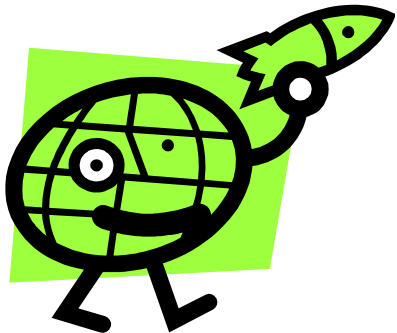


# 2011: JUMP-START SIMPLE

By Dawn Groves



January and February are the traditional months for hauling out your New Year's resolutions complete with built-in self destruct sequences. The yearly Lose-Ten-Lbs, Exercise-Daily, or Stop-Being-Late goals may be sincere and well executed, but they're doomed to fail as soon as you become anxious or overwhelmed.

It's your biology. **The stressed-out brain resists giving up energy to anything demanding willpower or delayed gratification.** At the right moment, it will fall back into the comfortable, well-worn neural pathways and instant relief of old habits. This is how the brain manages its energy. It's an efficient system with an unwelcome side effect: sabotaging healthy behavior change.



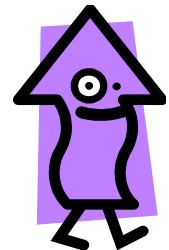
Bummer.

Let's try something different. In 2011, how about partnering with your biology instead of working against it? Here are two simple, biologically smart resolutions that will not only

make a big difference in your work productivity, they may actually stick around until 2012.

## 1. Do hard stuff first.

If you knew you had only so much high octane attention, when and where would you choose to use it? Attention is a brain function that lives on glucose (among other things). Studies have shown when an activity takes mental effort, glucose drops. Subsequent tasks requiring higher brain functions become more challenging to complete and are accomplished with less accuracy. **So here's the lesson: do hard stuff earlier in the day.** Less complicated tasks should be reserved for later in the day when your brain resources are lower. Stop fighting the biology of your thinking process.



## 2. Plan focus time.

Most of us have a hard time focusing in a distracting work arena, especially when we're resistant or have minds given to wander. One good solution is to plan "focus" blocks.

First, ask yourself, **"What's the best use of my time right now?"** This helps focus your limited attention on the most important and challenging task of the moment. It works well with priorities that can shift in urgency.

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Next, do that one activity for a predetermined period of time such as 25, 30 or 45 minutes. If you experience a lot of resistance, set a shorter period. **Resist the North American tendency to “hunker down and stay there.”** Hunkering often leads to habitual mental wandering. It’s more efficient if you set a shorter, more focused period. Use a timer so you don’t keep checking the clock.

Don’t forget to activate voice mail, disable email or text message chimes, and inform work associates that you’re on the clock. (If they know you’ll be available in 25 minutes, they’ll learn to wait.) A visual cue such as headphones, a highly visible egg timer, or a note on the door will convey focus time to colleagues without creating disruption.

**When the focus interval is over, take a mandatory short recovery timeout.** Check in with associates. Get some coffee. If you aren’t sure what to do next then ask yourself again, what is the best use of my time right now? And set the timer again.

Although the practice of working in short bursts isn’t novel, Francesco Cirillo has captured it into a simple system he calls the Pomodoro Technique, using a timer that looks like a pomodoro (red tomato). Clever!

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Efficient work requires attention; attention requires focus. **When strong focus is needed, you must maximize mental resources and stop trying to multi-task.** For a defined period, your mind and backside both need to be planted

smack dab in the middle of the activity you’ve deemed most important.

The good news is that your brain and body respond well to this kind of structure. There may be initial resistance to the change, but you’ll quickly adjust and get busy once the focus intervals are established.

Here’s another cool piece of brain trivia: Studies suggest that short-term memory embeds itself best using sound. Words sounding similar to each other such as “cat” and “fat” are easier to recall in the short term. Any sound accompaniment makes a difference. (Long term memory is more structured and semantic.) The upshot of this is, if you want to remember something quickly, try pairing it with snorting, squeaking, or hooting.

Kidding.

Well, not really.

- 
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  2. Staffan Noteberg



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