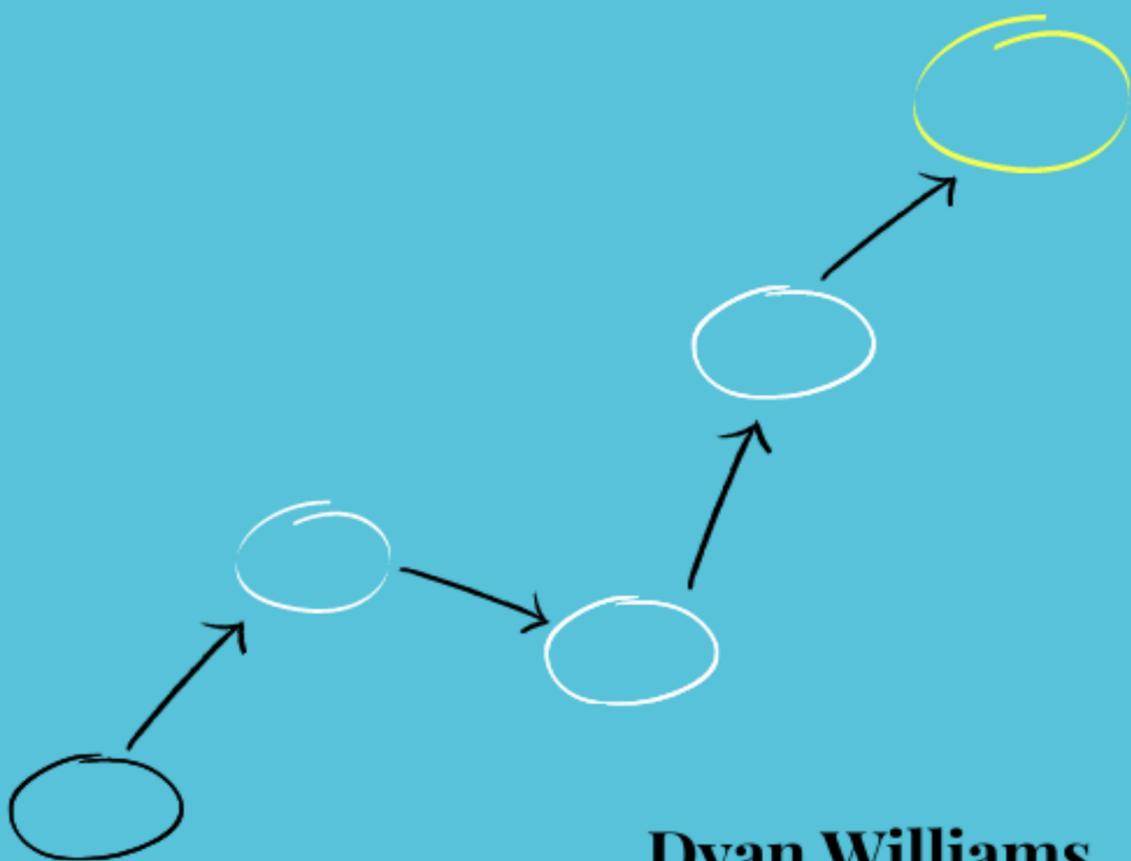


THE INCREMENTALIST

A Simple **Productivity System** to
Create Big Results
in Small Steps



Dyan Williams

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Big Results in Small Steps

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For E.B.

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Introduction

With multiple projects to start or finish, we often default to working longer and harder at the expense of our personal health, well-being, and innermost values. And even when we do pause and slow down to get the break we need, we might hear an inner voice saying we're not doing enough or achieving enough.

Cramming more things into our day to get all the things done is a mediocre stopgap at best. Both your mind and body need to rest for you to stay in flow, do amazing work, and match your actions with your priorities. When you account for sleep, nutrition, exercise, recreation, hobbies, family, relationships and all the other areas of a well-lived life, you really have an average of up to 2 to 6 hours, each day, for cognitively demanding or creatively challenging work.

When you mindlessly pile on the busywork, you're often left with 1 hour or less to do the core stuff that makes a lasting and positive impact. If your work day typically stretches out for more than 8 hours, you end up with increased fatigue, dulled thinking and diminishing returns on output.

Besides the tendency to engage in busywork, there is also the propensity to delay action when we feel pulled in different directions. Decision-heavy days and lack of margin will drain your energy and tax your willpower and motivation to do important things.

Ill-fated attempts to do it all and have it all done - at once - result in overwork and overwhelm. You end up either working frantically for long hours or barely making progress except to respond to emails or telephone calls. By and large, these productivity problems have little to do with lack of time. They have more to do with failing to realistically plan your day, not knowing where to start, having

scattered focus, feeling tired, procrastinating, and keeping a long to-do list. External factors such as your work environment and constant interruptions, as well as your personal circumstances and season of life, also affect the pace at which you can make and manage things.

But by defining your real priorities, taking daily actions, following through and celebrating the small wins, you can escape the busyness trap or climb out of the procrastination rut. And most important, you can do this with more ease and more comfort by making incremental changes.

You make intentional choices, break projects down into small action steps, and make time for when exactly you will do each one. You synch with your natural energy cycles and take deliberate breaks. And with this simple productivity system I refer to as Incrementalism, you maximize your time and channel your focus on what really matters. Before you know it, you have created a purposeful life and turned what used to be distant goals into reality.

INCREMENTALISM: A SIMPLE PRODUCTIVITY SYSTEM TO DO BIG THINGS AND CREATE BIG RESULTS IN SMALL STEPS

This book will show you how to become an INCREMENTALIST to make big changes, in small steps, without relentlessly pushing yourself too far beyond your comfort zone, burning out, and feeling inadequate. You can do great work and stretch your limits, gradually and slowly.

Incrementalism is a low-cost, high-reward productivity system that will help you implement your big idea or finish a big project regardless of your limited time, energy, resources, skills, motivation and, perhaps most of all, courage. The idea or project may relate to

your work, your family, your relationships, a creative endeavor, or any other domain of life.

Big successes are created over time and not overnight. “Big” doesn’t mean it has to be noticeable to others, like building a million-dollar business, winning first prize in a major competition, attracting a large social media audience or becoming a best-selling author. Rather, I define “big” as something that is truly meaningful to you: it deeply aligns with your core purpose and strengths, fosters vitality and presence, adds significant value, makes your day count, and gives you more freedom to design the life you want.

Through my coaching, speaking and writing on productivity, and dealing with my own struggles and setbacks, I have found that Incrementalism fuels positive transformation through consistent and low-resistance progress.

The Incrementalist approach includes a set of productivity principles that are structured but flexible enough for you to adjust to your preferences, needs, and circumstances. Even though it helps you reach big goals, it encourages you to stay curious and enjoy the process, rather than attach too tightly to the outcome.

Incrementalism includes 5 core principles:

Principle 1: Define your most important projects. Too many options and indecisions can keep you stuck. Decide what your highest priorities are and commit fully to them.

When a task or project languishes on your to-do list for days, weeks, months or even years, you need to decide whether to drop it or get moving on it. Lack of momentum saps your energy and reduces the likelihood of moving from idea to action to done.

Principle 2: Break down your project into a step-by-step process. Make each step as detailed and easily accomplished as possible so there’s no friction and doubt on what to do next.

Put each actionable step on a short to-do list for the day. Gradual steps that involve small tweaks are much easier to take than giant

leaps that require dramatic changes.

Principle 3: Make time to take the necessary action steps. Stay on track with high-priority projects by blocking time in your day to do them. Defer what does not have to be done now, delegate what is better done by someone else, and delete what does not have to be done at all.

Set target dates to complete your top tasks and prioritize accordingly. Then chip away and follow up until you're done. Quit making excuses about why you're not making progress. Make use of time pockets and work in short bursts if you don't have huge blocks of time to get the steps done.

Principle 4: Find your natural rhythm and work with it. Each day, you will face priorities that compete with each other. Do you reply to the email from your top client that hit your inbox last night? Do you call back the prospect inquiring on your service? Do you write the weekly article for your lead generation blog? Or do you tackle the big report that is due in a few days?

You need to consider the time of day and your energy level when choosing what to work on and what to put off. When you synch with your natural rhythm, you make important decisions and do focused work in your peak hours, and save routine tasks for when you are in a slump. For most people, mornings and mid-mornings are best reserved for high-cognitive tasks. Respond to the emails and voicemails later in the day when your client or prospect will barely notice the difference between 9 am and 1 pm.

Principle 5: Rest and recharge. Although taking regular breaks throughout the day or taking extended breaks (such as vacations and sabbaticals) might seem to be the opposite of work, they are integral to your productivity. When you have prioritized your projects, broken them down into small steps, and blocked the optimal time to start or finish them, you will have more breathing room to perform at a higher level.

Do not fill the margins with more work or pseudo breaks like mind-

lessly scrolling through the Internet and checking social media. While you could get a good chuckle from watching a YouTube video or connect with loved ones by sharing photos on Instagram, you need to engage online mindfully and with time limits. The digital space can easily hijack your attention if you don't put boundaries around it. Go for a walk (preferably outside), take a power nap, notice your breath or engage in any other restful break that restores your physical energy, fuels creativity, and sharpens mental focus.

HOW I'VE USED INCREMENTALISM TO CREATE (MY) BIG THINGS

I'm an Incrementalist by nature and by practice. I focus more on the progress and gains, and less on the goals and gaps. I cautiously take risks that change the trajectory of my life. Here are a few examples:

During my undergraduate years in college, I ended up with a minor in Speech Communication because I thought I was going to work in public relations after I graduated with my bachelor's degree. The problem was I had a deep fear of public speaking.

I took an introductory course in speech communication and discovered I could develop the skills to present to and interact with an audience, even if there was underlying anxiety. By the time I was done taking more courses in the field, I had enough credits to earn the minor. And I continue to apply this foundation to presentations and talks I give in my profession.

When I first learned about the profound benefits of a yoga practice, I so wanted to learn how to do a headstand. But I was terrified that I could injure my neck and spine while trying to get it right.

So I enrolled in a beginner level ashtanga yoga class. By the third session, my teacher gave me a simple instruction and with a very micro adjustment, I was finally in a headstand. With daily practice, I could hold headstands for more than a minute.

I soon enrolled in and completed a 230-hour yoga teacher training and certification program. Although I did not become a yoga teacher or open a yoga studio, the experience prompted my incorporation of mindfulness and breathwork into my work as a lawyer and as a productivity coach.

Using the Incrementalist approach, I established what is now a reputable law firm (with a global reach) from my home office in October 2014. My venture into solo practice in U.S. immigration law and legal ethics took me out of my comfort zone, but not too much because I had spent 10+ years at two other firms honing my professional craft.

During the last two years of that period, I had flextime and worked remotely two days of the week before I became self-employed. By the time I launched my own business, I was used to staying focused and productive while working from home.

In the first week of my business, I started out with one client in my local area. Today, I have hundreds of people – from all over the world and across the United States – reaching out to me to help them solve their problem.

With a steady stream of ideal clients, my tiny firm permits me to do great work, provide essential services, be financially independent, and limit my office hours to fewer than 40 hours a week. I built a successful business without accumulating overhead expenses, without tiring myself out, and without stretching myself too thin.

Having my own business gives me more autonomy, which was my main driver for going solo. In my first four years as a solo lawyer, I juggled parenting my first child (who was then a toddler) with my law firm responsibilities. By the time she started kindergarten, my second child was born. Still now a toddler, he too requires my attention while I manage my law firm and attend to client matters.

I have run my business from home with my kids around from the start. My husband and I have not used childcare options because I figured out how to use my natural rhythm to do focused work in

three shifts: the first is in the early morning before my family wakes up; the second is the afternoon when my younger kid takes a nap and when my older kid is doing a solo activity or still at school; and the third is in the early evening after my husband gets off from work.

On average, the work shifts add up to about 6 hours per day (30 hours per week). There are days when I put in more time at work, like when I have a due date fast approaching, I'm on a roll with a particular project, or I have an extended break coming up. But this mode is the exception, not the default.

Between each work sessions involving focused work, I take deliberate breaks, think and reflect, or allow my mind to wander. Because I'm not constantly grinding away on tasks, I have space to let ideas and insights percolate. This helps me gain momentum when I return to deep work, especially when it involves a novel issue.

I have found that I am just as productive, if not more so, than when I worked more than 8 hours per day (40+ hours per week) in my pre-motherhood days. I don't mean I always get MORE things done faster. I mean I get more of the RIGHT things done with deeper focus, more creativity and sharper precision. This leads to better results and greater satisfaction. Plus, when my day doesn't go according to plan, Incrementalism reminds me to appreciate the small progress and apply the lessons learned.

The book you are now reading culminated from almost a decade of my writing articles for my blog and other platforms as a productivity coach and legal ethics attorney. It is far less daunting to write an article of 1000+ words than to finish a book of 40,000+ words. My past micro-writing projects gave me valuable content and a solid framework to complete the 1st edition of *The Incrementalist* in about a month. It was first published in April 2020.

HOW THIS BOOK WILL HELP YOU

There are many productivity systems from which to choose. There is no one right way to be productive.

But no matter who you are and what you seek to accomplish, you can use Incrementalism to create big impact in tiny steps. It is a reliable and repeatable process to sustain true productivity, which is doing the right things at the best times, even when you have multiple projects and tasks calling for your attention.

I've applied every single principle I outline in this book and experienced the massive difference they make. I have found that lawyers, business owners, freelancers, working parents and others also experience positive changes in what they achieve and how they view setbacks when they use the Incrementalist approach.

One of the most helpful things you can do to reach a big goal is to take small steps, build upon each one, and keep moving consistently forward until you get to where you want to be (or until it's time to pause, quit or pivot). By using the Incrementalist approach, you make sustainable progress toward your target with simple habits that are supported by regular routines and deliberate rituals. Incrementalism is especially useful when you're cautious and risk averse or do not have limitless wealth and infinite resources to keep testing new ideas.

The term *Incrementalism* was coined by political scientist Charles E. Lindblom in the mid 1950s and was discussed in his 1959 essay titled *The Science of Muddling Through*. Lindblom outlined the benefits and methodologies for making small, incremental public policy changes, rather than huge, wholesale changes. Incrementalism has also been used to describe implementing continuous improvement in large-scale projects.

In the context of productivity systems, Incrementalism means taking small steps and making incremental progress – yearly, monthly, weekly and, preferably, daily – to create life-enhancing transformation and results. Through a series of tiny ordinary successes rather than by a single ambitious effort, you reduce backlog, gain traction, and maintain focus on important work and transformative goals.

Being an Incrementalist does not mean you keep your goals small

or you don't dream big. Rather, you implement revolutionary ideas and chart your own course by breaking down overwhelming projects into achievable parts that move you closer to your desired destination. Through incremental gains instead of huge leaps, you avoid diluting your attention, draining your energy, and wasting precious time. You also appreciate, learn from and enjoy the journey a whole lot more.

By applying the 5 Incrementalist principles I describe in this book, you will find it easier to move forward on and make space for the things that really matter, at a healthier and more sustainable pace. You will have a flexible system that you can custom fit to your needs and circumstances, guarantees purposeful action, builds in deliberate breaks, maximizes true productivity, and reduces resistance to change.

Whether it's pursuing a cherished hobby, nurturing fulfilling friendships, creating a happy home, making high-quality deliverables, launching a product, or establishing a new business, you can take incremental steps to make big changes and do big things. All without losing steam, exhausting yourself, and completely ditching the comfort zone that is there for good reason.

Habits, Routines, Rituals

How do you take committed action to create what you really want?
How do you distinguish real productivity from plain busyness?
How do you stay focused on a high-value task instead of divide your attention on many low-value to-dos?

It starts with making deliberate choices. And with consistent routines and intentional rituals, these choices become habits when we keep doing them often and, ideally, every day. Keystone habits create ripple effects that change every area of your life. With small, consistent action, you can create desired results in any domain.

Whether you seek to finish an innovative project, make time for daily exercise, or develop an essential skill, you will benefit from building habits that trigger positive change and continuous progress. When incorporated into a productivity system, habits help you accomplish your highest priorities with intense focus and unwavering effort.

INCREMENTALISM BEGINS WITH PRODUCTIVE HABITS

While self-discipline, willpower and a growth mindset all play a role in making your dreams and wishes come true, it's habit formation that makes the process easier.

A habit is an automatic behavior or practice that is hard to give up. It is an ingrained tendency or urge to do something, often triggered by a specific cue or anchor moment. It is formed through regular repetition and is a natural consequence of how the human brain works. A stronger connection with the trigger makes the habit more ingrained.

Productive habits keep you on the path of worthwhile pursuits, regardless of obstacles and setbacks. A habit usually manifests itself as an automatic urge to do something, often triggered by a

particular cue. You can begin to gain traction and move in the right direction by developing good, healthy habits. About 40% to 45% of what we do each day are actually habits, not real decisions.

Every habit starts with a neurological loop of three parts: First, there's the **cue or trigger** that leads to an automatic response. This includes the time of day, your emotional state, your location or environment, the people around you, and the immediately preceding action. Next is the **routine or the behavior itself** (such as making your bed after you wake up, or going for a walk during your lunch break). Third is the **reward** that satisfies a particular craving. The reward is the intrinsic feeling and external treat you get from the behavior, which your brain remembers and likes. You repeat the behavior because you want to receive the reward again.

Between the cue and the response behavior is the **craving**. Cravings are part of the habit loop because they are motivational forces behind every habit. There is no reason to act if there is no craving for the feeling or sensation (e.g. excitement, calm, joy) you get from the change.

Cravings trigger addictive behaviors or impulsive actions like checking emails, surfing the Internet and scrolling social media, whenever we get bored or stuck. If you get positive feedback from a client or stumble on exciting news, your brain releases dopamine – a hormone that makes you feel good. Craving this reward makes it harder to direct laser focus on a tedious task or difficult project.

With this loop in mind, you can begin to break bad habits and form good ones by using the following steps:

Observe your current habits. Although your behavior might have started out as a deliberate choice, it gets easier to activate or overlook once it becomes routine. If you want to drop a habit to replace it with a new one, the first step is to notice your routine and the cue that triggers it.

One habit I have is sitting for excessively long stretches of time to do focused work. When it's quiet and I'm in the zone, I tend to stay

with the task. By the time I peel my eyes away from the computer screen, more than three hours have gone by and I have not taken a single break.

The trigger is moving to my desk in my office when there is bliss of silence and no one around to interrupt me. The reward I get is feeling a sense of satisfaction from completing a tough task. At first, my delaying breaks between work sessions was a conscious choice. But after I identified it as a bad habit that reduced my mental clarity, caused eyestrain and increased physical fatigue, I took steps to replace it with a new routine.

To work in shorter intervals on cognitively demanding tasks, I set a timer to go off every 60 minutes or 90 minutes, which reminds me to take a 5 to 15-minute break before I begin my next focused session. By tweaking my routine, I created a new habit that helps me do better work with more energy and a clearer mind. I lapse into the old habit of working for too-long stretches of time in my home office when I do not set a timer and there is no one around to interrupt me.

Have an action plan that outlines the specific steps you will take to reshape your bad habits. Replace them with new habits that provide similar rewards and satisfy old cravings.

Set a realistic goal. Break down the goal into manageable steps that you can easily choose to do until they become part of your new routine. For example, if you want to take a morning walk every day, examine what cues will prompt the action. Set out your clothes and walking shoes the night before so you can get dressed and head out right after you wake up. The rewards include feeling healthier and adding an extra boost of positivity.

PRODUCTIVE HABITS START WITH ROUTINES AND RITUALS

Creating good habits or breaking bad habits comes down to your routines and rituals. Even though routines involve regular and repeated behavior like habits, they require deliberate effort on your

part. Instead of waiting for inspiration to get things done, you reserve time and space to do what you most want to get done. With enough regularity and repetition, routines can eventually become habits. They are behaviors you consistently do in the same sequence or at the same time.

Professor BJ Fogg, founder and director of Stanford University's Behavior Design Lab, recommends we make the behavior radically tiny so it's easier to form a new habit even when motivation is low and the behavior is hard to do. He explains that if you want to create a habit out of walking three miles every day, you start with putting on your walking shoes. This is the Tiny Behavior you need to do at the start of your new habit. By keeping the bar low and not raising it prematurely, you're more likely to sustain the habit.

It's also easier to create new behaviors and sustain them for the long term when you work with an existing routine. I used to struggle with making time to play piano or practice a piece I learned in a prior lesson. When my older child was a toddler, I noticed I had an ideal time slot on the evenings when it was my husband's turn to get her ready for bedtime. As soon as our family dinner ended and I had some alone time, I sat down at my piano and played for about 30 minutes. This became a part of my normal routine, with the new habit or new behavior (playing piano) following the anchor moment or existing routine (finishing dinner).

Sometimes, though, you need to shake up your routine if it's no longer workable due to changed circumstances. After my second child was born, I no longer had the luxury of playing piano in the evenings. But I continue to have my piano lessons on Sundays, which is not only an ongoing routine, but a cherished ritual.

Rituals are done with more intention and concentration. They are usually more enjoyable and more meaningful. With rituals, you are completely immersed in the process and look forward to the experience itself.

Mindfully pouring tea in a cup and savoring it slowly in the quiet

morning hours can be a ritual that grounds you. Rituals can include multiple habits such as drinking water, stretching, walking around the block, and reviewing your goals for the day as part of your morning routine.

Changing a habit involves incremental progress. Celebrate the small gains to keep your momentum going. Intentionally practice your new behavior, perhaps at scheduled times, to allow it to become automatic as fast as possible. The more quickly a new behavior turns into a routine, the less you have to rely on self-control and willpower to drop the old habit and make a new one. And if the routine involves rituals that you look forward to experiencing, the habit is more likely to stick.

Develop and follow a plan to make your high-priority project and creative endeavor into a habit. That way, you won't have to decide to do it, which takes self-discipline and willpower. You'll just do it as if it were second nature or part of your regular routine (like brushing your teeth, taking a shower, or checking your email).

Willpower, self-discipline and motivation are important, but unreliable. They come and go. It's more effective to develop a system of habits to propel you forward and give you a greater sense of control. Yes, you can lose a habit if you don't practice it, but you can always get back to the system to get back on track.

Incrementalism will help you make positive changes in all life realms, including work, family, relationships, hobbies, creative pursuits, and deliberate rest. It encourages you to give yourself grace and get back on track when you default to busywork or procrastination. Maybe the task or thing you've been putting off isn't so important after all. And if is, you can always come back to it, work it into your regular schedule, and transform it into a habit.

Note

Thank you, dear reader. If you practice the 5 principles of Incrementalism, you are bound to create big results in small steps. If you have specific feedback about the book or would like to share stories on how the Incrementalist approach helped you in gaining traction on what matters, please contact me at www.dyanwilliams.com or click on “Email the Author” on the Leanpub book landing page.

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