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Maximize Productivity Without Burning Out

By DAWN FOSTER of [GigaOm](#)

I have definite workaholic tendencies that are starting to induce productivity-draining burnout. In addition to my freelance consulting practice, I am usually balancing a number of [side projects](#), working on the board of a non-profit that I helped co-found, and attending [various events](#) around Portland to keep in touch with my freelancer peers and learn about new technologies. This isn't the first time, I've had to deal with burnout. It usually creeps in slowly, and before I realize it, my work and technology hobbies have pushed everything else to the back burner. The feeling of burnout leaves me tired, stressed and less productive, so it's time again for me to re-prioritize and take control to get my productivity back.

I recently read a Harvard Business blog post by John Baldoni about [staying creative under pressure](#), and he has several good suggestions: set standards, get a buddy and mandate time for fresh air. While he's talking about working under pressure, I use similar strategies to address burnout. (As an aside, if you don't already read the [Harvard Business blogs](#), you really should. They are a great change of pace from most of the technology blogs that I read. They are very well written and cover interesting topics from different points of view.)

Here's my take on Baldoni's three suggestions, plus an additional tip of my own to help reduce burnout and get your productivity back:

Set standards. Take a hard look at [how you spend your time](#) and figure out which of those activities — business and personal — are the most important and worthwhile. Re-prioritize your activities and adopt some system for making sure that you focus your time on the important activities, and be brutal about cutting any activities that take too much time while not providing enough value. Make sure that you find time for a few fun activities to balance out all of the work.

Get a buddy. For freelancers, this can take a couple of different forms, and I would think of this as your support system. If you are overloaded and have too much work, find someone who can help out with some of the activities or that you can refer potential clients to when your schedule is full. This could also be someone to pick up some work if you need a vacation. On the other hand, maybe you need moral support or a mentor to coach you through some issues, so this might mean having a regular coffee or lunch meeting with someone who can help. In my case, I rely on the many events that I attend to chat with other freelancer friends to share ideas, talk about issues, brainstorm about technologies or get moral support.

Mandate fresh air time. This is important, and for many of us, it seems to be one of the first things to fall out of our schedules. We spend way too much time sitting on our rear ends and not enough time getting the

blood pumping. A good [fitness program](#) can have a huge impact on your productivity. This doesn't mean that you need to run a marathon, but you should find a comfortable way to work regular exercise into your day. It could be a few short walks spread throughout the day, taking the stairs instead of the elevator, walking or biking instead of driving, or something more strenuous. I vary my workouts depending on my mood and the season. We have gorgeous weather in Portland this time of the year, so I try to take advantage of the hiking trails in many of our local parks, but during the rainy season, I'll spend more time in the gym.

Read for fun. Reading can be very relaxing, and I usually have at least one non-fiction book to expand my horizons while also reading a fiction book just for fun. Lately, I have been reading [George R. R. Martin's](#) "A Song of Ice and Fire" series for fun while also reading some books about online communities and technology. Take a few minutes every evening to read something you enjoy. The key to making this work is to read something you enjoy so that it feels like a reward, not a punishment.

How do you stay productive without burning out?

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