



If we take Gene Kim’s¹ observation that, “Improving daily work is even more important than doing daily work,” seriously, then we need a way to start implementing a practical approach for improving daily work. The challenge is twofold: making time for improving the work and determining what to improve.

For how to address these challenges we can take a cue from principles a good health and fitness instructor will provide a person new to regular fitness exercise. The purpose of fitness exercise for non-athletes is to strengthen the body and mind, improve overall health, and generate additional energy for other activities through consistent conditioning. Similarly, regular improvement to daily work serves to condition individuals and organizations toward greater strength, health, and energy.

Beginning Fitness Conditioning Principles

- Consistency is more important than intensity or duration. It is important to build the habit of consistent, regular exercise by committing initially to short fitness sessions at regular

intervals, such as twenty minutes for three days a week.

- Keep the fitness session routine simple. A beginner’s resistance training program may have the same three or four basic routines each session. The early focus is on conditioning the skeletal muscle system without creating cognitive overload that may discourage continuing the program. The same principle is applied to cardiovascular fitness conditioning.
- Use the practice of progressive overload to make small advances of your daily work improvement skills a small amount each session. Progressive overload is attempting one small improvement each session. It may be one more rep or five more pounds in resistance training or shaving two seconds off a mile pace in running or cycling. Not every attempt will be successful, and yet it is these repeated attempts that ultimately yield improvements, and at times breakthroughs.
- As the fitness conditioning yields results in terms of improved health and energy, begin increasing the intensity of work in fitness sessions and consider expanding the duration or number of these sessions.
- Don’t stress over missed sessions. Life and other demands will sometimes get in the way. Just pick up the conditioning where you left off the next day or next week.



Applying These Principles to Improving Daily Work

- Leverage the power of consistency to develop a habit of improving daily work by selecting three twenty-minute sessions each week during which your focus will be on conditioning yourself to improve some aspect of daily work. Ideally these three sessions are the same days and times each week, with occasional adjustments made for atypical events that conflict with your normal improvement session. While there is not the same imperative for physical rest between sessions, therefore scheduling not more than one session in a day, cognitive rest is also important, so, if possible, initially keep the three sessions on separate days. These are focused sessions, which means no emails, text messages, or phone calls during these twenty minutes.
- Keep the improvement conditioning session simple. Focus on the one action that will result in strengthening the quality of your thinking and actions, or your work group's collaborative shared thinking and actions. Ideas on types of actions to consider are in the next section.

- Start with simple and relatively easy improvements that require little effort. Improvements to your personal workflow are a good place to start. As you progress begin to explore improvements to daily work that includes other people in your circle of influence.
- One purpose for improving daily work is to free time that can be invested in generating additional valuable results. With additional time available, consider increasing the intensity of your improvement efforts in terms of time invested, and especially in terms of enrolling colleagues in the practices of improving daily work.
- Sometimes it is necessary to skip a session. Special meetings, urgent client requests, and other atypical additions to your workload may mean you need to cancel a session. That's okay, and nothing will be lost in terms of your personal improvement conditioning, if you pick up the practice again the next day or the next week.

Improvement Conditioning Practices

- Lean 5S (Sort, Set in Order, Shine, Standardize, Sustain) practices often yield a very quick payback in terms of improving work. 5S applies to your desk or workspace, your backpack or briefcase, and your file naming and storage protocols.
- Developing a personal kanban approach to organizing your work helps to decrease cognitive loading

and the impulse to keep many concurrent tasks in progress.² You will occasionally adjust how you implement your personal kanban as you learn what serves you well and what may work better for you.

- Develop standard work checklists for your routine tasks. Checklists are a simple way to make sure that you have addressed every detail of a task. More importantly, checklists are easy to modify and improve when you find you want to do something differently the next time you perform that task.³
- Develop a list of events and work products you believe could have turned out better. Add to that list actions you can take that will improve upon the outcomes of future similar events and work production. Keep that list easily accessible for when you are about to start similar work.
- If process maps for routines that involve coordination with other people do not exist, start creating process maps that display your understanding of the overall process. Test that understanding against that of other people engaged in that process. It's possible that there is a lack of alignment, which is an opportunity for significant group improvement. Once people are aligned on the process, work with the group to see where improvements can be made.



Summary

Just as there is a recognized benefit to regular fitness conditioning sessions by strengthening essential movement and body mass while removing needless body movements and mass,⁴ improving daily work also yields the benefit of removing needless work while allowing people to focus on the work that has a positive impact on individual and organizational objectives. While this article is intended as guidance on where to start with improving daily work, with the encouragement to go beyond these recommendations by continually planning, testing, and improving your daily work improvement approach.

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¹ Kim, Gene. *The Phoenix Project: A Novel About IT, DevOps, and Helping Your Business Win*. IT Revolution Press, 2013.

² Jim Benson and Tonianne DeMaria wrote the go-to book on developing a personal kanban. Benson, Jim and Tonianne DeMaria. *Personal Kanban: Mapping Work | Navigating Life*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011.

³ For an understanding of the value of checklists as a means of reducing complexity and cognitive load, read *The Checklist Manifesto*. Gawande, Atul. *The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right*. Metropolitan Books, 2011.

⁴ Readers interested in physical fitness conditioning protocols as analogous to daily work improvement may find work by Andrew Huberman, Gabrielle Lyon, and Michael Matthews among others of interest. An online search will provide links to these and similar experts. This note is not a medical endorsement of their recommendations and is provided solely for informational purposes.