

## Stay focused and reduce stress while working from home, meeting virtually

By Halley Sutton, Editor

One of the major challenges almost all sectors have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic has been the adjustment to working from home and conducting business virtually. The transition, along with seemingly endless virtual conference meetings and the anxiety and stress over the pandemic, might have made it difficult to focus over the last few months, or to feel productive.

At a virtual session for the annual conference for the Society for College and University Planning, Beth Ziesenis, owner of Your Nerdy Best Friend, shared tips for making working from home more productive, more fun, and more focused. Read on for her suggestions.

### Try new tools to cope with pandemic challenges

"If right now during this crazy time we don't take risks, try things that are new, and change the way we think, when will we?" Ziesenis said. To that end, she laid out several areas that might be affected by the transition to working from home during the pandemic. These include:

- > Distraction.
- > Stress.
- > Lack of productivity.

Ziesenis said that to address these challenges, she looked up a list of the 100 best productivity tips and tools from Filtered ([read more at https://bit.ly/3hfvpuV](https://bit.ly/3hfvpuV)) and parsed it for her favorite tools, and the ones she believes most meet the challenges workers are facing during the pandemic. She shared her favorite tools and techniques below:

**1 Time-boxing.** "This is a very simple concept," Ziesenis said. Many people already use checklists to organize their tasks and their days, but simply writing down that a task must be completed doesn't actually ensure you have time for it during your day, she added. "Oftentimes, people get overwhelmed by their list and can't complete it," Ziesenis said.

Instead of simply creating a to-do list, Ziesenis recommended adding events to calendars as you create a list item for them. For example, if one of your items is to create a PowerPoint presentation, block off an hour on your calendar to do exactly that. This action has multiple benefits, including actually blocking off time on your calendar

that can't be scheduled for meetings with other people, as well as helping ease the anxiety a long to-do list might cause, Ziesenis said. "This is especially important now that there's no separation between work at home and work at the office," Ziesenis said.

She recommended the following tools:

> **Calendar.** You can simply utilize whatever calendar your organization uses (like Outlook) to block out your schedule with your tasks, Ziesenis said.

> **RescueTime.** This computer software is less about time-boxing itself than the amount of time you actually spend on a task, versus surfing the internet, checking email, or other items that may distract you, Ziesenis said.

**2 Controlling your devices.** Nearly everyone spends more time on their social media platforms, if they have them, than they think they do, Ziesenis said. "It's really challenging when you have it so close in reach," she added.

Ziesenis recommended the following tools to control time spent scrolling your screen:

> **Forest.** This app allows the user to set a goal for leaving their phone alone, and a tree grows on the screen while the user does so. If the user picks the phone back up, the tree dies. "It gamifies getting rid of distractions," Ziesenis said.

> **Stay Focused.** Once installed on your computer, Stay Focused allows users to set certain sites as limited (e.g., news sites). You can set an amount of time per day you're allowed to spend on that site, and if you go over, Stay Focused will set up a series of pop-ups reminding you to get back to work, Ziesenis said.

**3 Sound and music.** There's a variety of research that shows that the right auditory cues can enhance focus and productivity, Ziesenis said. She recommended the following two solutions to find music that will enhance your productivity:

> **Focus@Will.** Focus@Will offers a variety of different types of background music the user can customize for higher- or lower-energy tracks, as well as timers users can set automatically. Ziesenis said the app has even been running a COVID-19 sale, with the usual subscription price of \$60 per year now being slashed to \$60 for a two-year subscription.

> **Spotify.** Surprisingly, video game soundtracks were composed to help the users focus while playing games for hours, so they can be a great solution to background music that might boost your productivity, Ziesenis said.

Another possible tool using sound that could increase your productivity and decrease stress are guided meditation apps, Ziesenis said. She recommended both Calm and Headspace. These chunked guided meditation audio clips are geared to help you keep focused in a distracting world, Ziesenis said. "Think of it as an investment in your career, and not a woo-woo practice," she added.

**4 Take short breaks.** One of the most important tools Ziesenis said she saw on the original productivity list were tools designed to help you streamline your workday into focused bursts of work, followed by short breaks. Ziesenis recommended setting up a block of time where you focus purely on one task from your to-do list; say, 25 minutes or an hour. Set a timer for that chunk of time, work all the way through, and then allow yourself a short break afterward to stretch, go to the bathroom, go on a walk, or check email or Facebook before starting up another chunked set of working time.

While this work can be done with any timer (or better yet, combined with a timed background

soundtrack), Ziesenis recommended the following tool:

> **The Marinara Timer.** The Marinara Timer is a customizable productivity timer with a variety of settings, including the original Pomodoro Technique timer that inspired this method of work. The Pomodoro Technique timer sets blocks of 25 minutes of work, followed by a short five-minute break. After four 25-minute blocks, the timer allows for a 15-minute break. ■

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