Finding Time
How to Accomplish More by Doing Less

QUICK OVERVIEW

Time itself cannot be managed. What we can manage is how we use the time we have. In her latest book, productivity expert Laura Stack presents her six-step Productivity Workflow Formula™ as a model for making the most of your time, including giving yourself a life outside of work.

With her mantra of reduce, reduce, reduce, Stack explains how to properly trim your workload. By eliminating time-wasting activities and focusing on the right things, you will become more productive and, hence, even more valuable to your organization. Results, after all, are what matter.

Do her methods work? Her clients affirm they do and report a much improved and more efficient workflow within their organization. Best of all, they report an average time savings of about 90 minutes a day. This summary focuses primarily on the first two steps of the Productivity Workflow Formula: Determine what to do and schedule time to do it.

APPLY AND ACHIEVE

Drawing upon her 20 years of experience in advising companies on employee productivity and workplace issues, Laura Stack candidly shares what does and doesn’t work when it comes to increasing productivity. In most cases, doing more isn’t most effective. She recommends that those who want to see better results should examine their work requirements, and then seek to eliminate any tasks that do not help achieve the desired results.

What does that mean to you, specifically? Build your schedule around your priorities. Focus on activities that are truly significant. Be reasonable in what you can accomplish in a day, and keep your schedule flexible. Know which low priority tasks can go undone if need be.

It’s important to realize that managing your own personal capacity is central to the entire process. By practicing good self-care and limiting your activities to what’s really important to you, you’ll be able to maintain the physical and mental energy level you need to perform at your best.

SUCCESS Points

In this book you’ll learn:

- Guidelines for determining if a task is important
- The value of saying No, and when it’s appropriate to do so
- Ways to help you focus your attention and avoid distractions
- Systems for processing and filing needed information
- The importance of managing your personal capacity
One morning, as I entered a ballroom to deliver a keynote address for a Fortune 100 telecommunications company, one of the employees approached me. She didn’t look happy. “I have to tell you something,” she said. “I’m not excited about you being here.”

I was a bit taken aback, since I hadn’t even opened my mouth yet. “No kidding,” I replied. “Do you mind telling me why?”

“Absolutely,” she continued. “I have no desire to be more productive. I’m working as hard as I possibly can. I’m killing myself with twelve-hour days and already have way too much to do. I don’t want a productivity consultant telling me to do more with less. I want to do less and achieve more.”

The light bulb went on, and I reassured her, “That’s exactly what I’m here to help you do.” This woman’s description of “too much to do” and desire to “do less and achieve more” framed my 20-year mission perfectly and inspired the title of this book.

Frankly, doing more isn’t always better. What really matters is results—not check marks—and not hours. Busyness doesn’t necessarily equal productivity, no matter how you slice it. No one really cares how many hours you were in the building or if you finished your to-do list. People only care about what you’re able to produce and the value of those results.

If you’ve got far too much to do and desperately need to take back some of your time, know that it’s possible to do so, assuming you’re willing to put some sincere effort into the attempt. By following the logical, intuitive workflow process I present, you can wrestle your schedule into submission. Ultimately, you can recover as much as ninety minutes of your day (or even more) to use as you see fit.

### THE CASE FOR REDUCTION

Simply stated, the central message of my unique approach to workflow is it’s better to do less, not more, so you can do better, more focused work. Many workers find this a startling concept, because they increasingly have to work harder and longer with fewer resources. Over the last few decades we’ve learned to be superbly productive, yes, but in a way that can’t be sustained over the long haul. In fact, I think we’ve just about hit the ceiling of what we can accomplish by stretching ourselves so thin we’re practically transparent.

So today, I preach the gospel of ruthless task reduction, because I honestly believe an abandonment of unnecessary chores, and a drastic triage of all that remains, is the only way to be consistently, profitably productive in this economy without destroying your health, your family life, and your joy.

You don’t have to kill yourself to prove your dedication to the company and produce the tremendous results required. Instead, get a handle on what’s really important in your organization, and focus on aligning business strategy with your day-to-day execution. Don’t just push and push and push until you can’t go on anymore. Ironically, this can limit your usefulness to your company, rather than increasing it.

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Never confuse activity with productivity.

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Working too many hours is demonstrably counterproductive, because it results in decreased productivity. Studies have repeatedly shown that a sixty-hour workweek results, on average, in a 25 percent decrease in productivity. The productivity numbers just get worse as the number of work hours increases, because exhaustion steadily erodes judgment and performance. Eventually, no matter how good your intentions, you hit a point of diminishing returns.

The lesson here? You aren’t a robot. Long hours lead to physical and mental fatigue, which results in slower work, more mistakes, and wasted time. It may also lead to depression, which can spiral out of control if left untreated. You’d take good care of any other tool, wouldn’t you? So why not take care of yourself?

### The Solution

I’ll show you how to train yourself out of the overwork mentality. Reduce, reduce, reduce will become your new mantra, to the tune of about ninety minutes a day. This ninety-minute savings isn’t a “guess”—it’s what clients have told me these methods have saved them.

I will show you how to logically reprioritize your work and shift your focus to the truly significant. You’ll learn to jettison old ideas that limit your productivity and begin re-examining
What to Do When There’s Too Much to Do

your workload with new eyes. You’ll excise useless tasks and cut through redundant data to sharpen your focus to a keen edge.

PRODUCTIVITY WORKFLOW FORMULA

With the new system I offer you, it’s simple to rearrange your life so you can have a life outside of work. Not necessarily easy, mind you—but simple and straightforward to implement. With that in mind, I’d like to introduce the Productivity Workflow Formula™.

The Productivity Workflow Formula breaks down into six primary steps:

1. Determine what to do. Study your work requirements closely; triage your to-do lists; handle time-wasters; and decide to do only what really matters.

2. Schedule time to do it. Assign time slots and durations appropriately; say no when appropriate; make decisions quickly; and control your meetings.

3. Focus your attention. Hone your concentration to razor sharpness; shut out distractions; learn focus techniques; and avoid multitasking.

4. Process new information. Research effectively; file digital information; and quickly handle incoming email voice-mail, and paper.

5. Close the loop. Determine what does and doesn’t work; reduce inefficiencies; solve people problems and bottlenecks; and tighten up systems as you go.

6. Manage your capacity. Focus on the physical factors affecting your energy; manage sleep, diet, exercise, and your own happiness.

DETERMINE WHAT TO DO

The first step in the Productivity Workflow Formula is to determine what you should be working on. When you implement this step correctly, instead of having 117 things on your to-do list, you may end up with just ten tasks, or five, or even three…but they’ll be the right ones. And don’t worry: Once you have the proper processes in place, you can revisit all the others systematically and get them done in their place.

Defining Importance

You may discover that determining what’s truly important is one of your biggest challenges. How do you know if something you do is important?

First, start with your job requirements. If you made a list of the top ten things you believe you’re responsible for, and then asked your manager to do the same, and compared the two lists, would they be the same? If not, you have a problem, because you aren’t spending your time in ways that are valuable to your best customer. Know your manager’s requirements cold, both the formal ones on your job description and the informal ones your boss expects you to do anyway. Keep the notes from your last performance review front and center, and make sure you’re making progress on them daily.

Just because a task is important doesn’t mean you’re the right person to do it, and even if you are, you still might be doing more work than is necessary. Ask yourself:

- Are you doing things someone else could or should be doing? If so, take steps to rectify the situation.
- Are you working below your pay grade? It’s a mistake to waste time on something if someone else can do it more cheaply. Delegate everything you can.
- Are you letting brushfires and crises take up your time? Why? Whose crisis is it?
Create a Not-To-Do List

One of my absolute favorite quotes is by the late, great Peter Drucker, who once pointed out, “There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all.”

It would be a great idea to compile a Not-To-Do list—a list of things you simply refuse to do. Start by writing down the time-wasting behaviors you should avoid. Then include the misaligned tasks that end up on your plate because you’re “being nice.” Then review and revise your list periodically, to make sure you don’t accidentally slip into habits that damage your productivity and keep you at work too long. You don’t need a calendar full of unnecessary tasks to be productive and accomplish more.

To-Do Lists: Tracking What’s Left

Everything you haven’t eliminated thus far has to be tracked and organized. Many people assume because there’s a crumpled up to-do list on the cover of this book, I’m against to-do lists. Not true!

You do need to-do lists to stay organized; I suggest that you keep not just one, but two lists. One is a limited daily to-do list, which I call a HIT list, since it contains all the High Impact Tasks (HITs) that keep your work/flow humming along. The other is a Master list, which contains all future projects and tasks, “someday” items, and good ideas you’re not yet ready to work on.

Creating a Not-To-Do List

What should go on a Not-To-Do List? Obviously, that will vary from person to person, based on what applies to a particular workplace and what each individual considers impractical or illogical. Here are a few ideas:

• Don’t do low-profit or low-priority work when you can delegate it instead.
• Don’t let brushfires and crises suck up all your time.
• Don’t spend all your time at work at the expense of family and friends.
• Don’t deal with work issues during personal time—and vice-versa.
• Don’t procrastinate.
• Don’t fall prey to perfectionism.
• Don’t attend useless meetings.
• Don’t gossip or complain.
• Don’t multitask.
• Don’t let your electronics hamper rather than help you.
• Don’t waste work time on social sites or the Internet.
• Don’t check your email more than a few times per day, unless your job requires it.
• Don’t check your morals and values at the door.
• Don’t undervalue those you work with.
• Don’t wait until the last minute to do important things.
• Don’t micromanage.

Once time is spent, it’s gone, and you can’t get it back.

You must separate what you need to do today from what you don’t need to do today. Combining the two is very distracting and makes it difficult to determine what to work on next.

Your HIT list includes a reasonable number of items that you honestly plan to accomplish on a particular day. By design, a daily HIT list literally guides your day’s work, so be realistic when compiling it. If your daily HIT list contains more than ten items, I’d say you’re stretching it. If used properly, your HIT list can be one of your most powerful productivity tools.

The Master list is a running list of everything you need or want to do at some point. Whenever something important comes in that lacks urgency or has no set deadline, add it to the Master list, so you have a running compilation of all the things you want to do eventually but don’t need to do today. Your Master list keeps your daily HIT list from overflowing into uselessness, and may consist of dozens or hundreds of entries as a result.

Constantly analyze your lists to determine where you can scale back. Triage ruthlessly and change your priorities when you must. By doing so, you’ll find you can cut out many tasks altogether.
What to Do When There’s Too Much to Do

SCHEDULE TIME TO DO IT

After you’ve eliminated time-wasting behaviors and determined exactly what you should do each day, the second step is finding the time to do it—literally—on your calendar.

Follow Basic Scheduling Principles

1. Delegate or outsource whenever possible. Get over the idea that if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself; this could be one of the reasons you’re stuck in your office all the time.

2. Create your own deadlines. If someone hands you a casual project with no official deadline, set one for yourself. Determine how long the full project will take. Then calculate how many days and how much time you’ll need to complete it.

3. Set priorities but be flexible. Construct your HIT and Master lists based on the value-weighted priorities you define. Allow a little flexibility into your calendar, so you can productively deal with crises and other unexpected events.

4. Take the time of day into account. You’re the expert on you, so keep track of your daily peak energy period, and hammer on some of your tough tasks during those periods, when your brain functions better. Leave simpler tasks for low-energy, “secondary time.”

Learn to Say No—And Make It Stick

If you really want to limit your availability and put fences around your time, you’ll have to shackle the worst time bandit there is: yourself. Most of us are simply too generous with our time—and when you’re trying to reach peak productivity, you can’t always give in when someone tries to lay claim to your attention. If you don’t put yourself at the head of your own line and block all comers, someone else will definitely cut ahead of you.

Some of us are hesitant to say no because we fear being labeled as having a bad attitude or not being a team player. This is an understandable fear, especially if the person trying to capture some of your time is an authority figure. You may also encounter this problem if you work in an especially competitive environment, where not giving all of your time is seen as a lack of commitment. If this is the case, then you may have to surrender some of your time, like it or not; but do your best to trim the required time to the bare minimum.

Rescuing Your Time from Meetings

An important part of working in the professional world is collaboration and teamwork. Unfortunately, many meetings really don’t do much, other than use up valuable time. If you’re going to perform at your productive best, you definitely have to apply the “less is more” concept to meetings. You can accomplish just about everything done in a meeting more efficiently in another format. In fact, a well-crafted email is often as effective as a sit-down meeting.

Conscious thought is the first key to learning to scale back your daily commitments, so you can take back time that you ought to spend on the rest of your life.

The meetings you do attend should be results-oriented and limited in frequency. They must also stick to the stated agenda without going off on tangents. Before you step inside, decide how much time you can invest in the meeting, and make it clear to the other participants at the beginning. If the meeting runs over schedule, you’re justified in leaving. At each meeting, strive to arrange for an email or telephone follow-up, rather than scheduling yet another meeting to report on your progress.

TOO MUCH FOR TOO LITTLE

Rather than ruin your health, alienate your family and friends, and lose yourself, take steps to nip workaholism in the bud right now, while you still can. Pull back. Weed out the unnecessary and trivial. It requires self-discipline and a willingness to put yourself and the things that truly matter to you first rather than last. Clearly, you have plenty of self-discipline; otherwise you wouldn’t be working so many hours. Making yourself a priority is probably a bigger problem. But it’s worth trying, because implementing the Productivity Workflow Formula will make life a lot easier for you by freeing up valuable recharge time without forcing you to sacrifice one jot of productivity.
ACTION STEPS

Get more out of this SUCCESS Book Summary by applying what you’ve learned to your life and business. Here are some questions, thoughts and activities to get you started.

1. Examine your job requirements. Are you spending time in ways that add value to your business and customers?

2. What tasks should you simply refuse to do? What time-wasting behaviors should you avoid?

3. What High Impact Tasks do you reasonably expect to accomplish today? Put these on your HIT list, and let it be your guide for the day.

4. What projects and tasks do you wish to complete someday? What ideas do you wish to develop? Add these to your Master list, which should be a perpetual work in progress.

5. What tasks can others do more cheaply and effectively? Take these off your plate by delegating or outsourcing when possible.

6. What time of day does your peak energy occur? Schedule tasks requiring the most energy and brain power during that time and leave simpler tasks for your off-peak hours.

7. Think about the meetings you’ve scheduled. Can some be eliminated by distributing necessary information via email, phone calls or other media? For the sit-down meetings that are truly warranted, what can be done to keep them on target and within the given time period?

About the Author

For more than 20 years Laura Stack has been advising leaders on ways to increase employee productivity. Laura has written five books, and her popular monthly electronic newsletter has subscribers in 38 countries. She has been featured nationally on the CBS Early Show, CNN, NPR, Bloomberg, and in The Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post and Forbes magazine, to name a few. She has represented Microsoft, 3M, Xerox and Office Depot in spokesperson roles and is the designer of the Productivity Pro planner by Day-Timer.

A dynamic speaker, Laura has given keynotes and seminars that focus on increasing profitability by improving output, reducing inefficiency and saving time in the workplace. She also serves as the 2011–2012 president of the National Speakers Association.

Laura holds an MBA and is the president of The Productivity Pro®, Inc., a consulting firm that specializes in productivity improvement in high-stress environments. She lives with her husband and three children in Denver, Colo.

Recommended Reading

If you enjoyed this summary of What to Do When There’s Too Much to Do, you may also want to check out:

Eat That Frog! by Brian Tracy

The 4-Hour Workweek by Timothy Ferriss

The Power of Focus by Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen and Les Hewitt