

How you are wasting your time

Eric Blair

30 April 2010

It's the little things. The things that take ten seconds a day. They add up.

I finally sat down and did the math. Let's say that some stupid activity, like typing in a password, takes fifteen seconds every day you come in to work. Then over the course of a year, you've spent an hour per year typing in passwords.

From here, we could think like an efficiency expert, and ask what your wage is. I don't know who you are, but let's make up numbers: you get paid \$25 an hour, and have twenty coworkers in your office making the same. OK, so the company is spending \$500/year to have people enter passwords. Plus the time spent changing passwords and mistyping them, which doubles or triples that.

Here's the rule of thumb: **if you spend two minutes doing something every work-day, then that will total a full workday per year engaging in that activity.**

You can scale that figure up or down. As above, fifteen seconds is an eighth of two minutes, and so totals to an hour/year. An hour is thirty times two minutes, and so an hour-per-day activity equals thirty full workdays per year.

Now let's move on to the rest of your life. The rule of thumb here is that **if you spend four minutes per day doing something, then repeating it every day for a year will add up to a full day.** Scaling down, ten seconds is 1/24th of four minutes, so ten seconds/day adds up to an hour/year. Scaling up, an hour/day adds up to 15 days/year.

This is the sort of thing spreadsheets were made for, so for your calculating convenience, here is a spreadsheet¹ (in OpenOffice.org²'s ISO-standard open document format) so you can toy around with the figures. You'll notice that I assumed 240 work days/year and 360 days/year, because the numbers are much more round that way, and there are few things that we really never skip.

OK, at this point, you've made a tally of your whole life, and worked out that you spend the first day of your work year logging in to your PC, the next two work weeks listening to your coworker complain about his neighbor, and a full week of your life lying in bed wondering what you're doing with your life. You've established that, as they say, living's mostly a-wastin' time.

The question from there is what to do about it. Much of what you've tallied probably isn't worth a couple of hours per year. So cut it out. Spending an hour or so learning to eliminate a minute-a-day problem really will pay off over the course of a year.

¹http://fluff.info/blog/asst/265-sum_of_moments.ods

²openoffice.org

But most of the little things can't be eliminated. Even if you could eliminate peeing from your life (since it adds up to at least a day/year for even the most efficient whizzers), what would you replace it with? More time trolling news sites? Going back to that season of the Simpsons that you missed? Toying with spreadsheets? You could take this exercise as a chance to eliminate cruft from your life, but you can also take it as a reminder that most of the experience of living is simply not productive or goal-oriented.