

# How to BOOST your personal productivity

By Jørn Hunskaar



*Sometimes we need to change (bad) habits that have been building up over several years to get the results we want.*

Jørn Hunskaar is a project manager at BEKK Consulting AS. He is passionate about using Agile software development techniques, such as Kanban and Scrum, to help his customers find creative ways to make software development both fun and productive.

Do you feel there are just too few hours in a day to get things done? Maybe your day is so clogged up, that you don't even have time to read the entire article?

In that case, the following small steps might help you free up some more time:

1. Keep track of how many tasks you have ongoing.

boost your productivity, you need to understand some of the underlying thoughts.

#### A TYPICAL DAY AT THE PROJECT

I'm a project manager, and a consultant, and most of the time I work in projects of different sizes developing tailored software for our customers. During a typical workday I spend several hours working in teams and with the team. In a good self-organized team, and that's what I'm aiming for in all my projects, we "pull" each other forward in a series of regular and irregular events.

#### WHEN THE SITUATION CHANGES...

A few months ago I started on a new project, but unlike regular projects, I was engaged in an earlier phase. We established the project and worked with the foundation. We looked at the business value, how the new system would be adopted in the organization, and how it would affect the way people work. We asked ourselves: "Should the project be initiated at all?" This was different from a typical project in so many ways, because these decisions have usually already been made.

I tend to see change as something good, so I found the work both exciting and challenging, but the portion

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2. Limit the number of concurrent tasks. Complete currently ongoing tasks rather than start new tasks.
3. Clear away routine tasks by "shutting out the outside world" in intervals of 25 minutes.

This is a great place to start to if you want to improve your performance. But if you really want to

of individual work was far greater than in a typical project. This required lots of self-discipline. The focus turned from what **we deliver**, to what **I deliver**.

I was the only person working full-time on the project, and there were no series of events that “pulled” it forward. Several people were involved, of course, but only part-time and on demand. As a consequence, I no longer felt as productive as I wanted to be.

Indeed, it’s quite common that a consultant’s working day changes. New projects are starting, while others end. When we start working with new customers, we need to get to know a new organization, and we need to build new relationships.

When the situation changes, your rhythm changes as well, and it takes a while before you get the structure you need and, once again, are able to exploit your full potential. I’ve been through this numerous times, and over time I’ve established work habits that let me get back in balance as soon as possible.

### PERSONAL KANBAN COMBINED WITH POMODORO

The past few months I’ve used a [personal Kanban board](http://www.personalkanban.com/pk/) to keep track of my work. I create

tasks that describe what I need to do, and then move them between the columns: backlog, this week, doing and done. I use a digital board called [Kanbanery](http://kanbanery.com/) (<http://kanbanery.com/>), so that I have the board available everywhere, but you might just as well use stickies on a whiteboard or on a piece of paper.

#### What are the different columns?

##### Backlog

Planned work I’ll work on myself or need to follow up.

##### This week

Tasks I’ve selected from the backlog that should be completed this week. Usually, I pick these from the backlog once a week, which means that tasks that stay in the backlog can safely be postponed until next week. Unplanned work that comes up during a week that needs to be taken care of rather quickly, are placed directly into this column.

##### Current

Tasks I’m currently working on or need to follow up straight away. Unplanned work I need to deal with right away goes straight into this column.

##### Done

The column where I put completed tasks. I archive these tasks once a week, to keep the column from getting too crowded.

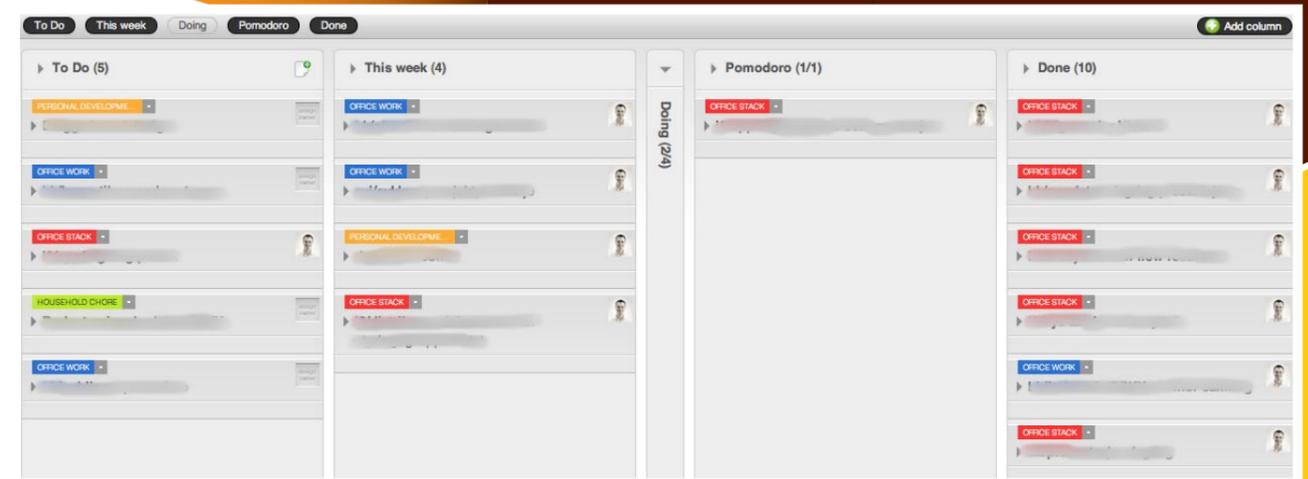
If you look closely at the screenshot below, you might discover that the

*doing* column has a **WIP limit** of 4. This means that I limit the number of concurrent tasks I can be working on at the same time. What the exact number should be is an individual choice, but setting a limit is important because it makes me focus on completing ongoing tasks.

This technique has worked quite well for several months, but despite this I didn’t feel very effective in the new situation at work. In my ongoing quest for improved efficiency I came across [this article](http://paulklipp.com/images/PersonalProductivity.pdf), (<http://paulklipp.com/images/PersonalProductivity.pdf>) which describes a combination of personal Kanban and the [Pomodoro technique](http://www.pomodoratechnique.com) ([www.pomodoratechnique.com](http://www.pomodoratechnique.com)). A potentially perfect match for me, as I already use personal Kanban.

Pomodoro is a time management technique. You select a task that can be accomplished in 25 minutes, shut out the outside world, and focus **only** on this task until the time is up. The task should be completed within the given time frame, then you take a 5 minute break to get more coffee, answer e-mail, etc.

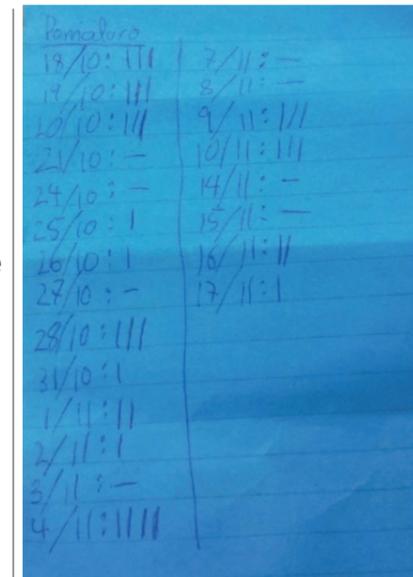
How **you** work most effectively with minimal disruption, depends on the situation and your personal preferences. Some people should probably sit on their own in a cubicle and remove access to all temptations (e-mail, Twitter, or perhaps the Internet in general). For my part, I sit in the open office space, put on my headset, and listen to music I know and like.



A personal Kanban board with a Pomodoro column. The doing column is minimized to increase focus on the Pomodoro task.

From a practical point of view, I combine the Pomodoro technique with personal Kanban by adding a Pomodoro column, with a WIP limit of only 1, to my board – right after the *doing* column. Whenever I need to work focused for a while, I move a task from *doing* to *Pomodoro*. The task should be sized so that it can be completed in 25 minutes. If it’s too big, I split it up into sub-tasks and move one of the sub-tasks into the Pomodoro column instead. When the task is completed, I move it to *done*. (screenshot above).

I visualize the workflow with my personal Kanban board to get a better view of what’s going on, letting me remove blockers and keep optimizing my flow continuously. I also count the number of Pomodoro sessions I’ve performed each day. It’s not a goal in itself to do as many as possible, but it works as a constant reminder that one or more Pomodoro sessions can help me clear away some work. I visualize this on a piece of paper that is easily accessible on my desk.



A visualization of the number of Pomodoro sessions I have performed is easily accessible on my desk.

### CONCLUSIONS?

In general, I would say the combination of the Pomodoro technique and personal Kanban works very well. A new dimension is added to my personal Kanban, without adding much complexity. As a result, my ability to complete ongoing tasks is taken to the next level, and for certain types of tasks (especially routine tasks) it really feels like a productivity boost.

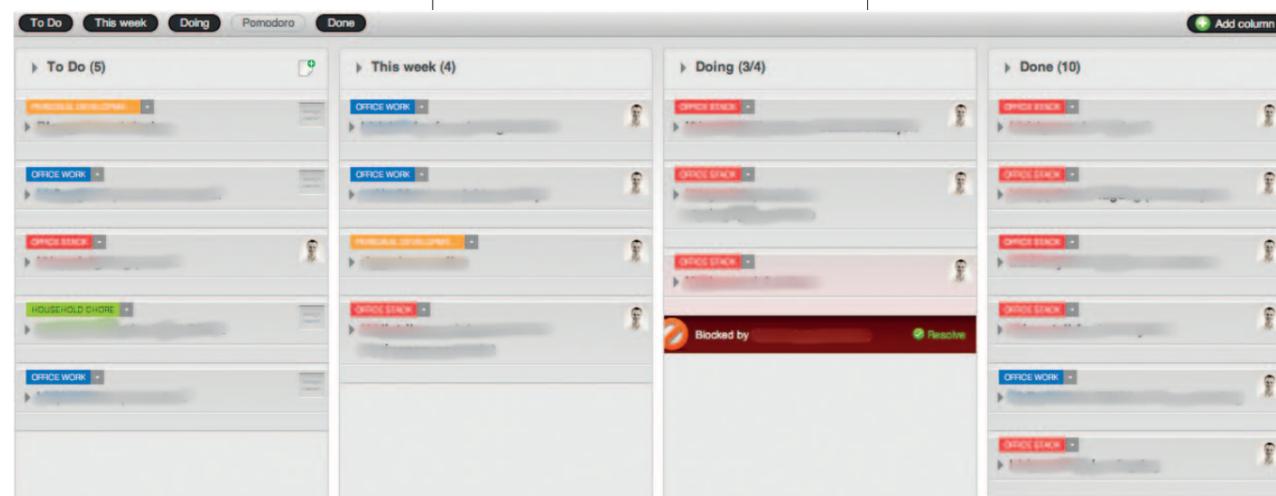
I briefly mentioned that I select tasks that can be finished in 25

minutes for my Pomodoro sessions. As you know, estimating the size of a task is difficult, and the truth is that don’t always complete the tasks within the allocated time frame. Sometimes I might use two or even three time boxes before I finish a task, but I’ve gotten increasingly better at splitting the tasks into appropriate sizes. If I don’t finish on time it’s no big deal – this only motivates me to do even more Pomodoro sessions.

Changing the way we work is not always easy. Sometimes we need to change (bad) habits that have been building up over several years to get the results we want. Still, I believe that by increasing the awareness of how we do things, and by taking one step at the time, changing the way we work is possible.

This technique is by no means a magical formula for reaching maximum productivity, but if you like what you just have read, give it a try! Don’t be limited by how I do things, it might not work exactly the same way for you. Instead, use this as inspiration to find your own way, and most importantly, make it a habit to occasionally try out something new.

Now, reflect for a couple of minutes. Are there any changes in the way you work that you can do **right now**, that will improve **your** productivity?



An example of a simple personal Kanban board.