

How to Accomplish More in Less Time

How to Accomplish More in Less Time

by Michael Masterson

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Introduction

One of the most incredible stories of accomplishment I know isn't about a man who made millions of dollars or became a success in business. It's about a doctor named Salvator Altcheck. Now, I didn't know him personally, but I read about him in *The New York Times* after he died at the age of 92...

For 67 years, Dr. Altcheck worked out of a basement office in the Joralemon Street rowhouse in Brooklyn Heights where he lived. He treated tens of thousands of patients over the years, delivered thousands of babies, saved hundreds of lives, and rarely charged more than \$5 or \$10 a treatment, when he charged at all.

He was known as "the \$5 doctor." A former patient of his, Jimmy Rios, said, "You could walk into his office, and he could tell you what you had before you sat down."

A Sephardic Jew who spoke Ladino, a combination of Hebrew and Spanish that has been spoken by the Sephardim since as far back as the 15th century, Dr. Altcheck came with his family to America in 1914. His father worked half a dozen jobs to put his children through school. Three of his children went to medical school. The father paid for the tuition of the first, which nearly broke him. But then the first, upon becoming a doctor, was able to pay for the education of the second, and then the second for a third.

(This is how some Korean families I know do it. Each child, in turn, goes to school while the others work.)

For more than half a century, Dr. Altcheck woke at the crack of dawn, tended to his personal affairs, and opened his office doors at 8 a.m. He worked relentlessly, breaking only once a day for a half-hour dinner at 5 p.m. His office hours ended at 8 p.m., but he didn't. He typically made house calls in the evening, often until midnight.

During the many years that he lived in Brooklyn Heights, he saw his neighborhood change from proper society enclave to wartime boardinghouse district to artistic bohemia to haven for young professionals. He knew everyone – professionals, thugs, artists, and bums – and everyone knew him. Once when he was held up at gunpoint, the robber suddenly recognized him and reached into his own pocket and gave the doctor \$10.

He stopped making house calls only when he could no longer climb steps. His last spoken words, according to his obituary, concerned something about his owing a medical report to a patient.

It makes you wonder why some people succeed in realizing their dreams, like Dr. Altcheck did, while others fail. I think most fail not because of incompetence but merely because they become lazy or distracted. Years later, they sit and think back and wonder: "What would have happened to me if I had persevered?"

What is your greatest ambition? What do you want to attain in life? Do you have a financially valuable skill to support yourself and your ambition? Do you know exactly what needs to be done to be successful? Are you giving yourself enough extra time to get the extra work done?

On the following pages, I'm going to show you how to get closer to where you really want to be. You'll get specific actions, some of which take less than 30 minutes each to implement. Some of them, you may even regard as "silly," "unnecessary," or "wasteful." Don't be cynical. These actions can change your life.

How to Accomplish All Your Most Important Goals

The hardest (and perhaps most important) step you'll take toward accomplishing your goals is selecting them. The rest is easy. It's true. And, in fact, I have a technique for doing it that has worked for me as well as for everyone else who has tried it, including dozens of individuals I've personally coached.

Start with a sheet of paper. Title it "My Life Goals" (if you have no shame) or "Stuff to Do Before I Croak" (if you are afraid someone will see it).

Now, make a list of everything you want to accomplish.

Making a lot of money. Writing books. Traveling to Rome. Learning to tap dance. *Everything*.

Write till you are done.

"We must use time as a tool, not as a crutch."
– John Fitzgerald Kennedy

Then let your list sit for a few hours. Even a day.

Next, narrow it down to your top 10 choices. Then take another rest. Now make another cut. This time, you have to select your top four goals. (If you have trouble doing this, imagine your obituary. What would you want it to say about you?)

These are your Life Goals... your top priorities... your bottom-line, long-term objectives.

Now, decide on the one that is *numero uno*.

On a separate sheet of paper... or perhaps on an index card... write down your four Life Goals, with the most important one on top. Highlight it.

The plan you are about to learn will pretty much guarantee that you will achieve all four of these objectives before you die. It will *definitely* ensure that you'll complete the first one.

What does that mean to you? Well, consider this: If you haven't done these things yet and you're over the age of 30, there is an 80% chance that you won't achieve them... ever.

Unless you follow this program...

Measuring and Improving Your Personal Productivity

Okay. Here's what you need to do now. Convert the four long-term Life Goals you just established into medium-term 5-year objectives. Let's say, for example, that your No. 1 Life Goal is to have a net worth of 10 million dollars. And let's say that you want to retire in 10 years. You might make "having a \$5 million net worth" your 5-year objective.

You are going to use this 5-year list to create a 1-year list. And you will use the 1-year list to create monthly lists. And you will use each monthly list to create weekly lists. And each weekly list to create daily task lists. The point is to break down these seemingly unachievable objectives into little goals that aren't so daunting.

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

So let's take a look at your 5-year objectives. It might be hard for you to visualize how you're going to get there from here. But all you need to do is break down those 5-year objectives further – into short-term 1-year objectives. Do it by determining what you need to accomplish this year in order to meet each one.

Using our example:

If your 5-year objective is to make \$5 million, you might determine that to meet that objective, you'll need to get 24 new clients this year.

Now, take a look at your 1-year objectives. Then ask yourself what you need to do this month to achieve them. What about next month? And the month after that? These things that you need to do will make up your monthly task lists.

Back to our example:

If your 1-year objective is to get 24 new clients this year (so you can meet your 5-year objective), you'll need to find two new clients every month.

Make every minute count on business trips...

Be in control of your business trips. When planning them, try to schedule five or six meetings in a row all in one place. It's an exhausting way to spend your day, but it will save you the time of running from one appointment to another.

Next, you're going to break down this month's objectives into weekly task lists. You'll be using the same process as you did when breaking down your 5-year and 1-year objectives. You'll determine what tasks you need to accomplish on a weekly basis to meet the objectives you set for each particular month.

Let's build on our example:

If you need to get two new clients each month to meet your 1-year objective, your weekly task list may include items such as these: Place 10 calls to prospective clients. Send out 10 brochures. Attend a meeting of my local Chamber of Commerce to network.

Believe it or not, completing the tasks on your daily list is the most important step of all. You must discipline yourself to spend the time to do it *every day*. If you don't, all of your other hard work will go down the tubes and you'll be lucky to achieve just one of your four Life Goals.

To create your daily task list, you simply break down your weekly task list into smaller, even easier to accomplish daily tasks.

Once again, let's revisit our example:

If your weekly task list is to (1) place 10 calls to prospective clients, (2) send out 10 brochures, and (3) attend a meeting of my local Chamber of Commerce to network, your daily task lists for the week might be broken down like this:

Monday

- *Make 2 calls to prospective clients.*
- *Address 5 brochures.*

Tuesday

- *Make 2 calls to prospective clients.*
- *Address 5 brochures.*

Wednesday

- *Make 2 calls to prospective clients.*
- *Mail the 10 brochures.*
- *Contact local Chamber of Commerce for time and location of their next meeting.*

And so on...

Organization made easy...

Buy a pack of 3-by-5 index cards. Carry one (and a pen or pencil) with you at all times to jot down fleeting ideas and other important notes. Once a week, transfer all of these notes to your calendar.

These index cards are also the perfect size for your task lists.

But there's something else you need to consider before structuring your daily task list. Because you also have a lot of pesky little tasks that you have to do – even though they

have nothing to do with your four Life Goals. I'm talking about aying bills, returning phone calls, making appointments, going to the grocery store, cleaning the bathroom... the list goes on and on.

I know it sounds like too much to handle, but there's a simple way to organize this seemingly never-ending work: with the Steven Covey Quadrant. You use the Quadrant by going through your daily task list and categorizing every item on it as one of the following:

1. *Important-and-Urgent (Example: a 1 p.m. meeting with a top client)*
2. *Important-but-Not-Urgent (Example: anything related to your four Life Goals)*
3. *Unimportant-but-Urgent (Example: getting the oil changed)*
4. *Unimportant-but-Not-Urgent (Example: leafing through a catalog to find a present for a relative's birthday next month)*

You then follow this simple rule: Your daily task list should contain nothing that's *Unimportant and Not Urgent*, and a diminishing number of *Unimportant but Urgent* items (which happens automatically as you become more in control of your schedule).

When you make tasks that are related to your Life Goals your priority, you will almost certainly have to sacrifice other, less-important tasks to complete them. And to make sure you achieve your No. 1 Life Goal, you may even have to compromise the other three. But if you follow my system, you will definitely achieve your primary goal – and you'll have a much better chance than you otherwise would have had of achieving the other three as well.

Rise Early and Catch the Golden Worm

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

Healthy, wealthy, and wise. Let's start with wealthy – since that's primarily what we're here for.

"Waiting is a trap. There will always be reasons to wait... The truth is, there are only two things in life, reasons and results, and reasons simply don't count."

– Robert Anthony

How does starting early make you rich?

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

Over the years, I've studied hundreds and experimented with dozens of time-saving techniques and organizational systems to boost my daily productivity. And I've found that all you need is a simple three-step approach.

This system of creating a daily task list is very good. It works. Don't make the mistake of thinking it is like others you've read about and dismissed – or tried and failed at. So let's get started...

Step One: *Getting Your Inputs (Time: about 15-30 minutes)*

Start with your weekly task list (which, you remember, is derived from your monthly task list, which comes from your yearly task list, which is a derivative of your 5-year objectives, which are based on your four long-term Life Goals). On a sheet of paper, jot down everything you need to get done this week. Make sure you give primary attention to tasks related to your No. 1 Life Goal.

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

Next, check phone messages, faxes, and your in-box. Don't respond to anything. Your job at this point is simply to organize it all – to figure out what you will do today and what you can delegate or do later.

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

A clever way to keep track...

Get two accordion folders. One with a pocket for each month and another with pockets for 31 days. As you go through your e-mail or read correspondence and memos, put aside anything you want to follow up on. Place it in the pocket of the month in which you intend to address it. When that month arrives, there will probably be 30 or 40 sheets of paper stuffed inside, which you can sort through and place in some kind of manageable order in each of the days of the month. Then, as each day arrives, you simply extract from that day's pocket the files you've placed there.

Step Two: *Sorting and Ordering (Time: 15-30 minutes)*

Now comes the fun part. Get out a clean sheet of paper – or even an index card – and write the date on top. Referencing all the inputs you have just gathered, select 15 to 20 that you intend to accomplish before the end of the day.

Be realistic. There is no way you can do more than 15 or 20 significant things in a 10-hour day. And you don't need to work more than 10 hours a day to accomplish everything you need to accomplish to achieve all your goals.

Of the 15 or 20 items, highlight four or five of them. These should all be Important-but-Not-Urgent tasks. (Remember: The Urgent tasks, you have to do. The Important-but-Not-Urgent tasks will advance your Life Goals. They are critical to your success, but you will almost certainly fail to do them unless you make them a priority. That's why you are highlighting them.)

To the right of each item, you might want to indicate how much time you think it will take. (You might also want to indicate how much time it actually takes, so you have some idea of how realistic you're being with your estimates.)

As a general rule, it's a good idea to structure all of your tasks so that none lasts more than an hour. 15-minute and 30-minute tasks are best. If you have something that takes several hours to do, break it up in pieces and do it over a few days. It will be better for the extra time you give it and you won't get crushed on any one day.

You can also break your day into working blocks. (You might want to indicate them on your list with bold, horizontal lines.) Try to group similar activities (writing/phoning/meetings/etc.) in each block. It is more efficient. When you have completed a block of work, reward yourself with some pleasant five-minute activity. For me it can be stretching, lifting a few weights, or shooting a rack of pool. A 12-hour day can be three four-hour blocks, four three-hour blocks.. even six two-hour blocks. See how you feel.

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

Step Three: *Give Your Day a Boost (Time: 15- 60 minutes)*

Do one of the highlighted tasks immediately. Before you do anything else. If you can, select one that will make you feel good. It might be something you enjoy doing or something you really don't want to do (because it will make you feel so good when it's done).

Follow these three steps right away – as soon as you get into the office (which should be about 90 minutes before everyone else does) – and you will have accomplished more by starting time than most people do by lunchtime. (Or all day, for that matter, since most people see the majority of their days consumed by unimportant emergencies.)

“A horse never runs so fast as when he has other horses to catch up to and outpace.”
– Ovid

Here's an example of what your daily task list might look like:

Daily Tasks 1/07/05

Task	Est. Time	Act. Time	
Phone mentor {highlighted}		30 min.	30 min.
Address 5 brochures	10 min.	15 min.	
Prepare presentation for new client prospect {highlighted}	30 min.	40 min.	
Renew trade magazine subscriptions	10 min.	15 min.	
Meeting with software team		60 min.	60 min.
Return phone calls and e-mails		20 min.	25 min.
And so on...			

Success & Work Go Hand in Hand

When I'm explaining the task-list concept to people, one of the questions I get asked most frequently is "How long should I work?" And many of them don't like my answer: "If you're behind on any of your Important-but-Not-Urgent tasks, you should work until you're done."

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

And remember that though success can come in a single windfall, it most often arrives bit by bit.

My system is a way for you to give yourself a significant advantage over the people you compete with in life. It actually gives you three advantages. You get much more done. You have to deal with far fewer unnecessary crises. And, most important, you spend a much greater percentage of your time doing things that move you along toward the goals you desire.

E-mail organization...

To make sure all of your e-mails receive prompt replies, keep a "sent" file. Go into it 3 times a week and purge everything you don't need to follow up on. You'll never again be in the awkward position of starting something and then forgetting about it.

How Long Will It Take You to Do What You Want?

Accomplishing a goal has three phases: deciding to do it, determining what specific actions are necessary and in what order, and executing those actions. By now, you should have chosen your Life Goals and derived from them 5-year, 1-year, monthly, weekly, and even daily objectives. I have given you a very good system for getting them done. What's left is the doing...

Ah, there's the rub.

Out of every 100 people who choose to do something, the majority will drop out before they begin because they don't have an effective plan. Of those that remain, 80% will fail simply because they stopped the doing. Execution, as they say, is nine-tenths of the game. So now, we are going to talk about how long it takes to actually execute your goals.

“Things may come to those who wait, but only the things left by those who hustle.”
– Abraham Lincoln

My theory (a hopeful one, admittedly) is that if you begin a task with a realistic idea of how long it will take to accomplish it, your chances of finishing it are greatly improved.

If you decide to become a lawyer, you need to know that it will take you three years of full-time effort after college. If you decide to learn Spanish, you are better off recognizing that a certain sum of hours is necessary to achieve any level of proficiency.

I have been thinking about this lately for several reasons. First, because I'm in the process of learning two new skills (ballroom dancing and Spanish) – and I'm interested in knowing how long it will take before I am “good” at them. And second, because I am coaching some friends and relatives on career choices and need to be able to tell them how long it might take them to learn their new skills.

You might want to know, for example, how long it takes to:

- * become a good public speaker
- * dance well at weddings
- * practice a martial art
- * play a musical instrument
- * learn the secrets of direct marketing
- * become a good copywriter

Put information “on hold”...

Create a “hold” box in your office – a place where you can keep materials that you will need to refer to later. For example, you can use it to keep a copy of data that someone is analyzing for you, a copy of a book that someone is reading and outlining for you, or a product sample.

Almost as soon as you ask the question “How long will it take to be good at...?”, you realize that “good” needs to be defined – for we recognize that it is possible to practice any skill at various levels of proficiency. To make matters simple, let’s say that, broadly speaking, you can have the following three levels of skill in just about anything:

- * competence
- * mastery
- * virtuosity

Anything Worth Doing Takes Time...

Let’s illustrate this principle with ballroom dancing.

You probably know people who move well on the dance floor. Whether it’s a cha-cha, a fox trot, or swing music playing, they can go out there and make the moves. They are not professionals – they could not compete favorably in a contest – but they are definitely *competent*. The next level – *mastery* – is the level of the professional dancer... a teacher or a member of a dance troupe.

It’s easy to see the difference between competence and mastery, isn’t it? What about *virtuosity*? Well, that’s Fred Astaire.

Now, back to the question: “How long will it take to be good at ballroom dancing... or any other worthwhile skill?” I’ve spent quite a bit of time thinking about this, talking to professionals, and recalling personal experiences. My conclusion is as follows:

- * It takes about 1,000 hours to become competent.
- * It takes about 5,000 hours to become a master.
- * It takes between 25,000 and 35,000 hours to become a world-class virtuoso. (And even then, only if you are gifted.)

These are ballpark numbers, but they are surprisingly reliable. Skeptical? Let’s check it out. What shall we use? How about language? How many hours would it take for you to become competent at speaking French? Based on my experience learning that language, here’s a good guess:

- * 300 hours to learn – cold – the 20 most common irregular verbs in three tenses

- * 100 hours to learn about 50 prepositions, conjunctions, and articles
- * 200 hours to get a good grasp of French grammar
- * 200 hours to learn about 1,000 useful nouns
- * 100 hours to memorize gender
- * 50 hours to acquire passable pronunciation

What does it all add up to? 950 hours.

As I said, that would get you speaking well, but it would hardly qualify you as a French teacher. To get to that level, you'd need to do a lot more work. Say you studied two hours a day and practiced for another three hours... and you did this for three years. At that point, you'd probably be ready to teach, don't you think? You would have reached a level most would consider fluent.

"Time is the longest distance between two places."
– Tennessee Williams

Take one more example – Jiu Jitsu. I have been at it now for two years. I have spent about 600 hours and have just received my purple belt. I feel almost competent. I can easily handle white belts and most blue belts, but I struggle with good blue belts. I have the distinct feeling that I am about 100 hours away from competence.

Seven hundred hours is not 1,000, but I've had the advantage of being trained by Reylson Gracie, probably the best instructor of his kind. That kind of education counts. In this case, it "saved" me about 30% of the time I would otherwise have spent to become "good" at Jiu Jitsu.

So I would make this adjustment to my 1,000-hour theory: Deduct 20% to 30% for good teaching.

Allocating Time to Achieve: The Case of the Terminal Bachelorette

Think about the goals you have set for yourself. Have you allocated enough time to accomplish them? Let me give you an example – an odd but true one.

A friend of mine – an attractive, intelligent woman – has been looking for the right man for as long as I’ve known her. She is committed to finding Mr. Right. And she has read books about how to do it. Yet, nothing has happened. The reason? She spends almost no time doing what she really needs to do to achieve this goal. She thinks about it a lot and is open to blind dates, etc. – but she seldom actually goes out there and makes herself available.

I wondered if my 1,000-hour theory would work in her case – and proposed that she try it. My guess: If she were to put in 1,000 hours over the course of one year, she would have her man.

Make it easier to leave the office...

If you’re having a hard time leaving the office on time, try these three suggestions that I adapted from a book by Paula Peisner-Coxe titled *Finding Time: Breathing Space for Women Who Do Too Much*.

1. On your calendar each day, make an appointment with yourself to “close up shop” 30 minutes before you want to leave. When that time comes, stop doing whatever you are doing and begin clearing your desk, packing your bag, and checking off your daily task list.
2. Fifteen minutes before you leave, stop taking phone calls and close down your computer. Start making the next day’s task list.
3. Five minutes prior to leaving, get up from your chair and look around the office. Did you forget anything? Do you have everything you need? If all is well, leave a few minutes early.

Since my friend had a full-time job, that meant she would have to get out there two hours every workday evening and five hours on Saturday and Sunday.

“Imagine,” I said, “that after work each day, you got yourself up and, for two hours, went somewhere where you might meet a man – an art class, a charity event, a bar, etc. – and that you did it by yourself, with all your energy focused on your task. And assume that each Saturday and Sunday, you did the same – maybe spending time in ProShops, health clubs, etc.”

“What would be the chance,” I asked, “that if you do that every day for a year, you would *still* not have the relationship you are looking for?”

“Zero percent,” she said.

Of course.

Like my friend, you can achieve whatever you want in life. You just have to make the effort, pay attention to what you are doing, and spend the time it requires to get there.

What is that you haven’t gotten around to doing? Something important. Something that will really improve your life.

Think about it.

“The secret to success is constancy to purpose.”
– Benjamin Disraeli

Getting Your 1,000-Hour Program Going

Now you know that it's going to take approximately 1,000 hours for you to achieve any specific goal (keeping in mind that you can probably do it in 30% less time if you have good coaching). So how do you put in that time in a way that allows you to *see* your progress? It's easier than you might think.

1. On a fairly large sheet of paper or poster board, create a grid of 1,000 boxes.
2. On the top of the chart, write (in bold letters) the task/objective that is most important to your success.
3. Sometime today, spend an hour doing something specific and useful to achieve that goal – and cross off your first box.
4. Put the chart someplace where it will be easy for you to see it every day.
5. Every time you put in another hour toward your goal, cross off another box.
6. Congratulate yourself. You are finally on your way!

One word of caution: Sometimes what seems like one goal is actually two. To “become a professional writer,” for example, you need to (1) become a competent writer and (2) get someone to pay you for writing.

What do you want to do? What skill do you need to become good at in order to achieve that goal? Make your chart and put in your first hour. You'll be amazed at how fast the next 999 go by.

From the never-give-up department...

Richard North Patterson rewrote his first novel, *The Lasko Tangent*, four times after it had received 14 rejection slips. It went on to win a prize for “best first suspense novel.” Since then, he has written 10 novels, five of them bestsellers.
(Source: *Bits & Pieces*, edited by Robert Bly)

Get More Out of Every Book You Read

You can give yourself a competitive edge – one that could pay you big dividends one day – by doing some extra reading. And, in fact, I’m going to show you how to read *52 additional books* this year... and every year thereafter.

I know you are busy already, but what I’m about to suggest won’t take as much time as you might think – and the benefits you’ll get from it will be well worth the effort.

Every day, new non-fiction books are published on every possible topic. Some of these contain information and advice that will help you achieve your goals. The trick is to locate the good ones and read them quickly, efficiently, and strategically.

“Some books are undeservedly forgotten; none are undeservedly remembered.”
– W.H. Auden

Tracking down the good books is easy.

Make it a habit to browse bookstores, especially in airports and train stations (where business and self-help titles are abundant). Pick up any title that appeals to you. Scan the table of contents. If it seems promising, read the first page. If you find the book interesting, hold onto it. Keep going until you can’t carry any more. Then sort through them and keep the ones you are most excited by. Armed with this load of books, you’ll be eager to get home and start reading them.

Eagerness alone won’t get you through an extra book a week, no matter how interesting and well-written it is. To keep up with the one-book-a-week schedule that I’m recommending, you have to find a way to cut your reading time by less than half.

Actually, if you approach non-fiction books tactically, they don’t take very long to “read.”

The first and most important thing is to realize that books like these are raw material for you, not finished artwork. So you should go through them as you might go through a big pile of kindling, looking for a few straight, dry pieces. Don’t waste your time fooling around with what’s not important. And don’t feel compelled to read every word.

Another way to improve your intellect...

A gradually increasing mental storehouse of quotable quotes will serve you well when it comes time to arguing your point or selling your own Big Idea. So collect memorable quotes that you come across by jotting them down on a notepad and memorizing them later. You want to be very selective about this. Acquire only those you are pretty sure you'll use.

I like to think that every good non-fiction book has one big secret to convey and several smaller ones. Your job is to find out – as quickly as you can – what they are.

There are many ways to speed-read, several of which I've tried over the years. The system I use now allows me to get through most business books in two to four hours. Here's how I do it (and I'm not the fastest reader on the planet):

1. Read the table of contents.

This should give you a quick idea about the range and depth of the subject matter. Figure out what you want from the book – what it can teach you. By doing that beforehand, you can dramatically shorten the amount of time you need to spend with the text itself. Your subsequent reading will be targeted and efficient, because your subconscious mind has already begun to think along the right lines and your interest has been primed.

2. Read the introduction and/or first chapter.

One of these usually serves as a sort of executive summary of the entire book. Here is where you can pick up the author's main argument and discover – if the book is well written – his Big Idea. (In my experience, most good non-fiction books have, at base, one Big Insight or Secret. If you miss that, you miss the book.)

3. Read the first paragraph of each successive chapter and the first sentence of each successive paragraph.

You will be amazed at how much information you can pick up this way. In terms of actual reading, you are covering only 20% to 30% of the text – but in terms of content, you are getting 80% to 90%. To get the most from this process, I usually assume that each chapter has one useful thing to teach me – and that's what I look for. When you reach a particularly useful section, feel free to slow down a bit. But get back to this technique as soon as you get what you need from that section.

4. Finally, read the entire last chapter and/or epilogue.

Like the introduction/first chapter, at least one of these will often serve as a summary. Reading them gives you a chance to internalize what you've already discovered and to make notes if you haven't already.

Control your e-mail in-box...

Try to cut down on the time you spend responding to e-mail. Limit yourself to two e-mail sessions each day and limit the amount of time you spend on each session *and* on each e-mail within the session. Get some kind of timer that will beep at you every so often to reduce the tendency to get over involved in an e-mail response. This will help you give the shortest and most succinct answers to all e-mails. Also, train those who e-mail you to keep their messages short and to the point.

I recommend keeping some sort of reading journal in which you record the title, author, Big Idea, and smaller ideas of each book. If you make your entry just after you've finished the book, this shouldn't take more than five or 10 minutes. Review what you've written once within 24 hours and then again sometime the following week. You'll be amazed at how much you'll remember. Studies show that we forget 80% of what we learn within 24 hours and most of the remaining 20% within the week that follows. But by focusing your attention on one Big Idea and recounting that idea in detail three times in 72 hours, you will remember – permanently – 80% of what you've read.

Once you get used to this way of reading, you'll find it addictive. You'll have a constant stream of new ideas coming to you that will help you in every important area of your life. You'll get smarter and better with each passing week – and that will make you feel better and more confident. Your friends and colleagues will notice the difference.

Plus, sooner or later, one of the ideas you pick up will be the big one that takes you to the next level.

Start today by going to the bookstore and picking up your first titles. Feel free to mark them up with a pen or highlighter, but remember that you are not looking to study them in detail. Your goal is to select from each one a few very helpful secrets. One big idea and half dozen little ones are plenty. Get them down and move on.

Use the scanning method I recommended above – and make sure you get through one book within the next seven days.

The Importance of Deadlines

Always set a deadline every time you agree – or get someone else to agree – to accomplish a task. Often, we work on an ASAP deadline. It's okay to work this way occasionally – but not on a regular basis.

Walt Disney once said that deadlines are good for everybody and everything. Even beavers, he pointed out, need deadlines. They sit around doing nothing all summer and begin building their dams only when the weather starts getting cold.

Stop watching television...

TV is a colossal waste of time. So make the commitment – right now – to quit. For the first few weeks, you'll go through withdrawal. But when you find out how much extra time you have for your family – and yourself – you'll be very glad you did it. If there's one show you simply can't give up, tape it and watch it while doing a routine task like cleaning the house or exercising.

Of course, for a deadline to be effective, it has to be realistic. This may sound obvious, but many people set (or agree to) deadlines that are impossible to meet. And then they either miss the deadline (and look like a failure), or they force themselves to meet it by compromising the quality of their work.

You'll never fall victim to this trap if you take these five simple steps before committing to a deadline:

1. Working backward from the desired end result, write down all the interim objectives you need to achieve along the way.
2. Create a list of the specific tasks that need to be completed to reach each one of your interim objectives.
3. Calculate how long it will take to finish each one of those tasks. .
4. Then calculate how much time you need to reach each interim objective.
5. Once you know how long it will take to reach each interim objective, you can figure out a realistic deadline for the entire project.

Don't set (or accept) any deadline until you've had the chance to break down the project in this way.

“If everything's under control, you're going too slow.”
– Mario Andretti

That said, I must admit that I often push my people to agree to fast deadlines. I'm happy when they do – but I'm also willing to compromise when they show me that a deadline I'm asking for is unrealistic. I'd rather know what can really be done early on, instead of being disappointed later.

Managing Large Projects With Ease

The time will come when you're faced with a job that seems overwhelming. The scope is enormous. The complexity is great. And you fear that it may be too much for you to handle.

Every morning, you promise yourself that you'll get started on it – but at the end of the day, you've still made no progress. The deadline is weeks or months away, but you know that if you don't do something immediately, you'll fail.

“Don't be afraid to give your best to what seemingly are small jobs. Every time you conquer one it makes you that much stronger. If you do the little jobs well, the big ones tend to take care of themselves.”

– Dale Carnegie

The solution? Begin with a five-day, “get-started” program. For five days, all you have to do is put in 15 minutes of concentrated effort on this monster of a job before you do any other work.

Fifteen minutes. It's such a short amount of time. Tell yourself, “I don't have to finish anything today. I just have to work on this in some serious way for 15 minutes.”

That doesn't sound difficult, does it?

Your commitment is just 15 minutes a day for just five days. Don't worry if you don't seem to be accomplishing anything at first. The point is to get the ball rolling.

Get a leg up on tomorrow...

Before you leave the office, take a few minutes to think about the most important task you have to accomplish the next day. Spend a maximum of three minutes doing something that will move that task forward in some way.

This is a technique my brother recommended to me many years ago. Since then, I've used it at least a hundred times, and it's never failed me. There have been times when I felt as if were wasting my time for the first day or two. But by the third or fourth day, I'm always up and running.

What happens is that those “wasted” 15-minute sessions aren't wasted at all. They force you to start thinking about ways to approach the job – first thing every morning, when you are fresh and alert. Sooner or later, inspiration kicks in – and you find that you're actually eager to get to work on it. This technique is also useful if you've been

slogging away at a project for a long time, and suddenly stall. You're so sick of it that you can't even stand to think about it. But you know that if you don't continue to hack away, it will never get done.

So the next time you're stuck on a project – either at the beginning or midway through – here's what to do:

1. Admit that you are stuck. Find some way to make that admission out in the open. Stand in front of the mirror and say, "I'm stuck." Say it to your spouse... a friend... a co-worker. Write it in your journal.
2. Change the status of the job. It was one priority among many. Make it No.1 on your daily task list.
3. Give yourself the 5-day, 15-minute challenge. Stick with it faithfully – first thing every morning – until inspiration hits.
4. Once inspired, you may be tempted to tackle the whole mess at once. Don't even think about it. Instead, break it up into small pieces. If it's a 40-page report that you have to write, break it up into 5-page increments. If it's a dozen people that you have to sell an idea to in person, make each conversation a separate task.
5. Working backward from your ultimate goal, figure out how many "units" (pages written, people contacted, etc.) you need to complete each day to meet your deadline. Figure out how long it will take you to do that – and schedule that on your calendar as your first task of the day.

When you get about 60% or 70% of the project done, it will take on a momentum of its own. At that point, you can safely assign it a slightly lower level of priority.

Reduce unnecessary commuting time...

Schedule all of your personal appointments within a block or two of your office. It might mean changing your doctor, your dentist, or even your gym – but if they're all just five minutes away, the time you'll save driving will be worth it.

Triple Your Chances of Accomplishing Your Greatest Goals

Two heads are generally better than one – not just twice as good, but three or four times as good. So if you want to triple – or perhaps even quadruple – your chances of success, partner up with someone who will work with you toward your goal.

If you can get one smart, hardworking person to help you with each of your four main Life Goals, you will almost certainly achieve them – and probably much sooner than you think.

Studies show that most successful people rely on the help of at least one other person. My own experiences validate those findings, and so do the experiences of my friends and colleagues. In fact, I can't think of a single lone wolf who succeeded. I know several people who *think* they made it on their own – but what they really did was rely on the help of others and then deny those people the credit they were due.

Four traits of top performers...

1. They take pride in being viewed as “top performers.”
2. They partner up with strong people.
3. They get the most out of their own strongest natural skills.
4. They define their work in terms of results.

(Source: *Follow This Path* by Curt Coffman, Gabriel Gonzalez-Molina, and James K. Clifton)

Business surveys indicate that partnerships achieve greater success than individual proprietorships. Statistically speaking, they are more likely to survive the difficult start-up stage, they grow faster, net greater profits (for each partner), and last longer.

The same can be said of social partnerships. On the average, married couples have higher incomes (per individual), enjoy a better standard of living, have more successful children, and view themselves as happier than do bachelors and single parents.

Plus, much, if not most, of the world's greatest art and entertainment has been the result of partnerships. (Think of Lennon and McCartney or of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.)

The capacity of the human mind is enormous – maybe unlimited. But it is impossible for any person to fully tap into that potential. We are all limited by emotional hang-ups, negative addictions, and self-destructive behavioral patterns. But you can overcome those limitations when you have a partner to push and prod you.

And when you reciprocate by pushing your partner to do and think and see more than he could on his own – well, then you have something very powerful.

Learn how to say “no”...

If you find yourself routinely doing work that should have been delegated to someone else, try these three ways to say “no.”

1. The “not-now” approach: “I can’t possibly devote enough time and energy toward that project while I’m still doing such and such. But beginning on [date], I should be free to give it the attention it deserves.”
2. The “not-all-that” approach: “I don’t have time to write up the analysis, but I’d be happy to edit it if someone else could do a rough draft.”
3. The “not-me” approach: “I’d be happy to help out, but I’ll need you to look at my current schedule and help me figure out what I can stop doing – give away or subordinate – so I can have the time to get the new job done.”

Almost all of my achievements have been the result of partnerships. Top on the list – of course – are my three spectacular children, products of a partnership that is principled by my spouse. The movie I finally managed to produce was the result of partnering with a friend who “guilted” me into doing what I wouldn’t have found time to do otherwise. My first \$100 million business was the result of a partnership in which I was the apprentice and my partner was the master. And a business that I’m currently involved in is the product of a similar partnership – except this time, I’m the “master” and my partner is one of my former protégés.

Now that I think about it, all of my multimillion-dollar business ventures have been partnerships. Most of my real estate deals, too. And the short stories I’ve had published, including those that have won literary awards, were all the result of working closely with a trusted editor.

There is romance in playing the lonely achiever, but little potential in it.

So... who are your partners? Who are your coaches? Who is urging you to get up earlier, work harder, and think smarter? Who is giving you good ideas? Who is praising your successes and warning you about pitfalls?

Do this today:

1. Review your four Life Goals.
2. Do you have a partner to help you achieve each one of them? If not, make a commitment to hook up with the kind of person (people) you need – an equal partner, a mentor, a coach, an editor, a cheerleader, or whatever.

Two ways to get your employees to help you save time...

1. Get your people into the habit of sending you one-page (no longer than that) memos and reports. If they absolutely must be longer than one page, require that they be accompanied by a half-page (or less) executive summary.
2. Tell your employees that when they read a magazine article that they think might interest you, you would like them to briefly summarize the key points for you (in writing) before passing it on.

Achieve More With a Mentor

It can take a decade or more to become a leader in your field, but you can shorten your learning curve – even drastically – if you have a mentor. With the advice, experience, and support of someone who has “been there, done that,” you can avoid the most common mistakes you are likely to make, overcome the stickiest problems, and take the smartest shortcuts.

No matter where you are right now on your career path, a good mentor will be enormously valuable.

“It can be no dishonor to learn from others when they speak good sense.”
– Sophocles

I’ve often talked about the mentors in my own business life.

From Leo, my first post-college boss, I learned the importance of persistence and dogged determination. He once had me call Honda more than 100 times to convince them to give us a new engine after the one we had died from lack of oil. We didn’t have a single, sensible argument in our favor, but that didn’t stop Leo from pushing me. Finally, after I phoned my way all the way to the top, the Honda executive leadership decided they had wasted too much time on us and gave in. I didn’t feel good about getting something we didn’t deserve, but I never forgot that lesson in persistence.

From Joel, my second major mentor, I learned a great deal. One lesson he taught me – by firing the lady who wanted me fired – was that a good leader needs to surround himself with the strongest people he can find. Another important lesson he taught me had to do with the fundamental nature of business. “Until you make a sale,” Joel explained patiently, “nothing else happens.”

You probably have no idea what you need to learn to make the next leap forward in your career. But there’s someone out there who does. The sooner you connect with that person, the faster things will start to happen for you.

How do you find your mentor? Look around your industry for some of the big success stories. What you’re looking for are five people who have retired within the past two to five years. If they’ve been retired any longer, they could be out of touch. Any less, and they’re not yet bored enough with retirement to miss working.

If your phone rings, let it...

You are doing yourself a disservice by picking up the phone every time someone calls. To maintain your productivity, get caller I.D. If the call is not one that you absolutely must take, jot down the person's name and return the call during the time of day that you've blocked out to answer phone messages.

Write each of these five people a short letter expressing genuine admiration. Compliment them on their specific achievements. Then tell them that you would value their advice on your own career. If they live in your town, invite them to lunch. If that's not possible, ask if you could schedule a 15-minute phone consultation.

At least one of the five will probably respond positively, and agree to give you a little of his time. If you find that you get along, you've got yourself a mentor.

Once you've found your mentor, make sure you know what you want to get out of the relationship. What do you need to learn? What can this person teach you? Those are the areas the two of you should work on.

Your mentor will be someone you can talk to. Someone you can trust. A good mentor will provide you with advice, feedback, and support. He will help you learn the secrets to success in your particular industry and will counsel you concerning various opportunities in your field. He will help you focus on your goals and give you direction.

Keep your files updated...

Every six months or so, update your filing cabinet. Chances are, at least one drawer is overstuffed. Take everything out, and toss anything that's outdated. Break up huge files into two or three sub-files before you stick them back in the drawer.

Show your mentor how much you appreciate what he is doing for you. Tell him how much you have learned from him and thank him every time he meets with you. Remember, the psychological reward of knowing that he is helping you succeed is his primary motivation. That said, you might want to at least offer to compensate him financially.

He might wave aside your offer. But if he accepts, you'll have to settle on a dollar amount. How much? That's up to you. Pay him no more than you feel comfortable paying him and no less than what he considers to be fair. If you can't agree on what that should be, find another mentor.

One of my current mentors, Sid, gets a check for several thousand dollars every time I spend time with him. On a per-hour basis, I'm paying him extremely well. But

given the help he gives me in making key decisions, the \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year that I invest in him is a bargain.

In Conclusion

As motivational speaker and author Robert Ringer says, the most successful people share one trait: “They don’t wait for motivation. They create motivation through action.”

In his speeches, he uses his own experience as an example. “If I had to wait for motivation to write,” he says, “I never could have written all the books I’ve written. (He’s written about a half-dozen excellent motivational books, including three bestsellers.) “Like most writers, I spend many mornings staring at my typewriter, unmotivated and without any definite idea of what I’m going to write.”

But instead of wasting time waiting for inspiration, he just starts writing. It doesn’t matter whether his initial effort is any good. So long as he gets started and keeps at it for an hour or two, he knows that he will end up with something worthwhile.

In the pages of this manual, I’ve give you a dozen tools that you can use to get started on whatever it is that you dream of achieving – and do it in less time than you ever imagined. But those tools won’t do you any good unless you use them. You have to take action. Not next month, or next week, or even tomorrow. Now.

That’s the difference between people who succeed and those who don’t. They don’t wait for everything to be “right.” They don’t wait for:

- * their personal lives to sort themselves out
- * or their work to settle down
- * or the projects they are working on to be completed
- * or the new additions to their houses to be finished
- * or the problems with their in-laws to be resolved
- * or to be inspired.

Like Robert Ringer, they take action.

“Unless you have a goal, make it a priority, and find a way to act on it every day, your chances of succeeding are very slim.”

– Michael Masterson