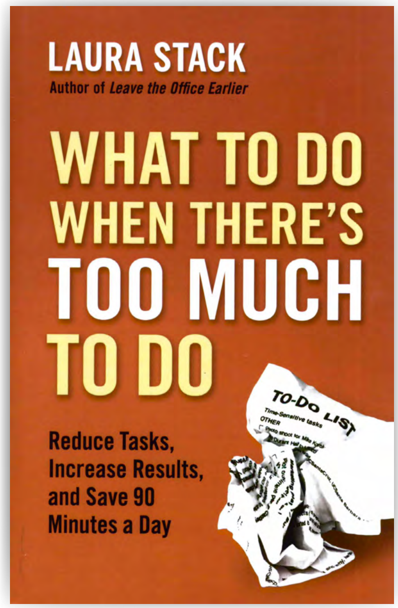
Business Book Summaries
October 5, 2012

What To Do When There's Too Much To Do

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

Laura Stack



Adapted by permission of Berrett-Koehler Publishers
ISBN: 978-1-60994-539

Introduction

Today's fast-paced and high-pressured business environment often requires workers to spend 60, 70, 80, or more hours per week on the job. Unfortunately, productivity tends to decrease as work hours increase, and in this type of business climate, traditional time management techniques may be meaningless and outdated. In **What To Do When There's Too Much To Do**, Laura Stack offers a system that allows workers to accomplish *more* by doing *less* work. Following her step-by-step Productivity Workflow Formula allows workers to organize their work lives around the tasks that really matter and disregard those that do not. The dozens of strategies that Stack provides help reduce commitments, distractions, interruptions, and inefficiencies.

The Case for Reduction

From a business standpoint, 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 health of a nation. Collectively, Americans are more productive today than at any other time in history.

Meanwhile, this level of productivity has been achieved at a high cost. Many businesses have been forced to cut staff members in an effort to save their bottom lines, resulting in a truncated workforce that must work harder to produce the same amount of results. However, working harder like this can be counterproductive.

Many workers might be surprised to learn how simple it is to rearrange their time in order to have more fulfilling personal and professional lives. One of the keys to achieving this is adopting the Productivity Workflow Formula (PWF). The PWF is a cyclical formula that has six steps:

1. *Determine what to do*: Study work requirements closely, triage 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 meetings.
3. *Focus attention*: Sharpen concentration, shut out distractions, learn focus techniques, and avoid multitasking.
4. *Process new information*: Research effectively, file digital information, and quickly handle e-mail and voicemail.
5. *Close the loop*: Determine what does and does not work, reduce inefficiencies, solve problems and bottlenecks, and tighten up systems.
6. *Manage capacity*: Focus on the physical factors affecting energy, and manage sleep, diet, exercise, and happiness.

This model is circular by design to suggest continuity and to reinforce the fact that it is a process that should be repeated again and again. PWF is meant to become a continuum; part of a daily routine that leads to increased productivity and efficiency.

Determine What to Do

In order for workers to stop overworking, they must determine exactly which tasks must be performed regularly, and then commit to doing *only* those tasks. To begin, they must review work requirements closely and prioritize their task list by applying the medical concept of triage. *Triage* is the process used by medical professionals to assign levels of care based on degrees of patient urgency.

In addition to triaging or prioritizing tasks, workers can also save time by eliminating time wasters. Examples of time wasters include:

- Paying too much attention to e-mail.

Key Concepts

In **What To Do When There's Too Much To Do**, author Laura Stack offers a system that allows workers to accomplish *more* by doing *less* work. Her Productivity Workflow Formula is designed to help streamline time management, reduce tasks, and increase results. There are six primary steps:

1. *Determine what to do*: Triage to-do lists and decide to do only what matters most.
2. *Schedule time to do it*: Assign time slots and duration for all tasks.
3. *Focus attention*: Avoid multitasking.
4. *Process new information*: Research, file information, and handle incoming information.
5. *Close the loop*: Reduce inefficiencies.
6. *Manage capacity*: Focus on physical factors affecting energy.

Information about the author and subject:
www.theproductivitypro.com

Information about this book and other business titles:
www.bkconnection.com

Related summaries in the BBS Library:

The Time Trap
Fourth Edition
By Alec Mackenzie and Pat Nickerson

10 Steps to Successful Time Management
By Cyndi Maxey and Kevin E. O'Connor

Get-It-Done Guy's 9 Steps to Work Less and Do More
By Stever Robbins

Make Every Second Count
Time Management Tips and Techniques for More Success with Less Stress
By Robert Bly

- Socializing excessively.
- Overusing the Internet.
- Committing to too many meetings.

Creating a to-do list is a common organization method; however, many people make the mistake of creating a list so large that they become overwhelmed by the sheer number of items on it. Stack promotes the concept of a master list that holds all of the fundamentals and "someday" items that are important but not urgent. The critical items on the list should be moved to the daily High Impact Task (HIT) list.

The HIT list should contain a reasonable amount of items that can realistically be accomplished in one regular work day. This list is meant to be a guide for the day's work, so it should take meetings, phone calls, lunch, and other items that must be included as part of the work day into account. The goal of the HIT list is to trim the waste from workers' daily schedules in order to increase productivity and reduce their number of work hours.

Instead of putting all tasks on one huge list, establish separate HIT (daily) and master lists to help prioritize appropriately.

Schedule Time to Do It

Once the day's tasks are assigned to the HIT list, workers must assign appropriate time slots and durations for each appointment and task. To make this system, and the resulting schedule, work, it is necessary for workers to learn to say no to unexpected work and to take control of meetings to ensure they stay on schedule.

Putting aside emergencies and crises, tasks generally fall into three scheduling categories:

1. "Have-to" items required by the job.
2. Routine daily tasks.
3. HIT list items.

When confronted with a project or task not on the HIT list, workers must ask questions to determine whether it is worth their time. They must find out how long the requested task will take, when it is due, and how urgent it is. When turning down a new task or project, workers must:

- Say no in a positive, upbeat way.
- Refrain from apologizing or explaining.
- Negotiate as necessary.
- Meet the person halfway when possible.
- Make sure the response is clear and understood by the requestor.

Meetings can be another time waster, so workers must trim those that are not absolutely necessary from of their schedules. For meetings that must be attended, they must be kept on track.

Focus Your Attention

Focus is absolutely required to achieve true productivity. For most people, distractions represent the biggest productivity hurdles. External distractions can usually be handled easier than internal ones as they are more insidious. Self-discipline is the watchword here, so workers must examine their average workdays to determine which activities are time wasters, and make and enforce rules to control them. They must take into account the following common distractions:

- Multitasking.
- Procrastinating.
- Perfectionism.
- Negative self-talk.
- Socializing.

The worst culprit on this list may be multitasking. While multitasking fools people into thinking they are accomplishing a lot, they are really just keeping themselves busy. Instead of haphazardly doing a number of things, workers should focus on one activ-

About the Author

Laura Stack is president of The Productivity Pro, Inc., president of the National Speaker's Association, and a keynote speaker on the topics of efficiency improvement, personal productivity, and time management. She is the author of four other books, including *Leave the Office Earlier*.

ity until it is complete. Then, they can move onto the next activity.

Technology is another common distraction, as many people cannot help frequently checking their smartphones, handhelds, e-mails, and other techno-tools. Many people seem terrified to disconnect for even a few moments, as if they will miss something critical. When their incoming message alerts chime, they grab their devices and allow the technology to dictate their actions and distract them from important tasks and people.

In order to rectify this, workers must slip off their electronic leashes by:

- Turning off and tuning out when it is time to concentrate.
- Putting all handheld devices and smartphones into a drawer, and scheduling time to check e-mails rather than reading them as they arrive.
- Deactivating all beeps, lights, flashes, noises, and notifications.
- Deleting the incoming message alert on work e-mails, and letting phone calls roll over to voicemail to be returned at a time scheduled on their HIT lists.

Establish daily routines for common work tasks, such as checking e-mail or organizing the day. This allows you to make fewer decisions, reducing energy expenditure.

Process New Information

Modern office workers face an astonishing flood of information flowing in from more sources than ever before. It is imperative for them to filter out the worthless information and organize the remainder. The first step toward accomplishing this is establishing a basic filing system to track paper documents. Different types of paper documents include:

- *Active/Dynamic*: Files that are accessed daily.
- *Project/Client*: Files that are accessed at least once a month and may include meeting notes, committee paperwork, etc.
- *Reference*: Files that are accessed at least once a year. For example, completed project files, tax paperwork, and budgets.
- *Archive/History*: Files that are accessed less than once a year but are necessary to keep.

Once the filing system is set up, workers must create a personal time management system. The system can be paper-based, electronic, or a hybrid method, as long as it meets the *HUG criteria*: Handy, Usable, and Garbage-free.

Effective time management involves three separate functions:

1. Capture inputs as they are received.
2. Organize information into tasks and start/due dates.
3. Reference what needs to be done.

Some will find that they use one tool for all three parts of time management, but others may use several. For instance, some people may choose paper for capturing inputs, but will use Microsoft Outlook to organize tasks, and then will sync everything with their smartphones or handheld devices to reference what needs to be done.

Besides managing and processing information, it may be necessary for workers to find ways to reduce their involuntary data flow, such as setting up spam filters and rules to automatically delete and categorize messages. For all types of data and information, they can follow three basic guidelines:

1. Do not touch/move items multiple times.
2. Do not use the inbox as a to-do list.
3. Empty inboxes once a day.

Employing the 6-D Information Management System is another way to handle information flow. This system is based on six decisions that are used to process and fine-tune information:

1. *Discard*: If there is no immediate good reason to keep something, toss it.
2. *Delegate*: If possible, transfer it to someone else.
3. *Do*: If the item requires personal attention, handle it right then and there.

4. *Date*: If future action is required, assign a specific date to work on it.
5. *Drawer*: If a file is important but does not require further action, file it for future reference.
6. *Deter*: If information is irrelevant, filter it out so it does not even enter the inbox.

Close the Loop

Once the commitment load is routinely being triaged, tasks are scheduled appropriately, attention is focused, and information is being processed, it is time for workers to consolidate everything into a single, efficient, time-saving system. Closing this loop means tinkering with workflow until all the components work smoothly together, weeding out the unnecessary tasks, and replacing anything that does not work well.

To begin, workers must create a plan of action to organize their workspaces for maximum efficiency. There are several starting points that can be implemented fairly quickly until more long-term processes are put into place:

- Get rid of clutter.
- Organize the entire workspace.
- Purge computer and paper files to make more room and simplify organization.
- Implement simple but logical filing and naming conventions for computer files to make them easier to locate and to determine what is in them.
- Tweak logistics and prepare materials in advance of when they are needed.
- Set up shortcuts for all standard tasks.
- Automate tasks or processes that are done more than twice.

These processes will help eliminate routine distractions at work, but dealing with human distractions that inhibit workflow can be even more difficult. One method for eliminating human distractions is limiting confusion when delegating assignments. By acknowledging and clarifying requirements from the beginning, it eliminates the need for people to check back. When faced with a micromanager, people must work around or accommodate them as much as possible to keep them from ruining productivity. If absolutely necessary, they can confront the micromanager politely but directly.

Despite how many successful systems are in place, there will always be workflow inefficiencies and bottlenecks. Ironically, some of these inefficiencies may actually occur because of processes and systems that have been set up to *enhance* productivity. In many cases, a broken system may not be fatally flawed; instead, it may require a few tweaks to transform it into something useful and productive. When a system fails, workers can assess the severity of the situation by asking a few simple questions:

- What changes can be made to improve the methods and processes currently in place?
- What can be done to work more effectively?
- What is the hold up?
- What new systems might be more beneficial?
- What is the one obstacle that is standing in the way of completing the necessary tasks?

Do not create just a paper-based filing system. Develop a logical system for electronic files as well, using folders and easily remembered naming conventions.

As important as it is for workers to confront and solve bottlenecks, it is also important not to obsess over them. If a bottleneck cannot be cleared, they must determine how to maneuver around it and keep moving on with the task at hand.

Teamwork is an increasingly important part of the workplace, and some workers may be dependent on others in order to keep their own workflow moving along. This can be done by clarifying the group workflow process, providing milestones and deadlines, assigning tasks to particular individuals, and setting up contingency plans for handling crises and emergencies.

It is also important to continually tighten the workflow loop, and make consistent efforts to maximize efficiency. By constantly evaluating what works and what does not, workers can learn from their mistakes and fill the gaps as they occur.

Manage Your Capacity

Establishing and maintaining an effective workflow routine is not enough; it also has to be powered by personal energy. Managing capacity is central to the entire PWF process, because in order to be productive, people must have the capacity to be productive.

Managing capacity requires focusing on the physical factors that affect energy: sleep, diet, exercise, and even happiness. It is important that people take care of themselves so that the workflow engine continues to run with a minimum of fuss. It is not possible to prevent every potential "power outage," but it is possible to prevent the majority of them.

This prevention requires taking steps to reduce the expenditure of energy. Personal "batteries" only have so much capacity, so it is important that people work within their limits and recharge whenever necessary. Overworking is draining and a detriment to productivity, so workers must take meal breaks, rest breaks, and vacations as often as possible. Not doing so usually means paying for it with flagging energy and mental strain.

Getting enough sleep is important as it reduces stress, evens out biochemistry, allows muscles to restore themselves, and allows the brain time to process and deal with new information. Workers must implement simple actions to keep their sleep schedules steady, such as controlling the thermostat, shutting out noise, and taking power naps.

It is also important for workers to watch their diets, focus on portion control, and eat foods that boost their energy. They can also add exercise to their daily routines either by maintaining a regular schedule or sneaking it in by taking the stairs rather than the elevator, parking at the end of the parking lot, or exercising while watching television at night.

Mental health is also important. Workers can maintain their happiness by doing the following whenever possible:

- Making empowered choices.
- Spending more time with family and friends.
- Doing something nice for someone else.
- Laughing.

Features of the Book

Estimated Reading Time: 2-3 hours, 176 pages

In **What To Do When There's Too Much To Do**, Laura Stack offers time-management advice for professionals and outlines her six-step cycle, the Productivity Workflow Formula, that is designed to maximize productivity and decrease the number of hours spent working. Stack's book includes concrete information on how to find and implement a time management system, a six-part decision making process for handling information, and tips for dealing with distractions that become bottlenecks. A chapter-by-chapter summary, bibliography, and self-assessment are also provided.

Contents

A Note to Our Readers

We at BBS encourage our readers to purchase the business books we summarize.
BBS Summaries are intended as a service to busy professionals, as we recommend only those books that are worth your time to read in their entirety. We apply stringent criteria in selecting only the best business books, and in that selection process, strive to help you make informed book-purchasing decisions.

Click to Buy This Book

This book is available at bookstores and online booksellers.

Business Book Summaries® is a service of EBSCO Publishing, Inc.
For more information about BBS, to subscribe to BBS,
or to provide us feedback, visit our Web site.
www.ebscohost.com

EBSCO Publishing Inc.
10 Estes Street
Ipswich, MA 01938 USA