



Chatsworth Consulting Group

## Ten Steps to Doing More With the Time You Have

How often do we hear (or think) “There simply isn’t enough time to get it all done.” We live lives of overcommitment, overscheduling, information overload, and extreme expectations. We multi-task and try to do it all, and we end up feeling like we’ve gotten nowhere and haven’t done what we needed to do. Instead of feeling pleased with our accomplishments and resting in our times of rest, we focus on what didn’t get done and run around frantic trying to finish everything – feeling frustrated, tired, and burned out.

The answer to getting on the other side of this vicious cycle is simple and in many ways counterintuitive. By focusing on these ten basic steps to doing more with the time you have, you can stop squandering your time and find yourself getting more done and feeling more at peace.

### **Step #1 – Focus – Do one thing at a time**

Multi-tasking has become a way of life. The truly talented of us drive, talk on the phone, and drink a cup of coffee...and are lucky we’re not in an accident. Or we skim through an article and make a phone call at the same time...and have very little idea what we discussed and what we promised to do. We sit on a conference call with our team and answer emails at the same time...and have no idea what the question was when the team turns to us for the answer. We pay the bills and pretend to listen to our five-year-old’s questions...and wonder why he’s drawing on the walls “with our permission.”

We have been mistakenly led to believe that we can accomplish more if we simply do more than one thing at a time, so we try to do everything at once to get it all done. While it may be necessary, and even beneficial and enjoyable, to multi-task at times, when it is our normal method of coping we often find ourselves frustrated, stressed, and confused by some of the things that have happened. Step #1 is therefore focusing – doing one thing at a time.

To truly do something fully and completely we need to give the task at hand our complete attention, and it isn’t possible to give something, anything, our complete attention if we are multi-tasking. I have a client who refers to multi-tasking as “multi-ignoring” because we simply aren’t paying attention when we’re focused in more than one place at a time.



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Focusing – doing one thing at a time – is the best way to do your best job at whatever you’ve got in front of you. It’s a chance to truly make the most of the time you have by using that time to put your full effort into what you want to get done – and to feel a sense of accomplishment, fulfillment, and even peace when you’ve accomplished what you’ve set your mind to with awareness, calmness, and concentration.

So challenge yourself to slow down and focus the next time you feel pulled in different directions or you convince yourself that you can “get this done while you’re also doing that.” Decide which thing you need to do is the most important, and let that be your focus for as long as it takes to do it, and do it well.

### **Step #2 – Prioritize – Do what really matters**

Deciding which thing is the most important is crucial to doing more with the time you have. We often get pulled in too many directions and don’t know where to turn or what to do first. With this pressure behind us, we often simply choose to handle what is loudest, or seemingly most urgent, on our to-do list or in our inbox.

Urgency is not the best way to choose where to put our efforts and attention. Urgent items may be loud and they may be noticeable, but by simply handling things based upon how urgent they seem, we neglect considering how important what we’re doing truly is. Step #2 is therefore prioritizing – doing what’s important, what really matters.

We live in a world where it is at least close to impossible to get everything done, and so it is essential to prioritize – to do some things before others in case we don’t make it through our task list. The best way to choose which things to do first is to stop and think through which things ring truest with us or are most in line with helping us attain our goals.

One of my clients works in sales, and he is always pushing himself to be in front of his customers. He knows that if he prepared a specific continuing education course for his customers they would be grateful and would agree to meet with him in order to take the course. However, he won’t give himself time to work on the presentation because it isn’t urgent. He feels he has to use his work time making cold calls and working on the things that are sitting in his inbox, because they feel most pressing. He is not paying attention to what is most in line with his goal of getting sales. He is prioritizing perhaps, but not based on what really matters.

The only way to be truly successful in doing more with the time you have is to do what really matters. To choose what to do next – where to put your focus – based on the outcomes you want to achieve. To prioritize and do first those things that are in line with your goals and intentions.

### **Step #3 – Intend – Get clear on your intentions before you begin**

So often, like with my client, we spend our time on things that aren’t really getting us to our ultimate goal. We dive into tasks because they’re next on our list or because we’ve promised we would, when the time we’re about to spend is in many ways wasted because the task at hand does not move us along to where we want to be. Many times we don’t even know where we want to be or why we’re doing what we’re doing.

It is essential to get a clear sense of our ultimate goals so that we can be certain that how we're choosing to use our time is in alignment with what we're after and want to achieve. To take a step back and be certain why we're doing what we're doing and how it will ultimately serve us. Step #3 is therefore intending – getting really, really clear on your intentions before you begin.

It is easy to go through life on auto-pilot – simply moving ahead and feeling as if we're like a gerbil on a wheel, constantly going but never really getting anywhere. Being intentional puts the where in where we're going and helps us clarify if we even want to be on the wheel we're on.

Intending means taking the time to clarify our long-term goals – to determine what is really important to us and what we want to achieve. Intending means stopping before each action, and even each moment when appropriate, and clarifying what we hope to get out of that specific encounter or endeavor, so that we can modify, if necessary, how we do what we do in order to get what we want to get. Intending takes time, but it is time well spent because we can then use each moment after that more wisely. It is important to put a little more effort up front in order to line up our actions with our goals and to clarify what our next best action is that will help us reach our desires.

#### **Step #4 – Clarify – Determine exactly what and why, and maybe even when and how**

Once we know our intentions – our overall intentions as well as our intention for the moment and/or task at hand – we can begin to get more specific about how to spend our time more wisely. With the big picture clear in our mind it's possible to work with the details of what needs to get done and figure out what to do first and how best to do it.

The details are often what trip us up. We squander time by taking on too much or too little, or by trying to get things done at the worst moments or in inefficient ways. We know we have to write a report for work, but leave it until late at night when our brain no longer functions. We want desperately to have time with our children, but by the time we “get everything done first,” they're tired and cranky and we're out of steam. Step #4 is therefore clarifying – determining exactly what we have to do (and why), as well as when we'll do it and how we'll get it done.

I'm the type of person who can easily balk at structure and rules. When someone suggests that I dive into the details to be exact about what I'm doing and how best to do it, my very being revolts. And yet, this discipline yields benefits – when I faithfully follow this step it brings me space and peace. There are others who spend all their time in the details – way, way down in the weeds without ever having the fuller picture. They get so bogged down in the minutia they need to pull up in order to clarify what they'll do and when best to do it. This step brings them freedom and the ability to do more than they previously could.

It might be helpful to make a list – or even two. An ongoing list of everything that you need to get done dumps the information from your head onto paper, thereby freeing up your mental capacity and energy for the tasks in front of you. It is amazing how much energy we waste making sure we don't forget all of our details and responsibilities. (Have you ever read, *I Don't Know How She Does It?* At the end of each chapter the main character mentally goes through a list of all the endless things she must remember to do – how much easier it might be if she wrote them all down?)

A second list can be even more freeing. This is the list you make each morning of what are your main priorities for the day. On one side list the big items that you need time and energy to dive into, and on the other side list the must-have-to's for the day that are quick and necessary. This clarity on how to spend your time will focus you so that you are more successful and effective. It will also help you clearly know what you need to do with the time you have, so that you can work your day to include your essentials.

### **Step #5 – Schedule – Make time for your essential tasks**

Even when we are really clear on what needs to get done and what our priorities are, there are still many days when we just don't seem to be able to accomplish even the most important things. We move from meeting to meeting, activity to activity, responding to others' needs, and reach the end of the day and wonder where it all went and why nothing important got done. Or we run out of steam just when we sit down to focus on something essential – a report, a child, our vacation plans.

The key to actually accomplishing the items we have designated as most crucial is to commit to a time when we will do those important things – and let nothing (or almost nothing) get in the way. Step #5 is therefore scheduling – making time for your essential tasks; actually scheduling a specific time when you will get something done.

I often ask clients if they have time for the crises that come across their desks and take up a few hours or an afternoon. “No,” they say. They don't have time, but somehow they find or make time...because they viewed it as important. Well, how important are the things you have classified as essential? If they're important, and you want to make sure you have time for them, then make time. Actually schedule them in your calendar, as you would a meeting, and hold yourself to it. Research has shown, in fact, that when we specify exactly when and where we intend to do something, we are much more likely to actually do it.

Schedule time to write the report that needs to get done (and schedule time at your best time of day, when you can be most productive). Schedule time to get out at lunch (or in the morning) to exercise and take care of yourself. Schedule your kid's games into your calendar, so that you make them. Even schedule the travel time, so you're not late. Schedule your personal and professional reflection – so that you can be clearer on which tasks and projects are essential and valuable. Schedule time for what you want to get done, and you're much, much more likely to actually do it...if you should even be doing it in the first place.

### **Step #6 – Delegate – Give away all you can**

One of the reasons that we don't accomplish enough in the time we have is because we simply try to do too much. No matter how hard you try, it isn't possible to do more than you humanly can do, yet many of us go down trying. The results are not pretty – we get frustrated, frustrating, impatient, sick, short-tempered, stressed out, etc.

Another option is to choose not to do everything – and to find others to take on some of the things that we originally thought we alone had to do. To share the burden, the responsibilities, the tasks, and even the rewards. Step #6 is therefore delegating – giving away all that you can.

So many of us reach a level in work and in life where we feel ultimately responsible for nearly everything. We feel that we and we alone, need to be the one to tackle the tasks on our lists. We somehow think that no one can do things as well as we can; we think that it will take longer to show someone what to do and how to do it; we think that it is a sign of weakness if we don't accomplish everything ourselves. We think these things (if we think at all), and we may be right, but nonetheless, these thoughts are bogging us down.

The people who truly get a lot done, at work and at home, are the ones who have learned (or taught themselves) to successfully delegate. To let go of the tasks, to let go of the how something is done, to let go of the need for control – and let someone else help lighten their load.

There are definite skills for successful delegating. There are books you can read and classes you can take. Time spent learning to delegate is time well spent. The essentials of delegation are to carefully remove yourself from tasks that do not require your personal involvement, and to establish guidelines and a system with the delegatee that allow you to support and guide them, check in as necessary, be a resource, and not waste your energy worrying about how they're doing. The main goal is to identify the projects, portion of projects, and individual tasks that you can give away, and then give them away successfully and use your time for the things that do require you personally. To carve out space for yourself for the issues that will arise unexpectedly, so that you can respond when necessary without dropping all your other balls.

### **Step #7 – Flex – Allow for circumstances, interruptions, and spontaneity**

Things unexpectedly come up. Circumstances change; interruptions happen; the best laid plans of mice and men go awry. No matter how well you plan and prioritize, allot your time and schedule your day, clarify your intentions and give away all that you can, there will be times when crises erupt and immediate action is required.

When it's time to drop everything and focus on the unanticipated issue at hand, strict adherence to your plans and schedule will not help you. By staying only with your original plans you will cause yourself more stress and accomplish even less. Step #7 is therefore flexing – allowing for circumstances, interruptions, and spontaneity.

The amazing thing about all the planning and scheduling you've been doing so far in this process is that these guidelines allow you flexibility. They are just that, guidelines, not hard, fast rules. We often get hung up by viewing a suggestion, especially a suggestion that works, as a requirement. "I scheduled this time to write this report," we think. "It doesn't matter that my client is calling with an issue that needs immediate attention – I need to do this now." My clients share with me that if they don't stay with their originally scheduled task, they somehow feel they've failed. Or they'll perhaps choose not to honor their commitment to exercise early in the morning because they're sick – and then struggle with the fact that they've dropped the ball and let themselves down.

The opposite is actually true in these circumstances. An essential part of doing more with the time you have is being able to flex to what life throws at you – and to not be too thrown by it. By sticking to a schedule most days, you create space for the unexpected. By focusing, prioritizing, intending, clarifying, scheduling, and delegating, you create a pattern of behaviors that supports you in getting more done, even when you have to take a step away from your

scheduled plans and tasks. You learn not only skills that will help you feel more complete and fulfilled with the things you've done and accomplished, but also a method to help you manage your own expectations for yourself and what you can actually accomplish.

### **Step #8 – Adjust – Manage your expectations**

Years ago I read an article in which couples who were married for many, many years answered the question, “What makes a successful marriage?” Their answer was perhaps surprising and a bit challenging to those of us who always expect the best. They all agreed that lowered expectations helped their marriages survive and thrive.

So many of us are overachievers – expecting always the best of ourselves and everyone else. But this level of achievement is extremely difficult to maintain, especially in this day and age when there simply is too much to do in the time that we have. While I am a firm believer in doing the best you can and always striving for more, there are times when we need to be willing to not do as well at everything – when we realize that something has to give in order for the important things to get the time and attention they deserve. Step #8 is therefore adjusting – managing your expectations for what is good enough.

Managing your expectations and adjusting your definition of good enough doesn't mean that you decide to never again do a good job. It simply gives you a bit of breathing space when it isn't possible to overachieve at everything. It gives you guidance by which you can pick and choose the projects, relationships, and tasks that require the best you can give, and also those things on your lists (that you haven't delegated) where you can let yourself slide a little bit.

You might be the type of person who decides that having a clean, straightened house every night is not as important as spending time with your family, digging into some work reading, writing a book, or taking a hot bath and relaxing. Or you might be the type of person who needs to have the house clean, so you learn to possibly lower your standards elsewhere where you do have breathing room. Whatever works for you is fine as long as you don't harm anyone else, or yourself, in the process. What matters is that you identify places where you can adjust your standards and let yourself be okay with that.

Just yesterday I realized I had a meeting for the nonprofit board on which I am Vice President. I hadn't planned for it, and I didn't have a babysitter. I asked my daughter to watch my young son, and agreed that she could make him cereal for dinner. It was easy for her and doable for me – who cares that the rest of the board teased me. I adjusted my standards for what would make a good enough dinner, took care of what I had to get done, thanked my daughter for her help, thereby strengthening our relationship which is one of my most important goals, and allowed myself to laugh at the whole experience – lightening my mood and therefore lightening my load.

### **Step #9 – Enjoy – Find a way to make it fun**

We often take ourselves, what we have to get done, and how well we do it so seriously. As if everything rested on this moment and our achievements. We put too much pressure on ourselves, which makes it harder to successfully work through our to-do lists.

How much easier might it be if we could adapt a lighter approach to the endless number of tasks on our list? How much easier might it be to get through the list if we weren't dreading the process? How much easier might it be if the process was actually something we looked forward to – something that was fun? Step #9 is therefore enjoying – finding a way to make what you are doing fun.

It is human nature to be more attracted to the things that we find fun. We like to do what we like to do, and we do our best to avoid, put off, or push ourselves through the rest. Anyway you look at it, our approach to doing the things we don't find fun is not likely to fire us up towards getting a lot done in a little period of time. Or even a long period of time.

When we can find a way to have fun with what's on our list, when we can bring joy and enjoyment into the process, we're more likely to dive into our tasks and find ourselves on the other side, with much more done. Finding a way to make what you're doing fun and pleasurable will give you energy – allowing you to do more with the time you have.

Perhaps it is finding a reason to smile or laugh, or playing your favorite music while you dive in. Maybe you find a partner with whom you can share the time or focus your mind around the positive aspects of what you're doing. Finding a way to make your task list enjoyable fires you up to move through it and strengthens your commitment to getting done what you've said you're going to do.

### **Step #10 – Commit – Write down what you'll do and share it with someone**

It can be much too easy to promise ourselves we'll do something, and then find an excuse not to. Look at the success rate of New Year's resolutions. Every January I can predictably see my gym overflowing with everyone who committed to finally getting in shape and losing weight. I can also predictably enjoy February, when everyone has fallen away from their commitment, and the gym is much less crowded. We simply don't always keep our promises to ourselves – we allow things to not happen and to not get done.

However, another wonderful aspect of human nature is our drive to do the things that we've publicly committed to do. It makes a difference whether we've promised ourselves we'll do something, or whether we've promised someone else. Unfortunately (or fortunately, if you use this quirk in your favor), we're much more likely to keep the promises and commitments we make to others. If we've gone public with our intention to get a specific job done (or to get it done in a certain way), then we are much more compelled to actually do it.

The good news is that you can use this in your favor – by simply going public as often as you can around the things that you truly want to do. Promise your colleague you'll have the report to them by Tuesday. Promise your children you'll spend time with them. Promise your partner you'll put quality time into the relationship, or maybe quality time into your self-care. When you make these promises out loud, or write them down, you have automatically compelled yourself to complete the task you've identified. Research has shown that when we commit to the specifics of what we'll do, and when and where we'll do it, we are much, much more likely to actually get it done.

When you've worked through these ten basic steps, when you've: focused, prioritized, intended, clarified, scheduled, delegated, adjusted, flexed, enjoyed, and committed, the tasks on your commitment list are the ones you have determined to be important, essential, requiring your involvement, and worth doing – and you've committed to and set aside the time to focus on each task and each task alone. At this point you'll be well on the road to accomplishing the things that matter to you, that perhaps you've been neglecting for too long. You will sense that you are doing more with the time you have – finding yourself with more done as well as feeling more at peace.

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