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The Time Trap

The Classic Book on Time Management

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

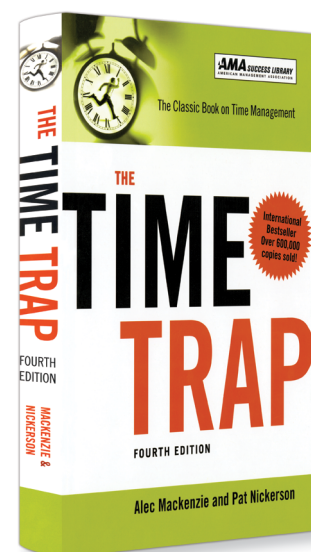
Suffering from information overload? Being asked to do too much? Can't say no? If you're finding your days clogged with endless activities and responsibilities and your work life spinning out of control, it's time to employ some practical, realistic solutions to the age-old problem of "too much to do and too little time."

Considered to be the classic book on time management, *The Time Trap* gives you powerful methods for both maximizing efficiency and getting the most satisfaction out of your workday.

Based on decades of research and interviews with businesspeople around the world — and extensively revised to include technology-based solutions to the challenges we all face in the virtual world — *The Time Trap* is loaded with smart tactics and priceless time management tools. Let this proven guide boost your personal productivity and professional success when time is *not* on your side.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Ways to avoid so-called "time savers" that don't really work.
- Tips to set realistic goals and make commitments you can keep.
- How to accurately estimate the amount of time needed on new tasks.
- A method to pinpoint and combat your most tenacious time-wasters.



by Alec Mackenzie
and Pat Nickerson

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: THE TIME TRAP

by Alec Mackenzie and Pat Nickerson

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PART I: TIME MANAGEMENT FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Your goal in pursuing better time management is to reach the end of any challenging day and ask yourself,

- How many minutes or hours was I able to focus, undistracted? (If you were able to beat the average manager's eight minutes of peace and concentration, celebrate!)
- How often did I insist that validity trump apparent urgency? (If your answer makes you proud, celebrate!)
- What proportion of my work added value for those I am here to serve? (If your answer pleases you, celebrate!)
- Was I able to negotiate realistic expectations (quantity, quality and time) in order to validate some tasks? (If yes, then celebrate!)
- How often, today, did my decisions fit my sense of ethics? (Celebrate!)
- Did I work hard, meet a lot of my goals and have some fun, too? (Celebrate!)

Getting to this point means leveraging a comprehensive set of ideas and tools to curtail distractions, adjust expectations (yours and other people's) and find satisfaction in doing work you can validate and celebrate. Unfortunately, we are prone to several traps that our traditions have taught us to accept. ●

Time Traps We've Been Taught

Information, exploding from worldwide sources, keeps expanding exponentially every day. When you can't keep up with the inflow, software makers and service providers step in to oblige — hiking your personal storage capacity

or holding your info-burden on their own servers until you tap it or delete it. But to start managing your business overload, you need to tailor your own criteria for opening and retrieving information. What you need is a personal set of criteria, a system well planned to cut through the clutter, ready to retrieve only the data you need at any moment. You need stringent filtering rules tailored to your needs.

Pressure Puts Off Planning

Cleaning up your personal information system takes planning and decision-making — and both of those take time because no one else can do it for you. But you're not alone if you find the prospect daunting and other matters more pressing. Can you relate to the following scenarios?

- You're frustrated when an important job is still not ready at deadline — but you're too exhausted to start hunting for missing data.
- When time-driven projects come up, such as year-end reports, you steel yourself for the long night and weekend hours ahead and then reach the finish line, afraid that your hasty findings may prove flawed.
- Senior requesters tell you, "Drop everything, and do this." But you know they'll return shortly for that "everything" you were told to drop.

Even if you are a time-aware professional — even if you list your priorities in writing and struggle to maintain them — you can still get sidetracked by two powerful habits, always painted as virtues: responsiveness and randomness:

Responsiveness and Randomness: Double Trouble

As a caring professional, you may well have been taught to welcome any of the following:



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- Walk-in workers with legitimate problems.
(*The problem is legitimate; the timing may not be.*)
- Unscheduled meetings about other people's priorities
(*The solution may lie with them, not with you.*)
- Email demands, all tagged "urgent."
(*You and your team need defensive email protocols.*)
- Lengthy phone calls from "the lonely" or disengaged
(*You must redirect without appearing brusque.*)
- A crisis unfolding despite your early warnings.
(*Politeness forbids saying or thinking, "I told you so."*)

You may shoulder the odious problem yourself, for the sake of peace. You'll earn little or no gratitude, and the upshot is clear: The interrupters will deepen their dependency. They'll be back — and you'll rue your role as rescuer.

Cool Your Itch to Respond

When you resist the urge to mend other people's problems, you give them a chance to extricate themselves on their own. You dampen their appetite for cheap help and let them expend some effort of their own. Especially for the experienced workers who may report to you, your practice of counting to ten may contribute handsomely to their development.

Time Management: The Oddest Assumption of All

Do you really manage your hours on earth? Your time is one asset you'd like to consider yours alone, and yet, you can't keep it. You can give it as a gift to your loved ones. You can donate it to worthy causes as a volunteer, and you can lease it out to your employers for an agreed sum. But you can't bank it. It cannot be accelerated or slowed. It must be spent the instant it is received and at one fixed rate: 60 seconds per minute, 60 minutes per hour. We cannot choose whether to use it, only how. ●

How to Connect Goals, Objectives and Priorities

Goals ... Objectives ... Priorities. In casual conversation, business people often use the terms interchangeably. This is a mistake with serious consequences. Though the terms are certainly related, they flow in a strict cascading hierarchy, from goals to objectives to priorities. If you attempt to prioritize your daily tasks without a clear picture of the goals and objectives that are driving them, you can invest a lot of time and effort to produce a result that falls short, because the goal never became clear — to you or anyone else.

The Cascade From Goals to Objectives to Priorities

Here's how the process is meant to operate in business:

Stage 1: Goals. Owners or investors and senior managers commit the research, the funds and the impetus to enter a new market, launch a new product or offer a new service. They draw up strategic plans that focus on the end point (the goals), citing the advantages or gains that this enterprise offers. They set out the concepts and parameters, add financial and political support, and lay out the goals for management in ways to motivate eager sign-up.

Stage 2: Objectives. Next, division and department heads draw up plans detailing all the diverse elements to be managed — design, engineering, finance, manufacturing, marketing, sales, service and administration. They lay out the programs and processes involved, plan for coordinated results and deploy the startup teams, doling out the budgets and setting up precise deliverables and time lines.

Stage 3: Priorities. Now, the actual performers in each department learn about the goals and objectives set by those above them. They accept their assignments and organize the practical task groupings to accomplish them. They make specific plans and schedules to fit this new work into their existing workloads.

In fact, priority setting is not about scheduling — not yet. It's not about when to do the new tasks — it's about whether these tasks should be allowed to compete with standing obligations. Priority setting aims to make goal accomplishment feasible — on both old and new goals. ●

How to Set Priorities and Hold Them

Today, you are asked to reset your priorities, not daily but hourly or at the "speed of change." Hundreds of messages can clog your email, voicemail and smartphone. Mergers, acquisitions and reorganizations can leave your head spinning. On some days, managers or customers can paint even the most absurd demands as valid, urgent and non-negotiable. Often, if the requester has enough clout, you accede to the demand and add a few more hours to your unpaid overtime.

A decade ago, most people reported to one boss, so they knew whom to consult about conflicting priorities. Today, you're just as likely to report to several bosses. If your business is built upon matrix management and project management, you may perform different roles in different groups: You may supervise one team, serve on a second and act as internal consultant or SME on a third.

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Furthermore, your “virtual” colleagues and clients may access you directly across continents and culture, so your clock never stops.

Hence, you face fuzzier lines of authority and thinner support than ever. As for setting and holding to priorities, you are on your own! You need a good system that suits your style.

Minimum Requirements for Prioritizing

There is no one best way. But you can build your system on three firm elements:

1. Build your logic on Vilfredo Pareto’s Law, the “80/20” law that proposes that 80 percent of your results will come from only 20 percent of your tasks.
2. Defend your logic with performance criteria.
3. Start each day with a written plan: three bullets, right in front of you, on your task screen or on a sticky note at eye level.

Once you embrace Pareto’s Law, you can seriously oppose the common dictates that say “do it now!” or “handle a piece of paper only once!” Sure, those rules sound good, but they only make sense if all incoming tasks had equally high impacts. Pareto is right, so only 20 percent of your tasks deserve attention at the best times on your schedule. Further, of the 80 percent of items clamoring for your attention, only 60 percent may deserve your attention soon — somewhere in the middle 60 percent of your day. And the lowest 20 percent may not merit your attention ever!

Hence, your new rule should be, Don’t DO it now — VALIDATE it now!

The Process of Validating Work

Compare new demands against those in your current load. If an issue can really compete in importance and validity, then slot it in and get it done — not “now” — but in a slot that will assure delivery by its deadline. If it’s only a mid-value item, then give it a slot on your schedule that cannot intrude on any slot dedicated to your top 20 percent. Or delay giving it any slot at all — instead, post it in a “holding space” for slotting later.

Standard Lead Time Tool: One Cure for Deadline Dementia

Many smart departments publish a list of common tasks they perform, along with realistic time estimates. They post these on a shared site and encourage requesters to take a look before submitting requests with optimistic deadlines imposed.

When you accept an assignment, ask the requester for an estimate of the time necessary to complete the task.

Always do that before accepting a deadline as reasonable. (Mostly, requesters don’t have a clue about work time estimates, but ask!) If common sense will let you do an “eyeball” estimate, go ahead. If not, offer to evaluate the job and come back later with an estimate.

Only after you have made a thoughtful estimate can you agree on a reasonable deadline. Next time you start to evaluate a job, don’t look at the clock or the calendar. Instead, consider the discrete tasks involved, and decide where on a time line they will fall.

Show Risks: Offer Options

If you’re the one delivering the final product, never opt out of a discussion on conflicting assignments. Instead, take three tactful steps:

1. Show the risks involved if you attempt clearing both tasks at speed.
2. Show options that make practical sense, with roughly matched trade-offs (pain levels) for either side.
3. State your own preferred solution and the reasons for it.

Then, with a clear conscience, you can accept their joint mandate and perform your best effort. By electing to negotiate, you give both parties the right to examine risks and options and to accept the honest advice of the one who must deliver the goods: you! ●

How to Tame the Time Log

Time seems to evaporate when you’re very busy. If you can discover where your time actually goes, you can capture more value from it and control the leaks that rob you by stealth.

How Logging Got a Bad Name

The simplest tool for getting control is a time log. But too many users and authors, by misreading the correct uses of logging, have given it a bad name. What do they fear?

- Boredom: Yes, time logging would be tedious if you kept it up for long. But you won’t!
- Inaccuracy: People forget to make entries, then try plugging items from memory...then abandon the job. But, it’s not crucial to write in every entry. In our system, you enter only those distractions that conflict directly with your top priorities.
- Guilt: People are shocked when they see their time losses; they berate themselves without mercy. But you can take up logging with the conviction that you’re not a machine. While you’ll never manage time perfectly, your brief, selective logging exercise will help you to protect your top priorities. That’s the whole point.

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Selectivity: The Most Vital Secret

If you try to log everything you do all day, you'll not only suffer boredom, you'll get nothing else done. But that's not what we have in mind. Instead, focus your log on a short list of your top three priorities. Then record "changes of direction," noting only the items that intruded into time slots reserved for priorities. On that basis, your simple time log can be designed like this:

1. Start with a simple two-column layout.
2. In the left-hand column — let's call it your "Red Zone" — you list only your top-priority tasks with their allotted time slots.
3. You hope the right-hand column will remain blank. Here, you log only those incidents that you allow to divert you from Red Zone tasks.

Analyze Your Log to Maintain Momentum

To get maximum value from your logging exercise, ask yourself 10 important questions. Do it while studying your completed chart. In fact, keep asking yourself these questions long after you have stopped logging. They'll help you discover insights and maintain your improved habits:

1. Did you start on your number one goal at the time you intended?
 - a. Did anything distract you from starting?
 - b. How could you have avoided that distraction?
 - c. Once distracted, how long did it take you to recover?
2. What was your longest period, totally uninterrupted on priorities?
3. What was your most productive period? Why?
4. Least productive? Why?
5. To what extent did you achieve your main goals? Were your time estimates adequate? Should you adjust for the future?
6. Did you keep any task that could have been delegated?
7. Concerning interruptions:
 - a. Were any interruptions actually more valid than the scheduled task? If yes — and if they'll repeat, then add them to your priority list.
 - b. What categories of interruptions were heaviest? Phone? Walk-in? Crises? Self-imposed escapes?
 - c. Did you needlessly interrupt anyone else?
8. Contacts:
 - a. Were your planned contacts aimed at advancing priorities?
 - b. Did they take longer than planned? Was your data ready?

- c. Did you get the right person? Was that person ready?

9. Paperwork and email:

- a. Did you spend time checking your email during time slots intended for priorities?
- b. Did you lose time on paper because of clutter, poor filing, missing data?

10. Monitoring:

- a. Did you have an adequate tracker for monitoring progress, especially on elements of your priority tasks?
- b. Did you use or provide a simple template for reporting progress by any teammates assigned to the task?

Keep your Red Zone log for three days; analyze what it tells you about your current habits, and gain some benefits from your own deeper insights. Then, select just a few permissive habits for removal or remodeling. Give yourself credit for your good habits to assure rapid response and recovery. Reinforce and rejoice! ●

PART II: THE NEW TIME TRAPS AND ESCAPES

Inadequate Planning

How much of your day do you spend juggling the demands of bosses, team members and customers? As your workload keeps expanding, do you find less and less time for planning? Do you reach many a day's end drained by activity but with little to show for it?

There's no more important activity for a serious time manager than a written daily plan. To be sure your plan will stick, you must commit it to writing. Only with your written or visual plan can you stay in control of your day.

Without a written plan, your friendly optimism can overrule your common sense. You take on too much; you put yourself in the middle of power struggles; you allow random interruptions; and you slow to a dead end. Your written plan will help you get your top 20 percent done; it will guide you in judging incoming priorities and will bolster your visceral strength to resist drift.

Three Barriers to Maintaining Priorities

There are three barriers shared by many managers and technologists who try priority-setting for a brief period and then abandon it:

1. **Confusion of time management rules with priority setting rules.** Time management is tactical — it determines when to do a task that has already

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been validated. Priority management is strategic — it determines whether to do a task at all.

2. **Unclear criteria for setting priorities.** Yours may differ, depending on your business or industry, but they must still meet objective, measurable standards or rules for defining where in the queue a task will go.
3. **Fear of negotiating when priorities are threatened.** Once armed with objective standards, you, as the performer or SME, must use your data to highlight risks and negotiate priorities. ●

Inability to Say No

As an astute professional, you've learned that the word "no" may insult the ear of a boss, colleague or customer. A flat "no" can damage relationships and stunt your career, exposing you to labels like rude, uncooperative, egotistical, even insubordinate. Yet, you must set some limits, some boundaries, or be forced to accept tasks whose technical or ethical risks are plain as day.

Consider this five-part approach that should get "no" across, firmly but gently:

1. When — for whatever reason — you must decline a request, don't say "no" outright. The moment requesters feel denied or resisted, they stop listening and start building counter-arguments.
2. Open, instead, with a response like, "I see a risk to you." Or, possibly, "I see a risk to our customer/to the public," whatever is true. This way, you raise your requesters' curiosity, not their defenses.
3. Let requesters see the risks graphically. If you are in the same room together, start sketching the risks on a scratch pad. This puts their focus on the page, not on your face. Sometimes, the requester will want to retrieve that sketch if they must make the case, later, with their own higher-ups.
4. Avoid mentioning any problem or inconvenience to yourself or your team. Your requester will expect you to manage your risks — and muffle your pain — in private.
5. Finally, be prepared to illustrate workable options for every risk you list. ●

Poor Communication

Despite its challenges, we take for granted that communication is simply a natural activity, a skill or gift we are born with. Through a lifetime of encounters, we ascend

to more and more convoluted conflicts in conference rooms, classrooms or courtrooms — communicating every waking hour.

Five Reasons Why Casual Communication Is Never Casual

1. The words we use have different meanings in different contexts, on paper and even more so in person.
2. The channels we use can carry subliminal meanings: An email of congratulations feels chillier than a greeting card or a handwritten note.
3. The distance between cultures and continents should oblige us to cultivate those nuances we'd sense so easily if we were face to face. A silence on the phone can rattle our nerves, but a face-to-face silence can speak volumes when we can see and read the facial expressions and body language the other person is conveying.
4. The timing and context — ours and the other person's — may contrast greatly during an encounter. If either party feels distracted, tired, suspicious or threatened — for reasons unrelated to the current message — those feelings can bleed into the exchange, distorting or blocking the message.
5. The quantity or volume of data may baffle us too. How much detail should we include in a message? Will basic coverage insult readers' intelligence? Will advanced coverage assume background that may be missing for too many receivers? ●

Poorly Run Meetings

We must improve meetings, not abolish them. Human beings exhibit a built-in need to assemble, especially in times of trouble or triumph. So face it: Meetings are here to stay. Virtual or actual — in times of trouble or opportunity, we can make meetings quick, constructive, comforting and compelling.

Don't Call Meetings Just Because You Can

Here are five ways to make meetings bearable:

1. Call a meeting only on topics requiring two-way communication.
2. Call a meeting only when the topic cannot be covered in a memo.
3. Hold team meetings on a reliable schedule — but without a set length. This gives every member a chance to suggest items of concern for your pre-agenda. Teams work better when they know they

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can rely on airing an issue of concern to several team members.

4. Keep meetings short. If you only need 20 minutes, that's all you take.
5. Prepare well. Today's teams are smart and easily bored. Some suggestions for keeping good order:
 - List agenda items in order of impact: If time runs out, damage is minimal.
 - Members will not interrupt presenters; instead they reserve questions for a question period that can be slotted after each agenda item or held to a timed Q&A session at the end of the meeting.
 - Members will not interrupt one another in mid-sentence or will raise hands to be heard next.
 - No "been there, done that" reactions. Don't criticize: Offer a better idea. ●

Information Overload and the Paper Chase

Information fuels your enterprise. In a typical year, you may scan industrial and market research, news outlets, learned journals and your corporate intranet — to scan millions, indeed billions of words in dozens of languages. Access is easy; selection is tougher; validation and deployment of the data, even more challenging. So, to gain control, you face two tasks:

1. You must tap information sources efficiently, for precisely the information you need and no more.
2. You must control the paper chase that still rages around you, 30 years after the pundits predicted you'd be paperless.

First Challenge: How to Gain the Information You Need

For a systematic assessment of what you'll need for any task, your team must think through your data requirements early. You could ask yourselves,

- What information will we need? At what stages of a project?
- Where will the information originate? Which department? Person?
- What deadlines are critical?
- What could go wrong?
- What steps could we take to buffer errors or delays?
- What alternative sources could we tap? When? At what cost?

The Second Big Challenge: Manage the Information You Gather

Your ability to apply the information you gather will depend on building a logical storage and retrieval system (probably electronic) and on improving your personal organization skills to avoid drowning in paper. Here are a few warning signs:

- Fat file folders clutter the top of your credenza.
- Several tasks are flagged on your electronic organizer, still untouched since yesterday.
- Scribbled scraps of paper — reminders of hallway conversations — lie half buried in clutter.
- Last month's professional journals lie unopened as this month's issues arrive.
- Your coffee goes cold while you dig through your briefcase for a missing flash drive.
- People kid you, kindly or otherwise, about your rumpled desk until an important task, buried in clutter, slips past your notice. Then it ceases to be a joking matter. ●

Confused Responsibility and Authority

Sudden change — the one constant in business — brings with it an immediate and dangerous condition: confused responsibility and authority. At the most basic level, they can be distinguished this way: Responsibility denotes a duty or obligation, whereas authority denotes the power to take action. If you impose responsibility on a team member, you must also grant matching authority to complete the task for which he or she is now responsible.

Five Clarifying Practices

To clarify responsibility and authority on any job being assigned, the boss must provide and the appointee must insist on the following:

1. An accurate job title that clarifies the appointee's level of authority.
2. A written job description agreed to by boss and assignee.
3. An organizational chart that shows who reports to whom and how members and teams interact.
4. A written change announcement to all whose cooperation will be needed.
5. A set of simple metrics to drive regular performance evaluations, to be conducted at intervals frequently enough to allow continuous improvement. ●

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Attempting Too Much

Have you reached a point where people take your superior service for granted? Do you make everyone happy but yourself? Do you allow important priorities to get buried by convincing yourself that “it all has to get done, anyway”? Keep your eyes open for the day when the overdrive that began as a virtue can morph into a vise drawn ever tighter around your time and your life.

Four Hazardous Habits of Mind

Four common confessions from perfectionist, workaholic overachievers include,

1. “I needed to keep excelling, even under pressure, to keep up my sense of self-worth, but others were clearly indifferent about the results. They tell me I’m overdoing it, even to this day.”
2. “I’m reluctant to delegate, either through lack of faith in others, inadequate practice in delegating or discomfort about my earlier, failed attempts to let go.”
3. “Almost daily, I overschedule myself, with unrealistic notions on how much can be done in a day.”
4. “Perfectionism drives me to lavish attention on minor details and to keep reworking everything. If my name is on it, it has to be perfect or I can’t release it.”

Execute Four Escapes

What can you do to change your mindset and behaviors?

1. You must dump the myth that you work better under pressure. People don’t work better under pressure; they just work faster. And that can lead to errors, discovered too late.
2. Don’t assume that “it all has to get done” — at least not by you. Discriminate between high- and low-priority tasks. Then, assign and teach a low-priority task to a delegate. Allow for learning and refinement time. Realize that the consequences can’t be too high if the priority is actually low.
3. With your team, build a standard lead-time menu showing commonly repeated tasks so requesters learn to make reasonable demands. Post the menu on a shared website. Teammates and requesters will consult it before bothering you.
4. Finally, save your perfectionism for those tasks that warrant it. Make a conscious decision about how good a result must be. Build your quality standards for vital tasks, and then set up your computer to flag any variables from that acceptable range. Your computer will keep an eye on things.

PART III: PARTING ADVICE

Where Do We Go From Here?

Perhaps your time logs showed you the truth about where your time has been going. Now, you need an action plan to confirm and consolidate your resolutions about upgrading time management.

Many people, when first introduced to time management, pounce on a specific idea or two — and off they go to reform their practices without a thought about the overall patterns of their lives or the ripple effects of one time management trap on another.

Expect the Tug of Old Habits

On their own, few people can analyze the causes of their difficulties with time management or understand the invisible habits that cause the problems. Instead, they jump at quick and easy solutions, then wonder why the cure didn’t take. In a few weeks, the old ways are back.

Long-term success demands a coordinated approach, one in which you recognize your persistent patterns of behavior and form a systematic plan, sketched out and posted where you can see it. Then, it must be followed, daily, to get you past disappointments.

So don’t limit yourself to exploring a few “whats.” Instead, work to understand the “whys” — the habits of your lifetime. Then, you’ll find it easier to adopt behaviors that conserve time for the people and the passions you value at work and at home.

You are in charge of your time, but your time-based decisions will impact others. Let people know what you’re doing. Enlist their help, and return the favor by sharing the time-saving techniques you learn. Lead by example. Few business development ideas are more team-friendly than good time management. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *The Time Trap*, you’ll also like:

1. ***Time Traps* by Todd Duncan.** Sales expert Duncan explains why you should abandon time management and instead adopt task management.
2. ***The 5 Choices* by Adam Merrill, Leena Rinne and Kory Kogon.** Be empowered to make more selective, high-impact choices about where to invest your valuable time, attention and energy.
3. ***Extreme Productivity* by Robert C. Pozen.** Pozen provides proven antidotes to productivity-draining activities such as meetings, email and an unbalanced workload.