Slowing Down with Personal Productivity Tools

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As I write this article, numerous other tasks are piling up on my desk, on to-do lists scribbled on my office whiteboard, and in multiple tabs and applications on my computer. I work on these tasks and projects between the meetings and classes lined up in my calendar. At 5pm, I turn off my computer and race home for my second shift: driving the kids to piano lessons and sports, shopping for groceries, cooking dinner, and doing laundry. In the moments between these tasks I check email on my phone, and at night, after the kids are tucked in, I will finish grading assignments. I am looking forward to the upcoming weekend to get together with friends, go out for a run, volunteer at a local club, and work on house projects. I am busy. I live in the fast lane.

I am not alone in this race: My colleagues, friends, and acquaintances are similarly working around the clock to graduate, receive tenure, improve their homes, and care for their families. This lifestyle is not reserved for academic professionals; various ethnographic accounts have documented experiences of busy American individuals and families, highlighting how the focus on efficiency and productivity diffuses from work to home life, school, and leisure time [1,2].

But this way of living has its toll. We humans are not machines, and we cannot be always on, 24/7. Few of us are able to escape living in the fast lane, and we envy those who choose a simpler life than ours, with a slower-paced job, fewer tasks, fewer worries, and more time on their hands. Why can't the rest of us? Where are we running to?

Like a Hamster on a Wheel

Our fast pace of life is not purposeless. We are motivated to accomplish meaningful activities that will have a positive effect on us individually and on our families, colleagues, friends, and neighbors, as well as the larger community. I spend the night grading assignments because I believe my students deserve prompt feedback on

TASKS

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their work. I spend evenings cooking and driving around town because I believe in the importance of nutritious meals and after-school enrichment activities for my children. I separate garbage into recycling, composting, and trash because I believe in the environmental consequences of doing so. When I stop and reflect on my endeavors and accomplishments, I feel like both a superwoman trying to save the world and a hamster on a wheel.

Saving the world and keeping the wheel turning are driven by cultural norms and social expectations to do more, not less, and at a higher quality. In the organizational and social circles I am part of, I am expected to publish more papers in more prestigious journals, to better prepare my children for the future, to have a nicer home, to be healthier, skinnier, and more fit, to be more attentive to my friends, and to be a more involved citizen.

Getting Organized

To tame the overload of appointments to attend, tasks to complete, social contacts to interact with, options to choose from, and information to digest, many of us use techniques for time and task management. One such technique is David Allen's acclaimed "Getting Things Done" system, which recommends recording all tasks of any sort, scale, or specificity, reviewing them for priority and category, and breaking them down to a series of action items [3]. A plethora of other self-help techniques similarly prescribe ways for getting organized and optimizing what to do at any given moment.

These techniques are put into practice using a variety of digital productivity tools. For example, task-management tools such as

Google Tasks, Remember The Milk, OmniFocus, and Things help users organize and keep track of their tasks, prioritize and categorize them, add new ones and check off completed ones, set up due dates and reminders, create subtasks, and so on. Other personal-productivity tools include, for example, powerful email clients that filter junk messages and push important ones to the top; online calendars for juggling appointments and efficient multiparty scheduling; social network sites for staying in touch with friends and acquaintances; and personal information-management tools for organizing, storing, and easily retrieving documents, books, photos, and music on computers, mobile phones, and the Web.

These productivity tools promise to liberate us from hard work and save us time by helping us do things more efficiently. Consequently, they are supposed to alleviate overload and make our lives easier. Add a task to a to-do list so you don't have to worry about remembering it. Put down an event in the calendar to not inadvertently double-book yourself. And stay in touch with friends through social networking sites so you can keep up with their everyday hustle.

Even More Overloaded

But given the cultural norms by which we live, we do not use the extra time to sit back, relax, or have a more comfortable pace of life. Instead, we tend to fill that freed-up time with more tasks and activities in an attempt to accomplish more. The more efficient we become, the more things we attempt to achieve, trapped in doing, doing, doing. It then becomes tempting to blame productivity tools for the aggravating

experiences of strain and rush despite—and sometimes because of—their widespread availability and accessibility.

Productivity tools do not necessarily accelerate the pace of life, but instead offer new ways of doing things [4]. For example, the time and location of meetings can be coordinated at the last minute using mobile phones; high school reunions can be organized through social networking sites; and switching between tasks is easy with simple keyboard commands. As a result, people might experience an increase in multitasking, more frequent interruptions, a blurring of the work-family boundary, and a loss (or gain) of control over time, all of which may be associated with feelings of time crunch.

How might information technology be designed to combat rush, busyness, and overload? Ideas often include solutions that restore a single-tasking (as opposed to multitasking), no-interruption working style that maintains a strict work-family boundary—for example, blocking social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter while working, reading email only at certain points during the day, or presetting leisure times in one's calendar. These solutions were designed with the mind-set that we are too busy, that we need a break from the flood of email messages, appointments, tasks, and contacts. Why? So we can focus better on what we want to achieve, and therefore be more productive and efficient. By blocking out personal time in the calendar for downtime, relaxation, or meditation, we admit that our day is overloaded. We see the personal time as imperative for recharging the batteries and getting back to a high-paced mode, rather than an overall more
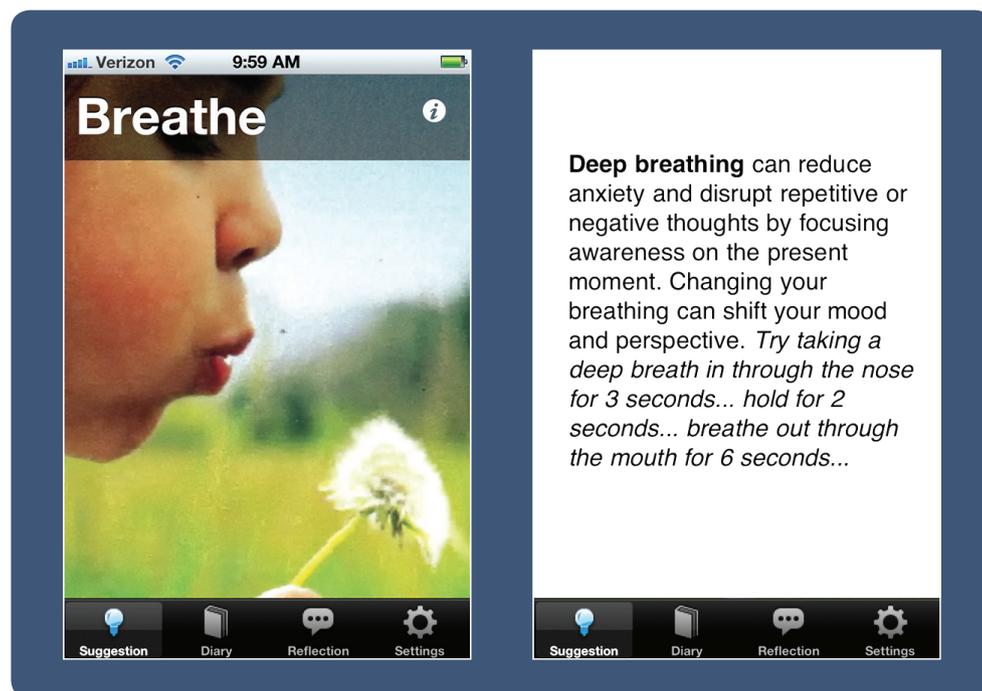
relaxed and slower-paced day. This logic is based on the premise that rush, overload, and fast pace are acceptable and expected.

Using Personal Productivity Tools
What does being busy and overloaded mean to people, and what does it look like in their everyday practices and activities? In these day-to-day experiences, how do individuals use their personal productivity tools, and what for? What can we learn from these experiences and uses for the design of productivity tools? To answer these questions, we carried out an interview study [5]. Our interviewees represented a diverse set of demographics, including a stay-at-home mom, a hairdresser, a musician, a truck driver, an after-school counselor, a community college student, and a university department chair. We asked them about their daily activities and how they go about organizing them. In response, they

described long days full of activities from early morning to late night, and showed us a variety of personal productivity tools they use, many of them physical artifacts, including wall calendars, planner books, and to-do lists.

We found that productivity tools play additional roles in everyday experiences beyond simply offering efficient ways for organizing activities, events, and tasks: Individuals used their productivity tools to negotiate their life goals and everyday priorities by deciding what goes or doesn't go into the tool; they felt socially committed by recording activities that involve others; and they gained a sense of structure and control over their lives by recording a representation of their everyday activities, tasks, and schedules.

Each participant personally customized their specific tools for their own needs and purposes. For example, retiree Kurt used a

▶ Figure 1. GoSlow's suggestion screen includes a theme and image (left) and more information (right).
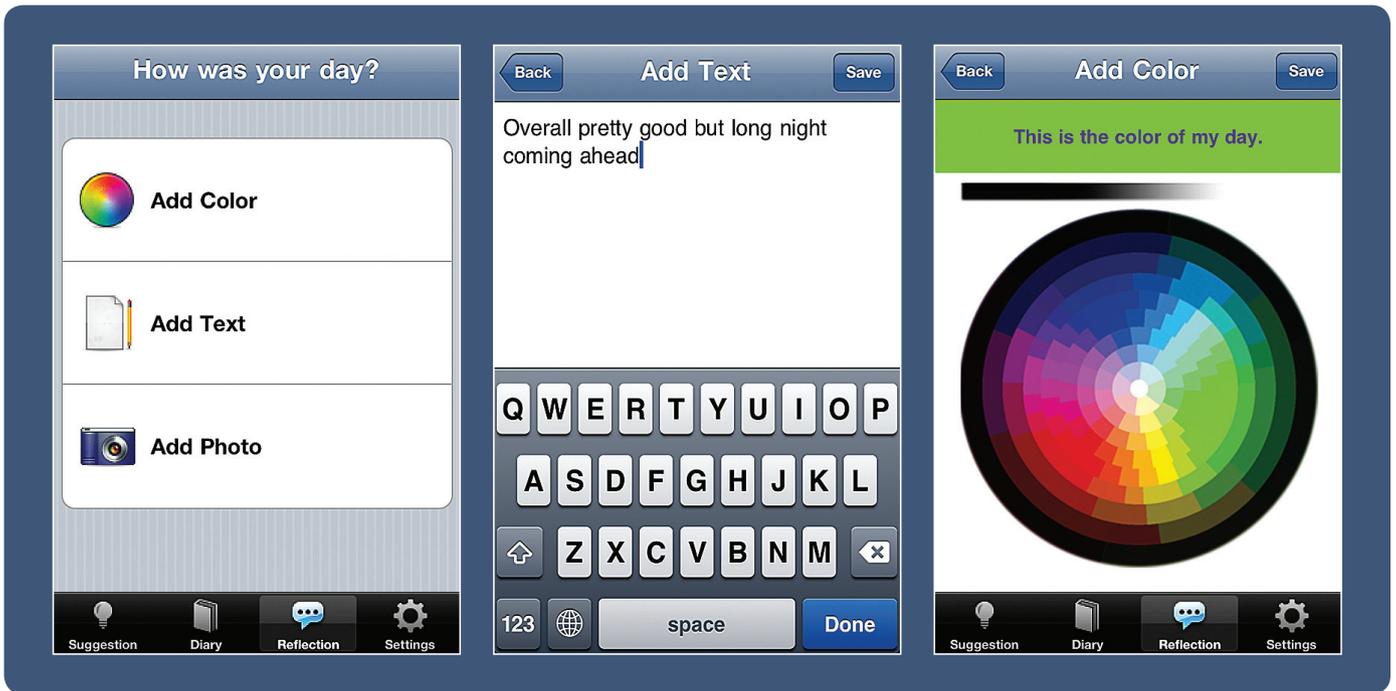
▶ Figure 2. From the main reflection menu screen (left), the user can enter a reflection by adding text (center), choosing a color (right), or taking a photo using the iPhone's built-in camera.

calendar book to plan an upcoming week's schedule; after-school program director Tammy used it to list and check off daily to-do items; and truck driver Keith, to record work-related activities after they had occurred. These idiosyncratic purposes and uses point to ways in which users of these tools construct their identities, not only through the activities and tasks they do, but also through the ways in which they organize and represent them in their productivity tools.

Furthermore, despite living in a culture that values systematic efficiency and productivity, our interviewees described many cases in which being rational is impossible or unwanted. For example, Sarah described flowing with her children's messy craft project right after she had cleaned the house and before they had to leave it to go somewhere. Real life is full of dynamic, unplanned, unexpected

interactions and situations. One way to combat busy schedules that keep changing is by being efficient and goal-oriented, formally representing activities in a tool, and attempting to follow the plan. But embracing values such as slowness, spontaneity, flexibility, unmediated interactions, and pause may be another way. Nick, an artist-activist, pointed out that adding an item to his to-do lists scribbled on scrap paper formalizes a commitment and creates pressure on him to accomplish it. He reminisced about periods in his life in which he did not use to-do lists and felt freer to be more spontaneous and flexible with his time, overall living a simpler, slower life.

Designing for Slowness

Hallnäs and Redström suggested *slow technology*, introducing pause and reflection as alternatives to efficiency, rationality, and productivity [6]. Can these principles be

integrated into personal productivity tools? Is there room for slowness even when we are task-oriented, at work and outside of work? *Slow productivity* tools may sound like an oxymoron, but if successful, they may help individuals restore the sane, healthy, and simple life they might be longing for across the realms of work, home, and leisure.

To explore this possibility, we started by designing and developing GoSlow, a mobile application prototype that offers serendipitous moments of downtime, pause, and introspective reflection [7]. We faced a paradoxical challenge: to offer ways to mitigate stress and slow down with the very technology that is accused of being a source of stress: the smartphone. We therefore followed the principle of minimal design, acknowledging that not every activity be formally represented and that slowness and reflection can happen outside of the system without leaving digital

traces. This may restore the user's control of when and how they should cut back and slow down, without being coerced or feeling bad about not using the application.

Upon setting up the GoSlow application, the user defines a time in the day in which they will receive a random "daily suggestion" (see Figure 1). These everyday suggestions, such as "breathe," "laugh," and "relax your body," were created by our university's health-promotion services based on established literature on stress management and on their ongoing interactions with the community. The user also defines a time in the day for reflection, which the application prompts with a simple question: How was your day? Users can then record their reflections as a response to this prompt by entering text, choosing a color, or taking a photo (see Figure 2). Again, at no time are users pressed to follow the daily suggestions or to record their reflections. Instead, these features offer subtle reminders to calm down, unwind, and contemplate one's everyday level of overload, pace, and stress. This can happen slowly or briefly, with the application or without it.

We gave GoSlow to seven individuals to install on their personal phones and use for a few days. They reported they enjoyed the simple suggestions for slowing down that they could choose when and how to incorporate into their everyday lives, and the mini moments that GoSlow offered for pause and contemplation. Users referred to GoSlow as an outlet or a buddy with which they shared their personal thoughts, and one user said that seeing the suggestions and reflection prompts helped him stop rushing around for a minute and think about his day.

What if a digital calendar, a task manager, or an email system could offer similar features? Spontaneity, slow moments, gaps between tasks, and unmediated interactions in one's daily routine are currently marginalized in the design of productivity tools. Our current efforts focus on incorporating these concepts into productivity tools, to highlight a fundamental but perhaps forgotten need for inefficient downtime and nonfunctionality.

Conclusion

The role that personal productivity tools play in a culture in which rush and overload are prevalent can be seen as a double-edged sword. These tools are being improved, becoming stronger, smarter, and faster for managing increasing amounts of events, tasks, contacts, and information on a daily basis. At the same time, they may be contributing to increasingly packed schedules, overcommitments, and feelings of overload.

The Slow Food movement was founded in 1989 against the rising fast-food phenomenon to encourage the restoration of local food production and consumption traditions. Many of us balance between fast and slow food: We cherish lengthy, home-cooked meals made with local products, but we sometimes crave and gobble up a quick sandwich. In comparison, designers of productivity tools should think about when being rational and efficient is important, and when slowness, inefficiency, reflection, and nonmediation are beneficial and should be supported.

Individual users do not live in a vacuum, but instead are part of organizational and social contexts with cultural norms by which they live. Incorporating slowness as a design principle in one productivity tool might not solve the problems related to a high-achieving, fast-paced life. However, highlighting slowness in productivity tools could open a window for acknowledging the benefit of this alternative value, giving people an opportunity to reflect on their time and task commitments and on what is really important to them.

ENDNOTES:

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Gilly Leshed teaches HCI, CSCW, and CMC in the Department of Communication at Cornell University. She uses qualitative and quantitative methods in her research as well as technology design to highlight social aspects of technical systems that challenge the task-oriented assumption behind many information technologies for individuals and groups.