

HIIT Your Goals! How Principles of High Intensity Interval Training Can Boost Your Career Productivity

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The daily juggle:

There are never-ending career and personal demands that all of us face and process daily. A career in healthcare means there is always an urgent issue that cannot wait and there must be dedicated focus on the patient care issue in front of us. We are all juggling multiple inboxes such as email, patient messages, staff messages and communications. Beyond these urgent daily matters, many of us have additional career goals. Maybe you always wanted to read a leadership book to help you prepare to lead a project which could position you for a leadership position. Perhaps you want to write a patient case report to help you with academic scholarly output. Perhaps you have wanted to write a book. Most people are trying to juggle family needs, raising children, household chores and social obligations. The pandemic has also shown us that now, more than ever, we all need to prioritize self-care such as

sleep, health, nutrition, and exercise. There are only 24 hours in a day, so how can everything get fit in?

Where oh where is the time?

If we are able to invest time into things that would help us to meet long-term personal and professional goals, the payoffs are often significant in terms of career and personal progression and satisfaction. The challenge is that these important tasks can feel overwhelming and nebulous since they take time, and we are always responding to the urgent tasks in front of us. Typically, the long-term professional and stretch goals get continuously put "on the back burner" since there is not an urgent deadline. How can we make time to move the tasks forward that will give us the most returns in terms of productivity and professional development, while still fulfilling personal and professional demands in a timely manner?

High Intensity Interval Training (HIIT)

What is HIIT? As the name suggests, it is a training module that involves short periods or intervals of intense work followed by intervals of rest/recovery (see below for an example of a typical HIIT workout).

HIIT has become very popular in exercise and training environments due its efficiency; the ability to accomplish a lot of work in a short amount of time. This shorter time frame makes tasks seem more manageable and not so overwhelming. It is much easier to schedule 20-minute intervals in your schedule than to block off 3 straight hours. And, once

you get going and create positive momentum, your progress builds and compounds and your results are amazing!

The most important aspect of HIIT is the intensity; that's what makes it effective. To get the most out of a HIIT session you must be "dialed in" and focused on your goal and not allow distractions to sidetrack you. Intensity is relative to the individual – an advanced athlete's intervals are going to look a lot different than a beginner's, but that is the beauty of HIIT, you can customize the intervals to your own ability level, skill set, schedule or goal/task.

Finally, when developing a HIIT workout or applying the principles to other tasks in your life, your intervals need to be realistic and sustainable; otherwise, you will not stick to them.

Example HIIT workout

Work interval: 20 seconds

Rest interval: 10 seconds

8-minute HIIT workout:

20s: Squats

10s: Rest

20s: Push-ups

10s: Rest

20s: Lunges

10s: Rest

20s: Mountain Climbers

10s: Rest

Repeat above four times for a total of 8 minutes.

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Intervals of Focus

There are examples of using intervals to achieve productivity. Francesco Cirillo created the "Pomodoro technique" in the 1990s (1). Pomodoro is the Italian word for tomato and he named this technique named after a kitchen timer shaped like a tomato. He described intervals of "focused work time" for 25 minutes followed by 5 minutes of dedicated rest. During the 25 minute work interval, the focus must be on the task and nothing else. During the "work" time, there can be no checking email, scrolling social media, or responding to calls. During the structured rest time, it is encouraged to do something refreshing like walking around, deep breathing, or anything else. Then it is back to the 25 minutes of work. The advantage of the Pomodoro technique is that it allows for focused work time in small aliquots which helps with making progress and overcoming procrastination. It is easier to find 25 minutes than a large block of time. 25 minutes of mindfulness can achieve more than one hour of interrupted work.

Let us take an example of how to use principles of interval training to move a high-yield task forward such as moving forward a personal project. This can seem overwhelming to start and finish. Without a strict deadline, this can also be easy to procrastinate since there is inevitably something seemingly more urgent that will hijack our attention. We all are very busy, and we have short attention spans. We think we must wait until all conditions are perfect to start a project. When will the day come when we have hours blocked, we have the perfect quiet environment, we have all our ideas assembled, we are caught up on everything and we can complete our project? The problem is for most people, this day never comes, and the task is never started, much less finished. How many of us have a task we have been procrastinating? How many of us have a task that we have procrastinated for over a year since we never find that "perfect day" to complete it? Principles of interval training can help us here.

"Ready, fire, aim."

For exercise, as for most things in life, getting started is the key. Rarely is there a perfect time, when all the stars align, and a message is sent from the heavens indicating that now is the ideal time. You simply must make up your mind and take the first step. Even if everything isn't perfect. Even if you are not ready. Even if it is uncomfortable. Throughout my twenty years as a strength & conditioning coach I have had the pleasure of working with thousands of clients – professional athletes, doctors, teachers, kids and everyone in between – and I have noticed there are two factors that determine success more than any others:

making the commitment to get started and then remaining consistent. It's that simple.

By employing short, small, achievable intervals, the principles of HIIT make getting started easier and consistency more likely. You will see greater results from working out consistently for 30 minutes 4 days per week than you will from working out 1 day per week for 2 hours; and you are more likely to stick with it.

High Intensity Interval Training principles can help us to overcome procrastination and increase our productivity for our professional goals. By focusing on a short, intense interval, we can block out a reasonable amount of time, like 20-30 minutes, with the goal to intensely move a task forward without having the fear and pressure to complete it. This can help overcome the inertia and unconscious procrastination that can come with tackling a big, important task. Many small intervals, done regularly and with focus will lead to the completion of the task. It is surprising how much can be achieved by just starting. Often the 25 minutes of dedicated work will lead to another 25 minutes and then another. Just as a runner may struggle for the first 10 minutes of a run but then gets into a pace and feels good enough to keep going, just the act of starting to take forward action can help to overcome the mental inertia to take on a lofty goal.

How to pick the intervals?

In Exercise training we consider a few things, namely: the task/goal of the individual, their ability level and their schedule/outside demands. All of these factors play a role in choosing the appropriate intervals. For example, an untrained and sedentary 50-year-old may begin with a work to rest ratio of 1:3, meaning their rest/recovery interval will be three times that of their work interval. Whereas a more advanced exerciser may have a work to rest ratio of 3:1, meaning their rest/recovery interval will only be one-third of their work time. Likewise, the activity plays a role in determining the intervals. Maximal strength-based movements require more rest time as to allow for appropriate muscle recovery and cardiovascular based movements typically do not require as much recovery time. So, look at your task and determine what the best approach is, and, most importantly, choose intervals that are realistic and sustainable and will lead to long term consistency. Be sure to reassess your goals and

adjust your action plan on a regular basis. Now get out there and attack your goals with purpose and passion!

For productivity, different types of tasks can require different types of “work” intervals. In our current environment of “sound bites” and multi-tasking, focused work takes practice to “get into shape.” For career productivity, after some practice with intervals, you will get a sense of which tasks require each type of interval. Let’s take the example of documentation. We know there has been much observation about how much time is spent on documentation in the Electronic Medical Record. Focused interval work can help to tackle charting and help physicians to finish this task at work rather than spending nights and weekends completing charts. For a follow-up inpatient progress note, setting a timer for 5 minutes of productive, focused time without distraction can lead to the note being completed and with fewer interruptions. It is also likely going to be a much more accurate note. Most all inputs, including calls, can wait 5 minutes. A complex note may take more than 5 minutes and by setting intervals, a physician can add an additional interval if needed.

The payoffs from increased professional productivity and career development are significant.

As Brian Tracy says “Rule: It is the quality of time at work that counts and the quantity of time at home that matters.”(2) Certainly, we have all regularly put in additional hours when absolutely needed. However, when long, unproductive hours are the norm, this can lead

to burnout and unhappiness. When we are not able to move forward our strategic priorities we can feel “stuck” and not moving towards our purpose. What if instead, we saw that day-by-day we were moving closer to our goals? Using intervals to move forward strategic priorities can help us move towards our purpose. Using intervals to help us with our daily mundane tasks can open up time for our loved ones and hobbies

Bonus tips for success:

Removing “decision-fatigue” is a key way to help overcome procrastination and anxiety over a task. This is why morning exercisers lay out their exercise clothes, water bottle and shoes the night before. Similarly, before a “productivity interval” to take advantage of the “work time” it is helpful to have all of your tools set up, such a lap-top, “favorite” a needed webpage (but not be tempted to surf) and keep a timer. It is equally important to “turn off” as many inputs as possible, such as notifications and emails. The key is not to allow the preparation to take on a life of its own and also to avoid delaying the task if the perfect preparation is not completed. Whether it is for physical fitness or career productivity Nike’s slogan of “Just Do It” applies.

References available upon request.

Academic Article	25 minutes: 5 minutes	Break down the various parts of the writing into aliquots and work on an aliquot in each interval
Inpatient Progress Note	5 minutes: 3 minutes (to answer pages or urgent calls)	During the 5 minutes focus on the task
On-line CME course or board practice questions	30 minutes: 5 minutes	Break-down a 2-hour course to complete over 4 blocks
Writing a book	20 minutes: 5 minutes with a longer break every 3 rounds	Scheduled daily or every other day
Reading a book on leadership	15 minutes: 3 minutes	Read a little each day