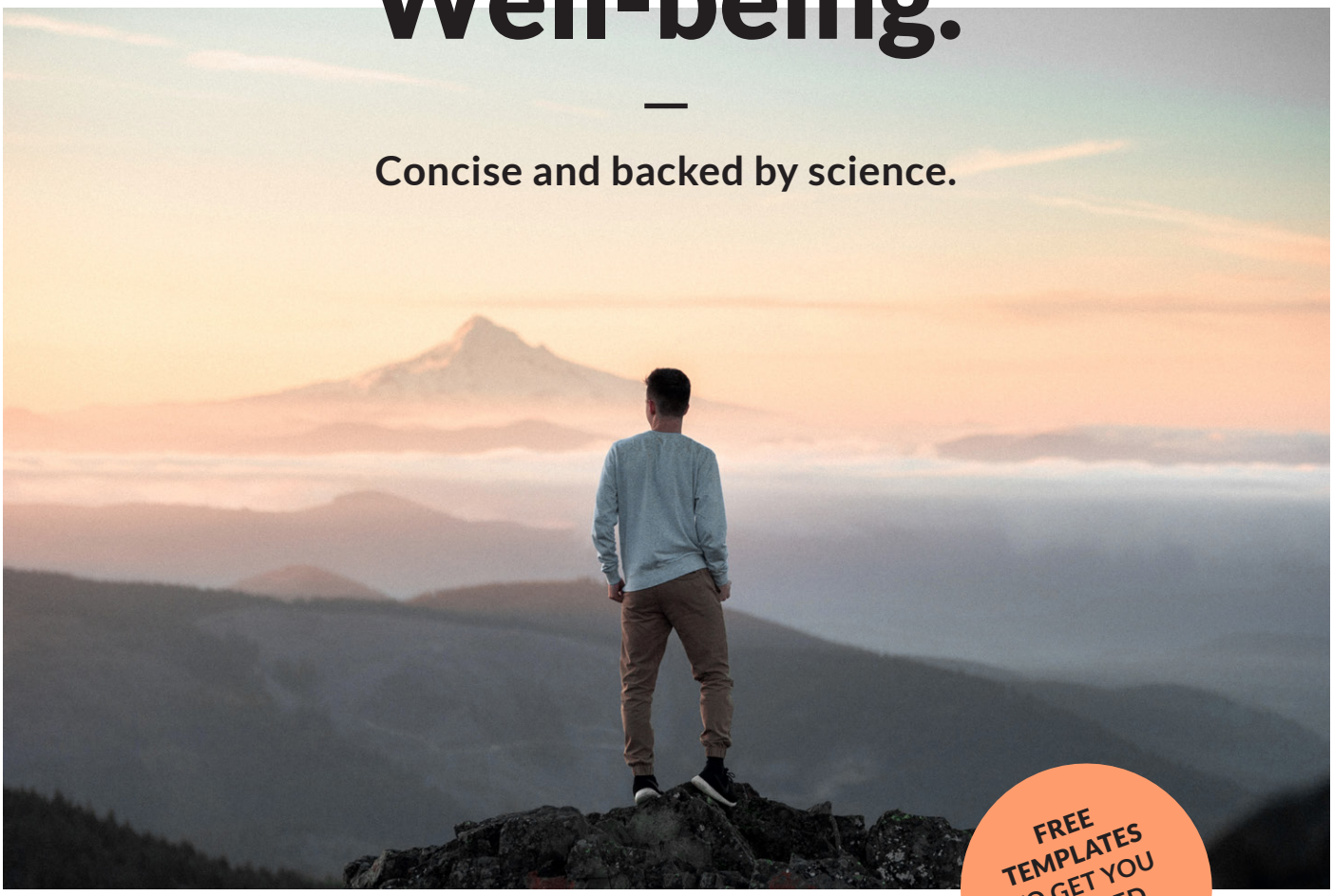
# The 3 Pillars To Transformative **Productivity & Well-being.**

—

**Concise and backed by science.**



FREE TEMPLATES TO GET YOU STARTED RIGHT AWAY!

**Dr. Kashyap Thimmaraju**

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# *Preface*

I believe that we should all have the *time and energy* for the things that matter most to us. For me that's eating healthy and exercising regularly to feel strong and confident, reading books that capture my imagination, being outdoors amidst pine-scented trails and swimming in cool waters, playing the fool with my kids, drawing out the future and immersing myself in new cultural experiences.

But you know what, there was a time when I wasn't doing all of that. I felt like I had to work a lot and struggled to balance my life. I managed and conducted multiple research projects, supervised student theses and projects, had teaching duties, contributed to grant writing, and had to cope with the pressure to publish my research in top academic conferences and journals.

So I'd work long hours, and sometimes even weekends, especially when there were experiments to be run and re-run and re-run! There were a couple of times when my partner went on holidays without me. I was fearful of not completing my work and felt like I had soooo much to do. In general, there were times I'd be anxious about all the things that had to be done. I had difficulty falling asleep and falling back to sleep. I recall the dozens of times I'd wake up in the middle of the night, take my phone, which used to be by my bed, with me to the bathroom and check my email. Thoughts of work would flood my mind.

During the day I used stimulants. I smoked half a dozen cigarettes. I drank espressos and double espressos. I assumed nicotine and caffeine could keep me alert. My right eye began to twitch which made me feel nervous and self-conscious. In retrospect, I was undoubtedly stressed.

The scene at home wasn't pretty either. The laundry basket overflowed with clothes, the kitchen floor had tomato sauce stains and we were always out of fresh produces and groceries. To top it off, I had a partner, family, friends and my health to balance as well.

Clearly, my well-being was steadily slipping away from me. I realized this when I looked up reasons for my twitchy eye – a stressful life with too much caffeine. But there was something more foundational I was going to unearth.

I first learned about the principles, systems, and practices used by leaders from the Harvard Business Review (HBR) articles while I was preparing for my first grant proposal. Over the weeks, as I learned more about different planning strategies, decision fatigue

and when to do what, I realized that the way I was operating until then wasn't sustainable. In order to have a healthy relationship with my partner, succeed at work, stay in touch with family, and take care of my health, I needed to make fundamental changes to the way I operated.

Those HBR articles sparked my interest and I was eager to learn more well after preparing for the grant. I devoured podcast episodes from the Harvard Business Review Ideacast [1], learned some of David Allen's key principles from Getting Things Done [2], organized my notebook using the Bullet Journaling Method [3] and explored mindfulness [4] from a fresh perspective.

It's been over five years since I had that life-transforming revelation. In that time, I've dissected several academic publications, perused dozens of books and broken down podcast episodes to extract the tools, techniques and habits that I've found to be valuable to my life. I've experimented with them and so have the people I've coached. It's a rabbit hole where there is so much to learn! What has emerged through my efforts is that there is a simple and effective way to get things done and still have the time and energy to live a meaningful and balanced life.

I view it as my duty to share what I've learned and experimented with over the years to help you optimize your productivity and well-being. This book blends scientific research with my personal experience and experiments. It's a concise and distilled version of the three pillars that transformed my productivity and well-being and continue to play a pivotal role in my life. By implementing what's described in this book, you can certainly step up your game in a fraction of the time and energy it took me. You don't have to make the mistakes I made. You can implement things in an order that will help you achieve results faster than I experienced. There are also templates and checklists to get you started.

Kashyap Thimmaraju,
18 Feb. 2022,
Berlin, Germany.

[1] Harvard Business Review. HBR IdeaCast. https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/hbr-ideacast/id152022135, 2022

[2] David Allen. *Getting things done: The art of stress-free productivity*. Penguin, 2015

[3] Bullet Journal. Start Here. https://bulletjournal.com/pages/learn, 2021

[4] Headspace. Be kind to your mind. https://headspace.com/about-us, 2022

# *Introduction*

*You don't need a new plan for next year. You need a commitment.*

Seth Godin

## *Changing Our Lives Can Be Challenging*

If we want to transform the way we live and work, then we have to first REALLY want to change. Second, we have got to be dedicated to the change we wish to live. We have to be gritty about it [5]. If you are not up for that, then try this out when you are ready. Nevertheless, I can promise you that if you adopt what's in this book, you will transform the way you operate forever and continue to look for new ways to optimize yourself.

If what's in this book overwhelms you or scares the living life out of you, that's completely understandable. Hey, listen, I didn't change my life overnight. It took me a long time, and I'm still optimizing myself. So I don't expect you to read this book and put it all into practice right after you are done reading. However, I've attempted to make it easy and attractive for you to start by giving you templates to work with.

You'll want to *take small steps*. Build *your* habits. Make *your* own routine. I can help you take the concepts from this book and make it work for *you*. Get in touch with me and we can work together on designing and implementing a system of habits, routines and rituals that works for you.

[5] Angela L Duckworth, Christopher Peterson, Michael D Matthews, and Dennis R Kelly. Grit: perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 92(6):1087, 2007; and Angela Duckworth. *Grit: The power of passion and perseverance*, volume 234. Scribner New York, NY, 2016

## *Who This Book Is For*

I wrote this book drawing upon my life experiences as a researcher. However, the system and key concepts described in this book apply to a wide array of knowledge workers, e.g., programmers, writers, design thinkers, engineers, architects, scientists, market analysts, etc. The chord that strikes the common note between these seemingly disparate groups of professions lies in the need for the individual to manage him-/herself (in addition to others). Working professionals who have dabbled in the productivity space or realized that they

want to be more productive will find this book valuable as it's a boiled-down version of several authoritative sources. This can be a huge time saver, particularly for someone who wants to improve but simply does not have the time to read, implement and test a dozen ideas from several sources. Finally, this book is meant to reinspire those who already know the key ideas and methods described in this book but have let some practices slip. To them, hopefully, the research and experiences I have presented casts new light on why certain practices are important.

## *My Sources Of Inspiration*

I've strung together concepts from well-researched and evaluated sources into this three-pillar system which is, to the best of my knowledge, unique. Here's a brief overview of the towering sources this book relies on. The method of regular planning and reviewing (weekly and monthly) is inspired by David Allen's Getting Things Done [6] and a German planner called Ein Guter Plan [7]. Techniques on increasing focus, reducing distractions and the daily wrap up are influenced by Cal Newport's Deep Work [8] and Tim Ferriss's 4-Hour Workweek [9]. The system for taking notes comes from Bullet Journaling [10]. In addition, I've also relied on scientific literature from the fields of Psychology, Neuroscience, Human Performance, Chronobiology, Business and Management, Human-Computer Interaction, Software Engineering, Personal Change and Spirituality to substantiate or motivate the value of specific ideas and practices presented in this book. Since this book is also sprinkled with lessons drawn from my personal experience, I have distinguished between my lessons and the research by citing my source(s).

[6] David Allen. *Getting things done: The art of stress-free productivity*. Penguin, 2015

[7] Ein Guter Verlag. Ein Guter Plan. https://einguterplan.de, December 2021

[8] Cal Newport. *Deep work: Rules for focused success in a distracted world*. Hachette UK, 2016

[9] Timothy Ferriss. *The 4-hour workweek: Escape 9-5, live anywhere, and join the new rich*. Harmony, 2009

[10] Bullet Journal. Start Here. https://bulletjournal.com/pages/learn, 2021

## *Book Structure*

In *The Three Pillars*, I introduce the high-level ideas of planning, focusing and following through, and reviewing that make up the three pillars to transform your productivity and well-being. The following chapters include a detailed breakdown of each pillar starting with *why*, *what*, and then going into the details of the *how*. In the *Final Words*, I leave you with a summary of the book and what lies ahead for you.

# *The Three Pillars*

> *A system is never the sum of its parts, it's the product of their interaction.*
>
> Russell Ackoff

Imagine you and your friends are going on a road trip for the weekend. You've booked a nice safari tent in an organic coffee plantation that's surrounded by sloping hills dotted with pine trees and inhabited by wild elephants and exotic birds. Check-in is at 14:00. The weekend is short and you all want to make the most of your time together. You are driving. What do you do?

The first steps typically involve looking up the fastest route on Google Maps and how long it could take to drive there, which is sufficient information to calculate when to leave. This in, turn, can be used to set a location and time for picking up your friends. Cool, now you have a *plan*! You know when and where you're going to pick up your friends, how you're going to get to the coffee plantation, driving time and when to leave.

You've packed the bags and you are stoked to hang out with your friends. It's now all about following the plan and getting there smooth and safely. You pick up your friends. On time. Nice. Now, to *focus* on driving. The route involves a slightly different way to leave the city so you want to pay attention to the roads, traffic and directions until you can cruise. However, to concentrate on driving when you have to focus on what the lady in Google Maps is saying about the upcoming turn and at the same time one friend is going on about last night's drinking session while another wants to connect his phone to the Bluetooth to play Summertime by Fort Francis is really difficult. You ask them to stay quiet for a moment so that you can focus on the road. You make the turn. The conversations continue and then the music plays. It's easier to follow the plan without distractions.

About an hour and a half in and you are making good time. However, it was an early start to the day, so everybody is feeling hungry now. There's a highly recommended breakfast joint in ten minutes and you all decide to make the stop. Delicious breakfast! But the service was slow. You *review* Google maps and you're looking at a 15-minute setback. That's okay. Everybody gets into the car and you focus on the road again. You continue driving for another hour and

a half. Google Maps says you're going to reach by 14:05 so it's a good idea to take a break and stretch a bit. 12 minutes later, you get back into the car, shut the door, stick the keys in the ignition and you are about to crank the engine when Google Maps says that there's an accident on your current route which is going to delay you by 30 minutes. There's a detour with an ETA of 14:45. What do you do? You and your friends weigh it out and feel that to keep driving is probably better than pilling up behind the accident zone.

Despite arriving an hour later than planned, the detour worked out well. You all probably avoided being severely delayed by the accident–who knows how long that could have taken to resolve? The folks at the reception kindly welcome you and show you to the safari tents. It's better than the pictures you saw online. Bliss.

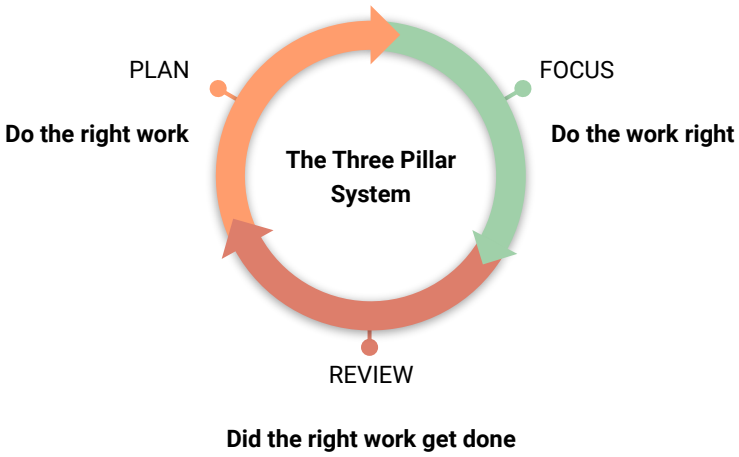



Figure 1: The cyclical process of plan, focus and review that makes up the three pillars to transform our productivity and well-being.

The above analogy highlights the three important actions you followed as the driver to reach the coffee plantation and feel that blissful state: Plan, Focus and Review. They are the three pillars (illustrated in Figure 1 as a cyclical process) that I used to transform my productivity and well-being.

**Plan: Do the right work.** To do the right work, start by planning. First, plan what needs to be done and then act. This means that we not only have a general idea (think of goals) of what is to be done but we also have a crisp and fine-grained sense of how it's going to be done (think of tasks) and what it's going to require of us (think of time and resources). Without these plans, we're going to be distracted by and reacting to what comes our way instead of working on that important report that requires undivided attention or prepping for an upcoming meeting with the leadership team or whatever it is that's going to get us closer to our long and short term goals.

**Focus: Do the work right.** Next, it's a matter of following through on the plan. To focus on what has to be done. To reduce, if not eliminate distractions when we are working on the tasks we planned. So if we are analyzing data from a spreadsheet, then that's what gets our

attention, not the phone on the table with news on tonight's Bundesliga's Bayern versus Dortmund. Without focusing on the things or tasks that are most important to us and our plan, other forces will pull us in different directions and we will be left wondering why we are not making progress.

**Review: Did the right work get done?** After following through on the plan comes the process of reviewing what was done and how it was done. Were we able to complete what we planned? Why not? What worked well, and what did not? Reflecting on the initial plan (general and detailed) and how it was implemented is valuable feedback on closing the loop and course-correcting when we make the next set of plans.

I'd like to highlight that the key value of this system lies in its generality. It can be applied to a single project, e.g., writing a report or training for a marathon, or it can be used to manage your professional and personal life. You can scale it. You choose where you want to apply it. You choose how you want to use it. And you *will* improve performance.

Plans are worthless, but planning is everything.

– Dwight D. Eisenhower

# 1. Planning

Have you every applied for a grant? Or asked someone for money to start a business? What do they always ask for? A plan.

A plan is meant to set the start and end points and even the checkpoints in between. It defines the scope of the goals and tasks we want to achieve. It also defines the resources and time we will use to achieve those goals. And it is something we can look at and reference en route. Imagine if the pilot did not have her flight plan when you boarded the plane. You would probably not be very comfortable sitting on that flight.

For some people, planning sounds daunting and tedious. Goals, tasks, plans, ewwww, time management! I understand this perspective. Some of us are simply not cut out to plan [11]. And some of us think that planning makes us less spontaneous. Or that the time spent to plan could instead be used to move the needle. Accurately estimating how long a frequent work task is going to take to complete for a knowledge worker is also difficult [12]. We're typically overconfident when it comes to judging our skills and capabilities [13].

However, if you want to take control of your life, planning is the first step. It is a skill that can be honed through regular practice. The simplest plan is a list of items you have to do, aka to-dos. A to-do list is better than not having a *plan* at all. But to elevate yourself, you will want something more powerful and slightly more sophisticated, to balance complex work-life aspects, e.g., leading multiple projects, making individual contributions, maintaining health, taking care of family, and spending time outside of work on personal interests.

So what kind of planning am I talking about? Think of an inverted triangle as illustrated in Figure 2. It starts broad on top with the month[14] and has the day at the bottom tip. At the monthly level, it's about setting goals for the month in different aspects of your life, looking forward to reaching those goals or special events in the month and identifying potential challenges. The weekly level revolves around planning the week, setting weekly goals and staying on track with a monthly plan. At the daily level, planning is detailed down to the hour to ensure you're on course with your important long term goals and make sure that you still have room to accommodate the unexpected.

There is a great deal of value in making plans at the monthly, weekly and daily levels. Here are eight reasons to convince you to start planning if you don't do so already.

[11] Elizabeth Grace Saunders. A Way to Plan If You're Bad at Planning. https://hbr.org/2017/07/a-way-to-plan-if-youre-bad-at-planning, 2017

[12] Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. Intuitive prediction: Biases and corrective procedures. Technical report, Decisions and Designs Inc Mclean Va, 1977; and Yoana Ahmetoglu, Duncan P Brumby, and Anna L Cox. To plan or not to plan? a mixed-methods diary study examining when, how and why knowledge work planning is inaccurate. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(CSCW3): 1–20, 2021b

[13] Sarah Lichtenstein and Baruch Fischhoff. Do those who know more also know more about how much they know? *Organizational behavior and human performance*, 20(2):159–183, 1977

[14] Or consider starting with the year. In this case, your goals for the year break down into the goals for the month and so on.

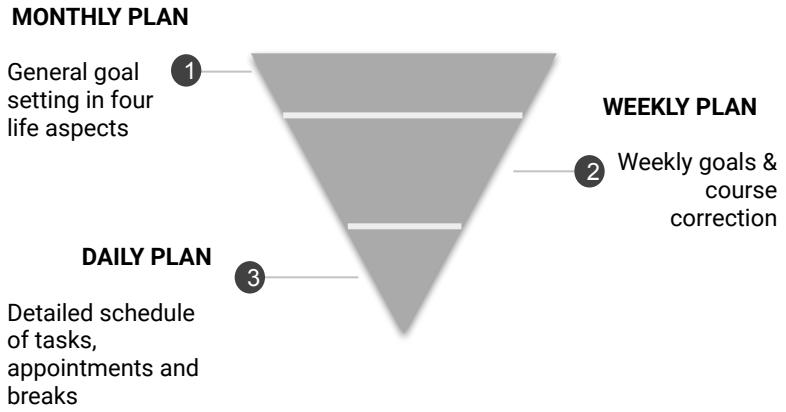



Figure 2: The planning triangle starts broad with a general plan for the month and then narrows down to a detailed plan for the day.

*Eight Reasons To Plan*

1. **The bigger picture:** It's all connected. Your days make up the week and the weeks make up the month. If there are people and interests important to you or targets you want to hit, then consider it to be your duty to carve out the time, space and energy for them. Planning at the weekly and monthly levels encourages you to consider other forces at play, e.g., appointments, meetings and trips.

2. **A north star:** Having a monthly and weekly plan gives you direction. You can use it to guide your daily plans to ensure you are including those items that you want to get done.

3. **Reason to say no or yes:** You can decline new things that come your way if you already know you have a lot to work on. Or the inverse, if you've got space, you can take up new responsibilities and perhaps help others.

4. **Clearer focus:** You switch from mostly reacting to being more intentional about your time and energy as you have a clear picture of what's going on and what's coming up.

5. **Being more spontaneous:** By planning (the week), you could end up with an extra workday [15] or be more spontaneous [16]. Think about that for a moment! Do you want that? I know I did, and ever since I learned about it I've taken my planning seriously.

6. **More "me" time:** If you've recently been drowning in meetings and have to squeeze out time in between them to work on your important tasks and goals, then planning out the week and month can help you identify larger time blocks that are yours.

7. **No wasted time:** Planning paves your roadmap. This helps you avoid spending time and energy figuring out the next move when you reach the next intersection along the route [17].

[15] Julian Birkinshaw and Jordan Cohen. *Make Time for Work that Matters*. Harvard Business Review, 2013

[16] Nir Eyal. The Key to Living With More Spontaneity Is Planning Ahead. https://forge.medium.com/planning-ahead-is-the-key-to-spontaneity-f68bb69 2021

[17] Richard Koch. *The 80/20 Principle: The Secret of Achieving More with Less: Updated 20th anniversary edition of the productivity and business classic*. Hachette UK, 2011

8. **Reduced overworking and stress:** Recent research on knowledge workers in the COVID-19 pandemic times revealed that planning can help reduce overworking and stress [18].

[18] Yoana Ahmetoglu, Duncan P Brumby, and Anna L Cox. To plan or not to plan? a mixed-methods diary study examining when, how and why knowledge work planning is inaccurate. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(CSCW3):1–20, 2021b

### *How To Make General And Detailed Plans*

If your goal is to make consistent progress, not feel overwhelmed, stay on top of things and still have the time and energy for life outside of work, then continue reading for a detailed breakdown of the monthly, weekly and daily planning strategies.

### *Plan Your Month*

The level plan, to begin with, is a general one and starts from the month. This is inspired by the "Ein Guter Plan" [19]. There are four cornerstones to the monthly plan: setting goals and expectations, things to look forward to, potential challenges and setting up appointments. Let's go over each of them more closely.

[19] Ein Guter Verlag. Ein Guter Plan. https://einguterplan.de, December 2021




Figure 3: An example of the goals for the month in four life quadrants.

**Formulate goals and set expectations for the month.** Set monthly goals in four different aspects of your life: work, health, social and recreation. It could be just work and health for you or you could add others too, e.g., personal finance, volunteer work, skills, etc. Note that having too many life aspects will make planning and execution difficult and overwhelming. What do these goals look like and how do you organize them? I've illustrated what it looks like in Figure 3. Notice how some of them are very general and some are specific. That's fine. It's also okay to modify the plan as you get into the month. The quadrants are meant to guide the plans for the weeks and days, so try to limit the number in each quadrant to a maximum of five to six. If you end up with many tasks in there, could the tasks be categorized under a single topic or objective? Having a few tasks in there instead of just goals is fine, but ensure that you have at least one goal in each quadrant, even if the goal is as simple as "call one friend a week". That's how you're going to balance your life and do those things you've always been thinking of doing but probably not

following through on.

**Emphasize the things to look forward to.** This one is meant to make you feel good about the month ahead of you. Shifting your mindset from dreading the month to looking forward to it can have a positive effect on motivation and well-being [20]. Write down a few things you look forward to in the month.

**Identify potential challenges and solutions.** Collecting your goals for the month and knowing what you look forward to also helps illuminate some challenges you may encounter. Write down any roadblocks you foresee so that you can come up with solutions to them and be prepared.

| THINGS TO LOOK FORWARD TO |
| --- |
| Meeting my friends and family in India |
| Feedback on the book |
| Eating healthy and running more often |

| POTENTIAL CHALLENGES |
| --- |
| Finishing the book review before I leave to India: there are several |
| loose strings that need to be tied together |
| Bad winter weather could affect the running plan |

Figure 4: An example of things to look forward to and foreseeable challenges in the monthly plan.

**Manage your appointments.** Finally, you look at your calendar and review all the appointments for the month. Do you have to make new ones based on the goals you set? If your month looks packed, this is a good time to mark out the days or weeks where you're going to do what you planned. Looking at the month ahead gives you the chance to consider life outside of work, e.g., are there any birthdays coming up so that you can wish that person? Holidays or travel plans? Date nights? Reconnect with a friend or family member? Now's the time to mark this out in the calendar. You're going to update the calendar as the month progresses so don't consider this to be set in stone. Things change. Life happens.

That's what planning the month looks like in theory. Now I'd like to share my experience and recommendations on putting that into practice.

### *Implementation Notes*

- **On starting:** Did you manage to do all of that? Excellent! Was that your first time? How long did that take you? And was that taxing or did you feel like you could not come up with much? I recall the first time I did this, I wrote down a bunch of "tasks" I had to do rather than "goals". For example, instead of having "submit the

[20] Lucija Andre, Annelies EM van Vianen, Thea TD Peetsma, and Frans J Oort. Motivational power of future time perspective: Meta-analyses in education, work, and health. *PloS one*, 13 (1):e0190492, 2018; and Leaf Van Boven and Laurence Ashworth. Looking forward, looking back: Anticipation is more evocative than retrospection. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 136(2):289, 2007

conference paper on Jan 20" as the goal, I included all the tasks I had to complete to finish submitting the paper. This highlights the point that by writing down what we want to achieve opens up the possibility for us to think deeper about our goals and what it takes to achieve them which is discussed in *Plan Your Week*. In addition, I wrote down A LOT which overwhelmed me when I had to execute. I cannot recall exactly how long I took but that session took a good amount of time. However, after practicing this skill for months and years now, it takes me roughly 25 minutes. This is only once a month and is totally worth it.

- **More than four life aspects for the month:** In my experience, achieving all the goals in each quadrant every month is challenging enough. I would strongly recommend sticking to four life aspects per month. However, you could change the life aspect you want to focus on in different months. For example, in March you could swap out health for volunteer work or even decide to concentrate on only three aspects.

- **When to plan the month:** I do this either on the last day of the month or a day or two into the month. It depends on when the month starts, as Sundays are typically when I review and plan. I can promise you that once you get into the habit of doing this, you'll start to feel uncomfortable, uneasy or even guilty if you don't have the month planned. It makes the month so much more meaningful.

- **How to handle vacation or disruptions:** Sometime in the year, e.g., when I've taken a long vacation, I come back and there's a backlog that needs to be taken care of which overrides planning the month. Other times, the transition between the months was a rough spell. It's okay, it happens. In such cases, I get organized with a daily and/or weekly plan and resume the monthly planning the following month.

- **On organizing appointments:** For the appointments, I do recommend using a digital calendar, especially if you are working with other people and have online meetings and so on. Using a planner is an alternative option. I use a combination of the two. There's more on calendars in the weekly and daily planning.

- **Use the monthly planning template via Google Docs** to get started.

### *Plan Your Week*

You have your goals for the month, now let's map that to your week and create a weekly dashboard. The idea here is not to plan out each day of the week in detail but to keep track of what's going on from a slightly higher level. And most importantly, it's going to cast light on what's possible in the week and what's not. There are four primary functions to perform when planning the week: create your weekly

| Symbol | Type |
|---|---|
| __ | Category, person, goal or topic that's planned |
| • | Task |
| – | Note |
| ○ | Appointment or event |
| > | Task has been carried forward aka migrated |
| < | Task has been planned |
| × | Task has been completed |
| 👁 | Insight or idea |

Table 1: Bullet journaling system legend

dashboard, break it down, include things not in your monthly plan and prioritize. Let's plunge right in.

**Create your weekly dashboard.** The intention here is to have a simple and structured way to track and organize your plans and notes. I've found the Bullet Journal Method [21] to be an excellent analog way to do just that. Essentially, you have symbols to indicate tasks, appointments, notes, etc. Markdown is a digital alternative. In my experience, I've found eight symbols (see Table 1) sufficient to serve the purpose of creating the weekly dashboard that keeps my plan and notes organized. So open up a fresh sheet (or use my Google Docs template) and have your monthly plan ready as in the next steps you will use these symbols to draft your weekly plan.

[21] Bullet Journal. Start Here. https://bulletjournal.com/pages/learn, 2021

**Break it down.** Choose a few goals from the month to work on for the week and break them down. Categorize them. Think deeply about what it will take to work on it. Flesh it out. There are going to be tasks for you to do, perhaps people to talk to and thoughts to write down. Put them all down in your dashboard. This is a good preparation step as it helps uncover some, if not all, hidden steps you might need to take to reach your goal. Figure 5 depicts my dashboard with some goals broken down.

**Include things not in your monthly plan.** The truth about life is that we also have a ton of things to do that's not accounted for in the month's plan. So you include them in your dashboard as these things often just show up like that food truck around the corner. If possible, break them down too.

**Prioritize.** Consider all the tasks and appointments you have from the monthly plan, breaking down your goals and those not in your monthly plan. Ask yourself some of the following questions to help you sort out your tasks and appointments.

- Is this essential?
- What's the one MOST important thing that needs to get done this week?
- What are the three MOST important things that need to get done this week?
- Is this appointment worth my time and energy? Should I reschedule, cancel or decline?

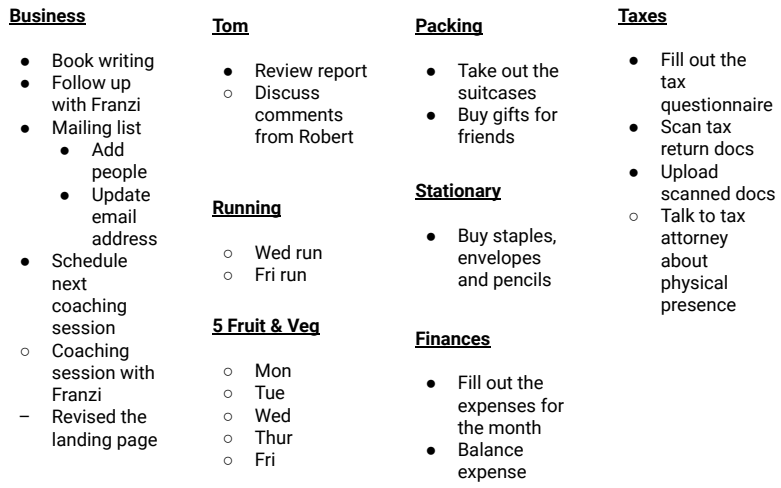



Figure 5: An example of my weekly dashboard using the symbols from Table 1.

- When am I going to work on my report/presentation/analysis? How long is it going to take[22] me to ...? Let me carve out time for that and perhaps even identify where I'm going to work on it?

Once you have your answers, mark them out in your dashboard and the respective days of the week in your calendar. Read on to learn what it takes to plan the week and avoid potential challenges in doing so.

[22] In *Plan Your Day* I cast light on estimating how long tasks take to complete and how we are inherently bad at this and what we can do to get better.

*Implementation Notes*

- **Digital versus analog tools:** I'm an analog guy, so all this happens in my notebook-planner (Ein Guter Plan) which I typically have with me on my desk and in my bag if I'm out. I love writing with a pen or pencil on paper. Every time I cross a task off, boom, a dopamine hit! You are free to use digital tools if that's what you prefer: Notion, Org Mode, Trello, Todoist, Monday are just some of them. In cases where there are several projects to manage and each of them has multiple categories under them, it's practical to use software tools that offer a Kanban board. I do use a digital calendar that I manually keep in sync with my notebook/planner. What's important is that you have an overview of all the days in the week besides your dashboard as this is where you will operate from between the month and the days.
- **When to plan the week:** I typically plan out the week or month on Sundays. This session typically involves some reflection and review as well–which I've covered in the *3. Review* chapter. Planning and reviewing the week and month are a lot to do in one sitting so I tend to split them across two days: one for the review and the other for the planning.
- **Notebook size:** If you're using a notebook or planner, you might want to consider the tradeoff between the size of your book and the number of notes you take. If you're taking a lot of notes,

you'll want to have a separate book for that or a book with more real estate.

- **On intricate weekly plans:** A word of caution about making a highly detailed plan for the week when it comes to planning out each hour of the week. These tend to get disrupted easily [23]. However, blocking out a couple of hours for each day in the week for something really important (a long term goal) can help you prioritize and schedule other tasks and appointments that come your way.

- **To block out time or to not:** If you've got a relaxed schedule, you can skip blocking out time across the week. But if you are buried in work, then that's when you want to carve out time across the week to ensure you're making progress towards the targets you set for the month. Note that we're amid the COVID-19 pandemic which has been a huge disruption to many of us. If you've got kids at home or family to take care of at this time, blocking out time is even more challenging. In these scenarios, I've admittedly not been able to carve out specific slots across the week except for my appointments, and that has worked out modestly.

- **Use the weekly planning template via Google Docs** to get started.

[23] Yoana Ahmetoglu, Duncan P Brumby, and Anna L Cox. To plan or not to plan? a mixed-methods diary study examining when, how and why knowledge work planning is inaccurate. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(CSCW3):1–20, 2021b

### *Plan Your Day*

We've finally reached the final step in planning, planning out the day. This is where those lofty goals you broke down earlier meet the minutes and hours of the day that you'll never get back again. Planning out the day is the best way to ensure you make use of the day's fleeting hours to work on your important tasks and goals. It's so easy to get lost in the matters that come up during the day. Planning the day involves four steps: Creating your job queue, estimating job time, prioritizing and scheduling which is illustrated in Figure 6. Let's get right into the details.

**Create your job queue.** In this first step, you collect all the tasks or jobs you have/want to do for the day. Don't worry about the order at this point. Look at your weekly plan. Look at your calendar, did you already mark out certain tasks/goals for the day? Include them in your list. Include breaks as well, e.g., lunch, coffee breaks, etc. The most important point to keep in mind when making your job queue is to include a "reasonable" number of tasks or appointments. If there are too many that you cannot complete, you could end your day disappointed. Ask yourself, "do I need to work on this today? Is this essential?". In Figure 7 I've provided a concrete example of what this could look like.

**How long does each job take?** Estimating how long a job is going to take is tricky as we are inherently bad at estimating job times [24], I still fall victim to underestimation errors. A recent study on knowledge workers showed that we tend to underestimate how long we spend

[24] Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. Intuitive prediction: Biases and corrective procedures. Technical report, Decisions and Designs Inc Mclean Va, 1977; and Roger Buehler, Dale Griffin, and Michael Ross. Exploring the" planning fallacy": Why people underestimate their task completion times. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 67 (3):366, 1994

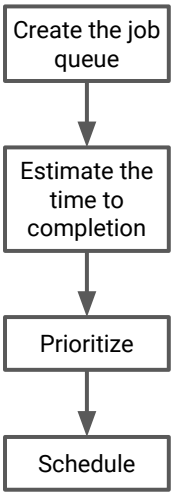



Figure 6: The four-step process to planning the day.

on email and overestimate the time for writing and planning tasks [25]. For each job in your queue, estimate the time it will take to complete it or how much time you will work on it. Sometimes, the task cannot be completed, because you might have to wait on someone else for information or authorization or due to the lack of preparation. Finally, total up the time. Have you exceeded or equalled your work hours for the day? If yes, reduce the time for the jobs eating the time or reduce the number of jobs. Typically, you'll want your total to be an hour or so less than your total work hours for the day. This is to ensure you have time to include the spontaneous things that come your way or have the room for estimation errors, e.g., an urgent meeting comes up or replying to an email takes longer than expected.

[25] Yoana Ahmetoglu, Duncan P Brumby, and Anna L Cox. To plan or not to plan? a mixed-methods diary study examining when, how and why knowledge work planning is inaccurate. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(CSCW3):1–20, 2021b

**Business**

- Write the book conclusion (1.5 hrs)
- Follow up with Julia (10 min)
- Mailing list
  - Add people (20 min)
  - Update email address (10 min)
- Ask Ann about the tax number (15 min)
- Schedule next coaching session (15 min)
- Coaching session with Franzi (1.5 hrs)

**Taxes**

- Fill out the tax questionnaire (20 min)
- Scan tax return docs (5 min)
- Upload scanned docs (5 min)
- Talk to tax attorney about physical presence (15 min)

**Tom**

- Review report (1 hr)
- Discuss Robert's comments (30 min)

**Packing**

- Take out the suitcases (10 min)
- Buy gifts for family (1 hr)

Figure 7: The job queue for the day with the estimated time of tasks and events taken from my weekly dashboard in Figure 5.

**Prioritize the jobs.** Now to prioritize those jobs: which ones are you going to work on and in what order? Identifying which ones to work on becomes difficult when there are more than five to six tasks in the queue and some of them require lots of time. To help

me guide my decision on choosing the tasks, I use the Eisenhower matrix [26] (see Figure 8), this is also what's part of Covey's 7 Habits of Highly Effective People [27]. Each job is either Urgent or Not Urgent and Important or Not Important. Placing each job in the respective quadrant clarifies which jobs to work on: Do, Delegate, Schedule and Delete.

Now for the order. Important things first. Whether you do the Urgent or Not Urgent first is up to you. Your situation determines the urgency, e.g., an important upcoming deadline is Urgent and Important so you'll want to work on those jobs first obviously. If there are other Important but Not Urgent jobs in your queue, include one to two of them too. That's what's going to get you closer to your long-term goal. Based on the time you allocated and the breaks in your day, solve your daily time puzzle. Too many cognitively demanding tasks one after another is exhausting, so interleave breaks and some routine tasks, e.g., the Urgent and Not Important, to ensure you can work on the tasks in the order you made.

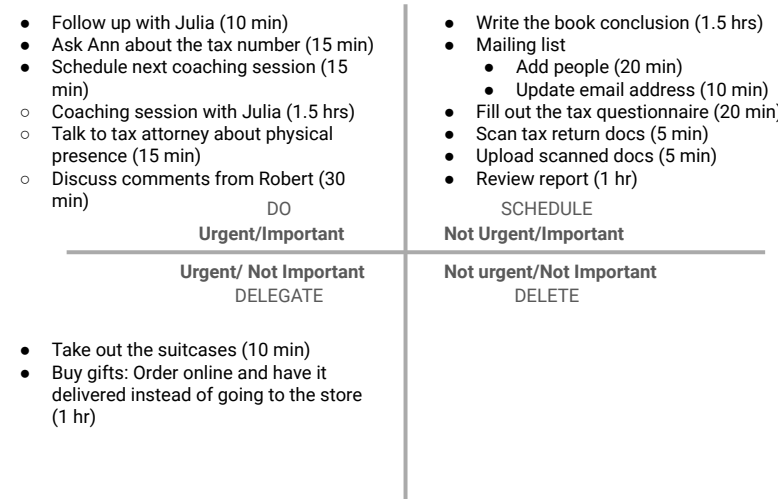



Figure 8: Prioritizing the tasks and events from the job queue in Figure 7 based on the Eisenhower matrix.

You could also skip this fancy process and prioritize jobs based on your chronotype [28] as illustrated in Figure 9. Whichever method you follow, ensure that important things get done first, i.e., when your energy and vigilance [29] is high to avoid sloppy errors [30].

**Make a schedule for the day.** Now to put your glorious plan in your calendar or planner. If you're using a digital calendar, then include two reminders: an interruption reminder five to ten minutes before the end so you can start to wrap up what you are doing and become aware that you have something else lined up [31], and another to notify the end of the time block. If you use a planner, then block out the time of the respective day. If you're using a notebook, then draw out your timeline and carve out time slots (see Figure 10). Keep this in front of you while you work for your reference and keep one eye on the clock. If you get into the flow of what you're doing, you could easily lose your sense of time [32].

Since planning the day is a frequent activity and every day is

[26] Laura Scroggs. The Eisenhower Matrix: Avoid the "Urgency Trap" with Dwight D. Eisenhower's famous prioritization framework. https://todoist.com/productivity-methods/eisenhower-matrix, 2021

[27] Stephen R Covey. *The 7 habits of highly effective people: Powerful lessons in personal change*. Simon and Schuster, 2004

[28] Dyan Williams. Finding Your Rhythm: When to Do What. https://dyanwilliamslaw.com/2019/12/finding-your-rhythm-when-to-do-what-step-2-match December 2019

[29] Vigilance is our ability to keep our guards up so that we concentrate on a problem/task for a sustained time period, e.g., to write a report, apply known concepts or models to solve problems

[30] Daniel H Pink. *When: The scientific secrets of perfect timing*. Penguin Press, 2019a; and Daniel H Pink. When: Vigilance Has Its Limits. https://www.danpink.com/resource/when-vigilance-has-its-limits/, 2019b

[31] Manas Tungare, Manuel Perez-Quinones, and Alyssa Sams. An exploratory study of calendar use. *arXiv preprint arXiv:0809.3447*, 2008

[32] Jeanne Nakamura and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. The concept of flow. In *Flow and the foundations of positive psychology*, pages 239–263. Springer, 2014

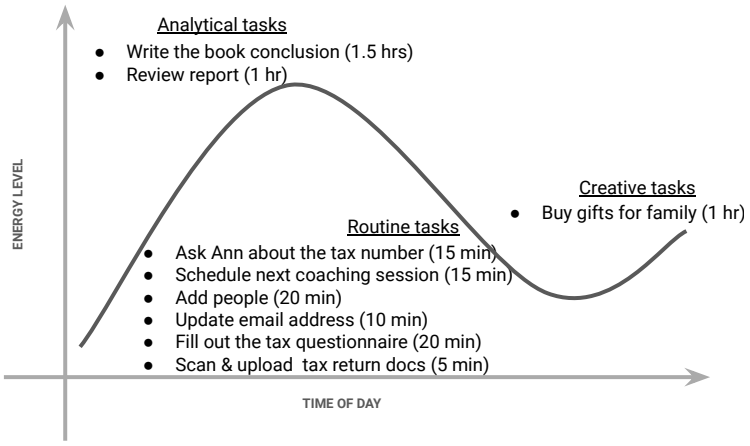



Figure 9: Prioritizing the tasks and events from Figure 7 based on your energy curve. For night owls, invert the curve, i.e., start with creative then routine and then analytical.

slightly different, it's worth shedding light on some important practical angles to keep in mind when you plan your day.

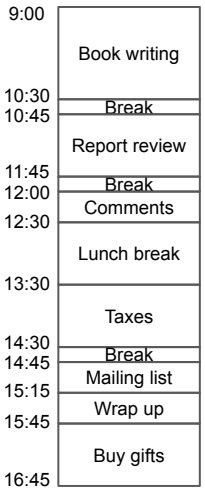



Figure 10: Schedule for the day broken down to the hour including breaks/buffer space.

*Implementation Notes*

- **Following through:** Stick to the plan as much as possible, but be pragmatic about it. Every day is filled with surprises, big or small, which will pull you away from your plan or force you to reconsider it. Focus on the important, which is what the next point is all about.
- **Focus on the important:** *Do not sacrifice the important work for the unimportant*. What does that mean to you? For example, my first task for today was to edit this chapter. While editing this chapter I came across a comment on changing the font size of Figure 3. Now tell me, is that important or not? Obviously, legible text in the figures is important to you, the reader. But while editing this chapter, the font size in the figure was not important. What

mattered, was the structure and flow of the content, and if my arguments held together or crumbled. Not the font size. Of course, there are going to be exceptions, e.g., instead of writing I end up playing with an online logo designer, or I plan my conference trip first thing in the morning instead of analyzing data for a report. But the exception should not become the rule.

- **On intricate daily plans:** Avoid getting lost in the details, e.g., including routine things like brushing your teeth and so on. Strike a balance between planning and doing.

- **When daily planning becomes effortless:** As you practice creating a job queue, estimating the time for tasks and building a schedule, you'll be able to intuitively select jobs and estimate the time for each of them so that they fit into your schedule. That means you will get faster at it and it won't feel difficult.

- **Which tools to use:** *Please don't fret over the tools*. I did my PhD in Computer Security and I know that finding the best/safest/fastest tech stack can be a rabbit hole. In most cases, the good old pencil/pen and notebook/planner adequately serve the purpose in addition to a digital calendar, e.g., Google Calendar.

- **How to include buffer space in your daily plan:** There are a few ways to leave room for the unexpected in your daily plan. The first is to schedule 15-minute blocks every 60-90 minutes as illustrated in Figure 10. This way you get regular breaks or have a little more time to work on the task in case you got interrupted or underestimated. Another option is to leave a 60-90 minute chunk unplanned in between your schedule. This way if something comes up during the day, e.g., your colleague wants some information or help from you, you can work on it in that planned timeslot. You could consider having this slot fixed, e.g., 60 minutes after lunch. Finally, instead of scheduling a 30-minute meeting, schedule 25 minutes for the meeting and actually end the meeting then so you have five minutes to change your location, take a break and be on time for your next appointment (meeting or task). Outlook and Google Calendar have the option to include such buffers by default, check your calendar settings.

- **Dealing with disruptions:** Learn to accept the fact that plans change. Be resilient to such changes and avoid brooding over them. Ask yourself "how am I going to respond to this?" As soon as you accept this fact, you switch from resistance to solution mode [33]. And that's what's going to help you continue with your day. However, if this happens frequently, then you will want to identify the root cause and potential solutions when you review your day/week/month. From my experience, people coming to my desk and asking me something was a frequent disruptor, so I'd politely tell them that I'm in the middle of something right now and that I'm available at another time (recall having a fixed

[33] Eckhart Tolle. *The power of now: A guide to spiritual enlightenment*. New World Library, 2004

slot to include such events). If it's urgent for that person, they will ask someone else or find an alternative solution. The general solution I'm highlighting is to inform people about when you are available and when you are busy and to respect that. You could consider using Do Not Disturb signs as well.

- **When to plan your day:** Planning takes time so carve out at least 5-15 minutes to plan your day. This raises the question of when to plan your day? The morning you start or the previous evening? I answer this in the *3. Review* chapter in the daily review. The short answer here is to create your job queue and estimate the times the previous evening. You can prioritize and schedule in the morning before you start.
- **Use the prioritization template via Google Docs** for the Eisenhower method and the daily schedule template via Google Sheets to schedule your day (and week).

### *Your Planning Checklist*

Use this checklist to guide your planning.

- Monthly Plan
  - ☐ Formulate goals and set expectations for the month
  - ☐ Things to look forward to
  - ☐ Identify potential challenges and solutions
  - ☐ Manage appointments
- Weekly Plan
  - ☐ Create weekly dashboard
  - ☐ Break it down
  - ☐ Include things not in your monthly plan
  - ☐ Prioritize
- Daily Plan
  - ☐ Create job queue
  - ☐ How long does each job take?
  - ☐ Prioritize the jobs
  - ☐ Make a schedule for the day

### *Your Planning Templates*

- Use the monthly planning template via Google Docs to get started.
- Use the weekly planning template via Google Docs to get started. Use the prioritization template via Google Docs for the Eisenhower method and the daily schedule template via Google Sheets to schedule your day (and week).

Concentrate all your thoughts upon the work at hand. The sun's rays do not burn until brought to a focus.

– Alexander G. Bell

# 2. *Focus*

This is where the rubber hits the road. You focus on following through on the plans you made. You take it seriously. Otherwise, why make plans, right? Focus in this system also means that when you work on what you planned, you concentrate on that task. At the same time, you eliminate distractions that try to draw your attention away from the task you intend to complete. This is one of the cornerstones to productivity and well-being that's not covered in Getting Things Done. However, Cal Newport has dedicated an entire book to this topic. The good news is that being able to focus is a skill that you can develop and master [34] through practice and self-control.

If you are still pondering the value of this chapter, then I've got four solid reasons why focusing on following through is profitable.

[34] Cal Newport. *Deep work: Rules for focused success in a distracted world*. Hachette UK, 2016

### *Four Reasons To Focus On Following Through*

1. **Finish with peace of mind:** Get things done steadily and calmly rather than stressing out closer to the deadline or beating yourself up by saying "I should have finished that sooner".

2. **Weaken your weaknesses:** Become aware of the negative effects interruptions and distractions have on your performance so that you can focus better.

3. **To learn from and experience your plans:** By following the plan, you understand the pitfalls and challenges of planning and gain insights into your estimation skills. This is valuable feedback for future planning.

4. **Respect:** You will have more respect for your time and energy as well as that of others.

Are you ready to learn how to put your plans into action? Awesome! Now for the technicalities.

### *How To Focus On Following Through*

Three methods will get you to focus on following through. The first is to navigate your day practically and effectively. The second is to induce artificial stress to focus on the task at hand. And finally, to eliminate distractions to stay focused.

## *Navigate Your Day Practically & Effectively*

The main idea behind navigating the day is about handling surprises and controlling your network tools (email and internet access) as these are unwittingly time suckers [35], apart from people showing up at your desk, phone calls and meetings (which again typically arise via email invitations). So how do you do it?

**Handle surprises by asking yourself a few questions.** In *Plan Your Day* we learned to include a window for error but we did not learn how to navigate such events. We also learned about the Eisenhower matrix which is applicable here as well. Whenever something unexpected comes up, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does this have to be decided right now?
- Can I politely say no?
- Can I delegate this?
- Can I schedule this?

If you can decide later, then schedule the decision-making process and continue what you were doing. If not, can you say no? Then do so politely. If not, can you delegate it? If yes, then either schedule the delegation process or do it immediately and then continue where you left off if you still have time left. If not, then you will have to work on it right away unless it can be scheduled at a later time or day. If you end up working on it immediately, you'll have to replan the remainder of your day. If not, great! You've navigated the surprise rather well.

**Email is a task, schedule it!** Be true to yourself and consider email as a communication task. This means that it goes into your daily plan. Typically, email is a frequent task, so it's going to be repeated multiple times a day. Also, recent research has shown that we tend to work longer than estimated on our email [36]. So reckon to allocate more time than you estimate for email. Now, you can prioritize your email access and schedule it into your calendar.

**Batch process Internet access.** Internet access is another one of those rabbit holes we tend to spiral into during our day. Here's how it happens to me. I outline the structure of my presentation in the slide deck. Next, I begin to fill in the content starting with the introduction. I immediately realize that I want to hook the audience with an image. I head over to Unsplash to find a free high-resolution image. Nothing striking shows up in my first search attempt so I search again. I click on something close to what I'm looking for and that's when I enter the rabbit hole. Click. Click. Click. Click... After five to ten minutes of clicking, my face has leaned closer into the screen. I've found something acceptable that I can use. Now, I spend a few minutes merely figuring out where I left off, work on a couple more slides and then I want another image. Before I know it, I'd spent a good half hour searching for content rather than producing something meaningful.

[35] Yoana Ahmetoglu, Duncan P Brumby, and Anna L Cox. To plan or not to plan? a mixed-methods diary study examining when, how and why knowledge work planning is inaccurate. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(CSCW3):1–20, 2021b

[36] Yoana Ahmetoglu, Duncan P Brumby, and Anna L Cox. To plan or not to plan? a mixed-methods diary study examining when, how and why knowledge work planning is inaccurate. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(CSCW3):1–20, 2021b

Here's how I get out of that vicious cycle. Instead of looking something up immediately when I'm stuck, I collect these queries and process them in batches [37]. Then I think of how I can work around this small obstacle. And then, I do exactly that, I workaround the hurdle. Stop! I know what you're thinking. I promise you can continue what you're working on without solving that tiny problem that comes up. You'll be amazed at how effective this can be!

If you got this far, then you will probably also want to know what happens when these ideas are put into action. Continue reading to find out more.

[37] Cal Newport. *Deep work: Rules for focused success in a distracted world*. Hachette UK, 2016

*Implementation Notes*

- **The two-minute rule and its limitation:** In Getting Things Done, David Allen suggests that if a task comes your way and it takes less than two minutes to complete, finish it right away. It sounds like a really good idea to avoid the planning overhead as well as, wait for it, getting things done. However, this rule introduces context switching, i.e., you switch from say, writing your report to answer a question from your colleague on where to go for lunch. Research has shown [38] that context switching is cognitively demanding and energy draining. Furthermore, when it comes to email, two-minute responses could easily spin into a 20-minute thread. The result is exhaustion due to the frequent context switching and no progress on the planned task. Therefore, when implementing this rule, it is important to consider the context of the two-minute tasks as well.

- **When surprises eat away the day:** Emergencies or unexpected events that consume a majority of the day, e.g., you're expected to work on a new and highly valuable pitch/proposal with an imminent deadline, can be stressful, inconvenient, or outright infuriating. It's easier said than done, but there is no point ruminating or fretting over the event that took over your plan. Practice acceptance [39] and move on with your day by telling yourself something like "acceptance is key, how do I want to respond to this new situation" or "I'm going to restart my day starting now" [40].

- **Keep you email client closed:** Unless it's time to work on your email, your email client should be closed. I'm serious, if your emails are visible they will eventually distract you. Yes, they will [41]! Moreover, why schedule the email task, if the client is always open? You've got to be strong! Exhibit self-control and delayed gratification. Also, if there's an urgent email response needed from your end that you don't know of, the person who needs you will find a more direct way to reach you. Trust me, you are going to be okay. However, if the potential risk and stress involved in this method outweigh the benefits, please disregard it.

- **Challenges with scheduled email access:** Scheduled access to email is psychologically incredibly difficult when you begin, there's

[38] Sophie Leroy. Why is it so hard to do my work? the challenge of attention residue when switching between work tasks. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 109(2):168–181, 2009; and Gloria Mark, Victor M Gonzalez, and Justin Harris. No task left behind? examining the nature of fragmented work. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on Human factors in computing systems*, pages 321–330, 2005

[39] Eckhart Tolle. *The power of now: A guide to spiritual enlightenment*. New World Library, 2004

[40] Tim Ferris. How to Get Back on Track After Slipping Up (Habits, Diet, etc.). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmgl_bT9_vc, 2021

[41] Cal Newport. E-mail Is Making Us Miserable. https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/e-mail-is-making-us-miserable, February 2021

always that lingering desire to "Get new messages". It could also be a distraction when you are working on something, especially when you are waiting on someone for information, authorization or direction. In such moments, notice your thought patterns and tell yourself something like "Let me finish what I'm doing and then I'll check my email as a reward", or "there's no new message for me, let me just continue what I'm doing and check it later on". After some practice, you will notice the desires wane away and you can concentrate better.

- **Avoiding the browser wormhole:** Keep your browser closed, otherwise close all tabs except those that are relevant to the task, e.g., access to an online database, online form or Google Docs. From my own experience, I can say that this can be tricky, especially if you've always had your browser open. So to begin with, consider replacing the tasks you use your browser for, e.g., the dictionary, with an offline application. MacOS has a useful dictionary with a thesaurus, translator and Wikipedia search engine. That's better than having your browser open with a dozen distracting tabs.

### *Artificial Stress To Focus Better*

If you've scheduled your email and Internet access that means your email client and web browser are also closed. Excellent! You've also planned your day so you've got different time slots for different tasks. Excellent! It's now about focussing on getting the current task done.

What has helped me a lot to focus on the task at hand is to make it a simple game: Can I finish this before I run out of time?

That's what induces the artificial stress that has proven to work very well for me. Initially, the thought of stressing myself out seemed like self-sabotage but after trying it out, I cannot work without a timer in front of me! Let's get into the concept a little more.

**Stress And Recovery.** You've probably played a video game at some point in your life. Typically, the goal is to win and there's only limited time to do that. When the timer starts, it feels like you've got it. The stress starts to build up halfway through and towards the end, it becomes really exciting, especially when there's so little time left and you are nearly finished. When we are playing against time, there's an urgency associated with it, and that's what drives us to stay focussed and eventually win. The time crunch is stressful, but it's good stress. The stress helps us stay on track. The stress involved will force us to recover too. Stress and recovery. That's what elite athletes include in their training regimen [42]: A burst of intense activity followed by a short recovery, a burst of intense activity then recovery (see Figure 11). Or more commonly–the Pomodoro technique [43] or interval training.

**Countdown Timer.** Okay, I've gone on about stress and recovery and how athletes use it. So how can we take that concept and bring it

[42] Josh Waitzkin. *The art of learning*. Free Press New York, NY, 2007

[43] Francesco Cirillo. The pomodoro technique (the pomodoro). *Agile Processes in Software Engineering and*, 54(2): 35, 2006




Figure 11: Two intervals of work/stress with two small breaks/recovery in an hour.

to our work? First, get yourself a countdown timer (Figure 12 is what I use [44]). It could be your phone, your watch, your kitchen timer, a sand clock, a timer on your extra monitor. If you don't have one go buy something (don't forget the batteries!). But it has to count down!

**Goal Setting.** So you've got your timer and you can see it count down but you have not yet started it because you don't have your goal yet. Well, you probably do, your goal could be something like "finish the report", "finish the presentation". That's most likely not achievable in a short time unless you're very close to finishing it. What's more specific, achievable, and time-bound is, something along the lines of: "I'm going to spend 15 minutes creating an outline for the report. After that I'll spend 15 minutes adding bullet points to each of the headings." Or "I'm going to study 3 sections from the next chapter in 45 minutes." The goals are specific (outline, sections), achievable (outline, 3 sections), and time-bound (15, 45 minutes). Note that it doesn't always have to meet all the SMART criteria [45], the most important are specificity, achievable and time-bound. If the goal is too ambitious, you'll be left feeling dejected, if it's too easy, you're not pushing yourself enough. Try to strike a balance between the goal or challenge and your skill. This is what's also going to get you into the so-called flow state [46].

Well, that's easier said than done. Here are some concrete challenges and solutions with implementing such a technique.

### *Implementation Notes*

I'd like to point out that, this is slightly different from what Newport [47] prescribes where the countdown timer is brief and there is no resetting the timer. In what I suggest, the goal is to finish within the allocated time, but you can reset it and as a result, work in intervals rather than a single period.

- **Working without a SMART goal:** One of the advantages of writing down your goal is that it holds you accountable and makes it serious. But let's face it, coming up with a SMART goal is not always feasible or practical. So what is important is that you have a *clear* idea of *what* you want to do before you set the timer. Merely telling yourself, I'm going to work on the report and then setting the timer works in many cases.

- **Did the timer beep or not:** If you're wearing noise-cancelling headphones, you'll want to make sure you hear the timer beep

[44] E-More. E-More Kitchen Timer, 60-Minute Visual Analogue Timer. https://www.amazon.de/gp/product/B085RXL8CT/ref=ppx_yo_dt_b_asin_title_o03_s00, 2021




Figure 12: The 60 minute countdown timer I use.

[45] George T Doran et al. There's a SMART way to write management's goals and objectives. *Management review*, 70(11):35–36, 1981

[46] Jeanne Nakamura and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. The concept of flow. In *Flow and the foundations of positive psychology*, pages 239–263. Springer, 2014; and Steven Kotler. Frequently asked questions on Flow. https://www.stevenkotler.com/rabbit-hole/frequently-asked-questions-on-flow, 2021

[47] Cal Newport. *Deep work: Rules for focused success in a distracted world*. Hachette UK, 2016

at the end. If you miss this, you should still be able to see that you've run out of time.

- **Ignoring the timer:** This is the toughest to get around. This is where self-discipline comes in, be honest with yourself. Think about what it takes for you to not ignore it.

- **Preparation is key:** Collect the necessary information before you start. This means that you'll want to spend a few minutes or maybe even an hour, gathering all that you need to begin working the interval session. For example, opening up that email in a text editor, downloading the reading material, putting the data in the appropriate folders, opening up SSH connections to the servers, asking your colleagues for data, you get the picture. In general, being prepared and ready can save you time and cognitive resources when the need to be laser-focused arrives.

- **Despite your preparation, you need to use the internet, email or IM for more information:** In my experience, internet access is a thorny issue and that's something you will have to recognize for yourself. It's asking for distraction from various sources: browser tabs, ads on webpages, finding something that piques your interest, the list goes on. Email and IM disrupt the technique and introduce unhelpful stress and anxiety [48]: e.g., you reach out to someone for information and they're taking their time to respond which blocks or frustrates you from making progress. Instead, go back to the *Navigate Your Day Practically & Effectively* chapter to learn how to navigate your day effectively.

- **How long do I set the timer to:** I've found 20-25 minute intervals to work great. I used to have 60-90 minute intervals and I'd lose track halfway through. More than 90 minutes is pointless in my opinion as there is way too much time to get distracted. It will also seem like you have a lot of time until the last 15 minutes.

- **What happens to the timer when I get interrupted:** Imagine someone interrupts you, do you stop the timer or let it run? In my opinion, let the timer continue to run. Depending on how much time you have left and how long you are interrupted, the beeping at the end will remind you that you lost time and that there's a chance you can reset the clock for the next interval. This will also gently remind you to perhaps reconsider whether the interruption or what you intended to complete is more valuable.

- **What kind of timer to use:** In my experience, an analog timer with a loud beeping sound at the end has been the most effective for me. Sand clocks are an option but you will have only a visual cue to indicate the end, the auditory part is absent which makes it less impactful in my opinion. When you start, using your phone is great but you'll be surprised as to how fast the battery drains. Make sure notifications on your phone are disabled as that's likely to be distracting. If you're someone constantly on your phone,

[48] Margarita Tartakovsky. What to Do When You Have to Wait – and Can't Stop Worrying. https://psychcentral.com/blog/what-to-do-when-you-have-to-wait-and-cant-stop-w 2016

then avoid using the phone as the timer. Placing your phone in front of your face is asking for distraction.

### *Eliminating Distractions*

Using the timer is one way of increasing your focus. Eliminating distractions is about taking precautions to ensure that you stay concentrated. There are many measures you can take to cut out distractions, I've included four simple and effective ones to get you started.

**Work with a clean screen.** The concept here is to work from a screen that's clear of distractions. What does that mean? A few things. It means that once I'm done working on a particular task I close all the applications associated with it. This includes closing associated browser tabs and even the browser, with Spotify being the only exception. This prevents me from stumbling upon an online article while working on an important task or finding the correct tab to reference during a screen sharing session. It means that my desktop screen is free from clutter, e.g., I use Mac OS's "Stacks" to organize my desktop. It also means that my dock is minimalistic to prevent me from wanting to open unnecessary apps [49]. To open an application or search for something I use spotlight. You can do all of this yourself, it's not rocket science. There are apps out there that can clear up your screen when you want to focus [50]. Also, many applications these days have a so-called "focus mode" that's worth experimenting with.

**Eliminate attention seekers.** Notifications are outright attention seekers. That's why banners, alerts, and badges are typically red. I recommend turning off the notifications. It's so simple, either use the Do Not Disturb feature on your phone/computer or manually disable notifications for all your apps, except for your calendar and phone calls. Chat messengers, email notifications, social media, news, and games can also be turned off. These notifications have crippling effects on attention-demanding tasks [51]. So if you want to be able to focus, you've got to control what comes your way. Turning off notifications is one way of doing that.

**Keep your phone out of sight.** Smartphones, like notifications, have also been engineered to keep us engaged [52]. The bright colours, fast internet access and numerous apps make it hard to live without. The next time you're in a public space, e.g., park, notice how many people are on their phone. It's so common while working too. Our phones are a huge distraction [53]. I typically avoid carrying my phone on me, especially when I'm at home. It's connected to WiFi so I can receive calls and messages on my computer while I'm working. I need this in case I get an emergency call from the daycare or my family. But other than that I keep it face down and away from me as much as possible.

**Tidy desk.** Those desks that are full of books and other things that make one look like they're getting stuff done are nonsense [54]. Cluttered desks make it hard for us to work with ease. It forces our brain

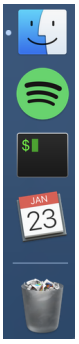


Figure 13: What my desktop dock looks like .

[49] Niklas Göke. How To Set Up Your Mac For Focused Work. https://betterhumans.pub/how-to-set-up-your-mac-for-focused-work-ab356575 2017

[50] MacPlus Software. Increase Productivity, Make your Desktop less distracting. https://noteifyapp.com/deskcover/, 2021b; Ben Willmore. Isolator. https://www.willmore.eu/software/isolator/, 2019; and AppYogi Software. Cover Desk – Desktop Utility. https://appyogi.com/apps/cover-desk-mac-desktop-utility/, 2021a

[51] Cary Stothart, Ainsley Mitchum, and Courtney Yehnert. The attentional cost of receiving a cell phone notification. *Journal of experimental psychology: human perception and performance*, 41(4): 893, 2015

[52] Ezra Klein. How technology is designed to bring out the worst in us. https://www.vox.com/technology/2018/2/19/17020310/tristan-harris-facebook-twitter-humane-tech-time 2018

[53] Sanjeev Yadav. Your Phone Is A Distraction Only If You Want It To Be. https://sanjeevai.medium.com/your-phone-is-a-distraction-only-if-you-want-it- 2020

[54] Brett McKay. How to Declutter Every Aspect of Your Work Life. https://www.artofmanliness.com/career-wealth/career/declutter-office-digital-work-life/, 2020

to do more, i.e., sort through the clutter, and can be distracting depending on what's lying around. Keep your workspace and living space tidy [55]. Get rid of unwanted things. I tidy up my desk regularly. This means that I throw away things that are no longer of value, file away documents, dust off surfaces and arrange the few things that I need to work with, e.g., timer, headphones, water jug and cup, notebooks, stationery holder, charging cable, keyboard and mouse. A clean environment makes us feel good and is a relaxing place to work and live as we don't have to constantly navigate hurdles or search for things amidst a stockpile. It has taken me months to reduce distractions and I'm still not done. Nonetheless, there are three insights based on the above techniques that you can use to reclaim your attention faster than I did.

[55] Greg McKeown. *Effortless: Make It Easier to Do What Matters Most*. Virgin Books, 2021

*Implementation Notes*

- **Exhibit self-control:** Once you've turned off notifications, set restrictions or time frames on when you will use those devices or apps. Resist the desire to use those devices or open those apps by telling yourself "There's nothing new for me, I'm going to continue working".

- **Keep your phone out of sight:** To begin keeping your phone out of sight while you work or when you're at home, first put it on silent. Then leave it in a room that you infrequently visit or a surface that you do not see while working or hanging out in the living room, for example. You'll also want to consider the possibility that you may have to pass that room on your way to the bathroom which could tempt you to grab your phone. Resist yourself.

- **Quit hoarding:** First on browser tabs, just close them all! Seriously. Do it now. Seriously. If you wanted to read those New Yorker essays, you would have by now. And those tabs that you need for work? Hmmm... close them. You can load them when you have to use those sites. If that means waiting a few minutes at that point, that's okay, view it as a tiny break to pause and breathe. What matters now is to not be distracted. Second, when you want to tidy up the desk, get yourself some trash cans and trash things that you are not using. Are there papers you printed a long time ago? Do you still need them? Really? Are there are a dozen pens, pencils and clips lying around? Do they even work? Throw them away. Are there coffee mugs or bottles taking up space? Put them for a wash. Are the flowers in the vase wilted? Are there leaves fallen below the flowers? Are there pencil shavings occupying valuable real estate? Clean it all up.

### *Your Focus Checklist*

Use this checklist to assist you in following through and focusing.

- Navigate Your Day Practically & Effectively
  - ☐ Handle surprises by asking yourself a few questions
  - ☐ Email is a task, schedule it
  - ☐ Batch process Internet access
- Artifical Stress & Recovery
  - ☐ Place a countdown timer in front of you
  - ☐ Formulate a SMART goal if possible
  - ☐ Set the timer interval
  - ☐ Focus
  - ☐ Reset the timer if working in intervals
- Eliminating Distractions
  - ☐ Work with a clean screen
  - ☐ Turn off notifications
  - ☐ Tidy desk

Follow effective action with quiet reflection. From the quiet reflection will come even more effective action.

– Peter Drucker

# 3. *Review*

We now shift from execution to reflection. This closes the loop to the process. It's such a key aspect that is often overlooked by many of us. We make a lot of plans but tend to forget to review those plans. Think about how you or your colleagues end the day for a moment. Do you look at the time and then think to yourself, "that's it for today, I'm out of here"? And then pack your bag up and leave? What about ending the week? When Friday, Saturday or Sunday comes around, do you ruminate about the upcoming week?

Reviewing what we completed gives us a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. It can also sustain our motivation wave [56]. Reviewing what did not get completed and planned helps us stay on top of things [57]. Of course, there are going to be items that were not completed. So instead of getting frustrated or annoyed or disappointed by that, we analyze why and what went off course so that we can plan and execute better the next time. Reviewing and reflecting on our performance requires relatively little time and provides high returns in terms of well-being and productivity.

When it comes to reviewing our performance, think of a triangle (similar to the *1. Planning* chapter) but this time we start broad from the bottom with the day and build up to the month as illustrated in Figure 14. At the daily level, wrapping up the day involves identifying what got done and feeling good about it. It's also reasoning about what did not get done, finding solutions, and planning the next day. The weekly level leads to reviewing and organizing the weekly dashboards, reflection and gratefulness. And the monthly level culminates in contemplating the month–what happened, what to be grateful for, what went well and what was challenging.

As in the previous chapters, here are a few more reasons why reflection and review play a pivotal role in transforming your productivity and well-being.

*Four Reasons To Reflect On Your Performance & Plan Again*

1. **Breaks with benefits:** Pausing from the daily, weekly or monthly grind helps us recover from the stress, be it high or low levels of stress. The benefits lie in the review being effortless, providing you with an immense sense of accomplishment, and finally, an excellent way to track what's getting done and what's not.

2. **Practice gratitude:** There's always someone to thank for what

[56] B. J Fogg. Fogg Behavior Model. https://behaviormodel.org/motivation/, 2012; and Ramit Sethi. The ultimate guide to habits peak performance made easy. https://www.iwillteachyoutoberich.com/guides/ultimate-guide-to-habits/, 2016

[57] Yoana Ahmetoglu, Duncan P Brumby, and Anna L Cox. Disengaged from planning during the lockdown? an interview study in an academic setting. *IEEE Pervasive Computing*, 2021a

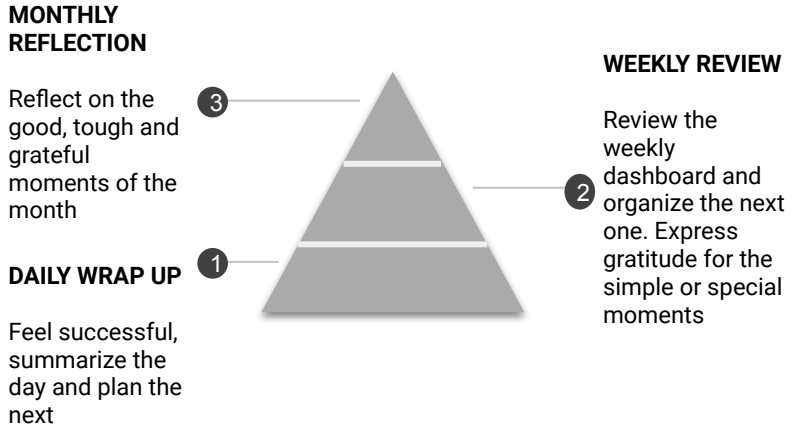



Figure 14: The review and reflection triangle starts broad with the daily review and then leads up to the monthly reflection.

you have achieved or the life situation you are in. Reflecting on that regularly can improve your well-being [58] and make the other person feel good if you express it to them.

3. **Improve plans:** Gain insight into your planning skills, e.g., do you plan to do too many things but are unable to complete most of them? Or do you underestimate or overestimate the time it takes to complete specific tasks?

4. **Get better at executing:** Gain valuable insights into why you can follow through on certain tasks/goals and not on others.

If that resonated with you, then let's get ready to unpack the final step in the process.

### *How To Review Your Performance And Plan Again*

The simplified version goes something like this: At the end of your day, week and month, ask yourself a few questions that make you reflect and you answer them truthfully. Obtain a realistic estimation of how long tasks take you which you can use for future plans e.g., how long does it take me to read a technical report? You also track the unfinished tasks along with the new ones so that they don't fall off the stack. Unlike in the planning phase, we're going to start the review with the day, week, and then the month. Each one is meant to complement the other and provide input to the next type of plan (i.e., daily, weekly or monthly plan). So let's get straight to it.

## *Wrap Up Your Day*

Wrapping up the day is something I used to do intuitively before I left my office or on my way back home from work. But after reading Newport's Deep Work [59] and Ferris's 4-Hour Work Week [60], I gave it a structure (see Figure 15) and make it a point to end my work in this

[58] Alex M Wood, Jeffrey J Froh, and Adam WA Geraghty. Gratitude and well-being: A review and theoretical integration. *Clinical psychology review*, 30 (7):890–905, 2010

[59] Cal Newport. *Deep work: Rules for focused success in a distracted world*. Hachette UK, 2016

[60] Timothy Ferriss. *The 4-hour workweek: Escape 9-5, live anywhere, and join the new rich*. Harmony, 2009

fashion. It has helped me create a psychological boundary around work. This gives me peace of mind after I'm done working and a good night's sleep as I know I've taken care of my responsibilities and have a plan for tomorrow. I don't feel that tingling sensation to check my email. In a nutshell, the daily wrap up has five questions you answer and is the last thing you do before you end your workday. It's meant to be a maximum of 30 minutes wherein your day's work is summarized and the path for the next day is laid out.

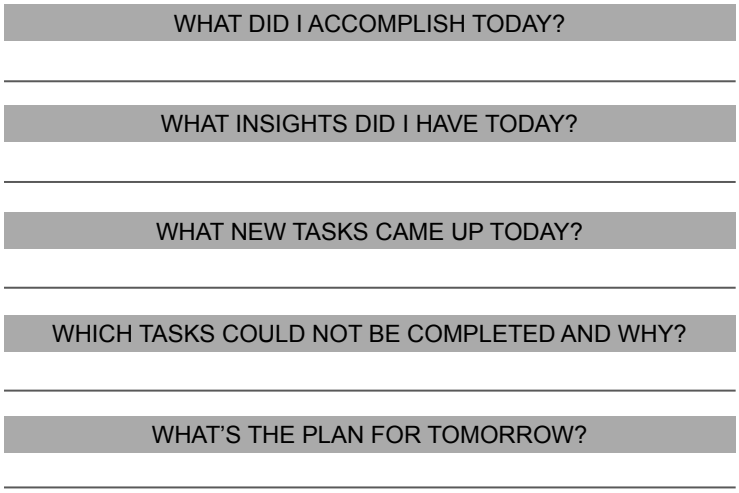



Figure 15: Five questions to answer before calling it a day.

**What did I accomplish today?** Go over the schedule you made and cross off the things you did if you didn't do so already. That's going to make you feel good, I know I feel great doing this. You could go a step further and write down a few sentences (using the – symbol from the *1. Planning* chapter) as well if you think there's more to say about what was done, why it was done or even how it was completed. This is also when you glance over your weekly dashboard and see if you can cross off anything there too.

**What insights did I have today?** Did you note down your insights or ideas when they popped up? It's a good idea to do so when you have those flashes, however, if you can still recall your creative thoughts, now is the time to do so. Use the 👁 symbol from the *1. Planning* chapter to mark your ideas. It's completely fine if you did not have any insights or ideas or if you forgot them during the day. It happens to me, too.

**What new tasks came up today?** Hopefully, you also noted down any new tasks that came up during the day; if not, now's the chance to include those new jobs or appointments in your weekly dashboard/plan. It might be adding things to an existing category or opening up a new one. It could also mean rescheduling an appointment, which means making changes to your calendar. Quickly reorganizing yourself before you end the day will leave you with peace of mind outside work hours.

**Which tasks could not be completed today and why?** Now, look at what remained from your schedule. Why didn't they get done?

Did something important and urgent come up that took away a huge slice of the day? Were there too many tasks? Did you underestimate the time to complete something? Whatever the reason is, be honest. Once you know why, you can think of potential ways to avoid that in the future. You might even want to write down your reasoning and solutions for later reference. What's important is that you act on this realization, i.e., make the necessary changes rather than fall into the same trap over and over.

**What's the plan for tomorrow?** You know what got done, what new things came up and what did not get done and why. You're perfectly positioned to identify your job queue for tomorrow. You can identify one to three important tasks as well as the urgent and unimportant tasks that you want to work on tomorrow. Look at your weekly dashboard and calendar. What do you have lined up? Can you allocate time for these tasks? If yes, you've sorted out your job queue for tomorrow, so when you come in tomorrow, you merely have to schedule it. This minimal planning will help you avoid fretting over incomplete tasks outside work hours [61] or waking up from a work-related nightmare at four in the morning.

That was the daily wrap up. Before we get to the weekly reflection there are three common questions regarding the daily wrap up that I'd like to answer next.

[61] EJ Masicampo and Roy F Baumeister. Consider it done! plan making can eliminate the cognitive effects of unfulfilled goals. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 101(4):667, 2011; and Bluma Zeigarnik. On finished and unfinished tasks. *In W. D. Ellis (Ed.), A source book of gestalt psychology*, 1938

*Implementation Notes*

- **How many accomplishments to write:** When writing down what you accomplished today, be reasonable and avoid redundancy. I used to write down every single thing I did for years and then in a passing conversation with a close friend who also reviews his day, he mentioned that he is selective in writing down his accomplishments. I paused and recalled one of my core beliefs, quality over quantity. So ask yourself, do I need to write down every single thing I did? Maybe not. Choose a few and feel good about those. But if you do want to note them all down, do so.

- **On email during the review:** Avoid writing too many emails when wrapping up. That should have been in your schedule before the wrap-up. However, we forget to reply to messages or emails and these things pop up while wrapping up the day, so go ahead and attend to them as long as you're not spending 20 minutes on merely that. If this tends to happen often, you might want to schedule a 15-20 minute slot before you wrap up where you work on those urgent tasks that must be done before you wrap up.

- **Planning the next day:** When planning the next day, select your job queue in the evening and schedule them the following morning. You could schedule some tasks/appointments but scheduling the entire day could lead to rescheduling overhead depending on when and how you start the day.

- **Use the daily wrap up template via Google Docs** to get started.

### *Review Your Week*

The weekdays have gone by, you've been wrapping up each day and you've been able to stay on top of everything that's come your way. Excellent! If not, that's okay too. It's the weekend so let's reflect on how the week went. You probably already have a good idea of how the week played out for you from the daily reviews which makes this step less about the reflection and more about the organization. There are three parts to the weekly review: reviewing and organizing the weekly dashboard, reflection, and thankfulness.

**Review and organize your weekly dashboards.** Look at the current week's categories. Identify which ones are incomplete, and move them to the following week. Recall the > and < symbols from the *1. Planning* chapter, this is when they're put into practice. Use the > to mark a task or category that you've carried forward or the < if something has been planned for a later week or month. Review the weekday's notes and your weekly dashboard to identify any new or hidden categories, tasks or appointments that came up and move them to the following week. You may have to add new goals to the month or a future month; add them now. Next, review your goals for the month–is there something that you can include in next week's plan? This housekeeping activity is going to ensure a smooth start to the next week.

**Reflect on the week.** Look over your monthly goals, is there anything to cross off? Do the goals seem unrealistic? If so, then move them to another month or scratch them off. Are there categories in your weekly dashboard that are not making progress but have been showing up for a month? Scratch them off, or plan a more realistic date and time. What worked well during the week? What did not? How can you change things to be better? Reflect on these questions for a few minutes and write down your thoughts.

**Be thankful.** Is there anybody you can be grateful to for what happened during the week? Did something happen to you for which you can be grateful for this week? Express your gratitude to the person or people if you can, otherwise write it down. Studies [62] have shown that expressing gratitude can have numerous positive effects on our well-being, e.g., increased happiness, recovery from injury and, unlocking creativity. Expressing gratitude also makes neurocircuits in our brain that make us feel good [63].

Next, I would like to clarify questions on when to review the week, how long it takes and what to do when we get thrown off schedule before transitioning into the monthly reflection.

### *Implementation Notes*

- **When to review the week:** When do you review the week–Friday, Saturday or Sunday? It depends on you. As I mentioned in

[62] Fuschia M Sirois and Alex M Wood. Gratitude uniquely predicts lower depression in chronic illness populations: A longitudinal study of inflammatory bowel disease and arthritis. *Health Psychology*, 36(2):122, 2017; and Eric Lindberg. Unlocking Creativity and Maximizing Gratitude - Dr. Glenn Fox, Dr. Scott Barry Kaufman | Flow Research Collective Radio. https://flowresearchcollectiveradio.podbean.com/e/7/, 2020

[63] Eric Lindberg. Practicing gratitude can have profound health benefits. https://dornsife.usc.edu/news/stories/3124/practicing-gratitude-can-improve-your-health-and 2019; Liz Tung. Your brain on gratitude: How a neuroscientist used his research to heal from grief. https://whyy.org/segments/your-brain-on-gratitude-how-a-neuroscientist-use 2019; and Glenn R. Fox, Jonas Kaplan, Hanna Damasio, and Antonio Damasio. Neural correlates of gratitude.

the *Plan Your Week* chapter, I review the week and plan the next in the same session which is typically on Sunday. However, there are times when I review the week on Friday evenings and then plan the week on Sunday. There is no fixed rule. Consider reviewing your week at the same time and location every week, e.g., 2 p.m. at your desk or 8 p.m. on the sofa. You could also consider stacking it up after lunch on Saturday or pairing it with coffee and cake on Sunday.

- **How long does the weekly review take:** Depending on your workload and what's going on in your life, the time and energy it takes to review *and* plan may vary. So review your week on Friday evening and plan the week on Sunday. This way you've reviewed and organized your dashboard and have an idea of how to plan and improve the following week. On Sunday, you can plan the week and include anything that may have come up during the weekend.

- **Getting thrown off schedule:** Not every week(end) is going to be predictable, especially with kids around or family to take care of. So how do you recover if you are thrown off schedule? If reviewing the week is too much to handle, skip it. But guarantee yourself that you will do so the next time because if you skip the review a second time, then you're more likely to skip it a third time and eventually end up not doing it at all. Skipping the review is going to hurt your planning which could eventually lead to you falling back on deadlines or not keeping up your word. This, in turn, is going to make you look bad, feel guilty, or in a worst-case scenario, undermine your team.

- **Use the weekly reflection template via Google Docs** to get started.

### *Monthly Reflection*

The weeks have turned into a month. Those daily and weekly reviews have paid off in helping you plan and execute better. To transition to the next month, it helps to pause and reflect. It's easy to forget all that we accomplished in a month. In retrospect, we realize we completed *a lot*. We can also identify what went well and what was challenging, e.g., why couldn't I reach all my goals or how an unpredictable event threw me off course. There are four questions to help you review your month and they are shown in Figure 16. These questions are inspired by Ein Guter Plan [64].

**What happened this month?** Review your notes, calendar, or planner and recall the events that transpired this month. Were there some memorable moments or events, any small or big wins? Did something nice or sad happen this month? Feel free to include anything that happened in your life this month. You'll be amazed by how much you got done and all that you experienced!

**For what am I grateful this month?** Recalling all that happened in

[64] Ein Guter Verlag. Ein Guter Plan. https://einguterplan.de, December 2021

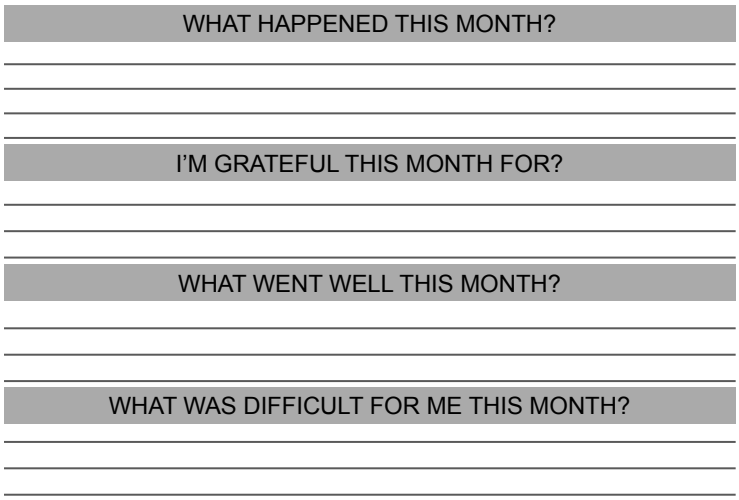



Figure 16: Four questions for the monthly reflection.

the month is a nice segue to express gratitude for what happened this month. Are there people, events or transactions you can be grateful for this month? Write them down. This introduces a positive perspective into the month which will make you feel good [65].

**What went well for me this month?** Now write down the good things you did this month. Pat yourself on the back and be proud of what you did. It could be something small or big, it does not matter. We tend to listen to our inner critic [66] who typically finds faults and complains about how we're not good enough. By finding the evidence for all the good things you've done, you silence that negative voice and gently encourage yourself. This gives you the confidence and motivation to strive forward [67].

**What was difficult for me this month?** Finally, we come to the problems of the month. What were the hurdles you had to overcome? Were you successful or not in crossing them? Why or why not? It's not rocket science and you very likely know the reason(s) for your success or failure. Giving it some thought will give you insights into how to confront such challenges in the future. You could also use this place to vent out your frustrations from the month. However, be aware of too much "complaining" every month.

That's all there is to the monthly reflection. I've got two points to clarify on inculcating the monthly reflection into your life after which comes the conclusion to this book.

[65] Nathaniel M Lambert, Steven M Graham, Frank D Fincham, and Tyler F Stillman. A changed perspective: How gratitude can affect sense of coherence through positive reframing. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 4(6):461–470, 2009

[66] Lisa Firestone. 4 Ways to Overcome Your Inner Critic. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/compassion-matters/201305/4-ways-overcome-your-inner-critic, 2013

[67] Courtney E. Ackerman. 12 Tips For Building Self-Confidence and Self-Belief. https://positivepsychology.com/self-confidence-self-belief/, 2021

### *Implementation Notes*

- **How long does the monthly review take:** Reviewing the month does take some time and effort. I usually spend around 20 minutes reviewing my month and I do this over the weekend. I find the whole process very therapeutic. I tend to plan the month in a separate session as I find the planning to be more exacting than the review. However, if you have the energy to combine the two, then go ahead.

- **Descriptive answers or brief accounts:** I answer the questions in very short sentences to cover as much as I can with the limited space I have in my planner. However, if you are doing this digitally, you can go on at length. So my advice would be to pick the ones that matter the most to you and write them down. Follow the same principles mentioned in reviewing the week (Chapter *Review Your Week*) to practice this consistently.
- **Use the monthly reflection template via Google Docs** to get started.

### *Your Review Checklist*

Use this checklist to help you with your review process.

- Wrap Up Your Day
  - ☐ What did I accomplish today?
  - ☐ What insights did I have today?
  - ☐ What new tasks came up today?
  - ☐ Which tasks could not be completed and why?
  - ☐ What's the plan for tomorrow?
- Review Your Week
  - ☐ Review and organize your weekly dashboard.
  - ☐ Reflect on the week.
  - ☐ Be thankful.
- Monthly Reflection
  - ☐ What happened this month?
  - ☐ For what am I grateful this month?
  - ☐ What went well for me this month?
  - ☐ What was difficult for me this month?

### *Your Review Templates*

- Use the daily wrap up template via Google Docs to get started.
- Use the weekly reflection template via Google Docs to get started.
- Use the monthly reflection template via Google Docs to get started.

# *Final Words*

> Take time to deliberate, but when the time for action has arrived, stop thinking and go in.
>
> Napolean Bonaparte

In this book, I shared the story that led me to research, design, test, and implement a system that transformed my productivity and well-being. I then introduced the system as a cyclical process: plan, focus, review; and then drilled down to the specifics of each step in the process.

Planning sets the stage for everything that follows, starting with the month, followed by the week and then down to the day. Setting goals and expectations, identifying potential challenges, following a note-taking system, breaking tasks down to atomic units, prioritization, estimating task completion times well and scheduling are the main aspects of planning. Regular planning ensures that we make consistent progress on our long term goals as well as the urgent and unexpected tasks or events that inevitably come our way.

Following through on our plans involves handling surprises well, scheduling communication and internet access, increasing our focus using artificial stress, and eliminating distractions by turning off notifications, keeping our phone out of sight and working in a clean space. It also takes some practice and considerable self-discipline to curb our desires for instant gratification. Staying disciplined ensures that we get things done.

Reviewing our performance is chiefly about reflecting on what we accomplished, noting down the ideas that popped in our minds, asking ourselves why we could not complete planned tasks, reorganizing our weekly dashboard, expressing gratitude and giving ourselves the chance to express our problems or frustrations and coming up with solutions to overcome those problems in the future. Reflection and review ensure that we make necessary changes to reach our goals as well as sustain our perseverance by giving us a sense of success every day.

At this point, you've learned the key concepts of my system and potential challenges you might face implementing them. I've shown you what I use and I've given you the templates to get started. You are empowered with an operating system to achieve the goals that

you set and take charge of your life.

Finally, I'd like to leave you with a few thoughts.

1. There's more to your productivity and well-being than what's mentioned in this book, e.g., nutrition, exercise, recovery, motivation, self-awareness, creativity, etc. Show me more!

2. It takes careful thought and effort to tailor what's in this book to your mode of operation. e.g., the idea behind the timer makes sense but it sounds daunting, should I skip over this or not? What's the real benefit in applying it or what do I risk not doing it? Customize this system for me!

3. To implement some or all the concepts from this book in your life you will want to think of crafting habits that last. From my own experience of designing lasting habits, reviewing the science and coaching people, I know very well how demanding all of this can be and what the common pitfalls people tend to make when crafting a new habit. For example, instead of starting easy many people make it difficult to start a new habit which explains why the new habit does not even last a few attempts. Take me from theory to practice

4. Sometimes, writing down your goals or blocking time out in your calendar is not the hard part, it's honouring them that's hard. Holding yourself accountable to someone or a group can help. I want accountability

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