YOUR 2021 PRODUCTIVITY Playbook

Aegis Network Group

Finally, we've waved goodbye to 2020. The year that will go down in the history books for that catastrophe of epic proportions.

And we know, this new year may not see us waving goodbye to the virus, but at least we're all a little more used to this new way of living.

So, with the relief of this new year, there also comes the annual kickstart. A boost in motivation when it comes to our health, our habits, and of course, our work.

As a business owner or manager, it's likely you will be setting more goals than the average Joe. The growth and success of your business lies on your shoulders. And that's before we start talking about the growth and development of your team.

How are you going to ensure a new level of productivity across your business this year?

If this isn't something you've already considered, don't panic. As always, we're here to help you out.

If you have considered it, we can help you too, by making each step that bit simpler.

You are about to feast your eyes on our ultimate guide to business productivity in 2021 >>

GOALS AND PLANNING

As with most things, we'll start with goals and planning. After all, if you don't know where you're going or have a plan, you won't get very far.

Your goal needs to be as specific as possible. In fact, we like the acronym SMART, which says goals should be:

- Specific: Very clear on what you want to achieve
- Measurable: You know when you've got there
- Achievable: Can be completed
- Relevant: Helps your business with its long-term aims
- Timebound: Has a deadline

So where do you start when it comes to planning? Well, it's probably deciding on what your plan is, right? And for that we need to create a mind-map or brainstorm some ideas.

Microsoft Planner is a great tool to help you do this. You can create a plan, along with your team, assign and discuss tasks, and even track your progress with charts.

We also love Microsoft Whiteboard for the beginning stages of planning.

The clue is in the name; it's a virtual whiteboard, blank to let your creativity flow. It has so many other uses, but developing a plan with a mind map is one excellent way to use it. It allows you to jot down your own ideas, invite others to collaborate and add their own input, and add to it as and when you need to.

Next, we need to break that plan down into actions. You know what can help?

Your to do list.

Who doesn't love a to do list, right? You can create them for any period you like; daily, weekly, monthly etc. And just tick off each task as it's completed. When you see actions being marked as done it's a really satisfying feeling (this is your brain being flooded with the reward chemical dopamine).

Make it a habit to look at your to do list every morning (or create a new daily to do list each day) so you know what your most pressing tasks are for the day ahead.

As an aside, sometimes you'll have something on your to do list that keeps being moved over to the next day and the next, and the next… being constantly put off. We all have those jobs we just want to avoid. Do the worst/ hardest jobs first and then you make the rest of your day easier!

We recommend Microsoft To Do. It's a great tool for keeping your to do lists all in one place, giving you access whenever and wherever you need it. You can:

- Add tasks day by day
- Break them down into manageable actions
- Share lists and assign tasks to members of your team
- Set reminders
- And even attach files

As a bonus, you can also make your lists look more exciting with colored backgrounds.

The next thing that any good plan needs is some expense management. We all must work within a budget, whether it's big or small. Keeping track of what you're spending and the costs you have coming up makes it easier to see exactly where you are with your business finances.

There is loads of different software available to help you keep a track of your costs. You probably already use one that also helps with your invoicing and tax calculations. Since we're beginning a new year, it might be time to assess whether the software you use is working for you.

Does it make life easier or are you finding yourself more stressed out with it than you should be? Does it talk to other software that you use within your business? Does everyone who needs access to it, have access to it?

PRODUCTIVITY

It's said that if you do something enough times it eventually becomes a habit. What better new habits to adopt than ones that make you more productive? We can't think of many.

If we all had more hours in the week, we'd all be more productive, wouldn't we? So, you simply need to find more hours in the week to get more things done.

Easy.

You don't think so?

Well, we'd like to prove you wrong on this one. You see, if you manage your time better, you can see exactly where you're wasting time. For example, you could identify jobs you're doing each day that someone else could be doing instead.

You might find that something you thought was taking you minutes a day is taking a lot longer.

Or you could spot things you're doing that are simply wasting time.

That sounds great, right? So how do you do it?

Say hello to time management and time tracking apps. Get used to using these every day, and you will make yourself more productive quickly. Because not only will you want to make the most of your time when you're keeping track of each minute, but you'll also see where the big chunks of your time are being wasted.

We really like OneNote as a time management app. It integrates with both Outlook and Teams, so that you can save and share your notes, documents, and other content at the click of a button. It means you can access everything easily without having to repeat it or have it saved in loads of different places.

As for time tracking, look at Toggl Track. It allows you (and your team, if you like), to track how long you're spending on tasks. As well as letting you manually time each thing you do, you can save yourself even more time and let it automatically track how long you spend using each

application, on discussions and chat, and even on real-life tasks like meetings and lunch (by syncing with your calendar).

If you could do with spotting where you're wasting time, then this is the tool for you. There's a free plan so give it a go if you think it could be helpful.

Another time tracker that many people love is Timeular. This combines a physical device with software. Many people find it easier to remember to use, as there's something to sit on your desk.

While we're talking about productivity, what's one of the biggest distractions to anyone working in an office? Nope, not the constant reminders to wash your mug... it's the internet.

You're working away when suddenly you have an urge to quickly check your favorite news site. Or you remember that big event that's coming up that you need an outfit for (or is that just a 2019 problem these days?!). Or you think you'll give yourself a 5 minute break to scroll through Facebook.

Before you know it, you've lost half an hour on something that will get you no closer to your goal.

You need a distraction killer. An app that literally blocks you from your distractions when you need it the most.

There are a few great apps that do this for you, but one we really like is Freedom. Unlike some of its peers, it can block distracting sites and apps across all your devices, so you're not tempted to pick up your smart phone when 'computer says no'.

You can select what you'd like to block, a time frame for blocking, and select the devices to include. The developers say that people report saving an average of 2.5 hours PER DAY when using the app.

What could you get done given an extra 12.5 hours a week?

COLLABORATION

You wouldn’t get half as much completed without the skills and expertise of your beloved team. So, it’s vital that you have all the tools you need to collaborate and communicate effectively.

This has never been as important as it has become in recent months. With people working remotely and not seeing some of their colleagues in the same room it's imperative that communication doesn't break down.

If you haven't yet tried Teams for this purpose, do it now. It really does do it all when it comes to working as, well, a team.

You can use it to manage your projects, creating different teams for each project you're working on. It allows you to keep all your files and documents for each project all in one place (and accessible to those who need them, when they need them). It even allows for video meetings and instant messaging.

And because it's a Microsoft 365 app, it integrates with your calendar, your contacts, your files… everything you need can be found in one place, on whatever device you're using, whenever you need to access it.

What a world we live in.

Microsoft Projects is also a handy app for getting down to the detail and planning of your projects. You can create a visual roadmap for new projects, plan and schedule, and view insights into each project and its progress.

You may also think about a company intranet to always keep your people up-to-date. Here you can store company documents and policies, store knowledge and information relating to procedures or projects, and even news about the business and the people within it.

SharePoint can help you do this, and go that step further in solidifying a great culture of teamwork within your business.

ENGAGE AND COMMUNICATE

This time we're talking about your customers, not your team.

What are you currently doing to engage your customers with your business? Could you do more?

Think about things like customer contact. How often do you or your team speak to your customers (or prospective customers for that matter)? Do you send out regular email communications or marketing? Do you utilize social media platforms to engage on a more personal level? Do you provide learning resources for customers and potential customers, as an added extra?

These are all things that could help create a better customer experience of your business. You want to do this because we know that the more connected a person feels to a company, the more likely they will be to use that company for longer. And to recommend it to others.

So, look at how you can utilize different apps to help you connect with your customers.

Firstly, regular email communication is key. If you don't already send regular emails to your customers and to your prospects, start to do this now.

You don't have to be in touch with your database every day - that will put people off - but anywhere from once a week to once a month is a good place to start. Talk about new products and services you've added, offers or promotions you have on, or helpful information or tips relating to your field of expertise.

Mailchimp is a great way to start email marketing. You can create good looking emails, auto-fill personal details like someone's name, and send it out to your contacts at the click of a button. Again, it's free to sign up and there's a free plan for sending to under 2,000 contacts.

Now look at your social media. Have you updated it recently? Is it something that takes too long each day to bother with? Or do you forget about it for a few weeks, then have a surge in posts, and then fall off again?

Be more consistent. Yes, some businesses will find it easier to think of content, but you don't need to post every day if you don't

want to. Just keep to some kind of schedule.

Utilize something like Hootsuite to schedule posts in advance. You can set up a few posts to be published automatically each day or week. And then add other content when you have it. This allows your social media platforms to be regularly updated with little commitment from you.

It also helps if you have a lot of content to post, but don't want to publish multiple posts each day. Schedule them when you remember and space them out over a few days.

Do you ever create any video content?

Video is the way we're moving, with people wanting to watch video instead of reading. Just look at the popularity of TikTok and the Instagram Stories and Reels.

Microsoft Stream is a great way to utilize video to help you connect and engage with your audience. Film tutorials, updates, and even host online events with this app to increase your customer engagement and give your clients the support they need.

SECURITY

We've saved this one till last, so that it stays with you when you're finished reading.

Your number one goal for 2021 should be to increase and maintain a high level of cyber security in your business. After all, you really don't want your company to become a statistic this year.

First, look at utilizing a great password manager. This should create strong random passwords for all your software and apps, save them, and automatically log you (and only you) into your accounts.

It really is as simple as that.

No more changing passwords every month - and getting your team to do the same. No more jotting down obscure passwords in the back of your notepad. No more frustration at the 'incorrect password' notification. Just safe, secure logins each time.

There are loads of password managers out there. Some charge, some offer free plans. Some can be used across a business; some are for personal sign up. Speak to your IT service partner to find out which one could be the best fit for you.

Secondly, look at implementing multi-factor authentication for logging into apps and software. This adds another layer of protection to your data, by giving you a one-time-use password as a second step to your log in. It's a bit like the way some banks get you to log in to your account online, using a code sent to or generated on your phone.

Again, there are lots of tools that will help you to implement this. But speak to your IT service partner to find the best one for your specific requirements.

AND THAT BRINGS US NICELY TO OUR FINAL POINT: YOUR IT SERVICE PARTNER

With the challenges that last year brought us, it should be clear that it makes good business sense to work with a reliable, reputable, and expert IT service provider. Having a partner that is available to you exactly when you need them is important. It also makes better financial sense than using someone ad hoc.

Do you have an IT service partner?
Are you happy with them?
Do they work proactively for you?

If you answer no to one of those questions, it's time to look at an alternative partner (hello ☻).

LET'S MAX OUT 2021

2020 demonstrated that things in business can change in an instant. Whether you're still working from the office, or working from home, your productivity is always something that can be improved.

If you don't have co-workers around you to help boost your motivation, it could be time to change some of the ways you're working. Give some of these apps a try - perhaps for 30 days - and see what a difference they can make for you. Make them part of your routine and give them a chance to become habits.

If just one of these suggestions works for you, you'll hopefully notice a boost in your satisfaction, a growth in your business, and you'll hit your new goals faster than you'd hoped. Please do let us know if you try any of them, and how you get on.

IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR A NEW IT SERVICE PARTNER, WE'D LOVE TO WORK WITH YOUR BUSINESS IN 2021. CONTACT US TODAY TO FIND OUT WHAT WE CAN DO TO HELP YOU.

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