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Set a productive tone for the day, do your worst work first

Let me briefly describe a situation I had not too long ago. I woke up, had a wash and got dressed. I then opened some mail without processing any of it (in fact it just stayed on the coffee table for the rest of the day), idly browsed through my bookmarks and finally made breakfast. Then I watched a little TV and played on my Nintendo Wii. In total this took nearly two hours but what had I really got done? On my to-do list I had a bill to pay, important emails to reply to and I needed to get my home tidied for guests visiting later in the week... but I'd spent my entire morning putting it all off and pretty much getting nothing constructive done (I did finish a level on Super Mario Galaxy though). Before I knew it, it was the evening and I decided to move those iffy little tasks to the next day. Then on that next day it was the same sort of situation (another level got completed) and I moved them to the day after that. And so it went on. By the latter stages of the week, all those tasks had been pushed back so far that it actually made it even harder to do them. I now had a weekend's worth of emails to process instead of two days worth. My home was messier than it had been at the beginning of the week and I now had less time to clean it before my friends came knocking. And the bill... well that was still pending. Thankfully, my electricity hadn't been cut off yet.

During my weekly review I sat down and looked at what I could do about getting back on track. How could I deal with those awkward tasks, those annoying jobs and irritating little projects that were always getting put off? Then I noticed what the problem was. I was doing all the fun and interesting work to start the day off, a classic procrastinators habit. Not only did it set the tone for the rest of the day it also left me with the prospect of spending the rest of my time working on stuff I didn't really want to do. I want to spend my afternoons and evenings taking it easy and doing enjoyable stuff, not toiling through my inbox! The answer is of course to turn this approach on its head and do the unpleasant stuff first, as soon as you rise from your bed if necessary. By getting all those tasks off my radar early it left me with the rest of the day to do what I enjoyed and actually wanted to do. That's much more satisfying than having the prospect of doing annoying stuff weighing you down. What's more, it sets a much more positive tone for the day. Nothing screams being super-productive and flicking the middle finger to procrastination than getting all that horrible work done by lunchtime.

As soon as you wake up or as soon as you get to work in a morning, pick the most unpleasant task you have on your to-do list and dive right in. Do it before all the doubts build up, before procrastination starts to kick in and before you talk yourself out of it altogether. It's a lot easier to contend with knowing that you have freed up your afternoon to do all the fun stuff.

In summary

How you start the day will often set the tone for the rest of it. What's more, nobody wants to do all the horrible, unpleasant and generally tedious work in the afternoon, we want to have something to look forward to! Do that sort of work in the morning - before doubts and procrastination set in - and get it out of the way early.