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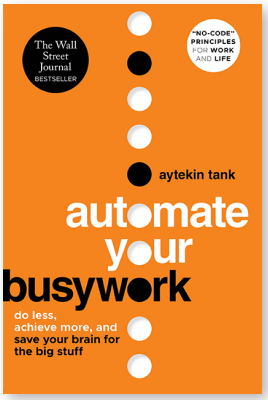
Automate Your Busywork

Do Less, Achieve More, and Save Your Brain for the Big Stuff



by **Aytekin Tank**

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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

For many professionals, the workday disappears under a pile of repetitive tasks, manual processes, and administrative demands that make it feel as though there are never enough hours to focus on meaningful work.

Automate Your Busywork: Do Less, Achieve More, and Save Your Brain for the Big Stuff tackles this universal pain point head-on, explaining how automation can help anyone break free from busywork and reclaim time for high-value thinking and creativity. Drawing from his experience as an entrepreneur and CEO of JotForm, author Aytekin Tank emphasizes how automation—particularly today's accessible, no-code tools—has leveled the playing field, giving individuals and teams the ability to streamline tasks without relying on developers or IT departments.

By adopting an "automation-first" mindset, readers can offload routine work, reduce cognitive overload, and shift attention toward the strategic projects that move businesses forward. Ultimately, Tank shows that automation is not about doing less work, but about reclaiming the time, focus, and mental energy needed to do the work that truly matters. This approach offers a practical way to identify, design, and refine automated workflows that improve with use. Over time, small, well-built systems can compound into lasting gains in focus, efficiency, and impact.

IN THIS EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY

- Understand how no-code automation tools can eliminate repetitive tasks and free up mental capacity
- Learn the "automation-first" approach to identifying and simplifying workflows
- Apply the "flywheel" method to build, test, and refine automations over time
- Develop sustainable habits that shift you from busywork to meaningful productivity

Introduction

We're all drowning in busywork. We all have too much to do. Despite all our technology, or maybe because of it, so many of us spend our days fighting busywork that distracts us from our higher purpose.

What would you do if you could eliminate the dull and repetitive tasks you hate? We all have just 24 hours in a day. What separates the truly successful from the floundering is how we use those hours.

This is where automation comes in. Turning repetitive tasks into automated digital processes frees your brain for the essential, creative work. And you don't need to hire a team or spend money on expensive new products. Automation is accessible to anyone who wants to take advantage of it. With a little effort, anyone can automate.

Automation has been the foundation of my career. My early automation ideas developed into what I call the *automation flywheel*. Think of it as a system that takes a little energy to start turning, then continues to build momentum and speed. Every time the flywheel spins, you get more efficient and achieve better results. With patience, you'll be able to automate entire systems that run in the background while you do the real work that only you can do. After all, automation isn't about working less, it's about spending your time on the work you care about.

My ideas about work and automation have evolved over the years, but a few principles continue to hold true:

- Your productivity is not the problem.
- Work isn't going anywhere.
- If you have a manual or repetitive task, you can automate it.
- Modern work requires a machine for success.
- Automation can't happen overnight.

It all comes down to this: determine the result you want, design the machine that will deliver that result, and then configure the automations you need to build it. This is the automation flywheel in a nutshell.

No matter what your responsibilities are, automation can—and will—make your life easier. Here are just some of the benefits you can expect to achieve when you commit to automation.

- overcome human limitations
- increase speed
- document processes
- maintain consistency and minimize errors
- enable continuous improvement
- enable complexity
- lower costs
- reduce stress

CHAPTER 1

Automation Fundamentals

Deeply productive automation can't be simply unboxed and plugged in. To truly conquer your busywork, you'll need to put in time and effort to determine precisely what needs to be automated. But the benefits will come back to you in spades, in part because you'll likely identify tasks that could be greatly reduced or even cut out completely.

Identify Your Busywork, Define Your Meaningful Work

No matter what your busywork is, there's a good chance it can be partially or even fully automated—if not now, then likely soon. As for right now: even if it's not yet possible to automate an entire task, it's almost certainly possible to automate parts of it. This is where mapping out your process comes in. By breaking each task into its smallest, most basic parts, it becomes more apparent which steps you can streamline or automate and which you can reduce or abandon. Once you've identified individual elements of a task, you might find that solutions for that element are already available.

Next, grab a pen and paper. Or ask Siri, Alexa, or a digital assistant to take notes for you. Take 15 minutes to describe or sketch out your vision of work that matters to you and your career. What do you enjoy doing the most? What would you like to save your brain to do more of? What delivers the most impact? Include as many details as possible. Don't worry about a perfect breakdown at this stage; just get down as much as you can. As you continue, keep this "meaningful work" vision nearby, and perfect it as you go. It will be a valuable compass on your journey through automation.

Now that you've identified part of what you're seeking, the first step of exploring the fundamentals of automation calls for shattering key myths about work and productivity:

Myth #1: We should always be available to our colleagues, and we should respond to messages as soon as they arrive.

Solution: Block out periods when you focus on deep-thinking work.

> Use automation to remove repeatable tasks from your to-do list altogether.

Myth #2: Procrastination must constantly be kept at bay.

Solution: Use automation to remove guesswork and decision-making from tasks you tend to procrastinate on.

Myth #3: Making a list and crossing out completed tasks is the best antidote to feeling overwhelmed.

Solution: Use automation to remove repeatable tasks from your to-do list altogether.

Introducing the Automation Flywheel

I developed the automation flywheel after I realized that automation is never fully "done"—it's ever-evolving. In keeping up with that reality, the automation flywheel is a process of continuous improvement. The flywheel starts turning when you realize you've fallen into a pit of busywork and you're ready to climb out, and it proceeds in three stages:

Stage 1 — Divide and Conquer

- **Divide** – the process begins with exploring the source of your busywork: what it looks like, why it's happening, and who's involved (or who isn't involved but should be), plus key signs and symptoms.
- **Conquer** – bring workflows and processes together so individual tasks work in coordination, underpinning your automations and freeing up bandwidth for meaningful work.

Stage 2 — Design and Implement

- **Design** – like sketching a product prototype, this is where you'll literally draw or map out each step of your automation.
- **Implement** – here's where you'll build the actual automation and connect your data. I'll suggest some popular tools for common automation tasks, but, thanks to the blistering pace of technological change, you'll need to do your own research.

Stage 3 — Refine and Iterate

- **Refine** – better automations can help you work faster and more effectively. But before you can refine your automations, you'll need to set and track key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure the results.
- **Iterate** – test and change. Tinker and update. This is the continuous improvement process that keeps your automations on track.

We're a society awash in busywork. But though we may be drowning in a sea of technology, that same technology can also be our life preserver. And though it will take time and energy to get your flywheel going, it builds speed and momentum with every turn. It's the machine that will deliver the results you're seeking. And unlike busywork, the effort you put into this process will pay increasingly more dividends as the weeks elapse.

Embrace the automation flywheel; it's the secret to reclaiming your time and focus.

CHAPTER 2

Divide and Conquer

The divide-and-conquer stage of the automation flywheel can help you figure out *how* and *why* you're overwhelmed with busywork. You probably have some sense of this already; maybe your schedule is crammed with unproductive meetings, or you lose hours to instant messaging. As you explore what's eating up your time, there may be some surprises along the way. The most potent drains are often hiding in plain sight. These are the repetitive, manual tasks we tacitly accept as part of our workday when, in fact, they could be automated right off your to-do list.

Divide: Learning the Power of Workflows

Workflows are a series of interconnected steps that produce a result. Some workflows are linear, meaning they always follow the same series of steps, in the same order.

We often fail to understand the structure of our workflows, and why seemingly isolated tasks are often heavily dependent on other jobs or people. We also fail to estimate how much time each step requires, and we don't realize that a one-off task actually has multiple steps with their own, individual timelines.

Mapping out the full process in advance is the essence of a workflow. This way, when it's time to act, you're not deciding *whether* to do something, or wondering *what* to do next.

The plan kicks in, and you execute.

Exploring your workflows can highlight critical flaws in the process and empower you to fix things right at the root.

To be clear: not every task has a workflow. You can't develop a systematic workflow for highly creative and strategic tasks, like writing, brainstorming, planning, or having complex personal conversations. Workflows are most effective for activities that have the following qualities:

- are repetitive and systematic
- are recurring
- follow a set pattern
- require little-to-no personal input
- involve multiple, interconnected steps
- can be delegated
- can be delayed

Workflow Models and Elements

Every journey has a pattern, so does every workflow. The following are some of the most common workflow models:

- **Linear/sequential** – unfolds in a straight line, following the same steps each time from start to finish, with each step leading to the next without loops, splits, or directional changes.
- **Nonlinear** – involves branches and dependencies that alter the workflow's path based on conditions or inputs.
- **Loop** – restarts the workflow from the beginning once the final step is completed.
- **Parallel** – runs multiple steps at the same time, allowing processes to move forward simultaneously and preventing bottlenecks.

Every workflow has four components:

1. **Trigger**. Starts the workflow and initiates the action.
2. **Steps**. The tasks that occur during the workflow; they exclude the background work required to build the flow.
3. **Results**. What each step achieves; every step has a result.
4. **Outcome**. The completed workflow and the destination it was designed to reach.

It's worth noting that steps aren't synonymous with to-do list items. To be "steps" in a workflow, they need to help fulfill the same outcome.

Every workflow step can also be categorized in one of three ways:

- **Input**. The materials and resources required to complete a step.
- **Transformation**. The rules that determine how input is received and what happens to it.
- **Output**. The materials and resources produced by the transformation step; they become inputs in the next step.

Conquer: Spotting and Plotting Workflows

Learning to recognize workflows is an adaptation. Everything may blur together at first, but with time, you start to focus and see the opportunities. Here's what to look for:

- You're doing a task over and over again.
- Tasks drag on... and on and on.
- Tasks get blocked or stalled.
- You get lost in rabbit holes.

You've probably already discerned a truism worth hammering home: busywork = manual workflows. In preparation for automating that busywork, you'll want to start tracking which workflow candidates might be worth pursuing.

Though you won't always have 20/20 workflow vision, sharpening your spotting skills can help you find more opportunities to transform busywork into automated workflows.

Developing an Automation-First Mindset

Once you've adjusted to the metaphorical dark and are better at spotting the workflows hiding in your busywork, you're ready to embrace an automation-first mindset. You'll view all your to-do items (especially new tasks) through the lens of digital delegation:

- What can I automate?
- What should I spend my time on?
- What *shouldn't* I spend my time on?

As you hone this new automation-first mindset, the following are three principles to help guide you:

1. Harness impatience

People who are lazy and impatient don't like doing the same thing twice. Truly lazy and impatient people are incredibly resourceful—if there's a way to automate a repetitive task, they're going to find it.

> Once you start to see everything as a system that can run on autopilot, it will change your life and your career.

2. Accept the process

Automation can be boring. For most people, breaking already dull tasks into their respective parts and planning a digital workflow is not exactly a party. But you have to embrace your boredom on the road to automation.

3. Embrace systems thinking

Based on Donella H. Meadows's book, *Thinking in Systems*, this principle provides that:

- Everything is a system.
- To understand and improve the system, you have to understand each part, and how the parts connect.
- If you can't see or experience the full system, you need to create models to put it all together.

The same core principles apply to workflow automation. Once you start to see everything as a system that can run on autopilot, it will change your life and your career.

Clarify Your Priorities

Making space for meaningful work means being relentlessly selective about what you choose to do and where you focus your time. If you stick to your priorities, you'll be more productive in all the ways that matter.

Despite all the studies and statistics highlighting the need for focus, it isn't always easy to determine your true priorities. So many things are vying for our attention, how do we separate the meaningful from the trivial? Here are a couple of techniques you can use to find some clarity:

1. The Eisenhower matrix

The four quadrants in the Eisenhower matrix can be simplified as follows:

1. Urgent and important – do immediately, finish quickly.
2. Important, but not urgent – schedule time for this.
3. Urgent, but not important – delegate or automate.
4. Neither urgent, nor important – try to eliminate.

2. The impact/effort matrix

1. High impact, low effort – since these are quick wins that deliver great returns for relatively little effort, these are the workflows to start with.
2. High impact, high effort – these are larger projects that can deliver strong returns but require more time; make them your secondary priority.
3. Low-impact, low effort – tackle these workflows only if you have extra time or help—or if you really find yourself on a roll.
4. Low impact, high effort – don't touch these projects; they're not worth your time.

Turn to your list of prioritized workflows. Once you've chosen which workflows to automate, you need to set some metrics. What do you want to achieve? What will success look like? You can measure the progress of an automation based on a variety of considerations, including quality, speed, satisfaction, and opportunity.

CHAPTER 3

Design and Implement

The design and implement phase of the flywheel is like planning your escape route. You'll get up close and personal with the tasks that waste your workday and determine how to get them off your plate and out of your way. Automation can do the heavy lifting for you. It can tackle even the most frustrating processes while you strategize, write, lead, create, and do your very best work.

Design: The Power of Maps

Maps are the key to automating your busywork. You've already identified the repetitive, manual workflows that are ripe for optimization. Now, it's time to structure these workflows into visual maps and build the automations. This is where the work happens.

Before you can automate a workflow, you need to understand its current state; that's the only way to streamline the process and make it work better. Here's what to map out:

1. Determine the need
2. Establish a clear beginning and end
3. Sketch in the middle steps
4. Assign responsibilities and ownership
5. Review and refine

Keep in mind that you're automating this workflow to simplify your life, not to add new steps and people into the process. Limit the flow to exactly what needs to be done and who needs to participate in order to accomplish your goal.

Keep the following two points in mind as you design and map out your workflows. Prioritizing modularity and stripping your flows down to the essentials can maximize your time and effort.

- **Make it modular**. Smart workflow design is modular, which means it's composed of self-contained blocks or components. These components can be rearranged, stacked, repeated, and moved as needed.
- **Apply the Pareto principle**. The 80/20 rule, or the Pareto principle, can help you trim processes. Examine each workflow map and prioritize the essential 20%. These are the steps that move most of the work forward. Of course, you can't start randomly cutting steps, but you can use this principle to find pivot points that accomplish the bulk of the task. The more you can simplify these parts, the more effective your workflow will be.

Workflow design doesn't need to be complicated, but it does need to be accurate. A truly useful workflow also does the following:

- provides clarity
- minimizes distractions
- simplifies complexity
- speeds up work
- supports continuous improvement

Implement: From Design to Deployment

So, you've mapped out at least one workflow diagram and you're ready to put it into action. Now what? To put it simply, you need to find tools that will do the manual work for you. Examine each step of your workflow and consider what kind of action needs to happen and what product features might enable that action.

Start where you are. Many of the products you already use have built-in automation opportunities that are flying below the radar. Before you search for brand-new tools, it's worth exploring your existing apps and programs to learn about lesser known functions that might support your workflows.

Consider the cloud. The cloud has unleashed a wave of new automation tools, or software as a service (SaaS) products, that don't cost half your monthly rent. Technology sites like my favorite, G2, will give you a taste of the sheer scope of these options. There are dozens of products for virtually every need and function.

Choose Recommended Products. Not all cloud automation solutions are created equal. Choosing the first hit from your web search is hardly ideal. Yet, who has the time to evaluate a whole series of products? That's where technology journalists and user reviews come in. And if you're entirely lost in the technical part of this process, professional consultants are available to help you identify and implement the best tools for your needs.

Conduct a SWOT Analysis. If you're evaluating a pricier product or one you'll use to automate many different workflows, you may want to go a little deeper. A SWOT analysis explores a tool or system's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

CHAPTER 4

Refine and Iterate

Now it's time to examine how your workflows are performing. Think of it like assessing a first draft: How does the automation flow? Are there steps where the logic breaks down or you keep getting stuck? Is it achieving the goals you established?

Refinement is a process of establishing feedback systems that deliver insights so you can continually improve the workflows, without starting from scratch each time.

Refine: Measure What Matters

Here's the good news: you can measure and track nearly any aspect of your workflow. The bad news is identical: you can measure and track nearly any aspect of your workflow. That's why it's important to identify the most relevant key performance indicators for your automations. After all, you've taken the time to design and implement these workflows; they should perform as expected. You'll also want a benchmark for improvement.

Each KPI measurement is called a metric. Most metrics will include both current and target values. You can track one metric or a whole array. I recommend starting small. Metrics are also like variables in a scientific experiment, so the more you introduce, the more complicated the refinement process can become.

> Automation opportunities are everywhere; you just need to keep scanning the road in order to spot them.

Keep in mind you're establishing KPIs for your automated workflows, not your job role or an organization as a whole.

Determining the right metrics can be surprisingly tricky. Use your overarching goals to prioritize workflow KPIs and metrics. Once you've addressed those, you can:

- Solicit stakeholder feedback
- Make them SMART – specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound
- Create reports and dashboards
- Establish review cycles

Apply Systems Thinking

Your workflows are also systems, and thinking in systems is one of the three core principles of an automation-first mindset. Knowing how to apply systems thinking will help you with every turn of your flywheel. Now that you've automated a chunk of your busywork, we now need to implement feedback systems to refine and improve the output of your workflows.

There are many times in life when the outcome is *more* important than the output. In the same vein, your workflow shouldn't just work; the system should create value for you and everyone else involved. Quality beats quantity. So, how do you assess the quality of your workflows? Start with basic testing: Does it operate as intended?

Remember that a productive workflow provides clarity, minimizes distractions, simplifies complexity, and reduces manual work. Another important way to improve your workflow outcomes is asking what others think about the entire workflow.

Iterate: Test, Change, and Innovate

Workflow iteration is also a process of continuous improvement. It keeps your automations on track and ensures they meet your evolving needs. After setting KPIs, analyzing what you've built, and refining your workflows, hopefully you don't need to start back at the beginning. More likely, you've hit your stride. Now you just need a way to keep enhancing what you've built. Welcome to the final stage of the flywheel.

If your first automations are working flawlessly, congratulations. Don't fix what isn't broken; the time for upgrades will come soon enough. If, however, you're still tinkering with the details, find and adopt a process-improvement approach.

The following process-improvement tools, techniques, and methodologies can streamline your workflows and guide your iterations:

- **Kaizen**: Japanese car-maker Toyota pioneered this approach, which focuses on making incremental upgrades throughout an organization. Any individual, industry, or organization can apply the continuous improvement principles of Kaizen.
- **Six Sigma**: Widely used in business settings, Six Sigma is designed to pinpoint process inconsistencies or defects so as to deliver better products and services.
- **Lean**: As the name suggests, this approach is all about cutting waste. Industries or organizations use Lean techniques to determine if and how a process adds value to the business. Processes that don't bring value can be relegated as waste.
- **Lean Six Sigma**: A combination of Lean and Six Sigma, this methodology focuses on reducing waste and minimizing process defects. It's a highly effective way to improve business processes across a variety of industries.
- **5S**: The 5S model has five key steps: sort, straighten, shine, standardize, and sustain. It's part of both the Kaizen and Lean methodologies and emphasizes consistency and process standardization.
- **Agile Management**: Used primarily in software and tech companies, including Jotform, Agile centers on rapid change through collaboration. Flexibility and adaptation are key. The "fail fast" philosophy of Silicon Valley founders is imperative to this approach.
- **Total Quality Management**: An older process-improvement approach, this method measures success through customer satisfaction. Strategic process creation is at its core.
- **Theory of Constraints (TOC)**: What's preventing you (or the organization) from achieving specific goals? That's the focus of TOC. Once you identify

the constraint, you can take steps to improve the process that underpins that constraint.

Iteration is the process of testing and improving how your automation works. It's also about what makes it work. Over time, the tools and technologies powering your workflows might start to get sluggish. Sometimes, nothing's amiss in your design or implementation; the issue can lie with the technology itself.

To keep everything running smoothly, it's important to stay on top of new products because innovative solutions emerge all the time. Many people find that a quick review of the product landscape every six months can prove fruitful. Even just a small improvement to your automation could make a large difference.

CHAPTER 5

Design a Life Without Busywork

Our digital world has empowered us to accomplish so much, yet many of us are proportionately beholden to electronic tools and tedious processes. My goal has been to loosen their grip, to help you find more space and freedom. Because once you've developed your automation flywheel, it can help you in so many ways.

Just as we're not defined by the busywork that occupies our days, we don't live our lives in neat, administrative categories like banking and vacation approvals. Trying to force a wild human brain into precise, professional boxes is one of the reasons we're so overwhelmed in the first place.

You'll find a variety of ways to automate your memory, peace of mind, creativity, communication, happiness, and growth. I hope you find some that fit your current needs— and keep in mind that others may help you down the road. In any case, they're intended to sharpen your automation-first mindset and help you spot increasingly more targets as time goes on.

Conclusion

The automation flywheel is my attempt to transform your relationship with technology, to demonstrate how you can use automation to sweep low-value tasks off the table and free yourself to focus on meaningful work. You have been given a lasting pattern that applies to every automation you'll build and implement.

At its core, this approach reinforces three essential ideas:

- **Anyone can automate**. No-code tools are built to help *everyone* plan and execute valuable automations, regardless of their technical prowess. Programmers work hard to ensure these products are truly user-friendly. That doesn't mean, of course, that they're no-effort tools.
- **Cultivate an automation-first mindset**. Automation opportunities are everywhere; you just need to keep scanning the road in order to spot them.
- **Automation pays dividends over time**. Your automation flywheel could be a little creaky at the start. Try not to be discouraged. You will get faster, and it will feel more intuitive. And then you can enjoy the compound interest that comes from automating repetitive processes—and automating more of these workflows over time.

Most importantly, know that *you can do this*. You have the skills at your disposal.

If you peel away the layers and all the strategies discussed here, you'll see that your task really has just three steps: determine the result you want, design the machine that will deliver that result, and then configure the automations you need to build it.

It's that simple, and it's that powerful.

Aytekin Tank is a founder, productivity expert, and automation enthusiast. He is the founder and CEO of Jotform, a bootstrapped global SaaS company he has led since 2006. Jotform provides powerful online forms used by tens of millions of people worldwide. Tank is known for building profitable, people-focused products without outside funding. He frequently contributes to *Fast Company* and *Entrepreneur*, where he writes about leadership, productivity, and practical uses of SaaS technology in everyday workflows. His work centers on helping organizations operate more efficiently by designing tools that simplify work, reduce friction, and scale with purpose.