



***Done:  
Time Management Strategies for  
Regaining Command of Your Day***

Executive Summary

## Introduction

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We are bombarded by interruptions and distractions throughout the day. They hamper our ability to get things done. They interrupt our focused efforts and reduce our productivity. Getting more done each day occurs when the unnecessary interruptions and distractions are reduced.

For example, getting just six minutes more done each day results in twenty-four hours of additional productivity each year. That's three days of work off the desk each year...six minutes at a time.

The four sections below offer six suggestions each on how to reduce unnecessary interruptions and distractions during the workday. Find one or two from the two dozen recommendations in order to start getting those six minutes back.

## Regaining Command of Email

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Email is the global *de facto* communication standard. Business use of email continues to grow. Email is also a hybrid form of communication—a written form used conversationally. This hybrid nature, coupled with habits developed early in its use, results in email being both the boon and the bane of the modern work world. It is the boon, because we can communicate globally, twenty-four hours a day. It is the bane, because everyone else can too!

Consider these suggestions to make email part of a more productive day:



### ***1. Turn New Message Alerts Off***

New message alerts were valuable when email was new. We only received five emails per day back then and needed to be alerted to their arrival.

Times have changed. Now, we receive five messages per minute. The new message alert serves only to distract us from other productive efforts, resulting in lost time getting back up to speed when we return to the effort after checking the alert. For example, it takes four seconds to look at a new email, determine its importance, then act accordingly. If we get 100 alerts a day, then we're losing four hundred seconds (6:40 minutes) each day just checking the 'ding'! That's well over twenty-four hours per year lost to this one activity.

(Author's note: read the next suggestion before summarily disregarding this one.)

### ***2. Check Email Regularly Versus Constantly; Process Like Physical Mail***

Staying responsive to others while getting work done is a difficult balance. Regularly checking email—versus constantly checking email, is one way to achieve this balance. Staying focused on one thing—even for a short period of time—produces higher quality work faster. That's a positive result.

The frequency of inbox visits varies from day-to-day depending on other demands. However, a good rule of thumb is every fifteen minutes. That allows focused effort and responsiveness to cohabitate.

Finally, when checking email, treat it like regular mail. Delete the trash, file the filing, and leave the rest in the inbox for future effort. Decluttering the inbox along the way makes finding and working on important messages easier to do.

### ***3. Craft Single-Subject Emails***

Email has incorporated many conversational nuances as a hybrid communication method. Not all of them are good or productive. One bad habit is switching topics mid-message. This is a normal conversational behavior but it doesn't translate well to email—a written form.

Consider how physical letters were crafted: one subject in each letter. The reasons were simple. Not only did it focus the writer and reader on one subject—more effective—it was easier to file and to find.



These goals—effectiveness and ease of use—also pertain to email. Thus, only discuss one subject in each email. If a new subject needs to be communicated to the same person, start a new email.

#### ***4. Leverage the Subject Line***

Another bad email habit is the failure to craft good subject lines. The subject line is one of the few pieces of information every email recipient sees. Yet, most subject lines are only marginally communicative. Here are some examples of good and bad subject lines:

##### *Bad Subject Line*

- Question
- Meeting Tomorrow
- Need Information

##### *Good Subject Line*

- Question—Thompson Matter—Deadline=End of Business Today
- Meeting Tomorrow—Smith Matter—2:00pm Eastern—Conf Rm 12 North
- Need Information—Robertson Deal—Deadline=Tuesday at Noon Eastern

The bad subject line emails tell the reader little, requiring the email to be opened and read before any meaningful action occurs. That's a waste of time. The good subject line emails tell the recipient what they need to know without ever opening the message. They're more effective and more efficient. Moreover, finding and filing the good subject line emails is much easier.

#### ***5. Minimize Use of 'Reply All'***

'Reply all' is often required to keep everyone in the loop and to document effort properly. However, it's not *always* required. One study found that people overuse 'reply all' about twenty percent of the time. If we all get one hundred emails a day (a low estimate) and we all reduce our use of 'reply all' by twenty percent, we'd all have twenty fewer emails per day that we didn't need to open, read, and delete. How many minutes would that save? All it takes is making one consideration: Does *everyone* on this email thread need my response?



## **6. Create Calendar Appointments From Email**

A nifty Outlook trick is to create a calendar appointment directly from email. Doing this transfers a *copy* of everything in the email to the appointment's notes section. The result is an appointment containing the entire correspondence readily available prior to or during the appointment.

Creating an appointment from email is easy. Click on an email in the inbox, then click Meeting, which is located on the Home tab at the top of the screen. Complete the appointment information per usual, then send to any meeting invites. *Caveat: Invitees see what you see, so be careful about any confidential information.*

Decide if any of the above suggestions make sense. If so, implement them and start getting those precious six minutes per day back!

## **Regaining Command of the Calendar**

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The workday is frenetic. It is filled with meetings, calls, assignments, and constant requests. Schedule management requires a delicate touch to balance others' needs against work that must be done.

Consider these suggestions to remain productive throughout the busy day:

### **1. Schedule Time Between Meetings**

Running from meeting to call to meeting to call is more than exhausting; it is ineffective. Much is lost in the transitions—good ideas, take-aways, prep time, etc. Carve a few minutes out between each appointment to debrief from the last appointment, prepare for the next one, or to check in with teammates. Do this by inserting a short "Unavailable" event on the calendar after every actual appointment. Many "Unavailables" will get lost, but the one or two that survive are invaluable.

### **2. Put Appointments on the Calendar and To-Dos on a Separate List**

Appointments are hard-coded time. They involve a specific group at a specific time to address a specific topic. To-dos are soft-coded time. They must be interleaved among all the hard-coded appointments each day. Separate them by placing *only* appointments on the calendar and to-dos onto another list (paper, app, etc.). Keeping them separate allows the



brain to do what it does best—piece the puzzle together of how the to-dos will get done among the appointments. Moreover, new appointments and to-dos are integrated easily into this system.

### ***3. Survey the Landscape Regularly***

One key to staying on top of things is to periodically stop and take stock of what is happening. Counter-intuitively, slowing down can be faster. Taking a short break to match time availability with workload often results in doing more, because this small planning effort better utilizes the time available to produce work product.

### ***4. Schedule Only Four Hours of Work Each Day***

Optimism can undermine productivity. An 8-to-5 workday does *not* result in eight hours of work product. The exigent needs of each day fill much of that day's available time. Therefore, to the extent possible, plan for four hours of focused effort each day. Otherwise, the day's end only brings disappointment—the need to inform others that the work promised did not get done.

### ***5. Establish Regular Office Hours***

Drive-by interruptions are the enemy of productivity. These are not the necessary interruptions—when people come by physically or electronically for work purposes. Drive-by interruptions serve no professional purpose. For example, stories about last night's soccer game—interesting? Yes. Productive? No.

Avoid these by *mostly* closing the office door and setting specific times to meet with colleagues. The analogy is the college professor who maintains office hours for student questions. Communicate these availability times regularly to all who need questions asked or answered, and steer the drive-by culprits to a coffee or lunch meeting.

### ***6. Take Short Breaks***

The mind is productivity's engine. It requires periods of rest in order to perform optimally. Find ways to take short breaks during the day to recharge the mind. Walk around the office floor; go grab some coffee; do anything that gives the mind a short rest. Then, jump back into the work. It is amazing how much gets done after even a fifteen-minute break!



Grab one of these immediately actionable suggestions to make the best of the time available today!

## Regaining Command of Tasks

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Getting things done: that is the basis of productivity. Finding ways to manage the flow of work more efficiently directly affects how much gets done. Here are some recommendations for smoothing out the daily workflow.

### **1. Do One Thing at a Time**

Multi-tasking is neurologically impossible. The intellectually minded can read the Stanford University study that first broke the bad news:

<http://news.stanford.edu/news/2009/august24/multitask-research-study-082409.html>

The brave can simply ride in a car where the driver is texting and driving!

Multi-tasking results in something called switch costing—the time it takes to switch back and forth between tasks. That “cost” adds up quickly; not to mention the amount of energy wasted and the level of stress experienced.

Focus is where productivity occurs. Seek ways to focus on one thing at a time. Turning off message alerts and establishing regular office hours—both discussed above—are good examples of creating quiet work environments that facilitate focus.

### **2. Identify Today's One Thing**

Treading water, that is how many days feel. One way to combat that feeling, and to get more done, is to pick one thing each day—just one—that *will* get done. Even checking only one thing off the list feels good. The work year consists of two hundred and forty days. Getting today's one thing done means that two hundred and forty “feel goods” occur each year. Not bad, huh?

### **3. Spread Priorities Out**

Schedule project deadlines as far into the future as possible. Work always takes longer than originally planned. Moreover, every day is littered with emergency projects. The result is that other projects get pushed back anyway, but the time it takes to update others of the



delay is simply lost time. There is no productivity in disappointing clients with expended deadlines.

#### **4. Conduct Regular Core Dumps**

Where is the noisiest place on earth? It is right between the ears. All those thoughts are bouncing around at billions of bits per second. It's any wonder anything ever gets done! Conversely, the mind is the key tool in producing work. Quiet down that workspace by core dumping. Get everything out of there. Write it down. Add it to an app. Dictate it. Just get it out. The result is a quiet, focused mind, which is very productive.

#### **5. Use Full Screens**

If multi-tasking is impossible, what is the point of having multiple windows open on the screen or multiple monitors on the desk? The point is to aggregate disparate pieces of information into a single location. Period. That is the only reason. Since multi-tasking is highly inefficient, having multiple windows open or extra monitors sitting on the desk only reduces productivity. Close the superfluous windows and turn off the extra screens when not aggregating disparate information to a single location.

#### **6. Do One More (Little) Thing**

Before walking out the door each day, do one more (little) thing. File something. Return a call. Just make it something small and quick. Doing this will result in over two hundred more things getting done each year!

Which of these suggestions appeal to you? Put one or two of them into practice today and start getting those six minutes back!

## **Regaining Command of the Workplace**

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Where we work physically and how we work together in groups is a ripe source for small productivity changes that produce a lasting positive effect. Read the following six suggestions to determine which one or two of them you can incorporate into your day:



## **1. Create a Designated Workspace**

Clear an area of everything. Place in that spot *one thing* to work on at a time. Having a designated workspace with only one thing in it eliminates the effects of peripheral vision.

Peripheral vision extends one hundred and twenty degrees in all directions. It's a survival mechanism and can't be turned off. Everything within that sphere is being "seen" by the brain, which causes mini-distractions. Achieve laser focus on the work at hand by clearing the viewfinder of all peripheral distractions.

## **2. Face Away from Traffic**

Most offices are arranged with the occupant's chair facing the door. Peripheral vision negatively affects focus here as well. Traffic passes by the office door all day long and the instinctual response is to look up—another mini-distraction—or worse, if passersby stop and come into the office.

Shift the office orientation by ninety degrees to face a wall with the office door off and behind one shoulder. The potential distractions from hall traffic are immediately eliminated!

## **3. Sequester Away**

One way to eliminate constant interruptions by others is to sequester yourself away to a quiet place such as a conference or caucus room. Take one or two projects along with you, sit down and work on those tasks, then get back to the fray. Sequestering for as little as thirty minutes greatly increases productivity on important work.

## **4. Elicit Versus Give Answers**

Employ the Socratic Method in order to develop direct reports into problem solvers versus question askers. The goal for any manager or supervisor is to help people develop beyond the supervisor's assistance—getting others to think for themselves and become problem solvers. The only way to accomplish that goal is to *stop* answering questions asked by direct reports and *start* asking them instead. The objective is to use leading questions to help subordinates arrive at the correct answer. Forewarning is appropriate so the direct report does not feel manipulated.



## **5. Reduce Meeting Lengths by Twenty-Five Percent**

There are only two bad answers as to why one-hour meetings exist: (1) That's the way it's always been done, or (2) Outlook said so. Consider cutting all meetings by twenty-five percent. One-hour meetings drop to forty-five minutes and thirty-minute meetings drop to twenty-five. Imagine how much more could be done with those extra minutes!

## **6. Distribute Materials in Advance of Meetings**

The most expensive time an organization spends is in meetings. The salaries of everyone sitting around the table accumulate quickly. Why, then, are the materials necessary to the meeting being handed out at the beginning? Why aren't they handed out the day before? If materials are handed out in advance, everyone can review them and be prepared to participate productively during the meeting!

We spend a lot of time at the office...together. Pick one or two of these tactics to make the most of that time.

## **Conclusion**

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The goal of this program is to find six minutes of productivity per day. Those six-minute increments aggregate into twenty-four additional hours of accomplishment per year. Pick through the list above and make a couple of small changes. A year from now, you'll be asking, *"What am I going to do with my three days, now that I have them?"*