

# Skillbook

# Improving Productivity

Time Management  
Skills



Mindtools

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## Skillbook

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21 Young Street, Edinburgh, Scotland, EH2 4HU.

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Version 6.0.

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# 1. Introduction

**T**hink about the last time you felt highly productive. What were you doing? Why did it go so well? What expectations did you and others have of your performance?

Chances are, you were most productive when:

- You had clear objectives.
- You could concentrate on the task in hand.
- You had sufficient resources to meet the expectations placed on you.
- You understood the significance of the task and you worked hard to complete it.

This combination of factors leads to optimal performance, and to what psychologists call “flow.”

When you experience “flow”, you’re calm, relaxed and highly effective. It can be an incredibly enjoyable and satisfying state to be in, which motivates you to continue to perform and achieve. You’re in a positive work cycle, and stress, anxiety, confusion, and boredom tend to slip away.

This might sound too good to be true, but you can change things to work like this. In this **Skillbook**, we’ll look at how you can get into a positive mindset and become more productive. In around one hour, we’ll show you how to:

- Manage your pressure levels so that you can focus on the task at hand better.
- Work out your priorities so that you can use your time most efficiently.
- Cut out the distractions, so that you can work in a state of flow.

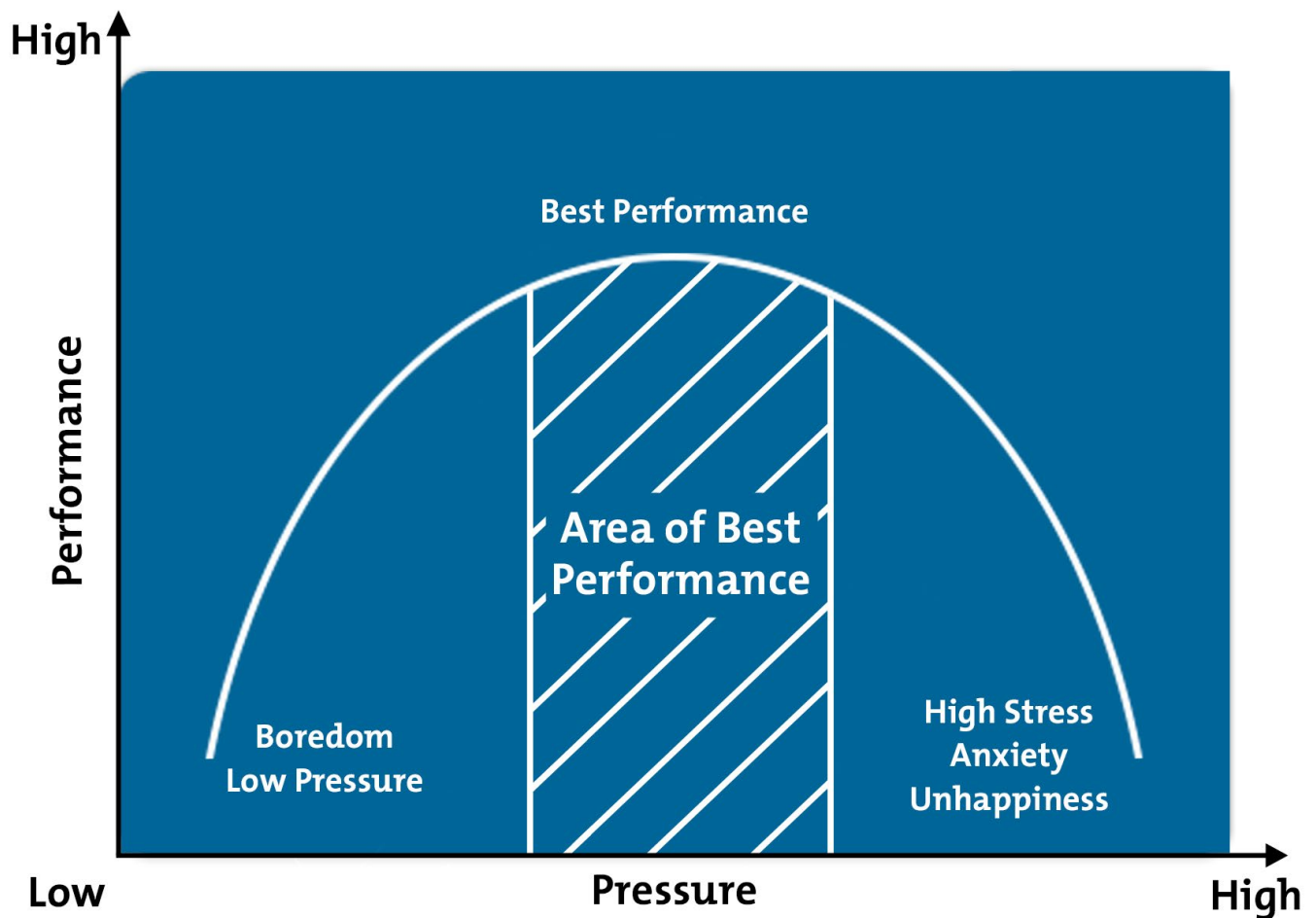
By the end of this Skillbook, you’ll know exactly what you need to do in order to work as productively, effectively and happily as possible.

## 2. Productivity and Pressure

One of the greatest influences on your performance is the amount of pressure that you experience. For instance, your productivity can plummet when you experience too much pressure, but did you know that too little pressure can also negatively impact your performance?

The Inverted-U model, shown in figure 1 below, was developed by psychologists Robert Yerkes and John Dodson in the 1900s. Despite its age, it still highlights the important relationship between pressure and performance.

**Figure 1 – The Inverted-U Model**



The model shows that we perform at our best when working at “mid-level” on a pressure scale. If the pressure is too low or too high, our performance is poor.

For example, if you’re working on a monthly report that no one’s counting on or chasing you for, you might not be motivated to do it. You can lose focus or become bored when this happens, and the task gets pushed to the bottom of your to-do list.

On the other hand, if the report’s a complicated one that you haven’t yet started, and you need to finish and submit it by the end of the day, you might feel so anxious about not completing it on time that you can’t concentrate.

The Inverted-U model highlights that, when you experience the “right” amount of pressure, you’re motivated enough to do what you need to and your attention isn’t stretched too thinly by competing demands.



### Tip:

Be careful to distinguish between “pressure” and “stress” here. Pressure is an internal, or external force, that spurs you on to achieve. Stress happens when the pressure becomes too great.

Pressure can be good, if it motivates you to perform better. Stress, by definition, is bad. It’s the feeling that you’re losing control and it can be harmful to your health.



### Action:

Answer the following questions to see how pressure impacts your performance.

**Think of a time when you performed badly because you were under-motivated. How could you have motivated yourself to perform better?**

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**Now, think of a time when you performed exceptionally well. What level of pressure did you feel?**

**Think of a time when, no matter how hard you tried, you couldn't perform at your best. What could have helped you in this situation?**

To improve your productivity, the first step is to manage the amount of pressure you work under by concentrating on areas where you experience too little, or too much, pressure.

If you're a calm person who isn't daunted by high-pressure situations, you may need to place extra demands on yourself in order to improve your productivity. For example, you could become solely accountable for completing a particular task. If you're highly affected by pressure or you frequently feel under stress, then you may need to look at ways to reduce this. Perhaps you could delegate a task, or change its workflow so that it's easier or faster to complete.



### Action:

Think of a task that you've recently struggled with because you were under too little, or too much, pressure. What could you have done to experience the optimum amount of pressure in this situation?

Write down your thoughts in the box below.

**Task:**



### 3. Productivity and Priorities

**T**o perform at your best, you need to focus on the most important tasks. It's easy to get sidetracked by the most urgent or interesting ones, but your overall productivity declines when you "fritter" your time away on non-strategic tasks.

#### What are Strategic Tasks?

A strategic task helps you progress towards achieving your personal, departmental or organizational objectives.

Filing your expense receipts, for example, or keeping an orderly work space are important tasks. But if everyone in your organization focuses solely on "support" tasks like this, how likely is it to grow, develop and achieve its objectives?

Examples of strategic tasks are completing a training course that will help you do your work, submitting a report that will move a project forward, and carrying out market research to learn about your customers.

#### Action:



Take some time to think about your daily tasks and the ones that are strategically focused.

First, write down how you help your company achieve its objectives.

What are you responsible for?



### Action:

Next, complete the table below. To do this:

- List your regular tasks.
- Record the approximate percentage of time that you allocate to each one.
- Decide whether each one is strategic or non-strategic, and check the appropriate column.
- Calculate the percentage of time you spend on strategic and non-strategic tasks.

Duties/Tasks/Projects/Responsibilities	% of Time Spent Doing	Strategic	Non-Strategic
Total % of Time Spent		%	%

What's your result? Are you spending the majority of your time on strategic or non-strategic tasks?

If your time's largely taken up by non-strategic tasks, you need to plan to redirect your efforts toward your strategic priorities, and delegate as many of your non-strategic activities as possible.



## 4. Productivity and Flow

**P** sychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi described flow as “being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you’re using your skills to the utmost.”

When you experience the “right” amount of pressure, and when you work on strategic tasks, you’re more likely to enter into a “state of flow.” This helps you concentrate and work without distraction. You can put all of your energy and resources to productive use because you’re not fighting stress or feeling torn between competing priorities.

But how do you enter a “state of flow” if you’re in a busy office environment, where you’ll likely be interrupted regularly?

Here are some of the common things that can impact your ability to focus:

- **Stress.** It’s difficult to concentrate when you’re feeling stressed. One of the most common causes of stress at work is feeling that you have too much to do.
- **Interruptions and distractions.** You’re busy working away and someone barges into your office, the phone rings, or you see an email notification. It’s easy to be lured away when you’re not totally immersed in your task, and it can be hard to regain concentration.
- **Negative thoughts.** It’s easy to think about how you’re going to fail when you’re under pressure or feeling stress, or how inadequate you are, and all the ways in which your skills fall short of other people’s expectations. This constant negative “noise” can take your focus away from your work.
- **Uncomfortable work environment.** The position of your desk might mean that you’re easily distracted by people passing. Your chair or desk height might be uncomfortable, or the office might be too hot, cold, bright, or dark.
- **Poor nutrition.** When you don’t eat breakfast or drink enough water, you can struggle to concentrate. Dehydration and hunger can make you feel tired, irritable, slow, or even sick. Your brain can’t operate at its best when it doesn’t have enough energy.



### Action:

Take some time to think about the things that break your flow at work. Then review the links at the end of the table on [page 12](#) , to find out how you can deal with them.

**What sources of stress do you experience?**

**How can you can deal with them?**

**What sources of distraction and interruption do you experience?**

**How can you deal with them?**

**What negative thoughts and worries distract you?**

**How can you deal with them?**

## 5. Key Points

**Y**ou need to focus on your pressure, priorities and “flow” to improve your productivity at work.

Try to find a pressure “sweet spot,” where you’re motivated enough to perform at your best but not distracted by the challenge of getting the job done.

Work out your priorities by identifying the strategic tasks that will help you move toward your long-term objectives.

Manage your distractions so that you can enter a “state of flow,” and channel all of your energy into the task at hand.

Use the strategies we’ve described to get more done, and feel great, too!