Three Powerful Ways to Get More Done
March 1, 2018
by Dan Richards

We’d all like to get more done in our day. Recently, best-selling author Dan Pink outlined three powerful, research-backed ways to improve your productivity.

His talk took place at the business school at the University of Toronto to promote Pink’s new book When – The Scientific Secrets of Perfect Timing.

Pink’s talk covered three key insights:

1. How the hidden patterns in your day profoundly affect your performance
2. A five-minute routine can dramatically improve your effectiveness
3. End points are important – Sometimes they bring us down and sometimes they fire us up

Here’s how to implement each of those insights in your practice.

Schedule work to reflect the hidden patterns in your day

Pink began by talking about the dramatic impact when we do important work. He pointed to research that we are more productive in the morning, what Pink called our “peak stage.” Our effectiveness then drops into what he referred to as a “trough” before recovering late in the day.

This won’t surprise anyone who has spoken to an audience after lunch and seen heads nodding. But just in case you’re not convinced, the research on this is indisputable:

- An NYU analysis of transcripts of 26,000 earnings calls found that in the afternoon, CEOs and CFOs were more negative, irritable and combative than for morning calls with similar earnings results. In some cases, short-term stock performance suffered as a result.
- Doctors conducting colonoscopies in the morning found 20% more polyps than those same doctors performing that procedure in the afternoon … and doctors seeing patients in the afternoon were significantly more likely to prescribe unnecessary medications.
- Research of student performance shows that time of day explains 20% of the variation in performance on cognitive tasks. A study in Denmark found that every hour after 8 am that students took an exam resulted in a drop in performance equivalent to lower levels of household income and parental education. Indeed, taking that test an hour later had a similar impact to
Implications for your business

Based on this research, Pink suggested that you schedule your tasks to mirror your position in productivity cycle:

Peak phase (8 am to noon): High-value work

Schedule your most important meetings and work. Here’s when you do the high-stakes work that requires the most attention and is the most demanding. And here is also when your clients are likely to be at their sharpest and best positioned to engage in conversation.

Trough phase (1:30 to 3pm): Admin tasks

Here’s when you should do your iterative, admin work and respond to less important emails.

Recovery phase (3 pm on): Creative work

Pink suggests that this is the best time for creative work – thinking, writing, putting together presentations.

Short breaks dramatically improve your effectiveness

A second theme of Pink’s talk related the importance of taking regular breaks to promote recovery.

This is not a new insight – psychologist Daniel Levitan discussed the research on taking regular breaks in *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload*. In that book, Levitin pointed to research showing that the brain works best when it works intensely for 90 minutes and then takes a break; indeed people who take regular breaks are more productive than those who work continuously.

Pink provided five ground rules for effective breaks,

1. Moving beats stationary (Rather than sitting at your desk, take a short walk)
2. Outside beats inside (That walk should be outside if possible)
3. Social beat solo (Ideally, a friend or colleague would join you for that walk)
4. Fully detached beats semi-detached (Which means leaving your phone behind)
5. Short breaks beat no breaks (Even micro breaks of three minutes improve performance)

There is another kind of break that improves productivity – and indeed minimizes that after-lunch slump in productivity that Pink talked about. That is a 10- to 20-minute power nap. According to Daniel Levitin, research suggests that a 15-minute power nap has the same impact on your energy as an extra 90 minutes of sleep.

Pink and Levitin aren’t alone in extolling the virtues of short naps. One of today’s leading sleep
researchers is Notre Dame’s Jessica Payne. Here’s what Payne had to say in a recent interview:

Experience suggests strongly that we can train ourselves to nap in the afternoon, and that it really helps. If you go longer than 20 minutes, especially if you’re sleep deprived, you run the risk of falling into deep sleep, the type of sleep that’s difficult to awaken from. But at 20 minutes you stay in a lighter mode, in stage 2 sleep. You wake up refreshed and rejuvenated from that kind of sleep and the data tell us that you reap cognitive benefits. What’s most interesting to me is that people who get enough sleep at night still seem to benefit from the brief daytime power nap. This means that the benefits of napping aren’t only about recovery from deficits … I call them “sleep proxies” because they’re not the same as sleeping, but they are active steps you can take to help your brain when it is depleted.

More on Daniel Levitin’s research can be found in Why the Way You Work Destroys Productivity.

**Implications for your business**

Pink characterized breaks as a critical component of peak performance. As a result, you and your team need to build regular breaks into your routines. For maximum effectiveness, you need at least two breaks a day – one mid-morning and the other mid-afternoon. These should not be just any breaks, but the right kinds of breaks, using Pink’s five rules for effective breaks.

**End points are important – Sometimes they bring us down and sometimes they fire us up**

Pink’s final theme related to the importance of end points.

He began by talking about how hitting key ages motivates action – and in particular something called “nine-enders.” A nine-ender is any age ending in 9 – for example 29, 39 or 49 – and for many people turning one of those ages is a catalyst for action that they wouldn’t otherwise take. Running marathons is a good example – 29-year olds are twice as likely to run a marathon as 28- or 30-year olds and someone who’s 49 is three times as likely to run a marathon as that same person aged 50.

Pink also talked about birthdays and other events he described as “temporal landmarks.” Just as January marks a new beginning for many people and can be a catalyst for action, so birthdays can prompt changed behavior … people are significantly more likely to go to the gym in the month after their birthday than in the month before.

Finally, he talked about the timing of good news and bad news. Tell someone, “I’ve got good news and bad news, which would you like to hear first” and four out of five answer, “Give me the bad news.”

Pink proposed that when talking to clients or team members and you have good news and bad news, you

- Start with the bad news
- Follow up with the good news
- Use endings to elevate and leave meaning
I’ve written in the past about the “peak-end” effect. In essence, there’s clear research that two things shape peoples’ recollections of any experience. First are the peaks, the highs and the lows. And then there is how that experience ends. That’s true of a trip to an auto dealership to shop for a car, restaurant meals and vacations – and it’s also true of your meetings with clients. Whenever you can, choreograph meetings to end on a high note.

**Implications for your business**

There are a few ways that Pink’s insights on the importance of endings can affect your business.

One advisor schedules meetings with clients around their birthdays, inviting his top clients for a birthday lunch to follow. In part this to ensure that client meetings are spread throughout the year, but there are a couple of other benefits. Scheduling meetings around client birthdays taps into the goodwill that many people feel on their birthdays and sends a clear message that you know and care about that occasion. And by having meetings coincide with birthdays, they occur at a time when clients tend to be more open to new ideas and new ways of thinking – and that may be especially true if the birthday is a “nine-ender.”

Pink’s talk was also an important reminder about the importance of ending meetings in an upbeat manner, or in his words to use endings to elevate the experience and leave meaning.

You can find more on Dan Pinks’ ideas on timing in this article from *Atlantic Magazine*.

*Dan Richards conducts programs to help advisors gain and retain clients, and is an award winning faculty member in the MBA program at the University of Toronto. To see more of his written commentaries, go to www.danrichards.com.*