

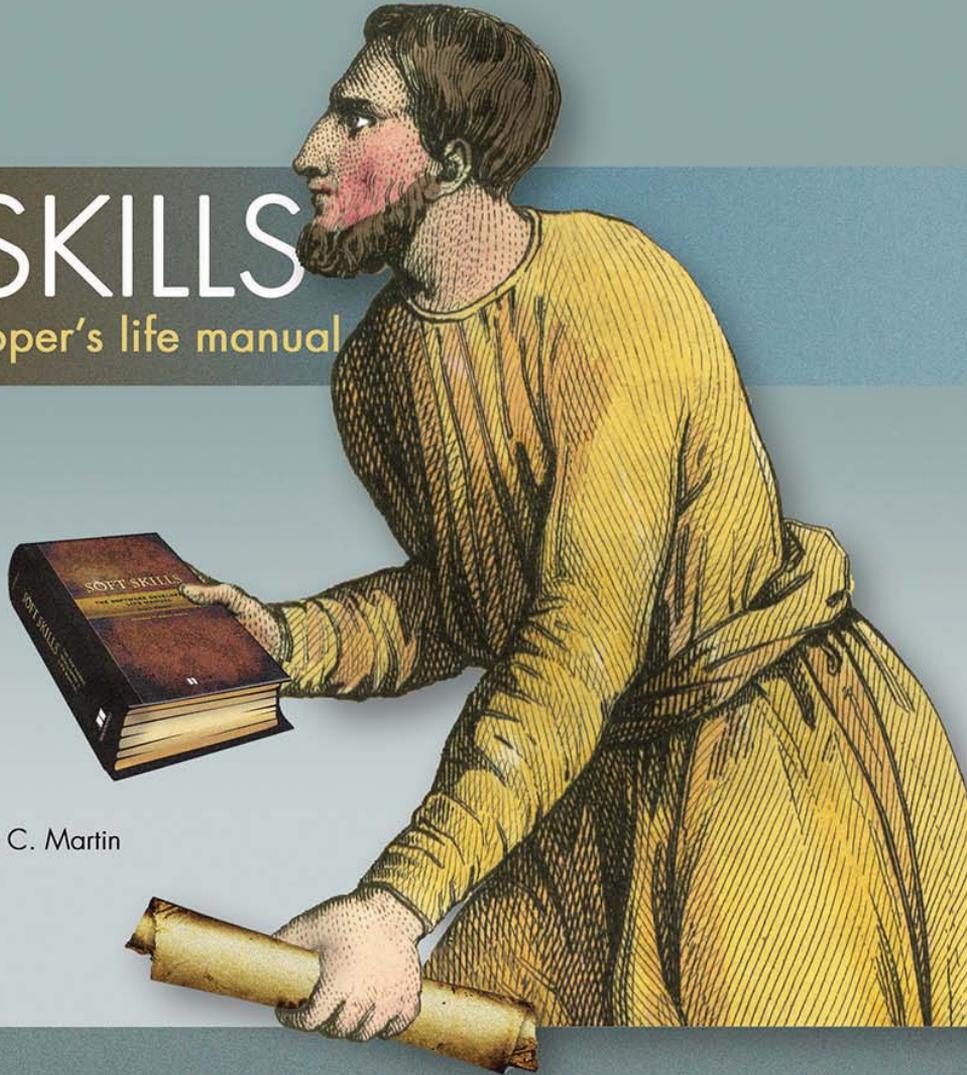
SAMPLE CHAPTER

SOFT SKILLS

The software developer's life manual

John Z. Sonmez

Forewords by
Scott Hanselman and Robert C. Martin





Soft Skills

by John Z. Sonmez

Chapter 37

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My personal productivity plan

I've gone through almost all the major productivity systems out there. I've tried Getting Things Done. I've spent time using the Pomodoro Technique. I've used variations of the "Don't break the chain" technique from Seinfeld. (In this technique, you basically mark each day on a calendar that you successfully achieve doing some task. The idea is to make the streak as long as possible.) I've even tried list-based systems like Autofocus. After trying all these systems, I couldn't find one that worked perfectly for me, so I took some of the most useful things from all of them and combined them with some Agile processes to create my own.

In this chapter, I'm going to tell you the exact productivity plan I use to keep myself as productive as possible—the same plan I'm using right now to help me write this book.

Overview

The basic idea of my productivity plan is to plan out my entire week in small tasks that take no more than two hours. I use what is called a Kanban board to organize my week. The Kanban board is a simple board that has different columns that you can move tasks between. In the Agile world, Kanban boards usually contain columns for the various states some work could be in. Typically, there will be states like "not started," "in progress," and "done." But my Kanban board has columns for each day of the week. (Take a look at *Kanban in Action* by Marcus Hammarberg and Joakim Sundén [Manning, 2014] for an excellent book that talks more about the Kanban technique.)

I utilize the Pomodoro Technique to stay focused when I'm working on my tasks and to estimate and measure how long they'll take. We'll talk more about how that technique works in the next chapter.

Quarterly planning

My planning starts at the quarter level. I divide my year up into four quarters of three months each. When I plan out my quarter, I'll try to come up with one big project that I want to get done during that quarter and I'll also plan out some smaller goals. I'll also think about what things I'll do on a weekly or daily basis. This planning is usually done in a list in an application like Evernote. I'll create a high-level outline of what I want to accomplish during the quarter. This gives me a good idea of what my one major goal is and how I'll achieve it. It also keeps me focused.

Some of my quarterly goals have been things like writing this book, creating my *How to Market Yourself as a Software Developer* package (<http://devcareerboost.com/m>), and sometimes even just taking a big break.

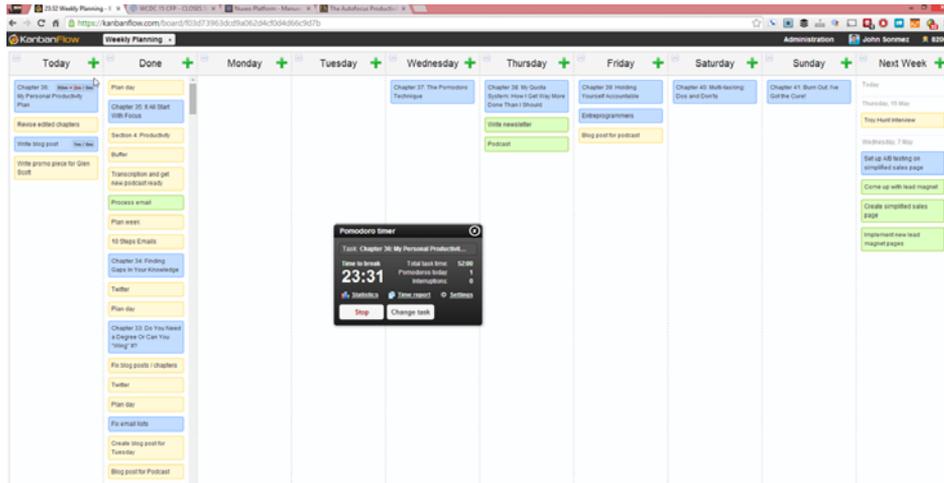
Monthly planning

Every month, on the first day of the month, I print out the calendar for that month and try to plan out where I think work will fall on the days of the month. I can't be very exact here, but I can estimate roughly how much work I can get done that month based on how many days are available and any previous commitments I made. I'll simply take items from my quarterly outline and see what I can fit on the calendar.

I'll also plan out anything that I want to do on a monthly basis. For example, I batch-create all my YouTube videos for the month at the beginning of the month and that usually takes me a whole day.

Weekly planning

Every Monday morning, I'll start my day by planning my week. I was using a tool called Trello (<http://trello.com>) for the Kanban board I



Sample Kanban weekly schedule

use to organize my week, but lately I’ve been using Kanbanflow (<http://simpleprogrammer.com/ss-kanbanflow>) to create my Kanban board, because it has a built-in pomodoro timer. My Kanban board has a column for each day of the week and also has columns for “today,” for what I’m going to be doing that day, and “done,” for any tasks that I’ve already completed. I also have a column called “next week” where I move any tasks that I couldn’t get done this week or anything I know I need to do next week and don’t want to forget.

I start off by going through the list of things that I need to do every week. I have a checklist I created in Evernote that lists everything I need to do each week. For me, it includes

- Writing a blog post
- Producing a YouTube video
- Creating a blog post about the video
- Recording two podcasts
- Creating a blog post about the podcast
- Getting my podcast transcribed and edited
- Writing a newsletter email
- Scheduling my social media content for the week

I schedule all of these tasks by creating cards in Trello or Kanbanflow. For each card, I estimate how long it will take in pomodori (which are each 25 minutes of focused work). I assume that I can get about 10 pomodori done each day. I make sure to add these tasks first, because I know they need to get done each week.

Once I've added the mandatory tasks for the week, I go through my calendar and see if there are any fixed appointments that will take up time during the day. For those days, I'll either create cards to represent those appointments—if they're work-related—or I'll reduce the number of pomodori I expect to complete that day.

Finally, I'll slot in whatever work I plan to get done that week. I'll add cards for each task I'd like to get done that week, filling in all the available slots. I usually leave myself a small amount of slack by only scheduling nine pomodori worth of work each day.

At this point I'll have a pretty good idea of what I can accomplish during that week. I find this prediction to be very accurate. I have the



Schedule your weekly tasks.

power to shift around cards to prioritize certain tasks that I think are more important and I want to be sure get done. I'm also able to see clearly where my time is going each week and I'm able to control where I spend that time ahead of time instead of looking back at where I actually spent the time in retrospect.

Daily planning and execution

Each day I'll start off by getting my workout done, before I sit down to work. I do this so that I won't have an interruption during my day that might break my focus. Once I'm ready to sit down and actually work, the first thing I do is plan my day.

To plan my day, I move the cards from the corresponding day into the "today" column and put them in the order of importance. I make sure that I work on the most important things first each day. I'll also adjust the tasks for that day and give them a bit more detail if what the task entails wasn't clear enough from the card. I want to make sure that I know exactly what I'm doing and what criteria I'll use to determine that a task is done before I start it. Doing this prevents me from procrastinating and wasting time during the day with tasks that aren't clearly defined.

Once I've slotted everything I plan to do for the day, I'll go back and make small changes to the schedule of the rest of the week. Sometimes, I'll get more done than I expected, so I'll need to move cards forward or add new cards to the board. Other times, I'll be behind, so I'll need to make adjustments and possibly move some cards to the next week.

Finally, I'm ready to work. I'll go over the Pomodoro Technique in more detail in the next chapter, but I basically use the Pomodoro Technique throughout the day to focus on a single task at a time and to work through my list.

Dealing with interruptions

There are many interruptions that can come at you during the day. As soon as you sit down, the phone rings. Your email notification pops up

on your screen. Someone has liked your post on Facebook. Oh no, the world is coming to an end again, better check CNN and find out why. Some interruptions are unavoidable, but I've found that you can actually get rid of most of them if you're willing to put forth the effort.

I try to avoid interruptions as much as possible during the day, because I know they're the biggest productivity killers. I work at home in my home office, so this is a bit easier than in cubicle environment, but it's still a challenge. My phone is never set to ring. It's always on silent during the day. My wife and daughter also know not to disturb me while I'm working on a pomodoro. If they need my attention, they'll either send me an email or pop their head in the door so that I know when I'm on a break to come and see them—unless, of course, there's an emergency.

Another big thing I do to avoid interruptions is to basically ignore email during the day. During breaks, I'll often check email just to make sure there isn't something urgent that has to be dealt with immediately, but unless there's something truly urgent, I'll only reply to email at one set time in the evening. By batching up all my email correspondence at one time, I'm able to get through my email much more efficiently. (I'd probably be more productive if I could kick the habit of checking email, but I'm only human.)

I also either log out of or make myself unavailable on all the chat programs that can be a source of constant distraction. I find chat programs to be a complete waste of time. In most cases an email works better, because I can respond at my leisure instead of being interrupted while I'm trying to focus.

Breaks and vacations

Working like a machine on a tight schedule every single day isn't something that can be maintained in the long run, so I make sure that I have some time off and some weeks I'll do what I call "free work," which is basically a week where I don't use pomodori and I don't plan the whole week out. I just work on what I feel like working on during that week. Those weeks are usually pretty unproductive and I'm eager

to get back to my system, but they give me a break from the monotony and help me to remember how important having a system is to being productive.

I also take a day off every once in a while to recharge or do something with my family. I just schedule my week around it accordingly. Tomorrow I'm taking my daughter to Disney World, so I'll be just doing three pomodori worth of work when we get home. I take a longer break every few months for a couple of weeks or a month at a time. During that longer break, I either queue up things like blog posts and podcasts, or I do the minimum I need to get done to keep up with my weekly commitments. I find that this kind of break is needed after working hard and being productive for an extended period of time. (After I finish this book, I'll be taking one of those breaks.)

Taking action

- You don't have to use my exact productivity system, but you should have some kind of system in place to ensure you get consistent results. Make a note of what you're doing right now each week. See if there's some way you can develop a system that you can repeat on a monthly, weekly, and daily basis.

SOFT SKILLS

The software developer's life manual

John Z. Sonmez

For most software developers, coding is the fun part. The hard bits are dealing with clients, peers, and managers, staying productive, achieving financial security, keeping yourself in shape, and finding true love. This book is here to help.

Soft Skills: The software developer's life manual is a guide to a well-rounded, satisfying life as a technology professional. In it, developer and life coach John Sonmez offers advice to developers on important "soft" subjects like career and productivity, personal finance and investing, and even fitness and relationships.

Arranged as a collection of 71 short chapters, this fun-to-read book invites you to dip in wherever you like. A Taking Action section at the end of each chapter shows you how to get quick results. *Soft Skills* will help make you a better programmer, a more valuable employee, and a happier, healthier person.

WHAT'S INSIDE

- Boost your career by building a personal brand
- John's secret ten-step process for learning quickly
- Fitness advice to turn your geekiness to your advantage
- Unique strategies for investment and early retirement

John Sonmez is a developer, teacher, and life coach who helps technical professionals boost their careers and live a more fulfilled life.



"Useful, practical, and actionable advice on a wide array of topics."

—From the Foreword
by Scott Hanselman

"Conveys a message that every software developer (and everybody else, for that matter) ought to hear."

—From the Foreword by
Robert C. Martin (Uncle Bob)

"Stop coding for a few hours and read this book! Your code—and your life—will be much better."

—lonel Condor, SDL

"A pragmatic and holistic view of software development."

—Javier Muñoz Mellid, Igalia

"A career coach in a book."

—Heather Campbell, Kainos

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