

HBR Guide to  
**Getting the  
Right Work Done**

## Harvard Business Review Guides

Arm yourself with the advice you need to succeed on the job, from the most trusted brand in business. Packed with how-to essentials from leading experts, the HBR Guides provide smart answers to your most pressing work challenges.

**The titles include:**

*HBR Guide to Better Business Writing*

*HBR Guide to Finance Basics for Managers*

*HBR Guide to Getting a Job*

*HBR Guide to Getting the Mentoring You Need*

*HBR Guide to Getting the Right Work Done*

*HBR Guide to Giving Effective Feedback*

*HBR Guide to Making Every Meeting Matter*

*HBR Guide to Managing Stress*

*HBR Guide to Managing Up and Across*

*HBR Guide to Persuasive Presentations*

*HBR Guide to Project Management*

HBR Guide to  
**Getting  
the Right  
Work Done**

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS

Boston, Massachusetts

Find more digital content or join the discussion on [www.hbr.org](http://www.hbr.org).

The web addresses referenced and linked in this book were live and correct at the time of the book's publication but may be subject to change.

Copyright 2012 Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation

All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior permission of the publisher. Requests for permission should be directed to [permissions@hbsp.harvard.edu](mailto:permissions@hbsp.harvard.edu), or mailed to Permissions, Harvard Business School Publishing, 60 Harvard Way, Boston, Massachusetts 02163.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

HBR guide to getting the right work done.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-4221-8711-1 (alk. paper)

1. Time management. 2. Decision making. I. Harvard Business Review Press. II. Title: Harvard Business Review guide to getting the right work done. III. Title: Guide to getting the right work done.

HD69.T54.H374 2012

650.1'1—dc23

2012012383

## What You'll Learn

Are you paralyzed by the pile of projects on your plate? Has fear of delegation buried you in administrivia? Is your focus destroyed by the incessant call of e-mail and Twitter? Do you leave work exhausted—but with little to show for it? Are promotions passing you by because your peers are more productive?

You can't possibly tackle every task that awaits you. But here's the good news: You can learn to get the *right* work done, focusing your time and energy where it'll yield the greatest reward—for you and your organization. This guide will help by offering a range of accessible tools so you can sample them and see what works for you.

You'll get better at:

- Prioritizing
- Staying focused
- Working less but accomplishing more
- Stopping bad habits and developing good ones
- Writing to-do lists that work

## What You'll Learn

- Breaking overwhelming projects into manageable pieces
- Thwarting e-mail overload
- Refueling your energy

# Contents

## Section 1: GET STARTED

**1. You Can't Get It *All* Done** **3**

*... so what should you do?*

BY PETER BREGMAN

**2. Nine Things Successful People Do Differently** **9**

*It's not who you are; it's what you do*

BY HEIDI GRANT HALVORSON

**3. Being More Productive: An Interview  
with David Allen and Tony Schwartz** **23**

*Do you need the right system or the right  
frame of mind?*

BY DANIEL MCGINN

## Section 2: PRIORITIZE YOUR WORK

**4. Get a Raise by Getting the Right Work Done** **35**

*Focus on the work that will bring the  
greatest reward—for your organization and  
for you*

BY PETER BREGMAN

**5. The Worth-Your-Time Test** 39

*Stop wasting time on the wrong work*

BY PETER BREGMAN

**6. Say Yes to Saying No** 43

*Make it easier to decline projects and invitations*

BY ALEXANDRA SAMUEL

**Section 3: ORGANIZE YOUR TIME**

**7. A Practical Plan for When You Feel Overwhelmed** 49

*How to get started when you don't know where to begin*

BY PETER BREGMAN

**8. Stop Procrastinating—Now** 53

*Five tips for breaking this bad habit*

BY AMY GALLO

**9. Don't Let Long-Term Projects Become Last-Minute Panic** 57

*What to do when you have "all the time in the world"*

BY PETER BREGMAN

**10. Stop Multitasking** 63

*Do just one thing to get many things done*

BY PETER BREGMAN

**11. How to Stay Focused on What's Important** 69

*Stop fighting fires*

BY GINA TRAPANI

**12. To-Do Lists That Work** **73**

*The secret is specificity*

BY GINA TRAPANI

**13. How to Tackle Your To-Do List** **77**

*Use your calendar*

BY PETER BREGMAN

**14. Reward Yourself for Doing Dreaded Tasks** **81**

*When crossing items off your list just isn't enough*

BY ALEXANDRA SAMUEL

**Section 4: DELEGATE EFFECTIVELY**

**15. Management Time: Who's Got the Monkey?** **87**

*Delegate, Delegate, Delegate*

BY WILLIAM ONCKEN, JR., AND DONALD L.

WASS, WITH COMMENTARY BY STEPHEN R. COVEY

**16. Levels of Delegation** **109**

*Teach them to fish*

BY LINDA A. HILL AND KENT LINEBACK

**Section 5: CREATE RITUALS**

**17. Ritual: How to Get Important Work Done** **113**

*Make good habits automatic*

BY TONY SCHWARTZ

**18. Power Through Your Day in 90-Minute Cycles** **117**

*Work with your body's natural rhythms*

BY TONY SCHWARTZ

## Contents

### 19. An 18-Minute Plan for Managing Your Day 121

*Frequent check-ins with yourself will keep you on course*

BY PETER BREGMAN

### 20. Use a 10-Minute Diary to Stay on Track 125

*The best way to spend the last few minutes of your day*

BY TERESA AMABILE AND STEVEN KRAMER

## Section 6: RENEW YOUR ENERGY

### 21. How to Accomplish More by Doing Less 135

*Take breaks to get more done*

BY TONY SCHWARTZ

### 22. Manage Your Energy, Not Your Time 139

*Time is limited, but your energy is not*

BY TONY SCHWARTZ AND CATHERINE MCCARTHY

### 23. Why Great Performers Sleep More 147

*. . . and how you can, too*

BY TONY SCHWARTZ

## Section 7: TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR E-MAIL

### 24. Simplify Your E-mail 153

*Three folders will do it*

BY GINA TRAPANI

### 25. Eight E-mail Overload Experiments 157

*Don't be afraid to be extreme*

BY ALEXANDRA SAMUEL

## Section 8: MAINTAIN YOUR NEW APPROACH

### 26. Sustaining Your Productivity System 165

*You've become productive! Now keep it up*

BY ALEXANDRA SAMUEL

## Section 9: EXPLORE FURTHER

### 27. More Productivity Books to Explore 171

*Summaries of three popular titles by Covey, Morgenstern, and Allen*

BY ILAN MOCHARI

### 28. Productivity Apps and Tools 175

*Tech tools to keep you on track*

### *Index* 181



Section 1

# **Get Started**



# Chapter 1

## You Can't Get It *All* Done

by Peter Bregman

Brad is as hard a worker as anyone I know. (Names and some details have been changed.) He's not just busy, he's keenly focused on getting the right things done. And it pays off—he is the largest single revenue generator at his well-known professional services firm. A few days before Thanksgiving, Brad flew from Boston to Los Angeles with his family. During the five-hour flight, he decided not to use the plane's Internet access, choosing to play with his children instead. A five-hour digital vacation.

When they landed, Brad turned on his BlackBerry and discovered that a crisis had developed while he was in the air. He had close to five hundred new e-mail messages.

So much for a digital vacation.

The truth is, we can't really get away from it. There's no escaping the nonstop surge of e-mail, text, voice

mail, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn—and that’s just the technology-based stream. How can we ever catch up?

We can’t.

The idea that we can get it all done is the biggest myth in time management. There’s no way Brad can meaningfully go through all his e-mail, and there’s no way any of us are going to accomplish everything we want to.

Face it: You’re a limited resource.

On the one hand, that’s depressing. On the other hand, acknowledging it can be tremendously empowering. Once we admit that we aren’t going to get it *all* done, we’re in a much better position to make explicit choices about what we *are* going to do. Instead of letting things haphazardly fall through the cracks, we can intentionally push the unimportant things aside and focus our energy on the things that matter most.

That’s what this guide is all about.

There are two main challenges in doing the right things: identifying what they are and then doing them.

To determine the “right things,” we need to make choices that will move us toward the outcomes we most want. Which, of course, means we need to know what our priorities are.

In terms of the second challenge—the “doing” or follow-through—we need tools. Rituals. To-do lists. Delegation skills.

But which tools will work best for you? Which rituals will help you follow through? You might be the kind of person who can read through a book like this, full of great advice, and implement it all at once. I am not. I get overwhelmed and end up not changing anything.

So, here's one way to use this guide:

1. **Identify your time management challenges.** Do you leave the office with a nagging feeling that you worked all day but didn't get your most important work done? Are you distracted by little things? Avoiding big, hairy projects? Take this three-minute quiz (see "How well do you manage distraction?") to discover where you're distracting yourself the most.
2. **Find one piece of advice you think will have the greatest impact on your work.** Once you've identified your biggest challenges, read through this guide and find a tip that speaks to you. Maybe you're not clear on your "right things." Maybe the rituals you're using aren't working. Maybe you procrastinate. Choose one tactic you think will help you the most. Then do that *one* thing.
3. **Do it again.** Once that tactic has had an impact on your work, repeat the process. Return to this guide and select another tip.

Because Brad is a paragon of productivity, he decided to put his BlackBerry away and wait to reply to the messages until he was in his hotel room. Then, using his laptop, he attacked the crisis: called his client to allay their concerns, delegated tasks to his team, and sent an e-mail to his team and his client detailing the plan. Within an hour, he had finished, shut his laptop, left his BlackBerry in his room, and enjoyed a fun, chaos-filled dinner with

TABLE 1-1

## How well do you manage distraction?

|  |       |              |       |        |
|--|-------|--------------|-------|--------|
| 1. Even though it feels like I work nonstop all day, I still don't get the most important things done.   | Never | Occasionally | Often | Always |
| 2. No matter what I intend to focus on at the beginning of the day, as soon as I start working (checking e-mail, etc.), I seem to get derailed and lose my focus.                      | Never | Occasionally | Often | Always |
| 3. When I have something important and challenging I want to accomplish, I spend my time doing lots of little things and avoiding the big one.   | Never | Occasionally | Often | Always |
| 4. When my work gets challenging, I somehow keep interrupting myself by surfing the Web, doing e-mail, and other distractions.   | Never | Occasionally | Often | Always |
| 5. When I'm on a conference call, I get bored and start multitasking until I miss something important; then I try to recover without making it obvious that I wasn't paying attention. | Never | Occasionally | Often | Always |
| 6. I'm late for meetings and appointments because I try to get one more thing done instead of leaving enough time for preparation and/or travel.                                       | Never | Occasionally | Often | Always |
| 7. I feel overwhelmed and stressed out by the number of things I have to do.   | Never | Occasionally | Often | Always |
| 8. My work day ends in frustration as I think about all the things I intended to accomplish but didn't.  | Never | Occasionally | Often | Always |
| 9. When I try to make space for my own work, I get interrupted by others and I find it hard to protect my time.  | Never | Occasionally | Often | Always |
| 10. I don't spend enough time at work in my "sweet spot" (doing work I'm really good at and enjoy the most).   | Never | Occasionally | Often | Always |

**Score yourself**

Number of checks in:

Never \_\_\_\_\_

Occasionally \_\_\_\_\_

Often \_\_\_\_\_

Always \_\_\_\_\_

**Guide to scores**

**If you selected mostly “Never,”** congratulations! You’re already doing a great job of focusing on the work that will give you—and your organization—the highest reward. You likely already have rituals and tactics that make you productive. Look to this guide for some new tips and ideas to expand your collection of productivity tools.

**If you selected mostly “Occasionally,”** you’re doing pretty well. Perhaps willpower or delegating is helping you focus on getting the right work done. But there’s even more you could be doing to boost your productivity. Perhaps you haven’t experimented with rituals. Perhaps your obsession with e-mail is derailing you. Read on to discover new ideas about how you can get even more of the right work done.

**If you selected mostly “Often,”** you could use a process to help you get and stay focused on the right work. Resist the allure of “urgent” projects to focus on the work with the greatest long-term rewards. Learn how to craft the most useful to-do lists so that you can power through them and leave work feeling a sense of accomplishment.

**If you selected mostly “Always,”** you need help. But you know that, because you bought this guide, so you’re already on the path to productivity. Pick your biggest pain point and start there, then return to the Guide as often as you need to.

This quiz is derived from Peter’s book, *18 Minutes: Master Distractions, and Get the Right Things Done*. For free *18 Minutes* tools and resources (including an online version of this quiz offering more detailed results and feedback), visit <http://www.peterbregman.com>.

---

## Get Started

his family—which, at that time, was precisely the right thing for him to do.

---

**Peter Bregman** is a strategic adviser to CEOs and their leadership teams. His latest book is *18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distraction, and Get the Right Things Done*.