5 Ways to Unleash Excel's Potential
& Avoid the Productivity Black Hole

Microsoft Excel presents users with a tricky situation. On one hand, it is one of the most powerful, adaptable spreadsheet tools available. It gives users incredible freedom to customize how information is displayed and organized, making it a uniquely adaptable blank slate that you can use to complete a wide array of tasks. On the other hand, Excel makes all of this customization possible through a combination of forums, built-in tools and interface elements that can be incredibly cumbersome to make sense on your own.

The problem here isn't that Excel is onerous or poorly designed, but that it can do so much that users can easily experiment and explore their way into time-sucking productivity black holes as they try to get a spreadsheet just right. Because of this, learning the ways to get tasks done quickly in Excel can empower you to spend more time and energy on key processes. These time savers extend beyond simple keyboard shortcuts and the like, and five of the most noteworthy options are:

1. Take Advantage of Built-In Charting Functions

Making data easily digestible is critical for a wide range of core business functions, including presentations and reporting. However, spreadsheets do not naturally lend themselves to presenting data. The information is shown in small cells, spreadsheets can extend well beyond what can be displayed on the screen and the amount of raw data within a sheet can make it difficult to process the key trends. Conversely, putting data into a chart or graph makes the information much more readable, particularly at a glance, and you don't have to manually go about creating that visualization once you have information organized in Excel.

Excel features a chart/visualization tool that you can use to automatically transform the data within a spreadsheet into a chart or graph. A *WordStream* report pointed out that **using recommended charts within Excel gives you a quick, no-hassle way to put multiple charts together on a page and make data highly visible to stakeholders.**[1]
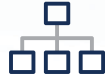
2. Leverage Templates

Having to manually write out formulas and organize spreadsheets can be incredibly useful when you need to create a custom form, but you don't always have to reinvent the wheel. Microsoft offers a wide range of templates within Excel, giving users the freedom to start with a framework in place, easily making modifications and entering data to meet their specific demands. According to *Make Use Of*, **templates for frequently used spreadsheet formats including project timelines, budgets, and calendars can all prove incredibly useful when it comes to saving time when using Excel.**[2]

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3. Use Autofill When It Makes Sense

Do you often work with repetitive data sets with clear patterns? You don't have to enter all of that information in manually. *WordStream* recommended using the autofill tool to let Excel do the work for you. Just fill out the cells needed to establish the pattern, then click and hold over the bottom right of the column to drag the pattern over the cells you want Excel to autofill. The news source pointed out that this functionality can save users a great deal of time, especially if they need to have cells repeat data.

4. Make Data Pop with Conditional Formatting

This is another tip courtesy of *WordStream*, as the source pointed to conditional formatting as an ideal way to make data stand out. The tool can highlight specific cells based on conditions you set, allowing you to:

- **Highlight exceptions** to patterns.
- **Draw user attention** to specific information.
- **Set parameters around how data displays** in cells to make patterns clearly visible.

Sources:
[1]http://www.wordstream.com/blog/ws/2016/05/06/excel-tricks
[2]http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/7-tips-save-time-microsoft-excel/

Finding ways to easily customize your experience can save time, especially when built-in tools let you avoid manually adjusting each cell with highlights and similar issues, and conditional formatting is one such tool.

5. Link Data Across Sheets

Microsoft has refined Excel to be able to integrate data from across varied sheets and files, letting you bring together information from diverse sources into charts and visualizations. Furthermore, these sheets can be integrated with one another so that data shared across multiple locations automatically updates and links data to eliminate unnecessary data entry and maximize productivity.

Customize without Losing Too Much Time

Following these five tips can go a long way in helping you reduce the amount of time it takes for you to create unique, customized spreadsheets. Excel doesn't always require extensive manual touches to do what you need it to accomplish. Instead, you can combine manually using formulas and other tools with these capabilities to quickly establish the sheets you need to organize data and make it as actionable as possible.

Want to learn more about what Excel can do to improve productivity? Check out Learning Tree's suite of courses to identify training options that align with your operational needs.

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