

# Cracking productivity – how to work smarter, not harder

## ***Being productive is simple. No, wait, we haven't really cracked it***

As every creative knows, there are times when there just aren't enough hours in the day – the days before a new show opens, say, or that awful week everyone has just before a week off. We're all likely to be allergic to doing less, and putting in more hours is probably the last thing any of us should do, so that leaves just one option: to be more productive.

In theory, being more productive isn't rocket science. It's simply about working smarter than harder.



Now that deceptively simple phrase may look great on a poster, or in a social media post. You know what, it might even have made it onto a t shirt or two. But the truth remains that being more productive remains – for many of us – something we aspire to, rather than a set of behaviours and attitudes that guide our daily working practices.

## ***Maybe this list of things to try will help?***

The good news though is that we've been super productive on your behalf, and pulled together a list of tried and tested tips, courtesy of our team and a bunch of other creatives who had a few insights of their own to add to the mix. So here goes...

### ***Take regular breaks!***

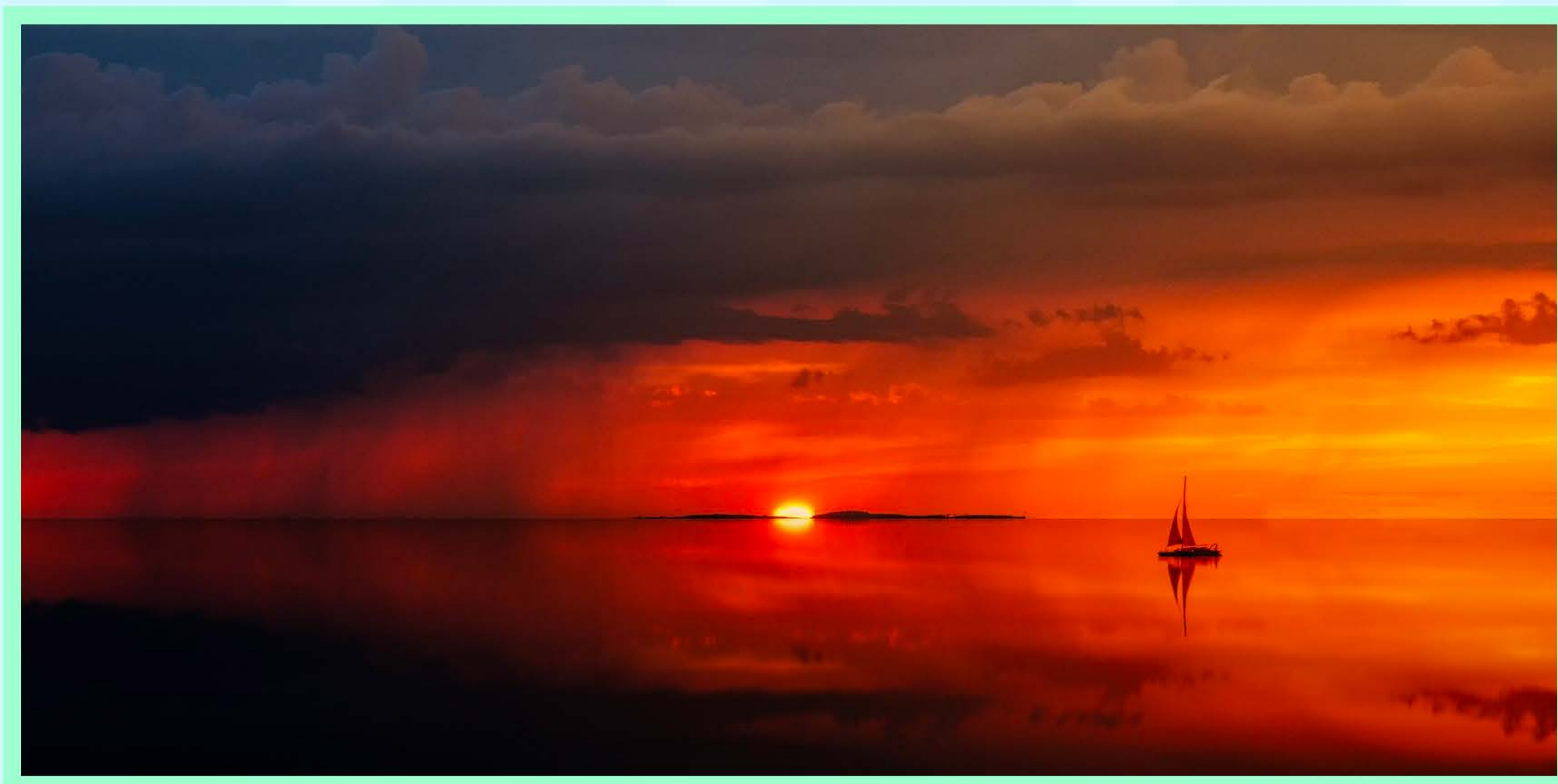
**This might sound counterintuitive – taking breaks if you need to get more done – but research has shown that taking short breaks while you're working actually boosts concentration, memory and creativity. Yay!**

Conversely, routinely working for long stretches of time leads to stress, exhaustion and decision fatigue. Boo! We love a brew, so for us the kettle is a key weapon in warding off sitting in front of our screens without a break. In fact a couple of people in the team have stove top kettles, which take longer to boil than an electric kettle, just so that they get a proper break! What could you do to build in regular breaks?

## ***Review your plan for tomorrow at the end of your working day***

Some of us here absolutely love a to-do list (in fact, they could probably write a thesis about them), but the long and the short of it is that for a lot of people a to-do list is THE key productivity tool. Creating or firming up a clear to-do list for the next day before you leave the office, studio or rehearsal room gives you a head start on your tomorrow. But a couple of pointers...

**First up, make sure your list is realistic and simple – no more than 2 or 3 ‘big ticket’ items. (‘Achieve world peace’ and ‘take the dog for walk’ have the same number of letters but are seriously different tasks, obviously.) And secondly, work out how long each one is going to take, just to make doubly sure what’s on the list is realistic.** And if lists aren’t your thing, then ditch the list idea and just put your tasks straight into your calendar, again allocating the right amount of time to them.



## ***Make a not to do list***

We love this one! So, having extolled the virtues of the to-do list, we also want to introduce you to the not-to-do list!

This does exactly what it says on the tin; it’s a list of all the things you are going to stop doing, in order to become more productive. Seriously, this can be a game changer, because it requires you to reflect on all the things that drain your time or that you could do differently, and think about what’s behind them. A few of us did this a while back, and it really did make a difference to how we structured our working days.

## ***Set yourself some deadlines***

An oldie but a goodie. For open-ended tasks or projects, try giving yourself a deadline, and then stick to it. If you find this way of working difficult, maybe build some rewards in for hitting the deadline.

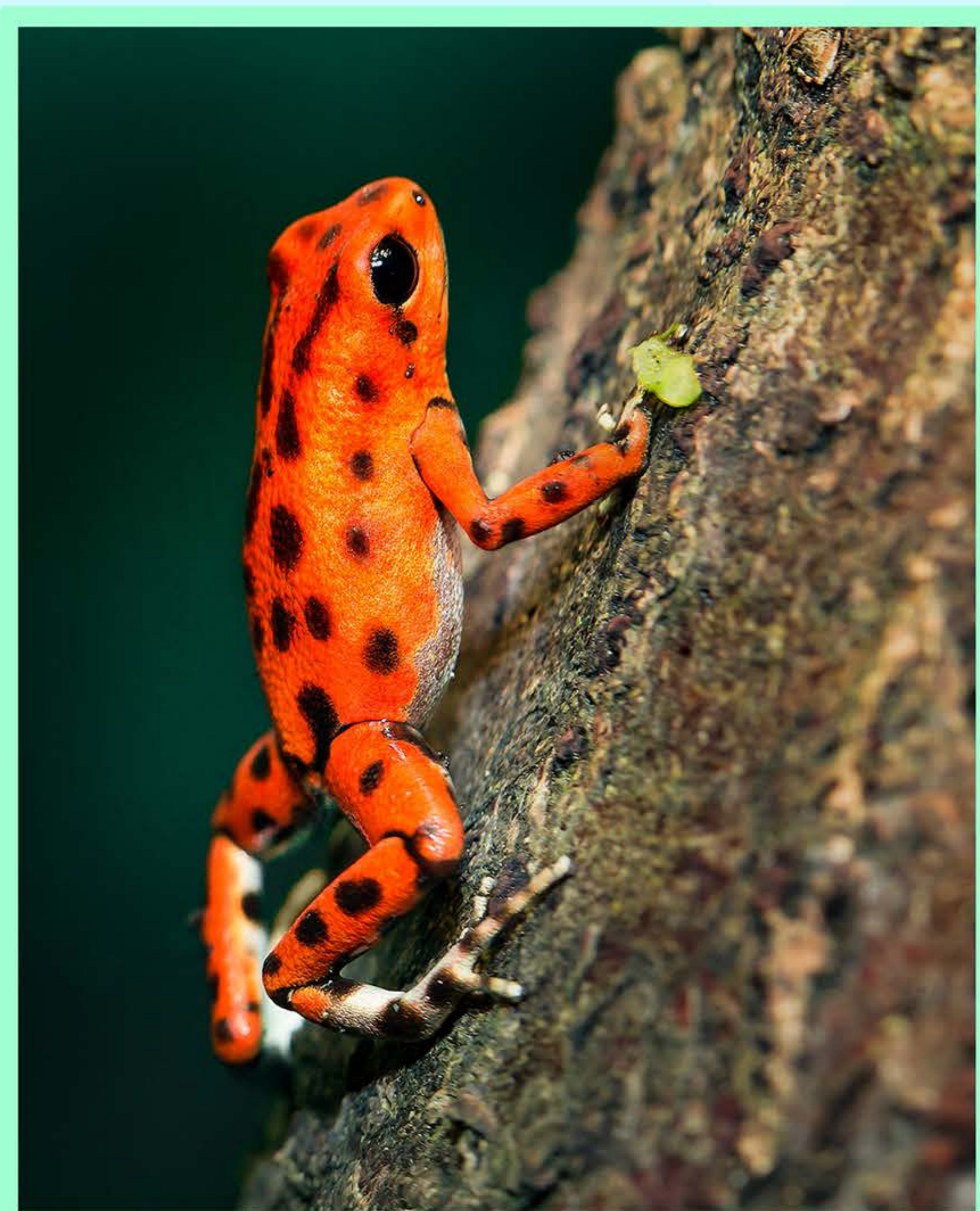
## ***Learn to single-task, and track your time***

Even though many of us rely on our ability to multi-task, the truth is that our brains aren't really wired to do this. And whilst we think of multi-tasking as something that makes us more efficient, it's also true that scientists have shown that it actually reduces productivity by as much as 40%, because all that toggling between things hampers your concentration and memory, and increases stress and mental fatigue.

Now we are rubbish at this, but the answer it seems is to focus on only one task at a time. A few people we know swear by tools like RescueTime and Timeular to help them keep track of how they are spending their time, so maybe they'd work for you too.

## ***Eat the frog!***

Apparently, writer Mark Twain once said, "**Eat a live frog first thing in the morning and nothing worse will happen to you the rest of the day**". (Not sure we want to test that one!



And it's on this quote that Brian Tracy's famous 'eat the frog technique' is based, the 'frog' here being the most crucial task on your to-do list, and the one that you're most likely procrastinate about if you don't get it done. Tracy's logic is that if you want to get more productive you need to get into the habit of tackling your major task first thing each morning. And if you have more than one key task to achieve in any one day you should – and we quote – “eat the ugliest frog first” (i.e. do the most difficult one first).

### ***Follow the 'two-minute rule'***

Now we're not quite sure how this works with the whole 'eat the frog' thing, but different strokes for different folks, right? So the basic gist of the two minute rule is that if you have a task that can be done and dusted in two minutes, you should do it right away as it will actually take longer to come back to it later. The idea here is that it saves you time because it reduces the amount of time you spend procrastinating. We're not entirely convinced by this, but some people we work with swear by it.



### ***Tidy desk = tidy mind***

**Hmm.** Now we always thought that a messy desk or workplace was a sign of creativity (that's our excuse anyhow), but it seems that science says otherwise, and that people with a messy workspace are less efficient and more frustrated than their tidier friends. Clutter, it seems, limits your brain's ability to process information, which in turn contributes to stress and fatigue. So a tidy desk does seem to equal a tidy mind. People, it's time to lose the gonks, seriously cut back on your post it habit and buy a new pen pot.

## ***Ditch the digital distractions***

**Yes, we know you know.** But we also know you probably haven't done it. Recent research showed that globally adults spend an average of 2.5 hours a day on social media, while another study showed that the average American spends nearly a quarter of their work day on social media for non-work purposes.

You don't need us to tell you that constantly checking your phone for social media updates is a big productivity no-go. So set a limit on the amount of time you spend doing it, and maybe disable app notifications or keep your phone on silent mode while working so that the constant updates won't distract you.

**Who's zooming who?** The answer can sometimes be 'everyone' and 'all the time'. Whether they're in real life or on zoom, for many of us meetings are one of the biggest time-sucks around, yet somehow we continue to book them in, show up for them and then inevitably, complain about how much time they take up!



**So before you accept your next meeting invitation, ask yourself whether you can accomplish the same goals or tasks via email or even – and this is old school – the phone.**

If you can't avoid having lots of meetings you might want to consider making them standing meetings. Someone in our team swears by this, and there is actually some evidence that standing meetings – where everyone stands – can improve performance and collaboration. Try it, and if standing is the way to go for you, why not think about a standing desk too?!

## ***Give up on trying to be perfect***

Now this is a big one for us. Hands up if you too are a bit of a perfectionist? It's OK, you're not alone; it's a trait that's really common amongst artists and people running their own creative businesses. We are hard taskmasters! The reality of course is that perfection is an illusion and that trying to achieve it can be a real drain on your time. **So it's time to embrace the idea that often good enough is good enough!**

## ***Give yourself something nice to look at***

So this might sound really fluffy, but there's real scientific evidence that making your office or studio (or wherever you work) look nice can increase productivity by up to 15 percent. So it's time to get busy with the paint brush, treat yourself to some new stationary, hit up the garden centre for a new plant or two... and get productive!



## ***Get enough sleep***

We've saved the best to last. This one again is an oldie but a goodie. Not getting enough sleep (that's between 7-9 hours for most of us) reduces our efficiency and makes us more likely to make mistakes. Conversely, a good night's sleep improves our mood and memory, boosts our creativity and also enhances our ability to make smart decisions fast.

**So it's yay for the duvet and time to make sure that you get enough zzzzzzs...**

**Inspired by these? Then don't forget to check out the other goodies in the [Work, Rest and Play](#) module of our Balance toolkit.**