LAURA STACK

Author of *Leave the Office Earlier*

WHAT TO DO WHEN THERE'S TOO MUCH TO DO

Reduce Tasks, Increase Results, and Save 90 Minutes a Day

TO-DO LIST

Time-Sensitive tasks

OTHER

More Praise for *What to Do When There's Too Much to Do*

"Stack's incredible book shows you how to get organized better and get more done faster than you ever thought possible."
  —Brian Tracy, author of *Eat That Frog!* and *No Excuses!*

"This book will save you time, money, and—most of all—your sanity. In our fast-moving, multitasking world of now-now-now, Laura Stack is an extraordinary resource for you, and her expertise is delivered with this book."
  —Tim Sanders, bestselling author and former Chief Solutions Officer, Yahoo!

"I don't know anybody who is more organized or who has more energy and has more fun getting things done than Laura Stack. No kidding. She doesn't just write about what she knows; she writes about what she lives. If you feel like there's too much to do, read this book for tips, tactics, and strategies that will decrease the time you invest and increase the results you enjoy."
  —Mark Sanborn, author of *Up, Down, or Sideways* and *The Fred Factor*

"Laura's Productivity Workflow Formula will help you become the 5 percent employee that creates 95 percent of the company's value. Yet another high-value tool from the Productivity Pro!"
  —Jeff Bettinger, Chief Career Strategist, HelpMyResume.com

"I am a raving fan of Laura Stack because she is the absolute master of teaching me how to do less and achieve more. For me, like so many others, time has become the new currency. I can always make more money, but I can't make more time. Laura teaches me to make much better use of the time that I have so that I can do more of what I want to do. For me, that's priceless. This book will motivate you to do the simple yet powerful things that can make your work and your life immeasurably more productive and fulfilling."
  —Joe Calloway, author of *Becoming a Category of One*

"Leadership, strategy, and business acumen are essential for being successful in business today. At the heart of Laura's effective productivity system are strategies to maximize these essential business skills. Read this book! Adopting her system will unleash your strategic thinking potential and productivity in your business and maximize your results. It has worked for us, and I guarantee it will work for you!"
  —Mike Howard, Chief Security Officer, Microsoft Corporation

"In this prolific and pragmatic guide, you will find tangible strategies for tackling the working world's toughest issue: time management. Finally, someone has realized we're at maximum capacity, and Stack gives us usable ideas to help us reduce, reduce, reduce."

   —Rory Vaden, cofounder, Southwestern Consulting, and *New York Times* bestselling author of *Take the Stairs*

"If you have so much to do that you're not sure what to do, here's the first thing to do: buy Laura's book!"

   —Randy Gage, author of *Prosperity Mind*

"Are you overworked, overstressed, and overwhelmed, yet still you're underproducing? Laura Stack can help you. Buy this book and devour it. You can do less, stress less, and still achieve more. It's possible! Learn how inside."

   —Darren Hardy, Publisher, *Success* magazine, and *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Compound Effect*

"Laura Stack is an extraordinary teacher, speaker, and coach who inspires people to become peak performers. This book is a must-read for anyone who wants to stop 'doing more with less' but 'do less to achieve more.'"

   —Dr. Nido R. Qubein, President, High Point University, and Chairman, Great Harvest Bread Company

"Laura Stack improved our work flow, communication, coordination, documentation support, and teamwork. Her touch to our business made and continues to make a lasting change for the better. I can't say enough about how helpful her knowledge and training have been."

   —Montague Boyd, Senior Vice President, Investments, UBS Financial Services

"Counterbalancing my practice that 'If you aren't overwhelmed, you're not reaching your greatest productivity' is Laura Stack's most logical advice found in her latest book. Laura's philosophy is that what you opt *not* to do is often as important as—and often more important than—what you *do*. This book is all about productivity and making the most of the time that we all find in such short supply. Take the time to read the book, and you'll amaze yourself at the demonstrated and proven results."

   —Tim Jackson, CAE, CMP, President and CEO, Colorado Automobile Dealers Association

WHAT TO DO WHEN THERE'S
TOO MUCH
TO DO

Reduce Tasks, Increase Results,
and Save 90 Minutes a Day

LAURA STACK

To my son,

JAMES STACK

When I have too much to do,
spending time with you
puts life in perspective and
makes everything better.
I love you.

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PREFACE

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 lightbulb went on, and I reassured her, "That's exactly what I'm here to help you do."

I established my company, The Productivity Pro®, Inc., in 1992 to help people achieve Maximum Results in Minimum Time®. This woman's description of "too much to do" and desire to "do less and achieve more" framed my twenty-year mission perfectly and inspired the title of this book.

Frankly, doing more isn't always better. Would your manager be more impressed if you completed thirty-seven low-value tasks in one day, or just seven tasks with incredible impact? Can an eight-hour-a-day employee be more productive than a twelve-hour-a-day employee? You know the answers. 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.

I wrote this book to help you achieve more *impactful* results, not necessarily *more* results. I also realize the irony of asking you to spend some of your precious time reading this book, given all you already have on your plate. But all worthwhile things take time to implement, so I urge you to consider this an investment toward greater time-savings in the future.

We'll focus on doing less and achieving more, not doing more with less—thus the subtitle, "Reduce Tasks, Increase Results, and Save 90 Minutes a Day." The promise of this book is to be a hero at work and get a life at the same time. It's good for you, because your results will be stellar, and you'll achieve greater life balance. It's good for your employer, because you won't leave your company to search for a better life. Your satisfaction and morale will increase, and your employer's turnover will decrease.

Productivity is a win-win scenario!

Doing less will require a reset of your default "Go, Go, Go!" setting. Today's fast-paced, high-pressure environment often requires sixty, seventy, eighty, or more hours a week. But productivity tends to decrease as work hours increase; after all, how can you perform at your best when you're overworked and constantly tired? You'll make more mistakes and spend more time fixing them. You'll get further behind and run faster to stay in one place. It's a vicious, overwhelming cycle, and for many people, it seems impossible to break.

But buying this book proves you're determined to try. Just stop for a minute and ask yourself: "Do I *really* need to work so long and hard to get everything done . . . or is it possible I'm being inefficient?" When you take an honest look at your daily habits, workflow, and processes, you may discover there's a clog in your productivity.

What to Do When There's Too Much to Do turns traditional time management on its head, because many old-fashioned techniques are meaningless for today's working professional.

When I started college in the late 1980s and attended my first time-management course, the instructor taught us to write down our schedules for the entire day, including the specific time we'd work on each task. I dutifully wrote up-to-the-minute agendas, detailing what I would do and when. From 8:00 to 8:30, I'll do this task. From 8:30 to 9:10, I'll do that task. Back then I could pretty much keep up with it, and my days usually went as planned. When something unexpected came up, it was fairly easy to adjust my agenda.

Then things started to change. Fax machines, voicemail, the Internet, e-mail, handhelds, apps, and all kinds of other technology exploded on the scene. The productivity game changed forever. Today, if you attempt to plan out every minute of your day, your schedule will blow up in the first five minutes.

With so much information and so much to do, it's become harder to be productive—and yet we feel busier than ever. With the recession, we're running lean and mean. We have greater expectations, fewer resources, and more work placed on us, which results in more time in the office and less time for life and loved ones.

Desperate workers are more stressed than ever before, as they receive information from multiple sources and attempt to track and organize it. We're constantly communicating with more people, more quickly, through more media, so we have more conversations to recall.

If you added up the amount of time it would take to complete the tasks on a typical person's to-do list, there might be hundreds of hours of work represented there. You can spend more time "planning" and "prioritizing" than just doing the work! Due to the blazing speed at which information flows, it's a waste of time to keep reordering a giant to-do list. Instead, organize your life around the stuff that really matters. Adopt a systematic workflow process to help you determine your high-value tasks, protect the time to do them, and focus on their execution.

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 in this book, 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.

But before I launch into the details of this new and unique system, there are some people I'd like to acknowledge. I thank God for the gift of all these people in my life!

I want to thank my husband, John, who is my biggest fan and supporter. He puts up with my bizarre travel schedule and entrepreneurial lifestyle with understanding and cheerfulness. You have my undying gratitude and love.

Meagan, Johnny, and James, my children, I'm so proud to be your mom I could just burst.

Thanks to my incredible office manager, Becca Fletcher, my productivity weapon of choice. I am so fortunate to have you in my life and literally don't know what I'd do without you. Everyone needs a Becca!

I'm so grateful to Eileen Stack, my wonderful mother-in-law, who tirelessly helps our family and takes care of our children if both parents are out of town. Thank you for your unfailing love.

Mark and Darla Sanborn are great pals, and we have so much fun together. Spending time with you reminds me life's so much more than work!

I'm indebted to my mentor of eight years, Dianna Booher, CSP, CPAE, author of forty-five books, for the countless hours of time she's lovingly given me. I appreciate you introducing me to the team at Berrett-Koehler, who immediately believed in me and this book. Thanks to my editor, Neal Maillet, for your guidance throughout the project.

Thanks to my proofreader, Floyd Largent, for his eagle eyes and incredible editing skills.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to our hundreds of clients, who have provided us the opportunity to work with you on the strategies in this book, learn from your feedback, see the results, and hear about your successes. Thanks for your enthusiastic support of my work.

I'm privileged to be the 2011–2012 president of the National Speakers Association. Over my nearly twenty years of membership, I've gained many wonderful friends, too many to mention by name, but you know who you are. Thank you for your encouragement, coaching, and camaraderie.

The Case for Reduction

If you're serious about your career, then you've probably read a number of books about time management and productivity in an effort to make better use of your workday. So what's new about this one? *What to Do When There's Too Much to Do* is unique in its approach to workflow, and I think you'll find it a breath of fresh air in an overcrowded and increasingly redundant field. Simply stated, the central message 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—and that's precisely why my message is so very important. 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.

From a business perspective, productivity is the rate at which goods or services are produced per unit of labor. On a wider scale, this measure of corporate success is also a primary metric of the overall economic health of a nation. Collectively, we Americans are more productive today than at any time in our history.[1] But just think about the factors motivating this productivity increase, especially in recent years. Many businesses have cut their staffs to the bone in an effort to save the bottom line; as a result, the truncated workforce must somehow do more with less, just like the woman who stopped me

before my presentation that day. We've defaulted to working long hours just so we can keep our jobs. And it's killing us.

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. Consider this worrisome factoid: According to a government report released in August 2011, American productivity declined for two consecutive quarters for the first time since 2008.[2] The second-quarter decline for 2011 was a bit less than expected: an annual adjusted rate of 0.7 percent rather than the anticipated 0.9 percent (yay?).[3] The bad news: 2011's first-quarter productivity figure, originally estimated at 1.8 percent growth, suffered a sharp downward revision to reflect an actual productivity *drop* of 0.6 percent.

Granted, we've experienced a minor economic expansion in the past few years. But the positive effects have been mostly limited to businesses, with very little trickle-down to individual workers. Indeed, as some observers have pointed out, many businesses posted productivity gains from early 2009 to late 2010 *only* because they had previously cut costs. In the process they pared down their workforces, requiring the workers they retained to work longer hours—often for the same compensation.

This refusal to increase the average worker's pay even while forcing them to work harder may seem draconian, and in one sense it is. Workers know that there are plenty of people lined up to take their jobs if they complain too much about the pay and long hours, and many employers press this fact to their advantage.

But in a larger sense, the flat compensation growth just continues a trend visible in the statistics since 1980. According to a study released by the *New York Times* in September 2011, compensation grew steadily along with American productivity from 1949 until 1979, and then more or less flattened out—even as productivity skyrocketed.[4] Productivity rose 80 percent from 1979 to 2009; compensation increased just 8 percent. That contrasts sharply with increases of 119 percent and 100 percent, respectively, in the 30 previous years. Basically,

for the last three decades, American workers have been willing to accept insipid pay increases while pushing productivity through the roof.

But now we've hit the wall. As a class, we're exhausted, and any motivation to maximize productivity is mostly negative rather than positive. Recent economic growth may have been good for businesses, but it shortchanged the workers. We built on unstable economic ground . . . and now we're starting to see the cracks in the foundation. Even with high unemployment rates, employers complain about not being able to find competent workers.

SAVING OUR OWN LIVES

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.

Many workers think that a willingness to do whatever it takes, at the expense of all else, can cure any workplace ailment. Their employers, and society at large, have trained them to think this way. But they never seem to understand a salient point here: you don't have to kill yourself to prove your dedication to the company and produce the tremendous results required.

And I mean exactly that. The Japanese have an entrenched tradition of working superhuman amounts of unpaid overtime, more to demonstrate company loyalty than to enhance productivity. It also drives high levels of *karoshi*, the practice of literally working yourself to death. This problem isn't unique to Japan; Westerners have the same problem, though our medical establishment doesn't really keep tabs on it as such.

Is the possibility of a raise or promotion really worth risking your health? And let me emphasize the word "possibility" —after all, how can you ensure your hard work is even regis-

tering with the higher-ups? You can't just try to outwork the other guy. 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.

HARSH REALITIES

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.[5] 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. If you go too far, your habits of overwork may harm your organization's bottom line—the exact opposite of what you intended when you set out on your quest to prove yourself.

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—as is often the case, because the person affected is too busy to take care of it. Depression comes with harsh penalties of its own, and they can feed back into the productivity issues and make them even worse.

The old forty-hour workweek was originally struck as a compromise, as the best balance between productivity and overwork. Today, a forty-hour week isn't plausible for many people, given the expectations or structures of their jobs. Some people continue to insist they function better with a more demanding schedule. But they fail to recognize the signs of when they've reached capacity. Are you willing to do what it takes to short-circuit a drop in performance? You'd take good care of any other tool, wouldn't you? So why not take care of yourself?

THE SOLUTION

In the next six chapters, 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. Take for example the testimonial I received from Montague L. Boyd, CFP, Senior Vice President of Investments at UBS Financial Services:

> Prior to Ms. Stack's training, we customarily had employees who stayed into the early evening hours in order to finish or just keep up with our workload. Ms. Stack spent a day with us and then three or four months later a second day. Ms. Stack worked with us to develop more efficient methods of intra-office communications. Ms. Stack also showed us how to prioritize daily items and to keep track of them. She showed us how to use Microsoft Outlook properly. There are far too many details to recount here; they made a huge difference. Now we regularly find that we can finish our work every day with time to spare. We operate with much less confusion and rarely if ever worry about those items that may "drop through the cracks"! They just don't. There are six investment partners. We have a partner in charge of our Retirement Plan group and a Research partner. We operate smoothly now and communicate effectively in much less time. My estimate is that each of us saves about ninety minutes per day compared to our systems before Laura Stack. Six support staff went from a state of confused, stressed, and long hours to an efficient team. They finish most days well before "quitting time" and go home on time every night. Nobody has stayed late in months. Ms. Stack has lived up to her title as "The Productivity Pro." She has shown us a path to accomplish more—much more—in fewer hours. Our staff believes

they can take us through exponential growth with very little need for additional manpower. All of this extra time gives us the opportunity to think and find other ways to improve our business plan for greater success.

In the same way I helped his team, 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 your workload with new eyes. You'll excise useless tasks and cut through redundant data to sharpen your focus to a keen edge.

Instead of accepting your fate and allowing it to overwhelm you, step up and take your future in your own hands—and do what's necessary to achieve a work-life balance that you can manage indefinitely. Unlearn the mistaken beliefs that serve as obstacles to productivity. Recognize your limits, trim away the fat, and adjust your attitude until you can plainly see that the *real* issue here is discovering what you can reasonably accomplish within the time available. If you do all this, you'll eventually come to realize that there really *is* time enough in the day to do everything that matters.

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™.

A BRAND-NEW MODEL:
THE PRODUCTIVITY WORKFLOW FORMULA™ (PWF)

The PWF 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 e-mail, voicemail, and paper.

5. **Close the loop.** Determine what does and doesn't work; reduce inefficiencies; solve people problems and bottle-necks; and tighten up systems as you go.

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

Graphically, the PWF looks like this:

The model is circular by design, which suggests continuity, as well as a process that can (and should) be repeated again and again. In other words, you get into a continuum and don't have to leave it; it just becomes part of your life. Plus, instead of thinking of productivity as a straight line from A to B (followed by . . . nothing) it becomes its own self-fulfilling prophecy. Each improvement gets you to a new place, instead of to some plateau you never leave again.

THE PRODUCTIVITY WORKFLOW FORMULA™ (PWF)
Determine + Schedule + Focus +
Process + Close + Manage = PRODUCE

If you incorporate the PWF into your life, you really can save yourself ninety minutes a day that you can use to live your life, instead of working it away. This may sound odd if you feel shackled to your desk now, but it really *is* possible to get more done while doing less work. You just need to separate the valuable wheat from the nonproductive chaff.

So let's take a look at how you can become more efficient, step by logical step.

Go to www.LauraStack.com/WhatToDo to receive complimentary bonus material, tip sheets, and group discussion worksheets.

Go to www.bkconnection.com/whattodo-sa to assess your strengths and improve opportunities around your PWF.

🕐 We've highlighted Productivity Pro tips with a clock icon. If you're seriously pressed for time, skim these tips and read the summary at the end of each chapter.

1

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.

In this chapter, I'll show you how to reduce your commitments to an efficient core group of tasks. In the end, you'll produce for your organization at a record level and work fewer hours than ever before.

Workplace productivity, in its most meaningful sense, is all about achieving high-value goals—preferably in the shortest time possible. And make no mistake about it: At the end of the day, all that truly matters is *results*. What did you actually accomplish? Did your accomplishments advance the organization's goals in some measurable way? If not, why not? If you just kept busy while not appreciably moving forward, why did you bother?

Never confuse activity with productivity. Everyone has too much to do, and nobody really cares how many tasks you crossed off a list or how busy you were last week if key projects keep falling through the cracks.

Therefore, you must pare down your commitments to

include *only* those things that truly matter for you and your organization. Remember: your goal here is to reduce your responsibilities to a reasonable level, so you can go home at a sensible time and have a life outside of work—not try to take on everything, and punish yourself constantly with sixteen-hour days. That will result in plummeting productivity and burnout.

🕐 At the end of every workday, take a moment to ask yourself: Was I productive today, or did I just stay busy?

WHY DO YOU HAVE SO MUCH TO DO?

When you look at your to-do list, does it scare you? Your list is so long, an entire team of people couldn't finish it all. Looking at your huge to-do list, you might feel as though you'll be buried forever and never see the light of day. So before I begin to describe how to reduce your commitments to a reasonable, consistently workable level, let's take a step back and look at the reasons why most of us always seem to have too much to do.

Too many options. There are so many seemingly "good" things to do, and often we want to do as many as we can. The result is a huge running to-do list that doesn't distinguish between today, next week, next month, and next year. Without a separation between the lists, many people stare at a to-do list with hundreds of items on it and have a difficult time choosing what to do when faced with an open thirty minutes.

Bad math. We take inputs without producing outputs. We accept projects, allow interruptions, go to meetings, answer calls, and check e-mail . . . and our to-do list grows longer, but nothing valuable gets checked off.

Pavlovian response. We're slaves to our technology, environment, noises, and brains. We can't overcome inertia, get in the flow, and focus on completing a single task. We respond immediately to every chime, ding, and noise.

Indecision. We don't determine whether tasks are in or out or even relevant or not, so we leave them on our lists, which causes us to have to repeat the evaluation process again—putting them back into our 'decide later' consciousness, lengthening our to-do lists, filling our inboxes, and expanding our perceptions of how much we have to do.

Disorganization. Our tech toys can't keep up with the speed of thought. This is especially inconvenient if you're in a restaurant, meeting, or on a plane with all your electronic devices off, and you think of something to do. We need ways to capture inputs back into the system.

Fear. We can't say no to anything that doesn't meet our stated objectives. We're afraid to take action to cut out the time we waste each day on nonproductive activities.

Lack of direction. We lack clarity from our leadership and haven't taken the time to harness our own focus to determine what really matters. Or we're not aligned with strategy from top to bottom; consequently, we don't have clear priorities. Often, our actual work doesn't reflect our job descriptions or what the boss actually thinks we are/should be doing.

In reality, many of the things on our to-do lists are unnecessary time-stealers. In most cases, they were added because somebody thought it might be a good idea. Watch out for "somebody"; they're not necessarily interested in helping you be productive. In fact, the things they're giving you to do are the things *they* don't want to do. In other words, they feel those tasks aren't worth their time . . . so they decide to steal *your* time instead. To top it off, many of us voluntarily take on

tasks that are seemingly unnecessary at first glance (and may actually be), but end up burning time we could otherwise use to be productive.

To get control over your schedule, you must first eliminate anything that doesn't have long-term consequences for your work. Philosopher William James once wrote, "The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook." In other words, in trying to determine what to do, you must first eliminate those tasks that don't enhance your productive value.

WHAT IS YOUR PRODUCTIVE VALUE?

How do you determine your value? Look at what you do from your employer's viewpoint. Simply put, the more productive you are, the more valuable you are to your organization. And let me qualify that by saying where this really matters is *in the long term*. If you shine brightly for a year by working eighty-hour weeks until your body gives up and literally falls over, then your productive value, while extraordinary for a little while, isn't particularly impressive when viewed from a wider perspective. Your organization would rather get ten years of steadily productive work out of you than one extraordinary year before you burn out.

Reducing your commitment load to the bare minimum, so you can most effectively use your time at work (and still enjoy life and recharge for more work), makes you more valuable to the organization. Some bosses lose sight of that sometimes; but most will realize this is in fact the case (especially if you send them a photocopy or scan of this section of the book), and will prefer to keep you rather than lose you permanently . . . one way or another. If you're self-employed, this isn't as much of an issue. But it's still apropos in terms of how it affects your organization, whether you operate a sole proprietorship or an up-and-coming Inc. 500 firm.

So What's Your Personal ROI?

The concept of Personal Return on Investment (PROI) is one that's been steadily gaining currency in the business world over the past few years. While the term can be defined in several ways, in common usage it's just what it sounds like: the investment potential that you, as an employee, offer to your organization. Now, I realize that it may seem somewhat degrading to be treated (and especially to treat yourself) as a mere investment . . . but to some extent, that's precisely what you are: your organization's investment in its human capital.

Like any other resource, you're only as good as your PROI. The harsh realities of survival in the Great Recession have hammered this point home to employers and employees alike. As a modern worker, you've got to be hard-nosed about your ultimate value to your employer. You ignore this at your peril.

Elsewhere in the business world, ROI is defined as the profit realized from a resource minus the original and ongoing investment. It's no different with Personal ROI. In addition to your pay, the organization is probably providing you with various benefits, as well as regular training and/or education, experience in your field, and personal stability. What are you providing in return? The organization is pumping resources and cash into you, so how are you repaying them?

You'd better be returning a substantial multiple of your investment on a consistent basis—and, more important, you have to be able to prove you are. Before you can do that effectively, you'll need to sit down and determine what you bring to the table. Perform a tough, even brutal self-assessment of your value, focusing on these factors:

- What are you really good at?
- What makes you special?
- What distinguishes you from your peers?
- How do you personally help the organization achieve its corporate goals?

As a business resource, your value is dollar-driven. A good rule of thumb is you should be able to prove you've earned or saved the organization at least three times your base salary every single year.

In some jobs, proving your PROI is easy. If you're a salesman who's just landed a $5,000,000 account, it's easy to point to that accomplishment. But not every job directly results in corporate income. For example, what if you work in Human Resources or Customer Service? Well, you'll need to dig deeper for your provable PROI, by showing how deft you are at hiring profitable, productive workers, or maintaining intra-departmental harmony, or soothing the feathers of irate customers—whatever the case may be for your particular position.

If you ever find yourself coming up short, you must be willing to invest your personal capital, especially your time and energy, toward increasing your PROI, so you can thereby make yourself more attractive. In addition to working hard, fast, and smart, don't hesitate to ask for more training or institute new systems to maximize efficiency and performance in your job. These preventive measures are short-term in nature, and they'll pay time-saving (and PROI) dividends for a long time to come.

In calculating your PROI, be reasonably creative about what you've accomplished, and don't leave out anything that might be relevant. Do you have a tendency to finish projects early and under budget? Include that in your assessment, because you've saved the organization money. Are you good with clients, able to develop a positive relationship that lasts for years? Then you've earned the organization money, because that's where profits come from: multiple sales to repeat customers (at a decent margin, of course).

You may not be able to provide a specific dollar amount or percentage for your personal PROI, but you should be able to demonstrate that without you, the organization would be worse off. This is also a great exercise to perform prior to your performance evaluation, so you can have an intelligent conver-

🕐 Recalculate your Personal Return on Investment (PROI)
periodically. This will help you determine what
you need to brush up or cut back on.

sation with your supervisor about what you've accomplished in the past period.

And never forget this: You can't assume anyone will automatically realize your worth. So in addition to being able to prove your PROI when called upon, be proactive about stepping forward and demonstrating that hiring you was a positive investment decision. This is especially true if you feel you're undervalued, or if some unscrupulous coworker attempts to take the credit for your work. As the saying goes, the squeaky wheel gets the grease; but be careful here, because obnoxious squeakiness can get you the boot instead.

Demonstrate by your actions and initiative that you're worthy. Then be politely assertive, though not aggressive, in pointing out your PROI to those who matter in your organization—so you can maximize your value both to the organization and to yourself.

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? Sometimes a task's importance isn't immediately obvious. You need some simple guidelines to channel your efforts.

First, start with your job requirements. Think in terms of results, not a vague-sounding title or general tasks. What did the organization really hire you to do? Ask yourself, "Why am I here?" At the very minimum, what do your superiors expect you to accomplish on a daily, weekly, monthly, or even an annual basis?

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.

For example, in a small company such as mine, I'm both the President and Chief Executive Officer (CEO). As the CEO of my organization, I'm responsible for mapping our strategic direction and building our brand. I need to understand trends, conduct research, and write books. As the President, I'm the rainmaker. My job is to give killer keynotes and seminars on strategic platforms, so the referrals and recommendations continue to build the business. This requires me to practice my performances, continuously update my programs, and talk to clients. It's incumbent on me to delegate, hire out, contract, ignore, or eliminate *anything* that doesn't "fit" into one of those buckets. I don't know how to use the fax machine or the postage meter. I *could* use them, of course, but I shouldn't be doing that at my level, so I simply refuse to touch it.

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?
- Can you cut back on the output of some tasks without others complaining? Do they matter in the end analysis?

🕐 If one of your tasks properly belongs to someone else, hand it back to them—even if they don't want it. Your work must come first, so stop being so darn nice.

Second, determine what's personally important to you: What do you need to do before you leave the office to feel good about what you've accomplished? Be sensible and try to limit yourself to a few core tasks. If you're having trouble determining a task's value, then weigh the consequences of not getting it done. Consider how much each task is really worth, based on the results you achieve and the amount of time you have to spend on it. Who or what would suffer? You? Anyone? If you didn't do it at all, would anyone notice? If you can't figure out why a task needs to be done at all, stop doing it and see what happens. I'm serious. If someone screams, consider putting it back on your list—but only if it's something that affects you in some significant way. As my father (a retired colonel in the U.S. Air Force) used to tell me, "It's easier to ask for forgiveness than to get permission." I tested that one a lot and it generally worked. If I got yelled at, that was a pretty good clue.

For every task, ask, "Who is affected by it, and how?" Remember, you're the most important person in this equation. Is the task a job requirement? Formal or informal? Does it contribute to your immediate objectives? Is it related to your long-term goals? (Do you *have* long-term goals?) Is it necessary to achieve those goals? If the task only benefits someone else without noticeably impacting you in any way, then why are *you* doing it? If possible, hand it off to the person whom it directly affects, and tell them you won't be doing it anymore.

The general idea here is to cut, cut, and cut more. It's best to not have a task on a list in the first place than to continue to think about it, prioritize it, and organize it. Simplify your goals and objectives to a point where you feel good about what

you've accomplished each day, week, or month, and your employer feels even better about the results (you've exceeded your PROI).

TRACKING DOWN TIME-WASTERS

Of all the resources available to us, time is certainly the most precious. Unlike office supplies or even money, it's impossible to get more; there's no box marked "Time" in the supply closet where you can grab a spare minute or two. Once time is spent, it's gone, and you can't get it back. And yet, we invariably waste it. Every minute wasted keeps us from doing things we've determined we *should* be doing.

You can't afford to waste time at work. A firm grasp of time management is absolutely crucial if you want to succeed in your workload reduction efforts. When you "manage time," you're ultimately just managing yourself. Where do you need to practice better self-management?

With that in mind, let's take a look at the biggest self-inflicted time-wasters in modern business and how to avoid them.

E-mail. Do you hang out in your inbox all day long? Bad idea! If you drop everything and immediately attend to every e-mail as it comes in, you're derailing your productivity, over and over again. Not only do you waste whatever time it takes for you to read, ignore, or act on a given e-mail message, but you also require more time to refocus your attention on whatever you were doing prior to the interruption.

Let's face it. E-mail can be a phenomenal productivity tool, but it will eat your day alive if you let it. If you simply can't resist looking, then you'll need to shut down your e-mail completely to focus on other tasks. Turn off your alerts as well in your e-mail options, so the tone or the envelope in the system tray won't constantly remind you that there's e-mail waiting.

We'll discuss techniques for handling distractions from e-mail and other technologies in Chapter 3.

The Internet. The Internet has to be the single worst productivity thief in the modern business era. Sure, it's useful, and it can and has built fortunes—but it's also a siren that lures workers onto the rocks of unproductivity. In recent surveys, workers have admitted to wasting an average of two hours per workday, and approximately an hour of it is online.[6] Yikes!

The Internet is a bottomless pit of information . . . some useful and some not-so-useful. It's much too easy to sit down to do one thing (pay a bill or look up an address) and end up wasting time on something else entirely (reading news stories or checking your social networks).

If meandering around the Web is relaxing for you, it's fine when you're ready for a purposeful break. Just make sure you do it at an appropriate time and place, so it doesn't interfere with work time. Otherwise, treat the Internet like any other tool: Use it when you need it, and put it away when you're done.

Social media. Be especially careful with social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn. From a productivity perspective, they can be time-sucking vampires. I use all three strategically in my business, because they serve a valid marketing purpose for me, as they do for many other entrepreneurs. However, in many jobs and companies, employees aren't using social media to boost annual earnings. To the contrary, they're squandering those earnings. Even those with a valid business reason can waste inordinate amounts of time reading postings and commenting on non-business issues. Think I'm exaggerating? Consider this:

Meet Bob. Bob uses Twitter every day for just twenty minutes during business hours. No big deal, right? Wrong! That comes to one hundred minutes of lost productivity each week. There are fifty-two weeks in a year; let's say Bob gets two

weeks of vacation, so that's five thousand minutes of lost pro-
ductivity annually, just from Twitter alone. If Bob works for
the organization for ten years, that's fifty thousand minutes of
lost productivity over the course of Bob's career. That works
out to more than 833 hours—twenty-one weeks of lost produc-
tivity! And all because Bob is a mild Tweetaholic who Tweets
twenty minutes each day. How has his Tweeting impacted the
bottom line? Now, imagine what happens if you have an orga-
nization with five, fifty, five hundred, or five thousand Bobs.

Socializing. We all want a workplace where people get along
and enjoy spending time together. However, too often we're
chatting when we should be working. Chitchat is fine for
lunchtime and breaks, but otherwise you should be working.
You should especially avoid chattering outside someone's of-
fice or cubicle, because then you're not just wasting your time,
you're distracting someone else, too. So it's a good idea to set
limits on your social behavior, no matter how much you might
not want to.

Back in 2006, I read with a mixture of interest and amuse-
ment an article referencing a study done by OfficeTeam/
Robert Half International about whether socializing at work
around the water cooler is a waste of time.[7]

Predictably, workers said no. Also predictably, managers
said yes. The answer, of course, is *yes* . . . and *no*. Come now;
this is a silly study. As with any study, it's easy to skew the
numbers. The answers will vary in any case, depending upon
the context of the socializing and your point of reference. You
can't say that all socializing is a waste of time, although some
is, of course. Thirty minutes spent discussing the details of
Aunt Sally's surgery could qualify as a nonproductive activity.
However, some socializing is needed for relationship building,
bonding, camaraderie, and mentoring.

Still, there should come a certain point in the conversa-
tion when you realize, "Okay, I've been here long enough
. . . time to move on." That's when you should wrap it up—

immediately, without spending another ten minutes winding down. If more people would listen to their intuition, we wouldn't need time-wasting studies such as the one I just cited.

Negativity. Speaking of limits, I can recommend two so-called "social" activities you should stop altogether: gossiping and complaining. Not only do they waste time, they're damaging to the corporate culture, which can skewer productivity even further.

Talking with your buddies should stop short of discussing other people behind their backs. Airing someone's personal business for entertainment reasons is never going to help you achieve anything, and spreading negativity or criticism is downright hurtful.

As far as complaining goes, we all have things in our lives we're unhappy about, but grousing about them accomplishes very little. As for gossiping, all it does is spread negativity, and who needs more of that? In particular, you should avoid complaining about the amount of money you make, and how dissatisfied you may be with your job or coworkers. Instead of moaning about life, readjust your attitude. If you're disgruntled about things you can't change, learn to accept them, and move on. If you find yourself complaining about things you *can* change, then by all means try to.

Handling personal issues. These days, it's too easy for the rest of your life to intrude on your workday. You can be interrupted by personal messages in myriad ways—IMs, texts, e-mail, and calls—and you know the remedy. Turn off your electronics, don't check your personal e-mail, and end any

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🕐 We don't like it when people gossip about us, so stop gossiping about others. It's a hurtful waste of your time.

personal calls on the company's phone or your cell phone as quickly as possible.

In addition to communications issues, many of us also allow minor personal business to eat away at our working hours. I've known people to balance their checkbooks, book vacation travel, or sort out their mortgage applications while at work. I suspect people do these things during the workday because they work so many hours . . . by the time they're home . . . it's late and they're exhausted. This is obviously counterproductive. If possible, finish up work on time, leave, and conduct your personal business on your personal time. Some of our globe-trotting schedules don't allow for this nice, neat compartmentalization, but it truly does help with focus to the extent you can make it happen.

Better yet, try to gain flexibility. It's true that life happens, and it isn't always convenient, and some things can only be arranged during the week from 9:00 to 5:00. Fortunately, companies are starting to realize that it's in their best interests to assist employees who are attempting to manage their lives during the day, rather than standing in the way. That can mean anything from allowing workers to access the Internet for incidental personal use to offering flexible schedules to accommodate personal appointments.

If necessary, talk to your boss, your peers, and your staff about finding opportunities for flexibility within the workday. Employees who feel they don't have to accomplish a million things during lunch hour will be more productive during the rest of the day. So do whatever you can to promote a reasonable work-life balance—but realize there's only so far you can go in the "life" direction without damaging workplace productivity. Once you hit that limit, you'll need to leave your personal business at home. Then go home and leave work at work. There's always a blurring of boundaries you can't avoid, especially when you own a company, but it does make sense to draw boxes around each one as much as possible.

Smoking. I'm sure I'll get e-mails on this, but some workers have a ready-made excuse for wasting time: they're smokers. Of course, it is your choice to smoke; however, you should only do so on regularly scheduled breaks or at lunch, within the parameters your employer has set. Not all smokers follow the rules, because they need more cigarettes than the rules allow. Many smokers often take extra time here and there to nurse their addiction. Given the fact that most employers don't make this easy anymore, it can take ten minutes or more to get to the designated smoking area, smoke a cigarette, and get back to work. That can add up to a lot of wasted time per workday. The solution? Kick the habit.

Arriving late/leaving early. This one's self-explanatory. Many of us pare a few minutes off the day occasionally, and some of us make a habit of it. It may not seem like much, but get this: if you're late or leave early an average of just ten minutes a day, that adds up to about a week's paid vacation over the course of a year. Better start setting that alarm earlier.

Boring or unpleasant tasks. It's difficult to get motivated to complete mundane tasks. You'll focus much better on your important work if you don't have all those less-interesting tasks hanging over your head. So jump in and get them done! About 99 percent of the time, those nitpicky tasks are dramatically easier and less painful than you expect. Getting started is the hardest part. If you're really having trouble, schedule a five-minute appointment with yourself to begin the chore. When the designated time arrives, start working on the task. If you feel like stopping at the end of five minutes, you can. The only rule is, you must schedule an additional five minutes for tomorrow. When you begin to see some progress, five minutes soon becomes ten, fifteen, and then twenty. Sometimes you just need some momentum.

WHERE DOES YOUR TIME GO?

The solution to all these time-wasters is simple enough: "Stop!" However, what if you're not even sure where all your time is going? Paralysis can derail your efforts to reduce your commitment load and prioritize what remains. If so, spend a week logging how you spend your time during the week, activity by activity. Include everything, not just your important tasks. You can get a complimentary copy of a time-log worksheet, instructions, and debriefing guide on my website.[8]

With your logs in hand, ask yourself these questions:

- How aligned is my time use with my top priorities?
- What should I stop doing?
- What do I need to do more of?
- What am I not doing that I need to do?

To further clarify your time-use situation, you can adopt the approach Michael Bungay Stanier outlines in his book *Do More Great Work*. Separate what you have on your plate into BAD work (mind-numbing, non–value-adding tasks), GOOD work (largely what your employer expects from you) and GREAT work (important work that feeds your soul, and will make a huge difference if only you can find the time to do it). The goal, of course, is to reduce or eliminate Bad work and to address Good work—for example, by delegating it to someone who would consider it their Great work—so as to find more time and energy for *your* Great work. Michael's book provides fifteen maps to help you sort it all out and get moving.[9]

Stay On Point

As you know, you can't really manage time (or else you'd be able to do a really good job and create a thirty-hour day, instead of a twenty-four-hour day). You can really manage only yourself, so make a sincere effort to protect your limited stock-

pile of minutes—not just from others, but from yourself. Stop trying to do everything!

There *will* be enough time to do the most important things if you're efficient about it. So make your time-saving decisions authoritatively, and move forward without worrying. Remember, even if you work for someone else, the buck ultimately stops with you. *You* are in control of what you accomplish each day. When you take charge this way, you can focus on the truly important—and stop wasting time on things that don't matter in the long run.

If you identify one or more of these time-wasters in your daily routine, here's my recommendation: Choose the worst one, determine how to fix it, and discipline yourself to put what you've learned into play. Once you have a handle on that time-waster, move to another. I think you'll be surprised at how much productive time you'll free up over the long run.

Create a *Not*-To-Do List

One of my absolute favorite quotes, which I like so much it's in my e-mail signature, 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."

As a result of the analysis you've done so far in this chapter, it would be a great idea to compile a *Not*-To-Do list—a list of things you simply refuse to do. This type of list is central to my unifying theme of reducing your commitment load and teasing that extra ninety minutes out of your work schedule.

A not-to-do list need not be fancy. Just 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 periodi-

🕐 Prepare a list of time-wasting things you refuse to do. Keep this *Not*-To-Do list close, and refer to it frequently.

cally, to make sure you don't accidentally slip into habits that damage your productivity and keep you at work too long. For example:

- 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 e-mail 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.

This sample list only scratches the surface; but you get the point. Obviously, not-to-do lists will vary from person to person, based on what applies to a particular workplace and what each individual considers impractical or illogical. Decide you'll only tackle tasks that are necessary, and don't waste your time on things that shouldn't be done. Scaling back and eliminating tasks and time-wasters from your life might seem counterintuitive, insofar as productivity is concerned. You might think the key to productivity is getting more done each day. This is far from true. You don't need a calendar full of unnecessary tasks to be productive and accomplish more.

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. Study your obligations and work requirements closely so you can determine what's necessary and what isn't.

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! The paper wad is symbolic of the frustration people feel when they look at a single, giant, overwhelming list.

You do need to-do lists to stay organized; in this section, we'll discuss not just one, but two lists. (There are other types of lists, which we'll discuss later so as not to confuse the issue.)

1. A limited daily to-do list, which I call a HIT list, since it contains all the High Impact Tasks (HITs) that keep your workflow humming along.
2. A Master list, which contains all future projects and tasks, "someday" items, and good ideas you're not yet ready to work on.

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. Let's review these two lists in detail.

🕐 Instead of putting all your tasks on one huge list,
establish separate HIT (daily) and master lists
so you can prioritize appropriately.

The Daily HIT List

Your HIT list includes a reasonable number of items that you honestly plan to accomplish on a particular day. Most of your day-to-day activities will consist of tasks funneled to you during meetings, e-mails, phone calls, and verbal communication. (We'll discuss how to process incoming information into these lists in Chapter 4.)

The HIT list isn't a repository for *everything* you want to accomplish. By design, a daily HIT list literally guides your day's work, so be realistic when compiling it. If you have three hours of meetings, and you know you'll have a bunch of e-mail, and you know you'll be interrupted by coworkers, clients, and your boss—and you need to take bio breaks—why would you plan seventeen hours of work for yourself? If your daily HIT list contains more than ten items, I'd say you're stretching it.

HIT list items might include these tasks:

- Send agreement to XYZ client.
- Work on PowerPoint deck.
- Finalize monthly earnings report.
- E-mail Johnny's teacher about running club.
- Conduct statistical analysis of marketing results.
- Write article for company newsletter.
- Call CSU College of Business to schedule tour.

If used properly, your HIT list can be one of your most powerful productivity tools. It's a great way to manage up as well. It's important to ask, "Which is more important—this XYZ task I'm working on currently or this task you just put on my plate? If I handle this new task, I may not be able to finish this other one today as promised." When my office manager Becca has done this with me, I have removed things from her plate instantly.

The Master List

The Master list is a running list of *everything* you need or want to do at some point. (This is what some people have been using as a daily to-do list until now.) While items on the HIT list may rank as important in the short term, you can't allow them to overwhelm the long-term projects and tasks needed to achieve true workplace success. 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.

Many of the strategic goals of your company, department, and team will end up here, along with "someday" ideas like revamping old workflow systems and inventing new ones, or your intention to learn a new language. Your Master list keeps your daily HIT list from overflowing into uselessness, and may consist of dozens or hundreds of entries as a result.

Master list items might include:

- Hire a new assistant.
- Research new customer relationship management (CRM) software.
- Download barcode app.
- Buy new printer.
- Create QR code for business card.
- Find WordPress plug-in for membership sites.
- Get landscaping estimates for backyard.

A Master list should be a perpetual work in progress: a living, evolving document guiding long-term workflow. You

⏲ Perform a "brain-dump" of all your important but nonurgent tasks, as well as all the "someday" tasks you want to accomplish. This will form the basis of your master to-do list.

can't let it turn into a dead file for forgotten tasks. To keep it at the top of your mind, your Master list has to flow into your HIT list, so that each day, you're not only doing the urgent, but you're working on the important as well.

The Flow from Master to HIT

Every time you think of something you need to do, ask yourself, "Is this something I need to do TODAY?" If yes, put it on your HIT list. If no, add it to your Master list.

We'll talk through many different organizing options in Chapter 4, but in general, if you're using a paper planner, write the task on the appropriate daily page for the HIT list. The Master list would be a separate paper list you file behind a tabbed section or the "M" tab for "Master."

Personally, I like using Outlook Tasks for my Master list, because the Master list automatically becomes the HIT list, without having to think about it. To set it up:

- Change the "Arrange By" field in your To-Do Bar to Start Date (not the default "Due Date"—why would you want to know something is due today if it will take three days to work on it?).
- When you think of something to do, fill in the Start Date on the day you need to begin that activity or want to think about it again. Enter the Due Date for the day it's due. (If you fill in only the "Due Date" field, you will see that item on your Task Pad every day.)
- Name your Categories with your key projects. Brainstorm a list of all Tasks needed to complete each project and assign Start and Due dates for each piece. Tag each Task with the correct Category, so you can view your Tasks "By Category" to see a list of all Tasks related to a particular project.
- The "Today" flag in the To-Do bar now becomes your HIT list, since Tasks move themselves forward automatically.

- Leave the Start and Due Dates blank for "someday" items, so they appear under the "No Date" flag and can be reviewed systematically.

The Review Process

Once you make your lists, you should conduct three reviews of them:

1. *Monthly Forward Thinking.* Review your calendar and project plans to determine what you need to complete by the end of the month. Assign Start Dates for those "someday" items ready to move into your daily consciousness. What deadlines are approaching, what project steps should be started, what meetings do you need to prepare for, what travel arrangements do you need to make, and so on. Delete out-of-date items or those that will never happen for one reason or another.

2. *Weekly Reverse Thinking.* Review the past week's daily pages for incomplete activities and missed items. Where did you leave a message and didn't get a return call? Where did someone cancel an appointment that you need to reschedule? What didn't get done that needs to? When did you forget to send a thank-you present to a client? Make sure you move any follow-up to the appropriate day for action. The most successful performers are not only self-starters; they are self-finishers as well.

3. *Evening Daily HIT List Triage.* Let's say you end up with ten tasks on your HIT list. The average HIT list will contain a mix of items with different priorities, originating from a variety of sources. By necessity, urgent but relatively unimportant items will dominate your list. But you must also

🕐 Triage your master list occasionally to cull any tasks you will clearly never do, or those that are out of date.

work in the non-urgent but essential tasks—that is, the things that count most in the long run. So when you're faced with a block of discretionary time, what should you do first? Before you leave work each day, order your tasks for the following day using the triage system below. If an unexpected task pops up, triage it accordingly and work it into the list.

🕐 Before closing down shop for the day, spend 15 minutes reviewing the tasks on your HIT list for the next day. Determine priorities, so you know in what order to tackle them.

TRIAGE: WARTIME PRIORITIZATION

Many of us fall into the trap of considering a HIT list a "Must Do" list, even if doing so requires a sixteen-hour day. You do *not* have to complete everything on it before leaving the office. If a task has relatively minimal significance, or you just don't have time for it, then let it go—at least temporarily. Don't assume everything is sacred; that just leads to overwork and all the negative things that come with it. Given life's unpredictability, flexibility is a must.

How do you practice flexibility? Decide in advance which of your planned tasks you can drop at a minute's notice, if necessary. To cut your commitment load to a bearable level—and thus recapture that daily ninety minutes or more that you deserve—the concept of triage is crucial.

The term 'triage' derives from the medical field, where it's applied to the need to assign levels of care based on degrees of patient urgency. It literally means, "The sorting out and classification of patients or casualties to determine priority of need and proper place of treatment."

In a hospital emergency room, a triage nurse decides which patients need to be seen immediately and which ones can wait

for care, based on the relative severity of their conditions. The concept of first-come, first-served goes right out the window, as well it should; priority becomes paramount. Triage exists so the doctor's time isn't spent taking care of someone who has the flu, while another patient is bleeding to death all over the emergency room floor.

HIT list triage may not be as momentous as its medical namesake, but it does act as a form of preventive medicine for your productivity. Just as the triage nurse has to decide which patients need the most attention, you must determine which tasks on your list take priority over the rest. Those are the ones to focus on; everything else is secondary, to be taken care of only when the top-priority tasks are completed.

In wartime situations, due to the high number of casualties, time is of the essence. Accordingly, medical personnel have adopted assessment systems to shorten the task of prioritization. Most NATO armies use a procedure to divide the wounded into four groups by priority (P):[10]

- P1: Not breathing (life or death)
- P2: Bleeding (can become a crisis as time passes)
- P3: Broken bones (can become problematic if left untreated)
- P4: Burns (painful, requires long-term reconstruction)

They may adjust as necessary, depending upon the severity of the injury. P1 items require immediate attention (if you lose a heartbeat, you're done). The other categories are more flexible. A wounded soldier might have extensive burns that are more serious than someone with a small wound with little blood loss. Such a soldier might require P2 treatment rather than P4, so the label is more important than the examples.

⊕ Stop viewing your HIT List as a "Must Do" list. Instead, consider it a "Want to Do" list, and stay flexible.

Consider your current HIT list. What are the equivalents?

- P1: You will get fired if this isn't done today.
- P2: A valuable long-term activity that should be done soon (often from the Master list).
- P3: Someone will be unhappy if you don't do this eventually.
- P4: Human "pain-management" activities such as social-izing and Facebook.

What *must* you accomplish today? If you have a meeting in an hour and haven't finished preparing your presentation, this is obviously critically important, and should be taken care of right away (P1). Your strategic plan may need an update, requiring a few hours of focused thought (P2). On the other hand, if you need to return a call to a vendor, it's much less important, even though the person makes a return call *seem* urgent (P3). As a percentage, most incoming e-mail is unim-portant (P3), but if you don't check it for two days, your boss might be unhappy (P1). You can even eliminate some tasks from your list of priorities. Cleaning out the break-room re-frigerator might not be a task you should ever tackle (P4), no matter how much you have the urge.

Remember that everyone's priorities are different. It's up to you to determine the priority of each task on your to-do list. As you evaluate each entry, think about the hospital emer-gency room and ask yourself, "Is this task life or death?" This will help you to determine what needs to be handled at once (P1), what needs to be taken care of later in the day or perhaps the next few days (P2), what can wait even a few weeks if nec-essary (P3), and what can be eliminated or shouldn't be done (P4). When you know the relative importance of each task, you can find an appropriate time to tackle it.

Remember to be a bit flexible. There are the urgent P1 and P2 tasks you need to tend to ASAP; as such, they represent the bread and butter of your HIT list. However, you should also leave space on your daily list for less pressing P2 and P3 items

from your Master list. Often, these items have no particular urgency, so you must be proactive and work on them a bit at a time rather than allow them to languish and become crises.

As your day progresses, new emergencies might come up, and these need to be added to your schedule. The emergency room would never turn away a dying patient simply because they weren't on the schedule in the morning.

Meanwhile, work toward eliminating those tasks that are unnecessary. This might be the equivalent of someone coming into the emergency room with the sniffles or a paper cut. These tasks don't matter and shouldn't be cluttering up your schedule. People aren't going to get upset with you for not doing the things that don't matter. Purely reactive busyness will get you nowhere; your work must be underlain and supported by the solid bedrock of job requirements, strategic goals, process maintenance, and other important but non-urgent items.

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. Do what you should do without venturing into not-to-do territory. The time you save will help you work toward that extra ninety minutes a day. This is one portion of the extra time you'll gain to recharge, reconnect with life and family, and prepare for upcoming challenges.

SUMMARY: PWF STEP 1 CHECKUP

You can't exorcise the demon of overwork until you first determine exactly which tasks you need to perform on a regular basis, and then commit to doing only those tasks whenever possible. Start by studying your work requirements closely, and then make a sincere effort to apply the medical concept of triage to your task lists. Cut back or eliminate the time-wasters and set out to do only what truly matters. Common offenders include:

- Paying too much attention to e-mail
- Overuse of the Internet, including social networks
- Excess socializing
- Handling personal issues on the clock
- Smoking
- Arriving late/leaving early
- Too many meetings

Many of our reasons for having too much to do are hollow, with tasks imposed on us by other people, or taken on because of bad math, indecision, disorganization, fear, or lack of direction. Cut back on tasks that have no long-term consequences for your job, so you can catch enough breath to recover from work and enjoy the rest of your life. The concept of triage really comes into its own here, because it helps you establish task priorities on the fly, and push aside anything minor either until you can take care of it, or until it drops off your to-do list.

Speaking of to-do lists, don't just toss everything willy-nilly onto one big list and then expect to be anything but overwhelmed. Leverage the concept of the Master list, where you put all fundamental and "someday" tasks—the important but non-urgent items—while funneling the "right now" tasks to your daily HIT list, where you can handle them right away. Furthermore, compile a *Not*-To-Do list, where you track the things you refuse to clog your schedule with.

The more you can trim the waste out of your schedule, the more valuable you become to your organization—because you're much more productive than before, even though you may work fewer hours. Too many people confuse activity with productivity, forgetting that staying busy doesn't necessarily mean creating results, no matter how many hours you work.

If you just shift your focus to the right things, you can do more in eight hours than you did in twelve before—and you'll preserve your health and sanity along the way.