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Pandemic fatigue: staying purposeful and keeping productive

Right thinking

Staying productive during ongoing lockdowns is proving to be a challenge for many. In this article, we revisit the three steps we outlined in our 2020 article to help you stay productive in the midst of a pandemic: first, constantly reinforce priorities; second, make it easy to start and hard to stray away from them; and finally, build in rewards to sustain the habit.

We've also added some learnings, hints and tips to bring this article into 2021 ... as we know lockdown fatigue is real. We hope you find them helpful.

We came, we saw, we conquered.

That was the feeling earlier this year. It was March 2021. We commuted to the office, we bought quality coffee, we chatted mask-free with our colleagues, we shared successes and important milestones. We used phrases like 'post COVID' ... we thought it was over. Then Delta arrived. And not the Goodrem version.

As Melbournians, we moved from celebrating being Australia's most liveable city to the world's (second) most lockdown city – congratulations Buenos Aires*.

The Right Lane team transitioned back to working from home, homeschooling, and online shopping (maybe the online shopping was just me?) ... the transition was seamless, but that didn't mean it was, or is, easy.

Lockdown fatigue is real. We all have colleagues, friends, or family members doing it tougher than others. There is a real cost of mental fatigue, disconnection, and an ongoing sense of groundhog day. Zoom calls with friends have dropped off, sourdough baking is a thing of the past,

learning a language on Duo Lingo is now not a priority.

So how do we stay productive during these ongoing lockdowns?

In May 2020, Abhishek Chhikara wrote about [staying productive in the midst of a pandemic](#). He suggested a productivity habit requires a three-step approach: first, constantly reinforce priorities; second, make it easy to start and hard to stray away from them; and finally, build in rewards to sustain the habit. (Chhikara, 2010)

For me, staying busy aids productivity. This includes taking on additional client studies, supporting team members, and committing to short-term deadlines on projects.

What else? What new ideas do we have?

Using the three-step approach identified in Abhishek Chhikara's May article, I asked my team to give me some hints and tips – what do they do to stay productive during these unusual (read difficult, challenging) times?

1. Constantly reinforce priorities

Review your organisation's strategy

Now, more than ever, it is critical for organisations and teams to have a well-defined strategic plan that includes clearly defined priorities.

Setting aside time for a strategy day (or similar) allows the team to reflect on what has changed, and is changing, in the operating environment and encourages conversations about the robustness of the current strategy against these changes. What needs to change? What stays the same? Are the targets too ambitious or conservative? Where do we need to push harder? Where should we commit more resources? These are just some of the key questions that need to be considered.

Reviewing and updating Right Lane's strategy earlier this year was a great opportunity to refocus our efforts, reduce the number of priorities, recast our FY22 targets, and cascade the strategy to our team.

Our strategy on a page is a visual reminder that sits on the front screen of our share drive, and for some, printed at our desks.

Align individuals' priorities

'Our team don't see themselves in the strategy' is a common refrain we hear from our clients.

Team members are feeling disconnected in their personal lives and oftentimes distanced from their families. It is important to do what we can to align our team and their roles to the purpose of the organisation. Each team member should see their hard work and contribution as making a material difference to the success of the organisation.

At Right Lane, as part of our strategy review process, and to crystallise the link between the organisation's strategy and our own individual priorities, our team developed individual OKRs (Objectives and Key Results).

OKR is a collaborative goal setting system (Doerr, J 2018). It is a simple approach to create alignment and engagement around

measurable and ambitious goals. OKRs are famously used by Google, as well as a range of successful companies. They drive simplicity, ambition, accountability and transparency.

Developing clear OKRs has been a blessing. It aids in prioritising our individual and collective time, guides our decisions

about where to allocate resources, and gives the team shorter term goals to strive for. The end of Q1 is upon us, I know what I am yet to achieve and where I need to spend time. It has allowed me to think creatively about what I can do, try new things and take risks.

Make routines routine

It is important to clarify realistic daily priorities, anchored in the longer term priorities. This clarity helps us to stay focussed and disciplined when we are surrounded by noise and distraction.

One of the practices we put in place in early 2020 was routine daily check ins. Once we were back in the office, we evaluated whether we would continue the practice. Overwhelmingly, my team agreed that daily check-ins should remain (whether in person, virtual or a combination of both). Right Lane Quality Assurance Specialist, Jackie, is a big believer in the benefits of regular small team check ins.

'I definitely wanted daily check-ins to stay as an important team routine. They keep the team connected. Everyone is on the same page; check ins identify where people need support or alternatively have capacity to help others.'

2. Make it easy to start and hard to stray

So, your team knows what the organisation's priorities are and what needs to be done today, but how can you make sure your team members get things started and done, with nothing getting in the way?

Managing your time

Managing your time, when balancing other commitments (home schooling, caring responsibilities) is a challenge. Senior Expert, Debbie, suggests working on one client, project or task at a time.

'Work on one thing at a time and get that done, then move onto the next thing. Be disciplined about not straying from the one thing.'

Consultant, Ash, likes to work in 2-hour blocks. This is broken down into 25 minute focus time on 1 task and 1 client only with a 5 minute break.

'You can change up the intervals, but I think 25/5 is pretty common. I find that 25 minutes of intense concentration is my most productive cadence.'



**Make it easy to start
and hard to stray!**

Create a (supercharged) to do list

Right Lane Director, Marc, suggests a five-point 'to do' list. His list is broken down by: meetings, may do, must do, magic, and me. For those of us that are motivated and energised by a list, ticking things off the meetings, must dos and may dos is essential. Not only does it help prepare Marc for his day, but it is a simple mechanism for feeling a sense of achievement.

'When stuck in this groundhog day-like existence, being grateful for incidental happenings, is the purpose of the magic column. This practice helps me cultivate gratitude and joy. This could be an engaging conversation with a colleague or winning a project.'

3. Build in rewards to sustain the habit

Cementing productivity as a habit may require a motivating reward. Rewards make habits easier to adopt because they drive an underlying chemical reaction, releasing the neurotransmitters such as dopamine and encouraging your brain to continue the habit (Schultz, 2015).

Give yourself a treat

Right Lane Engagement Manager, Jess, is all for being prepared with treats on hand.

'Coffee, tea, chocolate are all good rewards. I've taken to baking each weekend so I have something to treat myself with during the week.'

Schedule in exercise

Walking the dog, or an online yoga or pilates class are great ways to remain productive. Taking advantage of good weather is a mood and productivity improver for Communication Specialist, Lou.

'Given how unpredictable our weather has been lately in Melbourne, I'm trying to make the most of any sunny days. If the weather's good, I'll take advantage of it and go for a walk. It's amazing how much sunshine can improve my mood, attitude, and productivity.'

Our team has found deeper connections with each other by walking together (socially distanced of course) and having walking meetings with those who live close by.

Celebrate successes

Don't forget to celebrate successes, in a considered, genuine way. As a 'for purpose' organisation, our team are motivated by the impact we can have on clients and the community more broadly. Reflecting on, and frequently broadcasting post engagement survey responses, particularly on questions relating to addressing clients' highest priorities (100% in FY21) and net promoter score (currently 90; up from 76 in the previous financial year) is a great way to keep the team motivated, focussed and productive.

There will, of course, be moments of 'can't'. Give yourself permission to reset and not be, or be less, productive. In these challenging times, this is ok too. Take time to reactivate your nervous system – there is nothing less productive than staring at a document for another 30 minutes. Step back, connect with yourself, reset, and try again.

If you've got any tips to share, we would love to hear them. All inspiration will be gratefully accepted.

***NOTE:** at the time of publication, Melbourne has taken the crown (from Buenos Aires) as being the world's most locked down city.



'Rewards make habits easier to adopt because they drive an underlying chemical reaction, releasing the neurotransmitters such as dopamine and encouraging your brain to continue the habit.'

References

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want to know more?

If you would like to discuss this article in more detail, please contact Lauren Spiteri: lauren@rightlane.com.au

About Right Lane

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We work alongside clients who do great work within the sectors they operate, and we are excited to be involved in creating outcomes that truly make a difference.

We are an ethical consulting firm with a strong belief in the work we do, and with a passion to give back to the broader community with the skills and expertise available within our walls.

Right Lane was established in 1997 to help private, not for profit and public sector clients to clarify and accelerate their future plans. Over the past 24 years, we have helped the executive teams and boards of well over 300 organisations to define and adapt their direction and strategy, identify and clarify their priorities, align their efforts with their aspirations, get their major projects started and finished, and measure and improve their performance.



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