



# Hack The System

the minimalist

guide to hacking

your habits



**I'm not here to waste your time**

**You can spend your days looking for the secret system**

**Or you can choose one that works**

**The pages that follow won't be everything you need to  
succeed**

**But they'll lead you in the right direction**

## Have you ever wanted to achieve a goal -- but find yourself bogged down by distractions?

You're not alone. For years, I thought that it was a medical reason that I couldn't focus. Sure, I did okay in school, but every time I *really* wanted to get something done, well...I didn't.

Instead, I would find myself visiting the same websites, browsing forums, and sitting in chat rooms: complete wastes of time.

Think back to your own personal productivity. Do you often procrastinate until the last minute? Do you often find yourself letting some task or goal linger on your to-do list, without ever actually getting done?

I used to think it was willpower. Or a chemical imbalance. But I was wrong -- it was **the context**.

We are living in a society designed for distraction. We are living in a society where companies, apps, blogs, and websites vie for our attention with bright notifications and loud audio reminders. And suddenly, it's become socially acceptable--nay, socially *expected*--to check our phones in the company of others, or when we are on our own.

Hell, there's even a Wikipedia page about [Phantom Ringing](#).

When we can't succeed in completing a task, when a task is sitting at the top of our to-do list but consistently gets replaced by something as inane as a Skype conversation or a post on Reddit, it's not always a fault of willpower.

**It's a fault of the system.**

And that is what [Hack The System](#) is about. How can you manipulate the system that you're living in to ensure your success, rather than fighting it?

## Introducing the Rider, the Elephant, and the Path

In their phenomenal book [\*Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard\*](#), the Heath brothers compare behavior change to a Rider who is traveling via an Elephant. **The Rider is the superego**—he sets the direction for the way **the Elephant, your emotional ego**, will go. Don't forget though -- an elephant is very strong.

Let's take the example of avoiding sugar. If your brain (the Rider, that is) decides he wants to not eat any candy, he'll have to compete against your emotions (the Elephant) to control his cravings. I don't know about you, but I don't plan to go face-to-face against an elephant any time soon.

There is, however, a third, very important variable: **the Path**. If there is only one direction that the Elephant can go—if he has been going downhill, on a narrow road with no turnoffs, for example—it is unlikely that the Elephant will go in the wrong direction. **The Path is your context, the situation that you are putting yourself in.**



Me doing pushups on an elephant:  
Imagine me as your mental brain,  
and the elephant as your emotional  
brain.

This was the cover of India's largest  
tabloid. See the full article here:  
<http://manee.sh/9DDEOb>.

So if you position your mental Rider and your emotional Elephant on a Path that has no access to candy--for example, [living in the wilderness for 28 days](#)--it doesn't matter what your emotional Elephant decides to do. He just simply won't have access to candy.

*And that is how you win.*

## What are some examples of System Hacking (shaping your Path)?

I call a context change a *System Hack*. I see the system as being your current context, and the best way to influence behavior change is to hack that system. By changing your context, you'll change your life.

### • Hacking Accountability

Everyone seems to know that accountability is important for getting things done, but few actually use it.

Every morning, at 9am, I receive a call from my accountability partner. She and I tell each other our plans for the day (written down on a spreadsheet) and give each other advice. If we fail, we have to share what we did wrong.

**Do you have an accountability partner?** If not, it's time to find someone: someone you trust, someone who is trying to do what you're doing. Find them, and become accountable to them. A daily phone call and shared google spreadsheet works wonders. You can set up a nice spreadsheet on Google Docs, share it with your partner, and consistently call them to make sure they are doing the same.

## • Hacking Monetary Punishment

Without a doubt, monetary punishment has been the best hack I've ever used to achieve a goal.

In June, I wanted to lose weight. So, I followed the Paleo diet. However, I would always find myself cheating.

"Just one cookie isn't so bad!" But then I would have 15.

"Hey, maybe just one bite of ice cream." But it's never only one bite, is it really?

So I decided to try using monetary punishment. Instead of trying to force myself to not eat a single cookie, I just told my accountability partner this:

"For the next two weeks, I will eat only Paleo. Every day that I mess up, I owe you \$50. One bite of a cookie, one piece of bread, doesn't matter--I will pay you \$50."

**The change was astounding.** Forbidden food became a non-issue--I didn't even *consider* cheating because I knew that I would owe \$50.

If you don't have an accountability partner, you can check out [Stikk.com](http://Stikk.com). Stikk works in the same way--you set a goal, make it public, and if you fail, you owe a significant amount of money to an individual or an organization.

Really want to achieve your goal? Set it up so that if you fail, you have to donate your money to a charity organization that you despise. Hey, the most popular charity currently on Stikk is the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum. Just sayin'

## • Hacking Physical Pain and Public Shame

One thing I learned about myself through time tracking (with [RescueTime](#)) is that the number one waste of my time is chat. Skype, Gchat, Facebook: you name it, I waste my time with it.

One time, I had a very specific project I really needed to finish. I just couldn't get it done, no matter what happened, and the deadline was steadily approaching. So, I did what I had to do.

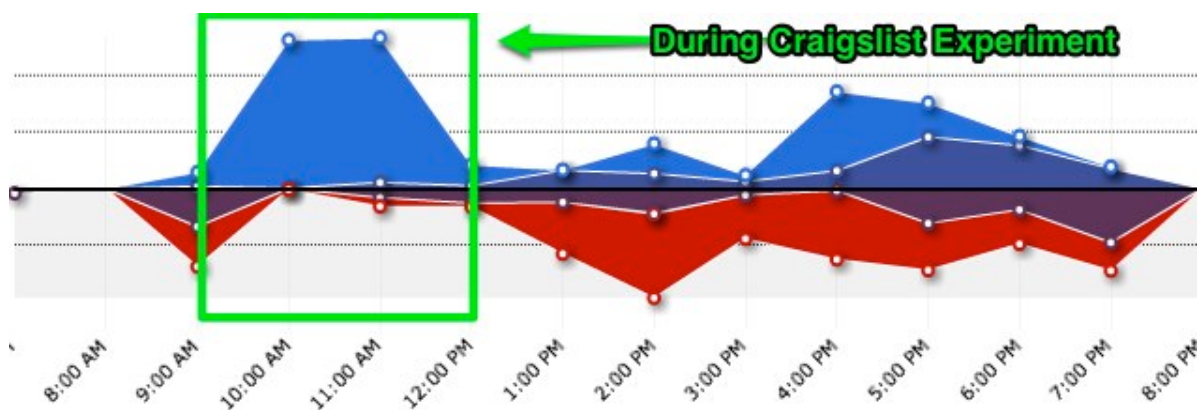
I hired a girl on Craigslist to slap me.

Instead of trying to force myself to remain off of Facebook and Gchat, I brought in the cavalry. For \$8 an hour, I hired someone to sit next to me and watch me as I worked. If I went on any distracting site, her job was to slap me in the face.

[You can see a video of her slapping me here.](#)

The funny thing, of course, was the change in productivity that occurred when she sat next to me.

Below, you'll see a graph of my RescueTime usage. Blue means productive activities, while red means unproductive activities. Take a look at the difference while she sat next to me.



My average productivity level went from 42% to 98% (!!!) when she was around. Why? Because of the social interaction. Having her watch me was like having an authority figure over me, sure. But really, having someone to work with, someone to talk to, someone to chat with in real life was the social interaction that I had been using Skype to replace. And it only cost \$8 an hour.

If you're interested, here's the ad I put up on Craigslist. I received 20 legitimate responses within 12 hours.

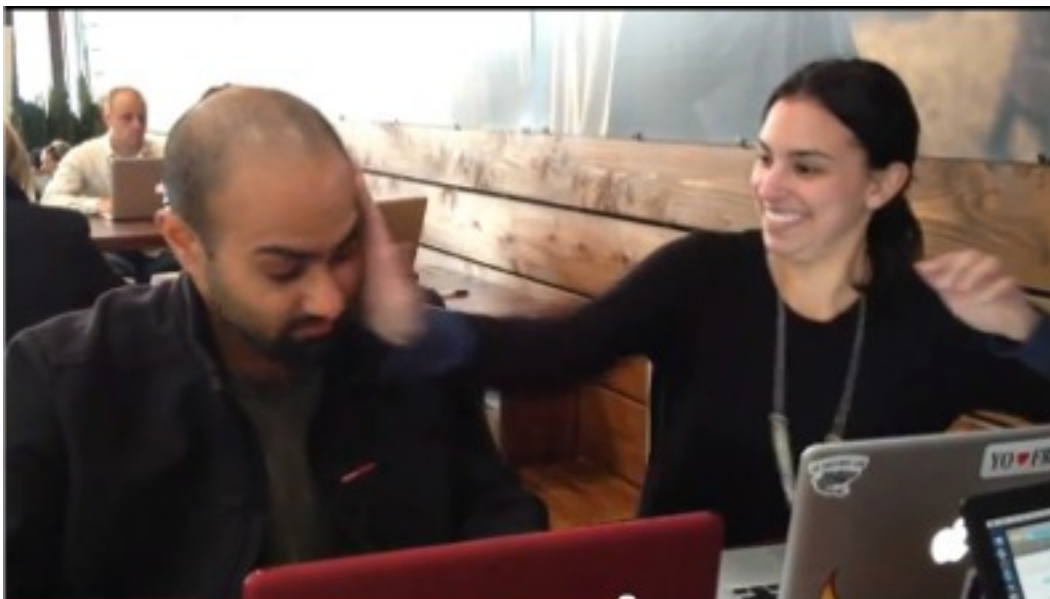
Title:(domestic gigs) Slap me if I get off task...

Hey!

I'm looking for someone who can work next to me at a defined location (my house or a mission cafe) and will make sure to watch what is happening on my screen. When I am wasting time, you'll have to yell at me or if need be, slap me.

You can do your own work at the same time. Looking for help asap, in mission, near 16th mission BART.

- Compensation: \$8 / hour, and you can do your own work from your computer at the same time.



Getting slapped by Kara. [Video here](#)





**2) Brainstorm for 5 minutes. What is holding you back? Why haven't you been able to succeed so far?**

Consider everything you've tried so far. What has worked? What has failed?

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**3) Brainstorm for 5 minutes. What would be different in your life if you succeeded?**

Consider everything you've tried thus far. What has worked? What has failed?

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**4) Now it’s time for some context shifting. Think of the last time that you experienced the success from step 3, if only for a minute. What was happening around you at that instant? What was the context?**

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When you think of therapy, you probably think of long talks on a couch with a psychologist asking you about your past. Sure, Freudian therapy can find some reasons why you do what you do, but the average session takes years--- and at the end, you’ll find out it’s all because of your mother, anyways.

Instead, consider **Solution Focused Brief Therapy**. Rather than focusing on the past, it concerns itself with the present and future.

A common question in this form of therapy is “When was the last time you succeeded in your goal, even for just a short time?” An alcoholic, for example, might respond, “I didn’t drink last Thursday when I went bowling with my wife’s friends. And I guess, the time before that, I went bowling as well.”

The solution has already happened. The therapist discovered that the *context of bowling with the alcoholic’s wife’s friends* is the context where he doesn’t drink.

So, think back to the last time you accidentally succeeded in your goal. Maybe you simply need to replicate the same circumstances.

Read more about [Solutions Focused Therapy here](#).

**5) Now that you know the context that helps you succeed, how can you incorporate this into your own life? What can you change in your daily routine to make this change happen?**

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**6) This is by far the most important step. What single action can you do today in order to inch forward towards this goal? Write it down.**

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**Now, go do that action from step 6. Seriously.  
Do it. Right now.**

**I'm not joking. Go. Go do it. One little action. Do  
it.**

**Did you do it? Great. Next step.**

**Email me at [maneesh@maneeshsethi.com](mailto:maneesh@maneeshsethi.com)  
telling me what you did, and what goal you're  
trying to achieve.**

**We are going to work together. We are both  
going to achieve our goals.**

Text

**I hope you enjoyed the Minimalist Guide to Achieving your Goals. If you have any questions, feel free to email me.**

**And check out more hacks and tips at**

**<http://hackthesystem.com>.**

**And seriously, if you didn't complete that action from step 6, get up off your ass and do it.**