



## Not Today

The 9 Habits of Extreme Productivity

By Erica Schultz and Mike Schultz

13-minute read

### Synopsis

*Not Today* (2021) explains how you can become extremely productive through nine simple steps. The authors learned many of these lessons while running their business at the same time as caring for their gravely ill young son.

### Who is it for?

- Entrepreneurs and ambitious workers who want to up their productivity
- Business leaders with an eye on efficiency
- Lovers of inspiring personal stories

### About the author

Erica and Mike Schulz are the leaders of RAIN Group, one of the world's leading sales training companies. They've worked with top organizations including Toyota and Harvard Business School. Mike has also written several other books including *Rainmaking Conversations*. They are also the parents of Ari, their son, which they count as their greatest achievement.

## **What's in it for me? Learn the secrets of extreme productivity.**

If you struggle to be productive at work, you're not alone. Modern life is full of distractions and diversions, and it's all too easy to find your focus drifting.

But Mike and Erica Schultz have had more reason to lose focus than most of us. For years, they juggled running their own ambitious business with caring for their seriously ill son, Ari. But they managed to pull it off.

These blinks will teach you some of the habits that Mike and Erica learned while they kept up that extraordinary balancing act. Because extreme productivity really can be learned.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- the four types of TIME and how to manage them;
- how to train yourself into better routines; and
- how to get into the zone any time you want.

### **Their son's heart defect turned Mike and Erica's lives upside down.**

These blinks are about how to be more productive at work. But they're not just about that, because the authors, Mike and Erica Schultz, learned many of these lessons in pretty much the hardest way possible.

In the years before they had kids, Mike and Erica lived a gloriously busy life together. They ran a successful small business that was just starting to turn into something big. They renovated a house by beautiful Lake Boon in Massachusetts. And they had active social lives too.

The one extra thing they wanted was a family, so they were ecstatic when Erica got pregnant.

During an ultrasound, however, the concerned expressions on the medical staff's faces told them that something was wrong. The problem, it turned out, was in their child's heart. In that moment, everything changed.

### **The key message here is: Their son's heart defect turned Mike and Erica's lives upside down.**

Ari, Mike and Erica's son, had hypoplastic left heart syndrome, which affected his heart's ability to circulate blood. Even after several operations during pregnancy, Ari was born in a critical state and had two major operations in his first seven months.

Despite his heart problems, the precocious young Ari loved sports. He wowed people with his basketball moves, and was playing golf at the age of two. But in his

five and a half years of life, he spent more than a full year in hospital care.

And of course, so did his parents.

Taking a break from work would have meant Mike and Erica's whole business failing. And *that* would have meant losing their health insurance.

Imagine not just running a business from a hospital waiting room, but doing so while your infant son is fighting for his life down the hall. How could you get any work done at all?

Yet during this period, Mike and Erica rebuilt their business, expanded into nine international offices, and wrote four books, including a best seller. And they had two more children, Lexi and Eli.

They also did some research into productivity. Surveying thousands of professionals, they identified a group they called the Extremely Productive, or *the XP*, who had notably different work habits from everyone else, which allowed them to get far more done.

These habits aren't things you have to be born with. They're simple little hacks that anyone can learn. That's how the authors managed to reshape their business during those dark days in the hospital with Ari.

And it's how you can increase your own productivity too – as you're about to find out.

### **Extremely productive people manage their time better – and so can you.**

When you have a child whose life is at risk, you really have to make every moment count. And that's especially true when your schedule is as busy as Mike and Erica's was.

In fact, they started to look at time in a whole new way. For them, TIME became an acronym, with each letter standing for a different category.

T is *treasured time*; I is *investment time*; M is *mandatory time*; and E is *empty time*. And once you start to break down your day into those four categories, you're a big step closer to becoming extremely productive.

### **The key message here is: Extremely productive people manage their time better – and so can you.**

Treasured time is what it sounds like: it's the time that's most special to you on a personal level. For Mike and Erica, this was often the time they spent with Ari, watching hockey on the hospital television, or playing baseball in the play area. But they also treasured the time they spent in jujitsu class, or in front of *Grey's Anatomy* with a cold beer. Don't just think of this as time off – think of it as time to cherish.

Investment time generates returns that exceed the work you put in – just like a financial investment. When you take investment time seriously, you'll start to see new possibilities and opportunities for expansion. It's where you should look to spend most of your work time.

Mandatory time is time doing the day-to-day things you feel you *have* to do, even if you don't want to. You should try to minimize mandatory time. Some of it you can – and should – outsource. Some of it you might be able to turn into investment time. Your daily commute, for instance: stick on a relevant podcast, and a mandatory activity becomes an investment.

Empty time is wasted time. Surfing the web, checking social media, staring into space. This one's easy: just cut it back. Eliminate it altogether if you can – it adds nothing.

All that might sound easier said than done. But the truth is, it's easier than you probably think to craft a new routine for yourself in which you can maximize treasured and investment time and minimize mandatory and empty time.

As the authors discovered, you just need to develop nine habits. And that's what we're going to look at next.

### ***Motivate yourself to get productive by recruiting your drive.***

During Ari's frequent spells in hospital, the authors got to know other families, some of whom were in even harder situations. One couple they met, Sherry and Jack, lived so far away that Jack usually had to sleep in their car when their son was in the hospital.

With Sherry and Jack in mind, the authors set up a charity fundraiser, so parents like them could stay in a nearby apartment. They dove headfirst into the project, and Ari got excited about it too.

Just two months before the event, they learned that Ari needed a heart transplant. Naturally, they considered canceling their plans.

But when they told Ari the fundraiser might get called off, he was devastated at the thought of not helping Sherry and Jack.

That turned out to be all the motivation Mike and Erica needed. Because the first step in being productive is being *driven*.

### ***The key message here is: Motivate yourself to get productive by recruiting your drive.***

How do you pull off big, difficult projects like a charity fundraiser? You could talk about the *what* – what the event or the fundraising target should be. You could also talk about the *how* – how you should invite people or market the event.

Or you could talk about the *why*, which is all about a sense of purpose. Without purpose, you're just going through the motions, but with it, you're driven enough to accomplish almost anything. Mike and Erica call this *recruiting your drive*, and it's the first of the nine habits that make up the authors' *Productivity Code*.

In order to recruit your drive, make sure your target is something you're motivated to achieve. Then plan how you'll do just that.

Extremely productive people – the XP – are much more likely than everyone else to recruit their drive by *writing their goals down*. If you're not doing that, you're less likely to accomplish as much. So with pen in hand, break your year down into quarters. Then break each of these down into months and each month into individual weeks. Finally, decide on what you want to achieve in the year and then break that goal down into manageable chunks spread across the smaller units of time. This makes it much easier to reach your targets.

Tie that to a sense of *why*, and not just *how* and *what*, and you're off to a flying productive start.

### ***Prioritizing important activities and developing better routines helps you make the most of each day.***

During Ari's long, final stay in the hospital, the family fell into a morning routine that involved a scarily large amount of iPad time. Ari would wake up and watch sports for hours, and soon, the morning was gone. That was that. But he was in hospital – how could Mike and Erica say no?

Still, they eventually realized they had to change the routine. So every morning they started getting Ari out of bed and walking around the hospital. They would greet everyone they met with a cheerful "Good morning!" Or, once Ari developed an interest in Japan, he'd say it in Japanese: "Ohayo!"

This new habit completely changed Ari's mood – not just for the morning, but for the whole day.

### ***The key message here is: Prioritizing important activities and developing better routines helps you make the most of each day.***

Ari's morning walk is a great example of the second habit in the Productivity Code: *ignite your proactivity*. This is all about how you structure individual days. Start by filling your daily calendar with investment time activities. Then, within that schedule, prioritize your Greatest Impact Activity, or GIA. This is the activity with the biggest long-term return on detailed, concentrated effort. Exactly what it is may vary from day to day, but in general, it's best to work on your GIA early on in the day, when your mind is fresh. On those days when you'd rather stay in bed, try shifting your attitude

by sitting up and saying “3, 2, 1, go!” That should give you the momentum you need.

Habit three is to *reengineer your habits*. On one level this couldn’t be simpler: identify unproductive, empty-time habits – like Ari’s morning iPad routine – and upgrade them. But this also works on the micro scale.

Take your phone, for example. When a notification comes in, do you immediately grab it and lose your concentration? If so, you can solve that problem by turning off unnecessary notifications. Or just train yourself to react differently. The next time it happens, remind yourself how much you’ll gain by staying focused and leaving your phone where it is.

Changing your environment can be useful, too. Look around you and think about what aspects of your surroundings do and don’t help you concentrate. Fix them – find somewhere else to work if you need to.

To really turbo-boost your productivity, though, it’s all about not space, but *time*.

### ***The fourth, fifth and sixth habits are all about managing your TIME.***

During Ari’s time in the hospital, Mike’s father usually looked after Ari in the morning while Mike worked. But when his father couldn’t make it, Mike faced a problem managing his time.

One such morning, Ari was watching hockey as Mike tried to work. But Ari had developed a new obsession. He kept trying out hand signals, imitating the hockey umpires.

Mike’s initial reaction was annoyance – not at Ari, but at his distraction from his GIA. How could he concentrate on work when all he wanted to do was spend time with his son? Eventually, he realized the lesson he was learning, set his work aside, and played with his son.

Because sometimes treasured time wins out.

### ***The key message here is: The fourth, fifth and sixth habits are all about managing your TIME.***

As that morning with Ari proved, sometimes you need to adapt your schedule to fit your priorities. To do that, adopt the fourth habit: *obsess over TIME*.

Obsessing over your treasured, investment, mandatory, and empty time means figuring out where every single activity in your day fits within that structure. Then make sure that your priorities are reflected in your daily routine. How? Well, take treasured time. *Increase* investment time. *Minimize* mandatory time. And, as much as possible, *eliminate* empty time.

Sticking to these rules and achieving greater productivity isn’t just about what you do, though. It’s also about what you *don’t* do, and that’s where habit five

comes in: *say no*. This means having a clear idea of what’s really important. If someone asks you to do something that doesn’t fit with your priorities, have the courage to say no. Next time you’re asked to bake cookies for a charity sale, ask yourself: Would this be investment time for me? If not, politely decline. That’s habit five: *say no*.

Habit six is *play hard to get*. This is about concentration: distractions are everywhere for us these days – including in our inboxes. But does every email need to be dealt with right away? Don’t make out like you’re constantly available: block off time for dealing with issues that arise, and devote the rest of your time to your own schedule. Go someplace else if you need to. Remember: your TIME is your own. It has to be.

### ***Habits seven and eight get you into the zone, and give you the energy to stay there.***

The first and second sections of the Productivity Code have taught you how to get motivated, and organize your TIME. The final section is about how to put theory into practice, by executing in *the zone* – that state where you’re completely engaged with work, tuned out from all distractions, and able to accomplish remarkable things.

Sounds nice, right? But how do you get there whenever you need to?

Well, maybe it’s worth asking someone who had to get in the zone every day while waiting in a hospital, with his young son down the corridor.

### ***The key message here is: Habits seven and eight get you into the zone, and give you the energy to stay there.***

Mike wasn’t always in the zone, especially in the early days of Ari’s hospital stays. He’d be checking his email or Facebook, texting, getting coffee – you name it. Sixty minutes of work would routinely turn into 11 or so minutes of real focus.

So how do you go from there to being in the zone? In short, discipline. Block off what Mike calls a *sprint* – 20 to 90 minutes set aside for productive work. Then try a *relay*, which is four sprints in a row with short breaks in between. Time your sprints with a stopwatch, but don’t use the one on your phone, which you definitely don’t want to be looking at.

Of course, for a productive session in the zone, you also need sufficient energy. This is something else the XP are much better than the rest of us at doing: they sustain their energy levels for longer, and not just with chocolate bars. Energy is a triad of mind, body, and spirit. To have enough energy, you need to nurture each of these elements.

Encourage your mind through positive self-talk, and give it a break by minimizing decision-making. For instance, instead of wasting mental energy on deciding

what to have for breakfast, just have the same thing every day.

As for your body, you probably already know how to take care of it: eat nourishing food, get enough sleep, and exercise. But do you do these things? If not, it's time to step up.

Finally, there's spirit: if you're taking treasured time and doing meaningful work, you're well on your way.

Of course, life isn't as simple as that might make it sound, but these basic principles are what you should be aiming towards. And when things don't go the way you want them to – well, that's where habit nine comes in.

### ***The final productivity habit is to right the ship – no matter what life throws at you.***

When he was five and a half, Ari finally got the heart transplant he needed. But tragically, his body didn't accept it, and he passed away not long after.

Mike and Erica felt utterly drained and defeated, and they struggled to cope. They both had trouble sleeping, and Mike was drinking too much. Despite the good habits they'd developed, they were running on empty.

But eventually, they simply had to pull themselves together and let a positive attitude lead them forward. In other words, they had to *right their ship*.

### ***The key message here is: The final productivity habit is to right the ship – no matter what life throws at you.***

How do you get back on track when life seems so overwhelmingly hard?

One way is to engage not your free will, but your *free won't*. This is a little like reengineering your habits, and it's particularly useful if you've fallen into destructive routines. Start by identifying your bad habits, from ordering another beer to checking your phone. You might feel like you don't have the will to choose whether or not to do these things, but luckily, you do have *free won't*. So dig in and tell yourself no. In Mike's case, this meant giving up alcohol and taking up exercise, which helped him lose 25 pounds and start sleeping well again.

Another tip relates to the authors' advice on breaking down large tasks into small ones. *Micro changes* make a huge difference, not just in achieving your goals, but in improving your outlook. If getting into cycling feels like too big of a commitment, turn it into a manageable one: ride for just 15 minutes the first day, and then let yourself relax.

One final tip for righting the ship is to make a contract with yourself. This could be as simple as signing up for a class or joining a gym. Or you could promise yourself that, if you don't meet a target, you'll make a donation

to a charity you dislike – that's how Mike lost all that weight.

Ari may be gone, but he's still in his parents' hearts, inspiring them and motivating them to make the most of their lives. And that's a lesson everyone should remember.

The XP aren't magicians. Just like the rest of us, they get distracted, discouraged, thrown off course. But they are far more likely than anyone else to get themselves back on track. And with just a few adjustments to your routine, you can do the same.

### ***Final summary***

The key message in these blinks is that:

**Erica and Mike Schultz learned the hard way how to become extremely productive, while their young son Ari was fighting a heart condition. But the brilliantly effective habits they developed can be learned by anyone and everyone who wants to get more done. The nine habits revolve around getting motivated, obsessing over your TIME schedule, and working steadily and energetically in the zone. Extreme productivity is closer than you think.**

And here's some more actionable advice:

### ***Set a Big Picture Goal – and then break it down.***

Productivity isn't just about *how* and *what* – it's also about *why*. And that's why you need a Big Picture Goal – something you want to achieve, maybe months or, even better, years in the future. Write this down, then break it down into manageable steps: where will you need to be after two years? How about after one? Then figure out how to get there, including which targets you'll need to hit every month, week, and day. Once your goal is broken down into chunks, you'll start to see that it really is achievable.