

Chapter 22 - “Maximizing Productivity”

In this chapter, we'll give you some tips to maximize your productivity on the blocks. Of course, you shouldn't worry about productivity and hitting big numbers until you get the basics down, namely planting acceptable quality and making it home safely for dinner each night. We'll talk about efficient planting techniques, and efficient work strategies. We'll also talk about how to stay organized, and how to stay focused. In the end, it'll mean more money in the bank for you.

Maintaining a high level of Health and Safety is a requirement of good productivity. If you're injured or sick, your productivity will decrease. You might even miss some days of work, which cuts into your paycheque and leaves your crew short a planter. Eat well, sleep well, and practice techniques that minimize the chance of musculoskeletal injuries. Wear and use the right gear. Understand typical planting risks and hazards and how to avoid them. Remember that you have a legal responsibility to practice reasonably safe behavior.

While it's tempting to try to compete in productivity with the experienced planters, remember that they've already mastered their quality and know how to keep themselves and those around them safe. Once you become competent in terms of safety and quality, productivity will start to rise naturally, and your crew leader will feel comfortable with giving you tips to reach higher daily numbers. It's ok if you're not the fastest planter. But if you're slow, don't be shitty quality and slow.

Beginning planters often ask experienced planters how to get faster. Sometimes, the experienced planter will say, “If you want to plant more trees, you have to plant more trees.” This sounds dumb on the surface, and it seems that they're mocking the rookie, but it's absolutely true. Let's parse this and rephrase it so it makes more sense: “If you want to plant ~~more trees~~ faster, you have to ~~plant more trees~~ practice.” The best way to get better at something is to study it or practice it. The more you practice planting, the better you'll be at planting. When you're a first-time planter, only a week into the job, planting an extra thousand trees doesn't just mean a few hundred extra dollars in your bank account. It means that you've practiced more, which moves you up the experience curve faster, and makes you a faster/better planter. Some people are fast learners, and some are slower, but everybody gets faster with practice.

Staying Organized

Never underestimate the effect that being organized can have on your productivity and earnings. Don't be lazy - be organized. As a planter, making sure you're informed and ready to go at the beginning of each day makes a big difference to how productive you are.

Here are some helpful ways to stay on top of your organization:

- Remember this phrase: "Boots, bags, shovel, water, lunch." Every morning, before you get into the truck, do a visual inspection to make sure you have all five of these items.

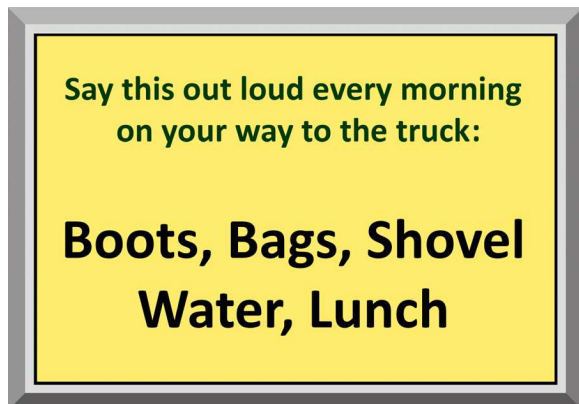


Figure 22.01

Boots, Bags, Shovel, Water, Lunch.

Remember this phrase. So long as you have these five key things each day when you arrive at the block, you shouldn't have to worry about any unnecessary down-time.

- Always fill your water jug at night. It helps you avoid a lineup, and on cold camp mornings, the water lines might be frozen, so you might be out of luck.



Figure 22.02

Fill Your Water Jug At Night.

Why put something off until morning, when you know that you'll probably be rushed? Also, at certain times of the year, the water system might freeze at night. If so, then you might not be able to fill your water jug in the morning.

- Repair or replace any worn or torn gear as soon as you notice it. Don't wait until the end of the shift to do something that you could do this evening.
- Make sure that your gear is adjusted properly to fit your body. You'll be able to work faster and more comfortably if your gear is set up correctly.



Figure 22.03
Set Your Gear Up Properly.

This type of ground is known as untreated, raw, unprepped, or plant-as-is ground. There has been no site preparation work on it prior to the commencement of planting activities.

- Know the weather forecast and potential site conditions for the next day, so you can organize any clothing or special gear in the evening. Don't leave it for morning.
- Know the contract specs. If you don't, or if you forget, ask your crew leader.
- Know what to do in an emergency. Run through scenarios in your head. Know where to find emergency contact information, and how to work things like VHF radios and satellite phones. Always know what radio channel to use to call for help. Assume that your crew leader, the person who is normally in charge, is the one who is hurt and unconscious. Your crew leader should verbally test you once in a while on a drive home from the block, by giving a potential disaster scenario and asking you to walk through all the steps that need to be taken in that situation.

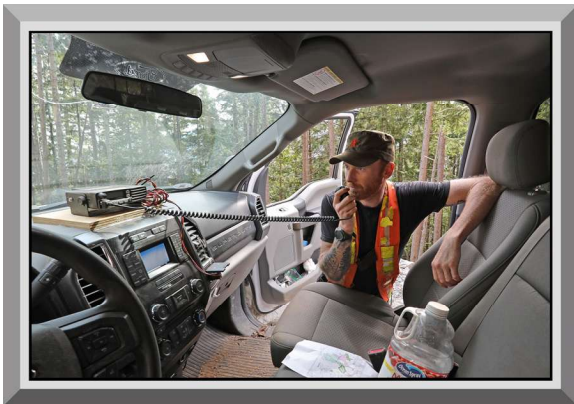


Figure 22.04
Understand Communication Protocols.

Know how to use the radios. Obviously, this matters because you can call for help if there's an emergency. However, it's also good for efficiency, because you'll know how to contact your crew leader for information if any questions or problems arise.

- Keep track of your tallies every day. Write them down in a diary along with information such as prices, block numbers, who you were working with, what the weather was like, and any other notable information that can help jog your memory about things that happened that day.



Figure 22.05
Keep Track of Your Tallies.

It is very important that you keep a record of your daily production and activities, in case any problems arise later with your payroll. Documentation could be used as corroborating evidence if you decide to talk to the Labour Board about a problem.

- If you have a laptop or tablet in camp, consider using a spreadsheet to keep an ongoing track of your daily earnings, and running averages. Many planters guess at their average daily earnings. Inevitably, they guess too high, deluding themselves that they're earning more money than they really are. A spreadsheet will give you accurate numbers, and let you see where things really stand. This information might be important to you at some point with respect to budgeting, or to making lifestyle/career decisions. Graphs and charts of ongoing daily earnings can also be very motivating to some planters.
- There used to be a good app called "Numbies" which Alex Brown developed. This app was first released in 2019 and got good reviews, but it isn't available anymore. As of spring 2026, it appears that a few other similar apps are on the verge of being released publicly, and we'll hopefully have more insight here within a year. One app that you can search for is "Planter Pro 2.0" which may be available on both Android and iOS. If you end up having a dispute with your employer, a detailed record of your production tallies will help significantly when you decide to take your case to your provincial labour board.

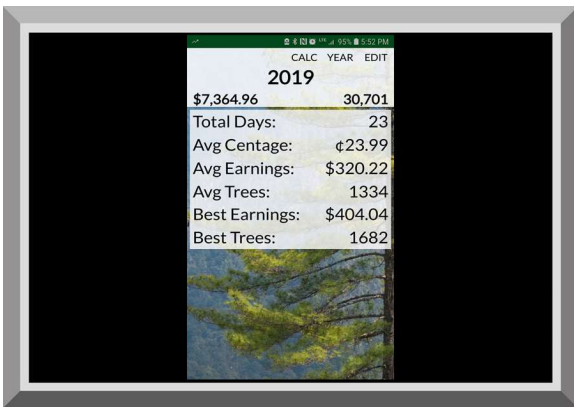


Figure 22.06
The [former] Numbies App.

Some people keep detailed records of their daily earnings and averages on spreadsheets on their laptops or phones. This screenshot was from the 'Numbies' app, which is no longer available. You could look into a newer app called "Planter Pro 2.0" which I haven't experimented with yet.

Efficient Planting Techniques

Highballers move fluidly through the block, always positioning themselves correctly to complete the next anticipated task, and seldom doing only one thing at a time. They know how to move through the land and plant with minimal strain on their bodies, and minimal energy wasted.

Planting has many steps: bagging up, looking for naturals, looking for a good microsite, moving to it, screening (if needed), driving the shovel into the ground, opening the hole, inserting a seedling, closing the hole, flagging (if needed), looking for trees, and doing it all over, again and again and again. Each of these steps takes time. You're capable of trimming a bit of time off each of these steps, sometimes by combining a couple of tasks together. Even just a second or two saved each time that you plant a tree adds up if you repeat something a hundred thousand times in a summer.

Here are some techniques to help you maximize your productivity:

- Always plan ahead. Be looking for the spot for your next tree as soon as your current tree is in the ground. Eventually, you'll get to a point where you're skilled enough to always be planning out the next two or three trees ahead of you.



Figure 22.07

Keep Looking Ahead.

As you're moving through your piece, always pay attention to what's coming up after your current tree. Good planters often try to continually plan out their next several trees in advance as they are working, so they never have to stop to think or look around.

- Learn to plant ambidextrously. Sometimes, the best microsite is in a spot which is awkward to deal with in your normal planting stance, but if you're able to quickly reverse your shovel hand, you might find that spot easier to deal with. If I had to give one single piece of planting advice to new planters, it would be to learn to plant ambi.
- Sometimes, being lazy is not a bad thing. If you pick a microsite that's easy to plant in, and still meets requirements, that's smarter than putting more effort into a more difficult microsite. I guess that rather than saying it's good to be lazy, I should say that it's smart to be efficient. In both situations, the goal is to conserve energy.
- Use the spacing tolerance to your advantage. Don't aim for perfect spacing. Aim for perfect AVERAGE spacing, but be willing to fluctuate by a foot or so to find the best spots.
- Practice movements and approaches that conserve energy. Don't bend over twice for one tree.
- Always face forward. You should never have to turn around to plant a tree.
- Always think of ways to multi-task, such as grabbing a seedling while you're in the process of walking to the next spot.
- Always plant the back of your piece first, but don't dead-walk in to start at the back! Plant your way in, plant as much as possible, and save just enough trees in your bags to plant your way most of the distance back out to the cache.
- Learn about piece management techniques to make your approach to planting more efficient, and to minimize inefficient things like dead-walking.

- Don't work against gravity. If you're walking across the block and there's a large log or piece of slash in the way, step over the block rather than up onto it and then back down. The reason for this is because if you change your height above the ground, you're working against gravity. Changes in potential energy (working against gravity) expend a great deal of energy.
- Wear a cheap watch! This is an absolute essential for two reasons: it lets you time a bag-up, which gives you something to motivate and/or pace yourself during the day. And secondly, it lets you know what time it is late in the day, to ensure that you're back at the trucks on time, or don't take too many trees on your last bag-up.

Efficient Work Strategies

Get an early start. Being organized and prepared really helps you. A strong morning start is psychologically powerful. You'll feel good about your production right from the start, instead of trying to psych yourself up to catch up to where you thought you should have been. The afternoon heat and fatigue will slow you down, so the morning plant is really important in achieving high production.

Know when to line plant your piece, and when to area plant it. Neither technique is correct in all situations. They each have their advantages and disadvantages. Very frequently, you'll use a combination of both techniques on any given run, unless you're in very straightforward land.

Try to keep a steady pace. If you take numerous very short breaks of a minute or so apiece during the day, to allow yourself to catch your breath or take a small drink of water, it's much better than taking one extended break. This is especially important on cold days, because moving around keeps you warm. A long break, or eating a lot of food at once, tends to make you feel sluggish. Many planters use their bagging-up time as their break, and may not even stop to eat, either pacing around as they grab a quick sandwich, or eating while they're bagging up.



Figure 22.08

Eat Small Amounts While Bagging Up.

It's better for your body to eat small amounts frequently throughout the day, rather than a single large lunch in the middle of the day. If you can eat just a bit during each bag-up, or every second bag-up, you should never feel either extreme of hungry or bloated.

If you always have a small water bottle or two in your bags, you can take very brief breaks during your run of fifteen seconds or so, and keep yourself hydrated. This gives you a moment to catch your breath, and means that you don't have to drink giant amounts of water when you're back at your

cache. You can refill your small water bottles when you bag up, so you always have something to drink mid bag-up.

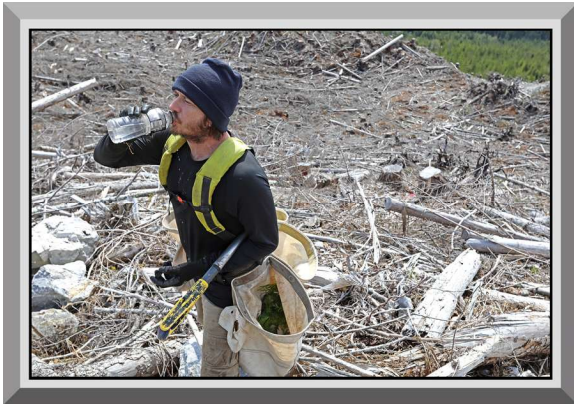


Figure 22.09
Keep Yourself Hydrated.

Having a small water bottle in your planting bags allows you to take short pauses occasionally during your bag-ups, to catch your breath and keep yourself hydrated.

Photo Credit: Andrew Ulmer.

If you're a new planter, or just new to a contract or different block, encourage prompt feedback from your crew leader or checker. The sooner you're aware of any adjustments required to meet the quality standards, the less risk there is of a significant number of planting faults, and the faster you'll be able to establish a productive planting rhythm with confidence.

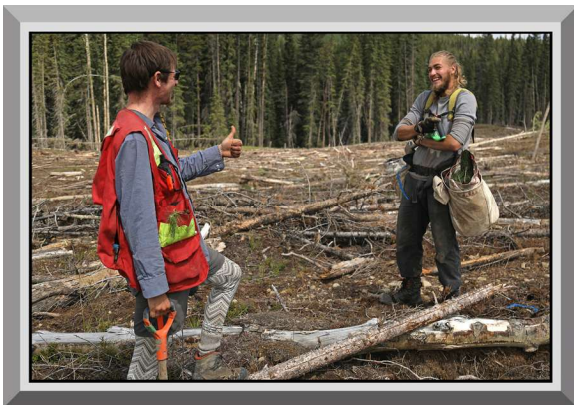


Figure 22.10
Know Your Quality & Density.

It's easy to check your density throughout the day, by occasionally taking a minute to throw a quick plot on yourself. If there's a checker nearby, you can ask them for feedback. Their feedback can help you adjust your techniques before things get to the point of replanting.

Bagging up should be done efficiently, as a lot of time can be wasted here. Save the socializing for camp. Make sure you have the appropriate mix of species in your bag. Eat or drink while you bag up. Some people prefer to unwrap all bundles at the cache while bagging up, saying that it saves time. It doesn't. I agree that unwrapping a few bundles at a time on the block takes a few extra seconds during your bag-up, but you still need to spend those seconds at your cache if you unwrapped everything at once while bagging up.

I don't like rules saying that you can only have one bundle unwrapped at a time. Those rules date back to a time when slow rookies were taking two or three hours to complete a bag-up, and foresters were worried about plugs drying out in the planters' bags. In today's industry, well-watered plugs and productive planters mean that desiccation of plugs is essentially a non-issue. I have no problem with throwing a full box of trees into my bags quickly at the cache and heading right back out to the block, then getting a few seconds now and then to catch my breath while unwrapping four or five

bundles at a time. The key to keeping everyone happy is to ensure that your plugs are not drying out.

Some planters don't take their bags off during the day. They put their bags on when they arrive at their cache, and take them off before getting into the truck at the end of the day. Throughout the day, they bag up while their bags are still on. This reduces the temptation to sit down or take a break when you're at the cache. This practice may only save you a couple minutes each day, but these saved minutes add up to a lot of time over the course of a season.

Staying Focused

Some planters find that a certain relaxed mental attitude is helpful in maintaining efficiency on the job. They see planting as a type of meditation. Some people find that repetitive thoughts, like a song that's stuck in your head, or counting, can help you keep focused. Other planters strive to actively maintain a strong focus on the task at hand, and try to avoid letting themselves get distracted by anything other than the trees that need to be planted. Although you don't necessarily have to have such an intense focus, what you don't want is for your mind to wander aimlessly and have your movements follow suit. You need to be constantly aware of your surroundings, of the other trees and obstacles around you, where you'll put your shovel next, and how to be as efficient as possible. Ideally, you're thinking about the next spot or next few spots to be planted. This helps you cover the ground needed, without working yourself into a corner that requires back-tracking. Back-tracking is a waste of time. Dead-walking is a waste of time.

Productive planters are not only moving quickly, they're also incredibly aware of their surroundings. They make numerous decisions, in fractions of a second, to make the most of the time taken while moving between planting spots. They use ribbon, natural boundaries, and terrain, to keep track of areas that haven't been planted yet. They avoid areas that have already been planted.

Social media has become a major problem for some planters in the past several years. Put the phone down when you're at work. You're not getting paid by the hour, so if you're checking Facebook or Instagram or TikTok at the cache, you're costing yourself money. If this is a problem, perform a self-intervention and leave your phone in camp so you can focus on planting during the day. Some people even turn their phones off at the start of a shift, and don't turn them back on until they go into town on the next day off. Do you have enough self-restraint and willpower to do that? If so, you'll be a better planter. As a rookie, you'll be more miserable if you keep checking Facebook every Saturday night and see your friends posting pictures at the cottage or beach back home, while knowing that you're going to be getting up at 5:30am on Sunday morning to put on wet underwear in the rain.

Even the most optimistic of planters will sometimes have a bad day, where it's almost impossible to self-motivate yourself. On a day like that, even if you don't feel like planting, you'll have to learn to

force yourself to keep working. No matter how slow you're planting, it's faster than sitting at the cache. You may as well face the fact that no matter how miserable you are, you're going to be stuck on the block for ten hours. You may as well make some money while you're there.

For more photo and video resources associated with this chapter of the book, visit:
www.replant.ca/training/productivity