

FREE TO FOCUS

A TOTAL PRODUCTIVITY SYSTEM TO
ACHIEVE MORE BY DOING LESS

MICHAEL
HYATT



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Stepping into Focus

What will your life have been, in the end, but the sum total of everything you spent it focusing on?

OLIVER BURKEMAN

I think I'm having a heart attack!" Of all ways to end a relaxing dinner, this is among the worst.

I was a publishing executive in Manhattan on business. A colleague and I were finishing a delicious meal after a busy day when the chest pain began. I didn't want to concern my friend or embarrass myself, so I ignored it for a while, hoping it would pass. It didn't. I smiled and laughed but heard less and less of what my friend was saying. I was beginning to panic but tried to keep up appearances. The pain intensified. The room closed in. Finally, I just blurted it out.

My friend jumped into action. He paid our bill, hailed a cab, and rushed me to the nearest hospital. After some

preliminary tests, the doctor reported that all my vitals were fine. I wasn't having a heart attack after all. After a thorough checkup, my primary care physician didn't find any problems either. I was okay! Except I wasn't. I found myself back in the hospital two more times over the next year. Each of these events turned out exactly like the first. Doctors kept telling me my heart was good, but I knew something was wrong.

In desperation, I made an appointment with one of the top cardiologists in Nashville, where I live. He ran me through a battery of tests and called me into his office as soon as the results came in. "Michael, your heart is fine," he said. "In fact, you're in great shape. Your problem is twofold: acid reflux . . . and stress." He said a third of the people he sees for chest pains actually suffer from acid reflux, and most are neck-deep in stress. "Stress is something you need to address," he warned me. "If you don't make this a priority, you could be back in here with a real heart problem."

I was exactly like the overworked, overstressed people he told me about. Work had been insane for as long as I could remember. It never seemed to slow down. At the time I was leading a division in my company, attempting a near-impossible turnaround (more on that later). I already had more priorities than I could count. I was being pulled a hundred different directions. I was the center of every process. I got every phone call, every email, every text. I was on duty 24/7 in a nonstop whirlwind of projects, meetings, and tasks—not to mention emergencies, interruptions, and distractions. My family was weary, my energy and enthusiasm were waning, and now my health was suffering. Something had to give.

Life in the Distraction Economy

My problem back then was doing too much—mostly by myself. Later I realized focusing on *everything* means focusing on *nothing*. It's almost impossible to accomplish anything significant when you're racing through an endless litany of tasks and emergencies. And yet this is how many of us spend our days, weeks, months, years—sometimes, our entire lives.

We should know better by now. We've been doing business in the so-called Information Economy for decades. In 1969 and 1970 Johns Hopkins University and the Brookings Institution sponsored a series of conferences on the impact of information technology. One speaker, Herbert Simon, was a Carnegie Mellon professor of computer science and psychology who later won a Nobel for his work in economics. In his presentation, he warned that the growth of information could become a burden. Why? "Information consumes the attention of its recipients," he explained, and "a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention."¹

Information is no longer scarce. But attention is. In fact, in a world where information is freely available, focus becomes one of the most valuable commodities in the workplace. But for most of us, work is the hardest place to find it. The truth is we live and labor in the Distraction Economy. As journalist Oliver Burkeman says, "Your attention is being spammed all day long."² And stemming the flow of inputs and interruptions can seem impossible.

Consider email. Collectively, we send over two hundred million emails every minute.³ Professionals start the day hundreds deep with hundreds more on the way.⁴ But don't stop there. Toss in the data feeds, phone calls, texts, drop-in visits,

instant messages, nonstop meetings, and surprise problems that flood our phones, computers, tablets, and workplaces. Research shows we get interrupted or distracted every three minutes on average.⁵ “Even though digital technology has led to significant productivity increases,” says Rachel Emma Silverman of the *Wall Street Journal*, “the modern workday seems custom-built to destroy individual focus.”⁶

We’ve all experienced it. Our devices, apps, and tools make us think we’re saving time, being hyperproductive. In reality most of us just jam our day with the buzz and grind of low-value activity. We don’t invest our time in big and important projects. Instead, we’re tyrannized by tiny tasks. One pair of workplace consultants found “about half the work that people do fails to advance [their] organizations’ strategies.” In other words, half the effort and hours invested produce no positive results for the business. They call it “fake work.”⁷ We’re doing more and gaining less, which leaves us with a huge gap between what we want to achieve and what we actually accomplish.

What It Costs Us

The cost of all this misspent time and talent is staggering. Depending on the studies you consult, the total time lost per day for office workers is three hours or more—as many as six.⁸ Let’s say you work 250 days a year (365 days, less weekends and two weeks of vacation). That’s between 750 and 1,500 hours of lost time every year. The annual hit to the US economy rises as high as \$1 trillion.⁹ But that’s too abstract.

Think instead about the stalled initiatives, postponed projects, and unrealized potential—specifically, *your* stalled

initiatives, postponed projects, and unrealized potential. I've consulted with thousands of busy leaders and entrepreneurs over the years, and that's what I hear most from my clients. The dollar value on lost productivity does matter, but it's not what really hurts. It's all the dreams left unexplored, the talents left untried, the goals left unpursued.

Between the projects we want to accomplish and the deluge of other activity—some which is legitimately important and some which only masquerades as such—we're left feeling drained, disoriented, and overwhelmed. About half of us say we don't have enough time to do what we want to do, according to Gallup. For those between the ages of 35 and 54 or people with kids younger than 18, the figure is higher—more like 60 percent.¹⁰ Similarly, six in ten surveyed by the American Psychological Association in 2017 said they're stressed at work, and almost four in ten say it's not the result of one-off projects; it's constant.¹¹ There are upsides to stress, but not when we can't accomplish what matters most and the strain feels unrelenting.

It seems like the only way to absorb these costs is to let work push back our nights and invade our weekends. A study by the Center for Creative Leadership, for instance, found that professionals with smartphones—and that's pretty much all of us now—engage with their work more than seventy hours a week.¹² According to a study commissioned by the software company Adobe, US workers spend more than six hours every day checking email. To preserve time for the rest of the day's work, 80 percent check their email before going in to the office, and 30 percent do it before they even get out of bed in the morning.¹³ According to another study, this one by GFI Software, almost 40 percent of us

check email after 11:00 at night, and three quarters of us do it on the weekends.¹⁴ Anecdotally, this seems just as bad, possibly worse, with team chat apps like Slack.

It's like we're working on the wrong side of the Looking Glass. "*Here*, you see, it takes all the running *you* can do, to keep in the same place," the Red Queen tells Alice. "If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"¹⁵ To manage the pace, some people resort to amphetamines and psychedelics to give them an edge.¹⁶ Even if we grant the supposed benefits of cognitive-enhancing drugs and downplay health and social concerns, what kind of world are we creating where we have to tweak our neurochemistry to stay competitive?

This kind of running carries costs of its own. Not only does it directly contribute to the feeling of unrelenting stress, but long work hours deprive our health, relationships, and personal pursuits of the kind of time they deserve. Hustle into the evening, and your sleep suffers. Leave early for the office, and you skip your morning run. Check email at your kids' soccer game, and you miss the game-winning play. Catch up on a presentation, and you must reschedule that date with your spouse . . . again.

The costs come down to trade-offs. Every day we're constantly making value judgments, deciding what's truly worth our focus. Early in my career, I'm afraid to say, I chose busyness far too often. Now I know these trade-offs make it impossible to give my high-value tasks, health, relationships, and personal pursuits the time and attention—the focus—they deserve. And, as Oliver Burkeman asks, "What will your life have been, in the end, but the sum total of everything you spent it focusing on?"¹⁷



The pace of work in the Distraction Economy can be relentless. How often do you feel like Alice, running as fast as you can just to stay in place—and twice as fast as that to get ahead?

Counterproductive Productivity

To offset these costs, many of us turn to productivity systems. If we're falling behind like Alice, we figure, maybe we can run faster! So we Google tips and hacks. We troll Amazon and the App Store for ideas and tools to manage our time and boost our efficiency.

That's what I did. After my heart scare, I knew my pace wasn't sustainable. There had to be a better way. I studied every productivity system I could. I tried, tinkered, and tweaked all of them. Little by little it made a difference, and I began sharing my discoveries and applications. That's why I launched my blog fifteen years ago. It was a productivity laboratory for me and my readers. Even though I was then CEO of a major

publishing company, I was getting recognized as a productivity expert. Later I founded a leadership development company and now coach hundreds of clients and teach thousands more about productivity every year.

In those early days, I was looking for a way to do more—or at least the same amount a little faster—without killing myself. But I quickly found that keeping pace with the Red Queen wasn't the answer. The breakthrough came when I realized most productivity “solutions” actually make things worse. When I begin working with entrepreneurs, executives, and other leaders, they usually tell me productivity is about doing more and doing it faster. That's because our instincts about productivity come from the age of manufacturing when people performed a defined set of repeatable tasks and could improve the bottom line with marginal gains in execution. But that's not my job. It's not the job of the people I coach. And I bet it's not yours either. Today we have amazing variety in our tasks and we contribute to the bottom line with new and significant projects, not small improvements on existing processes.

And that's the root of the problem. By approaching productivity with the old mindset, we invite the burnout we're trying to avoid and fail to reach our true potential. No one can keep up with the Red Queen. And running faster doesn't help if you're pointed in the wrong direction. It's time to rethink the whole model.

A New Approach

The most productive business leaders I coach recognize productivity is not about getting more things done; it's about

getting the right things done. It's about starting each day with clarity and ending with a sense of satisfaction, accomplishment, and energy to spare. It's about achieving more by doing less, and this book shows you how.

Free to Focus is a total productivity system that follows three simple steps, composed of three actions each. I've arranged the steps to help you gain momentum as you go, so resist the temptation to jump ahead.

Step 1: Stop. I know what you're thinking: "Stop? That can't be the right word. Shouldn't the first step in a productivity system be *Go*?" No. In fact, that's where most productivity systems get it wrong. They jump right to showing you how to work better or faster, but they never stop to ask, *Why? What's the purpose of productivity?* There's a lot at stake with the answer. Unless you first know *why* you're working, you can't properly evaluate *how* you're working. That's why *Free to Focus* suggests to truly start you must stop.

For the first action, you'll *Formulate*. This will help you clarify what you want out of productivity. We'll reframe productivity so it works in the real world, instead of the wrong side of the Looking Glass. Second, you'll *Evaluate*, identifying and filtering your high-leverage activity from low-leverage busy work. You'll also discover a tool that, if used correctly, will completely revolutionize how, when, and where you spend most of your energy. Finally, you'll *Rejuvenate* by discovering how to leverage rest to boost your results.

Step 2: Cut. Once you have a clear view of where you are and what you want, it's time to move to Step 2: Cut. Here you'll discover that what you *don't* do is just as important to

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your productivity as what you do. Michelangelo didn't create *David* by adding marble. Ready to break out your chisel?

First, you'll *Eliminate*. You'll discover the two most powerful words in productivity and how to use them to banish the time bandits stealing your hours. Second, you'll *Automate*, gaining back time and attention by accomplishing low-leverage tasks in the background without much effort. Finally, you'll *Delegate*. It's a terrifying word for many, but don't worry. I'll reveal an effective method for getting work off your plate and ensuring it gets done to your standards.

Step 3: Act. Having cut out all the nonessentials, it's time for execution. In this section you'll learn how to accomplish your high-leverage tasks in less time and, more importantly, with less stress.

Your first action here is *Consolidate*, which will help you leverage three distinct categories of activity and maximize your focus. Next, you'll *Designate*. By that I mean you'll learn to stage tasks so they fit your schedule and hold back the tyranny of the urgent. Last, you'll *Activate* by eliminating interruptions and distractions and making maximal use of your unique skills and abilities.

Along the way you'll meet some of the clients I've coached who have put these lessons to work in their lives. I'll show you how to do the same thing. Each of the nine actions ends with exercises to help you put these steps into practice right away. Don't skip these activities. They're custom-built to ensure your success. Your days of getting derailed by nonstop interruptions and an out-of-control to-do list are over. Your nights of lying in bed exhausted from a busy day but unsure of what you actually accomplished are done.

It's time to hit the reset button on your life and finally put a system in place that ensures the time and energy to accomplish your most important goals, both in and out of the office.

Can you imagine it? Can you picture when you feel fully in control of where your time is going, when *you* get to decide how to spend your precious energy, and when you hit the pillow at night still energized from a productive, satisfying day? I hope you can, because that time is coming. You really can accomplish more by doing less. Take the first step and discover how.



ASSESS YOUR PRODUCTIVITY

Before we get started, I recommend you stop and complete the Free to Focus Productivity Assessment if you haven't already done so. Go to FreeToFocus.com/assessment. It's quick, easy, and essential to get a baseline of your current productivity. Don't beat yourself up if your score is low. That's why you bought this book, right? You're already aware of some problems, so there's no point trying to hide them now. And, if you score high, don't think you're ready to set this book aside just yet. No matter how well you're doing now, there is always another level of success for those dedicated to pursuing it. Get your personal productivity score at FreeToFocus.com/assessment.

STEP 1

STOP



1

Formulate

Decide What You Want

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to."

ALICE AND THE CHESHIRE CAT

Remember the scene from *I Love Lucy* where Lucy and Ethel get hired at a chocolate factory? Their job is to wrap truffles as they come down a conveyor belt. Their manager threatens to fire them if a single chocolate slips by unwrapped. The pair start out okay, but within seconds the sweets are racing by. Lucy and Ethel start shoving them in their mouths and filling their hats with the overflow. When the onslaught finally stops, their manager comes to



CBS Photo Archive/CBS/Getty Images

Where do we stuff all the extra to-dos, queries, and assignments we encounter on the job? Like Lucy and Ethel, when we successfully manage the overwhelm, our reward is often more work!

inspect their work. She can't see that Lucy and Ethel are hiding all the unwrapped candy, so it appears as if they've kept up and done a good job. Their reward? "Speed it up!" the manager shouts to the person driving the conveyor belt.

Almost everyone I know has felt like Lucy and Ethel at times, including me. Some of us feel like that most of the time. For us, it's not chocolates racing toward us. It's emails, texts, phone calls, reports, presentations, meetings, deadlines—an endless conveyor belt full of new things to do, fix, or think about. We're being as productive as we possibly can, but we can only handle so much.

So we shove the extra tasks into our nights and fill our weekends with projects we can't finish during the workweek. It all piles up on the assembly line in our minds, claiming our mental, emotional, and physical energy. That's what drives us to explore productivity tips and hacks—to find ways to shave

a few minutes off each of the million tasks demanding our attention. If we could wrap each chocolate just a split-second faster, maybe, just maybe, we'd be able to keep up. Some of us can make that approach work for us. But it's the wrong approach because it doesn't get at the underlying problem. Either we're too successful in coping with the relentless pace or we're buried by it. Either way, we never stop to ask why we're subjecting ourselves to it in the first place.

So, let's finally stop and ask. What do we want from our productivity? What's the purpose? What are the objectives? True productivity starts with being clear on what we truly want. In this chapter, I'm going to help you formulate your own vision for productivity, one that works for you instead of the manager shouting, "Faster!" This is important, because if we're honest, sometimes that manager is us. On the wrong side of the Looking Glass, sometimes we're not Alice; we're the Red Queen.

To get at the heart of the problem, we'll explore three common productivity objectives. Spoiler alert: The first two are all too common but generally ineffective. The third, however, will be a game changer for you.

Objective 1: Efficiency

Ask a random stranger about the purpose of productivity and there's a good chance you'll hear something about efficiency. This is usually based on the assumption that working faster is inherently better. This easily gets us into trouble, though, because I think people try to work faster just so they can cram even more things into their already-packed day.

Productivity as a concept emerged from the work of efficiency experts such as Frederick Winslow Taylor in the

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Applying an engineering background to factory workers, Taylor identified ways to boost efficiency—normally by reducing, even eliminating, workers’ autonomy. “The system must come first,” he said, and it would have to be “enforced” by management.¹ Taylor instructed managers to dictate workers’ methods and routines down to the tiniest details, eliminating any waste or drag. Taylorism, as his approach was known, did produce results. Factories experienced increased efficiency with workers getting more done in less time, but it came at a cost. By limiting employee discretion and freedom, Taylor effectively turned them into manufacturing robots.

Taylor died more than a hundred years ago, but we’re still trying to follow the same basic efficiency model: working a lot of hours and doing as many tasks as possible as quickly as we can. The problem is most of us aren’t factory workers; we’re knowledge workers. We’re hired more for our mental output than our physical labor. As such, we often have tremendous discretion over our time and a great deal of autonomy as we go about our daily tasks. While twentieth-century factory workers did the same set of tasks all day every day throughout the week, we are constantly surprised by new challenges, opportunities, and problems. All these things require a tremendous amount of mental energy not only to figure out solutions but sometimes just to keep up.

Taylor’s goal was to find ways to work faster. When you apply that to the knowledge economy, however, the work never seems to end. There’s always a new idea to consider or problem to solve, and when we do a good job and complete our work, we’re rewarded with—you guessed it—more work. We’re stuck in the proverbial hamster’s wheel, running

as hard and fast as we can but never making any real progress on our ever-growing list of projects and tasks. We're too afraid that if we slow down, we'll fall hopelessly behind. If we try to get off the wheel, we may never get back on, so we just keep running. Why do you think most people check their work email on their cell phones all day, all night, and all weekend—even on vacation? It's because they're terrified to let it pile up for a few hours, a day, or—heaven forbid—an entire week.

“Productivity to me looked like just getting more done,” one of my coaching clients, Matt, told me. As the founder and CEO of a multimillion-dollar heating and plumbing business, he said he was always concerned with how he could get more accomplished. “The more you get done, then the more time you have to do something else—and just always jumping on whatever comes up. So if I had more margin I could get more done, which would produce more income and more projects. It's always about more.”

We'll come back to Matt's story later. For now it's enough to say, the important question is not, *Can I do this job faster, easier, and cheaper?* It's, *Should I be doing this job at all?* Getting clear on that question is more important now than ever, as technology gives us unprecedented access to information, other people, and, of course, our work. We can now work wherever and whenever we want. Our technological marvels haven't made things better. In fact, they've made things worse. The promise of the smartphone was that it would make it easier for us to get our work done, improve efficiency, and give us more time to focus on things that matter. But has your smartphone or tablet magically given you more free time? I bet it's done just the opposite.

Theoretically, we can be more efficient than at any other time in history. As recently as fifteen years ago, most people wouldn't have been able to imagine all we can do today with the supercomputers in our pockets. We can call, email, schedule, manage tasks, videoconference, review spreadsheets, create documents, read reports, message clients, book trips, order supplies, create presentations, and do practically anything else right from our phones. We can close deals between stoplights and check invoices while waiting in line at the grocery store—and you don't even have to wait in line because you can just order those groceries from an app.

I love tech. I'm a certifiable geek! But I understand tech a lot better now than I did early on. New tech solutions may enable us to work faster, but more significantly, that efficiency brings with it the temptation and expectation to work *more*. We take all the time we save with efficiency hacks and use it to squeeze even more tasks into our days. We've figured out a way to speed up our own conveyor belts, and now we're drowning in chocolates with no place left to stuff the overflow.

Objective 2: Success

If efficiency isn't the best goal for our productivity efforts, what about increasing our success?

It seems reasonable to assume improved productivity will lead to greater success, right? Well, sort of. Pursuing the vague notion of success in and of itself can lead us into trouble. The problem is, most of us have never stopped to define what success means. It's like running a race with no finish line or leaving for a trip without knowing where we want to end up. With no clear destination, how will we ever know when we've

arrived? This is especially problematic here in America, where we too often buy into the *more* myth. We strive for more products, more deliverables, more clients, more profits. That enables us to acquire more stuff: more houses, more toys, more expensive vacations, more cars. This, in turn, can lead to even more work, more stress, and ultimately, more burnout.

Roy is another of my coaching clients. He's a national account manager for a major lumber company, and this was his struggle. "As measured in our industry, I was pretty productive, but I wasn't meeting my own goals, and I had reached a major plateau," he told me. "I was exhausted, I was worn out, I was stressed out and still not accomplishing my goals. So I tried working harder." Already clocking seventy hours a week—sometimes more—Roy thought the only thing that could deliver success was more hustle.

"I just felt like if I kept pushing through I would get to the other side, and it just wasn't true. I really thought more time and hours would help me accomplish my goals, and they just pushed me further into almost burnout." The emotional toll showed up first in his family but then extended to work itself. His ability to work well with his colleagues suffered. He admitted, "I was drained when I started the day and drained when I ended."

It's a vicious cycle, and it is taking a toll on far more of us than just Roy. According to Gallup, the average American workweek is closer to fifty hours than forty. And one in five works sixty hours or more.² You might think it's blue-collar workers who clock the longest shifts, but no. It's professionals and office workers who rack up the most hours.³ In one study of a thousand professionals, nearly all—94 percent—said they clocked fifty hours or more each week. Nearly half

that number worked more than sixty-five. Factor in long commutes, family commitments, and other demands, and even marginally overstuffed schedules cause us to steal time from the margins; the same study found professionals spend about twenty to twenty-five hours each week out of the office monitoring work on their smartphones.⁴

We are living in a period of what German philosopher Josef Pieper called “total work,” where labor drives life, not the other way around.⁵ And the results are, honestly, depressing. More than half of employees say they’re fried, 40 percent work weekends at least once a month, a quarter keep plugging away after hours, and half say they can’t even leave their desks for a break.⁶ When Kronos Incorporated and Future Workplace checked with more than six hundred human resources leaders, 95 percent said burnout is undermining their employee retention efforts. They identified low pay, long hours, and heavy workloads as the three biggest contributors.⁷ Unsurprisingly, a recent Global Benefits Attitudes Survey of workers found stressed employees have significantly higher absentee and lower productivity rates than their happier, healthier peers.⁸ Most sobering of all, researchers say workplace stress factors in at least 120,000 deaths per year in the US alone.⁹ During the 1970s in Japan the problem was so acute, they coined a word for it: *karoshi*, “death by overwork.”¹⁰

Clearly, if our goal in increasing productivity is to achieve some vague notion of “success,” we aren’t doing it right. Sick, dead, or dying doesn’t sound successful to me. We aren’t robots. We need time off, rest, time with family, leisure, play, and exercise. We need big chunks of time when we aren’t thinking about work at all, when it’s not even on our radar. Sometimes, though, the relentless pursuit of “success”

keeps us always on, always engaged, and always available. This is a recipe for failure for both you and your employer. Yes, success is a powerful motivator—but only if you understand what success truly means to you.

Objective 3: Freedom

If productivity isn't fundamentally about improving efficiency and increasing success, then what is the goal? Why should we bother? That brings us to the real objective, and *Free to Focus's* underlying foundation: *productivity should free you to pursue what's most important to you*. The goal, the true objective of productivity, should be freedom. I define freedom four ways.

1. Freedom to Focus. If you want to master your schedule, increase your efficiency and output, and create more margin in your life for the things you care about, you've got to learn how to focus. I'm talking about the ability to zero in and do the deep work that creates a significant impact, work that moves the needle in a big way. You want your work to solve actual problems in your world, to send you to bed every night knowing exactly what you accomplished and what progress you made toward your goals.

Think back over the last couple of weeks. How much of your time were you free to focus—truly concentrate—on your work? To sit down and attack one task with absolute attention: no distractions, no calls or texts or emails, nobody dropping in to say hi or to ask you a question about something that really didn't matter to you? If you're like most of us, I doubt you've had much time like that at all recently.

Productivity
should free you to
pursue what's most
important to you.



Even when we try to hide by working offsite, whether it's at home or a coffee shop, the always-on accessibility of the smartphone and computer leaves an open door to a million different distractions.

As we've already seen, the average employee faces a distraction every three minutes. Later in the book, we'll explore what impact each of those little interruptions has on our ability to focus. Here's a hint: it's not good. And if you just realized that you are almost never focused on one task for more than three minutes at a time, don't get discouraged. You're not alone. This entire system is designed to bring you the focus you've been missing. Trust me, we'll get there.

2. Freedom to Be Present. How many date nights have you spent thinking about, talking about, or worrying about work? How often do you check your work email or messages when you're out with your family or friends? The statistics we've already seen paint a pretty bleak picture of our ability to unplug from the office and focus on our relationships, health, and personal well-being. Even when we're not technically working, we still drag all our unresolved tasks around.

When we can't get free of our work obligations, we can't be fully present to our family and friends or take the necessary downtime. The *Onion* satirized the problem in a piece headlined "Man on Cusp of Having Fun Suddenly Remembers Every Single One of His Responsibilities." Attending a friend's cookout, the man was "tantalizingly close to kicking back" but then remembered "work emails that still needed to be dealt with, looming deadlines for projects . . . and phone calls that needed to be returned." After "teetering on the

brink of actually having fun,” he “was now mentally preparing for a presentation.”¹¹ We laugh because it’s true.

I’m not interested in efficiency that only gives me more time to work longer hours or success that drives me to work when I should be playing. I’m after *productivity*, not efficiency, which means ensuring significant margin that enables me to be fully present wherever I am. When I’m at work, that means I’m fully present at work. When I’m at dinner with my wife, Gail, that means I’m fully present with her. The important people in my life deserve the very best of me, and I don’t want to shortchange them just so I can spend extra time and energy worrying about work.

3. Freedom to Be Spontaneous. This may sound silly to some, but I have always prioritized the freedom to be spontaneous. So many of us have our lives meticulously planned out to the last minute, and we won’t tolerate any interruptions or deviations. That doesn’t sound like an enjoyable way to go through life. Instead, imagine being able to drop whatever you’re doing if your kids or grandkids walked in to say hello. That kind of spontaneity only happens when you create margin in your life, and that is the byproduct of real productivity. When you know you have the most important tasks covered and prevent yourself from taking on more than you can comfortably handle, you’ll discover the freedom to be spontaneous.

4. Freedom to Do Nothing. We’re always on, and we consider it a virtue. But as we’ll see, our always-on culture actually undermines our productivity. It also undermines our joy. When Gail and I visited Tuscany, we discovered *la dolce far*

niente—the sweetness of doing nothing. It's a national skill in Italy. Americans usually feel guilty doing nothing. Admittedly, I sometimes feel unproductive in the middle of non-task time. But that's the point.

Our brains aren't designed to run nonstop. When we drop things into neutral, ideas flow on their own, memories sort themselves out, and we give ourselves a chance to rest. If you think about it, most of your breakthrough ideas in your business or personal life come when you're relaxed enough to let your mind wander. Creativity depends on times of disengagement, which means doing nothing from time to time is a competitive advantage.

Getting the Right Things Done

The kind of freedom I'm talking about may sound inconceivable to you right now, but I promise, it's possible. The first action on the path to becoming free to focus is to get clear on your objective. We've already seen that the best objective should be to free yourself to focus on what matters most to you. As I've said already, productivity is not about getting *more* things done; it's about getting the right things done. That's what this book is all about—to help you achieve more by doing less.

How do we define *less*? The rest of this book will answer that question, but basically, we're talking about cutting away all the tasks that currently eat up your time that you are not passionate about, that are not important to you, and, frankly, that you're not any good at. Amazing things happen when you start focusing primarily on what you do best and eliminate or delegate the rest. You'll experience greater

motivation, better results, more margin, and genuine satisfaction in your work and your life.

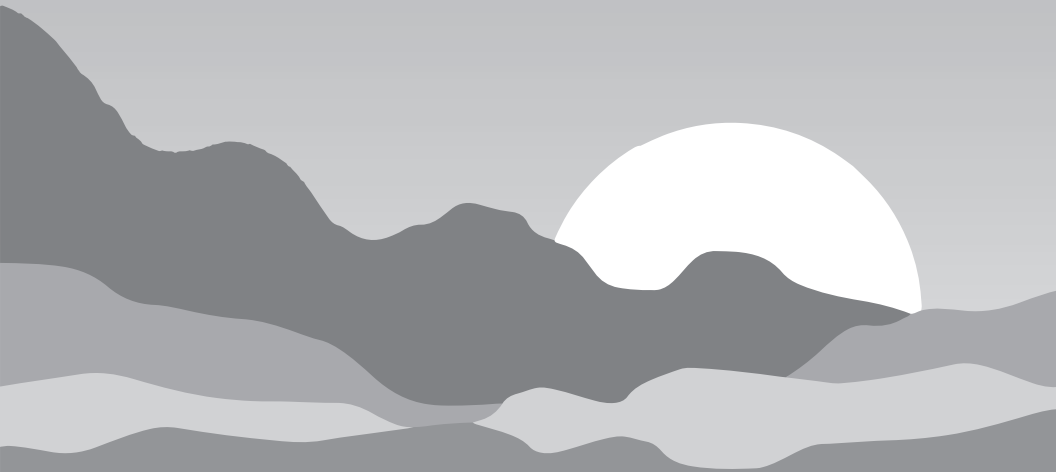
Far too often we tailor our lives to our work, meaning we allow our work to sit in the middle of our schedules like a whale in a bathtub. Then we try to squeeze everything else in our lives around it. I think we've got it backward. We should design our lives *first* and then tailor our work to meet our lifestyle objectives. It's not far-fetched. I work with hundreds of entrepreneurs and executives each year who do this and hear from thousands more moving that direction. The result is not only improved work but also greater satisfaction across the board.

For this reason companies, including major corporations, have been experimenting with cutting hours and expanding employee choice. They're seeing the payoff. One Toyota plant in Sweden cut shifts down to six hours. Not only were employees able to complete the same amount of work in six hours that previously required eight, but they were happier, turnover went down, and profits went up.¹²

We've known this for a long time. In 1926, Henry Ford made Ford Motors one of the first companies in the US to switch from a six-day workweek to the five-day, forty-hour model we're so familiar with today. At the time, it seemed crazy to business analysts, but Ford was a visionary. As his son and Ford Motors president Edsel Ford explained to the *New York Times*, "Every man needs more than one day a week for rest and recreation. . . . We believe that in order to live properly every man should have more time to spend with his family."¹³

Of course, these changes boosted Ford Motors' team morale, but many were surprised at the impact to the bottom

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line of the business. Productivity skyrocketed. The factory workers had a renewed appreciation for their company and more energy for their work. In the end, with their hours reduced to forty per week and getting entire weekends off, employees actually produced more by working less, taking Ford Motors to even greater heights.¹⁴

What's Your Vision?

Why start by stopping to discuss our productivity vision? Because jumping to tips, hacks, and apps won't address the most basic issue. The core problem is within ourselves, and it's something we've struggled with for centuries. Basil the Great, bishop of Caesarea in modern-day Turkey, addressed it in the fourth century. "I have indeed left my life in the city," he said, after moving to a monastery, "but I have not yet been able to leave myself behind." Basil compared it to a person who gets seasick on a big ship and tries to find relief by moving to a dinghy. Doesn't work. Instead, he just brings his seasickness with him. The problem, according to Basil, is this: "We carry our indwelling disorders about with us, and so are nowhere free from the same sort of disturbances."¹⁵

Most of us view shiny new productivity solutions like the seasick man climbing into the dinghy. *Relief, finally!* But they won't help. We think we can solve our problems by moving to a new app or device, but we're simply dragging our core productivity problems along with us. Doing something different, something better, requires rethinking productivity. If we're gunning for greater efficiency or success as the main goal, we'll fail. Productivity should ultimately give you back more time, not require more of you.

My most productive coaching clients pursue the third objective: freedom. What's more, they have a specific vision for what that looks like in their lives. They start with a picture of what they want their lives to look like before they try to fit their jobs into it. They know where they're headed. Importantly, they don't have any special power you don't. They've got agency, and you do too. You get to choose. So, what's it going to be? The endgame is different for everyone, but I hope you are at least starting to formulate a vision for what fewer, more productive work hours could make possible for you. What will you do with the extra time you're going to free up in your life?

Ask yourself what you want, how many hours you want to work, how many items you want on your task list, how many nights and weekends you want to work. What do you want to focus on? Maybe you want to devote more time to work that drives results. There's nothing wrong with this if that's truly what you want. Or maybe you want to devote more time to other life domains, such as spirituality, intellectual pursuits, family, friends, hobbies, community, or something else entirely. It's completely up to you; no one else can—or should—tell you what matters most to you. Once you figure it out, hold on to that *why* for dear life. It will be the star that guides your ship through this exciting voyage; without it, you'll get lost. That's what productivity gives you: the freedom to choose what you want to focus your time and energy on.

Once you complete the following Productivity Vision exercise, you'll be ready for the next chapter. There, you'll have the chance to evaluate how far you've already come toward achieving your vision and where you need to go from here.



CREATE YOUR PRODUCTIVITY VISION

Formulating a new vision for your life is going to require some serious thinking on your part. You need to be able to picture it in your head and get crystal clear on what you want your life to look like and why it matters to you. To get started, complete the Productivity Vision at [FreeToFocus.com/tools](https://www.freetofocus.com/tools). Start by defining what your productivity ideal looks like. Then break it down into a few powerful, memorable words. Finally, clarify the stakes by outlining exactly what you stand to gain if you achieve that vision and what you will lose if you don't.

Remember, this is a vision for what your life could look like. You probably don't have the resources to fully realize your vision today, but don't let that stop you from dreaming. *Free to Focus* is designed to help you start making progress toward your destination, and you'll never make any real progress if you don't know where you're going.