

Effective Multitasking

7 Habits to Boost Your Effectiveness

PIOTR NABIELEC

Sample of the original book

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version of the book.**

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Effective Multitasking

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Preface

We live in busy times. Our task lists and responsibilities are constantly growing. Effectiveness is key. Doing two or more things at the same time proves ineffective. True multitasking is a myth - no one should expect it to work. However, it is possible to deal with our e-mail, events, and tasks in a manner that appears simultaneous from the perspective of hours and days. This is what I call "effective multitasking."

I studied and discussed productivity habits and techniques for more than 10 years and found that most people, regardless of their company and position, are struggling to keep up with their e-mail, task lists, and calendars. A highly skilled professional with over 20 years of experience in the IT industry once told me that he approached each day with a clear picture of tasks to accomplish, but during the course of the day something magical happened where incoming e-mails, phone calls, and discussions derailed him so that he rarely accomplished half of what he originally planned. That meant overtime, stress, and the loss of precious time.

While sharing productivity habits with other co-workers, one eventually shouted with enthusiasm that these simple habits are so important that they should be taught at schools! That event inspired me to write this book. I believe simple habits can radically change

productivity levels and that the key is clarity. We can get a few steps closer to "effective multitasking."

While writing this book I learned a lot from people that were reviewing this material and I hope their input made the content and the examples clearer. They also gave me faith that this really can help many people. This book would not be what it is without a few people that I would like to give special thanks and praise. Aga who is the love of my life, for her patience, openness to discussion, and helpful hints. Dominik Gazda for his continuous support, open mind and being with me from the very first lines of this book. Mikolaj Walanus for his inspiring graphic work - the cover, all the illustrations, and web page creation. Abraham Storer for his patience and conscientiousness while doing so many corrections to this text. Sebastian Bigos for the inspiring conversations that provided the spark to actually start writing. Tomasz Kaczanowski for his valuable hints. My family for being with me no matter what. God for his grace and all the gifts and talented people that have surrounded me my whole life.

I would also like to thank all the early reviewers of this book: Sandi Mitchell, Eoin McCoy, Dominik Gazda, Piotr Kuchta, Krzysztof Raś, Uttam Sarkar and Henryk Metz.

Introduction

Have you ever experienced a situation like this: you come to work, make a good plan for the day, and a few hours later come to realize that you responded to a number of e-mails and pressing issues, but made no progress on the tasks planned for that day?

We have e-mails. We have meetings. At work, every hour brings changes like a rotating kaleidoscope. Urgent tasks, important e-mails, and professional distractions make us feel like we have lost control, as chaos filtering from different channels bombards our minds. How do we cope with this?

Many of us struggle to respond to incoming e-mails in a timely manner or prioritize tasks across different projects. Suddenly many things left for the future become urgent and important and there are days that we must completely switch into fire-fighter mode.

At times such as this, you may consider that there has to be a better way to organize your work, improve productivity and accomplish more in a limited amount of time. If you know this feeling, simple techniques contained in this book will help you organize, relax, engage fully and become a reliable person. This book will help you find your natural style of organization and put it into practice.

My story

There are several events in my life that completely changed the way I think and operate. One of them happened a few years ago when I had a helpful conversation with my colleagues at work about running. They were attending marathons while I struggled to run for five kilometers without dying. Every time I finished a run, I had to lie on my bed for half an hour. Still, I was able to run like this for four consecutive years. After talking to them and reading just a few chapters from a book they recommended, I could run for more than five kilometers with no additional training and immediately after coming back home I was able to operate normally. I even felt much better after the run than I felt before!

For several years before that conversation, I had good motivation and sincere resolution; I put my whole heart into my efforts. However, my efforts were completely foolish. With just a few changes to my running habits, I was able to double my four-year progress within the next six months. Until that moment I believed that good motivation, sincere resolution and whole-hearted effort were enough in everything I did. Now I know it is not.

At that time I determined to do things more wisely. If I wanted to be effective at my work, in my personal life, or even running, I knew I needed to know the appropriate techniques and rules, so that I would not waste time. I started to study habits that productive

people have, putting them into practice and then sharing them with my colleagues and friends.

I noticed obvious results in those who followed these habits - simple techniques changed the way they worked as they were able to see the big picture and prioritize tasks more easily. Most importantly, they didn't have to memorize everything. This helped to minimize their stress so that they could engage fully and creatively in daily tasks without the fear that something would be lost.

This book shares techniques that may offer a revolution or a small improvement to you. I hope this will have an effect on you similar to the few, wise pieces of advice I received about running some time ago.

Inspiration

There are tons of books and articles to boost your effectiveness. Usually they are very good, but the problem is they mostly work for people that are organizational geeks and may be inaccessible to the rest of us struggling to catch up with daily tasks at work and at home. You can read "Getting Things Done" or "Zen to Done," "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People," "Kanban," "Scrum," "Flow," "Pomodoro Technique" and many more. But you need something really simple, right?

The objective is to make a simple system that will be visual, easy to learn, and help you organize at work. At the same time, it should allow you to focus on your tasks, not on the system. I hope you will find such a system through this book and that it will help you achieve success.

Habits

The key to success is to form a way of behavior that will work for you, even if you don't actively think about it. It is not merely about self-control. It is about taking one step at a time and forming a habit that is completely unconscious.

Do you know how long it takes to form a habit? Imagine you want to start drinking a daily glass of water or do fifty sit-ups before breakfast. How long will it take to perform automatically, without self-control? A great article on PsyBlog, "How Long to Form a Habit?", answers that question with a simple number - 66 days on average. It reveals the very simple truth that it will take you two months of daily repetition before a behavior becomes a habit. Give yourself time and just be regular. Do not give up too early!

Have you ever noticed that some people who have their houses close to the airport can completely ignore even the loudest aircraft? On the other hand, some can recognize their favorite songs just after the first few notes. You may have recognized this phenomenon when

conversing with someone in a noisy environment. When you focus, it nearly seems that the rest of the world does not exist. How is it possible that some people ignore big disruptions while others seem to be tuned into something subtle? It is all about giving positive and negative responses to our impressions. If you practice ignoring something you will slowly become less sensitized. If you give positive, practical responses to your impressions, your sensitivity will increase.

In this book, we will be working on building the right habits with practical, positive responses.

IT WILL TAKE YOU TWO MONTHS OF DAILY REPETITION
BEFORE THE BEHAVIOR BECOMES A HABIT

What is it?

We will work on building effective habits using systems that are visual and easy to remember. The key is to practice regularly. You will learn how to manage your e-mail inbox, calendar, and task list. The heart of this system is based on a mind map, which stores all important information in one place, using a visual format that displays information, while preserving a hierarchy of priorities. Along with the mind map, it's

wise to use color-coded formats whenever possible so that both hemispheres are fully engaged in the process.

This system works perfectly at work, but can also be used at home to organize daily tasks. The mind map system performs ideally in the workplace environment because of the consistent availability of your computer, phone, and colleagues. If you find it working for you in your professional environment, you should be able to use it at home, or wherever you have access to a PC or a tablet.

How to read this book

This rather short book focuses on seven practical habits. You will have to practice these habits and adjust them for your work environment and personal style. Just reading the book won't change anything. I strongly suggest reading the whole book, while identifying which habits will give you the most progress and will be easiest to learn in the beginning. When you are ready, read identified chapters once a day for several consecutive days and keep practicing! When you finish the book and still have no idea where to begin, there is a chapter waiting to help you take the first steps.

Each habit contains a description, summary, and most importantly, examples that will help you put the theory into practice. Be sure that you fully understand and appreciate each habit-driven behavior. They are intended to help you organize! The most important

aspect is patience – put the habits into practice one by one. As mentioned earlier, it will take several months to do it naturally. Expect great gains!

Habits are numbered, but it does not mean that you cannot proceed to the next one before the previous is fully formed. Trust your intuition, because while reading the book you will immediately realize which habits are most relevant to you.

Are you ready?

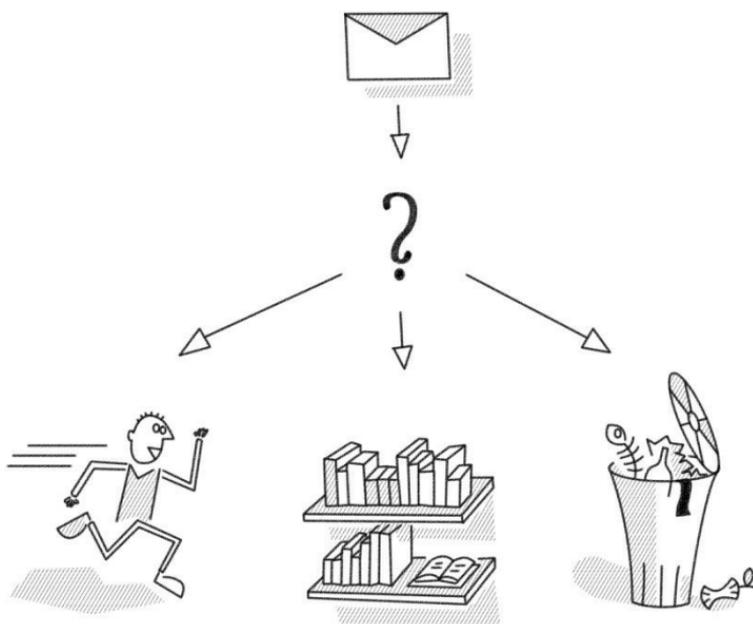
Let us start!

Inbox as a Task List

Let's assume, on average, you receive somewhere between 10 and 100 e-mails a day. That makes thousands of e-mails a year. How do you navigate through them effectively and at the same time lose none of the important messages?

We will turn your e-mail inbox into a task list. Most of the time, it will be nearly empty. Navigating through it and searching for important pieces of information will take you seconds. There are just four habits that will do it for you.

Habit 1: Classify action



The first and most important habit involves quickly and intuitively responding to each e-mail with two very important questions.

1. Does it require any action from me?

Look at the e-mail. Does it really need you to act? Do you need to read the whole message? If it is short, just read it and classify. If it is long and you need more time to read it, this is a potential task for a future time.

We would like to convert your inbox into a task list, so it should contain only messages that require an action from you, such as reading the whole message, understanding the details, responding, thinking about the solution etc.

Think about it for a moment: if it is in your inbox, it requires an action from you.

IF IT IS IN YOUR INBOX, IT REQUIRES AN ACTION FROM YOU

2. Will I ever need this?

If your e-mail does not require an action from you, it can either be useful material for another day or it is garbage. The problem most people face is that they have

a fear of the ‘Delete’ icon and they do not know the meaning of this simple button on their keyboards.

When it is garbage, such that you know you will never need to read it again, be brave and click ‘delete’ – Voila! Your time and disk space are saved.

This is it: it requires an action from me OR it is material for future reference OR it is garbage. It will take some time for this simple classification to become completely unconscious for you.

Take your time to process the main folder of your inbox right now. Just start. Try to process a hundred messages a day and split the whole process into several days. This way the habit will form more quickly. Remember it may take two months or more to form! The next habit will help you organize your folders for storing e-mails.

IT REQUIRES AN ACTION FROM ME

OR

IT IS MATERIAL FOR FUTURE REFERENCE

OR

IT IS GARBAGE

Visualization

You always have breaks while reading your e-mail. When you look at your inbox after a period of time, it may contain a large number of unread items left to classify. There is a very quick action you can do to easily pick the most important messages first. How do you do this? Let us use visualization.

Usually the most important messages, that will likely require your action, are sent directly to you or to you and your colleagues. For the less important, you are probably on the CC line. One may use Microsoft Outlook or another e-mail service to automatically apply colors to such messages.

Example how to set colors for Microsoft Outlook

Go to View -> Settings

Click “Conditional Formatting” or “Automatic Formatting” button

You should now be able to add two rules.

- Let’s call them “To me only” and “To me and others.”
- For the first, chose the red font and for the condition mark “Where I am” and “the only person on the To line.”
- For the second – blue font and “Where I am” – “on the To line with other people.”

(Of course you may use different fonts and colors. This is just a proposal).

When you apply these settings, some messages will change their colors and immediately catch your attention. These are good candidates to classify first as they are very likely to demand an action from you.

Other techniques

Why keep your inbox nearly empty?

Some people use flags or other techniques available to identify items that require action. However, the main problem is that our brain is not a CPU. The logical flow of information is only a small part of what we perceive as important. We have emotions, impressions, and memory. Both hemispheres process this information, performing the analysis from different angles.

When your inbox functions as a task list, it provides a clear visual signal of how much work is left. It can be summarized with just a simple look. You may think, “not much” or “ouch, too many, I need to start delegating or do something about it.” The task list satisfies the logical part of your brain, while also providing an important, immediate impression.

Examples

You are reading an e-mail from one of your team leaders and after the second sentence you realize it is just for your information, but has nothing to do with you and you do not even need to read the whole message. You immediately stop reading at this point and drag it to

one of the folders for future reference. One day it may be important to come back to this message.

You are reading a company announcement about a colleague's promotion with a list of his new responsibilities. You realize you will never need this information again and bravely delete this!

Another company announcement contains a few names that may be useful in the future, but not necessarily now, so without reading the whole message you move it to one of the folders.

There is a message automatically sent by one of the system tools and informs you about a status change of something unimportant. Another time you bravely delete it.

You see a long message from your boss to you and a few other colleagues (probably colored blue by Outlook). It is important for you to read this; however, it is not urgent. You simply leave it in your inbox as a task for a moment when you have more time. It can be now, but it can be later if you have other things to do.

There is a short message from your boss (probably colored in red by Outlook) with a simple question. Since this is urgent, you should immediately act – respond to the e-mail and immediately after clicking 'send,' drag it to one of the folders for future reference.

You received an announcement from the IT department saying that in a week, on Monday at 3PM,

there will be a planned network downtime. They are very sorry, but they need to do it. It will last for just half an hour. This may be a very important half hour! You create a half-hour calendar event for Monday at 3PM named “Network downtime.” Next, you drag the email into the event you created, save it and also drag the original email into one of the folders. When a reminder pops up the next Monday, you know 15 minutes in advance that you should re-plan your work, so that for the next thirty minutes the network connection will not be required. No surprises, no worries.

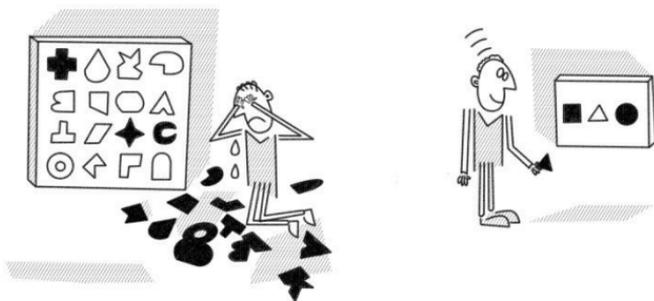
The message you read asks you to complete the company survey. The deadline is in two weeks and you currently do not have time to do it, but you would like to give your opinion. You leave it in your inbox as a task and at the same time put an event in your calendar for the final date to submit the survey. You may give it a name, such as “Survey deadline,” and drag the original message into the content of the event. Setting a reminder for a day or two before the deadline is probably important. Leaving the email in your inbox makes this a task for you and the calendar event will ensure that you don’t miss the deadline.

Summary

This habit does not require much effort and provides some quick improvements. You may process a hundred messages in just a few minutes. Delete garbage,

move most of the messages to folders for saved material, and leave just a few of them which require your attention and action. You do not answer all of them immediately, and do not need to read them all. First classify the emails and determine your tasks. Then you can plan accordingly. When you start doing this, you will quickly realize how many e-mails received do not require any action from you and only blur the picture of tasks to perform.

Habit 2: Storing materials



Subfolders

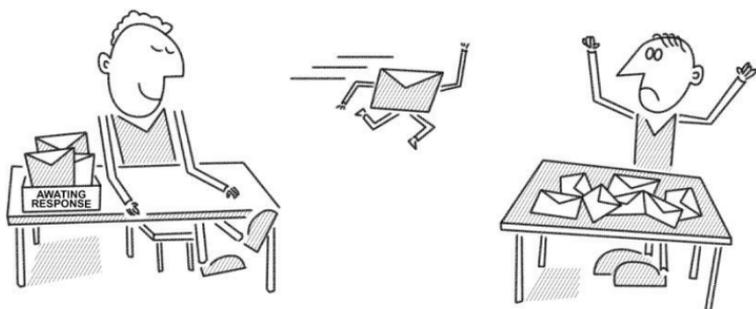
How many times have you searched for something for a really long time saying, “I had it somewhere?” Or perhaps you have asked your colleague to send a message once again - now another person must find the message because you couldn’t.

Sample of the original book

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Habit 3: Awaiting response



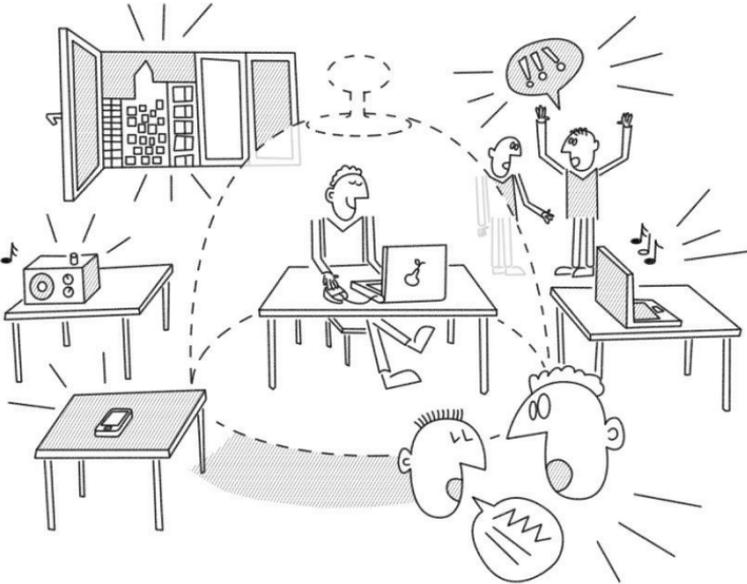
How many times have you sent an e-mail that asks for some action or information and you never received a response? We can blame others, but we need to take responsibility for completing what we began. The third habit will help you to complete and track all of your tasks, even if delegated.

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Habit 4: Prioritization and Total Focus



Prioritization

The first three habits let you quickly categorize your e-mails, store and access materials effectively, and easily keep track of all the messages that require an action from someone else. As mentioned in the introduction, it may take two months of daily repetition before they become habits.

If you applied all the techniques correctly, your inbox is now a task list. It can be completely empty, but it usually contains several messages that are long and may take time to read and ponder, or require some other action. Messages that are likely to require an action from you are possibly marked with a different color or font.

E-mail clients can usually sort incoming messages by date, subject or sender, but it can be difficult to prioritize these messages. Whenever you feel that you are losing control of the priorities, you should immediately add the task to your mind map.

Total focus

Two questions will help you with the formation of the fourth habit: “Is it possible to complete this task in 3 minutes?” and “Is it possible to work for the next 25 minutes without distractions?” Three minutes in the first question could really be two or five, but the main point is to determine if you can complete the task quickly. The second question is about total engagement. Are you able

to stop looking at your e-mails, communicators, SMS, and focus completely on your tasks for a limited amount of time? When you connect these two questions and only select “quick wins” from your inbox, you should be able to process most of it in less than half an hour and leave only longer tasks for the future. After completing this task, there shouldn’t be more than a few e-mails left.

We will refer to this simple technique of cutting off distractions and interruptions for a limited amount of time, as the Pomodoro Technique. There are several tools available on your PC, tablet, and phone to help you with this. It can even be as simple as the old, analog alarm clock. Set the countdown to 25 minutes, stop all activity other than your current tasks, ask others to come later for non-critical issues, and focus completely until you hear the alarm signal. After your session is finished, take a break, refresh yourself, and take a short walk. Try one Pomodoro session a day and if you find it successful, add more.

Managers usually find it hard to organize at least one session per day, because they can’t believe the world can exist without answering all calls and reading and answering all incoming e-mails on-the-fly. The key point is to understand the difference between critical, important activities (value judgment) and urgent activities (timing judgment). The truth is if this is not “critical and urgent,” it may wait, but if you don’t deal with your important tasks effectively, they will all soon

become “critical and urgent.” This is the trap that too many people fall into. If you have a desktop alert for all incoming messages disable it during the Pomodoro session - it is only distracting you! It will take at most 25 minutes before you read all messages. When you deal with the important issues in a timely manner, you realize that the number of critical and urgent tasks radically drops.

IF IT IS NOT “CRITICAL AND URGENT,” IT MAY WAIT, BUT IF
YOU DON’T DEAL WITH YOUR IMPORTANT TASKS
EFFECTIVELY, THEY WILL ALL SOON BECOME “CRITICAL
AND URGENT”

What your inbox is trying to tell you

Imagine that for a week you have been working according to the four habits mentioned above. After a few days one look at your Inbox will tell you the truth. Are there old messages that you are constantly avoiding? Do you feel you are able to process it all, given the speed they are received? Are most of the tasks coming from just one person? Observe it with a fresh mind and record the first feeling. It is important to remember that your brain is not a CPU, but also has emotions.

Be honest with yourself and think how you could improve the situation. Delegating tasks is not that hard, especially when you see that specific tasks drain your energy more than others. Telling someone that they put too much onto your shoulders may be hard. However, you may find that others respect responsible people who know their capacity and limitations.

Your inbox is always trying to tell you something. Never wait until “something happens,” but each week take a small step forward based on your first impressions.

Examples

You have seven messages in your inbox. A quick look reveals that five of them should take no more than five minutes to answer, one requires thinking about the solution, and the last one will probably take you half an hour. There is nothing critical happening, so you turn off all the messengers, desktop alerts, mute your phone, and set the countdown timer to twenty-five minutes. You answer five quick e-mails one by one and immediately move them to the appropriate folder. Now you are left with just two longer messages. There are ten minutes left in your Pomodoro session, so you read the next message thoroughly and realize that the solution is pretty simple, so you answer the email with a short summary and move the message to the right folder. When you start thinking about the last message your

alarm rings and it is time to lock your computer, take a short walk around the office, and have a few thoughts about your family and friends.

When you look at your phone, you realize that there is one missed call and one text message waiting for you. Your friend called and the message says he wants to see you this evening. Your calendar is free, so you create a new event and call him back to say that it would be really nice to see him again!

After coming back to your desk, you see that there are two people that wanted to talk to you over internal messenger and there are three new e-mails waiting. It takes one minute to categorize all your new e-mails and none of them requires your action, so your mailbox is left with just one message. You look at the conversations started and one of them seems to be longer and the person is in your office. Instead of typing the response and wasting your time, you go directly to her and a two-minute conversation solves the problem at hand. The last conversation turns out to concern a simple question.

You are involved in several conversations over IM at the same time. Two of them are longer, the rest seem short. You ask the two to wait for a few minutes and answer all the short questions one by one. For the remaining two, you ask the second one to wait for a couple more minutes, and ask the first if you could call directly. What could be a twenty-minute chat is now a

five-minute phone call that you end with a smile and immediately ask the other person for another call.

You are in the middle of your Pomodoro session and someone comes to you in person asking for help. This is not critical, so you ask him for fifteen minutes, put a reminder in your calendar and immediately go back to your tasks. A bit later when you are fully focused on your current task, another person comes. This time it is critical, so you save your work and immediately address the problem. You feel you need to talk to this person one on one and it is about lunch time, so you invite him for lunch, where you freely elaborate on the problem.

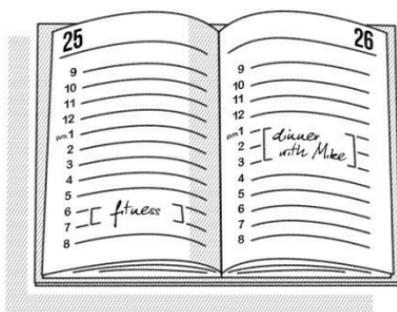
You come back after lunch and realize that you have just received twenty new e-mails and most of them require your action. Now there are thirty-five messages in total waiting in your inbox. Fifteen seem to be very quick, so you respond one by one and leave twenty. It would take two days to address all of them, but you see that there are four main categories of action. You delegate two of them to your team members, forwarding all the required information in one message and then move the sent messages to your 'Awaiting' folder. Afterwards, you meet with them in person, give instructions, and answer all questions. You then schedule one Pomodoro session and twenty-five minutes is enough to answer five e-mails, leaving you with five for a later time and two delegated tasks.

Summary

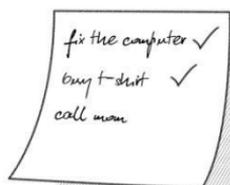
The fourth habit is all about priorities and focusing on the current task as much as possible. When you turn off your distractors, ask people for some time to yourself, delegate, and effectively use your task list and calendar, you are able to fully engage in your current task. When you focus on important tasks, the number of critical and urgent issues decreases.

Mastering your Calendar

Habit 5: The golden rule of your calendar



ONLY events
NO tasks



ONLY tasks
NO events

Take a minute to open your calendar. Let us take a close look at it, whether it is in electronic or paper form. There are two very important questions that inform the fifth habit – “Is this event bound to a specific time?” and “Is there any event I need to remember that I did not put in my calendar?” We can anticipate that you will form the fifth habit when you answer these two questions unconsciously and quickly.

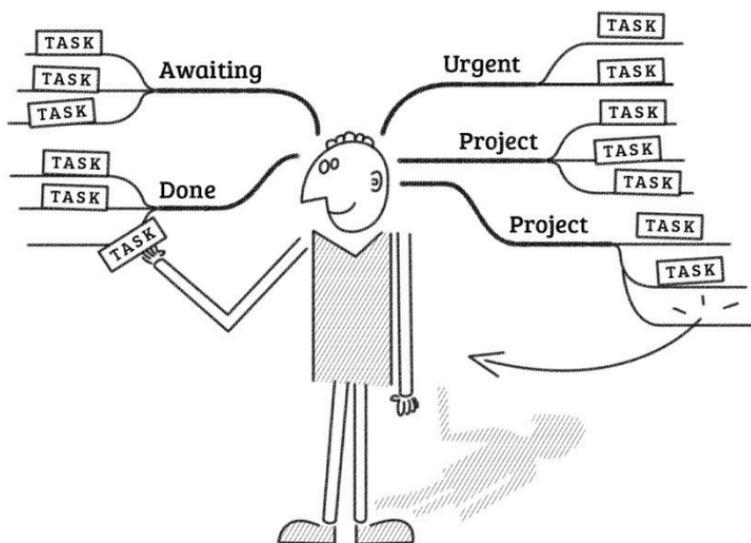
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Effective Task List

Habit 6: Task List - Mind Map



In the first five habits we addressed e-mail and calendar usage. A task list is the one remaining item to complete the big picture.

You probably already have a task list in one of the popular forms - a hand-written scrap on a sheet of paper, a simple text file, sticky notes, or a piece of software like “Remember The Milk.”

All the techniques mentioned above work fine. However, for a long time I searched for a visually appealing task list that allows for easy prioritization, displays relation of tasks to bigger projects, shows delegated tasks, and works on any PC, Mac, or tablet.

I wanted to use a system that with one look would tell me where I was and signify the most important step forward. In the next chapters we will discuss the sixth habit - mind map - which will incorporate all such information.

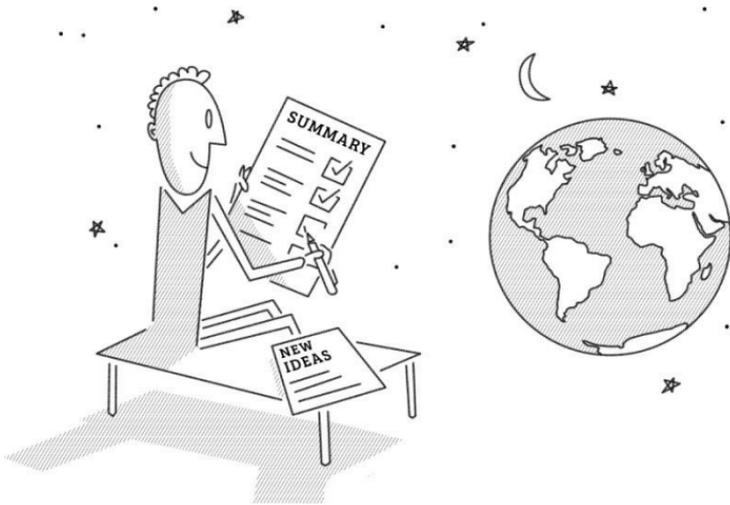
Sample of the original book

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Cleansing

Habit 7: Weekly cleanup and daily startup



There is one last habit to form and it is all about sustainability. Have you ever tried to organize something, filled with an initial burst of energy? The sky is bright, you are energetic, changes seem clear, and there is plenty of good energy. However, within a few weeks or months these days may feel far away.

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