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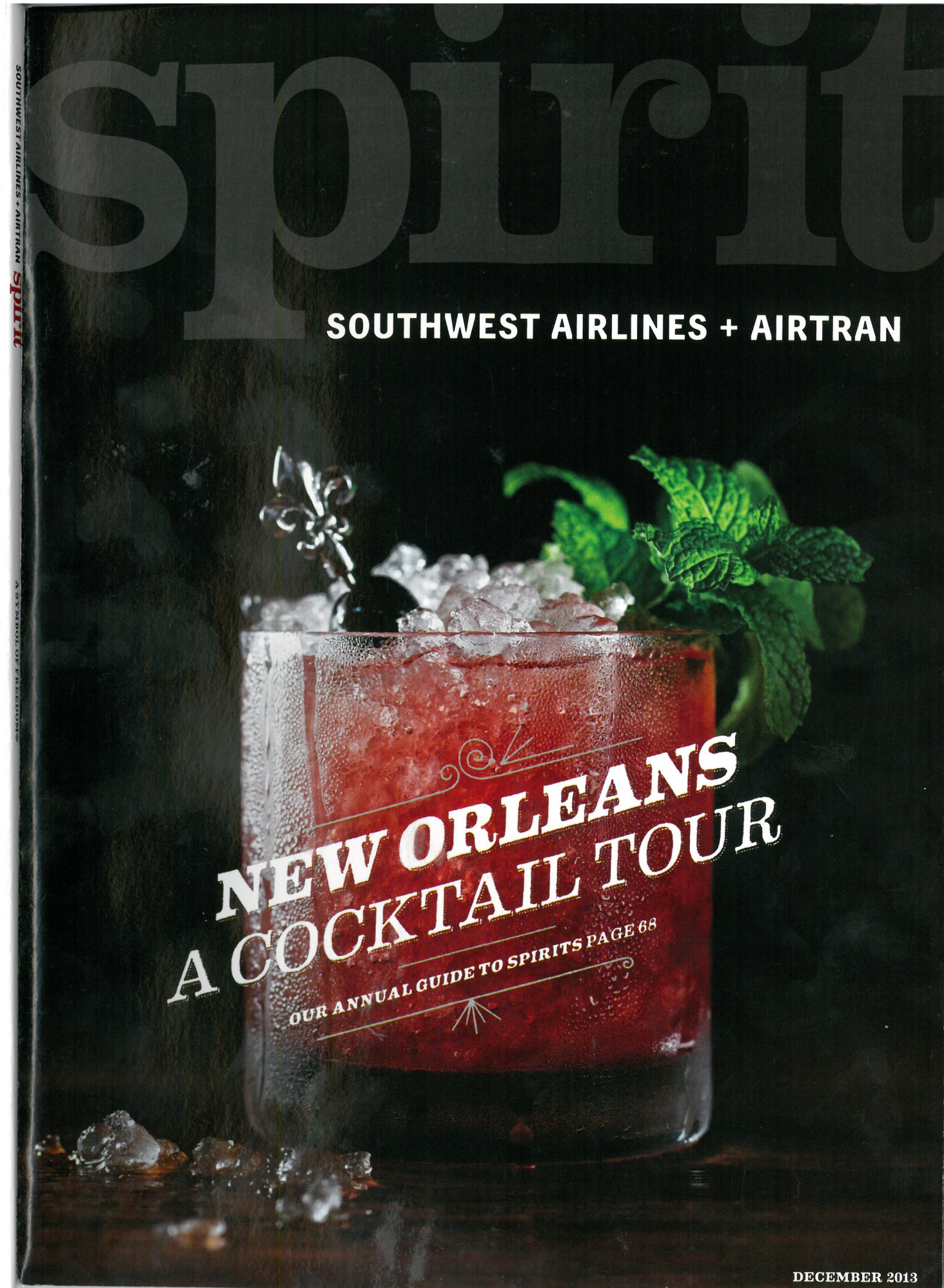
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Work easy. Play hard.  Windows 8



DECEMBER 2013

SCHOOL

Time Well Spent

Want to increase your output? Hop off the hamster wheel.

BY JILL COODY SMITS

PRODUCTIVITY. IT'S THE rate at which something is produced, the number of widgets you crank out for the factory, how much time it takes to git 'er done. In the very big picture, it's essential to the nation's economic growth. In the much smaller one, it's also essential to whether you get a festive little bonus sometime this month.

Unfortunately, most people don't just wake up, say, "Today, I will be prolific!" and then seize the day as their very best self. Productivity—whether on the scale of Picasso and his 100,000-plus works of art, or simply the lucky guy who goes to sleep feeling satisfied with his day—requires effort, planning, and willpower.

It also helps if your employer does its part by providing you with the



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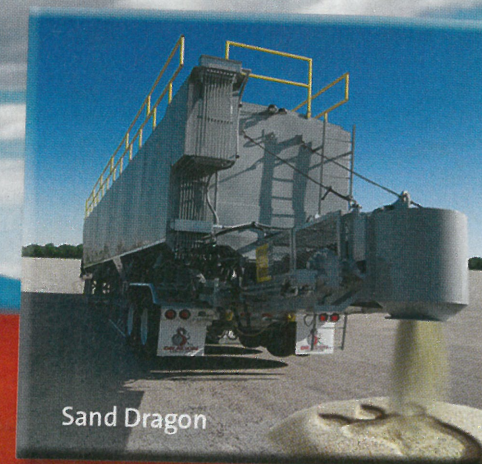
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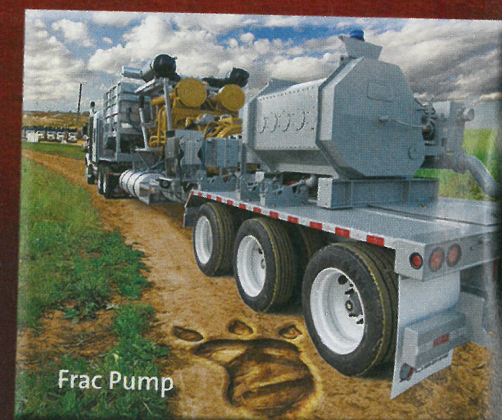
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(Business)

basics necessary to achieve maximum output. For example, your boss's ongoing choice to provide employees with beepers in a smart-phone world could be a hindrance. Ditto his refusal to hire enough staff, provide adequate training, or pay the electric bill.

But the good news is that many factors are at least partially within your control. Things like managing time wisely, working smart, and showing up ready to perform. Easy peasy, right? It can be, if you know some proven strategies.

PRODUCTIVITY, PERSONIFIED

It's a little after 11 p.m. in Austin, Texas, and Monica Maldonado Williams has just sat down at her home computer to work on her "side project," *GivingCity*, a magazine about and for the philanthropic community. But this is just the beginning of the end of her day.

Upon waking at 6:30 this morning, Williams made a mental to-do list, powered through the morning rush to get her two young children off to school, then recorded a rambling conversation with herself on the drive to her full-time job as marketing and communications director for the Austin Lyric Opera. While there, she raised funds, mastered the Web, sold tickets to Verdi's *Don Carlo*, participated in meetings, and attracted media attention. She also had lunch.

Around 5:30, she left the office, picked up a latte on the way home, drove to youth choir practice, ate the slow-cooker meal she started this morning, and read to her children. At some point between waking up nearly 17 hours ago and sitting now at her computer, eating a single Ghirardelli chocolate, she also managed to squeeze in a 30-minute run and spend a few minutes engaged in semi-meaningful conversation with her husband.

Now, before you go thinking this is a script for one of those 1980s "My

A philosopher-physicist may subscribe to the notion that time is an illusion. Your manager does not.

gender is just as good as your gender, and I'm smokin' hot" advertisements, you should know that it's been pretty well established that no one can have it all. No, this is simply a description of one day in a very real person's very productive life—and there are lessons in it for all of us.

TIME—IT JUST KEEPS ON TICKING

While the philosophizing physicist in you may subscribe to the notion that time is an illusion, the manager who conducts your annual review probably does not.

As a result, you must acknowledge that time actually does exist (at least in the professional world) and come to grips with the fact that it is not renewable. Nor does it give a darn whether you are on Facebook, in a meeting, or writing a report—which can be a problem in terms of productivity.

"Time passes whether or not you make a conscious decision about how to use it," says Laura Vanderkam, author of *What the Most Successful People Do Before Breakfast*. "Since there's no chance to pause, not choosing is still a choice."

Once you've come to terms with the fact that the Rolling Stones were wrong and time is not, in fact, on your side, the next step is attempting to put it in its place. For Williams, as with many productive people, that means starting the day with a list. "At first I wake up in a mild panic.

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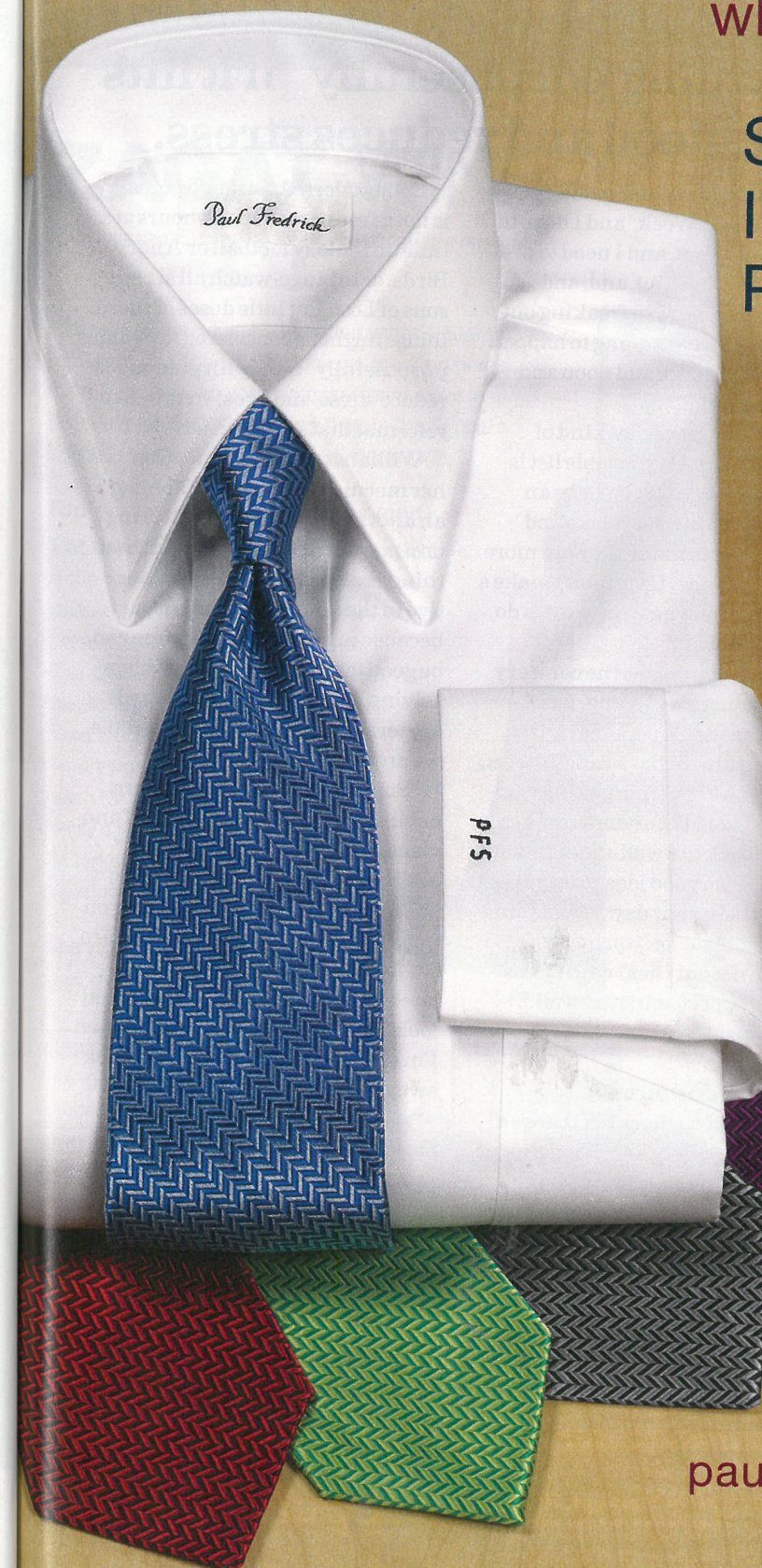
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(Business)

Angry Birds might be considered “dawdling purposefully” if it lifts your mood and reduces stress.

Like, ‘Oh! My daughter needs two apples for ‘Red Week,’ and I have to get that email out, and I need to prepare for that meeting, and, and ...’ Then I tell myself I’m freaking out and map out what’s going to happen at 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. and noon and when I’m home.”

Vanderkam says that kind of specific, concise, achievable list is a smart strategy. “If you have an extremely short list of tasks and assign a time to them, they are more likely to get done. If you don’t make a decision about what you want to do, life comes at you.”

And life, at times, is the contrary yin to productivity’s yang. Last-minute meetings, personal crises, a working lunch that runneth over: How do you keep from getting completely derailed? Vanderkam says it comes back to a well-thought-out agenda. “It’s a good idea to leave some slack in your day. If every minute isn’t spoken for, you have the ability to not only deal with crises but seize opportunities as well.”

STEP AWAY FROM THE COMPUTER

It may sound obvious, but there’s a big difference between being productive and sitting chained to your desk, lethargically futzing on the computer in a guilt-driven, ineffective effort to crank out a sales analysis. While you may feel compelled to go through the motions of being busy, research shows that stepping away for a few minutes when you’re mentally drained will ultimately make you more efficient.

Vanderkam says, “Part of using your time well is managing your energy and being strategic about taking breaks so you can feel productive enough to get things done.”

Killjoy alert: A “strategic break” is not a free pass to spend hours at a time on fantasy football or Angry Birds, or to binge-watch all six seasons of *Lost*. But little doses of those things might be considered “dawdling purposefully” if they lift your mood, reduce stress, and boost your will to reformat that spreadsheet.

Williams’ daily download on her morning commute, grabbing an afternoon coffee, and snacking on a piece of chocolate—all of these things help her stay more productive in the long run. That’s in part because mind-wandering time can be good for creativity and problem-solving, but also because rewards are terrific behavior reinforcers (i.e., we are suckers for treats).

“Sometimes you have to figure out little motivators for yourself and visualize the long-term reward,” Williams says. To that end, when she needs to stay up late working on *Giving City*, she gives herself time to eat from her secret stash of chocolate and “poke around [the Internet] looking at gowns for the opera. Then I’m sitting there already, just a click away from my work.”

MOVE IT, OR ...

JUST MOVE IT, OKAY?!

Newsflash No. 1: In case you haven’t heard, exercise is good for you.

Newsflash No. 2: So is eating well and getting a good night’s sleep.

Newsflash No. 3: Obesity and other chronic health problems cost the U.S. more than \$150 billion in lost workplace productivity every year.

Newsflash No. 4: You can work exercise into your day. Really.

Wellness and productivity are interconnected on so many levels it’s hard to know where to start. According to Tim Church, a professor at

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(Business)

Pennington Biomedical Research Center. "There's no doubt that wellness affects productivity. When you're physically active, you sleep better, have more energy, are in a better mood, are less likely to be sick, and are more likely to be at work."

Exercise is also really good for clearing your head and keeping you sharp. Did you know that some scholars believe Einstein conceived of relativity while riding his bike? All of that physiological goodness can work for the rest of us, too. Williams says, "Often when I run or exercise, I have epiphanies. It's the time when all the stuff in my brain shifts down."

But don't be disheartened if you can't squeeze in hours and hours of marathon training every week. Church says research shows even doing small things, like walking to lunch rather than sitting at your desk skipping a meal, can make people more productive. Unless you have a really progressive boss who invested in standing desks last year, you probably sit ... a lot. While most of our work demands it, Church says there is still a lot of benefit in simply "breaking up the bouts of prolonged sitting" by walking 50 feet every half hour or so. If we just muster what it takes to move, it's a win-win for our employers and us. "At this point, we can confidently say that a physically active person is more likely to be a productive employee," Church says.

IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS

In addition to the big stuff, there are many small things you can do throughout the day to increase professional productivity. If, like Williams (who, by the way, thinks of sleep "by the week and not by the night"), you keep occasional late nights, a catnap can help you control impulses and ignore distractions—two things that are really hard when you're sleep-deprived. Just tell your boss you're "going George Costanza." Maybe it will turn into a thing.

A catnap can help you control impulses, something really hard to do when you're sleep-deprived. Just tell your boss you're "going George Costanza."

Also, don't forget that lunch is more than just good times down at the commissary—it's actually energy you need to make smart decisions.

Finally, be the master of your technology rather than vice versa. While it's a good practice to stay on top of email, doing it while writing a press release, answering sales calls, or meeting with a client is stressful and distracts you from completing anything well and in a timely manner.

So, what does a productive day look like? For Williams, it's one that "hits every base—finalizing a few things at the opera, meeting deadlines, and doing the things my family needs me to do."

According to the U.S. Department of Labor's American Time Use Survey, people with lives similar to Williams' spend more than a third of each day eking out a living. When you consider those eight-plus hours, you might as well make the most of them; you might as well make the effort to hit every base.

Jill Coody Smits is an Austin, Texas-based journalist. Find her online at blueseedcommunications.com.

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