

# The 7 Ways Successful People Approach Their Work

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**CONTRIBUTOR:** Opinions expressed by Forbes Contributors are their own.

When it comes to work, everyone has their own methods for getting tasks done. But it turns out that the most successful people tend to have similar habits.

Or, so says [Laura Vanderkam](#), author of a new mini e-book, "[What the Most Successful People Do at Work](#)." (The e-book is the third in a series, which also details the habits of successful people in the [mornings](#) and on [weekends](#); the series will be published in paperback in September.)

Vanderkam, who wrote [168 Hours](#), a guide to getting the most out of your time, has, over the years, asked hundreds of people to track how they spend their days. Her analysis of these time logs has provided the fodder for her books, and in her latest examination -- of how successful people approach work -- she's come up with seven common habits that people who shine in their fields use to accomplish things.

While one of these matters above all others, it is also the one that takes the longest to achieve -- and you'll see why in a minute. Here are the seven commonalities she found.

## 1. Mind Your Hours.

If you want to give your working hours a makeover, you've got to know how long your activities take. One of the most prolific children's book illustrators interviewed in the e-book can project exactly how much time a drawing will take (and actually measures each by how many *Seinfeld* reruns will play in the background before she's finished). Then, she uses that knowledge to set goals for specific time periods — i.e. three illustrations in a day.

To get the same understanding of your own work or productivity, Vanderkam recommends you keep a time log for a full week so you also capture the weekend — that's when people tend to be less conscious of what they're doing. There's no one way of tracking your time, so just pick something that works for you. As Vanderkam said by phone from her home outside Philadelphia, "The goal is to be helpful, not to make you hate your life." For instance, Vanderkam updates her time log twice a day. Another person might want to do it more frequently, using a computer or smartphone app.

Whatever you choose, make it something convenient that will also allow you to faithfully track what you've been doing.

"Time passes whether or not you make a conscious choice about how to use that time," Vanderkam says. "And not being conscious of how you spend your time is also a choice. I can't tell you how many people tell me by the second day, 'I got so sick of saying, 'checked Facebook,' for the tenth time that I stopped doing it.'"

## **2. Plan.**

The next step to being more conscious with your work time is to plan out your hours. This might seem really obvious, but many harried workers find themselves in triage mode — only answering urgent matters and never taking a moment to strategize about how best to spend their time. As Vanderkam writes, "People lament that they'd love to have strategic-thinking time, but they're just too busy!"

She recommends having a planning session at least once a week -- or a big one weekly and then smaller ones as projects get finished. She also suggests planning over different time frames. For instance, at the end of the year, you could plan your goals for the year, and then, in your weekly planning sessions, make sure you are steadily working toward those goals.

## **3. Make Success Possible.**

With a new plan, it's easy to start getting excited about your goals, become over-ambitious ... and then fail. But you are more likely to reach your dreams as long as you set discrete, doable tasks for yourself -- and then make sure you're held accountable. First, break down big projects into small steps, and try to limit yourself to tackling three to six a day.

Then, make sure you get to them. Everyone has a different accountability system, says Vanderkam. She personally uses an accountability partner, with whom she has weekly check-ins on Friday. Others might want a more punitive or public approach, such as making a promise on [Stickk](#), a web site in which people can set goals and then promise to do something dreaded, such as donate to an organization they loathe, if they fail.

## **4. Know What Is Work.**

Many of us end up spending inordinate amounts of time answering email. As Vanderkam writes, “According to a 2012 McKinsey Global Institute report on the social economy, knowledge workers spend 28 percent of their time wading through their inboxes.”

But checking email is not the same thing as doing “work” — and by that, Vanderkam means the core of what you’re trying to accomplish. “Email expands to fill in the available time. Give email less time, and it will take less time,” she says. If you’re the kind of person who is worried about leaving your inbox unattended, Vanderkam suggests starting to wean yourself off by being on email for 20 minutes, and then using the next 40 minutes to focus on a task without interruption. Eventually, expand those times between email check-ins.

Another thing that can look like work but isn’t always: meetings. “The reason you have a meeting is that you want something to change in the world by the end of it,” she says. “The problem is that people have meetings to check that everyone is still doing their jobs — but hopefully you hired people good enough where you don’t have to check.”

She also notes that many people schedule meetings as a way of imposing a deadline. She says that if you’re a supervisor giving an assignment, you should explain that you won’t meet about the work, but you still need the project done by a certain time.

In general, she says, “meetings have to earn their place in someone’s life.” For this reason, she recommends shying away from recurring meetings. “Everything you do with an hour should be a conscious decision,” she says.

## **5. Practice.**

Vanderkam points out in her book that while professional musicians or athletes spend time practicing their craft or sport, many people with other jobs don’t. “Yet, if you think about it, your job is likely a performance of sorts, too,” she writes. And that means that you can also consciously practice your job skills with the goal of improving, though you’ll need to ask someone to give you feedback.

“That’s the chunk that’s missing for a lot of people in their work,” Vanderkam says. “We don’t have as much feedback as we need. People do yearly performance reviews, but that’s kind of useless vs. ‘What did you do right in this presentation?’” If you don’t get regular feedback, then after you, say, complete a task or give a presentation, ask your supervisor what you can do to improve next time. Or, have a friend in the same profession either look over your work before you send it to your boss or watch you practice giving your presentation before the real thing.

## **6. Pay in.**

Let's say, God forbid, that you lost your job today. In order to find a new one, you'd have to draw on your career capital, which Vanderkam says is "the sum total of your experiences, your knowledge, your skills, your relationships — and all these things enable you to get a new job if you need one, create new situations for yourself or other people, or even let you take a break without having it ruin your career." Successful people tend to pay in to their career capital account regularly.

There are three main ways to create career capital. One is to simply improve your skills and adopt new ones important in your line of work. Take professional development classes, or have a mentor help you figure out what you'll need to learn in order to succeed five, ten or 20 years from now. Another type of career capital deposit is developing a portfolio of your work. "The good thing about writing or illustrating books is that they are then out there in the market, speaking for you and your ideas even when you're not around," she writes. And that explains why experts in many fields from medicine to business take up the pen. But writing or publishing isn't the only way to create this portfolio. Doing work that has any kind of visible, tangible outcome will have the same effect.

The third and final way to build your career capital is to build up a network of people loyal to you. You can do this by introducing colleagues to others you know who could be helpful to them, providing references for people, and also standing by associates when they're down. "Anyone can have lunch with someone who is successful," says Vanderkam. "Real career capital comes from having lunch with someone who just lost the job she loves."

## **7. Pursue pleasure.**

The final commonality Vanderkam found among the successful is that they find joy in their work. While many of our jobs have elements we like less than others, over time, she recommends we try to tweak our time to spend more hours doing the things we love and fewer hours doing the things we don't.

The other thing she found is that joy, in turn, often comes from feeling a sense of progress in our work. In fact, a feeling of progress brings more joy than encouragement from a boss. For this reason, focusing on the core parts of your work that are measurable and give you the greatest sense of accomplishment will bring you joy, further fueling your desire to work.

So, which of the seven rules does Vanderkam think is most important? Paying into our career capital account, which of course, builds slowly. But, she says, “If you take the long-term view of your career, say, ‘I won’t be with any one organization the whole time, but I will be with me. What can I do to make sure that “me” is a great person to work with?’ If you’re paying into your career capital account every day, it’s hard to see how your career couldn’t soar.”