

Haiku Productivity: Limit Your Work Week

What if you only worked 4 days a week? Or 5 days of 3 hours a week? Or whatever hours you decided?

Last week I talked about the fine art of limiting yourself in my new [Haiku Productivity](#) system. This week, let's see how Haiku Productivity could be used to allow you to work less, be more effective, and free up more time for yourself.



Photo by [Mike9Alive](#)

I know, it sounds nice but unrealistic. But it doesn't have to be, if you really want to control your work life. It depends on what you're willing to do.

What I've Done

This is something I've been doing myself for the last couple of months, so I can share my experiences with you. I decided that I wanted to limit my work to three days a week, about half a day's work for each of those three days.

I've pretty much done that, despite that I have a full-time job, I blog, and I do freelance writing.

I didn't start by limiting myself to three days a week right away. I first tried to fit all my work into four days, and that was a challenge. Then I started eliminating some of my work, slowly, and that made things much better.

Now I've stacked everything into three days. That includes writing posts for Zen Habits (one half day), freelancing (two half days), and my regular work (interspersed among the other two). I've done that by eliminating some of my work in all three areas, down to the essential.

Now, I should confess that I do work more than those three half days. I do some work in the other halves of those three days, for example, and I do a little work on the two other weekdays. But my essential work is limited to those three half days, and the work I do outside those three half days consists of personal projects I want to do that I couldn't do before (such as writing a book).

What do I do with the rest of my time? I respond to reader emails and comments, I work on other projects that I want to (including an upcoming ebook and a longer-term book project), I spend time with my family (I get off at 3 p.m. these days). I don't do any work on weekends.

My work week isn't exactly where I want it yet. I am working on quitting my day job (just want to save up a bigger emergency fund first) and I am working on getting to [my ideal day](#). It's a longer-term process than just setting limits and making the change overnight.

How to Do It

So how do you go about limiting your work week? The key is to set a limit, but how you go about achieving the

limit is the hard part. Here are some suggestions:

- **First, set the limit.** I suggest something like 4 days a week. But you might be ambitious and shoot for 3 or even less. Or you might go for 5 days a week, 6 hours each day. Whatever seems ideal to you, go for it!
- **Identify the essential.** OK, if you have less time to do your work, how do you get that done? You have two choices: 1) work faster; or 2) do less work. I suggest taking the second option. You need to determine what exactly you really need to accomplish within the limits you've set for yourself. If you cut your work week by 20%, for example, you need to cut out 20% of your work. That means identifying what **MUST** be done, and what can be put off. Make a short list. Do what **MUST** be done first, and don't putz around.
- **Eliminate the rest.** If you have a short list of your essential tasks, take a look at what's not essential. Is there any way to eliminate it? Delegate it? Outsource it? Delay it? Think hard about this, because if you can somehow eliminate 20% of your list, you've made huge strides to meeting your self-set limits.
- **Batch.** If there's something you do every day, consider batching it all into one day. For example, I was writing my Zen Habits posts every day, but now I do it all at once. And in truth, it saves me time. You could do that with almost anything. Same thing goes for something you do throughout the day, like email or phone calls. Consider batching tasks like that into one session per day.
- **Do it in stages.** If you have a big cut in work hours as your goal, you might not be able to accomplish it all at once. I recommend a gradual change. First, set a smaller limit (maybe 1 hour less per day, for example, or only a half day on Fridays). Focus on making that first stage work, and when you've got that down, make further cuts. Keep doing this until you get to where you ultimately want to be.
- **Decide what to do with excess time.** Setting limits on your work isn't going to work if you don't know what you want to do with that extra time. Decide on working 1 hour less each day? What are you going to do with that hour? It can be anything: fun projects, creating a side business, spending time with loved ones, reading, exercising, going to the beach, whatever. But set aside that block (or blocks) of time for something, and be sure to do it.
- **A note on communication.** Whether it's email, phone, IM, Skype, Twitter or whatever, you can fill your work day with communication tasks. It will fill the time allotted to it. Instead, allot a small amount of time for each *vital* communication method (30 minutes for IM, 30 minutes for phone, 1 hour for email, or whatever) and don't allow anything outside of that limit.

What if I'm an Employee?

Most people don't exactly control their work days or weeks. I understand that. I have more flexibility than most people, but that's been something I've consciously developed, by changing my expectations and the expectations of my boss and the people around me. If they expect me to work 40 hours a week, then I have to do that. But if they expect me to do the essential work, and do it well, then it shouldn't matter if I do that in 2 hours or 40.

However, I'll acknowledge that not everyone has the luxury of flexibility that I do. So how can you apply Haiku Productivity to your work week in that case? It's still possible, but it's more limited. Here are some ideas:

- **Manage expectations.** You need to start with a conversation with your boss about expectations he or she has of your work. What is it that they really want you to accomplish? Is it so important where or how or how long it takes for you to accomplish that? If you are able to do it from home, or in fewer hours, would that matter? Talk about wanting to be more productive, which doesn't mean producing more, but producing more important stuff. And then make that happen. If you can change the expectations that people have of you, you are well on your way.
- **Use free time for other projects.** You might be able to free up time by limiting your work to 6 hours a day (for example). But perhaps you can't just leave work after 6 hours. Instead, use the extra time for new projects (work-related or otherwise, depending on the flexibility you have) that you've wanted to work on but couldn't. I used to use that free time for freelance writing, but my working conditions have become more flexible since then.
- **Work from home.** If you can work from home, you're set. You need to show your boss, through a one or two day trial run, that you can actually produce more from home. Know what your boss wants you to complete for that day, and do that and more. Once you get approved to telecommute, you can then set your work hours. Just be sure to get the work done, but how you do that is up to you.
- **Move to task goals, not time goals.** This goes back to managing expectations, but you want your boss to set goals for you that are based on tasks or projects, not on how long you work. If you can do that, you have

taken a big step towards being able to limit your work hours.

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