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# Mise-en-Place for Knowledge Workers

6 Practices for Working Clean

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Workplace Skills / Become More Productive

## Take-Aways

- Knowledge work lacks a “culture of systematic improvement” common to other professions and trades.
- To increase your productivity, borrow from chefs’ six-part mise-en-place philosophy. First, sequence your work.
- Second, use placeholders as reminders to execute next steps.
- Third, distinguish between immersive and processing time to help yourself prioritize.
- Fourth, cultivate a “finishing mind-set.”
- Fifth, use small, exact movements to work most efficiently.
- And sixth, make your physical environment conducive to productive work.

## Recommendation

Restaurant kitchens were once messy, chaotic, disorganized places. In 1859, a 13-year-old boy named Georges Auguste Escoffier revolutionized how kitchens operate by introducing a philosophy called mise en place. His method streamlined culinary work and is now the gold standard for kitchens worldwide. Productivity expert Tiago Forte argues that knowledge work must undergo a similar transformation. By infusing your work with a dollop of mise-en-place principles, you can reap palatable productivity gains.

## Summary

### **Knowledge work lacks a “culture of systematic improvement” common to other professions and trades.**

Trainee nurses learn the best method for starting an IV, and apprentice carpenters learn the best practices for constructing a door frame; but knowledge workers receive no such guidance for structuring their work. Left to their own devices, they often end up using ineffective, self-concocted systems which breed chaos.

*“Mise en place can be distilled down to just two words: work clean. Clean as in efficient. Clean as in elegant. Clean as in direct. Clean as in without friction. Clean as in simple. Clean as in clear. Clean as in decisive. Clean as in powerful.”*

To prevent disorder in their kitchens, chefs employ a philosophy called mise en place, whose guiding principle is to “work clean.” Chefs prepare their equipment, ingredients and work stations prior to cooking to create simple, frictionless processes and to externalize a portion of their cognitive load to the environment. By automating the repetitive aspects of their jobs, chefs have more time to focus on the creative aspects. Knowledge workers can benefit from adopting a similar workplace philosophy.

### **To increase your productivity, borrow from chefs’ six-part mise-en-place philosophy. First, sequence your work.**

Sequence is of vital importance in a kitchen; after all, you can’t cook pasta if the water’s not boiling, dice meat if it’s not thawed or add garlic if it’s not chopped.

*“The present has incalculably more value than the future. Because the actions you take right now have more time for their effects to propagate.”*

The same is true of knowledge work. Once you become aware of the importance of sequence, you’ll notice that the first jobs you tackle each day are most important, as they set the tone for the entire day. So make a to-do list each morning to determine how you will sequence your day.

### **Second, use placeholders as reminders to execute next steps.**

Chefs can’t commit every tiny action needed to complete a dish to memory. Instead, they use objects as placeholders – that is, prompts to remind them of the next step in the sequence. They may lay herbs on a cutting board, put a clove of garlic on the counter, then pour oil in a pan on the stove. They chop the

herbs until they hear the oil spitting, which prods them to add vegetables to the pan and to start chopping garlic. Each physical object reminds the chef of an “open loop” in the work sequence.

Knowledge workers, too, can use placeholders as reminders for future tasks, though most of those tools are digital. For example, when an open loop like an important email or stray idea arises, enter it on your calendar, to-do list or read-later app. These digital aids can trigger action at an appropriate time in the future.

### **Third, distinguish between immersive and processing time to help yourself prioritize.**

Boiling water and thawing meat require processing time. These activities don’t require the chef’s undivided attention while they happen. Tasks that consume immersive time, such as sautéing and seasoning, require the chef’s complete focus.

*“Not all time is created equal.”*

Knowledge workers deeply value immersive time – that is, the period they do their most important deep work. But don’t underestimate processing time. The small actions you do today – like training a colleague in one of your tasks or delegating one of your daily chores – can unleash immediate efficiencies. The earlier you initiate these steps, the more you can leverage the labor of others to get the job done.

### **Fourth, cultivate a “finishing mind-set.”**

A chef knows that a meal that is 99% complete has no value. Only when the dish is 100% finished can a chef serve it up, forget about it and focus on preparing the next customer’s meal. Thus, chefs don’t start what they can’t finish. Unfinished tasks consume your attention and focus. Eventually, managing a multitude of small, unfinished tasks can take up all of your time and energy, leaving you treading water just to stay afloat. When you start a task, have a plan for finishing it. Knowledge work can be unpredictable. When interruptions arise, take a moment to find a home for the unfinished task: Put it in your task manager, or bookmark the point you stopped reading. Leave the task poised for easy retrieval, so you can finish and unlock the full value of your labor later.

### **Fifth, use small, exact movements to work most efficiently.**

Chefs divide each task into small, accurate movements, allowing them to work quickly and produce consistent results. Knowledge workers are adept at breaking big projects down into smaller steps, but they often forget to do so when it comes to repetitive tasks, like checking email. A standardized process for repeated actions helps you improve speed and efficiency over time, without compromising quality.

### **And sixth, make your physical environment conducive to productive work.**

A chef’s kitchen is neat and tidy. Tools and ingredients are stored in intuitive places where the chef can find them quickly and easily.

*“The workspace becomes like an extension of the chef’s mind, so she can reach for a spoon or knife just as intuitively and naturally as she reaches for a thought in her mind.”*

Arrange your workspace in a way that offers stability, even when your work is unpredictable. Routinize the start and end of your workday. Use a digital notes app, so you can access your work on any device. At the end of each day, shut down your computer to create boundaries and achieve work-life balance.

## About the Author

**Tiago Forte** is the founder of Forte Labs, a San Francisco-based consultancy for improving productivity.



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