

## INTRODUCTION

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# The Case for Reduction

If you're serious about your career, then you've probably read a number of books about time management and productivity in an effort to make better use of your workday. So what's new about this one? *What to Do When There's Too Much to Do* is unique in its approach to workflow, and I think you'll find it a breath of fresh air in an overcrowded and increasingly redundant field. Simply stated, the central message is *it's better to do less, not more, so you can do better, more focused work*.

Many workers find this a startling concept, because they increasingly have to work harder and longer with fewer resources—and that's precisely why my message is so very important. Over the last few decades we've learned to be superbly productive, yes, but in a way that can't be sustained over the long haul.

From a business perspective, productivity is the rate at which goods or services are produced per unit of labor. On a wider scale, this measure of corporate success is also a primary metric of the overall economic health of a nation. Collectively, we Americans are more productive today than at any time in our history.<sup>1</sup> But just think about the factors motivating this productivity increase, especially in recent years. Many businesses have cut their staffs to the bone in an effort to save the bottom line; as a result, the truncated workforce must somehow do more with less, just like the woman who stopped me

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before my presentation that day. We've defaulted to working long hours just so we can keep our jobs. And it's killing us.

In fact, I think we've just about hit the ceiling of what we can accomplish by stretching ourselves so thin we're practically transparent. Consider this worrisome factoid: According to a government report released in August 2011, American productivity declined for two consecutive quarters for the first time since 2008.<sup>2</sup> The second-quarter decline for 2011 was a bit less than expected: an annual adjusted rate of 0.7 percent rather than the anticipated 0.9 percent (yay?).<sup>3</sup> The bad news: 2011's first-quarter productivity figure, originally estimated at 1.8 percent growth, suffered a sharp downward revision to reflect an actual productivity *drop* of 0.6 percent.

Granted, we've experienced a minor economic expansion in the past few years. But the positive effects have been mostly limited to businesses, with very little trickle-down to individual workers. Indeed, as some observers have pointed out, many businesses posted productivity gains from early 2009 to late 2010 *only* because they had previously cut costs. In the process they pared down their workforces, requiring the workers they retained to work longer hours—often for the same compensation.

This refusal to increase the average worker's pay even while forcing them to work harder may seem draconian, and in one sense it is. Workers know that there are plenty of people lined up to take their jobs if they complain too much about the pay and long hours, and many employers press this fact to their advantage.

But in a larger sense, the flat compensation growth just continues a trend visible in the statistics since 1980. According to a study released by the *New York Times* in September 2011, compensation grew steadily along with American productivity from 1949 until 1979, and then more or less flattened out—even as productivity skyrocketed.<sup>4</sup> Productivity rose 80 percent from 1979 to 2009; compensation increased just 8 percent. That contrasts sharply with increases of 119 percent and 100 percent, respectively, in the 30 previous years. Basically,

for the last three decades, American workers have been willing to accept insipid pay increases while pushing productivity through the roof.

But now we've hit the wall. As a class, we're exhausted, and any motivation to maximize productivity is mostly negative rather than positive. Recent economic growth may have been good for businesses, but it shortchanged the workers. We built on unstable economic ground . . . and now we're starting to see the cracks in the foundation. Even with high unemployment rates, employers complain about not being able to find competent workers.

### SAVING OUR OWN LIVES

So today, I preach the gospel of ruthless task reduction, because I honestly believe an abandonment of unnecessary chores, and a drastic triage of all that remains, is the only way to be consistently, profitably productive in this economy without destroying your health, your family life, and your joy.

Many workers think that a willingness to do whatever it takes, at the expense of all else, can cure any workplace ailment. Their employers, and society at large, have trained them to think this way. But they never seem to understand a salient point here: you don't have to kill yourself to prove your dedication to the company and produce the tremendous results required.

And I mean exactly that. The Japanese have an entrenched tradition of working superhuman amounts of unpaid overtime, more to demonstrate company loyalty than to enhance productivity. It also drives high levels of *karoshi*, the practice of literally working yourself to death. This problem isn't unique to Japan; Westerners have the same problem, though our medical establishment doesn't really keep tabs on it as such.

Is the possibility of a raise or promotion really worth risking your health? And let me emphasize the word "possibility"—after all, how can you ensure your hard work is even regis-

tering with the higher-ups? You can't just try to outwork the other guy. Instead, get a handle on what's really important in your organization, and focus on aligning business strategy with your day-to-day execution. Don't just push and push and push until you can't go on anymore. Ironically, this can limit your usefulness to your company rather than increasing it.

### HARSH REALITIES

Working too many hours is demonstrably counterproductive, because it results in decreased productivity. Studies have repeatedly shown that a sixty-hour workweek results, on average, in a 25 percent decrease in productivity.<sup>5</sup> The productivity numbers just get worse as the number of work hours increases, because exhaustion steadily erodes judgment and performance. Eventually, no matter how good your intentions, you hit a point of diminishing returns. If you go too far, your habits of overwork may harm your organization's bottom line—the exact opposite of what you intended when you set out on your quest to prove yourself.

The lesson here? You aren't a robot. Long hours lead to physical and mental fatigue, which results in slower work, more mistakes, and wasted time. It may also lead to depression, which can spiral out of control if left untreated—as is often the case, because the person affected is too busy to take care of it. Depression comes with harsh penalties of its own, and they can feed back into the productivity issues and make them even worse.

The old forty-hour workweek was originally struck as a compromise, as the best balance between productivity and overwork. Today, a forty-hour week isn't plausible for many people, given the expectations or structures of their jobs. Some people continue to insist they function better with a more demanding schedule. But they fail to recognize the signs of when they've reached capacity. Are you willing to do what it takes to short-circuit a drop in performance? You'd take good care of any other tool, wouldn't you? So why not take care of yourself?

## THE SOLUTION

In the next six chapters, I'll show you how to train yourself out of the overwork mentality. *Reduce, reduce, reduce* will become your new mantra, to the tune of about ninety minutes a day. This ninety-minute savings isn't a "guess"—it's what clients have told me these methods have saved them. Take for example the testimonial I received from Montague L. Boyd, CFP, Senior Vice President of Investments at UBS Financial Services:

Prior to Ms. Stack's training, we customarily had employees who stayed into the early evening hours in order to finish or just keep up with our workload. Ms. Stack spent a day with us and then three or four months later a second day. Ms. Stack worked with us to develop more efficient methods of intra-office communications. Ms. Stack also showed us how to prioritize daily items and to keep track of them. She showed us how to use Microsoft Outlook properly. There are far too many details to recount here; they made a huge difference. Now we regularly find that we can finish our work every day with time to spare. We operate with much less confusion and rarely if ever worry about those items that may "drop through the cracks"! They just don't. There are six investment partners. We have a partner in charge of our Retirement Plan group and a Research partner. We operate smoothly now and communicate effectively in much less time. My estimate is that each of us saves about ninety minutes per day compared to our systems before Laura Stack. Six support staff went from a state of confused, stressed, and long hours to an efficient team. They finish most days well before "quitting time" and go home on time every night. Nobody has stayed late in months. Ms. Stack has lived up to her title as "The Productivity Pro." She has shown us a path to accomplish more—much more—in fewer hours. Our staff believes