

3 Ways to Make Time for the Little Tasks You Never Make Time For

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We'd all like to spend our time at work on high-value activities: setting strategy, fostering innovation, mentoring promising employees, and more. But every professional faces a relentless deluge of niggling tasks — the overflowing inbox, the introductions you promised to make, the stack of paperwork you have to file, or the articles you really ought to read.

This low-value work is particularly vexing in light of the [Pareto Principle](#), the adage — now gospel in Silicon Valley and many business circles — that 20% of your activities are responsible for 80% of the value you create. If you can jettison what's least important, the thinking goes, you can double down on what's driving your most important contributions.

Indeed, sometimes you can let go of these activities. But you have to recognize, and reconcile yourself to the fact, that there is a price. Tim Ferriss, author of the bestseller [The 4-Hour Workweek](#), advocates this approach. After one extended trip abroad during which he avoided email, he wrote that he had missed a large number of critical messages, including a fulfillment center crisis that caused him to lose more than 20% of monthly orders for his business, media interview opportunities that had expired, and more than a dozen partnership offers. Rather than mourning these lost chances, however, he embraced them. "Oftentimes," [he wrote](#), "in order to do the big things, you have to let the small bad things happen. This is a skill we want to cultivate."

Perhaps. Though if you work for someone else, rather than being self-employed, the tolerance level for these missed opportunities is a lot lower. If you can't afford to ignore email or other low-value tasks entirely, and your options for delegating to others are limited, here are three techniques you can use to minimize the pain and get things done.

One possibility is to **batch your less important tasks** and accomplish them in one fell swoop, creating a sense of momentum. You can do this solo — I used to park myself at a local café and vow not to come home until I'd completed my to-do list for the day — or, in some cases, communally. New York filmmaker Jeremy Redleaf recently launched "[Cave Day](#)," an event in which professionals pay a small fee to spend a Sunday at a coworking facility, plowing through tasks such as cleaning your inbox and writing thank you cards.

Another technique, for those who prefer an incremental approach, is the "small drip strategy." This involves **identifying small blocks of time in your schedule** (typically 15–30 minutes per day) and matching them with low-value tasks that need to be accomplished. Yesterday I had to look up how much I had paid my virtual assistant last year in order to get the information to my accountant, so he could issue her tax forms in a timely fashion. That's no one's definition of "strategic" or "high value." It's a boring, but mandatory, task that would be easy to put off. But when I reviewed my calendar the night before and saw I had a 15-minute window between two calls, I slotted it in and accomplished it. You can look for these scheduling holes serendipitously, or deliberately schedule in a half-hour of grunt work every day, perhaps at the end of the workday, when most professionals' [energy is waning](#) and your ability to do creative thinking has tapered off.

Finally, you could **procrastinate strategically**. This differs from simply ignoring all incoming email, Tim Ferriss-style. What you do is weigh the value of the opportunity and set your own

timeline for handling it. If the timeline happens to work for the other person, it's a happy coincidence; if it doesn't, you've already reconciled yourself to the possibility of missing out. I'll often take this approach when it comes to requests from miscellaneous bloggers. I respond quickly to inquiries from official journalists, but if someone is writing a post for their personal blog, I'd like to help them out, but don't want to sacrifice an important task (such as finishing book edits) to do so. I always write back eventually, but it may take me a number of days, or even weeks. If they can still use my quote, fantastic; if they can't, it's only a minor loss.

No matter how productive we become, we're never going to permanently rid ourselves of low-value work. By following these strategies, we can at least handle it more efficiently and leave more white space in our days for the projects that are truly meaningful.

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