



The "Work Less, More Success" Guide to Time Management!

Since 1992, I've dedicated my career to teaching people how to do *less* while achieving *more*. American workers need this relief now more than ever. In the past decade, we've worked harder and done more with less than at any time since the Great Depression. Unfortunately, the pay hasn't kept pace with our efforts, and we often excel at the expense of our health, relationships, and free time. People are tired of "do more with less" and want to "do less and achieve more"! Overwork may be slowly killing you, emotionally, physically, and/or spiritually.

But it doesn't have to.

Often, overwork stems from taking the wrong approach to structuring one's schedule. I have a solution to offer – one that will significantly reduce your task load and help you rebalance your work/life ratio in your favor. In my new book, *What to Do When There's Too Much To Do: Reduce Tasks, Increase Results, and Save 90 Minutes a Day*, which hits bookstores on June 26, 2012, I introduce my breakthrough Productivity Workflow Formula™ (PWF). The PWF's core message is simple: reduce, reduce, reduce! It's always better to do less, not more, so you can do better, more focused work.

In this article, I'll give you a sneak preview of the six steps of the PWF.

Step 1: Determine What To Do: REDUCE YOUR TO-DO LIST

Too often, we overwork ourselves by doing what doesn't matter much or what someone else could do. You can remedy this by studying your work requirements closely and then zeroing in on what truly matters. Use the medical concept of triage to reduce your to-do list to manageable proportions. The emergency room doesn't treat patients in the order they walk in the door; you shouldn't work in the order tasks arrive in your inbox or by who screams the loudest. Remain flexible at all times, realizing priorities can shift on the fly, with new high-priority tasks muscling their way into the workflow and pushing aside less-important items.

Quit thinking of your To Do list as a *Must Do* list, and in general, stop doing things that lack long-term consequences for your job. Delegate out low-profit or low-priority items. Take what remains and sort them into a Master "someday" list, where you track important but non-urgent tasks, and a High Impact Task (HIT) list of items you need to work on right away.

Master List tasks might include things like long-term strategies, hiring a new assistant, and reviewing basic French terms before you visit the Paris office. Your HIT List should consist of the items that keep workflow humming along: new and ongoing projects, milestones and deadlines, and critical items you need to accomplish every day. Your Master List flows to your HIT list on a dynamic, daily basis.

Just as important as your To Do list is your *Not To Do* list. Spell out the things you refuse to waste your time on, such as multitasking, most meetings, handling brushfires, and procrastination. Finally, get rid of general timewasters like arriving late, excessive Facebook time, and superfluous socializing.

Step 2: Schedule Time to Do It: REDUCE YOUR OBLIGATIONS

Once you've identified your key tasks, make the time to do them. Remember, time management *really* boils down to self-management: the willingness to stop misusing time and practice self-discipline. While you're not going to waste time during the workday, you're not trying to do it all. Block out time for your critical HIT lists tasks right on your calendar.

Work to reduce your obligations by adopting the computer science concept of "caching." This involves developing the ability to add, drop, and refuse new data on the fly, in order to streamline your workload. I call this "availability caching." When you find yourself at or near maximum capacity, it helps make your decisions about who and what to give your time to more automatic, objective, and logical.

Speaking of refusing data: learn to say "no" in a polite yet firm way. Don't let your co-workers talk you into accepting tasks that either belong to them or you lack time to handle. Ask your boss to prioritize projects when he or she tries to overload you. Meanwhile, keep a firm hand on your own tendency to wander. Don't derail yourself between tasks; exercise clarity, discernment, and vision to make the right choices "in the moment," because even tiny time intervals count.

Step 3: Focus Your Attention: REDUCE YOUR DISTRACTIONS

In this step, you reduce distractions so you can hone your focus to razor sharpness. Once you know exactly what you should be doing and have captured time to do it, you must focus on completing that important task. Distractions represent some of the worst productivity hurdles; even if they drag your attention away for just a few seconds at a time, they can cause you to lose your train of thought and fall out of the productive focus in which you accomplish your best work.

Take steps to ease external distractions like people chatting in the hallway, interruptions from co-workers, or traffic past your office or cubicle. If nothing else, you can close your door (assuming you have one), or take your laptop into an empty conference room, or establish signals to let your co-workers know when you'd prefer they not disturb you. To keep your electronics from repeatedly shattering your focus, turn off email alarms and instant messaging and let your calls roll over to voicemail.

Internal distractions often prove more dangerous than external ones, because they represent hurdles we put up ourselves. We don't intend to waste time but inevitably do it with gossiping, socializing, procrastinating, and constantly checking email. Ironically, some of the worst internal distractions come from efforts to *increase* personal productivity. Perfectionism, for example, often backfires, because trying to predict everything that could possibly go wrong means you never get started – and when you do get to work, you have a hard time letting go.

But few internal distractions hurt productivity as much as multitasking. Trying to do too much at once divides your attention, and one task actually gets in the way of the next. You lose track because you switch between tasks too often. Single-tasking works better: instead of juggling several tasks, focus on one until you've reached a natural stopping point (or you've completed it), and then move on to the next.

Step 4: Process New Information: REDUCE PROCESSING TIME

Streamline your information flow, and you'll inevitably cut back on your time expenditures. Make setting up an efficient filing system one of your first tasks. Develop a simple, noun-based labeling scheme, and apply it rigorously to your electronic and paper files. No document should ever take you more than a minute or so to find.

You'll also need a reliable personal time management system – some variety of organizer, whether paper, electronic, or hybrid, where you can keep track of all your schedules and contacts. Just make sure it meets the HUG criteria: it must be Handy, Usable, and Garbage-free.

Involuntary data inflow, especially email and phone calls, will likely represent a bigger problem. You can cut back on their influence by limiting your exposure to just a few times per day and processing your inboxes down to zero each time you do check, triaging on the fly. Because most work arrives via email, you should follow some foundational principles to reduce processing time:

- The Superglue Rule
- The Decisiveness Rule

- The Start-to-Finish Rule
- The Three-Minute Rule
- The Empty Inbox Rule
- The Discipline Rule

When you use these rules in conjunction with my original 6-D Information Processing System™, you can reduce the time you spend handling your inflowing information to a much more manageable level.

Step 5: Close the Loop: REDUCE INEFFICIENCIES

Next, reduce your inefficiencies by determining what does and doesn't work for you. Constantly refine your workflow processes, reworking or replacing components if they break down or just don't seem as efficient as they might be.

Other people may present your most difficult barriers to closing the loop. Since you can't control the actions of your co-workers, try to make your interactions with them easier. Start with precision communication that cuts down on unproductive "noise" like hedging and passive language. Get right to the point and ask for acknowledgement on everything. If you don't completely understand what someone asks of you, keep asking questions until you do. Don't give up if they get impatient – it's better than doing the wrong thing or over-delivering – both a waste of time and energy.

Micromanagers represent a special case. No amount of productivity training and time management finesse can save you from a micromanager's ego trip if you don't take the bully by the horns ASAP. If they hinder your workflow, confront them about it; they may back off. Otherwise, find ways to work around them – or find a job elsewhere.

Whether a blockage is human, process-oriented, or mechanical, never hesitate to step in and try to fix it. If you can't find a way to do so, then go around it and move on to things you *can* fix. Teamwork is crucial here. Do your best to ease the way for everyone involved. In addition to helping the team develop work plans, set and achieve milestones, and reach deadlines, ensure stability by establishing contingency plans to handle crises and other emergencies, such as unexpected absences.

Step 6: Manage Your Capacity: REDUCE ENERGY EXPENDITURES

The best-laid workflow plan will fall apart if you don't have the energy to sustain it. Therefore, Step 6 focuses on keeping yourself physically and mentally fit, through a combination of good sleep, diet, exercise, and preservation of personal happiness. Taken together, these form the hub that links and strengthens the other PWF steps.

Begin by recognizing the limits of your personal "battery." You can only go so far before you run out of energy, so know when to slow down and recharge. Don't skip your scheduled breaks – stretch breaks, meals, personal time, weekends, and vacations – or fatigue may eventually overwhelm you.

You can't stay productive if you don't get good, restorative sleep every night. Like it or not, your muscles require rest, your body chemistry needs time to reset, and your subconscious mind has to process new information. Do your best to encourage sleep on a regular schedule by establishing a peaceful environment, and avoid using your bedroom as an office.

Excess weight will also drag you down, so keep an eye on your diet, focusing on portion control and energy-boosting foods. Pair that with regular exercise. This can include anything from "subversive" activities you can engage in while going about your normal workday (like taking the stairs rather than the elevator), to working out at the gym twice a week.

Don't forget your mental health. If you can't maintain a high level of enthusiasm for your work, you can't stay at your productive best. Seek out happiness by making empowered choices, surrounding yourself with fun things, spending time with your family, doing nice things for people, cherishing yourself, and finding ways to laugh at adversity. All this will help you maintain a fresh, can-do attitude.

Staying on Top of Your Life

There's no doubt your career is important: you spend more than half of your waking life either working or preparing to. But you can't let it override everything else. For the sake of your mental and physical health – not to mention your friends and family – you've got to curb your workaholic tendencies.

Yes, working 70-hour weeks can make you fantastically productive...in the short term. But over time, you'll wear down to a ghost of your former self. Eventually something will break, and suddenly, your productivity will drop to nil. Like an overpowered light bulb, you'll produce a lot of heat and light for a while, but suddenly you'll burn out, much sooner than you should. Even if that doesn't happen, don't fool yourself: no matter how hard you work today, you can't guarantee corporate leadership will remember your sacrifice tomorrow. You might end up with a pink slip anyway.

Rather than grow old and break down before your time, implement my Productivity Workflow Formula in your career. These six steps are logical, straightforward, and can



help you reduce your workload to a reasonable level, resulting in a work/life balance you can live with over the long haul. Sure, hard work may be good for the soul – but moderation will keep you healthy.

You can get the full details on all six steps in *What To Do When There's Too Much To Do*, my brand new handbook for maximizing workplace productivity without running yourself into the ground. Reserve your copy today at [Amazon](#), [Barnes and Noble](#), or [800CEORead](#)! Email your receipt to WhatToDo@TheProductivityPro.com for special bonuses by author friends of Laura Stack. Visit www.TheProductivityPro.com/WhatToDo for complete details.

© 2012 Laura Stack. Laura Stack is the president of The Productivity Pro®, Inc., a time management training firm specializing in productivity improvement in high-stress organizations. Since 1992, Laura has presented keynotes and seminars on improving output, lowering stress, and saving time in today's workplaces. Her books include *SuperCompetent* (Wiley, 2010); *The Exhaustion Cure* (Broadway Books, 2008); *Find More Time* (2006); and *Leave the Office Earlier* (2004). Her newest book, *What to Do When There's Too Much to Do: Reduce Tasks, Increase Results, and Save 90 Minutes a Day* (Berrett-Koehler), hits bookstores in May 2012. To have Laura speak at your next event, call 303-471-7401. Visit www.TheProductivityPro.com to sign up for her free monthly productivity newsletter.



Educational Resources by Laura Stack

Screenshots of Microsoft Outlook Inbox and Tasks tricks:

www.TheProductivityPro.com/download.htm

Download the Laura Stack app for a free eBook! www.TheProductivityPro.com/app

Subscribe to our weekly one-minute productivity video training series "The Productivity Minute"!

<http://www.theproductivitypro.com/productivityminute/>

Link with me! <http://www.linkedin.com/in/laurastack>

Join our LinkedIn Group, The Productivity Pro® Alumni, to exchange ideas and insights:

<http://www.linkedin.com/e/vgh/1259217/>

Follow me on Twitter: <http://twitter.com/laurastack>

Become a Fan of The Productivity Pro®: www.facebook.com/productivitypro

Sign up for my free monthly newsletter, The Productivity Pro®:

http://www.theproductivitypro.com/r_subscribe.htm

Subscribe to my blog: <http://www.theproductivitypro.com/blog/>

Laura's website has over 150 free articles for download:

<http://www.TheProductivityPro.com/articles>

Microsoft Outlook 12-hour online video training: <http://www.TheProductivityPro.com/Outlook>

FREE downloadable worksheets, checklists, and resources:

http://www.theproductivitypro.com/r_free_stuff.htm

Take the quizzes FREE from Laura's books: http://www.theproductivitypro.com/r_quizzes.htm

Get a FREE tip of the day via email: http://www.theproductivitypro.com/r_subscribe_365Tips.htm

Resources for purchase (books, CDs, DVDs, self-study audio, video training, MP3s etc.):

http://www.theproductivitypro.com/t_productivity_tools.htm

The Productivity Pro® Day-Timer for the handheld: www.daytimer.com/laurastack

Laura's YouTube channel: <http://www.youtube.com/theproductivitypro>