

Five minute solutions for getting more done every day.

by Hugh D. Culver MBA, CSP

There is no question: everyone is trying to get more done in less time. Just look at the number of books on time management - over 6,000 on Amazon the last time I looked! People are working more hours, taking less vacation and are more stressed out than any generation before them.

In terms of evolution, it seems like we have moved from agrarian to industrial to knowledge to the era of overwhelm. Most of us have way too much to do and we are feeling the pressure of what physician-futurist, best-selling author Dr. Richard Swenson calls “lack of margins”. There is rarely the space between tasks or projects to reflect, or that quiet time at home to think.

“More than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly.”

Woody Allen

And maybe there are valid reasons for our crazy-busy lives. Maybe you are with a growing company, or are launching a new product, or you are experiencing downsizing and now you wear three hats at work, or there doesn't seem to be anyone that you can rely on to take some of your load.

Fair enough, some of these could be valid reasons and I sure you have others. But the reality is that when we don't have control over our time we can be more frustrated.

Here are the obvious frustrations that you might be familiar with:

- trying to keep up with a deluge of emails
- well meaning people, that lack a sense of urgency
- waiting for other people to complete their work
- meetings that are poorly prepared, start late and don't lead to decisions
- piles of paper and notes on your desk that doesn't have a home
- other people's crisis and poor planning
- background noise and overhearing conversations that distract you
- low value work that seems to always end up on your desk
- waiting for other people to make decisions



Ok, I'll admit, all of these may be valid excuse, but read on, it gets worse!

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In my experience there are three much more insidious and universal challenges with getting more done:

- **time doesn't expand.** You might get more work, but you still only get 1,440 minutes in a day and somewhere in there you need to sleep, eat, be with family etc.
- **you can't save time.** Once it's gone, it's gone. You are either effective with your time or you have missed the opportunity forever.
- **you are part of the solution!** Here's the toughest pill to swallow: if you have bad habits, weak organization systems or an unfocussed mindset you are destined to experience eternal frustration, just like Sisyphus trying to roll his boulder uphill.

It can always appear like external forces are rallying against you, *but it's actually you that created the road block*. And until you change *you* it will happen every time!

What I'm going to present here are solutions, quick ones, that will definitely get you back on track and feeling more productive. Each one of these can be completed in about five minutes. You might want to spend more time on them the first time, but daily use of them can be done in about five minutes each.

The idea is not to burden you with more planning exercises and long convoluted planning processes - just quick solutions that you can do quickly. Each of these techniques is taught in our one-day time management seminar **ReClaiming the Clock**. And each one of them has been picked as 'most popular' by our participants.

Now, here's the best part of all. Any one of these could save you as much as 30 minutes a day *and* result in you getting more done by working less. Here's a quick formula to illustrate what could happen:

Time saved in a day	Calculation of time saved for the year	Total time saved
If you were to save just 10 minutes a day (less time in meetings, fewer or shorter interruptions, check your email less frequently)	10min. X 200 days/yr worked = 2,000 min. saved. 2,000 minutes/450 minutes ¹ = 4.4 days	4.4 days
If you were to save just 10 seconds per email (have some pre-sorted, auto redirect some to delete, click and drag some)	10sec. X 50 emails/days X 200 days/yr worked = 100,000 sec. saved 100,000 sec/60 sec = 1,666 min.	3.7 days

¹ Assume there are 450 minutes in a typical work day: 7.5 hrs X 60=450 min.

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to tasks etc.)	$1,666/450 = 3.7$ days	
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But that's not all! The most important benefit will be when you are working a greater percentage of your day on high-value work and less on interruptions and other people's agendas. The catch is that you have to use these solutions, and use them repeatedly. It is only through repetitive action that you will start to see significant results and start to build you new habit 'muscles'.

Here are the top 15 five minute time solutions that I am using and my clients are benefiting from. As you read these focus on choosing only the ones that will have the biggest results for you - don't plan on doing them all!

1 Act like it is the day before vacation

Someone once said if you want to be rich act like a rich person. As crazy as this sounds - it works for any situation you are in: want to feel more confident, act more confident, want to feel happier, act happier.

Similarly, if you want to get more done in less time then act like someone that doesn't have any! I often ask participants in my **ReClaiming the Clock** seminar what it's like for them the day before vacation and the answer is usually the same - better!



People tell me that on the day *before* vacation they act differently! They don't deliberate much over decisions - just make up their mind and go for it. Their office is cleaned up for the first time in months and they work from a plan all day. And best of all they are resilient to whatever comes their way. As one student put it "I have a smile on my face all day and nothing gets in my way!"

This sense of urgency is exactly what you need every day. When you know it's essential that you get your list completed, no matter what, suddenly you are acting like a new person and the results can be fantastic!

So your first solution is to come to work with a sense of urgency. Focus on what you have to get done and avoid being influenced by how other people get through their day. Your goal should be to create realist goals and prove to yourself every day that you know how to set and complete goals, regardless of the chaos around you.

2 Plan the night before

The best way to get the most from your morning at work is to plan tomorrow today. Most people are morning people; this is the time of the day when they are the most

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productive, focussed, optimistic and resilient. Yet, it's a shame that so much time in the morning goes to distractions, interruptions, pointless meetings and email!

When you plan for tomorrow at the end of each day you use some 'low energy' time to plan and do a bit of a 'brain dump' by getting all the things you want to remember on paper. You can also quickly decide what to do with the tasks that didn't get done. When you do this avoid the temptation to simply roll them over to the next day!

Before moving them to the next day, consider these options:

- **DEFER IT** (plan to do it on the next working day)
- **DO IT** (just take the fine minutes needed and get it done)
- **DELEGATE IT** (use this as an empowering moment and coach someone else on

"This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it."

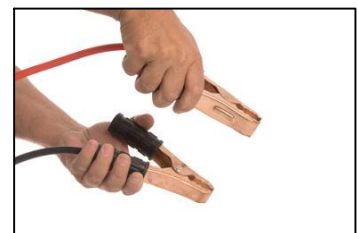
Ralph Waldo Emerson

how to do this task)

- **FILE IT** (store this task for a future date), or
- **DUMP It.** Does it really need to get done? Maybe this is one of those low-value items that is just taking up space?

3 Jump start your day

An athlete would never show up for a competition and just "hope for the best"! Successful people (including all high performing athletes) prepare themselves for the day long before they arrive at work.



When you **Jump Start Your Day** you actively prepare yourself to have maximum effectiveness for the first 90 minutes of your work day. Just like an athlete, you are getting ready for the 'competition' and preparing yourself for maximum performance.

Here is a quick list to get you on track:

- Plan the night before (see #2 above)
- Listen to educational audio tapes or podcasts on your commute to stimulate your thinking. There are now loads of podcasts that are less than 20 minutes long and have top-quality content.

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- Envision a successful day just before you walk into your building or go to your home office. See yourself easily crossing tasks off your list.
- Get right to work. Avoid social chatter and mini-ad hoc meetings. And start immediately to work from your plan.
- Stay focussed through the morning on your projects. Avoid the temptation to check emails or engage in small talk. Your morning is precious time to get work done - don't waste it.
- Check your emails for critical ones and then turn Outlook® off.

4 Have a plan for time off

One of the downsides of laptop computers and smart phones is the blurring of the work/life time boundaries. In one study by Nucleus Research the average user of smart phones works an additional 71 minutes per day (that's 15% more time than non-smart phone owners). They also found that the average mobile user first checks messages on his device at 7:10 a.m. and last checks his device at 10:00 p.m.

Whatever happened to technology saving us time!?

Here's a new rule that I live by: I need to plan for my time off just as rigorously as I plan for time "time on" work. Don't leave this to chance!

When I was training for Ironman® competitions I would schedule my morning runs, my afternoon swims and my evening time on the stationary bike. If I just hoped for a break in my day to squeeze in a workout it would rarely happen. My guess is that carving free time for you can't be left to chance either.

I don't mean planning every minute, just planning for the significant events in your day, like taking your daughter to a music lesson, dinner with your family, getting in a workout, or meeting with friends.

Force yourself to take time off from work and your batteries will be more charged for when you are actually supposed to be working.

"Until you value yourself you will not value your time. Until you value your time, you will not do anything with it."

M. Scott Peck

5 Create a victory before 10:30

Use your naturally high energy time in the morning to create victories by staying focussed and working on your



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hardest work first. The first 90 minutes are the best time to do creative writing, get sales calls done, resolve client issues, and make tough decisions.

I find that in the morning I can get work done in the half the time and enjoy it more. By working from my plan, staying focussed and always returning to my plan after a distraction I set myself up for success all day.

Here are some of the best techniques I have heard from my clients (and most of them I use myself):

- Book yourself into a meeting for the morning. Actually put the meeting in M/S Outlook (or whatever planning software you use).
- Let staff know that you will be working on projects in the morning and to save their questions until 10:30.
- Close your door. Forget the “open door policy” - that’s a 1980’s notion that was popular before downsizing, Internet, email and our current busi-ness culture.
- Put a sign on your door “In a meeting” to let others know that you need to have uninterrupted time.
- Use another office or go down the street to a cafe. I find I can often get twice the work done on a project when I am out of the office.

“Don't say you don't have enough time. You have exactly the same number of hours per day that were given to Helen Keller, Pasteur, Michaelangelo, Mother Teresa, Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas Jefferson and Albert Einstein.”

H. Jackson Brown

6 Unclutter your mind

Here’s a quick exercise try counting in your mind from one to 50. And, while you are doing that, pay attention to the number you are at when you first get distracted. Find it hard to do? It’s not surprising: our mind is operating at about 400 to 600 words per minute. In fact, most people that try this don’t get past 20 before their mind jumps in with another thought.



All day long your distractions interrupt your thinking and use up part of your mental “RAM”. When this happens we are slower, make more mistakes, feel frustrated and feel more stress.

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Ironically, when we unclutter our minds and think about fewer things we are actually better prepared to get more done. I notice this the most towards the end of a day in the office when my head is full of all the details of the day. All it takes is two minutes away from my desk (better yet, away from the office and down the street for a hot tea) and my mind is refocused and ready to work again.

Practice refocusing and uncluttering during your day by simply ‘relaxing’ your thinking, breathing and refocusing on just one task at hand. The more you practice this discipline the more natural it will become. By the way, uncluttering your desk (see below) is a great way to help your mind to relax.

“The problem is never how to get new, innovative thoughts into your mind, but how to get old ones out. Every mind is a building filled with archaic furniture. Clean out a corner of your mind and creativity will instantly fill it.”

Dee Hock, Founder and CEO Emeritus, VISA International.

7 Improve your systems

Systems are everywhere and influence most things you work with and work on every day. Just think about your filing system, your computer system, your ordering systems, even the systems that are in place for planning a meeting. Each one of these systems influences your results. Just like a highway, once you are on it you have limited your options.



Now imagine you could redesign any one of these systems (well, probably not the highways), which one would you change?

- How you receive and handle papers on your desk.
- How you plan your week and your day.
- The way your email software is set up to organize incoming emails and align with your bring-forward tasks.
- How you block time in the morning to work on your Boulders.
- How you take notes in a meeting and what you do with the notes.
- How you document important reference information or materials so that other staff can support you.
- How meetings are organized and run.

Here is a great exercise: for one day make a note of the systems that are either formally (these are written policies or procedures) in place or systems that are assumed (this is just the way we/you have always done this). And then ask yourself: ‘which ones don’t serve me anymore and which ones do I need to change?’

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Here are two great examples of new systems:

- after you check your critical emails in the morning avoid the distractions of incoming emails by having your new email notification turned off² and by actually closing the M/S Outlook window.
- when you return to your desk from a meeting immediately add any new responsibilities to your Outlook Task list and schedule time in your calendar to complete those tasks. Also send email requests to anyone that you need information from.

“I’m working to improve my methods, and every hour I save is an hour added to my life.”

Ayn Rand

8 Work on one thing at a time

Research into multitasking has found that we are simply not wired to do two things at once. With only a few exceptions (like walking and talking) humans are slower, more prone to mistakes and experience more anxiety when attempting to do more than one thing at a time. Do yourself a favour, and work on one thing at a time.

This may be the best change you make to your personal effectiveness at work - remove the distractions. Here’s how:

- Remove the visual distractions (see “Unclutter your desk” below).
- In conversations, focus entirely on the person you are speaking with.
- Get into a habit of attacking one task at a time until it is complete before moving onto the next task.
- Open one email at a time; deal with it completely before opening another.
- When ‘detours’ come up throughout the day, make a note of what you need to deal with in your planner and then return to what you are working on.



“Our thoughts create our reality -- where we put our focus is the direction we tend to go.”

Peter McWilliams

² To do this go to: Tools>Options>Preferences>E-Mail options>Advanced E-Mail options and unclick all the options under “When new email arrives in my InBox”.

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9 Get off the email

According to research completed by *Radicati Group*, workers may be spending as much as 41% of their time in email management. The ongoing checking and responding throughout the day adds up quickly. My guess is that for people that rely heavily on email for their work communications generally underestimate time spent on email by one half!

Nothing will free up your time more quickly than getting off the email. When you work from your plan, instead of responding all day long to the pop-up notification of a new email you become in charge of what gets done.

For some people this is a radical change from what has become their default work style. In fact, I often hear the argument from clients that they *have to* be responsive to their emails all day. This is nonsense! I have yet to meet an organization that is so time sensitive in their operations that they need staff to be hovering over their send/receive key all day.

Solution #9 is to have the approach that email is a distant second to your plan. It is your plan for the week and the day that will ultimately create the greatest success. Put another way, nobody will receive an award for most emails or fastest email replies in the office!

And like most changes to your habits you first need to convince yourself that this change is possible and worthwhile. Trust me, it is true: you can still get all your work done and not be anchored to your InBox.

Here are some of the most popular tips on how to get unanchored (some of these are also covered in other sections in this article):

- Check your emails in the morning for critical requests only, then turn Outlook® off by actually closing the M/S Outlook window to remove the distraction.
- Create a goal to limit your total time on email to one hour per day and actually monitor every minute you spend on email. Do this for at least one day to get a better feel for how much time you are spending on email.
- Between tasks and after interruptions return to your plan and not your email.
- Get better at using your email software. There are many tricks and systems you can use that will create immediate time savings. Look into creating rules, using Signatures (see “Learn one new trick a day” below for more tips).

“The path of least resistance is the path of the loser.”

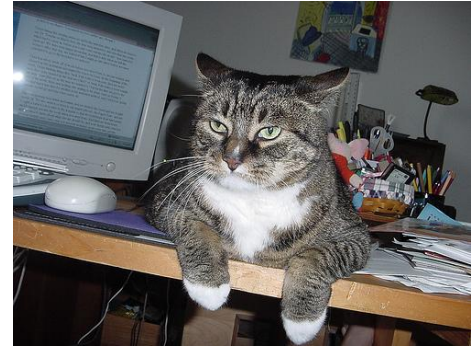
H.G. Wells

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10 Unclutter your desk

Have you ever taken your work to another room, or to a cafe and realized how pleasant it was to work from a new, uncluttered environment? Some days I can get almost twice the work done from a noisy café as from my office!



When you invest in uncluttering your desk and your office you are giving yourself the gift of clarity and effectiveness. Clients of ours that have done this say it was one of the best investments of time they have ever made. And it only took one hour!

Take this test. Invest a few minutes to file all the miscellaneous papers, files, notes etc. off your desk. Intentionally keep your desk free of distractions (remember all those Post-it® notes are distractions as well) and notice the difference. When someone comes into your office is it easier to give them your full attention? When you are on the phone do you sound more relaxed and engaged in the conversation? Do you notice you have less anxiety in the afternoon?

If you are getting the benefit I think you will, then make it a habit to once a week purge your office of unnecessary distractions. Just like tuning up your car, your investment will add years to your life and you will run better!

“The average American worker has fifty interruptions a day, of which seventy percent have nothing to do with work.”

W. Edwards Deming

11 Be generous: give work away

One of the most destructive beliefs held by managers is “If you want it done right you have to do it yourself”. This is a double whammy on productivity with you doing all the work and your staff missing the chance to expand their abilities. In the end neither one of you learn anything!



I am a firm believer in the power of delegation to increase engagement in others. But, don't think of delegation as “dumping” on others; it should be a positive exchange where you both win. When you delegate you get the work off your list, the other person learns something new, and they expand their responsibilities.

In the past year here are some of the responsibilities that I have (happily) delegated:

- All accounts receivable.

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- All accounts payable, including signing all cheques.
- Answering the phone.
- Most communications with our sub-contactors.
- All bookkeeping (I meet with my accountant once a year).
- Receiving all enquiries and negotiating contracts.
- Ordering all supplies for the office.
- Administering office staff.

“Leadership is communicating to people their worth and potential so clearly that they come to see it in themselves.”

Stephen Covey

Do a quick audit of your current responsibilities and repetitive tasks and ask yourself this question: if you were handed a huge project that, starting tomorrow, demanded one half of your time how would you manage your existing workload? What would you have to delegate to someone else?

Then ask yourself these questions:

- Could I teach someone how to do this?
- What would be the loss of quality (if anything) if they were doing this instead of me? And could I live with that difference?
- How would I use my new found time?
- What is stopping me from getting this off my list permanently?

12 Create a Stop Doing list

One of my favourite ideas for getting things done is the counter intuitive brain child of bestselling author Jim Collins (*Good to Great* fame, etc.). The idea is simple: make a list of all the low-value, distracting, unfulfilling tasks and routines that have, through some weird evolution, ended up on your plate and get rid of them. Collins calls this his “Stop Doing list”.

The critical piece to this invention is that you are doing this to create capacity. It is like the magic glass ceiling on your personal capacity has been raised; you have created more freedom to work on what creates the most value for you and others.

So, what will be on your “Stop Doing” list? Here are some of my favourites, take ten minutes today and create your own list and then enjoy crossing them off or moving them to someone else’s list:

- Lunch invitations. Unless it is a new client the answer is “No”.



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- T.V. in the evenings. I find that one movie a week is plenty.
- Finishing magazine articles or books that aren't adding value for me.
- Having unfinished work in sight on my desk, in my work area.
- Attending unproductive meetings.
- Trying to solve computer/Internet problems on your own. There are loads of people out there that love this stuff, let them do it!
- Researching trivial facts, quotes and references for your presentation, book or article. You can usually outsource this work for a pittance.
- Creating PowerPoint presentations. If you are not an expert on this let someone else do it. Focus more of your time on the outline and what you will say - that's what people will remember.
- Responding to communications with clients other than about my presentation content (this includes, contracts, invoicing, audio/visual needs, hotels, logistics, etc.).
- Reading mail and looking at bills. Reserve one block of time, once a week for this mundane task.
- Reading and responding to emails after 6PM and on weekends.
- Driving and using my cell phone.

“In cataloguing the key steps that ignited the transformations, my research team and I were struck by how many of the big decisions were not what to do, but what to stop doing.”

Jim Collins



13 Learn one new trick every day

Here's a fun one: look for one small trick you can learn everyday on your computer that will save you time. Most people we work with have never taken the time to learn even the basics and yet they spend 80% of their day on their computer.

Here are some of my favourites, start with these and then start your own list. Share these with others - they will love you for it!

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- Shortcut keys. In M/S Outlook you can use these wherever you are (in calendar, mail, tasks etc.). CNTL+SHIFT M: new email, CNTL+SHIFT K: new task, CNTL+SHIFT C: new contact, CNTL+SHIFT A: new appointment.
- Shortcut keys. Use standard formatting shortcuts, e.g. CTRL+B for bold and CTRL+Z, CTRL+X, CTRL+C, CTRL+V
- Click and drag an email to either Tasks for future reference or Calendar to create the appointment with the sender. The content of the email goes to the new entry and a copy is left in your InBox.
- ALT+TAB lets you quickly switch between applications. Like your TV clicker it will remember the last two applications you are working on so you can, for example, quickly switch from Excel to Outlook.
- Create quick access links to your favourite files, web sites or notes. Open Links on your toolbar (if “Links” is not showing on your toolbar at the bottom of the screen in Windows XP right click, click on Toolbars>Links). Now you can drag any web site (click on the site URL) or files (when you open the file click on its name) to this spot for quick retrieval.
- Do you have a pile of usernames and passwords you can never remember for all the software and web applications you use? Here’s quick trick: when you create a Favourite in Internet Explorer (or a Bookmark in Firefox) include your user name and password in the file name. Now when you mouse over the link your username/password is displayed. Simple!

“Take care in your minutes, and the hours will take care of themselves.”

Lord Chesterfield

14 Plus/Delta your day

After every seminar I teach or keynote I present I always debrief my performance. It only takes about five minutes, but it pays huge dividends. I simply ask three questions:

- What was great about today?
- What could have been different?
- What do I need to do next time?



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In our work we call this a “Plus/Delta”: on the plus side: what worked that you want to repeat next time. And on the “Delta” side, what could have been better? Once I have my lists I select one or two changes I will make next time. This iterative process keeps my work fresh and means that my results are constantly getting better.

You can run through this quick process on the drive home, with your team at the end of a project and even use it periodically in your team meetings. Once you get into the spirit of the Plus/Delta you (and your team) will start to look for improvements every day.

Better is always possible: what would better look like for you?

“There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all.”

Peter Drucker

15 Create Agreements with you

The most important skill of highly productive people is their ability to make agreements with themselves (clear, recorded goals) and keep them. Sounds simple, right? But how often have you wanted to change something (like your health, your weight, your financial situation, clean up your office, etc.) and that commitment never hit the paper as a real goal?

Start today by recording one new goal from this article and a time line for when it will get completed. Be as specific as possible and remember to make sure the goal is measurable (e.g. “no time on email after 3PM and no email on weekends” is far better than “spend less time on email”). Keep that goal visible, act on it every day and notice and celebrate your movement towards.

If you really want to take your new commitment to a new level then follow these four steps:

- Record the goal and keep it visible for four weeks
- Identify one small step you can take in the first 24 hours after creating the goal and do it first.
- Tell one person about your new goal and ask them to support you.
- Start every day by reviewing the goal, celebrating your progress towards it and getting refocused on working on the goal for the day.

“If you want to make good use of your time, you've got to know what's most important and then give it all you've got.”

Lee Iacocca

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Hugh D. Culver MBA, CSP has created extraordinary business successes that span from the wilds of Antarctica to the Boardroom. Since 1991 Hugh has presented his special blend of street smarts, humour and passion to over 450 organizations, including: Imperial Oil, Royal Bank of Canada, Sun Rype Products, Telus, Red Cross, Shoppers Drug Mart, KPMG as well as three universities and four colleges. Learn more about Hugh at www.HughCulver.com