

Michael Masterson's
**PERSONAL
PRODUCTIVITY
SECRETS**

*How To Accomplish
All Your
Most Important
Goals!*

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To help you become successful ... to get you closer to where you want to be in life ... you need to have a Master Plan. A Master Plan is what Jack Welch used to communicate and achieve his vision for General Electric. And it's what some professional sports coaches use to lead and motivate their teams when the prospect of winning a league championship that year or even the following one is next to zero. They know that instead of pumping up their players on the impossible dream, it's much more realistic — and can be just as exciting for them — to chart a longer-term success plan that will take them where they can hope to be.

The same process can help you achieve your personal goals.

Your personal Master Plan will be not only the foundation but also the blueprint of your success.

A Master Plan says that you are serious about your life goals. It is a formal contract between the visionary you and the daily, working you that lays out, point by point, what exactly has to be done to achieve all your major objectives over time.

The Master Plan works because it takes very large, sometimes very nebulous, ambitions and breaks them down into specific tasks — things you have to learn, things you have to know, and things you have to do. Transforming dreams into tasks may take away some of the romance, but what you'll get instead is a growing excitement about how increasingly likely it is that you will accomplish your dreams.

The reason most people don't achieve their ambitions is NOT that they aren't smart enough, shrewd enough, or complicated enough. It's that they are emotionally too complex, shrewd, and smart. They allow themselves too many subconscious conflicts of interest which stall their progress or derail them.

Making a Master Plan work is about simplifying your interests and acting upon them in a very simple way. When you get the emotional

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gratification of taking one forward step toward one cherished goal, it will make it that much easier to take the next step.

Think of your Master Plan as a behavior-response system for the ultrasophisticated (and highly interesting) YOU.

To perform better than you have in the past (and achieve more than you have so far), you have to act differently now. And if you really want to achieve those dreams you dream about, you have to make sure that what you do today — this very day, not tomorrow — will move you closer to those dreams.

***Start today by selecting your Life Goals.
The rest is easy.***

Don't be cynical. This can definitely change your life. It has worked for me and for everyone who has tried it, including dozens of individuals I've personally coached. So let's get started.

1. Take out a sheet of paper. Title it "Life Goals" (if you have no shame) or "Stuff to Do Before I Croak" (if you are afraid someone will see it).
2. Make a list of everything you want to accomplish. Everything. Like making a lot of money. Writing books. Traveling to Rome. Learning to tap dance. Write till you are done.
3. Let your list sit for a few hours. Even a day. Then narrow it down to your top 10 choices.
4. Take another rest. Now make another cut. This time, you have to select your top four goals. (If you are having trouble figuring out what is really important to you, do this: Imagine your obituary. What would you want said about you?)

These are your Life Goals, your ultimate priorities, the objectives that will make you the person you really want to be. Spend some time imagining yourself in the future, as you will be when you've accomplished them.

5. Now, pick the one Life Goal that is numero uno.
6. On a separate sheet of paper ... or perhaps on an index card ... write down your four Life Goals with your top choice on top. Highlight that one.

Now you must make one final and very tough decision.

Now you have to decide whether achieving your top goal is THE MOST important thing to you. You need to ask yourself if you would sacrifice everything else in order to achieve it. Here's why: There is a 99% chance you will achieve your top goal if you are willing to do anything to achieve it. That may mean compromising one or several of the other three goals. If you don't want to compromise the others, don't fret. You still have a very good (over 80%) chance of achieving all four of your Life Goals with my program.

So decide: One goal and damn the rest? Or a balanced life?

OK. Here's what you need to do now. Convert your four Life Goals into five-year objectives. For example, let's say that one of your goals is to have a net worth of \$10 million. And let's say that you want to retire in 10 years. You might make "having a \$5 million net worth" your five-year goal.

You are going to use this five-year list to create your one-year list. And you will use your one-year list to create monthly lists. And you will use each monthly list to create weekly lists. And your weekly lists to create daily "to-do" lists.

I know. I know. But it works. It really works.

Next, I'll show you how to make this conversion from a five-year plan to a daily "to-do" list with a morning routine that will make it highly probably that you will achieve your four Life Goals.

Rise Early and Catch the Golden Worm

Every successful person I know (or have read about) gets to work early. It's such a universal trait of accomplished individuals, I'm tempted to say it is the first and foremost secret of success. "Early to bed and early to rise," Ben Franklin said, "makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise." I used to think that was propaganda from a Puritan. Now I think it's an observation from a very wise man.

Healthy, wealthy, and wise. Let's start with wealthy — since that's what most people are interested in.

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How does starting early make you rich?

There is no better time to collect your thoughts and plan your day than early in the morning when the office is quiet. Not only are you undisturbed by phone calls and interruptions, but ahead of you is the potential of an unopened day. The solitude promotes a kind of relaxed, contemplative mood. You feel free to think in an expansive way. Later on, when the place is noisy and the pressure is on, it's difficult to pay attention to what's important. You feel your attention drawn in several directions at once. You feel the pressure of deadlines. And you may be hit with bad news, which could put you in a bad, unproductive mood.

A near-perfect morning routine

Over the years, I've studied and experimented with dozens of time-saving techniques and organizational systems. The simple three-step program that follows is a unique combination of what in my experience is the best of the best.

Step 1:

Getting your inputs (5-10 minutes)

Start with your weekly "to-do" list. (This is derived from your monthly "to-do" list, which comes from your yearly "to-do" list, which is a derivative of your five-year Life Goals list.) On a sheet of paper, jot down anything and everything you think needs to get done. Make sure you have at least one task associated with each of your four primary goals.

Now, scan your e-mail. Don't read the messages. You will get bogged down if you do. Just give them a quick once-over to see if there is anything waiting for you that may need to be taken care of right away and/or will take some extra time.

Next, check your phone messages, faxes, and inbox. Don't respond to anything. Your job for the moment is simply to amass it all.

When you have done all of this, you will have completed the first step of your morning routine. You will have gathered up all the work you might want to do that day. You will already be thinking about much of it. You will not have to worry about forgetting something important. And you will have a good idea of how much needs to be done.

Step 2:

Sorting and ordering (5-15 minutes)

Now comes the fun part. Get out a clean sheet of paper — or an index card — and write the date on top. Referencing all the inputs you have just gathered, categorize each item according to the quadrant developed by Steven Covey (the "Seven Habits" guy) as either:

1. Important and Urgent
2. Important but Not Urgent
3. Unimportant but Urgent, or
4. Unimportant and Not Urgent

Then select the items that you intend to accomplish before the end of the day.

When you start out, you'll be lucky to complete 15 tasks, so be realistic in your planning. As you become better at time spacing, you will do more. On a good day, I can knock off 35-40 tasks.

Make sure your daily "to-do" list contains nothing that is Unimportant and Not Urgent and a diminishing number of Unimportant but Urgent items (since they indicate that you are not in control of your schedule).

Now highlight four or five of the items on your list. These should all be Important and Not Urgent. (The Urgent tasks you **HAVE** to do. The Important but Not Urgent tasks will advance your Life Goals. They are critical to your success, but you will almost certainly fail to do them unless you make them a priority. That's why you are highlighting them.)

To the side of each item, you might want to indicate how much time you think it will take. And then you might want to add another column to record the actual time each task took. (I run a subtotal of the cumulating times to the right of that so there is some relationship between what I want to do and how much time I have to do it.)

As a general rule, it's a good idea to structure all of your tasks so that none lasts more than an hour. Ten-minute, 15-minute, and 30-minute tasks are best. If you have something that takes several hours to do, break it up in pieces and do it over a few days. It will be better for the extra time you give it and you won't get crushed on any one day. Also, be sure to slot in time for relaxing, eating, etc. When you are done, double check to make sure the time you allocated does not exceed the time you have available.

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You will have now finished Step 2. Your day is organized — not according to what others want from you but according to what you want from yourself. If you have never done this before, it will be a major change.

Step 3:

Giving your day a jumpstart (30-60 minutes)

Here's the best step. As your first task, take on one of the highlighted tasks. It might be something you enjoy doing or something you really don't want to do (because it will make you feel so good when it's done).

Follow these three steps right away — first thing when you get in (which should be about 90 minutes before everyone else) — and you will have accomplished more by starting time than most people do by lunchtime. (Or all day, for that matter, since most people see most of their day consumed by unimportant emergencies.)

Very Important: Make sure, as I said above, that you do at least one task each day to advance each of your four Life Goals. Really, you should do more than that. Your day's "to-do" list should roughly reflect, in terms of time devoted to each task, your Life Goals list, with priority given to your top goal, a bit less to your second, and so on.

Success is what happens when you do a little more each day.

Success can come in a single windfall, but most often it arrives bit by bit. This is a way for you to give yourself a significant advantage over the people you compete with in life.

It actually gives you three advantages. You get much more done. You have to deal with far fewer unnecessary crises. And, most important, you spend a much greater percentage of your time doing things that move you along toward the goals you desire.

Efficiency Tip No. 1: A Small Thing That Can Make a Huge Productive Difference

About two years ago, a retired publisher who does more work in one day than most working publishers do in a week, shared one of his secrets with me. Wherever he goes, however he's dressed, he carries in his pocket a very small pad of paper and a pencil. He uses it not only to jot down phone numbers and the like but also to record those fleeting good ideas — big and small — that come to us when we are least prepared to make note of them.

You are watching your kid play soccer. The goalie makes a spectacular stop. It triggers an idea about how to get your secretary to keep people from interrupting you in the morning. It's the kind of small, easily forgettable idea that would make your life better if you could just remember it.

I don't use a pad and pencil. I use a little leather index-card holder that fits easily in my pocket. In it, I always keep a blank card on which to jot down these random thoughts plus four additional cards to record my yearly, monthly, weekly, and daily tasks.

It's very helpful. Since I've started using this system, I no longer forget these little ideas that make life a little better. I also use it to help me keep my priorities straight. Rather than waste 90 seconds staring at the light board of an elevator, I can take a quick look at everything I'm trying to get done that day/week/month/year.

(My wife likes it too. I've become very good at remembering to pick up the random milk container, soccer player, etc.)

Start, today, by buying a pack of 3-by-5 index cards.

I use 3-by-5 index cards that are lined across the 3-inch side. These accommodate 18 entries on each side. (Eighteen seems to be about as many important tasks as I can get done in an average day. But you can use the back of the card if you have more to do.)

Review your cards each morning and consult them whenever you have a spare moment. You'll be surprised at how much more "on top of things" you'll be in a few days.

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This little tool will be enormously valuable to you.

Keep your cards (or notepad) with you at all times. When you get your next good idea, write it down. When you come across a fact that will help you sell an idea, record it. When you agree to do something, or meet someone, and you don't have that clunky calendar with you, make a note of it on your index card.

Every few days — or at the very least once a week — transfer your notes. Appointments go in your calendar. Names go in your address book or Rolodex. Ideas go in your idea folder. When everything has been properly disposed of, give yourself a fresh index card.

You can also use an index card as a cheat sheet when you attend formal business functions. Jot down full names and key facts (i.e., baby boy, Jason) for colleagues you are likely to run into. It can help you make a good impression.

Imagine. You will no longer forget important names and dates. You will develop a reputation for being good at follow-through. And you'll never forget those great ideas that come to you briefly ... and then are gone.

Efficiency Tip No. 2:

Don't Let E-Mail Ruin Your Schedule

If you let your e-mail (or your inbox) ruin your schedule, you aren't productive. It doesn't matter how hard you feel like you're working. You aren't doing the most important things.

You've got to limit the time you spend on e-mail — and stick to that limit.

Unless you are in the very unusual situation of being responsible for hourly deadlines (in which case you probably need to work your way up in the organization), you should write/read/answer your e-mail only once or twice a day.

You should also train those who e-mail you to keep their messages short and to the point. Tell them that very few messages need to be more than a screen-page long — and that when they pose a problem, it should always be presented to you with multiple-choice solutions.

So if you are on e-mail more than twice a day, stop it. If you are receiving a lot of unnecessarily long and/or unproductive messages, say something (diplomatically) to curtail them. If you are sending out long messages yourself, make a resolution to keep everything possible to a page or less.

Efficiency Tip No. 3: Group Like Tasks Together

Assembling common tasks makes you much more efficient. So group similar activities, such as making phone calls, handling e-mails, writing short memos, etc., into one category on your daily "to-do" list. (On a separate index card or sheet of paper, keep the phone numbers and a list of the memos you want to write.)

Efficiency Tip No. 4: Choose a Time Planner That Works for You

Most organized executives I know use personal organizers. Some use paper calendars. Others prefer electronic planners. I use a homemade system.

That said, I have personally found that the most efficient are the daily diaries. The least efficient? Without a doubt, it's the electronic planner.

Ultimately, what matters is that you pick a system you will use consistently. So anything that tickles your fancy is the ticket.

Efficiency Tip No. 5: Use a Pencil First — Then Ink

I've made it a habit to enter my appointments in pencil and then — at some sensible time — pen them in as I confirm them. This lets me know, at a glance, which meetings are confirmed and which are not. And it forces me to look at least twice at each scheduled event — better to remember it.

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Measuring and Improving Your Personal Productivity

Once you have started to follow my advice and have been using some sort of daily task list for three weeks, pull them out and review them. Calculate how many tasks on average per day you failed to complete. Take special note of how many highlighted (priority) tasks you missed. And then figure how often you took longer than expected to complete a task.

Problem No. 1: Not getting everything done

If (on average) you are leaving more than two tasks a day uncompleted, you need to do one of three things:

1. Decide to work more hours and be happy with that.
2. Learn how to do regular tasks more efficiently.
3. Do fewer things.

If you are having this problem, you will probably favor the second solution. And that is fine. But you need to take a serious look at the possibility that you are doing more than you should. Highly motivated people often want to do too much themselves.

So even if you decide to work longer and/or faster, please do this too: Identify one or two tasks every day that can be delegated or not done at all. Scratch them off your list.

Problem No. 2: Not finishing highlighted tasks

If some of the tasks you are failing to complete are important tasks — critical to achieving your most important goals — you are in serious trouble. The solution here is to change your schedule so that you can finish these tasks first thing in the morning — before you get to your busy work.

If you are having this problem, you are not going to like this solution. But it is probably the only solution that will work, so give it a try. You will feel very good about yourself when your highlighted tasks are done and the day has just begun.

Start with tomorrow's list today.

You can get started right away by revising today's (if it is still very early) or tomorrow's task list. Do this:

1. Look at all the entries you've been making. Calculate how many tasks on average per day you failed to complete. Take special note of how many highlighted (priority) tasks you missed. And then figure how often you took longer than expected to complete a task.
2. Create tomorrow's "to-do" list now. Allow more than enough time for every task. Put down only as many tasks as you have time for. Don't "hope for the best." Plan realistically.
3. Highlight only the Important but Not Urgent tasks. If you get behind, all your tasks will become Urgent. Remember, the tasks you need to accomplish are precisely those you don't have to do today. So highlight them (up to four each day; one for each of your Life Goals) and make sure you complete them.
4. Give yourself enough time. Calculate the total time you need to finish your tasks. Add an hour for unexpected emergencies and slippage. Then make sure you have enough time in your day to accomplish everything.
5. Break your day into working blocks. (You might want to indicate them on your list with bold, horizontal lines.) Try to group similar activities (writing/phoning/meetings/etc.) in each block. As I said before, it is more efficient to handle them this way.

When you have completed a block of work, reward yourself with some pleasant five-minute activity. For me, it can be stretching, lifting a little weight, or shooting a rack of pool. A 12-hour day can be three four-hour blocks, four three-hour blocks ... even six two-hour blocks. See how you feel.

6. Work until you are done. Realize that you are doing what most people are not willing to do. Count yourself lucky.

I admit that you can be successful without being an efficient, productive worker. But why would you want to? When you don't organize your own day, other people (and events) end up doing it for you. You become a reactor rather than an actor. You lose your independence in a very fundamental way. And eventually — since you are not in control of your life's most precious resource (your time) — you will pay for your laxity with stress, turmoil, and lost income.

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Don't Make This Common (and Costly) Mistake

A client and I met this morning. She said she was frustrated — that she had begun using a daily task list, as I had suggested, but wasn't getting some important things done. "'To-do' lists just don't work for me," she said.

That sounded wrong, so I asked to see what she was doing. As it turned out, she was simply writing a list of "to-do" items on a sheet of paper and crossing them out as she got to them.

Her list, which had perhaps a dozen items on it when she created it, now had 60 or 70 items covering several pages, some of them crossed out, others with notations. Scribbling here. Scratching there.

This client is not the only person I know who has opted for a general "to-do" list over my more complicated task list. Some of the people who are closest to me (I don't dare even print their initials) do the same. As far as I can see, they are kidding themselves. They have the impression that they are being efficient, but in fact they are only wasting their time recording tasks and objectives that, for the most part, will never get done.

By "modifying" my task-planning program to a general "to-do" list, my client had pretty much doomed herself to failure. The likelihood that she'd make real progress on her most important goals was very low.

***Do you use a single, general "to-do" list?
If you do, you're making a big mistake.***

In an attempt to "get everything on paper," my client wrote up a single list of all the things she wanted to do. It included mega-goals (like "become a stronger person"), big objectives (like "earn \$80,000 this year"), medium-sized tasks (like "make three new appointments this week"), and mini-tasks (like "return John's phone call").

As I mentioned above, her list ran several pages. She worked with it every day, she said — and she had made some progress — but the more she used it, the longer it got. Some important stuff went undone and she was feeling more swamped as time passed.

To change your life, you've got to stick with my basic program.

- You need to begin with four Life Goals — usually with a five- to seven-year time limit. These are the biggies like “be a great mom,” “become wealthy,” and so on. Write those down and put them somewhere safe.
- Then create a yearly goal sheet that is directly the result of those Life Goals. Make sure that you have specific, yearly objectives that move you along toward each Life Goal at a realistic and satisfying pace.
- Next, create a monthly task list (directly from your yearly objectives) and a weekly list (directly from your monthly).

Your daily “to-do” list should consist of specific tasks. You should estimate beforehand how long each task will take and you should therefore be able to accomplish 80% or more of those tasks each day.

If your schedule requires you to accommodate interruptions, allow for them on your task list.

You probably can't accomplish more than 20 or 22 significant tasks each day.

Over the years, I've found that a typical 10-hour day for me consists of approximately:

- 10 or 12 15-minute tasks
- six or eight 30-minute tasks
- one or two 60-plus-minute tasks

There is something about my nature — the emotional, physical, and intellectual capacities I have — that prevents me from doing much more than that.

You may be able to do more, but chances are you won't. If you do find that your limit is about the same as mine (or even less), you can create your entire daily “to-do” list on one side of a 3-by-5 lined index card. That's how I do it.

The important point is this: There is a giant difference between using a generalized “to-do” list and following my program for getting things done. If you are doing the former, your chances for changing your life are

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probably less than 20%. If you take a little extra time and effort to do the latter, your chances are 90% or better.

A Lesson in Productivity That I Learned from a Spanish Cigar

Let me tell you about a bad day I had a few years ago ...

I was beset by one problem after another from the moment I stepped into the office. By four o'clock, I was ready to scream. Then, in the middle of a particularly frustrating marketing meeting, I went a little nuts. Or I would have had I not excused myself and gone home.

That night, after a less-than-serene family dinner, I went out to the backyard and climbed into a little hot tub I had built for more romantic purposes. I lit up a cigar, stared at the sky, and asked myself the usual list of self-indulgent questions. ("Why Me? I never succumb to pressure. Aren't I Mr. Can Do?")

I nodded off. When I came to, my robusto was floating in the water beside me. I picked it up and — for no special reason — read the label. Underneath the brand name, there was a phrase in Spanish: "buenas cosas primero" ("good things first").

Then it hit me.

I had been feeling pressed and anxious for some time — and the mounting strain I had been feeling had coincided with a change I had made in my morning routine.

Instead of starting off the day by doing a little writing (which had been my usual habit), I had been starting it by answering my e-mail. I would sit down, turn on the computer, and let in the problems. The same kinds of problems I used to deal with in person, but with e-mail, there are more of them. (The nice thing about having a physical office door is that some people — hopefully those with less critical problems — walk away when they see you are busy.)

Bad thinking ...

My idea was to get the messy stuff out of the way before I'd give myself the pleasure of writing. It was the business-day equivalent of

eating peas before potatoes. But it was a big mistake. I was spending the most potentially productive period of my day battling problems. It was, to use the vernacular, a bummer.

Besides putting you in a bad mood and draining your energy, dealing with the day-to-day crap in the morning is inefficient.

Many problems solve themselves if you give them just a little bit of time. (Try it. You'll be amazed.) This is particularly true of personality problems, office politics, etc. By staying out of such imbroglios, at least for a while, you avoid saying or doing things you might avoid later. Other problems (and most of the "how-do-you-do-this?" questions fall into this category) are better solved (at least in part) by those who are asking you for help.

How to make four mistakes at once

By opening my e-mail and attempting to get it all "out of the way" before my "real day" began, I was making four mistakes at once. I was:

1. Doing more work than necessary
2. Getting myself entangled in messes I shouldn't have
3. Putting myself in an unproductive mood — somewhat irritated, apprehensive, and fatigued
4. Worst of all, I was spending my day's best energy on low-priority, high-anxiety issues.

So I returned to my regular routine. First, I organize my schedule. Next, I take care of a bit of writing that's on my "to-do" list for the day. I don't even turn on the computer until those two important jobs have been done. And it makes all the difference in the world.

By doing these two things, I have prepared myself for a productive day and I have accomplished one important task. Those two accomplishments make me feel good. And that feeling gives me extra energy when I turn on the computer and face my e-mail.

Give yourself the same benefit.

Begin each morning with a cup of great, freshly blended coffee from 7-Eleven or Dunkin Donuts (you can't do better). Then, after you've organized

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your day, pick out one task on your "to-do" list that is Important but Not Urgent and get it done. It should be something that will advance one of your four Life Goals. It may be something you enjoy doing, or it may be something that you've been trying to avoid. The critical thing is this: It must be something that, when done, will give you a positive feeling of accomplishment.

Today, think about what that task might be and put it on tomorrow's "to-do" list. Since you will want to get yourself organized and accomplish this task before your official day begins, make sure you won't be interrupted. So shut off your phone. And close your office door.

Get a Realistic View of Your Productivity

Successful people are usually those that spend most of their time in productive pastimes. From least productive to most productive, there are four types of activity:

1. Destructive (*fighting, drinking, suing, being angry*)
2. Fun but wasteful (*watching television, reading fiction, shopping, drinking late*)
3. Knowledge building (*learning almost anything*)
4. Wealth building (*I'm using the term "wealth" broadly here.*)

***In my experience, the more productively you work,
the better you do.***

Yes, there are exceptions. There are times when people get lucky on their first throw of the dice. Such stories are wonderful and well publicized, but they happen very rarely.

You can also, I admit, overdo productivity. In an effort to conquer the entire world in the course of a lifetime, you can lose your soul. But I wouldn't worry too much about that. It isn't likely to be your problem. I am always amused when someone — usually someone very skinny or very fat — disparages exercise by saying something like "I don't work out with weights, because I don't want to look like Arnold Schwarzeneger."

What you are worried about — and correct me if I'm wrong — is whether you are productive enough. You are probably asking yourself: "Am I really working hard enough and smart enough to accomplish my goals?" "Will I ever be able to experience all those wonderful things

I always wished for?" "Are there dreams I've already buried?" "Will they haunt me later on?"

Get honest with yourself.

We all tend to fool ourselves when it comes to assessing how well we use time. It's very natural to remember the "hard work" we do and forget about the little wasted things we do that eat up time.

To assess your time-management skills, do this:

- Starting today and continuing for the next three days, track your hours meticulously. Be completely honest about the time spent. Not time spent looking out the window, chatting about personal issues, or reading irrelevant materials.
- When you are done, total up your time according to whether it was spent on a routine task, an ongoing project, or planning/development. If you don't like these categories, you can group your activities as productive, wasteful, or destructive. Or, if you prefer, according to the Covey quadrant.

Then face the truth.

Do you spend at least 80% of your waking hours productively? And do you spend most of your productive time on your primary Life Goal?

Do you waste less than 10% of your time? (I am not against a little destructive activity. I encourage it. You need to do just enough to make life interesting, but no more. It's a difficult balance to achieve, but it's fun trying to get it right.)

If you are happy with what you are doing, treat yourself to a good bottle of wine or a nice massage. If you are not ... well, you know what to do.

Multitasking: One of the Most Odious Words Coined in the Last Decade

Of all the hot air that inflated the New Economy bubble (new myths about how businesses grow, what they should be about, the ergonomics of the new office, the psychology of the new employee, and how new businesses should be valued), the idea of multitasking has somehow survived the justly embarrassing fate of its imaginary siblings.

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I'm still seeing it in business magazines. And it still denotes something good. What a joke.

The idea of multitasking itself is inconsequential. It is simply a new term for an old practice: doing a number of things at the same time. I can eat food and read at the same time. Big deal.

What is pernicious about the use of the term "multitasking" is the idea behind it: that the Age of Information has fundamentally changed not only the way we process information, but also our ability to do so.

A new, young breed of worker is evolving along with the new technology. This new Super Worker can — like the computer — do many things at the same time.

The idea is absurd, but sometimes you can make a dumb idea sound smart by giving it a new name. Hence: multitasking.

Is multitasking new?

Ahh - no. Man has been multitasking since an ox-drawn cart first passed a pretty cave girl.

Is multitasking good?

Usually, no. And especially not for you.

The reason is simple. If you want to accomplish important goals, you must do important things. Important things can't be done with only one eye open. They require attention and energy. Energized attention means focus. It means doing one thing at a time.

"Multitasking" is a euphemism for being sloppy and inefficient.

Successful people — when they are most productive — focus all their energy and attention on the task at hand. They focus on the problem until they understand it. They find solutions by thinking without distractions. They set in place solutions by demanding the focused attention of others.

Think of any important task you do — anything that's on today's "to-do" list — and ask yourself honestly if you can do it well if you are half distracted by something else.

Multitasking makes you feel busy. You are in a whirlwind, scanning

your computer, glancing at memos, talking to three people at a single time. It feels powerful and impressive — but it's not. It's wasteful and foolish.

Let me put it another way: Any task you can properly accomplish while multitasking is a task you shouldn't be doing in the first place. It's too simple. It should be delegated or not done at all.

So much for multitasking.

Stop Doing Anything That's Keeping You From Focusing on the Important Tasks at Hand

I've talked about why you need to do mostly, if not only, important tasks and focus on doing them well.

I've examined the foolishness of multitasking and identified several common ways you can multitask yourself into a state of busy wastefulness.

You also need to be aware of — and get rid of — any and all activities/events that make it hard for you to focus.

If you are doing any of the following (while working), promise yourself you will stop. And then stop. Immediately.

- listening to songs with lyrics
- listening to talk radio
- watching television
- making or receiving personal phone calls
- playing video games
- surfing the net
- lusting after office mates

The Problem With TV: It's Not the Message, It's the Medium

Yes, television content has gotten much better. It's full of good stuff like PBS and the Discovery Channel — and it's sometimes better than movies. But it's not the content that's the problem; it's the watching.

(over, please)

When you make watching television a habit, you not only waste a lot of time but also train your brain to be lazy. And no one who wants to be successful at anything — from making money to curing diseases or fighting poverty — can afford a lazy brain.

I'm the world's biggest slug. Put me in front of a TV set, and I'll watch it until there's a power outage. I will not only watch it sans cease, I'll watch it all — every bleeping channel. (If television is evil, those remotes are doubly so.)

As a person whose DNA stands for "does no activity," I've had to fight hard to keep up a high level of productivity. And so I'm an unforgivable proselytizer when it comes to kicking the TV habit.

Here's what you should do: Pull the plug. If you must, rent videos of the Simpsons and Sex in the City. Watch them once a week on Friday nights. Get to bed early and stay the course.

Are You a Procrastinator?

Test yourself with this little quiz that was developed at the University of Alabama by H.E. Florey and posted at www.drarndt.com.

Choose the response that matches your behavior:

A) "It's easy for me to find reasons for not getting started on tough assignments."

4 = Strongly Agree

3 = Mildly Agree

2 = Mildly Disagree

1 = Strongly Disagree

B) "I know what I'm supposed to be doing but often start doing something else."

4 = Strongly Agree

3 = Mildly Agree

2 = Mildly Disagree

1 = Strongly Disagree

C) "I often carry books or work assignments with me but never get around to opening them."

- 4 = Strongly Agree
- 3 = Mildly Agree
- 2 = Mildly Disagree
- 1 = Strongly Disagree

D) "I like last-minute scrambling because I perform best when the pressure is on."

- 4 = Strongly Agree
- 3 = Mildly Agree
- 2 = Mildly Disagree
- 1 = Strongly Disagree

E) "If it weren't for all these interruptions, I'd get more of my top priorities accomplished."

- 4 = Strongly Agree
- 3 = Mildly Agree
- 2 = Mildly Disagree
- 1 = Strongly Disagree

F) "When faced with unpleasant decisions, I try not to answer directly."

- 4 = Strongly Agree
- 3 = Mildly Agree
- 2 = Mildly Disagree
- 1 = Strongly Disagree

G) "If you take half steps, you can often avoid or delay unpleasant actions."

- 4 = Strongly Agree
- 3 = Mildly Agree
- 2 = Mildly Disagree
- 1 = Strongly Disagree

(over, please)

H) "I would finish things, but sometimes I get too tired, nervous, or upset."

- 4 = Strongly Agree
- 3 = Mildly Agree
- 2 = Mildly Disagree
- 1 = Strongly Disagree

I) "I need to straighten my office/room/kitchen before I get started."

- 4 = Strongly Agree
- 3 = Mildly Agree
- 2 = Mildly Disagree
- 1 = Strongly Disagree

J) "Sometimes you just have to wait for inspiration before you sit down to get started."

- 4 = Strongly Agree
- 3 = Mildly Agree
- 2 = Mildly Disagree
- 1 = Strongly Disagree

Tally your scores, point for point for the number that matches your response — and then rate yourself.

Below 10: No problem.

Between 11 and 20: You are an occasional procrastinator.

Between 21 and 30: You're in trouble.

Above 30: You are probably hopeless.

So, You're a Procrastinator. What Do You Do About It?

There's nothing wrong with putting off unimportant tasks, but you will go to your grave with regrets unless you learn to take care of your important goals. The best way to prioritize your objectives and get the

important stuff done is to use my goal-setting and task-list protocol. I've tried dozens of other methods, but none beats this.

Also, you can ...

- team up with a friend or colleague to get the job done
- ask a friend or colleague to act as your boss on the project, setting deadlines and reviewing your progress
- once a week, "collect" all the undone (yet important) jobs and do them all in the morning — before you do anything else
- promise yourself a reward for completing the task

Is It Really Necessary to Be THAT Organized?

Somebody wrote me the other day asking if I "really do all the organizational stuff" that I recommend. "I don't think I'd have time for anything else," he said.

The answer is "yes." I do. And I consider doing that "organizational stuff" the most valuable part of my day.

There are countless studies showing that successful people (a) have formal objectives, (b) review those objectives regularly, and (c) plan their time accordingly. Not every successful executive I know does this. But as someone who has managed businesses both by reacting and by planning, I know the difference.

If I had to guess, I'd say I am — honestly — 50% to 100% more productive now than I ever was before. Not in terms of the actual number of things I get done, but certainly in terms of the number of important things I get done. I am now — after so many years — finally getting to some of the Important but Not Urgent objectives that I had been putting off for 20 years. And I'm doing it without neglecting any of the Urgent stuff. In fact, I'm better now at getting the Urgent stuff done before it becomes Urgent.

I owe it all to planning — to forcing myself to take the time to think and plan. To resisting the urge to jump right into the chaos that awaits me every day.

(over, please)

If you don't think and plan, you will work at a frantic pace, solving problems and initiating programs, always moving and ever stressful.

When you lead an unstructured life, you handle the stuff that comes your way, feeling like a martyr — and you always have a feeling that there is not enough time for the really important things you want to accomplish in your life. Daily emergencies take precedence. You operate in a constant state of crisis and you can — for a scarily long time — have the illusion that you are running things, when in reality what is happening is that things are running you.

Unless you make a change and spend some time every day (for every week and every month and every year) thinking and rethinking your priorities and figuring out what is worth your time and attention and what is not.

In “How to Become CEO,” Jeffrey J. Fox recommends spending an hour a day “planning, dreaming, scheming, thinking, calculating. Review your goals. Consider options. Ponder problems. Write down ideas. Mentally practice your sales call or big presentation. Figure out how to get things done.”

My success program takes less than an hour a day.

With my program, since you are working from a five-year plan, you spend (1) a full day every year planning the next 364 days, (2) about two or three hours once a month establishing monthly goals and organizing your daily follow-up files, (3) an hour each week establishing your weekly goals, and (4) no more than 15 minutes every morning organizing your day.

Yes, you can accomplish a great deal without planning — if you are ambitious, hard-working, and smart. But you'll get even more done if you spend time planning.

Give it a try. You risk only 15 minutes a day.