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WHAT TO DO WHEN THERE'S TOO MUCH TO DO

Reduce Tasks, Increase Results, and Save 90 Minutes a Day

TO-DO LIST

An Excerpt From

What To Do When There's Too Much to Do:
Reduce Tasks, Increase Results, and Save 90 Minutes a Day

by Laura Stack
Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

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PREFACE

One morning, as I entered a ballroom to deliver a keynote address for a Fortune 100 telecommunications company, one of the employees approached me. She didn't look happy. "I have to tell you something," she said. "I'm not excited about you being here."

I was a bit taken aback, since I hadn't even opened my mouth yet. "No kidding," I replied. "Do you mind telling me why?"

"Absolutely," she continued. "I have no desire to be more productive. I'm working as hard as I possibly can. I'm killing myself with twelve-hour days and already have way too much to do. I don't want a productivity consultant telling me to do more with less. I want to do less and achieve more."

The lightbulb went on, and I reassured her, "That's exactly what I'm here to help you do."

I established my company, The Productivity Pro®, Inc., in 1992 to help people achieve Maximum Results in Minimum Time®. This woman's description of "too much to do" and desire to "do less and achieve more" framed my twenty-year mission perfectly and inspired the title of this book.

Frankly, doing more isn't always better. Would your manager be more impressed if you completed thirty-seven low-value tasks in one day, or just seven tasks with incredible impact? Can an eight-hour-a-day employee be more productive than a twelve-hour-a-day employee? You know the answers. What really matters is *results*—not check marks—and not hours. Busyness doesn't necessarily equal productivity, no matter how you slice it. No one really cares how many hours you were in the building or if you finished your to-do list.

People only care about what you're able to produce and the value of those results.

I wrote this book to help you achieve more *impactful* results, not necessarily *more* results. I also realize the irony of asking you to spend some of your precious time reading this book, given all you already have on your plate. But all worthwhile things take time to implement, so I urge you to consider this an investment toward greater time-savings in the future.

We'll focus on doing less and achieving more, not doing more with less—thus the subtitle, "Reduce Tasks, Increase Results, and Save 90 Minutes a Day." The promise of this book is to be a hero at work and get a life at the same time. It's good for you, because your results will be stellar, and you'll achieve greater life balance. It's good for your employer, because you won't leave your company to search for a better life. Your satisfaction and morale will increase, and your employer's turnover will decrease.

Productivity is a win-win scenario!

Doing less will require a reset of your default "Go, Go, Go!" setting. Today's fast-paced, high-pressure environment often requires sixty, seventy, eighty, or more hours a week. But productivity tends to decrease as work hours increase; after all, how can you perform at your best when you're overworked and constantly tired? You'll make more mistakes and spend more time fixing them. You'll get further behind and run faster to stay in one place. It's a vicious, overwhelming cycle, and for many people, it seems impossible to break.

But buying this book proves you're determined to try. Just stop for a minute and ask yourself: "Do I *really* need to work so long and hard to get everything done . . . or is it possible I'm being inefficient?" When you take an honest look at your daily habits, workflow, and processes, you may discover there's a clog in your productivity.

What to Do When There's Too Much to Do turns traditional time management on its head, because many old-fashioned techniques are meaningless for today's working professional.

When I started college in the late 1980s and attended my first time-management course, the instructor taught us to write down our schedules for the entire day, including the specific time we'd work on each task. I dutifully wrote up-to-the-minute agendas, detailing what I would do and when. From 8:00 to 8:30, I'll do this task. From 8:30 to 9:10, I'll do that task. Back then I could pretty much keep up with it, and my days usually went as planned. When something unexpected came up, it was fairly easy to adjust my agenda.

Then things started to change. Fax machines, voicemail, the Internet, e-mail, handhelds, apps, and all kinds of other technology exploded on the scene. The productivity game changed forever. Today, if you attempt to plan out every minute of your day, your schedule will blow up in the first five minutes.

With so much information and so much to do, it's become harder to be productive—and yet we feel busier than ever. With the recession, we're running lean and mean. We have greater expectations, fewer resources, and more work placed on us, which results in more time in the office and less time for life and loved ones.

Desperate workers are more stressed than ever before, as they receive information from multiple sources and attempt to track and organize it. We're constantly communicating with more people, more quickly, through more media, so we have more conversations to recall.

If you added up the amount of time it would take to complete the tasks on a typical person's to-do list, there might be hundreds of hours of work represented there. You can spend more time "planning" and "prioritizing" than just doing the work! Due to the blazing speed at which information flows, it's a waste of time to keep reordering a giant to-do list. Instead, organize your life around the stuff that really matters. Adopt a systematic workflow process to help you determine your high-value tasks, protect the time to do them, and focus on their execution.

If you've got far too much to do and desperately need to take back some of your time, know that it's possible to do so, assuming you're willing to put some sincere effort into the attempt. By following the logical, intuitive workflow process I present in this book, you can wrestle your schedule into submission. Ultimately, you can recover as much as ninety minutes of your day (or even more) to use as you see fit.

But before I launch into the details of this new and unique system, there are some people I'd like to acknowledge. I thank God for the gift of all these people in my life!

I want to thank my husband, John, who is my biggest fan and supporter. He puts up with my bizarre travel schedule and entrepreneurial lifestyle with understanding and cheerfulness. You have my undying gratitude and love.

Meagan, Johnny, and James, my children, I'm so proud to be your mom I could just burst.

Thanks to my incredible office manager, Becca Fletcher, my productivity weapon of choice. I am so fortunate to have you in my life and literally don't know what I'd do without you. Everyone needs a Becca!

I'm so grateful to Eileen Stack, my wonderful mother-in-law, who tirelessly helps our family and takes care of our children if both parents are out of town. Thank you for your unfailing love.

Mark and Darla Sanborn are great pals, and we have so much fun together. Spending time with you reminds me life's so much more than work!

I'm indebted to my mentor of eight years, Dianna Booher, CSP, CPAE, author of forty-five books, for the countless hours of time she's lovingly given me. I appreciate you introducing me to the team at Berrett-Koehler, who immediately believed in me and this book. Thanks to my editor, Neal Maillet, for your guidance throughout the project.

Thanks to my proofreader, Floyd Largent, for his eagle eyes and incredible editing skills.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to our hundreds of clients, who have provided us the opportunity to work with you on the strategies in this book, learn from your feedback, see the results, and hear about your successes. Thanks for your enthusiastic support of my work.

I'm privileged to be the 2011–2012 president of the National Speakers Association. Over my nearly twenty years of membership, I've gained many wonderful friends, too many to mention by name, but you know who you are. Thank you for your encouragement, coaching, and camaraderie.

The Case for Reduction

If you're serious about your career, then you've probably read a number of books about time management and productivity in an effort to make better use of your workday. So what's new about this one? *What to Do When There's Too Much to Do* is unique in its approach to workflow, and I think you'll find it a breath of fresh air in an overcrowded and increasingly redundant field. Simply stated, the central message is *it's better to do* less, *not more*, *so you can do better*, *more focused work*.

Many workers find this a startling concept, because they increasingly have to work harder and longer with fewer resources—and that's precisely why my message is so very important. Over the last few decades we've learned to be superbly productive, yes, but in a way that can't be sustained over the long haul.

From a business perspective, productivity is the rate at which goods or services are produced per unit of labor. On a wider scale, this measure of corporate success is also a primary metric of the overall economic health of a nation. Collectively, we Americans are more productive today than at any time in our history.[1] But just think about the factors motivating this productivity increase, especially in recent years. Many businesses have cut their staffs to the bone in an effort to save the bottom line; as a result, the truncated workforce must somehow do more with less, just like the woman who stopped me

before my presentation that day. We've defaulted to working long hours just so we can keep our jobs. And it's killing us.

In fact, I think we've just about hit the ceiling of what we can accomplish by stretching ourselves so thin we're practically transparent. Consider this worrisome factoid: According to a government report released in August 2011, American productivity declined for two consecutive quarters for the first time since 2008.[2] The second-quarter decline for 2011 was a bit less than expected: an annual adjusted rate of 0.7 percent rather than the anticipated 0.9 percent (yay?).[3] The bad news: 2011's first-quarter productivity figure, originally estimated at 1.8 percent growth, suffered a sharp downward revision to reflect an actual productivity *drop* of 0.6 percent.

Granted, we've experienced a minor economic expansion in the past few years. But the positive effects have been mostly limited to businesses, with very little trickle-down to individual workers. Indeed, as some observers have pointed out, many businesses posted productivity gains from early 2009 to late 2010 *only* because they had previously cut costs. In the process they pared down their workforces, requiring the workers they retained to work longer hours—often for the same compensation.

This refusal to increase the average worker's pay even while forcing them to work harder may seem draconian, and in one sense it is. Workers know that there are plenty of people lined up to take their jobs if they complain too much about the pay and long hours, and many employers press this fact to their advantage.

But in a larger sense, the flat compensation growth just continues a trend visible in the statistics since 1980. According to a study released by the *New York Times* in September 2011, compensation grew steadily along with American productivity from 1949 until 1979, and then more or less flattened out—even as productivity skyrocketed.[4] Productivity rose 80 percent from 1979 to 2009; compensation increased just 8 percent. That contrasts sharply with increases of 119 percent and 100 percent, respectively, in the 30 previous years. Basically,

for the last three decades, American workers have been willing to accept insipid pay increases while pushing productivity through the roof.

But now we've hit the wall. As a class, we're exhausted, and any motivation to maximize productivity is mostly negative rather than positive. Recent economic growth may have been good for businesses, but it shortchanged the workers. We built on unstable economic ground . . . and now we're starting to see the cracks in the foundation. Even with high unemployment rates, employers complain about not being able to find competent workers.

SAVING OUR OWN LIVES

So today, I preach the gospel of ruthless task reduction, because I honestly believe an abandonment of unnecessary chores, and a drastic triage of all that remains, is the only way to be consistently, profitably productive in this economy without destroying your health, your family life, and your joy.

Many workers think that a willingness to do whatever it takes, at the expense of all else, can cure any workplace ailment. Their employers, and society at large, have trained them to think this way. But they never seem to understand a salient point here: you don't have to kill yourself to prove your dedication to the company and produce the tremendous results required.

And I mean exactly that. The Japanese have an entrenched tradition of working superhuman amounts of unpaid overtime, more to demonstrate company loyalty than to enhance productivity. It also drives high levels of *karoshi*, the practice of literally working yourself to death. This problem isn't unique to Japan; Westerners have the same problem, though our medical establishment doesn't really keep tabs on it as such.

Is the possibility of a raise or promotion really worth risking your health? And let me emphasize the word "possibility" —after all, how can you ensure your hard work is even regis-

tering with the higher-ups? You can't just try to outwork the other guy. Instead, get a handle on what's really important in your organization, and focus on aligning business strategy with your day-to-day execution. Don't just push and push and push until you can't go on anymore. Ironically, this can limit your usefulness to your company rather than increasing it.

HARSH REALITIES

Working too many hours is demonstrably counterproductive, because it results in decreased productivity. Studies have repeatedly shown that a sixty-hour workweek results, on average, in a 25 percent decrease in productivity.[5] The productivity numbers just get worse as the number of work hours increases, because exhaustion steadily erodes judgment and performance. Eventually, no matter how good your intentions, you hit a point of diminishing returns. If you go too far, your habits of overwork may harm your organization's bottom line—the exact opposite of what you intended when you set out on your quest to prove yourself.

The lesson here? You aren't a robot. Long hours lead to physical and mental fatigue, which results in slower work, more mistakes, and wasted time. It may also lead to depression, which can spiral out of control if left untreated—as is often the case, because the person affected is too busy to take care of it. Depression comes with harsh penalties of its own, and they can feed back into the productivity issues and make them even worse.

The old forty-hour workweek was originally struck as a compromise, as the best balance between productivity and overwork. Today, a forty-hour week isn't plausible for many people, given the expectations or structures of their jobs. Some people continue to insist they function better with a more demanding schedule. But they fail to recognize the signs of when they've reached capacity. Are you willing to do what it takes to short-circuit a drop in performance? You'd take good care of any other tool, wouldn't you? So why not take care of yourself?

THE SOLUTION

In the next six chapters, I'll show you how to train yourself out of the overwork mentality. *Reduce*, *reduce*, *reduce* will become your new mantra, to the tune of about ninety minutes a day. This ninety-minute savings isn't a "guess"—it's what clients have told me these methods have saved them. Take for example the testimonial I received from Montague L. Boyd, CFP, Senior Vice President of Investments at UBS Financial Services:

> Prior to Ms. Stack's training, we customarily had employees who stayed into the early evening hours in order to finish or just keep up with our workload. Ms. Stack spent a day with us and then three or four months later a second day. Ms. Stack worked with us to develop more efficient methods of intra-office communications. Ms. Stack also showed us how to prioritize daily items and to keep track of them. She showed us how to use Microsoft Outlook properly. There are far too many details to recount here; they made a huge difference. Now we regularly find that we can finish our work every day with time to spare. We operate with much less confusion and rarely if ever worry about those items that may "drop through the cracks"! They just don't. There are six investment partners. We have a partner in charge of our Retirement Plan group and a Research partner. We operate smoothly now and communicate effectively in much less time. My estimate is that each of us saves about ninety minutes per day compared to our systems before Laura Stack. Six support staff went from a state of confused, stressed, and long hours to an efficient team. They finish most days well before "quitting time" and go home on time every night. Nobody has stayed late in months. Ms. Stack has lived up to her title as "The Productivity Pro." She has shown us a path to accomplish more—much more—in fewer hours. Our staff believes

they can take us through exponential growth with very little need for additional manpower. All of this extra time gives us the opportunity to think and find other ways to improve our business plan for greater success.

In the same way I helped his team, I will show you how to logically reprioritize your work and shift your focus to the truly significant. You'll learn to jettison old ideas that limit your productivity and begin re-examining your workload with new eyes. You'll excise useless tasks and cut through redundant data to sharpen your focus to a keen edge.

Instead of accepting your fate and allowing it to overwhelm you, step up and take your future in your own hands—and do what's necessary to achieve a work-life balance that you can manage indefinitely. Unlearn the mistaken beliefs that serve as obstacles to productivity. Recognize your limits, trim away the fat, and adjust your attitude until you can plainly see that the *real* issue here is discovering what you can reasonably accomplish within the time available. If you do all this, you'll eventually come to realize that there really *is* time enough in the day to do everything that matters.

With the new system I offer you, it's simple to rearrange your life so you can *have* a life outside of work. Not necessarily easy, mind you—but simple and straightforward to implement. With that in mind, I'd like to introduce the Productivity Workflow Formula™.

A BRAND-NEW MODEL:
THE PRODUCTIVITY WORKFLOW FORMULA™ (PWF)

The PWF breaks down into six primary steps:

1. **Determine what to do.** Study your work requirements closely; triage your to-do lists; handle time-wasters; and decide to do only what really matters.
2. **Schedule time to do it.** Assign time slots and durations

appropriately; say no when appropriate; make decisions quickly; and control your meetings.

3. **Focus your attention.** Hone your concentration to razor sharpness; shut out distractions; learn focus techniques; and avoid multitasking.

4. **Process new information.** Research effectively; file digital information; and quickly handle incoming e-mail, voicemail, and paper.

5. **Close the loop.** Determine what does and doesn't work; reduce inefficiencies; solve people problems and bottle-necks; and tighten up systems as you go.

6. **Manage your capacity.** Focus on the physical factors af-fecting your energy; manage sleep, diet, exercise, and your own happiness.

Graphically, the PWF looks like this:

The model is circular by design, which suggests continuity, as well as a process that can (and should) be repeated again and again. In other words, you get into a continuum and don't have to leave it; it just becomes part of your life. Plus, instead of thinking of productivity as a straight line from A to B (followed by . . . nothing) it becomes its own self-fulfilling prophecy. Each improvement gets you to a new place, instead of to some plateau you never leave again.

THE PRODUCTIVITY WORKFLOW FORMULA™ (PWF)

Determine + Schedule + Focus +
Process + Close + Manage = PRODUCE

If you incorporate the PWF into your life, you really can save yourself ninety minutes a day that you can use to live your life, instead of working it away. This may sound odd if you feel shackled to your desk now, but it really *is* possible to get more done while doing less work. You just need to separate the valuable wheat from the nonproductive chaff.

So let's take a look at how you can become more efficient, step by logical step.

Go to www.LauraStack.com/WhatToDo to receive complimentary bonus material, tip sheets, and group discussion worksheets.

Go to www.bkconnection.com/whattodo-sa to assess your strengths and improve opportunities around your PWF.

🕐 We've highlighted Productivity Pro tips with a clock icon. If you're seriously pressed for time, skim these tips and read the summary at the end of each chapter.

1

Determine What to Do

The first step in the Productivity Workflow Formula is to determine what you should be working on. When you implement this step correctly, instead of having 117 things on your to-do list, you may end up with just ten tasks, or five, or even three . . . but they'll be the right ones. And don't worry: Once you have the proper processes in place, you can revisit all the others systematically and get them done in their place.

In this chapter, I'll show you how to reduce your commitments to an efficient core group of tasks. In the end, you'll produce for your organization at a record level and work fewer hours than ever before.

Workplace productivity, in its most meaningful sense, is all about achieving high-value goals—preferably in the shortest time possible. And make no mistake about it: At the end of the day, all that truly matters is *results*. What did you actually accomplish? Did your accomplishments advance the organization's goals in some measurable way? If not, why not? If you just kept busy while not appreciably moving forward, why did you bother?

Never confuse activity with productivity. Everyone has too much to do, and nobody really cares how many tasks you crossed off a list or how busy you were last week if key projects keep falling through the cracks.

Therefore, you must pare down your commitments to

include *only* those things that truly matter for you and your organization. Remember: your goal here is to reduce your responsibilities to a reasonable level, so you can go home at a sensible time and have a life outside of work—not try to take on everything, and punish yourself constantly with sixteen-hour days. That will result in plummeting productivity and burnout.

🕐 At the end of every workday, take a moment to ask yourself: Was I productive today, or did I just stay busy?

WHY DO YOU HAVE SO MUCH TO DO?

When you look at your to-do list, does it scare you? Your list is so long, an entire team of people couldn't finish it all. Looking at your huge to-do list, you might feel as though you'll be buried forever and never see the light of day. So before I begin to describe how to reduce your commitments to a reasonable, consistently workable level, let's take a step back and look at the reasons why most of us always seem to have too much to do.

Too many options. There are so many seemingly "good" things to do, and often we want to do as many as we can. The result is a huge running to-do list that doesn't distinguish between today, next week, next month, and next year. Without a separation between the lists, many people stare at a to-do list with hundreds of items on it and have a difficult time choosing what to do when faced with an open thirty minutes.

Bad math. We take inputs without producing outputs. We accept projects, allow interruptions, go to meetings, answer calls, and check e-mail . . . and our to-do list grows longer, but nothing valuable gets checked off.

Pavlovian response. We're slaves to our technology, environment, noises, and brains. We can't overcome inertia, get in the flow, and focus on completing a single task. We respond immediately to every chime, ding, and noise.

Indecision. We don't determine whether tasks are in or out or even relevant or not, so we leave them on our lists, which causes us to have to repeat the evaluation process again—putting them back into our 'decide later' consciousness, lengthening our to-do lists, filling our inboxes, and expanding our perceptions of how much we have to do.

Disorganization. Our tech toys can't keep up with the speed of thought. This is especially inconvenient if you're in a restaurant, meeting, or on a plane with all your electronic devices off, and you think of something to do. We need ways to capture inputs back into the system.

Fear. We can't say no to anything that doesn't meet our stated objectives. We're afraid to take action to cut out the time we waste each day on nonproductive activities.

Lack of direction. We lack clarity from our leadership and haven't taken the time to harness our own focus to determine what really matters. Or we're not aligned with strategy from top to bottom; consequently, we don't have clear priorities. Often, our actual work doesn't reflect our job descriptions or what the boss actually thinks we are/should be doing.

In reality, many of the things on our to-do lists are unnecessary time-stealers. In most cases, they were added because somebody thought it might be a good idea. Watch out for "somebody"; they're not necessarily interested in helping you be productive. In fact, the things they're giving you to do are the things *they* don't want to do. In other words, they feel those tasks aren't worth their time . . . so they decide to steal *your* time instead. To top it off, many of us voluntarily take on

tasks that are seemingly unnecessary at first glance (and may actually be), but end up burning time we could otherwise use to be productive.

To get control over your schedule, you must first eliminate anything that doesn't have long-term consequences for your work. Philosopher William James once wrote, "The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook." In other words, in trying to determine what to do, you must first eliminate those tasks that don't enhance your productive value.

WHAT IS YOUR PRODUCTIVE VALUE?

How do you determine your value? Look at what you do from your employer's viewpoint. Simply put, the more productive you are, the more valuable you are to your organization. And let me qualify that by saying where this really matters is *in the long term*. If you shine brightly for a year by working eighty-hour weeks until your body gives up and literally falls over, then your productive value, while extraordinary for a little while, isn't particularly impressive when viewed from a wider perspective. Your organization would rather get ten years of steadily productive work out of you than one extraordinary year before you burn out.

Reducing your commitment load to the bare minimum, so you can most effectively use your time at work (and still enjoy life and recharge for more work), makes you more valuable to the organization. Some bosses lose sight of that sometimes; but most will realize this is in fact the case (especially if you send them a photocopy or scan of this section of the book), and will prefer to keep you rather than lose you permanently . . . one way or another. If you're self-employed, this isn't as much of an issue. But it's still apropos in terms of how it affects your organization, whether you operate a sole proprietorship or an up-and-coming Inc. 500 firm.

this material has been excerpted from

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by Laura Stack
Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers
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For more information, or to purchase the book,
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