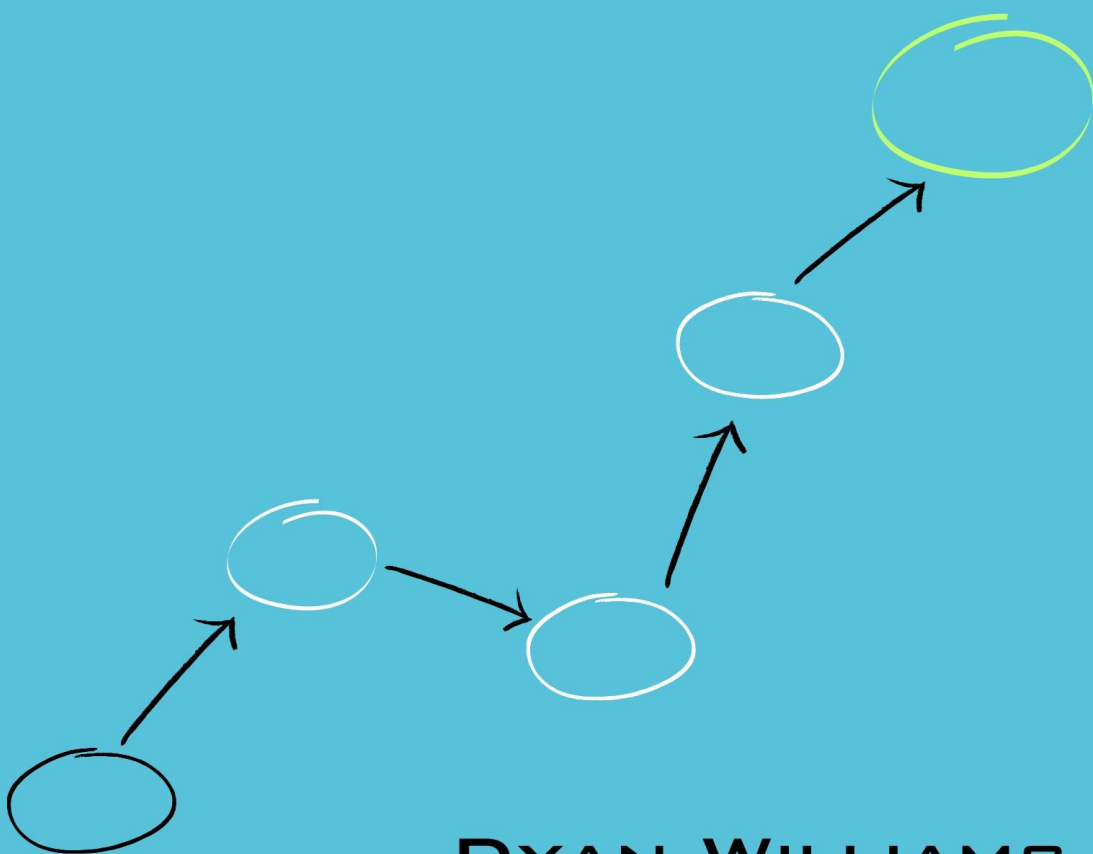


THE INCREMENTALIST

A Simple Productivity System to
Create Big Results
in Small Steps



DYAN WILLIAMS

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Big Results in Small Steps

Dyan Williams

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For E.B.

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Introduction

With multiple projects to start and goals to meet, we often default to working longer and harder at the expense of our personal health, well-being, and innermost values. Even when we do pause and slow down to get the break we need, we might hear an inner voice saying we're not doing enough or achieving enough.

Cramming more things into our day to get all the things done is a mediocre stopgap at best. Both our mind and body need to rest for us to stay in flow, do amazing work, and match our actions with our priorities. When you account for sleep, nutrition, exercise, recreation, hobbies, family, relationships and all the other areas of a well-lived life, you really have an average of up to 2 to 6 hours, each day, for cognitively demanding or creatively challenging work.

Piling on the busywork often leaves you with 1 hour or less to do the core stuff that makes a lasting and positive impact. If your work day typically stretches out for more than 8 hours, you end up with increased fatigue, dulled thinking and diminishing returns on output. When there is overload, the cost of your input outweighs the value of your output. Your time and efforts will be wasted if you do not optimize your hours and move at the right speed.

Nonetheless, there might be pressure to work 10 to 12 hours a day or 50 to 60 hours per week to meet goals, objectives and deadlines. Time-based productivity can be suitable for short-term gains and true emergencies. But it's not enough to create desired results in long-term projects that require creative thinking and focused efforts.

Besides the tendency to engage in busywork, there is also the propensity to delay action when we feel pulled in different directions. Decision-heavy days and lack of margin will drain your energy and tax your willpower to do important things.

Ill-fated attempts to do it all and have it all done - at once - result in overwork and overwhelm. You end up working frantically for long hours or barely making progress, except to respond to some emails, messages and telephone calls.

These productivity problems have little to do with lack of time. They have more to do with fixating on the wrong goals, striving for too much, failing to realistically plan your day, not knowing where to start, and putting off what's most important. External factors such as your work environment and constant interruptions, as well as your personal circumstances and season of life, also affect the pace at which you can make and manage things.

A shorter work week (like 4 days or 32 hours per week) brings its own challenges. If the work demands remain the same, you could be forced to work harder and more intensely to meet requirements in a shorter time frame. Thus, to avoid the busyness trap or to get out of the procrastination rut, you must define your real priorities, take daily action on the essentials, leverage your skills, and let go of the rest. Being able to separate what's important from what's not is the most crucial step to take, but this is hard to do when we're in reactive mode.

With the simple productivity system I refer to as Incrementalism, you figure out how to prioritize, make tasks more doable and enjoyable, maximize your time, and channel your focus on what really matters. You create a more purposeful life and turn what used to be distant goals into reality.

You also learn that making radical changes and ditching your current life altogether aren't always necessary. While bold leaps can bring exciting and massive improvement, they can also destroy stable parts of your life that you care deeply about. By making small, deliberate and ongoing adjustments, you're able to unleash the best version of yourself and create your ideal lifestyle without the side effects of too much change, too soon.

INCREMENTALISM: A SIMPLE PRODUCTIVITY SYSTEM TO DO BIG THINGS AND CREATE BIG RESULTS IN SMALL STEPS

This book will show you how to become an INCREMENTALIST to make big changes, in small steps, without relentlessly pushing yourself too far beyond your comfort zone, burning out, and feeling inadequate. You can do great work and stretch your limits, gradually and slowly.

As an Incrementalist, you get to implement your big idea or finish a big project regardless of your limited time, energy, resources, skills, motivation and, perhaps most of all, courage. The idea or project may relate to your work, your family, your relationships, a creative endeavor, or any other domain of life.

Big successes are created over time and not overnight. “Big” doesn’t mean it has to be noticeable to others, like building a million-dollar business, winning first prize in a major competition, attracting a large social media audience or becoming a best-selling author. Rather, I define “big” as something that is truly meaningful to you: it deeply aligns with your core purpose and strengths, fosters vitality and presence, adds significant value, makes your day count, and gives you more freedom to design the life you want.

Through my productivity coaching and law practice, and dealing with my own struggles and setbacks, I have found that Incrementalism fuels positive transformation through consistent, low-resistance progress.

The Incrementalist approach includes 5 core principles:

Principle 1: Define your most important projects. Too many options and indecisions keep you stuck. Decide what your highest priorities are and commit fully to them. When a task or project languishes on your to-do list for days, weeks, months or even years, you need to decide whether to drop it or get moving on it. Lack of momentum saps your energy and reduces the likelihood of moving from idea to action to done.

Principle 2: Break down your project into a step-by-step process. Make each step as detailed and easily accomplished as possible so there's no friction and doubt on what to do next. Put each actionable step on a short to-do list for the day. Gradual steps that involve small tweaks are much easier to take than giant leaps that require dramatic changes. As you build your focus muscle and your ability to follow through, you can then tackle bigger chunks at a time.

Principle 3: Make time to take the necessary action steps. Stay on track with high-priority projects by blocking time in your day to do them. Defer what does not have to be done now, delegate what is better done by someone else, and delete what does not have to be done at all. Make use of time pockets and work in short bursts if you don't have huge blocks of time to get the steps done.

Principle 4: Find your natural rhythm and work with it. Each day, you will face priorities that compete with each other. Do you reply to the email from your top client that hit your inbox last night? Do you call back the prospect inquiring on your service? Do you write the weekly article for your lead generation blog? Or do you tackle the big report that is due in a few days? When you synch with your natural rhythm, you consider the time of day and your energy level in choosing what to do and what to put off.

Principle 5: Rest and recharge. Although taking regular breaks throughout the day or taking extended breaks (such as a vacation or sabbatical) might seem to be the opposite of work, they are integral to your productivity. When you have prioritized your projects, broken them down into small steps, and blocked the optimal time to start or finish them, you will perform at a higher level. Do not fill the margins with more work or pseudo breaks like mindlessly scrolling through the Internet. Engage in offline breaks that restore your physical energy, fuel your creativity, and sharpen your mental focus.

HOW I'VE USED INCREMENTALISM TO CREATE (MY) BIG THINGS

I'm an Incrementalist by nature and by practice. I focus more on the progress and gains, and less on the goals and gaps. I cautiously take risks that change the trajectory of my life. Here are a few examples:

During my undergraduate years in college, I minored in Speech Communication because I thought I was going to work in public relations after I graduated with my bachelor's degree. The problem was I had a deep fear of public speaking.

I took an introductory course in speech communication and discovered I could develop the skills to present to and interact with an audience, even if there was underlying anxiety. By the time I was done taking more courses in the field, I had enough credits to earn the minor. I continue to apply this foundation to presentations and talks I give in my profession.

When I first learned about the profound benefits of a yoga practice, I so wanted to learn how to do a headstand. But I was terrified that I could injure my neck and spine while trying to get it right.

So, I enrolled in a beginner level ashtanga yoga class. By the third session, my teacher gave me a simple instruction and, with a very micro-adjustment, I was finally in a headstand. With daily practice, I could hold headstands for more than a minute.

I went on to complete a 230-hour yoga teacher training and certification program. Although I did not become a yoga teacher or open a yoga studio, the experience prompted my incorporation of mindfulness and breathwork into stressful situations.

Using the Incrementalist approach, I established what is now a reputable law firm (with a global reach) from my home office in October 2014. My venture into solo practice in U.S. immigration law and legal ethics took me out of my comfort zone, but not too much because I had spent 10+ years at two other firms honing my professional craft.

During my last two years as an “employed” lawyer, I negotiated flextime and worked remotely two days of the week before I became self-employed. By the time I launched my own business, I was used to staying focused and productive while working from home.

In the first week of my business, I started out with one client in my local area. I then grew my client base bit by bit, with a focus on high-demand areas where I had a deep interest and unique expertise. Within months, I started having hundreds of people – from all over the world and across the United States – reach out to me each year to help them solve their problem.

With a steady stream of ideal clients, my tiny firm permits me to do my best work, provide essential services, be financially independent, and limit my average workweek to 20 or 25 hours, depending on the season. I built a successful business without accumulating overhead expenses and stretching myself too thin.

Having my own business gives me more autonomy, which was my main driver for going solo. To run my business from home with young kids around, I learned to block time for work based on my natural rhythm and personal circumstances.

In my first four years as a solo lawyer, I juggled parenting my first child with my law firm responsibilities. She was then a toddler and next a preschooler. By the time she started kindergarten, my second child was born.

During these years, my first time block for deep work was in the early morning (5 to 7 am). I had quiet time when no one else in the home was awake. The second time block was in the afternoon when my younger kid took a nap and when my older kid was doing a solo activity or still at school. The third time block was in the evening (6 to 7 or 8 pm), after my husband got home from work.

I have since tweaked my focus blocks to match changes in life. Both my children are now old enough to give me quiet solitude (leave me alone) when I’m in deep work mode. I stopped waking up before

7 am just to get work done. I usually begin the day around 7 am and ease into it with morning rituals, like drinking tea, reading a book, or doing yoga. Then I have my first focus block. On some days, it starts with an 8 am scheduled call with a prospective client. On other days, it starts later around 10 am, usually for a research or writing project. I typically put in three hours of deep work before I take a lunch break with my kids (who are currently homeschooled) and my husband (who now works from home), post-2020. I have my second focus block in the afternoon, typically between 2 and 4 pm or 3 and 5 pm.

On average, the work shifts add up to about 5 hours per day. Depending on work demands and other responsibilities, I alternate between a 4-day/20-hour work week or a 5-day/25-hour work week. There are days when I work longer, such as when I have a due date fast approaching, I'm on a roll with a project, or I have a vacation coming up. But the maximum is 8 hours per day or 40 hours per week, and this upper limit is the exception.

I can move around my focus blocks and change my work schedule to fit my priorities, life circumstances and preferred lifestyle. What's constant is that I cap my work hours at all times. Even if you have less autonomy, flexibility, and control over your schedule, you do have some power to live and work by design, rather than by default. The 5 Incrementalist principles will help you tap into and harness it, no matter how small or hidden it might be.

I have found that I am just as productive, if not more so, than when I worked more than 8 hours per day (40+ hours per week) in my pre-parenthood days. I don't mean I always get MORE things done faster. I mean I get more of the RIGHT things done with deeper focus, more creativity and sharper precision. This true productivity leads to better results and greater satisfaction. If I gain very little and often lose a lot by working longer hours, there's no use engaging in this behavior. Plus, when my day doesn't go according to plan, Incrementalism reminds me to appreciate the small progress and apply the lessons learned.

Being an Incrementalist has given me more time to enjoy creative projects. I not only published the 1st edition of this book in April 2020, but also started a podcast in January 2021 and a YouTube channel in December 2021, called *The Incrementalist - A Productivity Show*. Through these projects, I am developing my writing, editing, speaking, project management, videography, and podcast/video production abilities. These ancillary skills add to my existing skillset, which lead to clearer focus, a calmer state, and better decision-making.

The book you are now reading culminated from a decade of my writing content for my blog and other platforms as a productivity coach and lawyer. It is far less daunting to write an article of 1,000+ words than to finish a book of 50,000+ words. Although writing a book is a creative endeavor, it is also a very solitary effort that involves hours, days, weeks, months and sometimes years of focused work.

My past micro-writing projects gave me valuable content and a solid framework to complete the 1st edition of *The Incrementalist* in about a month. I have since made updates to correct typos and grammatical errors (that were found), flesh out ideas, and reflect changes in how I apply the Incrementalist system. But the 5 core principles have remained the same.

Through small steps, I was able to finally hit the “publish” button on self-publishing services - beginning with Lean Publishing (lean-pub.com), which is perfect for in-progress books. In the writing and editing process, I often asked myself, *what’s the point?* There are so many other productivity books already out there or waiting to be released - many by big publishing houses.

Why would anyone - who is struggling to make big changes - read or buy *The Incrementalist* from a self-published author? Isn’t it enough to have books from James Clear, BJ Fogg, Michael Hyatt, Nir Eyal, Greg McKeown, Cal Newport and other authors who dominate the personal productivity, self-development space?

I am glad I overcame that psychological hurdle and emotional roadblock. It's been three years since I put out the first, imperfect edition in 2020. Over time, I have received positive feedback and sold enough copies to inform me that *The Incrementalist* is worth being in the productivity arena.

This 2023 edition is still not perfect. But it's good enough to explain the principles I use to operate a tiny but mighty law firm, complete many writing projects, host two podcasts and YouTube channels (one for productivity coaching and the other for legal issues), manage a happy home with my husband, parent two lovely children, enjoy creative hobbies, mentor and coach others, nurture relationships and friendships, and explore what makes life worthwhile.

HOW INCREMENTALISM WILL HELP YOU

There are many productivity systems from which to choose. Among the most well-known are David Allen's Getting Things Done (GTD), Ryder Carroll's Bullet Journaling (BuJo), Toyota Company's Kanban, and Brian Tracy's Eat the Frog method. There is no one right way to be productive. And what works now might not work in the future.

Even though I refer to the Incrementalist approach as a productivity system, it is more like a mindset, a philosophy, a perspective, or a way of being. No matter who you are, what you seek to accomplish, and which season of life you're in, you can use Incrementalism to create big impact in tiny steps. It is structured but flexible enough for you to adjust to your preferences, needs, and circumstances. It is a reliable and repeatable process to sustain peak performance and true productivity, which is doing the right things at the best times, even when you have multiple things calling for your attention. It does not require any special apps, digital tools, or productivity software. A simple notebook or planner with pen or pencil will do.

I've applied every single principle I outline in this book and experienced the massive difference they make. Whether you're a

lawyer, a business owner, a project manager, a working parent, or a knowledge worker who struggles with overwhelm, you will experience positive changes with the Incrementalist approach.

One of the most helpful things you can do to reach a big goal is to take small steps, build upon each one, and keep moving forward until you get to where you want to be (or until it's time to pause, quit or pivot). By using the Incrementalist approach, you make sustainable progress toward your target with simple habits that are supported by regular routines and deliberate rituals. Incrementalism is especially useful when you're cautious and risk averse or do not have limitless wealth and infinite resources to keep testing new ideas.

The term *Incrementalism* was coined by political scientist Charles E. Lindblom in the mid-1950s and was discussed in his 1959 essay titled *The Science of Muddling Through*. Lindblom outlined the benefits and methodologies for making small, incremental public policy changes, rather than huge, wholesale changes. Incrementalism has also been used to describe implementing continuous improvement in large-scale projects.

In the context of productivity, Incrementalism means taking small steps and making incremental progress – yearly, monthly, weekly and, preferably, daily – to create life-enhancing transformation and results. Through a series of tiny ordinary successes rather than by a single ambitious effort, you reduce backlog, gain traction, and maintain focus on important work and transformative goals.

Being an Incrementalist does not mean you keep your goals small or you don't dream big. Rather, you implement revolutionary ideas and chart your own course by breaking down overwhelming projects into achievable parts that move you closer to your desired destination. Your present self develops a closer relationship with your future self.

Through intentional choices instead of huge leaps, you avoid diluting your attention, draining your energy, and wasting precious

time. You also appreciate, learn from and savor the journey a whole lot more. You stay curious throughout the process, rather than attach too tightly to the big goal or desired outcome. You accomplish more, with greater ease and comfort, in incremental steps.

By applying the 5 Incrementalist principles I describe in this book, you will move forward on the things that really matter, at a healthier pace and at the ideal speed. You will have a flexible productivity system that guarantees purposeful action, synchs with your natural rhythm, builds in deliberate breaks, and reduces resistance to change.

Whether you seek to pursue a cherished hobby, nurture fulfilling friendships, create a happier home, make high-quality deliverables, launch a product, or establish a new business, this book is for you. You can take incremental steps to make big changes and do big things – all without losing steam, exhausting yourself, and completely ditching the comfort zone that is there for good reason.

Habits, Routines, Rituals

How do you take committed action to create what you really want?
How do you distinguish real productivity from plain busyness?
How do you stay focused on a high-value task instead of divert your attention to many low-value to-dos?

It starts with making deliberate choices. With consistent routines and intentional rituals, these choices become habits when we keep doing them often and, ideally, every day. Keystone habits create ripple effects that change every area of your life. With small, consistent action, you can create desired results in any domain.

If you want to finish an innovative project, make time for daily exercise, or develop an essential skill, you will benefit from building habits that trigger positive change and continuous progress. When incorporated into a productivity system, habits help you accomplish your highest priorities with intense focus and unwavering effort.

INCREMENTALISM BEGINS WITH PRODUCTIVE HABITS

While self-discipline, willpower and a growth mindset all play a role in making your dreams and wishes come true, it's habit formation that makes the process easier.

A habit is an automatic behavior or practice that is hard to give up. It is an ingrained tendency or urge to do something, often triggered by a specific cue or anchor moment. It is formed through regular repetition and is a natural consequence of how the human brain works. A stronger connection with the trigger makes the habit more ingrained.

Productive habits keep you on the path of worthwhile pursuits, regardless of obstacles and setbacks. A habit usually manifests itself as an automatic urge to do something, often triggered by a

particular cue. You can begin to gain traction and move in the right direction by developing good, healthy habits. About 40% to 45% of what we do each day are habits, not real decisions.

The Habit Loop

Every habit starts with a neurological loop of three parts: First, there's the **cue or trigger** that leads to an automatic response. This includes the time of day, your emotional state, your location or environment, the people around you, and the immediately preceding action.

Next is the **routine or the behavior itself** (such as making your bed after you wake up, or going for a walk during your lunch break).

Third is the **reward** that satisfies a particular craving. The reward is the intrinsic feeling and external treat you get from the behavior, which your brain remembers and likes. You repeat the behavior because you want to receive the reward again.

Between the cue and the response behavior is the **craving**. Cravings are part of the habit loop because they are motivational forces behind every habit. There is no reason to act if there is no craving for the feeling or sensation (e.g., excitement, calm, joy) you get from the change.

Cravings trigger addictive behaviors or impulsive actions like checking emails, surfing the Internet and scrolling social media, whenever we get bored or stuck. If you get positive feedback from a client or stumble on exciting news, your brain releases dopamine – a hormone that makes you feel good. Craving this reward makes it harder to direct laser focus on a tedious task or difficult project.

With this loop in mind, you can begin to break bad habits and form good ones by using the following steps:

Observe Your Current Habits

Although your behavior might have started out as a deliberate choice, it gets easier to activate or overlook once it becomes routine.

If you want to drop a habit to replace it with a new one, the first step is to notice your routine and the cue that triggers it.

One habit I have is sitting for excessively long stretches of time to do focused work. When it's quiet and I'm in the zone, I tend to stay with the task. By the time I peel my eyes away from the computer screen, more than three hours have gone by and I have not taken a single break.

The trigger is moving to my desk in my office when there is bliss of silence and no one around to interrupt me. The reward I get is feeling a sense of satisfaction from completing a tough task. At first, my delaying breaks between work sessions was a conscious choice. But after I identified it as a bad habit that reduced my mental clarity, caused eyestrain and increased fatigue, I took steps to replace it with a new routine.

To work in shorter intervals on cognitively demanding tasks, I set a timer to go off every 60, 90 or 120 minutes, which reminds me to take a 5 to 15-minute break before I continue the focus block. By tweaking my routine, I created a new habit that helps me do better work with more energy and a clearer mind. I lapse into the old habit of working for too-long stretches of time when I do not set a timer and there is no one around to interrupt me.

Have an action plan that outlines the specific steps you will take to reshape your bad habits. Replace them with new habits that provide similar rewards and satisfy old cravings.

Begin with a Tiny Behavior

If you have a big goal you want to reach or big change you want to make, break it down into manageable steps that you can easily choose to do until they become part of your new routine. For example, if you want to take a morning walk every day, examine what cues will prompt the action. Set out your clothes and walking shoes the night before so you can get dressed and head out right after you wake up. By taking small steps, you build momentum

that results in long-term rewards like being healthier and more productive.

Professor BJ Fogg, founder and director of Stanford University's Behavior Design Lab, recommends we make the behavior radically tiny so it's easier to form a new habit even when motivation is low and the behavior is hard to do. If you want to create a habit out of walking three miles every day, you start with putting on your walking shoes. This is the Tiny Behavior you need to do at the start of your new habit. By keeping the bar low and not raising it prematurely, you're more likely to sustain the habit.

Stack Your Habits

Instead of trying to make massive changes all at once, you focus on creating a single, 15 to 30-minute routine that involves multiple, small changes or habits that you repeat daily. You experience the powerful, compounding effect of small actions when you engage in habits that further your important goals, says S.J. Scott, author of *Habit Stacking*.

Professor Fogg explains that Habit Stacking is when you use an existing routine (anchor) to create a new habit (tiny behavior). Behaviors happen in sequence, one leading to another. You're creating a chain of habits to make the change effortless.

The Habit Stacking formula is: After (CURRENT HABIT), I will (NEW HABIT).

- After I brush my teeth, I will read 5 pages from a new book.
- After I load the dishwasher, I will practice playing a song on the piano for 10 minutes.
- After I shut down my computer, I will review my day.

You identify an existing habit and pair it with a new habit. Habit Stacking fits with Professor Fogg's ABC method for designing behavior and building habits. ABC stands for Anchor, Behavior, Celebration:

1. The Anchor Moment is to pick an existing routine or event to do the new tiny behavior and to remind you of it.
2. The New Tiny Behavior is to start out with an easy version of the new habit you want to create and practice it to get to the next level.
3. Instant Celebration is to celebrate the moment you remember to do the new habit, while you're doing the new habit, and immediately after you do the new habit.

Habit Stacking provides the following advantages, which prompt consistent action and reduce resistance to good habit formation:

1. *The cue is more obvious.* You allow the reward of the existing habit to become the new cue for the new behavior. Rather than pair your new habit with a particular time and location, you pair it with a current habit.
2. *The craving is more attractive.* You pair an action you need to do with an action you want to do. You prompt yourself to do the hard task by linking it with the easy, fun task.
3. *The behavior is easier to do.* You layer a new habit on top of a fully formed habit, which creates a chain of habits that together make a routine. Because the current habit fuels the desired habit, there's less friction to do the action steps.
4. *The reward is more satisfying.* You stack on a fun new habit to a challenging habit, which provides immediate reinforcement and immediate rewards. After you spend two hours on focused work, you could do a happy dance, take a walk around the block, do a set of jumping jacks, or listen to your favorite album. The easy, immediately satisfying habit is the instant reward for doing the hard habit that has delayed rewards.

Move Through the Three Layers of Behavior Change

Your current identity shapes your current habits, says James Clear, author of *Atomic Habits*. He points out there are three layers of behavior change. The first is changing your outcomes (i.e.,

changing your results, such as winning a race, getting fit, and publishing a research paper). The second is changing your process (i.e., changing your actions and behaviors, such as training to do 50 pushups in a row, developing a daily yoga practice, tidying up your office at the end of the work day.) The third is changing your identity (i.e., changing your beliefs about who you are, such as I am not a smoker, I exercise every day, or I write 1,000 words each morning.)

By focusing on who you want to be, you can then set the outcomes and design the process to steer you toward creating identity-based habits that stick. With small wins and incremental progress, you prove to yourself that you are the type of person you want to be.

PRODUCTIVE HABITS START WITH ROUTINES AND RITUALS

Creating good habits or breaking bad habits comes down to your routines and rituals. Even though routines involve regular and repeated behavior like habits, they require deliberate effort on your part. A routine is a sequence of behaviors you consistently do in the same sequence or at the same time.

A routine may include fixed tasks or variable tasks. A fixed task is what you do every morning, such as drinking water or tea, or taking a walk. A variable task is what you can move or drop depending on the situation, like eating breakfast or going to the gym. You decide what's negotiable and what's not.

Instead of waiting for inspiration to get things done, you reserve time and space to do what you most want to get done. With enough regularity and repetition, routines can eventually become habits.

Work with an Existing Routine Until it Stops Working

It's also easier to create new behaviors and sustain them for the long term when you work with an existing routine. I used to struggle with making time to play piano or practice a new piece. When my older child was a toddler, I noticed I had an ideal time slot after

dinner, on the evenings when it was my husband's turn to get her ready for bedtime. As soon as our family dinner ended and I had some alone time, I sat down at my piano and played for about 30 minutes. This became a part of my normal routine, with the new habit or new behavior (playing piano) following the anchor moment or existing routine (finishing dinner).

Sometimes, though, you need to change your routine due to changed circumstances. After my second child was born, I no longer had the luxury of playing piano in the evenings. But I continued to have my weekly piano lessons, which is not only an ongoing routine, but a cherished ritual. Now that my second child has completed the toddler years, I have returned to playing piano after dinner.

Make Your Routine into Rituals

Unlike routines, rituals are done with more intention and concentration. They are enjoyable and meaningful activities that you do deliberately, instead of automatically. With rituals, you are completely immersed in the process and look forward to the experience itself.

A ritual requires focus and attention to the present moment. Even mundane routines can be turned into joyful and purposeful rituals. A short walk around the block can be a walking meditation. Drinking tea can be a tea ritual, from the moment you start brewing the tea leaves, to the moment you pour the tea into a cup, to the moment you take the first sip and savor it slowly in the quiet morning hours. Rituals can include multiple habits that make up a routine, such as drinking water, stretching, walking around the block, and reviewing your goals before the day begins. The key difference is that rituals involve mindful efforts and conscious thought, while routines do not.

KEY TAKEAWAY: CHANGING A HABIT INVOLVES INCREMENTAL PROGRESS

Celebrate the small gains to keep your momentum going. Intentionally practice your new behavior, preferably at set times, to allow it to become automatic as fast as possible. The more quickly a new behavior turns into a routine, the less you have to rely on self-control and willpower to drop the old habit and make a new one. And if the routine involves rituals that you look forward to experiencing, the habit is more likely to stick.

Develop and follow a plan to make your high-priority project and creative endeavor into a habit. That way, you won't have to decide to do it. You'll just do it as if it were second nature or part of your regular routine (like brushing your teeth, taking a shower, or checking your email).

Willpower, self-discipline and motivation are important, but unreliable. They come and go. It's more effective to develop habits to propel you forward and give you a greater sense of control. Yes, you can lose a habit if you don't practice it, but you can always use the cue-behavior-reward system to get back on track. You may also redesign the routine and create new habits as your needs, desires and priorities change.

Principle 1: Prioritize Your Most Important Projects

Do you get distracted and overwhelmed with busywork even when your heart, soul and mind are calling you to do another thing that is more meaningful?

Do you keep adding items on your daily to-do list such that by the time your day is done, you've only accomplished a few minor things, but left the important project untouched?

Time management alone does not get to the root of the busyness problem. The key question is whether the demands, commitments, responsibilities, and requests are reasonable to begin with. When being busy or having many responsibilities is a measure of success, it's hard to make the necessary trade-offs. But if you want to make room for great work, you will have to drop the low-value stuff you're doing. There is no point waiting for the perfect time when all decks are cleared and motivation is at its peak.

You'll probably never have the perfect conditions to implement a big idea or finish a big project. You need to rise above suboptimal conditions by subtracting things from your task list and making the best use of your peak hours. You might even need to drop the good to make space for greatness.

Finding the right productivity apps and tools is not the real solution. It's more about directing your time, energy and attention on the vital few things that make the most difference.

When the word "priority" was introduced in the English language in the 1400s, it was singular. It referred to the very first thing. It

stayed singular for the next five hundred years. Nowadays, we have several priorities.

Failure to define your priorities sets you up for the busyness trap. This is when you take action on many things, without first making conscious choices about where to focus. When you're busy, you can feel productive in the moment. Then upon reflection, you realize you put most of your efforts into trivial tasks. You're always on – working long hours and constantly bouncing from one task to the next – but still do not have a sense of real accomplishment or deep connection with your activities.

Chronic busyness contributes to poor decision making, lower-quality work, feelings of overwhelm, high stress, lack of purpose, and sometimes burnout. The busyness (or efficiency) trap makes you less productive. Giving yourself too many options forces you to compromise instead of commit to the essentials.

True productivity is doing the things that matter. It means aligning your daily, weekly and monthly actions with your values, priorities and desired outcomes. Prioritizing your projects allows you to accomplish the most significant things, weed out the small stuff, and integrate your top areas of focus, such as work, family, relationships, health, and personal development.

Busyness or Productive Procrastination is NOT True Productivity

Busy people or productive procrastinators:

1. Get many things done, but often neglect the most important thing(s)
2. Say yes habitually and quickly
3. Are unclear about what's most important and rarely think about how to automate, delegate, defer or drop minor tasks
4. Generally feel overwhelmed, stressed out, and constantly busy

5. Have scattered attention on a wide variety of tasks and responsibilities, especially low-value projects that have limited long-term benefit

Productive people:

1. Get the most important things done
2. Say yes deliberately and slowly
3. Are clear about what's most important and regularly think about how to automate, delegate, defer or drop minor tasks
4. Generally feel accomplished, have optimal stress levels, and are routinely effective
5. Maintain focus on carefully selected high-value projects that significantly move the needle in their business, profession and life

What Drives Busywork?

Being busy is often associated with ambition, drive, strong work ethic and achievement. The pressure to keep up with peers or to meet others' expectations contributes to overwork and overwhelm. Truly productive people might even pretend to be "busy" so they can catch a break after diligently completing important tasks and major projects.

There is a pervasive "what's next?" mindset that keeps us thinking about the next thing even when we have finally achieved the main thing we planned to do. We might appreciate the congrats, the award and the celebratory event, but make no time to reflect on the experience, the efforts made, and the lessons learned. There is a high expectation to keep doing more, more, more.

Internal Self-Imposed Factors

When you're new to your role or you're in the exploration stage, it's important to say yes to opportunities and assignments. But as you do great work and gain recognition in your field, the demand for

your skills and expertise will rise. Then it gets harder to maintain the pace and meet all the demands on your time, energy and attention.

When you say yes to every new project, accept every opportunity, and keep a growing to-do list, you end up feeling overwhelmed and overcommitted. Overload steers you away from intended outcomes and your highest priorities. If everything seems to be a priority, you can be left stuck and undecided about what to do first. Instead of being on the top of the most important task, you're buried under the weight of many tasks.

External Organizational Factors

Organizational factors in workplace cultures also contribute to long work hours that squelch great work. They include emphasis on face-time, open door policies, back-to-back meetings, demands for immediate responses, and hyperconnectivity that come with few policies to prevent constant distractions and unnecessary interruptions.

There can be too much emphasis on collaboration and communication, at the expense of solo deep work. Collaboration overload – which involves attending meetings, taking telephone calls, and responding to emails – is a major time suck that takes up about 80% of the average employee's time in a given day. When you're too busy to complete your work during normal hours, you blame it on lack of time. Then the work bleeds into evenings and weekends and takes time away from other important areas of life, such as family, relationships, hobbies and recreation.

HOW TO PRIORITIZE YOUR MOST IMPORTANT PROJECTS

Becoming truly productive requires you to get clear on what is really important and invest your time, energy and attention accordingly.

1. DETERMINE WHAT'S REALLY IMPORTANT TO YOU

Knowing your areas of focus and where your daily activities fit in will help you prioritize, reduce busywork, and take action on your most important tasks. Areas of focus include work/career/business; home and family life; physical wellbeing and mental wellness; financial health; creative pursuits; personal development; spirituality and spiritual growth; relationships and community; and miscellaneous activities that require attention (e.g., emails, telephone calls, errands, chores).

Go with thick desires

To choose your priorities, you must know what you really want. Your true desires are based on your core values, beliefs, and intentions. They are inner directed. But as the French philosopher René Girard noted, our desires are mostly *mimetic*; that is, shaped by what others want or what we think others want. We choose objects due to the influence of a third party, a model or a mediator of desire, or what someone else has already desired or is perceived to desire.

Author Luke Burgis builds on Girard's Mimetic Theory of Desire in his book, *Wanting: The Power of Mimetic Desire in Everyday Life*. He recommends the anti-mimetic path to evaluate options and make independent decisions. He writes:

“Thick desires are less mimetic than thin desires. They have had time to form and solidify over many years or during a formative experience that is at the core of a person's life. Thick desires have meaning. They are enduring.”

Meanwhile, “Thin desires are rooted in ephemeral, superficial things. They're fleeting, mimetic desires that dominate most of

life when it is lived unintentionally and easily infected by mimetic phenomena.”

Although there are happy loners and people who enjoy being alone, we are social beings on a fundamental level. Our decisions are not based purely on logic and intrinsic value. We consider the wisdom of crowds, experts, role models, friends, family members, and all. Social utility - value based on what others like and have chosen - affects our decisions. The increasing homogenization of social media, proliferation of echo chambers and filter bubbles, and society’s polarization make it harder to know your real desires.

When defining your priorities, you need to examine whether they are based on thin, mimetic desires, which are temporary and less fulfilling. Focus on thick desires: your core motivational drives, patterns and themes that are meaningful and enduring to you. Make intentional choices about the information you consume, practice grounding rituals, engage in solitary activities, and pursue interests that bring you a deep sense of purpose and satisfaction, which make you impervious to fads and trends.

Distinguish between priorities and goals

While priorities are commonly linked to goals, they are not the same. Goals are objectives to be attained in the future and are usually time-bound and measurable. On the other hand, a priority is the one thing you need to focus on in the present. It is tied to core values that are more timeless and less easily defined.

When you design your life around your priorities, you get to attend daily or regularly to what is most important to you. This reduces your need to set and meet goals that can give you direction, but do not fix internal, existential problems.

Goals sometimes encourage a limiting either-or mindset, where you think and feel that you must achieve a certain milestone within a certain timeframe to have a satisfying life. Goals are your specific objectives and desired destination for the month, quarter, year, or 5 to 10 years into the future, which are always subject to

change. Although goal achievement builds confidence and creates opportunities, it doesn't lead to long-term fulfillment.

Hedonic Adaptation is a neurological process that makes humans less sensitive to new stimuli and their new reality. Reaching the important goal or getting the desired outcome initially makes us happier. But we soon get used to it and start to see it as part of our routine, daily life. Once we become desensitized to the change and return to our baseline or set point of happiness, we quickly move on to the next big thing and frequently get stuck on the hedonic treadmill.

Happiness is naturally transient because your internal wishes are constantly changing and are bound to be out of alignment with external reality. We can get so caught up in feeling good and reaching external achievements that we forget our real purpose or what is already great in our lives. With the Incrementalist approach, you focus on priorities, rather than goals, which makes you more equipped to sustain a life of deep meaning in the present.

It helps to understand the *why* behind the thing you want. The thing itself is usually less important than the feeling or experience you expect to get from it. If your goal is to launch the side business and get your first client, imagine how you would feel if you did. Would you feel excited, blissful and aligned? Focus on areas in your present life where you already experience excitement, bliss and alignment. When you come from a place of abundance and wholeness, instead of scarcity and inadequacy, you're more likely to create what you truly want, which might be different from what you think you want.

Forget about perfect balance

Consider the Pareto Principle, which is called the 80/20 Rule in the productivity arena. It states that 20% of your inputs and activities account for 80% of your outcomes and results. The 80/20 ratio simplifies the concept because in some cases it can really be 99/1, 95/5, 90/10 etc. The point is to prioritize the few, vital tasks that

lead to the most significant benefits. The 80/20 rule reminds you to avoid or minimize busywork that adds limited value.

You don't have to strive for a perfectly balanced life. It's okay for things to get out of whack when you have deadlines, demands and desires pulling you in a certain direction. It's more crucial to align your actions with your priorities and keep counterbalancing instead of spinning your wheels.

Intentional imbalance is necessary to gain traction, move forward and excel in a specific domain. To prevent any one priority from dominating your life, however, you must identify other important areas and pay attention to them as well. This doesn't mean you spend equal time and effort in each domain or maintain a perfect state of equilibrium. Rather, you choose a healthy combination of key interests that sets reasonable constraints and provides unique opportunities to sustain a rich, multidimensional life.

Until you choose where you really want to end up, you're bound to wind up someplace else by default. Get clear on what you really want so you can commit to it and get real results. Dig deep and tap into your mind, body, gut and soul when making choices about what you will plant, grow and weed out.

Stay in or stay close to your zone of genius

Dr. Gay Hendricks, a leader in the fields of relationship transformation and bodymind therapies, says we operate in four zones:

- In the zone of incompetence, you're addressing things you don't do well and should drop or delegate.
- In the zone of competence, you're attending to things you do well, but you're not especially good at and don't really enjoy.
- In the zone of excellence, you're working on things you're great at and are in high demand, but don't bring you great satisfaction or joy.

- In the zone of genius, you're doing what you love the most and using your unique skills, knowledge and experience to contribute the highest value to the world.

Dr. Hendricks describes the Genius Zone as a spiraling path that has no boundaries. It allows you to reach your full creative potential, minimize negative thinking and make the most contribution with a competitive advantage. When choosing your important projects and setting goals, you should make sure at least one of them is within your Genius Zone. Commit to spending at least an hour a day on your genius, where you can tap into your highest level of creativity and perform and feel your best.

Separate commitments from experiments

If you keep putting off a task, ask yourself what's stopping you and whether you really need to finish it. Does it make use of your strengths? Is it consistent with your values? Will it move you toward your big goals? Will it add real value or is it just unnecessary work?

Some things aren't right for you and won't ever work out, no matter how much effort you put into it. These include jobs, business ventures, and relationships. In such cases, it's healthy to quit and move on.

Some things are experimental and okay to drop even before you really get into it. You might have started it to gain a different experience, explore new opportunities, satisfy your curiosity, or shake up your routine. Start new things for the sake of being creative, even if you will never finish them. Once the purpose is served, you can shift to other stuff despite not being quite done.

Some things you finish just because there's little left to be done. Although a project might lose its value over time, it might be worth it to push through to the end if 80 to 99% of the work is done.

Some things are true commitments. This is when exercising self-discipline and habitually finishing what you start are necessary.

Years ago, when I began taking piano lessons, I had no specific plans or clear goals. I just wanted to have fun and learn something new. I didn't know if I'd play piano beyond a few weeks or months. But once my new hobby turned into a real commitment, I bought a piano and got sheet music for songs I wanted to learn.

Although playing the piano is purely an avocation, I'm dedicated to it. I follow through and finish playing a piece even when I get bored or frustrated with it. I show up for my weekly lessons. My focus and energy levels rise whenever I play music for at least 10 minutes daily. This will never be in my zone of excellence or zone of genius because I do not have the natural talent, innate skills, necessary time, and interest level to become great at it or to make music that adds beauty to the world. But as a creative hobby, it's a high priority I expect to indulge in for the rest of my life, so long as I have the physical capacity and mental acuity to do so.

2. LIMIT YOUR FOCUS ON YOUR HIGHEST PRIORITIES

Where you direct your focus affects your ability to think creatively, make steady progress and produce high-quality work. Doing the right things spares you from wasting time on work that doesn't really matter or doesn't produce long-term gains. Pick your three most important tasks or projects, your one thing, or your highlight of the day.

Review your goals, appointments and deadlines for the week, before it begins. Choose your "Weekly Big 3" – the three most important projects that you must work on or outcomes you want to accomplish in the coming week to make progress toward your goals. They can be deadline-driven projects or significant efforts that will make a massive difference in the long run. Then have your three most important tasks (daily big 3) for each day that support your weekly goals.

Your one thing is what you can do such that by doing it everything else will be easier or unnecessary, says real estate entrepreneurs and best-selling authors, Gary Keller and Jay Papasan. I write articles

on frequently asked questions I get as a lawyer so that when I get an inquiry, I can easily direct the person to more information on my website. This is one of the main ways I get new clients.

To make real progress on the first edition of this book, I needed to wake up early before my kids. This was my main way to get at least an hour of quiet time to write. On the few days when they woke up before I did, my writing project usually had to wait until the afternoon when I had quiet time again, but my energy level was down.

Your highlight is a focal point for the day. At the end of the day, what activity, task or experience will you look back on as the thing that mattered most to you? Write it down and focus your actions on it. Commit to one specific thing that will drive your most important project forward or give you a deep sense of accomplishment.

By having just three big tasks or one meaningful activity for the week or day, you can direct your attention on a major project that ties in with your long-term objectives. On the other hand, having a long list of priorities requires you to make too many decisions, which uses up limited resources, like time, energy and willpower. Roy F. Baumeister, research psychologist and an expert on willpower, says minimizing the number of decisions and focusing on goals, sequentially, instead of all at once, help you build your willpower instead of deplete it.

Keep a short and sweet to-do list, not an aspirational and long one. With a realistic plan, you are less likely to get overwhelmed and exhausted or feel miserable about not checking things off. Limit your daily priorities to the most important action items that you can really get done in a day. If you finish early and you have time and energy to do more, you can get an early start on tomorrow's list. But always make space for sufficient sleep, regular breaks, physical movement and healthy eating. Reflecting and refueling are just as critical as taking action and moving forward.

The most effective daily to-do lists support your greatest ambition,

inner purpose and heartfelt desires. They further the completion of your top projects for the quarter (3-month or 90-day period). They differentiate between essentials and non-essentials. They don't revolve around easy tasks that mainly serve to keep you busy or create an illusion of progress. The best to-do lists include specific action steps for moving toward challenging and internally rewarding goals.

3. APPLY THE URGENT-IMPORTANT PRINCIPLE

All things seem urgent and important when you fail to prioritize. External busyness involves having too much on your agenda. Internal busyness comes from worry and anxiety over unfinished tasks. At the end of the day, you will never get it all done, so just focus on getting the right things done.

Some tasks are emergencies that need to be dealt with right away. But in the grand scheme of things, they are sometimes not all that important and have very little long-term impact. The Priority Matrix is a useful starting point to make these distinctions.

PRIORITY MATRIX

Also known as Eisenhower's Urgent-Important Principle, the Priority Matrix is a popular tool for prioritizing significant, time-sensitive projects, building necessary knowledge and skills, and letting go of the distractions.

With the Priority Matrix, you put your tasks in one of four quadrants, based on their importance and urgency:

QUADRANT 1: IMPORTANT + URGENT

Attending to significant projects, time-sensitive or deadline-driven projects, and real emergencies

Examples: managing a crisis; preparing and filing a legal brief in support of an appeal; submitting a manuscript to the publisher on time

QUADRANT 2: IMPORTANT, BUT NOT URGENT

Acquiring knowledge; developing skills; planning and strategizing; reflecting and reviewing

Examples: completing a course or workshop; preparing for a presentation; writing articles for your target audience; designing a marketing strategy

QUADRANT 3: (FEELS) URGENT, BUT NOT (ALWAYS) IMPORTANT

Addressing other people's priorities and time-pressured distractions and interruptions

Examples: dealing with your boss' last-minute request; attending an impromptu meeting; providing status updates; responding to inquiries

QUADRANT 4: NOT URGENT + NOT IMPORTANT

Engaging in mindless activities, time wasters and digital distractions that do not energize you, but suck up your resources

Examples: constantly checking social media; surfing the Internet for an unlimited time; binge-watching online videos; complaining and gossiping

The Priority Matrix distinguishes between importance and urgency. Important tasks contribute to long-term accomplishment. Urgent tasks require immediate attention. Important and urgent tasks usually carry an immediate deadline or serious consequence if you fail to do them. But the important tasks are where you build leverage to avoid getting stuck constantly with the urgent. They may include learning vital skills, leveraging the skills of others, or designing systems, procedures and processes to be more efficient

and productive. If you deal with the important tasks now, they won't become urgent later.

Incrementalists plan ahead for important + urgent tasks or important tasks, which need to be completed today, or in a week, a month or a few months. Working incrementally on big, time-sensitive projects allows you to do bit by bit each day or each week to move toward completion. And you are much calmer and less stressed when the deadline arrives.

THE 5 DS OF DEFINING, LIMITING AND MANAGING PRIORITIES

The Priority Matrix reminds you that not every task is created equal: you may tackle it now, minimize it, assign it to someone else, put it off to a later date, or drop it altogether.

Use the 5 Ds of productivity to balance multiple priorities and reduce overwhelm. They are: Do, Diminish, Delegate, Defer, and Delete. You also need to watch out for the psychological barriers and self-sabotaging behaviors that can stop you from using the 5 Ds effectively.

1. Do

Do your urgent and important tasks now. Putting things off can create more overwhelm, reduce the quality of your work, cause you to miss deadlines, and damage your reputation. Procrastination often leads to long to-do lists without the necessary follow through.

In certain situations, delaying action is appropriate. Sometimes you do need to reflect on things, clarify your intentions, and determine your ultimate goal before you get moving. Some problems take care of themselves if you stay out of them. Some circumstances improve over time and with little or no effort on your part.

Choose the right things to do. Doing the wrong things might offer temporary relief, but no long-term value. If a colleague fires off an angry email to you, the temptation might be to craft and send an immediate, defensive response. It's best to wait until you're in

a calmer state of mind and address it on your own terms. Or you could just ignore it.

2. Diminish

Diminish what feels urgent, but is not really important. Being a perfectionist can cause you put in too much effort, energy and time into minor things that have minimal value. Perfectionists tend to be perpetually anxious, generally dissatisfied, and overly goal-oriented.

When a task or project must be done by you personally, focus on the most critical aspects rather than the trivial pieces. Perhaps a timely first draft is more important than a flawless but delayed final version. Strive to deliver a good, workable product instead of perfecting the parts that don't matter. If the client wants a simple solution that takes care of the basics, there's no need to deliver a complicated one loaded with bells and whistles. It's productive to meet expectations, instead of exceed them constantly.

Pinpoint what you can't control — such as how critics feel about you — and let it go. Focus on what you can do to influence the situation, improve your circumstances, and increase the likelihood of a positive outcome.

At times, being a perfectionist can present advantages. Maintaining impeccable standards and high expectations, and aiming for them, can work to your benefit. Catching damaging errors and paying attention to critical details are typical strengths among perfectionists, including many lawyers, surgeons and accountants.

Diminish tasks that aren't valuable to others or meaningful to you. Allow your perfectionist tendencies to help you hone your craft, without forcing you to lose sight of the big picture.

3. Delegate

Delegate urgent or important tasks that need to be done, but don't have to be done by you and can be done better by others. Delegating tasks or projects to another person is hard when you're

a control freak or a micro-manager. But in many instances, you need to delegate and hand over control to others. This creates time and energy to focus on what's most urgent or important to you personally and has to be addressed directly by you.

L. David Marquet, author of *Turn the Ship Around!: A True Story of Turning Followers Into Leaders*, describes levels of leadership in which you move from telling people what to do to not telling people what to do. The levels he sets forth are as follows:

Level 1: "Tell me what to do..."

Level 2: "I think..."

Level 3: "I recommend..."

Level 4: "Request permission to..."

Level 5: "I intend to..."

Level 6: "I just did..."

Level 7: "I've been doing..."

When you encourage others to take responsibility, you free up your time to focus on strategic matters and critical tasks that are best handled by you. You also reduce overwhelm due to taking on too much, as well as boost your productivity where it really counts.

You cannot delegate until you have defined what tasks need to be accomplished or what problem must be solved. Delegate responsibly to others, clarify expectations, set and respect boundaries, and allow autonomy in how tasks are executed, once they are assigned.

4. Defer

Defer projects that are important, but can wait. Overachievers have trouble deferring goals and dreams for later, even when they are at peak capacity. They load up on stimulants, work around the clock, and attempt to multitask to get the maximum number of things done in limited time. But going into overdrive – with no breaks for refueling and recharging – adds wear and tear. Running

out of steam compromises your ability to accomplish your highest priorities.

Don't commit to anything else when you're working on a major goal that deserves your undivided attention. If something is important to you, and you just don't have time for it now, deferring it is a viable option. Set a reminder for when you will start taking action on the deferred item. Keep a journal for all your creative ideas that require fleshing out. Create a bucket list or someday list for things that align with your interests, but call for more planning and preparation.

Setting goals and having the desire to achieve them can move you out of temporary dips. Knowing your ideal direction allows for strategic thinking, deliberate choosing and achieving your top priorities. But you can still lead a purposeful life, even if you experience disappointment from not achieving a goal.

Defer pursuits that you still consider worthwhile, but must give way to more important matters and true emergencies. Use your ambition to get you to the next level without running yourself to the ground. Postponing things allows you to concentrate on more meaningful tasks and avoid doing unnecessary tasks. Choosing deliberately allows you to finish vital projects before you transition to a new set of projects.

5. Delete

Delete things that are not urgent and not important. Some goals and objectives might reflect an old version of you. Move them off your list of to-dos especially when they get in the way of your accomplishing more important things.

If you find yourself postponing action on certain projects, take time to reflect on whether you really want to get them done. Meditating, journaling, and talking with a trusted confidante are some ways to consciously decide what you deeply want. Own your choices and release the fear of missing out or losing what was or could have

been. You will be more focused on what matters when you have less to do.

WHAT KEEPS YOU FROM MEETING YOUR PRIORITIES?

When you truly want to make the change, but you engage in contradictory behavior, you need to look at what's holding you back.

There are several common reasons and effective ways to deal with them:

1. Making Excuses

Excuses are often based on fear of discomfort, fear of uncertainty, fear of failure, and even fear of success (which frequently leads to more work, more opportunities, and more demands that you do not want.)

A common excuse is that you don't have enough time. But if you track how you spend your time, you could find much of it wasted on mindless activities. You also have pockets of time that you might consider too short to get things done, but all together really add up. You can make time to write your thesis, practice piano or take a nature walk for 15 minutes a day, even if you can't devote a full hour to it.

Your excuse could be the labels you put on yourself or the life scripts you follow. When you tell yourself things like "this is just who I am", "I'm not cut out for this" or "this will never work for me", you stay stuck in old patterns. There are many parts of you that are due to conditioning that can be altered, circumstances that can be reshaped, and habits that can be broken. Let go of the victim mentality and the need for external validation. Stop blaming your DNA or the way you were raised.

Excuses lead to procrastination, which as Steven Pressfield writes in *The War of Art* “is the most common manifestation of resistance because it is the easiest to rationalize.” He notes, “We don’t tell ourselves, ‘I’m never going to write my symphony.’ Instead, we say, ‘I am going to write my symphony, I’m just going to start tomorrow.’”

You alleviate anxiety and stress in the short term when you put things off to a day when you will feel more motivated, more inspired and more energetic. But if we keep postponing things, the deadline will soon be upon us and the consequences become more dire.

2. Giving In to Distractions and Interruptions

Distractions include actions that move you away from what you really want. They reduce traction, which involves actions that move you toward what you really want. Watching YouTube videos, surfing the Internet, and scrolling Instagram when you need to be doing focused work are distractions. They are internally oriented and often stem from old habits. There is a time and place to engage with the online world, like when it’s part of play and rest. But don’t let the digital space invade your workspace.

There are also interruptions from other people. They include requests, pleas and demands in the professional realm and personal sphere. Reacting quickly to whatever arises at work can provide instant gratification. It feels good to avert a crisis, facilitate team progress, rescue others, and save the day. But constant firefighting and impromptu problem-solving carry long-term costs and consequences. They leave you with less time to chip away at your most important, high-value projects.

When an unexpected, last-minute request comes in, pause and take a breath. Ask yourself whether it’s truly an emergency that you must deal with, right then and there. If it is, get support (when help is needed) or describe what else is on your plate (when reprioritization is needed). If it’s not, explain why you’re not the

best person to handle it or negotiate the due date.

Bosses and supervisors who keep piling on the work must be reminded about deadlines and milestones for existing projects. Have them make the tough choices and decide what to drop - at least for the time being - if you lack the autonomy to do so. To set expectations, you can have a frank discussion about the hours you normally do deep work and when is the best time to engage in real-time communication.

Respond promptly to clients' urgent requests, but don't assume you must take immediate action. Describe the next steps and the proposed timeline for delivering the product or service that meets their needs. Demanding clients might just want to blow off steam or explore how much they can make demands on your attention.

If a colleague stops by your office when you don't have time to talk, have her send a meeting request or check back with you tomorrow. Being helpful doesn't mean you drop whatever you're doing. Communicate your expectations ahead of time so that your teammates know when you're doing focused work and when you're open to collaborative discussions.

Your boss, supervisors, clients and colleagues have their own agendas and objectives, which often conflict with yours. Setting clear expectations and educating others about your work habits and responsibilities will help you minimize interruptions. Don't be afraid to push back on interruptions, particularly when you're working on a major project or you're up against a deadline.

If an interruption is outside your control, deal with it in the shortest time possible. Although you might want to have closure before you switch to the new task, it's better to break in the middle of what you're doing if the interruption requires immediate attention.

Communicate your need to do focused work and the benefits of no interruptions. Otherwise, you will find yourself attending to other people's priorities and putting out fires for much of the day. Save your time, preserve your energy, and make room for your top

priorities. Instead of jumping back and forth between tasks, apply laser sharp focus on your primary task.

“The important thing is to have good water in the well,” Ernest Hemingway told the *Paris Review*, “and it is better to take a regular amount out than to pump the well dry and wait for it to refill.” Hemingway advised writers to stop in the middle of a paragraph or sentence. If you must leave a task, do so when you’re in a state of flow. That way, you will be excited to get back into the task without losing too much momentum.

3. Failing to Set Clear Boundaries

A boundary protects areas that are important to you and that you care about. Having clear boundaries provides necessary margin and sets realistic expectations with others. Avoid responding immediately to requests the moment you get them. Instead, have a specific time period for when you engage in synchronous (real-time) collaboration through telephone calls, text messages, and the like.

If you answer every telephone call regardless of what time they come in and what you are doing, you signal to callers that their problem always matters more than your own. If you habitually reply to emails and text messages within 5 minutes of when you get them, the sender will come to expect the same or similar response time for all correspondences. If you keep an open office so anyone can walk in at any time, you show observers it’s fine to interrupt you whenever they please.

Being highly responsive has major drawbacks, such as losing focus and traction on your own work. Set appropriate boundaries that allow reasonable access to you without compromising your priorities. Honor your boundaries to ensure that others respect your time. Clarify expectations to reduce the interruptions and distractions.

Here are a few more examples of how to set boundaries so you focus on your top priority and your day doesn’t get hijacked by other people’s needs and demands:

- a. Close your office door when you need to do deep work. Tell your assistant to hold non-urgent calls and send an email to key colleagues asking them to connect only on matters that can't wait.
- b. Wear noise-canceling headphones if you work in a cubicle or open office space.
- c. Inform your clients at the outset as to when they may expect to hear back from you in response to an inquiry. Is it within an hour, within 24 hours, or by end of business day? Do not give them your cell phone number if you do not want to be contacted whenever and however they please.
- d. Develop an asynchronous approach to communications so that when you send an email or leave a voice mail, you don't expect an immediate response, or vice versa. Allow yourself and others to respond after the information is fully processed and when full attention can be given to the inquiry.
- e. Instead of taking impromptu walk-ins, schedule meetings during specific office hours.

4. Saying Yes Too Often

When you're new in your position, organization or profession, it helps to say yes to new assignments, especially when they (a) are unique learning opportunities in a field of interest; (b) will put you on the path to working with an ideal team or client; (c) and indicates your manager or boss trusts you and is seeking to stretch your responsibilities. But once you become the reliable go-to person, the requests and demands for your attention typically exceed your capacity.

It's easier to turn down thankless and stressful projects that don't capitalize on your strengths or fit with your top goals. But the good projects you frequently say yes to can also steal time and focus away from the great projects you really need to get done. Start saying no and stop overcommitting to opportunities that don't line up with your real priorities.

Avoid knee-jerk responses to requests. Before you quickly commit to a project, ask for more time to check your schedule and projects list. Ask for more information on what the new project will involve, including required tasks, progress milestones and expected completion dates. If you must deal with a true emergency, be sure to have a productive conversation later about how to prevent last-minute requests and minimize situational crisis.

If you truly want to say yes to a project, consider the trade-offs and steps to take to reduce overwhelm. Even when it's your boss, top client or another VIP making the request, you can renegotiate when the thing gets done, ask for more resources, describe preexisting priorities, or delegate or refer certain parts of the work. When you habitually say yes without any filters, you might do everything okay, but struggle to make the most important thing great.

If you're a people-pleaser, it can be very uncomfortable to say no. But everyone has limits. To decline a request, say no gently, directly, and clearly, while nixing the guilt. Saying no doesn't mean you show anger or annoyance or complain about how busy you are. It means you let the person know the project is not a good fit or will require displacement of preexisting priorities. If you track your time and plan when you will do things, it's a lot easier to assess your capacity to take on more.

Ask yourself how much effort it will take to do the task and how much benefit your task completion will offer to others. Dr. Vanessa Patrick, a professor at the Bauer School of Business at the University of Houston, provides this general framework:

Low cost to you + high value to others: Say yes (up to a certain limit). Passing the salt to the other person at the table helps her a lot, but takes very little effort on your part. Keep in mind that many small things can add up though.

Low cost to you + low value to others: Say no. There's no point doing things that don't need to be done in the first place. Eliminate meaningless (BS) jobs.

High cost to you + low value to others: Say no. Making a fancy dish for a potluck could be easily replaced with bringing takeout food.

High cost to you + high value to others. Say yes to challenges when it brings you joy, energizes you, and applies your unique skills and talents. Difficult tasks and projects are worth doing when they align with your values, priorities and goals, and provide extraordinary benefits to others.

5. Irregular Pruning

Weeds are invasive, vigorous and aggressive. They are not sown intentionally and grow where you don't want them to be. They compete with your plants for space, water, sunlight and nutrients. They usually spread and fill in faster than what you actually planted. Weeds produce by themselves very easily. But plants take effort on your part to grow.

Weeds are like the unhealthy habits, negative thoughts, limiting beliefs and toxic relationships that dampen your mood, drain your energy, and stunt your growth.

Plants are like the habits, thoughts, beliefs and relationships that inspire you, strengthen you, and add beauty to your experience.

To cultivate a spectacular garden, you need to weed out unwanted plants. Similarly, to create a sensational life, you need to chuck unnecessary things that weigh you down. You will need to weed out things you don't want to make space for what you want:

First, look for what you want to keep and what you want to get rid of. If you just sit back and let nature take its course, you could end up with a huge mess. The longer you put off weeding, the harder it gets to distinguish what you want from what you don't want. But no matter how long you wait, your deliberate choice between what you keep and what you throw out is the first step.

Second, weed out what you don't want – one at a time. Start small. Pull up and dig out what you don't want, one by one. The magnitude of the weeds won't intimidate you if you tackle them

individually. If you take on too much, too quickly, you will feel overwhelmed, exhausted and outmatched.

Third, weed out what you don't want – often. Pull up what you don't want before it goes to seed and spreads like wildfire. Weeding takes a shorter time to complete if you make it into a habit. Check back often and nip weeds in the bud from the get-go. It will take you much longer to pull them out if you neglect the task for weeks, months or years.

Fourth, dig into the roots. Remove what you don't want from the roots, rather than just prune the top parts that show. If you ignore the roots, which can be very large and deep, the weeds will likely return, sometimes stronger than before.

Fifth, nurture what you want. Without proper tending, gardens get overrun with weeds that stunt the growth of the plants.

If you don't attend to your valued relationships, important projects, and creative ideas, they will wither and die. And your life will more easily get cluttered with things you don't want.

6. Having Commitments that Conflict with Each Other

Your competing commitments lead to obstructionist behaviors that keep you from achieving your goals. Unless you become aware of these competing commitments, you will be immune to change. To make lasting change, you need to define your improvement goal, identify behaviors that keep you from achieving your goal, uncover hidden competing commitments, and pinpoint big assumptions that support the competing commitments and lead to behaviors that undermine your goal.

If you're lounging on the couch with a bag of chips, rather than going for a bike ride, your hidden commitment could be to maintain comfort. If you're constantly attacking and labeling others, instead of having a meaningful conversation to understand their perspective, your hidden commitment could be to protect your own turf. If you're giving in to demands and not standing up for yourself, your

hidden commitment could be to keep the peace.

Once you unearth your competing commitments and test the assumptions behind them, you can shift your mindset and start taking positive action. By understanding what you really want, committing to new patterns, and beginning with small, concrete steps, you can make the change you seek.

WHEN DO YOU QUIT (OR STICK)?

In your areas of focus, seek growth opportunities and say yes to challenging projects that will raise the floor and make you better and stronger. According to happiness researcher, Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar, you should go beyond resilience and strive for *antifragility*, which is a concept he borrowed from Dr. Nassim Taleb, a professor of Risk Engineering. This means you don't just bounce back and return to your original form after facing an adverse, stressful or chaotic event. Rather, you expand your perspective, gain strength from post-traumatic growth (PTG) and derive meaning from the experience itself. You get the opposite of fragility or, as Dr. Ben-Shahar calls it, Resilience 2.0.

Grinding away, putting in more effort and exercising patience, however, can be a waste of time, energy and attention. Sometimes you do need to stop, step back, and head in another direction. Giving up when you can't change unfavorable circumstances frees you to try other things that might work just as well, if not better. Rather than settle for mediocrity in a field that requires your weakest skills, you can strive for excellence in an area that demands your prime assets and deepest interests.

Best-selling author and marketing guru, Seth Godin, says there are three types of curves in every endeavor:

The Dip is the long slog between starting and mastering. Pushing through, working harder, and increasing your effort when you're

in the dip – when most people would prefer to give up – lead to positive results. You become an expert by moving through the dip.

The Cul-de-sac is the dead end. These include jobs, projects, and activities that create no significant progress or meaningful outcome, no matter how hard you work or how much effort you invest. The cul-de-sac has no dip and is usually boring from the get-go.

The Cliff is an uphill curve with a steep plunge downwards. You move up with more effort and harder work, but there is a sudden drop-off at the end. The cliff has no dip and is exciting only for a while.

Godin writes: “Sometimes we get discouraged and turn to inspirational writing, like stuff from Vince Lombardi: ‘Quitters never win and winners never quit.’ Bad advice. Winners quit all the time. They just quit the right stuff at the right time.”

Here are 3 questions to ask yourself when deciding when to quit or stick with it:

Am I in a cul-de-sac or on a cliff or in the dip?

Giving up can feel a lot like failing, even when it’s necessary to achieve success or drop energy-depleting, non-essential activity.

Persistence can shift to pestering. Perseverance becomes delusion. Commitment turns to compulsion.

If something seems misaligned, too boring or too good to be true, take a pause and figure out whether you’re in a cul-de-sac or on a cliff. Research the industry. Talk to people you trust. Track your progress and review your results.

An example of a cul-de-sac is a profession where your core values and beliefs are incompatible with your work environment, rewards system or organizational culture that is resistant to change.

A cliff is like a toxic relationship that can provide fleeting moments of fun and adventure, but is one you won’t regret ending once you have the guts to sever it.

If you stay too long on a dead-end path or on an uphill curve with a sudden drop-off, you end up with unnecessary failure and high sunk costs. Quit as soon as you can. And don't continue an effort just because you've already invested tons of resources in it. Consider the opportunity costs and trade-offs.

On the other hand, if you're in a dip, you need to avoid quitting just to relieve temporary discomfort or short-term pain. Abandon a worthwhile endeavor only after you have thoughtfully chosen to do so. Strategic quitting is different from reactive or serial quitting, which is the root cause of many failures.

Am I willing to slog through the dip?

Becoming number one in your market, achieving a successful outcome or hitting your target goal means you will need to push through the dip. If you're not willing to do what it takes to get through it, it's wise to quit. You can always come back to the project when you are able to prioritize it, invest the resources, and make time for it.

Before the dip starts, think about how much time and energy you are willing to invest and how much discomfort and pain you will take on to move through it. You can't be a book author if you're not going to write the book. If the actual work required is beyond your capabilities, weigh the challenges against the potential benefits and then decide whether to quit or stick.

Consider quitting when your current efforts are distracting you from what you should really focus on and master.

Am I doing this thing just for or mostly for fun?

Big successes come from moving through the dip and keeping the long game in mind. But the three curves are not a concern if you're just trying something out and loving it. Start the creative project, take the next step, finish or fail, and learn from your mistakes.

The full-time accountant doesn't have to shut down her Etsy shop just because it provides only a little extra income. The pianist who

plays for fun doesn't have to give up on composing and recording songs even if she will never sell her music. The weekend welder who makes tables and chairs for family and friends doesn't have to become a top industry professional.

No one has to see it, buy it, or talk about it for you to have permission to stick with it. If it's a hobby or a calling you enjoy, don't quit just because you can't or have yet to make loads of money from it.

It's okay to accept mediocrity at the outset. To cut yourself some slack. To not be exceptional. At least in the beginning, most of us fall in the middle of the bell curve. Keep this in mind as you push through the dip instead of quit when you're in it.

WHY DOES ANALOG BEAT DIGITAL IN DEFINING PRIORITIES?

When defining priorities and staying focused on the things that matter, I find a paper-based productivity system to be more effective than a digital solution. With so many digital apps to choose from in our high-tech world, it might be hard to believe that a paper planner or everyday notebook is all you really need to create your ideal day.

Among the popular productivity apps are Things, Omnifocus, Todoist and Evernote. Highly recommended web-based applications that facilitate team collaboration include Asana, Basecamp, Trello, Notion and Nozbe. Digital devices like your smartphone are also good for setting timers and reminder alerts.

An alternative, low-tech option is the reMarkable 2, which is a tablet (digital notebook) that has a paper-like surface and displays only in monochrome tones (black, white and gray). The best feature is that it allows for paper-like handwriting, which can be stored as files on the device. Although it converts handwritten notes to typed

text, this feature needs development, especially if you don't write clearly. You can also use the device to access and synch with cloud storage through the reMarkable 2's Connect subscription service, but this comes with a monthly subscription fee if you didn't buy the device before October 12, 2021.

Luckily, I bought the paper tablet back in June 2021, along with the separately-priced Marker stylus you need to write on the device. Despite the downsides, I use it regularly to create priorities lists and to capture ideas and insights for articles, blog posts and videos. Although an iPad definitely gives you more bang for the buck, I chose the reMarkable 2 over it because I didn't want to introduce additional access to apps or websites in my note-taking or list-making processes.

A paper-based productivity system lacks certain features that make it hard to do away with digital technology. But putting pen to paper is a tried-and-true method for limiting your to-dos, maximizing focus, and taking steps toward achieving long-term objectives.

For personal productivity, analog beats digital in several ways.

1. Reduces overcommitment

Digital apps – due to their sheer efficiency – make you more susceptible to overextending your to-do list and striving to do too much. Work overload can lead to high stress, chronic fatigue, health problems, and burnout.

Having finite space in a paper planner and writing by hand create inconvenience that, in the long run, raises productivity. You need to prioritize well to fit your list of most important tasks and responsibilities on the page. Instead of pushing yourself to do more than what is humanly possible, you get to carefully choose what you can realistically accomplish.

The analog approach makes it easier to gain clarity on your goals and stay connected with your decisions. A smaller, curated list of priorities helps you to focus your attention and reach a state of flow.

2. Encourages deliberate review

While a digital tool can make automatic updates and allow drag and drop, paper planning forces you to manually migrate unfinished tasks to another day. Analog tools increase your awareness of when you're procrastinating or planning poorly.

Handwriting involves more conscious effort to postpone start dates, reschedule meetings and reallocate time slots for activities. The analog method prompts you to quit delaying tasks that need to get done or drop insignificant ones that aren't worth your time.

An analog productivity system not only allows you to organize the present and plan for the future, but also keeps a record of your past. Flipping through pages tends to be a more pleasant tactile experience than scrolling through to review your progress and accomplishments and reflect on struggles and challenges. Compared to swiping, tapping and staring into a screen, reviewing your paper planner is more relaxing and meditative.

3. Improves active learning

The physical act of writing down your priorities, goals and commitments on paper make them more real and memorable. Recording your observations and ideas in a notebook brings calm, joy and presence that cannot be replicated when typing into a digital app.

Studies show that using pen and paper, not a laptop or tablet, helps you to amp up your brainpower, extrapolate thoughts, retain and interpret concepts, and recall key information. In a research article, professors Pam Mueller and Daniel Oppenheimer concluded that laptop note takers' tendency to transcribe lectures verbatim rather than process information and reframe it in their own words is detrimental to learning.

If you want to get better at setting your priorities and reviewing your progress, you're better off with analog tools than with digital solutions.

4. Blocks out distractions

Unlike digital apps, a paper planner cannot ping you with appointment reminders and to-do alerts. But this disadvantage is also what gives analog an edge over digital. When you get on your smartphone or computer to organize your day, you have ready access to online articles, videos, social media, text messages, emails, and other distractions that you do not have with analog systems. Navigating digital productivity tools often leads to distractions that fuels ineffective multitasking and reduces steady progress on your most important tasks.

A paper planner encourages you to single task and stay with one important thing until you are finished or at least until you have made significant progress. The analog method doesn't require special apps to block out time-sucking websites and social media when you need to think and work deeply. It doesn't come with inherent distractions to steal your time and attention whenever you feel frustrated or bored with a project.

Intense concentration on one appropriately challenging task gets you in the zone. Analog tools encourage you to focus on one priority at a time, rather than switch from one shiny new object to another.

5. Provides simplicity

Different apps serve different purposes, such as calendaring events, scheduling appointments, and making to-do lists. There are hundreds of digital apps to choose from and updated versions being released constantly. You also have to be tech-savvy and patient enough to learn how to use the features.

With old-fashioned pen and paper, you spare yourself from the complexities involved in a digital productivity system. Paper planners provide a simpler, easy-to-use, multifunctional alternative. You could have one main notebook to serve all your planning needs. A smaller travel notebook may be kept for capturing information on the go.

You could try well-known planners such as the Bullet Journal Notebook, LEUCHTTURM 1917, or the Moleskine Classic Hard Cover 12 Month Daily Planner, or even just a plain notebook to list your to-dos, set priorities, track time, record activities, and calendar your appointments, meetings and events.

Things that I look for in a planner are single-day pages that include an hour-by-hour calendar to record activities and events, a section to list my top priorities or to-dos, and space to make note of highlights and challenges. You might want different things, such as inspirational quotes, a designated area for goal review, or undated pages that give you more flexibility. Choose a planner that you will use and meets your unique needs.

Analog to-do list systems that you can adopt include Ryder Carroll's Bullet Journal (BuJo) Method. You may also create your own method or modify existing ones to suit your personal preferences and needs. For instance, while I don't subscribe to the entire Bullet Journal system, I like its use of symbols (e.g., events are marked with an open circle "o" bullet) and signifiers (e.g., priority is marked with an asterisk "*" to the left of the bullet). Symbols visually characterize the entries and signifiers give them additional context (e.g., *o Call Tom to follow up on business proposal).

Hybrid Approach usually works best, but full analog beats full digital for personal productivity

Digital solutions offer advantages that analog tools do not. They make information searchable, shareable, easier to organize and reorganize, and available for backup storage. They also provide automatic alerts on meetings, deadlines and other time-sensitive events.

A hybrid approach that combines digital and analog offers the best of both worlds. Personally, I use an online calendar and my iPhone to calendar events, set appointments and schedule meetings. I like to use them as backup systems with auto alerts. The information also goes into my paper planner, which I use daily.

To stay on track with daily must-dos, reserve time blocks for specific tasks, and make steady progress on big projects, I rely more heavily on the analog approach. In addition to my paper planner, I use a whiteboard to set daily time blocks for tasks and commitments. If I had to choose between the two, I would go with full analog, not full digital, to plan a productive day.

Analog information encourages purposeful reviews of what you accomplished on a daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly and yearly level. Digital information is more out of sight, out of mind. Digital apps also pull you toward mindless distractions and trivial options that waste your time.

Overall, analog beats digital when you need to focus your mind, keep on track with important tasks, and get in the zone while working on your highest priorities.

KEY TAKEAWAY: PRIORITIZING HAS TRADE-OFFS AND OPPORTUNITY COSTS, BUT IS ESSENTIAL TO CREATING BIG RESULTS

When you choose to focus on Project A, you will be giving up Project B, at least temporarily. When you opt to work late, you'll need to cancel the dinner date you had planned for the evening. Does it make sense to choose priorities related to your client or boss over those related to your spouse or partner? There really is no one right answer; it depends on a host of factors that only you can weigh to make the best decision under the circumstances.

By prioritizing a certain task, activity or thing, you invariably make trade-offs and incur opportunity costs. To do great work, nurture healthy relationships, and create big results in any life domain, you will have to say no to things that count less and say yes to those that matter more. Quit trying to do it all at once.

About the author

Dyan Williams is a solo lawyer who has happily operated her firm, Dyan Williams Law PLLC, from her home office since October 2014. She is also a Productivity Coach who helps parents, lawyers, business owners, consultants and other busy people turn their ideas into action, maximize productivity, reduce overwhelm, and make time for what truly matters. Through her presentations, writings, and coaching programs, she provides strategies and techniques to focus on your top priorities and successfully design a well-lived life. She is the host of a podcast and YouTube channel, *The Incrementalist - A Productivity Show*. She lives in the United States with her husband and their two children. To learn more about becoming an Incrementalist, visit her website at dyanwilliams.com and YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/@theincrementalist>.