

**THE WAY
OF THE
PRODUCTIVITY
NINJA**

an excerpt from

**HOW TO BE
A PRODUCTIVITY
NINJA**

OUT NOW



How to be a **PRODUCTIVITY NINJA**

Forget time management: How to get things done
in the age of information overload

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THE WAY OF THE PRODUCTIVITY NINJA



1

"Being busy does not always mean real work. The object of all work is production or accomplishment and to either of these ends there must be forethought, system, planning, intelligence and honest purpose, as well as perspiration. Seeming to do is not doing."

– Thomas Edison

Ever thought you should 'get better at managing your time'? Have you spent ages wondering how some people seem to be able to get so much more done than you, or how you can learn to cope with the seemingly endless and growing volume of emails and other things that need to be done? Do you wonder why there just never seem to be enough hours in the day?

It's often thought that good 'time management' is the key to productivity,

success and happiness. There are hundreds of books on time management, mostly written by 'guru' types who seem to have it all so perfectly and succinctly summarised: prioritise the right things, start the day with a list of what you need to do and then systematically tick them off from the most important at the start of the day through to the least important at the end. File things away, make short-term, medium-term and long-term goals, organise the clutter around you and manage complex projects with long but perfectly written project plans. It all sounds so easy and so perfect, doesn't it?

Well, let's get one thing clear straight away. I am not writing this book because I'm some kind of time management guru. I'm not one of those naturally organised people. In fact, my natural style of work is quite the opposite: flaky, ideas based, more comfortable at the strategic level than the doing level, allergic to detail, thought processes ungrounded in reality, instinctive, crazy-making, ridiculously unrealistic about what's achievable in any given time period, cutting things fine. All of these characteristics are in their own way, amongst what you could call my strengths and have made me successful in things I've done. They're part of who I am. I play to these strengths and also recognise them as the crippling weaknesses that they are, too. Changing my own bad habits and developing strong, positive new ones gave me the ability to help others do the same. But in grappling with my own unproductive demons and working hard to become more productive and gain more control in my work and in my life, I've come to an important conclusion: time management is dead.

TIME MANAGEMENT IS DEAD

Somewhere along the line, the game changed. We now live in an age of constant connection and information overload. The current potential to be bombarded with new information inputs - and from several different sources at the same time - would have been staggering to comprehend even ten years ago. In the old time management texts, dealing with new inputs was simple enough: they came in the form of paper letters, delivered to the office first thing every morning and perhaps again first thing in the afternoon if you were really popular. Dealing with and reacting to the new was a self-contained, limited activity that would take no more than an hour a day. According to the old time management principles, this left you free for the rest of the day to get on with the 'real work', which could be planned out early in the day via a simple daily to-do list and ABC priority system.

Today, such systems seem archaic: it's a big challenge to create the time and attention needed to get anywhere near our real work because we're buried under 24-7 email, social media, voicemails, instant messenger, texts, intranets, conference calls, collaboration tools and the burden of staying connected. Ever got to 5pm and found you're still staring at a full to-do list, wondering where the day went? Me too.

Quite apart from the ever-increasing volume of information in our work, there are so many other reasons why time management theories of old no longer cut it. Work is more complex now than it ever has been and yet our roles are less defined and the work itself more free-flowing; the emphasis is less on rigid management hierarchies and more on each member of the team taking personal responsibility; the pace of communication has increased dramatically and we're expected to reply or at least be 'in the loop' constantly. The pace of change certainly feels more dramatic too and working hours are becoming longer and more flexible not only to the needs of parents but of colleagues across continents.

YOU WILL NEVER GET EVERYTHING FINISHED

Ask yourself this: if you've ever made a to-do list with priorities on it (for example, A, B and C priorities), did you manage to get to the 'C' listed items before more 'A' grade opportunities or potential disasters presented themselves? Of course you didn't. And if you *did* get to those 'C' listed items, chances are you got to them because they suddenly started to rise up the ranks, becoming the more urgent 'A' and 'B' items because they were previously left unattended.

MOURNING THE DEATH OF 'GETTING EVERYTHING FINISHED'

It's time for us to acknowledge that we're no longer capable of getting it all finished. Think back to a moment in your working life when there was *nothing* more to possibly do that day. It's probably very hard to think of that situation in recent times; there's always a bit more business development, a bit of clearing the decks, a bit of catching up on reading or housekeeping. You're probably casting your mind back to one of your first jobs, where perhaps you worked in a bar and at the end of a long shift, you could all mop down the floors, close down the bar and sit down with a beer, rejoicing in a good night's work and the satisfaction of completion. Completion is a great feeling, isn't it? The satisfaction that you've achieved something, and that it's completely done and gone is psychologically thrilling.

The other reason completion is satisfying is that it naturally gives way to clear space. Psychologically, clear space helps provide perspective, a brief recovery from the frenetic pace of life and time to re-evaluate our priorities.

The trouble is, the modern work paradigm gives us so little sense of completion or clear space that it feels like we're constantly staring at the light at the end of a long, long tunnel. And when the light at the end of the tunnel approaches, you realise it's just some nasty bloke with a torch bringing you more work to do.

TIME MANAGEMENT IS DEAD, LONG LIVE ATTENTION MANAGEMENT

There's a new game now, with completely new rules. Put simply, skilful attention management is the new key to productivity, and how well you protect and use your attention determines your success. There are some mortal enemies standing in your way, though: stress, procrastination, interruptions, distractions, low-value commitments, annoying work practices - the list of things that get in the way of you focussing your attention onto what really matters goes on and on and on. It's time to think like a Ninja.

THE WAY OF THE PRODUCTIVITY NINJA

*"We must be willing to get rid of
the life we've planned so as
to have the life that is
waiting for us."
– Joseph Campbell*

This book is about developing a Ninja mindset and then applying it to every area of your working life - and even beyond that into your personal life too if you want to. It is about how we turn information from new inputs or vague distractions into completed and celebrated outcomes. It is about our

relationship with information at work, how we *are* ultimately in control and how we do ultimately have enough hours in the day to get the important stuff done. You'll notice I didn't just say get "everything" done.

In this chapter, I'll introduce you to the main behaviours – the way of the Ninja – that will boost your productivity, reduce your stress levels and change the way you think about your work. Necessarily, the way of the Productivity Ninja is about how we think about our work, not how we 'do' our work. Rather than being focussed on specific skills, talents or tools, it is an approach to work, from which systems and frameworks can then be easily developed. I will show you how to develop those in the coming chapters, but first let's talk about the underlying principles and mindset. In the later chapters, we will apply this mindset to your everyday situations at work: your email, to-do list, projects and meetings.

DECISION-MAKING IS OUR WORK

By 9.15am on an average day in the information age, we've received more information inputs than most old-school time management theorists would have received in a week! Our work has changed so much that for most of us, how we deal with surprise, new opportunities and new threats is what makes the difference. We no longer think *about* our work: thinking *is* our work.

Successful careers happen for those who make the best decisions. If you want to climb the ladder in your organisation, realise that your ability to react and be responsible are what you'll be judged on. The higher you go within an organisation or career, the truer this is. The art of decision-making, our ability to make space for the 'quality thinking time' we need and how we react on our gut instincts (especially when such time for thinking isn't available) defines us at work.

ARE YOU RESPONSIBLE, OR RESPONSE-ABLE?

How quickly do you react to change? And I don't mean just realising that things are changing, but actually digesting, understanding and responding with an appropriate action? It's long been thought that people get paid more or achieve more the more responsible they appear to be and the more responsibility they are able to take on in their job roles. If you're climbing a corporate ladder, you take on more responsibility the higher you go. But simply being 'responsible' these days isn't enough. It's become a popular trend for footballers or managers representing the team to come out with statements like, "I hold my hands up and say I'm responsible for my part in our embarrassing defeat". Whilst admitting responsibility is better than not doing so, honour in defeat still ultimately equals defeat. In the information age, things move quickly. As a society we value those that are comfortable with positions of responsibility but we rarely explore responsibility as something proactive and dynamic; we attach it as a passive label, like a heavy chain around the neck of every manager, boss or leader. "I don't want the responsibility", we say, as if it's a term full only of burdens and without corresponding joys. Being in a position of responsibility usually also means influence. The nature of responsibility is that it should also bring reward – the ability to make an impact, create wealth and success for your organisation, for society, for your family or for you. By viewing responsibility as inherently troublesome, we view it as the price to be paid for this success. We see it as a trade off. It shouldn't be this way.

To be response-able means you have the ability to define in the moment the actions you need to take to overcome any new challenge. This book will give you the tools to work on your response-ability and be more response-able in three important ways:

► **Response-able now**

We often choose not to respond with definite actions. We procrastinate and we seek to delay things if we're feeling lazy, tired, unsure or worried about the results. This book will look to challenge your thinking and develop new habits where you're proactively looking for ways to respond rather than for ways to avoid and defer.

► **Response-able later**

You don't want to worry about what could go wrong on all the other projects that you're not working on right now. We'll set up systems so that you always know what your next move will be on any given project and so that you know that these systems will keep things under control for you.

► **Response-able if the crap hits the fan**

When you have to drop everything to deal with a crisis, it's much easier if you have a sure-fire way of knowing or remembering what you've dropped. The systems and techniques in this book will make it easier to respond when such moments come along, ensuring full focus on the job at hand.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PRODUCTIVITY NINJA

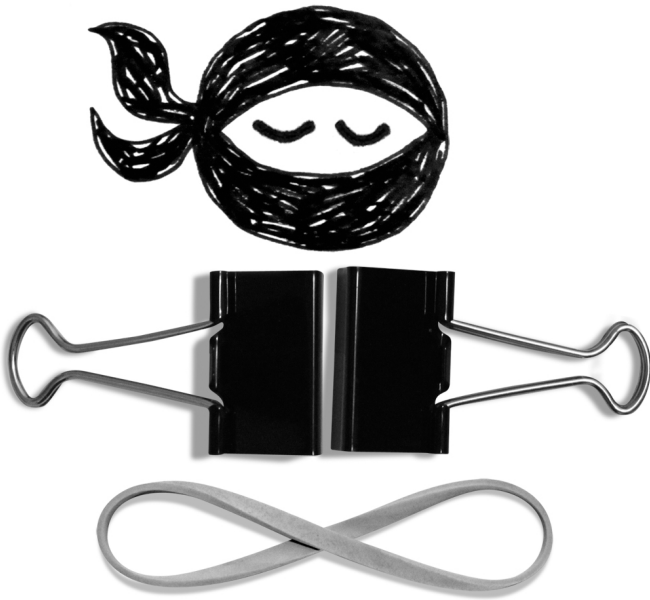
*"Simplicity is the ultimate
sophistication."*

– Leonardo da Vinci

What follows are the key characteristics that make up 'the way of the Productivity Ninja'. As we look at each of these in turn, you may begin to picture some of the ways

these approaches can influence how you currently operate. As we go through the later chapters, I'll show you the tools and techniques to achieve Ninja-level productivity.

ZEN-LIKE CALM



ZEN-LIKE CALM

Great decision-making comes from the ability to create the time and space to think rationally and intelligently about the issue at hand. Decisions made during periods of panic are likely to be the ones we want to forget about. The Ninja realises this, remains calm in the face of adversity, and equally calm under the pressure of information overload. You might not believe this, but it is entirely possible to have a hundred and one things to do and yet still remain absolutely calm. How do we beat stress and remain calm? I'll answer this question more fully as we look at the practical skills needed for Ninja-mastery of email, tasks, projects and meetings, but here are a few basic principles:

USE YOUR HEAD, DON'T USE YOUR HEAD!

*"The mind is for having ideas,
not for holding them."
– David Allen*

Be sure that you're not forgetting important items by keeping all of your support information in a system, not in your head. Be sure that you're not distracted and stressed

by what you *could* be forgetting - by using a system instead of your own head as the place where information and reminders live. This is certainly easier said than done, but once mastered, really works. I will introduce you to your very own Ninja System later in this book.

TRUST YOUR SYSTEM

You need to have trust that whatever systems you use will work. There is a danger that additional stress will be created by the uncertainty of not knowing whether your systems will help you deliver. Moving to a new computer or new software brings with it a few days of uncertainty, but many people live for years without ever really asking themselves if their systems work to the point that they really trust them to work. Sticking to what you trust and trusting what you stick to are crucial. The way to foster this trust and promote the Zen-like calm you need is to regularly consider not just your work, but the *process* of your work too. Briefly but regularly reviewing *how* you work will help you to promote clearer thinking in the work itself.

LOWER YOUR EXPECTATIONS. SERIOUSLY.

Realise that you'll never get everything done. That's not the game anymore. Be safe in the knowledge that you're in control, selecting the right things to do, and

that you're doing as much as one human being possibly can. This definitely does not mean 'don't be ambitious'; it does mean that if you have a sense of ambition, you'll probably experience some times in your life with more on your plate than you can physically do. What you know once you get into this situation is that you physically can't do it on your own. Once you recognise this, there are three things you can do:

1. Worry about it and beat yourself up with stress.
2. Identify a 'route through' - work like a horse until you get to the end, keeping sane in the knowledge that you're moving as productively and effectively as you can.
3. Get some help. Hire someone. Call in some favours. Delegate. After all, many hands make light work.

I'm a fan of numbers two and three but I see number one far too often when I'm working with people. The truth is that worry, stress and negative thought patterns are intensely tiring and completely unproductive.

KEEP YOUR BODY IN GOOD PHYSICAL CONDITION

*"A healthy body means
a healthy mind."
- Unknown*

Keeping fit and healthy will not only reduce stress in its own right, but will also give your brain the focus and energy it needs to produce clearer thinking and decision-making that will enable you to stay on top of your work, too. And it means you'll look hot. It's a win-win-win!

There are hundreds of theories about why physical fitness positively impacts the brain. I will discuss a few of them when we look at practical ways you can manage your attention span in Chapter 3. Aerobic exercise that increases the flow of endorphins to the brain, eating protein-rich foods like nuts, beans, fish and chicken and cutting down on your use of stimulants like caffeine and alcohol will all help you regulate your attention span, stay happy and promote positive-outlook thinking. Sometimes clichés are clichés because they're so true.

BE PREPARED & ORGANISED, READY FOR WHEN TIMES GET ROUGH

"A tidy desk is a tidy mind."

– Unknown

Some of us look at being organised as being a bit too anal or obsessive. "I don't have the time to be organised," is a common objection

I hear when coaching clients towards Productivity Ninja status. But the truth is that when we experience periods of 'flow' - the times in our day or week when we're most productive - the last thing we want to do is be thrown off track by being unable to find some crucial piece of information or by not having the tools we need readily available. Operating from a default of 'disorganised' simply means we're setting ourselves up to fail by regularly needing to break periods of flow. However, there are certainly times when 'being a bit more organised' should not be the first thing on our to-do list for the day; there are times when the delivery of the mission critical takes over and being organised can wait. But those times are far easier and you're more likely to experience regular periods of super-productive flow if at regular intervals you get back to the default position of being organised. Usually, those people who naturally resist the idea of being organised are the very same people who experience the greatest mindset shift from getting their paperwork, projects, email inbox and everything else under control. It's immensely calming if you do it regularly, but probably even more so if you don't normally experience it very often. The realisation that after each battle comes a period of rest and realignment, and the strategic value of preparedness for the battles to come, are central to the Ninja philosophy.

RUTHLESSNESS



RUTHLESSNESS

It's not a paradox to follow Zen-like calm with ruthlessness. We have already talked about the need to make clear-headed decisions, objectively and calmly. As well as needing to make more and better decisions, we need to be choosier, too: processing information to sort the wheat from the chaff, see the timber from the trees and sorting the big opportunities from the even bigger ones. Ruthlessness isn't just about how we process information though, it's also about our ability to protect our time and attention, focussing only on the things that add the greatest impact, even at the expense of other things that are 'worth doing'.

BEING CHOOSY: SAYING "NO" TO OURSELVES

With abundance of information such a problem, being choosy is the only way. It goes against the western, protestant work ethic culture that we're so familiar with to decide *not* to do things, but that's exactly what we must do. A lot. Being much choosier about what we say "Yes" to is an important skill – and learning to say "No" to ourselves means not biting off more than we can chew. If you do get into situations where you've bitten off more than you can chew (and I do this regularly, by the way!), it's about realising that renegotiating your commitments to yourself and others is better than burning yourself out trying to meet them all.

UNWANTED WORK: SAYING "NO" TO OTHERS

Picture this. You're in a meeting that you thought you were attending purely to contribute to, and the meeting discussion begins to come around to some decisions and commitments about actions people could take at the end of the meeting. There's a particular set of actions that you're renowned for being good at, and just as it's mentioned, several pairs of eyes turn and focus on you. It's easy in this situation to over-commit. It's harder to rein the conversation back from what you *could* deliver and on to what you're *able* to deliver. It's harder still, when you know how valuable your contribution could be, to say "No" to all of it... without feeling like you're letting the side down or losing favour with someone who matters. Saying "No" to others is tricky. It requires steely resolve, a ruthless streak and some great tactics so that you come out smelling of roses. We'll look at this in more detail later, but make it your mission to perfect the art of saying "No" to yourself and to others. It goes a long way.

INTERRUPTIONS

Our attention – particularly that proactive attention when we’re most alert, in flow and on top of our game – is arguably our most precious resource. It needs to be nurtured and valued. At the same time, there are a million interruptions out there: emails, phone calls, thoughts, stress, colleagues, social media, the next big crisis, the next big thing. All of them need to be stopped dead in their quest to distract and derail you. We deal with this in some detail in Chapter 3, but needless to say, our ruthlessness needs to put pay to a whole lot of temptation too: we often *like* to be distracted because it’s the perfect excuse for procrastination and thinking less. Facebook or Twitter win over the report we’re supposed to be finishing simply because it’s easier to be in those places, having conversations, than it is to get into the difficult thinking we’re supposed to be engaged in. There’s nothing like a good interruption to keep us busy, unfocussed and distracted from the difficult thinking ahead. And don’t pretend that doesn’t apply to you and that you’re smarter; if it’s not Facebook, it’ll be chatting with colleagues, or something else! So again, dealing with such interruptions is as much about our self-discipline as it is our ability to say “No” to the interruptions of others.

80-20 AND THE POWER OF IMPACT THINKING

“Begin with the end in mind.”

– Stephen Covey

Being ruthless also means being selective about how we achieve our goals. Using the 80-20 rule, we can start to recognise that not all of what we do creates an equal amount of impact. 20% of what we do accounts for 80% of the impact. Often, there’s a temptation to aim for perfection. In some areas of our work, this perfection is healthy and even necessary but in other cases, it can be avoided and the impact on the final result hardly even noticed. So we need to be ruthless in our planning. What are we trying to achieve? Has someone else solved this problem before? Could we beg, borrow or steal? What’s the quickest way we can get this item off our plate and move on? These questions lead us towards thinking about innovation and a contempt for the orthodox (which we’ll come to very shortly!) but with a steely focus only on the end and not on the means, we’ll give ourselves a better chance of saving some time, reducing the energy expended considerably and reducing the final result only by a fraction.

WEAPON-SAVVY



WEAPON-SAVVY

The Ninja is skilful on their own, but knows that using the right tools makes them more effective.

CHOOSE YOUR WEAPON, KNOW YOUR TOOLS

There are a range of tools out there to help keep us on top of our game. There are two broad types of tools that the Productivity Ninja needs to have in their armoury:

- ▶ Thinking tools
- ▶ Organising tools

Choosing what to use and when, and being aware of the capabilities of each are key to success. Tools need to give us confidence and ensure that through their productive use, we're rarely interrupted by our own ineptitude.

THINKING TOOLS

As our decisions get more complex, our need for tools to assist our thinking becomes more apparent. Strategic planning processes or line management feedback situations are often where we first encounter such tools, but their value is still underestimated. Certain tools and their explicit use can also give clients, line managers and other stakeholders additional confidence in your processes and can stimulate your thinking. For example, SWOT analysis (looking at strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) is a common business thinking tool that provides a simple structure to think about the present and future in a way that people can easily understand. There are a broad range of such thinking tools and frameworks that have been created to help make our lives easier and our decision-making better.

ORGANISING TOOLS

From Microsoft Outlook and iPhone apps to the humble stapler, there are so many ways to be organised. The trick is to get to a very good level of organisation rather than an excellent or mediocre level; this ensures that the time spent on getting organised receives the optimum payoff in increased productivity, rather than becoming a drain on our time and an unwelcome and unnecessary distraction.

DON'T GET SEDUCED BY 'PRODUCTIVITY PORN'

"Joining a Facebook group about productivity is like buying a chair about jogging."
- Merlin Mann

Tools are there to help us get things done, but our obsession with them can occasionally become a distraction. There are some great productivity websites out there – often created or led by influential and insightful thinkers – like Merlin Mann's www.43folders.com and Leo Babauta's www.zenhabits.net, but whilst we do need to keep up with technology and innovation to the extent that it increases our productivity, we also need to be hyper-conscious that this is in itself 'dead time', away from the completion of our priority tasks and projects. I worry when I hear someone talk about their productivity purely and exclusively in the context of which new iPhone app they've just downloaded. These tools assist our thinking and organising: they don't replace the need for it. Worse still, it's not uncommon for people to retype all their projects and actions from one piece of software to another under the oft-mistaken premise that they're increasing their productivity by 5% by doing this. No, that's just a day of procrastination.

MODELLING DECISION-MAKING

At the heart of the way of the Productivity Ninja is improving our ability to make decisions. By challenging ourselves to continually improve and innovate, the quality, quantity and speed of our decisions will increase. Remember that informed and clear decision-making is our aim. Thinking tools help boost our mental agility, but so does the right information.

It's often said that there are only eight stories in the world. Any challenge you're undertaking probably has a precedent, so getting out there and finding someone who is familiar with the territory of your decision making can help provide shortcuts to decisions that you thought would take you forever to master. Asking others for advice and investigating how others have tackled similar questions is a great way to come to more informed conclusions on tight timescales. Be equally free to share what you have learned with others and you'll find you are rewarded tenfold with the information and advice you get back. Learn from those willing to share, share with those willing to learn. I think we're moving towards a new age of collaboration, as our connectedness opens up new technologies that make this possible – and as I write this, I truly believe we're still hanging around on the starting blocks.

Twitter and Facebook are fantastic tools for throwing out questions or issues to a group of trusted friends and colleagues: it's so valuable getting a second, third, fourth and fifth opinion on something. It's amazing how much time and mental energy you'll save. But equally, don't be afraid to think independently and draw your own conclusions when your instinct tells you to.

STEALTH & CAMOUFLAGE



STEALTH & CAMOUFLAGE

We talked earlier about protecting your attention spans and keeping focussed. It's hard to do. This is where the Ninja needs to employ a bit of old-fashioned stealth and camouflage.

IF YOU'RE IN THE LIMELIGHT, YOU MIGHT GET CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE

One of the worst things you can do is make yourself always available. It's an invitation to some of your biggest enemies: distraction and interruption. Keep out of the limelight until you've got something you need others to hear. Avoid too much of the social chit chat and time-wastery that goes on in so many offices. Be a little bit elusive, a bit mysterious and even, if you have to, aloof. Protect your attention to ensure it's spent on what *you* decide to spend it on, not what others hijack it for. Here are a few examples:

- ▶ Spend as much time as you can away from your desk – work from home, in cafés, in meeting rooms, and outside. Even if you work in an open plan office where this feels impossible, you can still try to negotiate some 'thinking time' away from your desk with your line manager. And of course you can use the more ruthless and stealth-like approach of just booking vague-sounding appointments in your Outlook diary so that people just assume, "Oh, looks like they're out of the office..."
- ▶ Get a gatekeeper who can help you say "No" to appointments or meetings just not worth your while. (If you can get someone else to say "No", it's often easier for you, and nicer for the person you're turning down!)
- ▶ Screen your calls and don't answer your phone unless you decide the call is likely to be more important than what you're currently working on.
- ▶ Book time in your calendar for creative thinking, reviewing, forward planning and other important activities. Have a personal codeword for this if you work in an office where other people can book your calendar and are unlikely to respect your autonomy if they see 'personal thinking time' or 'reading' as a calendar entry. Use 'private' or 'meeting outside of the office' instead.

- Set clear boundaries around things like email, Facebook chat, Skype and Instant Messenger. Get into the habit of being very conscious of when each of these is to be turned on and off. The default setting in almost every organisation I've ever worked in is that Outlook (or other email client) is turned on 100% of the time. This same intrusion is increasingly true for Skype, IM and other services. It's time to wriggle away from the pressures of connectivity and 'go dark'.

GOING DARK

As well as protecting our attention from others, we must recognise the need to protect our attention from ourselves. We can be our very own worst enemy. There's a phrase in software development called 'Going Dark' which refers to the time when a developer is 'in the zone' with their programming and has subsequently stopped answering emails or responding to other communications. They can be extremely difficult to find. Those that manage software developers get frustrated by this, but also know that there's probably some amazing productivity happening... somewhere.

If your attention and focus is likely to be impeded by unlimited access to the internet and you're likely to be tempted by its millions of distraction possibilities (and who isn't?!), disconnect once in a while. Yes, a productivity book is telling you to *turn off* the internet! If I turn off my wifi connection for two hours, I know there will be no new email arriving during that time, and that it will be annoying enough having to fiddle around with turning the connection back on to keep me from doing so.

The art of camouflage is an important skill in keeping us productive. We may be off the radar, but that certainly doesn't mean we're not working. Quietly hiding away is not for everyone and it's not something you can't do all the time. But it does focus the mind on the task at hand and avoids so many of the interruptions and distractions that we place in front of our own eyes.

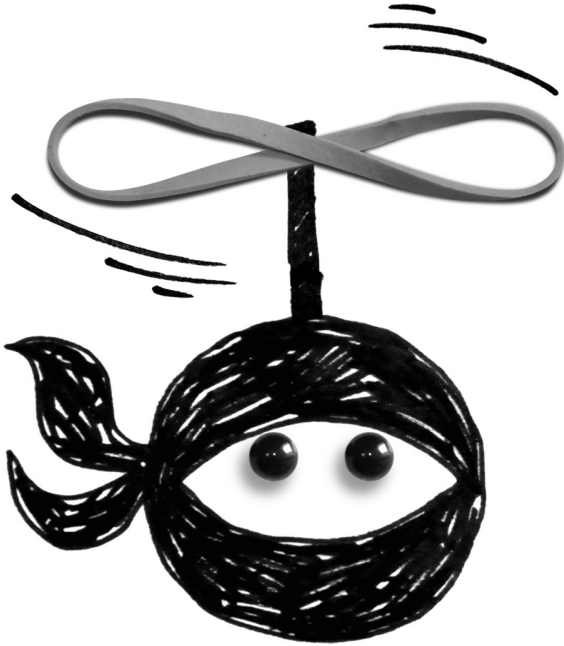
STEALTH DELEGATION

Finding other people to do your work for you is a great way to get more done. The problem is that the world is pretty scarce with people who actually want to do your work for you! Hence, a bit of stealth delegation is in order. This is unorthodox for a number of reasons, but consider first that you are unlikely to be

able to claim credit for your actions and also that things may turn out differently to how you had imagined. If you're prepared to tolerate that, it's a great tactic. Better still, work out from your project list which of the projects you could afford to have others work on in different ways, or that you care least about. These are the ones to consider stealth delegating. Here are three common forms of stealth delegation. As a Ninja, you might well discover your own techniques, too.

1. Piggy backing: advertising your offer through someone else's mailout, launching your new product at someone else's event or 'borrowing' their contact list to launch something jointly. If momentum exists elsewhere in the world, jump on board.
2. Cultivating 'partners-in-crime': looking for the 'win-win' opportunities to work with equally savvy, equally useful and equally inspiring people.
3. Short-cutting: find people who've done the research, got a recommendation, learned the hard way and are eager to give their advice so that you don't make the same mistakes. A five-minute phone call to get a personal recommendation is much easier than an hour Google searching the best solution. Find people whose opinions you trust – and trust them!

UNORTHODOXY



UNORTHODOXY

What's important is the end result. It doesn't matter if you use the conventional route to get there or find an easier path. Just because a seasoned professional tells you something needs to take 16 hours, doesn't make it true. Be willing to question everything. It's important to be on constant lookout for every opportunity to take advantage of progress and innovation and do things more easily because the chances are, a lot of the people around you stopped doing that long ago. They just do things the old way and they're happy not to change it too much. We must avoid getting stuck in a rut and doing things less efficiently than we could, at all costs.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO STAND OUT WHEN THE TIME IS RIGHT

Doing things differently is risky, even when we've got a good hunch that we've got a better way of doing things. Managers generally prefer the status quo as it gives them an easy life, so doing the thing that challenges the status quo can often tread a fine line between glory and failure. But this isn't about chasing glory (although we'll reluctantly and graciously accept it when it comes along); it's about doing things in a better way and the satisfaction that comes from pushing boundaries to improve the process and increase productivity.

PUSHING BOUNDARIES IS EASIER WHEN YOU'RE NOT REALLY PUSHING BOUNDARIES

This is one of the Ninja secrets. The exact problem you face at work today is a problem that someone in another industry faced yesterday and that someone else will face tomorrow. So just as we can model decision-making, we can also model innovation from elsewhere. Injecting some fresh thinking into a situation and trying to see the problem through the lens of someone in a completely different area of work can be a useful technique. If, for example, you're looking to communicate more creatively, why not ask yourself, "How would an advertising agency do this?" or, "How would Nelson Mandela tackle this?", or if you need more method in amongst the madness, ask how a surgeon or engineer would approach the task. And, if you know people who do those kinds of jobs, call them up and ask for their perspective. You'll be surprised how effective this kind of modelling can be. Genuinely pushing boundaries is exciting, but can be a lot more time-consuming and takes a lot more effort than simple modelling. Innovation in one industry or job role can be the status quo somewhere else and vice versa.

MODELLING & PARTNERS-IN-CRIME

An obsession with unorthodoxy and innovation also means ditching some of the foolish creations of the ego: never be afraid or embarrassed or too proud to ask for advice, even if that means you needing to show weakness. And never resist an opportunity to learn something new from a trusted source. Modelling the success of others is crucial. Mentoring is a great way to do this: take advice from those who have travelled the road you're setting out on, avoid making the mistakes they themselves made, and shortcut to success. Along with mentors, think about your 'partners-in-crime'. Who are the people travelling a similar road at the same time as you? Chances are, they all have mentors too and are learning equally important things. Never be afraid to share your learning with others as you'll be amazed at the priceless lessons you get back in return. Sometimes we resist such collaborative approaches because we believe, like some kind of superhero, that there is some added virtue in achieving things on our own or in being competitive. Remember, the only thing that matters is whether you get there; no one cares how.

BREAK RULES AND DISRESPECT BUREAUCRACY

Whilst certain rules are worth upholding – and there are certain rules that would get you fired if you broke them – a Productivity Ninja approaches work with the mindset to focus on the end result first and work back from there. Questioning of rules, especially in relation to bureaucracy, is a great skill. Remember that if the risk of serious repercussions is limited, it's usually easier to apologise than to ask permission. There are times when we just need to show some leadership and crack on. Don't be afraid to rip up the rulebook, especially if you can trash some tired old bureaucracy along the way.

AGILITY



AGILITY

A Ninja needs to be light on their feet, able to respond with deftness to new opportunities or threats. Anything that requires a lot of shifting of thinking, quick reactions and decisions will of course need our proactive attention. And as we know, this is a finite resource. Our ability to react quickly and appropriately to new challenges really comes down to two things:

1. Our own mental 'reserves' or capacity to spend more of our days in proactive attention mode without getting tired. People do this temporarily through the use of caffeine or other stimulants, which is fine to an extent and in the short-term, but we need to think more sustainably than that;
2. Our ability to bring in other resources to aid this process – other people, more time and better technology.

KEEPING LIGHT ON OUR FEET

Just as when we talked about tools we said there was a need to focus on these in the 'fallow periods' in order that we're most agile when the going gets tough, the same process is true of developing our 'response-ability'. There are some important steps we can take on a day-to-day basis to do this:

- ▶ Keep organised: if we need to react, we need to be ready.
- ▶ Under-commit, don't over-commit your diary: it's always very tempting to bite off more than we can chew and it's even easier to find your day committed to other people's meetings. At the start of the week or month, keep space and time in your calendar, ready and able to be filled by stuff you don't know exists yet. That might sound obvious, but one look at how packed your own schedule is in the next few days will prove that it's much easier said than done. This clear space in the diary is truly your 'response-ability'.
- ▶ Grown into, don't grow out of: with any organising system you use, think one step ahead and develop systems far in advance of the capacity you need. For example, if you're going to have an upsurge in business and new clients coming on board, managing client contact information on a scruffy Excel spreadsheet that's bursting at the seams will slow you down at the

crucial point. Investing the time before you need to into developing a super-hot database will seem unproductive at the time, but is actually the smarter move. In London, the Victorians built the sewers and tube lines to be ten times the required capacity. People complain about the tube system now, forgetting how ahead of its time it really was and how wise they were to think so far ahead in terms of the additional capacity requirements. All I can say is, thank goodness they did that for the sewers!

SPOTTING AN OPPORTUNITY OR THREAT, WHEREVER IT ARRIVES FROM

"Opportunity is missed by most people, because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work."

- Thomas A. Edison

In order to react and respond well, we need strategic vision. We need to spot opportunity even when it knocks very softly at the door and see threats coming whilst they're still relatively in the distance. Again,

this takes some preparation and research and there are some useful shortcuts to use. Networking, for example, is a great way to keep your ear to the ground. Different people will have a different policy on networking, but broadly I set out to tick off these criteria, in this order:

1. Am I likely to meet interesting and useful people?
2. Is this person remarkable? Do they have something to say, or a good track record, or good enthusiasm? (If not, move on - there's nothing to see here!)
3. Can this person tell me something that informs my work and broadens my strategic sense?
4. Can we work together on something?
5. Is there an obvious win-win here that takes half the effort of the conversation itself?

Only when I get to number five do I commit. Often we get carried away with possibility, but delivery is another matter, so only pursue those that in conversation appear to be the 'no-brainers'.

MINDFULNESS



MINDFULNESS

MANAGING OUR MINDS

Our minds are our most important tool. Being emotionally intelligent and self-aware are important for so many reasons, not least because they equip you to take action. For instance, a lot of the things that make up the Ninja mindset, such as remaining calm, being ruthless and pushing the boundaries by being unorthodox, aren't easy. In fact, in many ways they go against our evolutionary design.

LISTENING TO THE 'LIZARD BRAIN' & OUR OWN RESISTANCE

Our brains have evolved a lot since we were monkeys, but one thing has hardly changed: the lizard brain. A term popularised by Seth Godin in his brilliant book *Linchpin*, this part of our brain still remembers what it was like to need to survive, to blend in, to not make a fuss. In fact, the worst thing for the lizard brain to think would be that whatever we're doing makes us stand out. Standing out from the crowd in evolutionary terms meant you'd get picked off by a predator and this is exactly how the lizard brain still thinks!

Steven Pressfield's book *The War of Art* is a revealing and personal account of his battles as a writer against what he calls 'the resistance'. The resistance is a mindset, usually developed by the lizard brain, but characterised by stress, anxiety, fear of failure, fear of success and a whole host of other emotions that whirl around our brains and tell us to stand still. "Stop. Don't do it. It's risky. Do it how others do it because that's what we know is already accepted behaviour. Innovation and unorthodoxy is a crazy idea. Creativity is just wrong." Your job as a Ninja is to silence those thought processes as much as possible.

This sounds easy but it's not – mainly because they're often so quiet that you don't even realise they need silencing at all. Pay close attention to yourself and your gut instincts, but also objectively observe your productivity, noticing which tasks you're drawn to and repelled by. You don't need to be a psychologist or a counsellor to understand your own thinking, but you do need to pay close attention to it.

EMOTIONS & MEDITATION

Many people will tell you that allowing time and space to listen to your emotions, listen to your heart and just be mindful is either a waste of time or somehow 'hippy psychobabble'. The Ninja knows differently - knows that it's all about perception and there's a greater force inside of us that we can channel towards fulfillment, success and changing the world. A bad day can be as much about what's going on in your head as what's going on in the office. Those that regularly practice or have even tried some form of mediation will know of its benefits. In fact, meditation can help sharpen all of the other aspects of the Ninja mindset we've just discussed. I take a wide definition of meditation here that includes sitting quietly staring at a beautiful view, praying, free writing and other creativity pursuits, Yoga, walking (if the purpose is to walk, not to arrive!) and many other things. Again, the aim is to promote Zen-like calm and be focussed and fully present in your work.

LISTENING TO OTHERS

As well as taking the time to listen to our own thoughts and emotions, active and effective listening is at the heart of great meetings and collaborative work. Listening to objections and hearing only feedback and connection rather than criticism and opposition is a crucial skill, too. We will come back to these themes in Chapter 11.

PREPAREDNESS



PREPAREDNESS

Finally in our list of the characteristics to aspire to is one that underpins and strengthens so many of the others we've just talked about: preparedness. Zen-like calm in the heat of the battle is only possible if you're well prepared. Agility is only possible if you're starting from a position of being prepared and ready to react immediately, producing the right response. And you're only ready to be ruthless if you've got the energy. Being prepared is about practical preparation as well as mental preparation.

PRACTICAL PREPAREDNESS

A weapon-savvy Ninja knows the added sense of control they feel when tackling a problem or project with the right tools. There used to be a time when being organised, focussing on the stationery or the geeky apps was considered nerdy or uncool. Well, the time has come to unleash your inner geek. It's time to maintain practical systems that will mean you're always prepared to tackle whatever comes your way. It may seem less cool than just 'going with the flow', but there is power in stocking up on stationery, power in investing time in the right systems and power in attacking your work from the position of being well prepared.

MENTAL PREPAREDNESS

As well as being physically well prepared, we need to be mentally well prepared too. This of course means mindfulness, but it also means looking after our most precious resource: our own attention and energy. As such, we need time to be off duty too. Perhaps being off duty involves a long Facebook binge or surfing crap on the internet. Perhaps it involves going out with friends or taking time to focus your attention onto something completely different (or onto nothing at all). Many people are pressured by their bosses to stay late in the office. I have talked to a lot of people who say that even though no one feels like there's anything to do, let alone feels ready to do anything, they still stay - for about five minutes after the boss has gone home. If you're in a job where you're under this kind of peer pressure, it needs to change. We'll work on that together. As for your boss, well, perhaps buying them a copy of this book would be a start!

LUNCH IS NOT FOR WIMPS

‘Crunching’ is a term that means buckling down, eyes on the deadline or conscious of the busy period ahead. It means not looking after yourself and not coming up for air. Crunching is a great short-term tactic when the going gets tough. But studies show that sustained periods of ‘crunch’ only lead to diminishing returns. In the film *Wall Street*, Gordon Gecko, played brilliantly by Michael Douglas, uttered the now legendary phrase, “Lunch is for wimps”. It stuck in the collective consciousness and you’ll still hear it used to this day. Well, lunch is not for wimps. But preparedness is for Ninjas.

PREPAREDNESS LEADS TO MAGIC

It’s difficult to say why taking lunch or short breaks during the working day always brings you so quickly back to ruthless focus and your ‘A’ game. It just happens that way. Periods of rest are vital for preparedness. Next time you spend any meaningful length of time during the hours of nine to five *not* working and move your attention onto something completely different, just watch what happens; I’ll bet that on that day, you’ll get *more* done, not less. It’s like a magical little secret. Different shifts in gear seem to work for different people, but it’s as much in the body as in the mind. A five-minute blast of fresh air is infinitely more effective than ten minutes screwing about on the internet with your work still open in the background. The trick is to find the thing that works for you. As we look more at managing your attention and momentum later in the book, we will revisit this very unusual but startlingly effective secret.

EXERCISE: PREPAREDNESS

What you'll need: Self-awareness,
space to think

How long it'll take: 20 minutes

Ninja mindset: Mindfulness



You've read through the key characteristics that make up the Way of the Productivity Ninja – Zen-like Calm, Ruthlessness, Weapon-Savvy, Stealth & Camouflage, Unorthodoxy, Agility, Mindfulness, Preparedness – so take a moment to decide which three are already quite well developed in you, and which three you think you need to focus on throughout the book.

Make a note of them here and refer back to them as you work through the book.

NEARLY A NINJA...

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A BIT OF NINJA PRACTICE NEEDED...

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NINJAS ARE NOT SUPERHUMAN...



...BUT THEY SOMETIMES APPEAR SO

NINJAS ARE NOT SUPERHUMAN... ...BUT THEY SOMETIMES APPEAR SO

"Life is really simple, but we insist on making it complicated."

– Confucius

Working in this way is liberating, fun and super-productive. Sometimes as a Productivity Ninja you will seem to others like you have special powers. Sometimes it will even seem that way to you.

However, a Ninja is very different from a superhero. A Ninja is just a regular guy or girl, but with tools and skills and a very special mindset. There are no super powers and no kryptonite.

As a Ninja, you'll develop a reputation as someone who delivers, someone who is reliable, makes good decisions and takes their work seriously. Apart from when you wear your Ninja mask. Keep that private.

Ninjas are passionate, indispensable and calm under pressure. Ninjas get things done in a way that seems, well, magical.

NINJAS WORK MAGIC...

Magic isn't really magic, but it is magical. It's exciting to be around people who make magic happen – the people who seem to have an innate sense of how to deliver and create impact. It's even more exciting when *you're* the person creating that magic. As a Ninja, what were once routine tasks become opportunities for fun, discovery, experimentation and the unleashing of your inner geek. Thinking about the *process* of your work as well as the work itself will help you to love what you do, whatever that may be. You will gain excitement and a sense of magic from being better at doing what you were doing before; you'll be less stressed about it; and you'll experience a momentum in your work that you never thought possible. Ninjas work in a unique heightened flow of relaxed productivity, brought about by hyper-awareness, calm and focus. It's a magical experience that you won't want to go back from. But it's not all plain sailing either.

NINJAS ALSO OCCASIONALLY SCREW UP

*"The best brewer sometimes
makes bad beer."
– German proverb*

By seeking ultra-productivity, using unorthodox means and for a host of other more 'human' reasons, Ninjas are prone to screwing up once in a while. In old time management books, the time management 'gurus' would paint themselves as a picture of superhero perfection. They'd give you detailed planners to fill in, have you performing high fives in celebration of continuous massive achievement and leave you as the reader wondering how on earth they managed the impossible. Well, don't believe a word of it. We're all prone to screwing up – no matter how organised, how intelligent, or how seemingly perfect we are or are trying to be. Yes, you too.

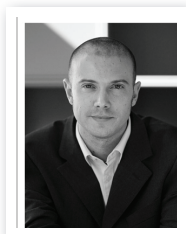
We can aim for perfection and fail, or we can aim for Zen-like Calm, Ruthlessness, Weapon-Savvyness, Stealth and Camouflage, Unorthodoxy, Agility, Mindfulness and Preparedness, and succeed. Yes, we'll make mistakes. No, we won't be perfect. But what we will do is increase productivity in ways you never thought possible before.

It simply isn't possible for me to make you a superhero and if you want that, there are plenty of other books out there that will promise it but won't deliver. It's an unrealistic dream, a fantasy never fulfilled.

But it *is* possible that we can make you a Ninja.

So, my apprentice! Let's get started, shall we?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Graham Allcott is a productivity trainer, social entrepreneur and founder of Think Productive. Think Productive run public workshops throughout the UK and also run in-house workshops for staff at a diverse range of organisations including the Cabinet Office (UK government), The National Trust, eBay, Heineken, British Airways, GlaxoSmithKline and The University of Bristol.

Think Productive workshops include:

- Getting Your Inbox to Zero

- Email Etiquette

- How to Get Things Done

- Making Meetings Magic

- Smells Like Team Spirit

- How to be a Productivity Ninja

Prior to founding Think Productive, Graham's career has been primarily in the charity sector and focussed on social action. He ran community volunteering projects for the University of Birmingham before becoming Chief Executive of the charity Student Volunteering England and then setting up his social enterprise consultancy, Fruitful Consulting.

He was also co-founder of Intervol, the founding Chairman of READ International and has advised Governments both red and blue on youth and community issues, including most notably The Russell Commission and National Citizen Service. He is a trustee of the youth homelessness charity, Centrepont.

Despite an intolerance of failure elsewhere in his life, he is an Aston Villa season ticket holder.

Graham lives in Brighton, UK.

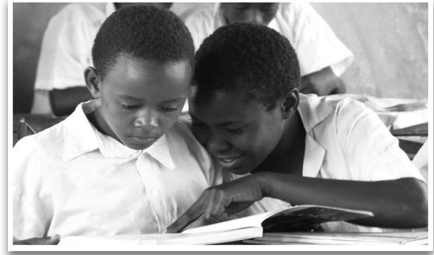
BUY A BOOK, CHANGE A LIFE

In reading *How to be a Productivity Ninja*, you are probably aware of the impact a good book can have. But have you considered the impact a million books can have?

Graham was the first Chairman of READ International and is now a founding ambassador for the charity. Graham is donating all the profits from sales of the e-book version of *How to be a Productivity Ninja* to READ International, meaning that for every e-book sold, at least five real textbooks will find their way to schools in rural Tanzania!

READ International provides empowerment through education by collecting and donating high quality UK secondary school textbooks that regularly become out-of-date, and shipping them to East Africa, where the curriculum is almost identical but where the ratio of pupils to textbooks is 5:1.

Founded in 2006 by a group of passionate and visionary students, READ International harnesses the power of books and education to empower young people to change their lives and create futures free from poverty.



Since its inception, READ International has won multiple awards and achieved the following:

- ▶ Shipped over a million quality textbooks to East Africa.
- ▶ Renovated 32 school libraries in East Africa.
- ▶ Distributed books to over 1,200 East African schools, serving 500,000 students.
- ▶ Saved over two million books from landfill, equating to 1,000 tonnes of waste.

Graham's opening line of this book is about changing the world as effortlessly as possible. So please buy lots of copies of the e-book version of *How to be a Productivity Ninja*, or donate directly to READ International by visiting: www.readinternational.org.uk.

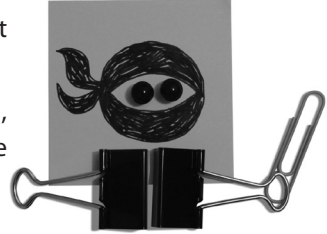
It doesn't take much effort and it will seriously change lives.



BRING OUR PRODUCTIVITY NINJAS TO YOUR OFFICE!

So you've become a Productivity Ninja, but what about Dave from accounts?! Perhaps we can help.

If you want to boost productivity in your organisation, Think Productive runs a full range of in-house workshops to do exactly that:



GETTING YOUR INBOX TO ZERO

A 3-hour tour through Ninja-email tips and tricks, complete with at-desk coaching so that participants finish the workshop with their inboxes actually at zero. Inbox Nirvana. Short, practical and dazzlingly effective.

"Very satisfying. Love the approach!" – Julia Ewald, eBay

EMAIL ETIQUETTE

Our Email Etiquette workshop focuses on good and bad email practice and teams leave having written an 'email manifesto' to help improve their email culture. 3 hours later, watch the emails in your inbox get easier and easier to deal with as a result.

"Email has always annoyed me! This session brought these issues to the forefront of my mind and we were able to deal with them!" – Nick Matthews, Cardiff University Students' Union.

HOW TO GET THINGS DONE

On this full-day workshop, we work both in the classroom and at desks to help people implement Think Productive's CORD workflow model, get their 'second brain' systems set up on computer or paper and fill several recycling bins full of old and useless paperwork. Energising, clarity-inducing and fun, we regularly have people describe the day as "Life-changing"!

"Very impressed. Actually the most productive and enjoyable course I've ever been on." – Lisa Hutchinson, University of Bristol

MAKING MEETINGS MAGIC

A 3 hour workshop designed to transform the world of meetings! We cover good and bad meeting practices, the 40-20-40 continuum and a range of techniques. Coaching and group work focusses on both the individual and team issues with the aim of reducing the time everyone spends in meetings and making the meetings you do attend, well, magic!

"Really made us think about using our time for meetings more productively and in some cases had us questioning the need for a meeting at all!" – Alison Jensen, British Airways

SMELLS LIKE TEAM SPIRIT

A unique, 3-hour team productivity workshop, focusing on what everyone needs to make a team work brilliantly: whether it be more time for creativity, a better structure of files on the server, a different schedule of communications or more understanding of different roles. Facilitated by us to create a safe space to have those courageous conversations you need to make changes happen.

"Brilliant and great value for money" – Natalie Pace, London Borough of Ealing

HOW TO BE A PRODUCTIVITY NINJA

Ideal for conferences or team away days, this 1 hour or 1.5 hour talk is an energising and motivating way to add zest to your day, packed full of tips and tricks. It's also a great way to get a taste for our approach and explore which longer workshops might suit you best.

"Entertaining and packed with useful ideas. Extremely useful and thought-provoking." – Heath Heatlie, GlaxoSmithKline

think productive

Visit www.thinkproductive.co.uk for more details, or drop us a line –
hello@thinkproductive.co.uk

CONTENTS

PREFACE

1. **THE WAY OF THE PRODUCTIVITY NINJA**
2. **WHY WE GET STRESSED**
3. **ATTENTION MANAGEMENT**
4. **NINJA EMAIL**
5. **NINJA PRODUCTIVITY: THE CORD PRODUCTIVITY MODEL**
6. **THE CAPTURE AND COLLECT HABIT**
7. **THE ORGANISE HABIT**
8. **THE REVIEW HABIT**
9. **THE DO HABIT**
10. **NINJA PROJECT MANAGEMENT**
11. **NINJA MEETINGS**
12. **MOMENTUM**



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