

SHAVE 10 HOURS OFF YOUR WORKWEEK

4 PROVEN STRATEGIES TO CREATE MORE MARGIN
FOR THE THINGS THAT MATTER MOST

MICHAEL HYATT

New York Times Best-Selling Author

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INTRODUCTION

HOW TO GET YOUR TIME BACK

Do you remember [the scene from *I Love Lucy*](#) when Lucy and Ethel get hired at a chocolate factory? Their job is to wrap chocolates as they come down a conveyor belt. Their manager says they'll be fired if they let a single chocolate slip by unwrapped. Everything starts out okay, but within seconds the chocolates are coming too fast. Lucy and Ethel start popping them in their mouths and filling their hats with the overflow.

When the onslaught finally stops, their manager comes to inspect their work. She can't see that Lucy and Ethel are hiding all the unwrapped candy, so it looks like they've done a good job. Their reward? "Speed it up!" she shouts to the person driving the conveyor belt.

Almost everyone I know feels like Lucy and Ethel at least some of the time, including me. Life comes at us faster than we can manage, and we just don't have enough time to get it all done. Each week contains 168 hours. We usually think of work filling about a quarter of that time, leaving plenty for rest, family, fun, and other personal pursuits. But that's not really how it goes, is it?

According to [Gallup](#), the average workweek is nearer fifty hours than forty. And for some of us, it's a lot more. A [study](#) by the Center for Creative Leadership found that professionals and business leaders who carry mobile devices like smartphones work *more than seventy hours a week!* Even if we're not crouched over our laptops, we're still answering email on nights and weekends, chewing up hours trying to stay ahead or get caught up.

We're always on. And it's wearing us out.

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WHAT A LIFE WITHOUT MARGIN IS COSTING US



All of this running and gunning is costing us a lot—probably more than we think:

- 1 First, it can cost us our career. Sometimes we think that the extra hours we work make us more productive, but that's not actually true. [Research shows](#) that putting in extra hours for a short stretch is okay, but after that—if we make it the norm—our productivity takes a dive. So we're not only getting less done, we're also burning ourselves out. Both of which will add up to a negative impact on our work.
- 2 Second, it can cost us our health. Because of the hours we work, most of us don't get the sleep we need. To save time in the kitchen, we eat for convenience, not nutrition—or even joy. We don't get enough exercise. And our rest and relaxation often looks like collapsing exhausted in front of the television or mindlessly clicking away time online. The result is that, despite our relative wealth, Americans are very unhealthy, stressed, and depressed [compared to other countries](#).
- 3 Third, it can cost us our sanity. There's no way this level of exhaustion is helping our emotional health. When we're weary and worn out, we're not as clear about things as we could be. We get irritable and irrational, make bad calls, and often see the world more negatively than we should. More than [twenty million prescriptions](#) are written every year for antidepressants and sleep aids. We're making ourselves crazy.
- 4 Fourth, it can cost us our family. The amount of time many of us work adds up to a big burden for our families. Andy Stanley uses the [metaphor of a rock](#) to make this point. It's like we have a stone we give someone to hold for us. If the duration is brief, it's not a big deal. They can manage. But we've made the duration permanent, and our spouses and children are straining under the weight. Some have already dropped the rock. Maybe that's your situation. It nearly was mine.

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5 Fifth, it can cost us our legacy. And let's be frank about this. If we blow it on the first four, we're blowing this one by default. Instead of succeeding at work, we'll be remembered as somebody always stressed, behind, and unable to get the job done. People will remember us as constantly tired, sick, and emotionally spent. If our families survive intact, it won't be without unneeded pain and trauma. And to cap it off, we're likely to die younger than we need to.

MARGIN IS A SELF-MANAGEMENT ISSUE



Working excessive hours is an expense we cannot afford. I've paid that bill myself, and I know how much it set me back.

I spent years putting everything I had into my work, to the detriment of my family and my health. It took a trip to the emergency room for me to see what was happening. I thought I was having a heart attack. The good news was it was just a terrible case of acid reflux. The bad news was that my doctor didn't let me off the hook. He said if I didn't dial things back, a real heart attack was probably not too far off.

That warning turned out to be a gift in disguise.

Why? Because it forced me to get intentional about the way I was using my time.

My key insight was that I didn't actually have a time-management problem. I had a *self*-management problem. The emergency showed me what *I* was doing wrong. I was responsible for my situation, and I was determined to turn it around. I took care of my family, started running, started eating better, and got more efficient at work with fewer hours on the job. The end result was that I was more productive at the same time I was investing in the things that matter most. I want to show you how you can do the same thing.

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HOW TO BUY BACK YOUR TIME



It's easier than you might imagine. Don't get me wrong—you'll have to work for this. But the payoff will be huge. And it's not like you have to bring everything to a screeching stop.

You can buy yourself much-needed margin by shaving off as little as ten hours from your workweek. You might even be able to trim more. But ten hours a week is huge! That's like getting back one forty-hour week each month. That's twelve weeks—an entire quarter—every year!

Think about what you could do with that much more margin in your life. Go back to the list above. Ten hours a week could start turning all of those negatives into positives. Think about the beneficial impact on your work, health, well-being, family, and, ultimately, your legacy.

How can you do it? In the chapters that follow, I cover four broad strategies packed with proven tactics that can help you shave off those ten hours—and possibly more:



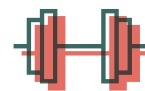
1. BOOST YOUR ENERGY



2. GUARD YOUR TIME



3. SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS



4. FLEX YOUR 'NO' MUSCLE

These four strategies have been life-changing for me.

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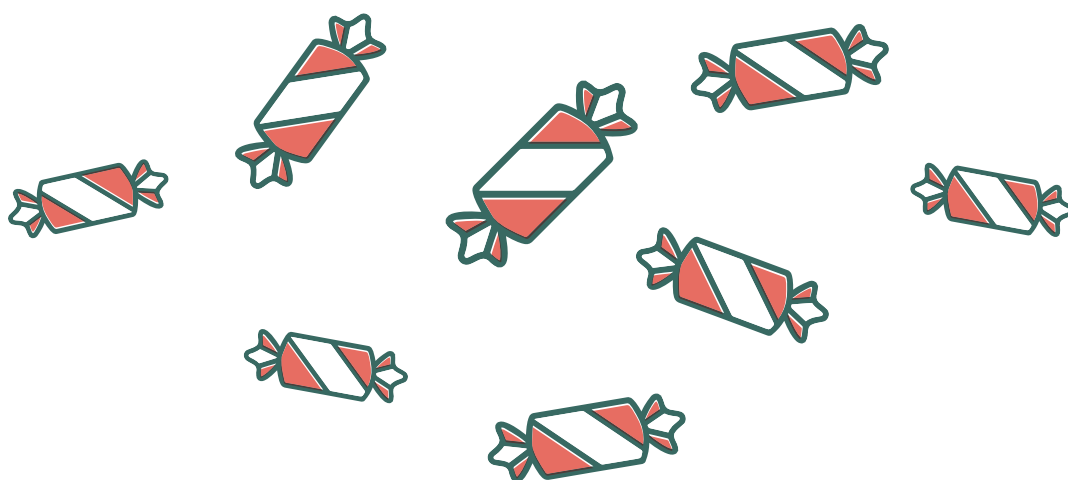
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Remember Lucy and Ethel? Instead of somebody else pushing more chocolates at us than we can handle, we can now be in charge of the conveyor belt—at least most of the time.

There are always things we can't predict, seasons when things come on us faster than we can manage. But if you intentionally employ these strategies, you'll be ready for those times instead of swamped by them. The last thing you need if you're barely getting by is for someone to think you've got it under control and shout, "Speed it up!" to the man in the back.



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STRATEGY NO. 1

BOOST YOUR ENERGY



The first and most important thing to know about time is that it's fixed. A physicist might have a nit to pick with that, but even physicists have alarm clocks and calendars just like the rest of us. We've all got twenty-four hours in a day, 168 in a week, and if time is fixed, we're not going to get any more.

Thankfully, time is not our only resource. We also possess stores of renewable, expandable mental and physical energy. That's the good news. But here's the bad: the very things that help us renew and expand it are usually the first things we eliminate when we're trying to save time—things like sleep, exercise, and healthy eating. Unfortunately, that only works for the short term.

DESTINATION: BURNOUT



In the long run, overworking drives down our productivity. We can see an uptick in our output for a few weeks, [according to Daniel Cook](#), Chief Creative Officer at Spry Fox. After that, it takes a dive. Henry Ford figured this out long ago, but we haven't learned the lesson.

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Many of us have tried to push excessive hours for months and years at a time. Is it any wonder we're burned out? One nine-year study of financial workers found that long hours essentially ruined them. They "started to break down in their fourth year on the job," said business reporter [James Surowiecki](#). "They suffered from depression, anxiety, and immune-system problems, and performance reviews showed that their creativity and judgment declined."

If our mental and physical energy is a renewable resource, then we need to treat it like one. It needs to be cared for and managed. That means we have to restore the very things that we typically cut out when trying to save time. This chapter covers three of those things, plus a fourth that's vital for staying engaged when the work gets draining. Together these four tactics can keep our energy levels up and even expanding.

1. GET ENOUGH NIGHTLY SLEEP



A while back, a major CEO missed a high-power advertising meeting because she fell asleep before the event and kept people waiting nearly two hours. It was notable enough that the [Wall Street Journal](#) picked up the story. But the really strange thing is that most of the coverage I read said nothing about how little sleep she brags about getting—just four to six hours a night. She defends working eighty hours a week by saying she gets [enough vacations](#). Apparently not.

Experts say we need about eight hours a night. But the [national average](#) is less than seven. And the real average is probably lower. We usually report how much time we spend in bed, not how much time we [actually sleep](#), so we probably only get about 80 percent as much sleep as we think we do.

We've all heard it—"if you snooze, you lose." But it turns out the opposite is true. By cheating our sleep, we're cheating ourselves. Sleeping more at night can actually help us accomplish more during the day. How exactly?

WHAT SLEEP DOES FOR OUR PRODUCTIVITY

- 1 First, sleep keeps us sharp. How many times have you gone blank in a meeting, nodded at your desk, or forgotten where you were going? It's happened to me more than I'd like to admit. Skimping on sleep—even a little—impairs our mental performance, creating fatigue, inability to focus, slow reaction times, and more. Going on six hours of sleep a night can reduce our functioning to the level of someone [legally drunk](#).
- 2 Second, sleep helps us remember, learn, and grow. Our minds are buzzing when we sleep, integrating new information learned during the day, processing memories, and sorting the significant from all the meaningless stuff we pick up. Even dreaming is [critical to this process](#). If our work depends on our creativity and insight—and whose doesn't?—then sleep is essential.
- 3 Third, sleep refreshes our emotional state. Nothing can make us feel depressed, moody, and irritable like missing sleep. But sleep works like hitting the reset button. In his book [Eat Move Sleep](#), Tom Rath explains that sleep reduces stress chemicals in the brain and dials back the part of the brain that processes emotions. The result is that we can start fresh if we invest in our sleep.
- 4 Finally, sleep revitalizes our bodies. We all have a body clock. When we ignore its signals in order to work more, we create unnecessary stress, and that stress contributes to depression, fatigue, weight gain, high blood pressure, and a lot worse. But sleep lowers stress chemicals in the body, boosts the immune system, and improves metabolism. Instead of waking unrested after putting in extra hours on a project, why not approach it recharged the next day? You'll do better work and feel better about it.

Bottom line: If we want to maximize our productivity and perform at our very best, we can't cheat our sleep. Every now and then, it may be necessary. But it's like Andy Stanley's analogy of the stone. We can bear the burden for a while, but we can't do it forever. If we try, we'll lose the very thing we're trying to gain.

So how can we get better sleep at night?

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HOW TO GET A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

- 1 First, we have to commit to getting the sleep we need. There's inertia to being tired. It's easier to just go on than go to bed. Researchers call it "[bedtime procrastination](#)," and it's an easy trap. But if we want the benefit of extra sleep, we have to decide on the tradeoff: one less link, one less episode, one less page. Determine to go to bed at a set time and then do it. Some people even recommend setting an alarm—not to wake up but to [remember our bedtime](#).
- 2 Second, it helps to establish a ritual. It's easier to do just about anything when there's a pattern or a rhythm we can follow. This is especially true for bedtime if the ritual includes things that are helpful in making the transition to sleep, such as:

	GETTING A WARM BATH OR CUP OF HERBAL TEA
	PRAYER AND DEVOTION
	A NOVEL SAVED JUST FOR BEDTIME
	PROCESSING THE DAY WITH OUR SPOUSES IN BED

The key is to follow the same pattern most nights, even on weekends.

- 3 Third, exercise can help, but not too late in the day. [Research shows](#) exercise in the morning or afternoon can benefit our sleep. One benefit of outdoor exercise especially is exposure to sunlight, which "keep[s] the body's clock in sync with the day-night cycle and prime[s] the brain to increase the level of melatonin [the sleep-regulating hormone] in the bloodstream," according to David K. Randall's survey of sleep science, [Dreamland](#). The important thing is to avoid exercise right before bedtime, which will make it harder to fall to sleep.
- 4 Fourth, we need to kill the lights. More than nine in ten of us use electronic devices before sleep, according to the National Sleep Foundation. Not only can the tweets, emails, videos, movies, and articles we consume leave our minds turning, but the light from our devices—even little LEDs—can compromise our slumber. [It's best](#) to turn off our devices an hour before bedtime and block all the light coming into our rooms.

- 5 Fifth, forget about work. Let the report wait for morning—the design comps, too, and the email. Unless we're already totally exhausted, all of these things just keep our minds active long after we close our eyes. Our bosses don't own our sleep. And if you—like me—are your own boss, then let's give ourselves a break! If you can't let something go, just write it down, hit the hay, and deal with it in the morning.

The evidence for the importance of sleep is clear at this point. All that remains is for us to take it seriously enough to change our habits. After all, becoming more productive, efficient, and effective in every other area of our life is pointless if we cheat our minds and bodies of the rest they deserve.

2. TAKE A NAP



I once worked for a man who napped nearly every day. He would sit upright in his chair, hold his keys in his hand, and doze. Eventually, the keys would clatter to the ground and wake him. He would snap to, refreshed and ready for the rest of the day. I'm a habitual napper myself, and I wouldn't trade those ten to twenty minutes for anything. I'm more alert, energetic, and creative because of the time I take to disconnect and recharge.

A lot of history's most successful and influential people have been nap-takers: Leonardo da Vinci, Napoleon, Thomas Edison, Eleanor Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan, to name just a few. Everyone I know who regularly naps says the same thing: naps are a secret productivity weapon.

WHY NAPPING PACKS A PRODUCTIVITY PUNCH

- 1 For one reason, naps restore our performance after the midday slump. Numerous medical studies have shown workers becoming increasingly unproductive as the day wears on. But a 2002 Harvard University study demonstrated a thirty-minute nap boosted the performance of workers, returning their productivity to beginning-of-the-day levels.
- 2 For another, naps restore our alertness. Some wake from naps groggy—that's usually because they slept too long. A full sleep cycle runs about an hour and a half. There are benefits from sleeping that long; but if you wake up late in the cycle, you'll feel disoriented.

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The good news is that our minds and bodies only require between ten and thirty minutes to leave us waking refreshed and sharp.

- 3 Finally, naps restore sensory perception and mental acuity. According to Dr. Sara C. Mednick, author of *Take a Nap, Change Your Life*, napping can heighten our sensitivity of sight, hearing, and taste. Napping also improves your creativity by relaxing your mind and allowing new associations to form.

We go, go, go in our always-on culture. But we were not meant to race without rest. Taking a nap reboots the system and gives you a fresh start. But most of us don't have a lot of time or the right conditions for a nap. How do we make it work?

HOW TO GET A KILLER NAP

- 1 First, decide it's important enough to schedule. A nap might seem like a luxury, especially if you're just getting started. But a nap is like anything else; if it's not scheduled, chances are good something we think is urgent will take its place. Treating a nap like an important meeting is the best way to ensure we actually get the rest we need. As for the best time of day to schedule it, we naturally experience a bit of a slump about seven or eight hours after we get up. That seems to be the best time for a snooze. I try to take mine right after lunch. If I can't do it then, I try to squeeze it in before 4:00 p.m., but that's pushing it. Any later in the day and a nap can interfere with nighttime sleep.
- 2 Second, keep it short, as in ten to thirty minutes. This just echoes what we read above. We don't need a lot of time, so try not to drift off too long. Set an alarm if you need one—or just hold some keys in your hand.
- 3 Third, set the right conditions. Low light and a comfortable chair or couch are good places to start. It may take you a while to fall asleep. Try slowing your breathing and calming your mind. It may take a few days to get the hang of it.
- 4 Fourth, be discreet. Getting caught napping at your desk is not a good way to earn respect. In some old-school environments, it might even get you fired! But most people get an hour for lunch. Eat in half that time and then go snooze in your car, an unused conference room, or even a closet. Let people know (if you can) that you want to be undisturbed for a certain period, and turn off notifications on your devices.

- 5 Fifth, try caffeine. This might sound strange, but the research says that sleep and caffeine can work together if done right. It takes about twenty minutes for caffeine to affect our brains. Because of the way sleep affects our neurochemistry, a cup of coffee just before a brief nap actually increases the impact of the caffeine when we wake. In fact, it seems that a [coffee nap](#) is better for boosting memory than a nap alone.
- 6 Sixth, be consistent. Try to nap at the same time every day. The routine will not only stabilize your internal body clock, but it will also allow you to fall asleep faster.

If our bodies naturally shift into low gear in the early afternoon, why push them to keep going, especially when a little sleep will help us accelerate when we wake up? Unless we are in extremely difficult circumstances, we can all find a way to get the rest we need. And with the right approach, we can maximize even just a few spare minutes.

3. GET (*AND STAY*) PHYSICALLY HEALTHY



When we are driving hard professionally, it's easy to cut corners in diet and exercise. As long as we feel fit (enough), we can keep drawing down that health account, but eventually the bills come due. Suddenly, all the things eaten for convenience and ease come back to bite us, and it's harder than ever to start exercising again.

After my experience with the cardiologist, I determined to improve my physical condition. I started eating healthy and exercising—mainly walking and running. It was tough at first because I was in lousy shape and had spent years developing unhelpful habits, but eventually it became a natural, even essential part of my routine. I could never accomplish what I do today if I weren't committed to my physical health.

WHY WE CAN'T AFFORD TO NEGLECT DIET AND EXERCISE

- 1 First, our bodies are made to move. God didn't design our muscles, tendons, and bones with desks and office chairs in mind. In previous times, physical work was a given. But if you work in the knowledge economy, chances are good you're vastly underworking your body. I know I was.
- 2 Second, exercise adds fuel to your gas tank. Some people think, *I can't run or work out. I just don't have the energy.* What they don't realize is that if they would just do it, they would be more energetic for the rest of the day. Exercise not only eliminates toxins from our system, but [according to the Mayo Clinic](#), it also improves our circulation and our heart and lung health. It might sound counterintuitive, but exercise gives you more energy than it consumes.
- 3 Third, exercise lifts our mood. According to one survey that Tom Rath discusses in [Eat Move Sleep](#), just twenty minutes of moderate exercise in the morning has been shown to improve mood as much as twelve hours later in the day. Exercise unleashes neurochemical processes that can leaves us feeling exhilarated and happy.
- 4 Fourth, exercise helps regulate our blood-sugar level, which directly relates to our energy levels. And, of course, so does food. This is one reason why I generally avoid high-carb meals. They make me sleepy and lethargic. Why? High-carb foods—especially refined carbohydrates—spike our blood sugar, which ramps up our insulin. Then it's slog city.
- 5 Fifth, and staying now on diet, eating for convenience instead of health and well-being leads to obesity and a whole range of conditions that sap our energy. Looking at the World Economic Forum's [Human Capital Report](#), what drives down the U.S. numbers is primarily our bad health. There's a direct connection to the foods we eat and what we're able to accomplish.

WHAT TO DO AND WHAT TO STOP DOING

- 1 First, stop delaying and determine to get (and stay) physically healthy. It's easy to compromise here. You have to decide before the deadline gets tight or the inbox grows that you're not going to back down from what matters most to your physical well-being.
- 2 Second, live more on your feet. If you sit in a car, then at your desk, then on the sofa at home, and finally head to bed for another large stretch of time, you're living the largest part of your day off your feet. The first thing to do is to get intentional about moving.

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Don't just sit there—do stuff. Get up and pace. Walk places. Jog. One of the best tricks for getting started is using a standup desk.

- 3 Third, get accountable. Whether it's a running partner or a personal trainer or just an app that tracks your activity, do something to create some accountability to stay active.
- 4 Fourth, cut out the sugar. In fact, cut out all the refined carbohydrates you can. There are no Oreos or Dominos in nature. Don't just eat what you enjoy at the moment. Instead, eat for the effect it will have later. Our high-carb, highly processed diets are making us sluggish in the short run and fat and sick in the long run.
- 5 Fifth, eat high-energy foods like good protein and fat, vegetables, and fruits instead—stuff that doesn't come with brand names and advertising campaigns. Michael Pollan's *Food Rules* gives some fast shorthand advice for foods that tend to boost our energy and restore our health.

4. MAINTAIN A POSITIVE ATTITUDE



Based on the numbers, this might not sound too easy. Our excessive work hours rob us of sleep and physical health. The negative effects compound like the interest on bad debt, costing us more than our physical health. According to World Economic Forum's *Human Capital Report*, Americans rank among the world's most stressed out. Our depression numbers are crazy high as well.

This affects everything. And nothing eats up positive energy like a negative mental state. If you are what you eat, this is just as important. "As a man thinks in his heart, so is he," says Solomon.

Thankfully, all of the tactics discussed so far in this chapter can improve our emotional health. Sleep and exercise can both boost our mood. In fact, one study found that an important contributor to feeling good about our work-life balance is exercising. People who regularly exercise showed more confidence in juggling the demands of work and home. They were also "less likely to be stressed at work," according to Russell Clayton, Assistant Professor of

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Management at Saint Leo University. And [another study](#) has linked high emotional well-being with eating several servings of fruit and vegetables a day.

Beyond getting more sleep, exercising, and eating better, there are several things we can do to maintain a positive attitude.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO STAY POSITIVE

- 1 First, we can decide to be upbeat. Even in difficult circumstances, we can choose to have a good attitude. And, whether good or bad, it will have a direct impact on your energy. Often, we can be more energetic by simply acting more energetic. I am always surprised at how my emotions follow my body. If I walk faster, sit on the edge of my seat, and smile, I will eventually feel more energetic.
- 2 Second, we need to avoid negative people. Negative—or worse, cynical—people drag us down. I used to think I could bring them up. But I [soon discovered](#) that there are some people who only appreciate negative validation. I don't have time for people like that anymore. I find that the best antidote is to surround myself with positive people.
- 3 Third, let's take it easy. Playing full out at every moment can reinforce negative emotional energy. In [The Power of Full Engagement](#), Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz explain that when Jack Nicklaus's golf game would go sour, he disengaged emotionally. It might seem counterintuitive, but Nicklaus understood that drilling down actually created more stress and amplified his struggle. It was better to step back and lighten up, which gave his mind a chance to recover from the stress.
- 4 Fourth, we need to feed our minds. You've heard the old saying, "Garbage in, garbage out." This applies to computers, but it also applies to your brain. I stimulate my mind by constantly feeding it new and engaging content—stuff that gets my creative juices going. There's nothing wrong with spending time with the television, but if you want to grow and be energized, make time to read.
- 5 Fifth, we should watch our words. Obviously, thoughts influence words and actions. But sometimes, it feels like my mouth has a mind of its own. Someone says, "Hey, how ya doin'?" Without thinking, we say, "I'm surviving." Guess what? That becomes our exact experience. We say it, and it shapes the way we perceive reality. St. Benedict said that we can let our words direct our minds. By expressing gratitude and enthusiasm, even when we don't feel them, we can steer our feelings toward our words and stay energized.

TIME TO REFRAME



Since we only have 168 hours in a week, the time we take to sleep, exercise, or prepare healthy meals might seem like a drain—or worse. When eulogizing one of Disney’s top executives, Michael D. Eisner [said](#), “Sleep was one of [his] enemies. [He] thought it kept him from performing flat out 100 percent of the time. There was always one more meeting he wanted to have. Sleep, he thought, kept him from getting things done.”

Honestly, that sounds terrible. One more meeting? I hate meetings. This approach to work is killing us and not doing our careers and families any good either. It’s time to reframe. Anything that helps you recharge and stay in good condition is not the enemy. What good is performing 100 percent of the time if our performance is poor?

Here’s the truth: Boosting your physical energy is the only way to get an edge on the clock. We can work faster, harder, and longer for only so long. Eventually we’ll burn out, lose our creativity and drive, make bad decisions, and do things that might cost us our careers or worse. There’s a word for that: *nuts*.

Hopefully this is obvious to us now, and it’s just a matter of implementing tactical changes like these. While taking more time for this kind of self-care might seem like it’ll set us back, the truth is that we’ll do more and perform better in less time.

Beyond boosting our energy, there are other things we can do to reduce the hours in our workweek. Now it’s time to dig into the day and week and see how we can make the most of our available hours.

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STRATEGY NO. 2

GUARD YOUR TIME



It never feels like we have enough time, does it? Work, family, projects, hobbies, dates, meetings, movies, podcasts, books—how do we fit it all in? About half of us say we don't have enough time to do what we want to do, according to [Gallup](#). Year after year, the number remains pretty consistent.

Given all the contemporary pressures we feel, this might feel like a modern problem. But it's not. Seneca, a Roman philosopher who lived around the time of Jesus, wrote a book about it called *On the Shortness of Life*. Everyone complains about not having enough time, he said. "It is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it," he responded. "Life is long if you know how to use it."

We've been struggling with the same issue for two thousand years—and probably a lot longer. Two reasons, Seneca said, are that we don't guard our time and we squander what we have. "Men do not let anyone seize their estates, but they allow others to encroach on their lives—why, they themselves even invite in those who will take over their lives," he said. "People are frugal in guarding their personal property; but as soon as it comes to squandering time they are most wasteful of the one thing in which it is right to be stingy."

This can and does happen to us every day—unless we take proactive measures.

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IT'S TIME TO GUARD YOUR GOAL



Like a lot of children his age, my grandson, Moses, plays soccer. One position I've always appreciated is the goalie. You may be running downfield to score a goal of your own, but if you lose control of the ball, the other team will take it and potentially score against you. What stops them? The goalie.

Life is like soccer. You are trying to score (think about meeting a deadline, finishing a project, getting your inbox to zero, whatever). Meanwhile, there's a steady drive to score against you (think about getting roped into one more meeting, getting tied up in conversation, being surprised by an important assignment you forgot—whatever it is, you know what you're up against). If you think of every goal in your net as a demand on your time, you can see the danger.

If Seneca knew anything about soccer, he would say we need to be the goalie for our time. Trying to score is only half the game. We need to guard our goal. This chapter is all about how. I talk about four different tactics that can help you protect and make the best use of your 168 hours, especially when it comes to work.

1. PLAN YOUR DAY IN ADVANCE



You've probably heard this famous quote from the Prussian military commander, Helmuth von Moltke: "No battle plan ever survives first contact with the enemy." So what's the point of making a plan in the first place? Another military leader has the best answer to that question.

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SHAVE 10 HOURS OFF YOUR WORKWEEK

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“In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless,” Gen. Dwight Eisenhower once said, “but planning is indispensable.” The very act of planning prepares us to win, even if the particulars of the plan change on the fly. And that’s especially true for planning our upcoming day.

WHY A DAILY PLAN IS ESSENTIAL FOR SUCCESS

Starting the day without a plan is a guarantee for wasting time. Instead of proactively doing the work that will move our business forward, we end up responding to the demands of others. We’re always going to have these kinds of interruptions—some days it feels like that’s all there is. A plan helps us get reoriented and back on task. But that’s only true if we know what the task is supposed to be, and that’s where planning is essential.

Planning our day forces us to set priorities. That’s a crucial step toward maximizing our 168 hours because it helps us filter out the useless or low-impact work. It also helps us think through contingencies. Establishing priorities and processing potential contingencies puts us in an active—instead of reactive—state of mind. We know what we have to do, and we can navigate the obstacles and distractions to get it done.

HOW TO EFFECTIVELY PLAN YOUR DAY

- 1 The first thing to do is start the night before. If you wait to plan the next morning, you might find yourself swept off your feet by the onrushing day before you’re finished. That’s especially true if you save it until you arrive at your desk. One glance at your inbox before you have your priorities straight can sink your entire morning. So at the end of the day, right before I shut down for the night, I get my list out and begin to identify the things I want to tackle the next day.
- 2 And that’s the second thing: Scan your list and identify five to seven action items you want to accomplish the next day. You can use a yellow legal pad, [Evernote](#), or a task manager like [Nozbe](#)—which is what I use. It’s important to be careful here. When I was a kid and overloaded my plate, my parents would say my eyes were larger than my stomach. When we’re planning our day, it’s possible to be too ambitious, commit to more than we can actually manage, and frustrate others and ourselves. That’s why it’s best to pick just five to seven items. If you scratch them off the list early, you can always add more after the fact.

Third, prioritize the list. Not every task is created equal. There are a lot of different kinds of tasks, and they don't all have the same weight. We have to set our priorities. My favorite tool for that is the priority matrix Stephen Covey explains in his book *First Things First*. Prioritization is as straightforward as slotting tasks in the right quadrant.

QUADRANT 1

Both important and urgent. We're talking about a project on deadline for a client or parent-teacher meetings at our kids' school. These tasks should be our first priority and go straight to the top of the day's to-do list and onto your calendar where appropriate.

QUADRANT 2

Important but not urgent, at least not yet. The deadline is more elastic than Quadrant 1 tasks. It could be something like working on the annual budget, getting an annual physical, or going out for a run. Because these tasks are not pressing, it's easy to push them off until they become urgent. The secret is to schedule time to do these tasks. If you get them on the calendar, there's less chance to lose track of them or let someone else's urgency hijack the opportunity to get them done.

QUADRANT 3

Urgent to someone else but not us. They should be our third priority, but unless we're careful, they can steal first position—what Moltke was talking about. In the business context, it's a coworker's last-minute request, an unsolicited phone call from a salesperson, or a request from someone you barely know. It's best to politely decline where you can or delegate it to someone more appropriate. If the buck stops with you, the answer is to process these tasks efficiently so you can get back to Quadrant 1.

QUADRANT 4

Should be empty. Seriously, if it's not important or urgent, then just delete it and move on! By definition, these tasks are pointless distractions that gobble up our 168 hours and keep us from finishing our Quadrant 1 and 2 projects.

I've been using this system for so long, it's second nature to me. I just do it in my head. But you can also sketch it on a notepad or use an [iPhone app](#).

2. PLAN YOUR WEEK



If you can plan your day, you can plan your week. And you definitely should. The rationale is the same as planning the workday—but the magnitude is greater. Unless we get above the fray, it's almost impossible to avoid getting bowled over. Before long, we're in full-on react mode and any progress we make on what's important to us is only catch-as-catch-can, and we're literally weeks and weeks behind schedule.

It's a crummy place to be—and it's entirely avoidable with a good weekly review. I usually schedule mine at home on Sunday night. By this time, I am refreshed from the weekend and have some perspective. By doing it at home, I avoid the craze that can set in Monday morning at work.

HOW TO WIN WITH A WEEKLY REVIEW

Here's the “agenda” for my meeting with myself. This is modified from David Allen's list in *Getting Things Done*.

- 1 First, gather all loose papers and process. I empty everything out of my briefcase, my inbox, and my wallet. I then go through each piece of paper and make a decision what to do with it. Following Allen's model, I first decide if it is something that requires me to take action. If not, I have three options: trash it, add it to my Someday/Maybe list, or file it for future reference. When action is necessary, I can:
 - Do it if it takes less than two minutes or add it to my task manager to do later;
 - Defer it by actually scheduling a time on my calendar to deal with it; or
 - Delegate it to someone else for action and add it to my Waiting For list.
- 2 Second, process my notes. I quickly read back through my notes, looking for action items that I agreed to do (I mark these in the meeting with a star) or action items I want to do based on my review.

- 3 Third, review previous calendar data. I look over the previous week's meetings and see if there is anything I missed. For example, I don't usually take notes in lunch meetings, but I may want to follow-up with a thank you note or a gift.
- 4 Fourth, review my annual goals. As I talk about in [*5 Days to Your Best Year Ever*](#), I always have seven to ten goals I am pursuing for the year. I review them to ensure I don't lose visibility on what matters most. I specifically make sure I have identified the appropriate next action and then put it in my task management system or on my calendar.
- 5 Fifth, review upcoming calendar. This is one of the most important parts of the weekly review. I note any upcoming meetings with an eye to the preparation I need to do. This keeps me ahead of the curve and my assignments on track.
- 6 Sixth, review my project lists. I keep all of these in my task manager, Nozbe, along with my goals. During the weekly review, I ask myself the question, "What do I really need to accomplish this week?" Like goals, I either identify the next action and assign a due date for the day in the upcoming week I want to work on it, or I schedule it on my calendar.
- 7 Seventh, review my Waiting For list. These are delegated tasks. If something important is overdue, or if I need a progress report, I ping the person responsible.
- 8 Eighth, review Someday/Maybe list. These are items that don't require immediate action but would be nice to do someday in the future. If I'm ready to move on one of these, I change the category and enter it into the appropriate project or action list. Allen has a few other items on his agenda template, but these are the ones that I find most helpful.

3. SCHEDULE *EVERYTHING* THAT MATTERS



I've talked already about the importance of getting things from your task list to your calendar. The truth is that it's helpful to block space on your calendar for just about anything that matters. In my experience, what gets scheduled gets done. And the reverse is true more often than we recognize.

WHY YOU HAVE TO MAKE YOUR CALENDAR WORK FOR YOU

As the saying goes, “nature abhors a vacuum.” If you don’t take control of your calendar, someone else will. It’s like Seneca said: We don’t let people steal our homes, but we sure let them squat on our lives.

We can be our own worst enemies here if we’re not careful. We can spend all our time amassing new tasks in phone calls and meetings and then run out of time to actually get our work done. Then when we finally have a moment, someone comes by and says, “How about doing *this or that thing* by *such and such time*?” You’re sunk. Instead of shaving ten hours off our workweek, we just added three more.

The answer is making appointments with yourself—and not just for work items. Calendar anything that really matters to you. You heard me. Go ahead and actually put appointments with yourself on your calendar. Then, when someone asks for a meeting or whatever else, you can legitimately say, “No, I’m sorry, that won’t work. I already have a commitment.” And you do—to yourself!

If you’re in an office environment, it might save you the conversation to begin with. Your calendar will show the time as “busy” when others check your availability. In conjunction with the first and second tactics we discussed in this chapter, this is the best way I know to be the goalie for your time and keep the scoreboard from tilting against you. It’s the critical step in ensuring you have time for your Quadrant 1 projects, and it’s key for keeping the ball moving on Quadrant 2 projects.

HOW YOUR CALENDAR CAN WORK FOR YOU

- 1 First, schedule time in the “alone zone.” This is a phrase coined by Jason Fried and David Hansson in their book, [*Rework*](#). This should be daily, if possible, and the idea is simple: Cordon off time for you to get your work done. Guard it. Fight for it. This could be a slot reserved for processing your email a few times during the day. It might be time set aside for special projects. Maybe it’s a recurring calendar item for regular weekly or monthly reports that you know will take a certain amount of time to prepare for. Whatever needs doing needs scheduling, so be honest with yourself about your upcoming tasks and how long they’ll take.

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- 2 Second, reserve time to think and brainstorm. I don't know about you, but I am so busy these days that I rarely have time to think. Yet, I know instinctively that I really can't accomplish anything significant without serious reflection, dreaming, and planning. This could be a day away from the office. Or just a morning spent with the door shut and your laptop disconnected. For me, running is very helpful. And that leads to. . .
- 3 Third, block out time for exercise (and sleep). If, as we saw in the last chapter, our health really matters to our success, then we need to allow time for it. It won't happen on its own. Beyond that, I find running gives me tons of head time. I'm problem-solving when I run, letting my mind wander around a whole arena of ideas and creative ways to handle them. Exercise time can also be used for prayer and other kinds of reflection or listening to podcasts, audiobooks, and courses. I accomplish so much when I run, I can't wait to do it again the next day.
- 4 Fourth, guard your nights and weekends. This is the natural time to downshift and recharge. But how often do we seize on it to catch up or get ahead on our work instead? Instead of shaving time, we're adding to it. Our families and stress levels will thank us. And there's more evidence every day that downtime is essential to our productivity and well-being. Play, even boredom, can rejuvenate us and stimulate our creativity.

Sometimes I feel unproductive in the middle of these non-task times. But that's the point. Our brains aren't designed to go nonstop. When we drop things into neutral, ideas flow on their own, memories sort themselves out, and we give ourselves a chance to rest. The difference between these appointments and the Quadrant 4 tasks, is that these might look unimportant, but they can be critical to saving time in our workweek—and to our success generally. It's vital that we respect ourselves enough to honor these commitments to ourselves.

4. TRIAGE YOUR CALENDAR



Sometimes, despite our best intentions and efforts, our schedule spins out of control. When that happens—and it will—the answer is triage. The term comes from battlefield medics determining where to apply their limited resources. Since there's no way to help everyone, the triage process helps them stay focused on who needs their help the most.

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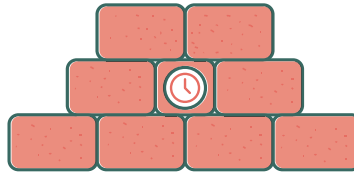
Some patients will survive without medical care. Some won't survive even if they have medical care. Triage means ignoring these two groups and focusing on those that will only survive with medical care. With regard to your calendar, it means you must know which things you can safely cancel or reschedule and which things demand your participation.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU HAVE TOO MUCH TO DO

Here's how the process works.

- 1 First, protect the basics. Look at current priorities and make sure time is properly allocated for in your schedule. This is especially important for your "alone zone" time. It's easy to think that meetings or calls are more important because of other people's expectations. It's no trouble for someone to ask you to handle something. But it might be major trouble for you. When the schedule starts getting out of control, the first priority is reserving enough time to take care of your Quadrant 1 tasks.
- 2 Second, eliminate the nonessentials. Sometimes we make commitments that seem important when we first schedule them. However, after further reflection, we might realize that they're not only unimportant, they might actually be counterproductive. When that happens to me, I either cancel these meetings, if possible, or see if I can handle them another way. When projects take longer than we think or the number of demands we have to address grows beyond what we can manage, there's nothing left to do but punt.
- 3 Third, reschedule some of what remains. Some things are important, but they are not important *now*. I like to get things done as soon as possible, but this sometimes works against me. So, I plan to go through my calendar and see what can be postponed without significant consequences. Maybe they're Quadrant 1 projects that can get a reprieve. Or they're Quadrant 3 projects that can be put off. Hopefully, with a little planning, I can regain my equilibrium and carve out a little more margin for myself.

IT'S TIME TO BE FIRM WITH OUR TIME



Time is intangible. Because of that, it's easy to miss its true worth. When we devalue our time, Seneca says we are “trifling with life's most precious commodity.” As he said, time is the one thing we should be stingy with.

Just because something is intangible doesn't mean it's unreal. Think about your credit balance. You may have a small plastic card in your wallet, but you've never seen the actual account it's connected to. Probably the most you've seen are some reports on a screen or page. The numbers are just abstractions. But if you run up a high balance and decide to skip the payments, the results will be far less abstract.

It's the same with time. It's intangible, but it's very real. Being the goalie for our time means that we treat our calendar like something concrete. Our energy is elastic, but our time is fixed. And if we don't act accordingly, we'll never have enough of it. But like Seneca said, we actually have plenty of time. We just need to use it well.

Part of using our time well is staying focused amid all the distractions of life. That's what we're going to look at next.

STRATEGY NO. 3

SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS



Eccentric magazine publisher and inventor Hugo Gernsback was troubled. There were so many distractions in the modern office it seemed impossible to get anything done. To solve the problem, he suggested a new device called the [Isolator](#).

Resembling a large diver's helmet, the Isolator would block the clickity-clack of office equipment, the ringing of phones and door chimes, and the chatter of coworkers. Through two small eyeholes a person could focus solely on the work in front of him and nothing else—at least until the oxygen tank ran out!

Gernsback unveiled the Isolator in 1925. But as forward thinking as he was, we live under a barrage of messages and inputs today that would have stunned him. We have social media, texts, app notifications, meeting requests, calls from office phones and mobile phone, and more ambient noise than we can possibly process. It's making us so scatterbrained an entire industry has risen around the practice of mindfulness—the idea that you can shut it all out and just be present. It's harder than it sounds.

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THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS MULTITASKING



There are a lot of problems that come from all this distraction, but the main issue we need to look at here is how it blunts our focus. Instead of being able to attend to our tasks, we're pulled away every few minutes—sometimes every few seconds—to answer *this* message or check *that* account.

We sometimes pretend that this is fine. Some of us like it. We're multitasking, we say. But we're not. We're really just fragmenting our attention. And that makes us less effective, not more.

Study after study has shown that multitasking decreases our productivity and creativity. “The human brain doesn't multitask like an expert juggler,” says [journalist John Naish](#); instead, “it switches frantically between tasks like a bad amateur plate-spinner.”

There's a big cost to that frantic switching. One study Naish cites found that students were 40 percent slower solving complicated problems when they tried jumping between tasks. Of course, multitasking doesn't feel slow. It actually feels fast, like we're flying. That's part of the reason we keep doing it, but the feeling of speed is deceptive. There's a big difference between being busy and being productive. Naish mentions research that shows multitaskers indeed work faster—while producing less.

THE ANSWER TO STAYING FOCUSED



According to [Clay Shirky](#), multitasking “provides emotional gratification” because it “moves the pleasure of procrastination *inside* the period of work.” We feel like we're getting things done when we're really dragging them out.

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If we're drafting an email but then pause to check Twitter, pull up a newsfeed, refill our coffee, and then return to our desk to finish, we've interrupted the necessary thinking to finish the email. It will take us longer to re-enter the required headspace to complete the original task.

This holds true even when doing similar things but only partially or in a fragmented way. Answering incoming messages while drafting an outgoing message will also lengthen the time. And all those little interruptions add up.

If we're trying to shave ten hours off our workweek, we don't need the Isolator. Instead, we need to employ some proven tactics to help us regain and retain our focus. If we're already following Strategy No. 1, we're ahead of the game. Solid sleep boosts not only our energy levels but also our creativity and problem-solving capabilities. And a healthy diet and exercise will also improve our attention.

This chapter reveals three more tactics that will enable us to stay sharp, pick up efficiencies in our work, and trim our time commitments.

1. DISCONNECT FROM ONLINE DISTRACTIONS



Shirky, who, among other things, teaches at NYU, banned his students from using their laptops and other digital devices in class. Why? It turns out that students waste about 40 percent of their class time on email, social media, and pointless Web browsing. But student or not, are we any better at staying focused?

WHY WE NEED TO PURPOSEFULLY DISENGAGE FROM THE WEB

In my experience, the Web is most people's No. 1 time suck. Yes, I know it is a wonderful tool for research, *blah, blah, blah*. But how often do we catch ourselves mindlessly surfing from one page to another with no clear objective in mind? You're reading a blog post or a news article, you see an interesting link or some software you want to try, you click, and then pretty soon you're lost. It's like going down a rabbit hole. We can waste minutes, even hours, every day like this.

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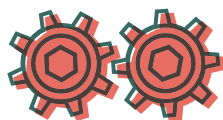
According to a [study by Salary.com](#), 7 in 10 respondents admit to wasting time at work *every day*, and most use the Web. The biggest site for wasting time was Facebook, which isn't surprising. Social media sites were all big drains. But people also reported online shopping and browsing travel, sports, and entertainment sites.

Recalling the priority matrix from the last chapter, this is Quadrant 4 stuff. The key is to put a fence around this activity, especially at work, and limit your time online. This goes for email as well. Unless you are in a customer service position where you have to be “always on,” you should check email no more than two or three times a day. Unless we intentionally disengage, wasting time is practically inevitable. If we're going to get serious work done and get our priorities knocked out day by day, we have to disconnect.

HOW TO DISCONNECT AND STAY FOCUSED

- 1 First, we have to turn off all of the ringers, pings, and notifications—at least while drilling down on important priorities. [One study](#) found when we divert our attention to incoming calls and messages, it dings our IQ by 10 percent. Letting ourselves get distracted by notifications while working on major projects is literally stupid.
- 2 Second, we need to avoid mindless surfing. If there's no reason to check Facebook or ESPN while working on our task list, then don't. If you have to be online for particular reasons, set a timer and see how fast you can accomplish the task. If you're working against a deadline, you're less likely to fritter away the minutes by following an unnecessary link. A session with a real stopping point encourages us to put everything we have into the available time.
- 3 Third, use technology to manage technology. I use [Anti-Social](#). It works with Mac and PCs and blocks access to any site you want for a designated period of time. You enter in the number of minutes you want to be cut off from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and all the rest. You can also turn off email. You can still access sites you need for work, but the only way to get to sites you block is to reboot. That's more hassle than it's worth. It's easier to stay on task.
- 4 Fourth, play music. I listen to music whenever I want to get out of the world and into my work. [Focus@Will](#) is an online service like Pandora but one that streams music selected specifically to lengthen your attention span and improve your concentration. And Focus@Will also lets you set up time-bound work sessions.

2. USE BATCH PROCESSING

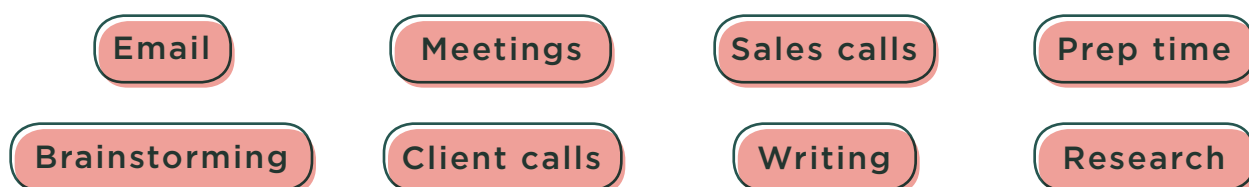


As we saw at the start, multitasking is a myth. We don't do several tasks at once. We just switch between several tasks—and usually not very well. The answer is to forget switching and try batching instead. Batch processing lumps together all our tasks that require similar resources. This not only allows us to train all our attention on one thing at a time, it also keeps our resources deployed in the most effective way possible.

If we have meetings scheduled throughout the day with odd breaks or sales calls mixed in with report prep and email, we're likely to lose focus. Instead of a scattershot approach, batch processing gives us a chance to find a groove and create efficiencies by doing similar tasks sequentially, one after the other. So how's it done?

HOW TO MAKE BATCHING WORK FOR YOU

- 1 First, think back over your typical workweek and identify categories of similar activities:



- 2 Second, scan the list you've made and try to lump as many similar items together as possible. You should end up with several large task blocks that represent focused time.
- 3 Third, rework your calendar. On your own or with your admin, figure out how best to slot these large blocks. If you're in a larger organization, this can be a challenge, but it's still doable and reaps big rewards. The key is to make sure you can schedule as much as possible and keep the right people updated about what you're doing.

In my case, I only take external meetings on Fridays because I don't want meetings interrupting the rest of my daily workflow. I also limit my email and call returns to two or three short blocks each day. It's not worth being legalistic about this. Things pop up all the time, and we need to be flexible. But it at least provides a rough guideline.

3. TOUCH EMAILS ONLY ONCE



Let's be honest. How many times do you read the same email message over and over again? Guess what? The information hasn't changed. You're just procrastinating.

I have a personal rule: I will only read each message once, then take the appropriate action. The goal is "Inbox: 0" every day. Now, honestly, I don't do it every day.

I do it *almost* every day, and I always keep my emails under a hundred. But I have met people who have thousands of emails in their inbox—with hundreds, sometimes even more than a thousand, unread. This is not helpful. Not only is it potentially bad for your personal brand, it also makes email far more time-consuming than it needs to be.

The key is not to get bogged down, to keep moving, to deal with each email message once and only once. The way you do this is to start by asking, *Is this email actionable? Does somebody expect me to do something with this email, or is it asking me to do something?* If no, there are three possibilities; if yes, there are three different possibilities. These are taken from David Allen's book, *Getting Things Done*. We discussed them in the last chapter, but this elaboration will help you deal specifically with your email.

HOW TO PROCESS NON-ACTIONABLE EMAIL

- 1 If the answer to the question *Is this email actionable?* is no, then you have three options. The first is to delete it. Yes, there really is a delete key when it comes to email. My own philosophy is if it's really important, somebody else somewhere in the world has a copy.
- 2 The second thing is to add it to my Someday/Maybe list. If I don't want to lose the idea but there's nothing to do with it just yet, I can drag it into Evernote and return to it another time. As I mentioned in the last chapter, I like to revisit these in my weekly reviews.

- 3 The third thing is to file it. When in doubt, file. Why? Because you can always get back to it if need be, and it really doesn't take up a lot of space—particularly with all the space that's made available to us in systems like Gmail today, which is where I have all my email accounts. I just go ahead and file it.

Here is what's important: I use one and only one folder for my filing. It's called "Processed Email." The reason I do this is because it keeps me from getting distracted and wasting time. The moment I have to start answering questions like, "Where am I going to file this? This is about Project X from Client Y, so do I file it in Project X? Or do I file it under Client Y? What if it's about two projects? Do I make a copy and put a copy in each folder?" It can become very complex very quickly. And that means time down the drain. Instead, I just put it all in one folder and let the software do the searching when I need to find that message. I can get back to almost any message in a matter of seconds. It takes less time than me having to remember what folder I filed it in.

But what if the email is actionable?

HOW TO PROCESS ACTIONABLE EMAIL

- 1 First, you can just do it. Here is where I use David Allen's two-minute rule. If you can take care of the action in two minutes or less, why even take the time to put it in your task list? You run the risk of losing it, not getting back to it, or not being as responsive as you'd like to be. So just go ahead and do it.
- 2 The second option is to defer it. It may need to get done, but it doesn't need to get done now. So go ahead and put it on your calendar, create a reminder, but defer the action until a later time. You can drag the email to Processed and set a reminder in a task manager like Nozbe. You can also drag the email into Evernote and add a reminder. Email apps like [Dropbox's Mailbox](#) let you defer emails with a swipe or place it on a to-do list. However you manage it, the thing is to get it out of your email inbox.
- 3 The third option is to delegate it. I am preaching to myself here, by the way. I'm kind of a control freak, and I have this unspoken assumption that nobody can do it as well as I can do it. But the simple truth is that we're not always the best person to handle every task. You probably have other people on your team more competent than you at one task or another. They may be colleagues. They could be contractors.

Whatever the situation, let's make sure to use them. It could be their designated responsibility—or maybe they really enjoy doing it. If you don't like doing something, it's easy to think no one does. But there are people in every possible kind of work who enjoy doing that work and are better equipped to deal with it. So why are you still doing it?

THE END OF DISTRACTION



Alan Jacobs says we live in the “age of distraction”—and we do. But the possibility of distraction has always been with us. Gernsback invented his Isolator helmet almost a century ago. And long before him, Seneca was concerned about all the time we waste.

Usually, we're as distracted as we want to be. While his recommended solution is more a novelty than anything, Gernsback was right about this: “You are your own disturber practically 50 percent of the time,” he [said](#). We can blame all the noise and stimuli out there—or we can take the necessary responsibility to change our behaviors.

Recognizing the futility of multitasking is not the same as discontinuing it. I know because I still struggle with the temptation to feel like I'm doing more when I'm really doing less. I bet most of us do. These tactics will yield results if we employ them. But they only work if we want them to. How much time do you want to reclaim in your life? To help us reach our answer to that question, let's turn to the final strategy.

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STRATEGY NO. 4

FLEX YOUR ‘NO’ MUSCLE



If life came with a rewind button, what decisions would you go back and edit? I bet most of the decisions we wish we could reverse involve times we said *yes*, not the times we said *no*. Like you, I have far more opportunities than I have time. I’m better than ever at discerning the good from the bad, but I still sometimes agree to projects or meetings and instantly realize I’ve made a mistake. A rewind button would be awesome.

Unfortunately, there is no rewind button. But we do have one very powerful tool in our kit to keep us out of these and other time-wasting situations.

We’ve already been introduced to it—the word *no*.

It can feel good, even powerful, to use it. But sometimes *no* is the hardest word to say. If you’re like me, you have difficulty saying *no*. I’m basically a people pleaser. I hate turning people down. I like to comply with their requests. I like to be helpful if I possibly can. But as I’ve achieved more and my influence has grown, this has become increasingly problematic. It’s essential to understand the reason why if we’re intent on shaving ten hours from our workweek.

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THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF A NEGATIVE WORD



The more successful you become,” as Andy Stanley says, “the more inaccessible you must be.” That might sound rude on the face of it. But as we become successful, we face more and greater demands on our time and resources. We cannot give to everyone or everything the same level of attention we once did because there is not enough time to field all the requests.

We only have 168 hours a week, but in our eagerness to say yes, we often fail to recognize how limited that time really is. We think our hours come with more minutes than they actually do.

In her book *The Best Yes*, Lysa TerKeurst recommends a helpful exercise: Start by listing the main things you do every week and then estimate the time they take. If our list and estimates are accurate, it’s easy to see that we have far less time than we imagine. What about the leftovers? TerKeurst says we should guard this margin for things we really want to accomplish and say no to almost everything else.

Most of us will find this challenging because saying no comes off as negative—not just in the literal sense of the word, but emotionally as well. It can feel rude, exclusive, arrogant, mean, or petty. But it’s important to remember that feelings are not always honest.

The truth is that there’s a yes inside every no. Think of it like saving money. When you say no to the extra dinner out or the new car payment or whatever, you’re simultaneously saying yes to your savings target, your financial security, or an exciting purchase you intend to make when you have enough socked away.

What we have to realize is that saying no is really about saying yes. The answer to overcoming the negative feelings that come from saying no is to get emotionally connected to all your yeses. We started the book talking about health, family, emotional well-being, career, and legacy. When you say no to overcommitments, you’re saying yes to all of these.

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Several carefully considered noes each week will help you shave the remaining hours from our targeted ten. I want to share four tactics that can help us flex our no muscle and save our time for what matters most. Let's warm up on an easy one.

1. PRACTICE THE ART OF QUITTING



My parents taught me, “Always clean your plate” and “always finish what you start.” But let's not fool ourselves. The first one is a recipe for gaining weight. The second one is a formula for not getting much done. For example,

- **You don't need to finish every book you start.**
- **You don't need to complete every project you begin.**
- **You don't need to continue habits that no longer serve you.**

We need to cultivate the habit of non-finishing. Not every project you start is worth finishing. Sometimes we get into it and realize, “This is a waste of time.” So give yourself permission to quit.

I do this with reading all the time. Here's publishing's dirty little secret: Most books are not worth finishing. Most books could be cut in half and you wouldn't miss a thing. The key is to read as long as you are interested and then stop. You can come back to it later if you want, but there's no sense being a martyr to something as arbitrary as a page count.

Every time we quit something, we're saying no. And lots of these are small, no-cost noes. Think of it like practicing for the big noes.

HOW TO PRACTICE SAYING NO BY QUITTING SOMETHING—TODAY

My friend, Bob Goff, has a standing practice called “Quit Thursdays.” Every Thursday he quits something. Why? “We won’t be controlled by those things we’d freely quit,” he says. There’s a big payoff in feeling that kind of personal control. And suddenly there’s also margin for something else. Everything we quit helps us reclaim time for something that matters to us even more. But you don’t need to wait for Thursday to get started. Whatever day of the week it is, try quitting something today. How?

- 1 First, take the list you created for the TerKeurst exercise.
- 2 Second, identify the things that stand out as particularly irritating or wasteful. You might have to add some more detail or break the list down further to find the worst offender. But, trust me, it’s in there. Maybe it’s a task you can delegate or a trip you don’t want to take.
- 3 Third, think about what else you could do with that found time: Start a more fulfilling project? Spend more time on product development or closing sales? Go on, imagine. Whatever it is, professional or personal, that’s your underlying yes. If it’s strong enough, it’ll provide the emotional energy to stop doing the one thing you’ve identified.
- 4 Fourth, quit. There may be some resistance, especially if you start quitting bigger, more consequential things. But don’t let that stop you. Just count the cost with your new yes in the balance and keep moving.

2. WEIGH THE PROS AND CONS



When we are confronted with requests or demands on our time, we have several possible responses, but they all come down to a yes or no, and every yes or no comes with consequences. The problem is that we sometimes do a bad job of weighing them before committing ourselves.

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HOW TO EVALUATE YOUR OPTIONS

TerKeurst offers several ideas for sorting the good from the bad. I find these four particularly helpful:

- 1 First, consider the trade. For every explicit agreement we make, there are always dozens of implicit agreements that go along with them. Choices are, as TerKeurst says, “package deals.” To make good decisions, whether yes or no, requires we work on making those implicit agreements clear so we can evaluate them. Ask yourself: What else is really in this package? Does this yes come with a no to your family this weekend? Does this no come with a yes to your spouse for a date this evening?
- 2 Second, chase down the decision. Every agreement comes with a trajectory. We should pause and play out where our decision will lead. “And then what? And then? Keep going until you walk it all the way out,” TerKeurst says. If the destination is one we’ll regret, the only answer is no. Further, if we’re unclear on the direction we’re choosing, we should probably say no, too. There are consequences for almost everything we choose. It pays to know what they are—and both sides. If we’re inclined to say yes, for instance, it’s worth role playing a no just to see what might happen. Sometimes we get so locked into justifying a yes, that we fail to really consider how far ahead we’ll be if we just say no.
- 3 Third, examine your motive for choosing. It’s far too easy to say yes or no for reasons that have little to do with the actual merits of the choice. Sometimes we’re just afraid of upsetting someone. We want to please, to cajole, or to impress. That’s an ulcer waiting to happen. We have to possess enough personal integrity to refuse those games. We have to look at the real pluses and minuses based on our existing commitments and goals and then answer on the merits of the actual choice.
- 4 Fourth, recognize there’s no such thing as a perfect decision. Sometimes we fear making the wrong call. So we hold off instead of just saying yes or no. That’s especially true for saying no because we harbor a fear of missing out. But let me tell you: Life is too short. If we are paralyzed with the fear of perceived scarcity, we’ll only reduce the one resource that’s truly scarce—our time. Make the call and move on. If you lose, pick it up in the averages.

This second tactic is more conceptual. The third is very practical and will shave hours off your month and probably hours off your week if you practice it.

3. AUTOMATE YOUR NO



As the number of requests I field continued to grow several years back, I was faced with a challenge. I couldn't say yes to everything, but neither could I say no. Sometimes we make the decision right away, but we're uneasy about communicating our decision because we fear it will offend—especially if it's no. What to do?

The solution is to find a way to honor the person with a no, while keeping ourselves free to work on what matters most. But how?

When I first figured out how to solve this problem, I identified eleven common requests I saw every week, sometimes every day. *Can I meet about a job?* was one. *Can I send you my book proposal?* *Can I interest you in a new product of ours?* *Can I pick your brain?* In most of these cases, I was of no real use to the person, or I simply didn't have time. But I was still stuck agonizing over how I could say no and how I could respond to them. It became a major waste of time.

So here is what I did to address the problem. It works for me, and I've been recommending it ever since.

HOW TO USE EMAIL TEMPLATES TO SAY IT FOR YOU

- 1 First, I came up with a thoughtful and gracious but very general response. I didn't make them feel badly for asking the question, but I definitively said no to their request, which freed me up again to stay focused on the things that matter most. I did this for each of the eleven common requests—a number that has since grown to twenty.
- 2 Second, I saved each response as an email signature in my email app. You may think the email signature is just for putting a bona fide signature at the end of your email. Maybe it is, but you can also insert almost any boilerplate text in one of those signatures.

- 3 Third, I named each of the signatures so I can find and insert it quickly. So I have one, for example, that says, “Response to Someone Requesting a Job.”
- 4 Fourth, when I get one of these common requests, I just pull out the right signature, modify the language to personalize it, and hit send. *Done.* You can give these signature files to your assistant to save even more time. Recreating the wheel is not only pointless, it takes time. One of the best ways to shave hours off your workweek is to roll out the wheel you already made and just spin it again.

4. FIX OR QUIT TERRIBLE MEETINGS



Of all the time killers in our workweek, meetings are probably the worst. Even effective meetings take a toll, but in my experience there are far more bad meetings than good ones. Either the meeting organizer isn’t prepared, the meeting objective isn’t defined, or you can’t really affect the outcome one way or the other. Meanwhile, each meeting we attend pushes our productive work further into our margin.

This sets up a bad cycle. Because we have to accomplish our productive work, we try to take it with us into our meetings. We answer email, try to finish reports, do prep for the next meeting, and so on. Someone once told me that he appreciated his company’s monthly business review meeting because he was able to process two or three hundred emails during the time.

During any particular meeting you can count on no more than fifty percent engagement by the participants, based on what I’ve seen over the years. In fact, according to a [Harris-Clarizen poll](#), only two in five employees are not trying to multitask their way through meetings.

The end result is that unproductive meetings become even more time-consuming and unproductive. So what can you do to get back your time?

HOW TO GET YOUR TIME BACK FROM THE MEETING MONSTER

- 1 First, cancel standing meetings that no longer add value if it's in your power to do so. Nothing is so appreciated by employees than a canceled meeting. Do it a couple of times, and it's almost as welcome as a three-day weekend. If the meeting isn't adding the value necessary, be a hero and kill it.
- 2 Second, challenge meetings that others have scheduled if you no longer believe they add value. Every meeting should have a clearly stated objective and a written agenda. If you don't have these two minimal items, or they don't line up with the desired outcome, push back. There's nothing wrong with killing other people's meetings if they're not worth continuing.
- 3 Third, consider or suggest alternatives to meetings. Sometimes we default to meetings even if they're not the best solution for the team or the project we're trying to address.
- 4 Fourth, cut—or recommend cutting—the length of meetings. The longer the allotted meeting time, the more likely it is that time is being wasted. Try cutting meeting times in half and see if you can still accomplish what needs doing.
- 5 Fifth, stop attending low-impact meetings. If the content of the meeting is irrelevant to you and your job, or if you don't feel that you really add that much to the discussion, ask to be excused. And in some contexts you can just excuse yourself. What are you waiting for? Be your own hero!

HOW MUCH IS YOUR TIME WORTH?



The only way to shave ten hours off your workweek is to flex your no muscle. In fact, you have to become a no ninja. The good news is that it gets easier the more you do it—particularly as you start reaping the benefits of increased time.

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That goes for the other strategies and tactics we discussed. We can scale our workweek down to a manageable number of hours by cutting out the wasted motion and developing a few good habits.

My premise is that you can get ten hours of your week back if you use these four strategies consistently. What if I'm only half right? What if it's only five hours a week? What could you do with your life if you had more margin? What kind of progress could you make on those Quadrant 2 categories that are important but not urgent? I think you could make all kinds of progress. Would that be enough to convince you that cutting it back ten hours is really possible?

Here's what I know: Reality and Possibility are like two horses in a harness. One can't run in front of the other very far. They have to go in tandem. When we get a sense of what's possible, it doesn't take long for reality to match the pace. And reality can speed up our sense of the possible as well.

If we're winning, it's easier to imagine an even bigger win.

As I said at the start of this chapter, the most important thing for this strategy is realizing that with every no comes a yes. If you say no to one thing, you're saying yes to something else. And vice versa. As you flex your no muscle, what are you saying yes to? How much is your time worth?

I ask because these questions go back to the same issues that we began this ebook with. What would getting back ten hours a week make possible for your health, your emotional well-being, your family, your career, and your legacy? You may be saying no to a lot more.

**But you'll be saying yes
to a lot more as well.**

CHEAT SHEET

Once you've read through *Shave 10 Hours off Your Workweek*, you can shave even more time by using this cheat sheet to stay fresh on the concepts.

STRATEGY NO. 1. BOOST YOUR ENERGY

Our time is fixed. We only have 168 hours a week. But we have expandable stores of energy if we employ these four tactics.

TACTICS



Get enough nightly sleep. Good sleep involves both quality and quantity. Set a regular bedtime and keep it; use an alarm if you need a reminder. Turn off your screens in advance and avoid late-day exercise. Kill all the lights and keep the temp low.



Take a nap. Schedule your nap sometime between noon and 4:00 p.m. and be consistent. Use a comfy chair and turn down the lights if possible. Keep it short—just ten to thirty minutes.



Get (and stay) physically healthy. Live on your feet. Stand, pace, walk, jog—anything to avoid being sedentary. Create accountability for your exercise routine. Replace refined carbs with good protein and fat, vegetables and fruit. Most importantly, eat foods that make you feel good *later*, not just in the moment.



Maintain a positive attitude. Decide to be upbeat. Fill your life with positive words and relationships, instead of negative words and relationships. Finally, take time to unwind and feed your mind with uplifting and engaging content.

STRATEGY NO. 2. GUARD YOUR TIME

Since we only have 168 hours in a week, we have to zealously guard it. These four defensive tactics will free you to score all week long.

TACTICS



Plan your day in advance. Start the night before and identify five to seven things you want to accomplish the next day. Now, use Stephen Covey's priority matrix to prioritize your list.



Plan your week. Process any notes, papers, or other details from the prior week. If actionable, do it immediately, defer it, or delegate it. If not, then trash it, add it to your Someday/Maybe list, or file it. Next, review annual goals, along with your upcoming calendar and projects. Schedule next steps. Now, check your Waiting For list and follow up on delegated tasks. Finally, review your Someday/Maybe list to determine if the time is right to act on one or more of these items.



Schedule *everything* that matters. Calendar "alone zone" time for busy work and brainstorming. Block out time for exercise and rest. And guard your nights and weekends for family and recreational time.



Triage you calendar. When things get crazy, you use your priority matrix to determine what's essential and what can be canceled or rescheduled. Eliminate nonessentials and reschedule the rest.

STRATEGY NO. 3. SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

Next, we need to make the most of our available time. Using these three tactics will help you focus your attention and work efficiently.

TACTICS



Disconnect from online distractions. Turn off all app notifications. Set deadlines for tasks to avoid mindless surfing. If you impulsively check social media or other websites, use an app like Anti-Social to block access. Finally, play music to shut out the distractions and drill down for set periods.



Use batch processing. Identify categories of similar activities, group them together, and rework your calendar by creating time blocks for similar tasks.



Touch emails only once. To avoid getting bogged down in your own inbox, determine if an email is actionable or not. If yes, do it immediately, defer it, or delegate it. If not, delete it, add it to your Someday/Maybe list, or file it in your processed email folder.

STRATEGY NO. 4. STRETCH YOUR 'NO' MUSCLE

Every time we say no to extra demands, we're saying yes to margin and the things that matter most. These four tactics will help you become a no ninja.

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TACTICS



Practice the art of quitting. Identify something irritating, wasteful, or boring. Decide if you can delegate or ditch it entirely. Determine what you would do with the found time, and let that inspire you to quit.



Weigh the pros and cons. Cost-benefit analyses are crucial for flexing your no muscle. Consider tradeoffs, see where your decision leads, examine your motives, and get comfortable with imperfect decisions. You'll make it up in the averages.



Automate your no. Don't reinvent your no. Identify recurring requests, formulate boilerplate answers in email templates, customize as necessary, and send.



Fix or quit terrible meetings. Identify useless meetings and cancel them if you can, challenge them if you can't, and recommend helpful alternatives. Recommend shorter meeting times. And finally, if all else fails, just stop attending.

I've been using these strategies and tactics for years and they've not only shaved time off my workweek, they've preserved my sanity. Better, they've helped me create the margin for the things that matter most in my life.

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