. And as we close out this year, we hope you have enjoyed us for this year. And 2022, we're going to have one more episode for this year where we do a recap of the whole year. We hope you can join us for that next week. And remember, 2023 is around the corner, and that means the opening up of our marketing studio. So we hope to have you on that platform as well. So again, we hope you all have a great holidays, and we hope to see you all here next week on Designer Discussions.



Outro: (21:39)

Are you ready to get serious about your marketing? We're opening the Designer Discussions Marketing Studio, a monthly series of indepth actionable content to guide your marketing, PR and business development. We want to help you transform your business and elevate it to work with your dream clients.

We hope you enjoyed this episode of Designer Discussions. What was your takeaway care to share your thoughts and tag Jason, Maria, and Miriam on social media. You can find them on all platforms at [Designer Discussions.com](https://www.designerdiscussions.com). Don't forget to, like, subscribe and leave a review or comment for this episode. From wherever you are listening.





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