

HARDEST WORKING MAN

By James Vest

People occasionally tell me they wish they had my work ethic, as if I possess something they do not. Work ethic is a combination of will-power and practical strategy for getting things done. If you lack either of these things, consider the following tips for finding your inter-doer:

Know What You Really Want to Do

This is way harder than it sounds. We all assume we know what we want, but there are only a handful of things we'd get up at 4am to do. Every year or two, I sit down and make a list of things I want to accomplish in one month, three months, six months, one year, three and five years. Some of these tasks may have steps ranging from a few days (restore an end table) to a few months (run a marathon) or years (buy a house), so it's important to know exactly what you want so you'll keep working on the steps to completion for as long as it takes.

As passions and life situations change, it's important to rewrite the list to reflect those changes. Remember to keep the old lists as a reminder not to get too stressed about completing every task because the way you feel about even the most important things change as your priorities change.

Understand What You're Getting Into, Then Make a Plan

When it comes to complex things, like writing a novel, you may need to do a lot of research to truly know all the little to-dos that will be required to complete a complicated task. If you don't have a clear understanding of how your large project works and

all the small steps that need to add up to get to the end, you might get lost on the road to completion.

When I was building this website I didn't write "Make a Website" on my list, I wrote things like "Choose background color" and "Fix Comment Line Spacing." By the end of the project, my list was over 90 items long, but by planning and working on one thing at a time-even days apart-I never lose my place within the project. As I got more familiar with my tasks, I'd add more things to the list along the way. Without any previous experience with PHP or HTML5, I researched, planned and finished the website you're reading.

Be Realistic with Your To-Dos

Another rule to follow is never put yourself in a situation where you feel overwhelmed or hopeless by your project. Through research and planning, you created a list of small, accomplishable steps. Avoid fearing a big project by selecting a task that mirrors the available time you have to work on it. If nothing on your list is doable in the time you've set aside, you may need to break those tasks down further.

Book Yourself Project Time

Another thing I hear a lot is "How do you find the time to do all that?" In short, I make time. When I want to work on a personal project from my list, I treat it like a project I am a freelancer whose new client is, well, me. Like the rest of my clients, I respect the ambitions, timetables and expectations I set for myself. I schedule important tasks in my calendar and schedule other things around them. I note start dates and due dates for important phases of my projects to keep on track. I may have to reorganize my schedule to make everything fit, but by holding myself accountable for due dates and micro deadlines, I show respect for my work and I give myself additional motivation to keep moving forward. Simply put, give yourself enough time to complete one task at a time, on time.

Start Each Session With Stuff You Know How To Do

With a long list, it's easy to judge yourself on how many things you accomplished at any given time. It's also easy to get stuck on a tough step early and have it eat up your scheduled time and your patience. I regularly shuffle the order of my tasks to make sure I start with things I know how to do to build confidence, momentum, and most importantly, focus my attention so I'm warmed up and mentally prepared for the tougher tasks that follow that might require some additional research to get going.

Keep a Record of Your Progress

If your task is going to last for months, don't erase things from your list when you complete them, mark them as done and go through the completed tasks when you need motivation to finish.

Do What Motivates You

This goes back to the first tip of knowing what to do. It's important to realize that in most cases, the biggest factor driving you to complete your personal projects is your motivation to see it in the completed category. Before you begin any long term endeavor, make sure you are clear on the reason or incentive for completing the work. This website took two months to design and build, but I was motivated by the challenge, my interest in web design (in which I learned a lot), my love of writing and my professional need for a slick portfolio site to get more work. In times of doubt, any one of those reasons carried the day, so make sure when you make a list of to-dos, you keep a mental list of the rewards for all your hard work, because at the end of the day, it's the difference between starting and finishing.