



The Do Less Manifesto

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By Claire Diaz-Ortiz

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Introduction

For much of my adult life, people have asked me how I get so much done. I sleep more than anyone I know, I read 200 books a year, I travel 100,000+ miles a year, I work hard in my career, I write books, and I have a family I love.

It's a lot.

And it wouldn't be possible without my obsessive passion for productivity. For turning it on when I should be on, and it turning off (*way off*) when it's time to recharge.

I don't think about productivity like other people do, and I think that's why I'm good at it. I don't think you need to turn off the TV or tell your friends you'll see them in six months or try sleeping in ninety-minute increments in order to achieve all the things on your long to-do list.

And so, over the years, I've started thinking more about what exactly it is I'm doing, putting clarity around those thoughts, and -- ultimately -- sharing those ideas with others, all in hopes that other folks can find

ways to rock their lives by doing less. Because that, I am convinced, is the key.

I believe you can be just as productive - and usually much more so - by working less.

The **Do Less Method** is about taking back your time, and giving it to someone who really knows what they're doing.

(You)

In this ebook, we'll be walking through my **Do Less Method**.

In Part 1, we'll look at the first step, **Decide**. I'll ask you to think hard about what is important in the season ahead, pare down on the non-essentials, and learn to clarify what you really want.

In Part 2, we'll dive into **Organize**. We'll implement key productivity strategies in order to reach the smart goals you've set for yourself.

Specifically, **Organize** follows four steps: **Limit, Edit, Streamline and Stop (LESS)**.

The Do Less Method has rocked my world, and it might just rock yours as well. I'm willing to bet on it.

Part 1: Decide

First, we're going to decide what matters. Then, we'll figure out how to get you where you're going.

Set Your Intentions by Choosing a Word of the Year

For the last few years, I've done something smart. Now, I'm not always doing smart things, so believe me when I say that this is something to write home about. What have I done? I've chosen a word of the year.

I got the idea from a book, and it's worked well to bring my life a greater sense of direction and fulfillment. I'm now such a fan that I'll shout it from mountaintops:

Each and every year, you should choose a word to represent the year you have in front of you.

Think long and hard about one word that will serve as a guidepost for what you want to do and be in the year to come. One word to mean everything you want your year to be, and one word that will be a guiding light when times get tough and you're not clear on what your priorities are.

There aren't a lot of rules. It can be a verb or a noun. A long word or a short word. A word in English, or a word in Esperanto. A word that has funny sounds in it or a word that rolls off the tongue. Depending on the type of year you're going for, some examples of great words might be: Breathe, Push, Persevere, Give, Abundance, Direction, Moxie, Contentment.

The first year I did this exercise, I needed it badly. I was in a season of overwhelm, and so choosing my word – REST – felt like taking a big old breath of fresh air. Those four letters meant the world to me. It wasn't all smooth sailing, though, and I made a lot mistakes during the year. But I did make progress.

This past year, I mixed it up, going digital with my word of the year and choosing not a word, but a hashtag.

#BanBusy aimed to help me be mindful of one of the scarcest resources I have: Time.

I have always been a student of time, trying to work it work *for* me and not against me when I think about work and play. And if there's one

thing I hate, it's being busy without accomplishing anything. Running the hamster wheel with no goal in mind and no metrics to measure my progress along the way. Not taking breaks even though I'm not being effective. Not being productive, and just being busy.

#banbusy was my aim to help myself. And, as in past years, it did just that. On really bad days, I'd wear the #banbusy necklace someone on Twitter sent me to remind me of just what I had signed up to. And, day-by-day, I worked hard to be a steward of my time, and a minder of not making my life *too* full.

The first step in deciding what you want to achieve or how you want to feel is about framing all those larger decisions as part of a larger theme. This theme is your word of the year (or your word for a season).

Think hard about a word that will help guide you in your upcoming season of life. Find a powerful word that encompasses the things you want to accomplish, yes, but the way you want to feel as well.

Don't jump into things. Try one word on for size. Then try another.

Give yourself time to find the right word (or, yes, hashtag) to express what you want the year ahead of you to be.

This process may take days or it may take weeks. You may start with one word, try it on for size, and discard it for another. That's fine. That's good, in fact! More than anything, you need to find a word that feels right, sounds right, and means right.

Find the **word of the year** that's **the word of you**.

Set Goals: How to Set Smart Goals

Once you have a word for your year, it's time to begin to set and reach your goals in the season ahead.

Now, there are smart goals, and there are dumb goals, and I bet you know which one I want you to go for. A man named Paul Meyer came up with the concept of SMART goals, and according to him, a **SMART** goal fits the following criteria:

- **Specific:** A goal should never be vague. The goal I have set for a few years now to read 200 books is not vague. It is not “I want to read” or “I want to read dozens of books.” No. I want to read 200 books. A specific goal is specific.
- **Measurable:** It's not hard to measure a measurable goal — so find a goal that you can count your progress against. I can count to 200 pretty easily. I can also count to ten, and to one. Of the 200 books I want to read, I want to read 10 in Spanish, and 1 in Italian.

- **Actionable:** With an actionable goal, you know what to do next. To read those books, I better fire up my Kindle. Do you have a goal to expand your business? You've got to turn off House Hunters International and get cracking. Choose goals you can count progress against.
- **Relevant:** Goals should be relevant to you and the year before you. The year I had a baby, I decided it was not realistic to read 200 books, and dropped my goal to 150. (I heard that babies took up time, y'all.)
- **Timely:** Goals must be timely. Let's say I want to write some ebooks, and I have a goal to publish two in a given year. The first book when? The second book when? Put a date by those numbers.

I usually have a bunch of SMART goals I'm gunning towards, and so instead of forcing myself to keep to an unreasonably small number of goals (five! Four! No more than three!), I put my goals into categories.

Here are the ones I use:

- Family

- Health
- Personal
- God
- Work
- Money

Within each of these categories, I have at least one goal each year, and often more than one.

My categories are pretty standard. That said, some obvious other or substitute categories you might want to include might be: Home, Parenting, Marriage, Extended Family, Nuclear Family, Giving, Running, Sports, Pets, Scuba, Cooking, etc.

Think about the most important things in your life, and distill them into meaningful categories that work for you. Then, match your goals into those categories.

Once you feel you have the right goals for your year ahead, it's time to dig deep into your goals and work out how to really accomplish them.

Break Your Goal Down into Bite-Sized Pieces

For years before I started setting annual goals, I knew I was reading a lot of books, but I had no idea how many. Then, I started writing down the name of every book I read in the course of a year. Since I was regularly reading close to 100, I set that as my first annual reading goal. When that came easily, I pushed myself to 150. When I hit that, I then set a goal to read 200 books.

Ultimately, the act of defining a number and putting it on paper was the key contributor to ensuring that I read more. After all, although I always read a lot, it was only when I started committing myself to a specific number in my annual goal-setting process that I saw that number steadily go up, year after year. So when people tell me that one of their goals is to read more (a common one), I naturally explain that a SMART goal means that a specific number is important. The problem, though, is that numbers can sound daunting. The reason I can set such a big goal at all is because I know how long it takes, and because I have broken my goal down into bite-sized pieces. I do this by doing two things.

First, I break my annual goal down.

You don't hit a big goal by doing it all at once, but by breaking it down.

To read 200 books a year, I need to read 16 books a month, or, 4 books a week. If I stick to this average, I've got my annual goal covered. Some months I won't hit this, but some months (like when I go on vacation for a week and read a lot), I will exceed this.

Then, I figure out how long my goal will take.

I know that I read about 200 words a minute, give or take. Business or health books that require highlighting or note taking can be slower, and the rare novel can be quicker. If an average book is 50,000 words, I can read one book in a little over four hours. So I need about 16 hours a week to read 4 books.

When I know these numbers, I can then face up to them with strategies to get that reading done. The same works for any goal you set for yourself, whether it's running a marathon or increasing your giving by 10% or planning a vacation with family. Breaking down the goal into actionable items and determining how long it will take to accomplish that goal is essential. Sometimes this will be significantly easier than other times. When faced with a goal like "publish a book", there are a

thousand small tasks that have to take place to make that happen. At this stage you don't need to have all those action items written down (or even know what they are yet!) but just plan as much as you can for the broad strokes of what needs to happen and when. Then you can move forward. At each stage of the larger process, you'll then again break down that part of the goal into smaller pieces.

And, piece by piece, you'll win.

Part 2: Organize (less is more)

We've talked about how to **Decide** on the key goals in your life, and now it's time to **Organize** your days to win. If you've ever cleaned a good closet, you know that the key to organizing is reducing. Yes, it's fun to move things around from one shelf to another and fold them more fancily along the way, but the way you'll really organize is by getting rid of excess stuff.

In the Do Less Method, the "O" (**Organize**) is divided into four parts. Each part makes up the word, **Less**. Let's go through each step, point by point.

L: Limit Your Work to Your Best 20%

The 80/20 Principle says that we accomplish 80 percent of our work in 20 percent of our time. (Conversely, we waste 80 percent of our time spinning our wheels to get a measly 20 percent of our results.) To truly be productive, we then need to try and only do that 20 percent of things we are really great at that bring us great results, and eliminate the other eighty percent from our plate completely. Ultimately, this is the key to freeing up immense amounts of time and getting rid of those sixty, fifty, or even forty hour work weeks.

The first step is to identify those “Best 20%” percent activities.

To get going, take out two pieces of paper. Label one, “Big Wins”, and the other “Activities”.

On the first sheet of paper, I want you to write down some of your biggest wins in the past few years in your personal and professional life. This should be a list of one-off individual things like, “The deal I closed with that big firm,” “Appearing on my local radio station”, “Taking a

family trip to Mexico”, and ongoing things like, “Learning from my mentor”, “Taking piano classes”, or “Spending regular time with my children.”

Now, on the second sheet of paper, labeled “Activities”, I want you to think about all the activities you take part in on a regular basis – no matter if they led to those big wins or not. Your list will include all manner of things, like sleeping, eating, emailing, traveling, taking meetings, giving presentations, cleaning the house, spending time with kids, going to family events, commuting, volunteering, etc.

Now, looking at the second sheet of paper, you need to identify which of three categories the things on the second sheet of paper fall into. Here are the three categories:

- 1) Things Only You Can Do: I recommend putting stars around the “things only you can do” category, as these are the most important.
- 2) Things Someone Else Can Do
- 3) Things You Should Stop Doing

So, for example, “spending time with kids” does not fall under “Things Someone Else Can Do”, as it is not something you can hire someone else to help you with or something you can delegate to someone on your team. In contrast, helping you manage your email is a great candidate for “Things Someone Else Can Do”.

There might be some areas where one thing falls into two categories. For example, “traveling for work”, although it is something only you can do, is not necessarily something you always need to do, or need to do as much as you do. Was that out of town meeting really necessary or did you just think you “should” be there in-person? Could you have cut it out? Sometimes, we think that all types of a certain activity are necessary, when we could pick and choose better and some instances might fall under “Things You Should Stop Doing”.

Most people find that once you categorize the activities, it helps to re-write them on a fresh sheet of paper into ordered columns of Things Only You Can Do (starred), Things Someone Else Can Do, and Things

You Should Stop Doing. Once you're done categorizing them, it's now time to look back at the first sheet.

The first thing to do here is to find where items on your Big Wins list also appear on your Activities list. The items that appear as Big Wins AND appear on the Activities List as "Things Only You Can Do" are your "Best 20%" Activities. Let's now order *all* the items on the Activities list to see where they fall in terms of your priorities.

- **First Priority: Big Wins + Things Only You Can Do** – These are your "Best 20%" activities and are key activities you need to prioritize in your life!
- **Second Priority: Big Wins + Things Someone Else Can Do** – These are important activities you need to keep doing, but they are things you need to delegate to someone else to do. Whether that means hiring someone for a few hours a week, or working to delegate better at work, you need to work hard to protect your time to not personally take on these activities.
- **Third Priority: Things Only You Can Do** – Evaluate carefully the activities here, because they are not on your list of Big Wins.

Some, you will see, you may need to continue. Some, you do not.

Challenge yourself to also think broadly about what this means.

- **Not a Priority: Things You Should Stop Doing** – Try to stop doing these activities as much as possible.

Let's look more in-depth into each priority category.

First Priority: Big Wins + Things Only You Can Do

First and foremost, you need to make sure to think hard about these first priority items – as they will get top billing. If you put on your Activities list that “speaking at conferences” is something that only you can do, you then need to be 100% sure that speaking at conferences is actually a Big Win for you, and that it's not just on the Big Wins list because it sounds impressive or others would be eager to do it.

Second Priority: Big Wins + Things Someone Else Can Do

Some of the activities on your list are not things only you can do, but are activities that directly contribute to your big wins. For example, a

blogger might find that posting regularly on social media is important to driving traffic to her website, but in reality those posts aren't personal posts and thus don't need to be done by the blogger herself.

When this is the case, the most important thing you can do is delegate this activity out to someone else. If you work in a larger organization and don't have the ability or authority to outsource or hire an extra set of hands, then the key for you is to make sure that you aren't taking on tasks or activities that are really the role of someone else.

Third Priority: Things Only You Can Do

This category is full of some important things that we need to do every day (sleep, eat, groom, go to the dentist) that you might not think contribute to your big wins (although I'd say eating and sleeping well definitely does!), and many, *many* things that regularly suck our time. Some people, for example, are quick to say that only they can manage their calendar, book their flights, respond to their emails, clean the house, make dinner, or drive the carpool, but if they think really broadly, they might see they could hire someone to help.

Not a Priority: Things You Should Stop Doing

Many of us have things we know we “shouldn’t be doing”. This is your chance to get rid of those activities, once and for all.

Additionally, though, it is essential in this category to not cut out all your meaningless activities. The #1 thing people forget to put on their Big Wins list is “downtime” or “relaxing” or “rest”. The reality is that we all need downtime desperately in order to be truly productive – and I believe that it is only when we are truly rested (and I don’t just mean sleep) that our bodies naturally upswing into productivity.

Ultimately, this exercise is a mind-opening way to see where your time and work is really moving the needle, and where you’re just running on the hamster wheel to stay busy.

E: Edit the Time You Spend on Work

Tim Ferris became famous for telling us that we could only work four hours a week and still succeed. And although his book's title isn't exactly *literal*, the overarching concept is true: We can absolutely work less and win. In fact, as I believe, working less is a key way *to* succeed. Tim believes combining two distinct concepts is essential to working less. Specifically, the 80/20 Principle (that we spend 20% of our time to get 80% of our results) and Parkinson's Law (that work expands to fill the time we have to complete it). Alongside the other tools in the DO Less Method, this is how I do my work and read and sleep more than most people I know.

Let's explore the specifics of editing the time you spend on your work.

Track Your Time

To edit down the time you spend on work, you first need to know how much time you're spending on doing the things you do. Here are three great ways to do so:

A Notebook or Excel Spreadsheet

Time experts like Laura Vanderkam might say that there's nothing better than a good old grid for a true time diary (whether in an Excel spreadsheet or on graph paper). The concept is simple: divide the day into 24 hours and spend a week or a month noting what you do during the course of a 24 hour period and adding up the results to understand where you spend your time.

Rescue Time

RescueTime is a program that automatically tracks all the time you spend on the computer, giving you a report showing exactly what you were doing every minute of every day that your computer was on. It can

also track any off-screen time you manually input. It also has functionality to help you hit and reach productivity goals – like helping remind me you not to spend more than 40% of your workweek in your email inbox¹.

Moment

Remember that your digital work time doesn't just happen on your computer, and that you likely spend far more time on your mobile device each day than you think. Moment is a great app that tracks how much time that really is. It doesn't break it down into categories like RescueTime, but it does tell you how many minutes you've been on your phone each day, and can also help remind you to stay off it you go over your prescribed goals.

The biggest misconception people have about working less is that you'll get less done. In reality, if you made yourself work 20 hours this week instead of forty, you would likely adjust quickly to identifying what is

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2012/dec/17/ban-staff-email-halton-housing-trust>

important, and to only doing those things. This is the premise behind the concept of editing down the time you spend at work.

Once you've tracked your time for a few weeks and know where you are spending your time, you're ready to tackle the task of editing down the time you're spending on your work. By doing this after you have started the process of trying to only do your Best 20% work, you will hopefully be able to fluidly start seeing some early results.

S: Streamline the Work You Do

Productivity isn't about never working. It's about working well when you *do* turn it on. Here are some key strategies to help you do just that.

Develop a Morning Routine

I believe in the power of starting a day well, and so crafting a morning routine is something I recommend to everyone. (For a primer, see my friend Crystal Paine's online course, [Makeover Your Mornings](#), on how to develop a great one.)

Some years ago I started implementing a 7-step process I have come to call The PRESENT Principle. It's a simple routine built around an acronym — P.R.E.S.E.N.T. — that helps guide me to remember to implement the seven most important things I need to do each and every day to keep me present in my life -- and to do those things in the mornings.

Here's an overview of my routine. Remember that this is what works for me, and that you may not like all the steps at hand. Just ignore what doesn't work for you, and always work towards the goal of finding something that sets *your* day up for success.

Ultimately, this takes me about twenty to thirty minutes each day, and I often find myself journaling at the end that it was, once again, the best thing I could've done to start my day.

The 7 Steps in My Morning Routine (the Present Principle)

P—PRAY (or PAUSE)

I start my days with a steaming cup of bulletproof coffee or tea and a prayer of guidance, thanks, and direction for my day ahead. I then take a few minutes to meditate. Another way to think of this moment more broadly is as a “pause”—for prayer, pause and centering. It's a critical way to start a busy life, day in and day out.

R—READ

After praying and pausing, I dive into reading something inspirational and motivational. I generally work through one particular devotional for a few months, and sometimes have a few going at a time. Make sure to find one that speaks to you personally, and not one that someone else loves but you think reads like fluff (been there, done that). If you aren't into the idea of inspirational or spiritual reading at this

groggy hour, think about a good read on business, leadership, or productivity that you can slowly work through sections of, day in and day out.

E—EXPRESS

After reading, I then take my own thoughts to paper. I use a black Moleskine journal that has seen better days, but a post-it note or Evernote document will do just fine. The key is just to get your feelings out there. Worries, thoughts, thanks, angst; anything and everything.

S—SCHEDULE

Now's the time in my routine that I sketch out an overview of my day and do a check-in on my week. I typically spend five minutes on this step—drafting my day's schedule and checking in on the week at large. I do this on paper, with the goal of this step being offline, but you may find it works best to use your computer or an app.

E—EXERCISE

I try to get in exercise of some sort every day (I run most days, except when my jogging stroller gets the best of me), and I find that doing it in

the morning is the most effective way to keep at it. Experts say this is also smartest when working to form solid habits. Move daily, and you'll feel better.

N—NOURISH

Each day, do one thing that truly nourishes you. Go on a walk. Take a bubble bath. Read a novel. Talk to someone you love. Do something for you. It's fun to do this in the morning straightaway, but if not, put this off until later as a reward for getting your big tasks of the day done.

T—TRACK

At the day's end, look back at how many of the steps in your routine you were able to accomplish. Can you do better tomorrow? Track your progress, and think about what is working and what isn't. This will better poise you to make tweaks and win long-term.

I'm not always perfect. Some days I don't do every step, and some days I don't do any of them at all, but trying to implement this routine each and every day has been an incredible motivation for me and has given me the conviction that morning routines can make anyone's day better

and brighter. To work less, and do more, choosing a morning routine can be a huge help.

The Power of Focus and Decision Fatigue

If you've read something about productivity and goal setting before, you've likely heard the now-common advice to **do the hard thing first thing**. Brian Tracy, author of *Eat that Frog!* is one of biggest proponents of this strategy, and his teachings have done much to convince folks that doing hard things first thing is essential.

Got an important memo to write? Do it first thing. Got a mission critical presentation to finish? Do it in the morning before anything else.

That said, most folks don't actually remember why this is so important. It turns out, it's not just about the fact that morning folks are more productive or about the fact that finishing one task helps you feel more productive and encourages you to keep going. Instead, I believe the key reason that doing the hard thing first thing is a good idea is all about warding off the energy-zapping power of **decision fatigue and maximizing your energy to focus**.

Listen up:

The reason you need to do your big job in the morning is that you will always have the most energy to focus *before* you get decision fatigue.

New to the term decision fatigue? Decision fatigue is that energy-zapping feeling you get after spending an hour trying to decide on the best flight home to your parents' house for Thanksgiving weekend (wake up early on Monday morning to fly home? Or pay more to fly back Sunday night?), or why you feel tired after hours of trying on wedding dresses (cap sleeves? sleeveless?). It's even the reason why some life-hacking entrepreneurs swear by wearing the same thing each day, or eating the same thing for lunch! Decision fatigue is the exhaustion you get from making decisions, and it's a real and present drain on our daily productivity.

By the same token, doing your hard thing requires focus. I believe that one of the biggest reasons we procrastinate on our big work and spend far too much time in email and meetings in our days is because when we lack focus, we do the thing that doesn't require that much focus at all. Email, it turns out, is a great candidate for that (and so one of the great reasons to not get super engaged in email first thing is to keep your mind energetic for your big task). Meetings are also great for a mind

that's not totally attentive. Doing hard work, it turns out, requires focus.

You will always be most energetic and most likely to focus before decision fatigue sets in. Although I'm betting you'll be more energetic *earlier* in the day, let's find out for sure.

Determine the Right Time of Day to Work

If you want to work towards more productive days, it is essential to figure out the best times of days to do the many activities in your life, and then to build a loose schedule around doing those things.

To do this, you need to first think about the many types of activities you do in a given day. Activities like:

Any of Your “Best 20%” Activities

Exercising

Relaxing

Leading Meetings

Taking Conference Calls

Giving Presentations

Doing my Daily Quiet Time

Emailing

Brainstorming

Doing Research

Chatting on the Phone with Family and Friends

Having Difficult Conversations

Reading

Using the list above,

- 1) Refer to your Activities list and look at all the items in the “First Priority: Best 20%” column and the “Third Priority: Things Only You Can Do” column – so, the two columns of Activities made up of things that you personally are going to keep doing on a regular basis.
- 2) Now *think* about when you’re best at each of those things. *Really think*. Don’t answer right away, but rather take some time to think about it. If an answer doesn’t come, keep watching to notice how you behave at different times of day, and how certain activities sit with you. It took me a long time to realize, for example, that attending meetings was a far better use of my lower energy afternoon time than leading presentations, which for me was best in the morning or evening. Watch yourself as you live your life, and think about it, over time. Remember the importance of the

Power of Focus and Decision Fatigue when deciding these times, as most people's Best 20% activities likely need that high-energy time before decision fatigue takes away your powers.

Slowly, but surely, you can **start to build a life designed around living your life at the best time of day**. Even if you aren't someone with a detailed schedule day in and day out, this can still work incredibly well to give you the broad strokes picture of how you should run your days.

Batch Your Work

One powerful concept that is essential to add to your productivity arsenal is to make sure you are batching your work. Most individuals do a number of different things in any given hour of a work day, with no regard to the fact that switching back and forth between activities – calls, emails, writing memos, chatting with coworkers about a “quick question”, coding, doing design layout - takes a huge toll on our productivity. In fact, studies show that we lose up to 40% of our time in any given day by switching back and forth between tasks.² You can reap huge rewards and make yourself infinitely more productive by batching your work to do similar tasks in bulk.

For example, I work hard to keep my meetings and calls batched into certain days of the week and times of day, and my creation days batched into others (this also addresses the issue that creation tasks require more focus). So, if you determine you have about 15 hours of meetings a week, you would schedule those as much as possible to fit within two days. Especially when working within a large organization this requires

² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/brain-wise/201209/the-true-cost-multi-tasking>

you to make an art of calendaring your meetings well, but as I've seen even within the busy meeting environment of Silicon Valley it is *very* possible, and it pays off remarkably.

This works for all manner of tasks and you'll likely find that most of the things on your Activities list will work within this strategy – from running errands, to going to doctor's appointments, to managing email, to doing any creation-based work.

As I'll talk about further, I make sure to also process email in batch as well, another huge time saver.

Tame Your Email

Did you know that you likely spend 40% of your work hours on email?³

At face value, that sounds like the biggest blow to productivity the world has ever seen. But first impressions can be deceiving.

The reality is that emailing is necessary to our work lives, and we need to email to succeed in our careers. We are expected to email with clients, partners, and coworkers, and to do so in a timely manner.

That said, email is a special kind of work.

The vast majority of email is not creation-based, and does not create tangible results. Email doesn't write a book, or record a song, or build a home. Hundreds of emails strung together do not lead up to a finished project. Instead, email is a fishbowl of semi-distracted people pinging each other back and forth ad infinitum.

So, given all this, how do we go about managing it? How do we acknowledge that it is necessary to do deals, write books, and

³ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/01/email-workday_n_1725728.html;
<http://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2012/dec/17/ban-staff-email-halton-housing-trust>

communicate with communicators, but keep it from getting in the way of creation? Specifically, how do we figure out a productive system to best respond to emails?

Firstly, I believe that 95% of the time email does not require the energy that our other projects do, and thus does not require the same level of energy. And so I agree you should never email first thing in the morning. Instead, with those first few hours of peak energy before that most of us have upon waking before decision fatigue sets in, we should focus on our most difficult task of the day, and get that done. This is not a new idea, and it appears in many other books on productivity.

But when *should* you respond to emails, if not in the first few hours of the morning?

Here are some email rules to live by:

- **As much as possible, email should be done in bulk.** There are always one-off exceptions to this rule, but in order to be truly productive you need to slot the bulk of your emailing into specific times of the day - and not *too many* times! The alternative, which most of us fall into the trap of, is doing our "real" work all day

with email perpetually in the background, ready to interrupt our concentration and derail us on a near-constant basis, even for the most minor of emails.

- **Email should be done when you have *less* energy, rather than *more*.** So figure out when that is, *whenever* it is, and create a block of time in your schedule to fit in your emailing in that period. In my experience, the lull in the afternoon is a great time to go through a bunch of non-urgent emails.

The vast majority of the emails you get, every day, are not urgent. And, thus, the vast majority of the time you spend actually answering emails each and every day is likely not urgent. The problem, of course, is that most people generally have no idea what a truly "urgent" email is.

Let's look at what *urgent* emails actually are -- not in *theory* -- but in practice as we examine how I divide up my email.

I divide my email into four categories, and believe that most folks would benefit from utilizing such categories in their own inbox:

- Urgent

- Daily (although I don't necessarily get to thing every single day, like on weekends)
- Weekly
- Never

In my email inbox, urgent and daily emails generally come from the same sources, and the response time is simply determined by the degree of urgency I associate with the particular note at hand.

Here is what this category of email is mostly made up of:

Urgent and Daily Emails

- **"Live" Projects:** In the course of a year in your chosen profession, you might have 30 "projects" on your plate. In the course of any given month in that year, you might be in some stage of development or analysis with up to 12 of those individual projects. However, only a few of those 12 will be considered "live" at any given time. These "live" projects will get top billing in that

month -- meaning that the majority of your attention will be focused on them. Sure, you might think of some of the other projects -- but it is the "live" ones that you are most attuned to.

- **Life-changers:** This is a mixed bag. Generally though, life-changers are some type of make or break news (you sold your company! the IRS is auditing you! your mother's participating in a flash mob!) or opportunity (a significant press opportunity! a president wants to meet you!). You know these when you see them.

- **Inner Circle Emails:** We all have one of these circles, and these folks get top billing, even when they are emailing their tenth pregnant stomach shot or stupid animal YouTube clip this week. To be a happy individual connected to friends and family, this is healthy and important (and not productive).

Weekly emails:

I consider weekly emails to generally be emails that are often about other people's agendas. So, typically, these are queries from people who want things I may or not may not be able to give that are not considered urgent, and do not fall into any set of my real priorities. These are emails I do want to respond to, but should not do on a daily basis if I hope to get my own work done.

Never Emails:

We all know what these are, and have different standards for what these may be. Think boundaries, and don't invite crazy in.

My Email System:

- Check your email daily at a few pre-set times to deal with urgent and daily emails.
- Every week, calendar aside time to deal with weekly emails in one fell, focused swoop.
- Never deal with never emails.

Fix Your Meetings

People who work with me know how much I despise meetings, and how I've made something of a study of figuring out why our meeting culture is so broken. When the reality is **spend 35-50% of your time in meetings**⁴, I don't think I'm very controversial in saying there is a problem. Obviously, some meetings need to happen. But the notion that we need so many of them – with so many participants! – to successfully run our work lives is absolutely preposterous. Here are the critical ways to change the way you think about meetings, reduce the meetings you lead and attend, and make meetings more meaningful when you are there.

Use Email When You Can

The key to avoiding many unnecessary meetings is to do things in writing when you can. Especially these days, where seamless chat tools like Basecamp and Slack and Google Chat exist to make back and forth exchanges *even* more instantaneous easier than a regular email client,

⁴ <https://www.themuse.com/advice/how-much-time-do-we-spend-in-meetings-hint-its-scary>

written communication is often infinitely faster in reaching certain goals than having a meeting. Although no one thinks they want more email, in terms of time efficiency, email almost always wins.

Use an Efficient Way to Schedule Meetings

If you do your own scheduling, you know that the least efficient thing you can do is to email back and forth with someone about good times that you can connect. Instead, try a tool like [Calendly](#).

Batch Your Meetings

Remember to batch schedule your meetings just as you batch schedule other activities in your work life. If you are introvert, like me, this also helps to deal with the fatigue that comes as the result of meetings.

Have an Agenda

The vast majority of meetings do require an agenda, and this is an important step in keeping things on track and on time. Work hard to create simple, clear agendas that everyone can follow. If other people need to prepare something, send the agenda with enough time ahead of time so that they can come with what is expected from them.

Only Go to Meetings Where You're Really Needed

If you work in a large organization, you likely have seen the number of meetings folks invite you to increase linearly with the number of years you've been there, and the number of employees hired. Nip this in the bud and directly ask organizers to remove you from meetings that you aren't adding value to – or that fifteen other people can handle on their own.

Learn Positive Multi-tasking

As I've said before, I read a lot. And although this has always been true, it was the year that I discovered the power of positive multi-tasking that I really upped my reading goals. I did it through a little thing called audiobooks.

Positive multi-tasking (my term) is essentially the act of combining “brainless” physical activities with mental activities. For example, here is when I find time to listen to audiobooks, and when you can do so (or do any other of your brain-“full” activities.)

1. **While Exercising:** I'm a huge fan of listening to an audiobook while running or working out. If you want to read and work out at the same time, you have to find a stationary bike (or subject your treadmill to Kindle-induced nausea), but with an audiobook you can be doing anything.
2. **When In Transit:** The other main time I listen to audiobooks is when I'm in transit somewhere. Driving, taking public transport (a cab, subway, or bus), or walking anywhere (through the grocery

store, through an airport) are all easy times to listen to audiobooks when you wouldn't otherwise be able to read, and when most folks listen to music or nothing at all.

3. **While Eating:** As a devout reader, I know that although you can read books while eating, it's never quite ideal. In contrast, listening to audiobooks is the perfect complement.

4. **While Doing Other Brainless Tasks:** Unloading the dishwasher? Cooking something you've made a thousand times? Putting on makeup? Nursing (sorry guys)? A perfect time to listen to an audiobook. Don't worry about putting on the headphones, just let your iphone (or other device) play it on speaker. I do this all the time, and love the content I'm able to consume in an otherwise "down" moment.

Inventor Nilofer Merchant is one of many innovators who has jumped on the bandwagon of walking meetings – taking meetings with coworkers while walking around the park, or up a mountain. This isn't a strategy that works only if your coworkers are up for the exercise, though. Having a walking meeting (or a walking call with a friend, family member or friendly American Airlines representative) over the phone is

a key smart multi-tasking move, and has become even more common with the advent of treadmill desks.

Just be careful not to pant. During my long marathon training runs I was known for calling friends and family members to chat. One day, twenty minutes into a call, my friend Court asked, “Are you panting?” I confessed.

Remember the basics: positive multitasking combines a truly brainless activity with a brain-“full” activity. Or, said another way, a mental activity with a physical one.

S: Stop

One of the best things you can do to work better is to stop working.

Ensuring you recharge – both in small ways and big ways – is absolutely essential to doing good work.

Take Breaks

As Arianna Huffington says in *Thrive*, the point of finding an oasis in your day isn't to escape from it all and live on a Wyoming ranch – but rather to find a way to *live well* in the midst of our lives.

Here are some key ways to find your oasis to recharge during the day-to-day:

Take A Mini Break:

One of the best ways to bring yourself back to the moment in a day of stress or overwhelm is just to pull your hands away from the keyboard, move your eyes to the window, and breathe. Let the thoughts come in, and let the thoughts flow out. And breathe all the while. Try the Time Out app on your computer to help remind you to do just that.

Find a Moment to Stop:

Mini breathing breaks are great, but what's even better is a ten or fifteen minute period of time where you can take a stop and do nothing, all for

yourself. I find that the best way to do this - especially in a corporate environment where it's not necessarily possible to stare at the wall for 15 minutes while others look on in wonder - is to take a short break to go on a walk. *Outside.*

They say that one of the best ways we can reduce stress is by getting out into the beautiful world around us. Indeed, nature is a great way to get the endorphins going, and to kick your stress to the curb. Whether it's a beautiful park, a pristine botanical garden, or just a hotel balcony with a view, find nature and go there.

Combine it with a trip to get a coffee, say, or to run an errand you need to do. But in those 10 minutes of walking, don't make phone calls. Just walk and breathe and wait as the thoughts jamming your mind slowly rearrange themselves into calm.

It's all about finding those small moments where you take time out of the crazy, and finding moments to disconnect from the speeding train of your life to bring your mind and heart back to calm.

Tap Into Positive Emotions

You've likely heard it said that smiling makes you actually feel better. It's true, and I have more than one friend who swears by smiling in the mirror whenever she feels down. Positive emotions like hope are key to making sure your stress is as low as possible. Every day, think of a way you can better tap into these key emotions and cultivate the side of your heart and mind that wants to feel happiness. A great way to do this in the midst of your workday is to find something you love to do and weave it into your workday.

Take a Weekend Off

Two days isn't a lot of time. And, as many of us know, two days can easily be taken up with shuttling kids back and forth to sports practices and birthday parties. To make our weekends count, we have to find a real break from work, and a real way to rejuvenate for the week ahead.

Laura Vanderkam, author of *I Know How She Does It*, suggests a great strategy for making sure you are maximizing rejuvenation in your weekends, and it's all about something she calls "anchor events". The concept is this: Choose a few pleasurable activities you want to do over your weekend, and schedule them in. It may be "bake a cake with my

daughter on Saturday”, or “watch a movie as a family on Friday night”, or “go to tea with a friend”.

Whatever your anchor events are, by scheduling in this fun time, you’ll be able to take advantage of the happiness we all get from the anticipation of them. Additionally, you’ll come to the end of your weekend feeling like you truly enjoyed yourself, and didn’t fritter the time away with reality TV marathons. In general, the strategy of scheduling downtime doesn’t require a whole weekend, and can also work well even in an afternoon.

Take a Vacation

With a longer period of time on the table, the stakes are higher, and the potential for rest and rejuvenation is even greater.

They say that 57% of Americans don't take all their vacation days each year, and I'm surely not the only one who thinks there's a problem with that.⁵ A vacation is the perfect pause that more of us need in our work

⁵ <http://www.cnn.com/2011/TRAVEL/05/23/vacation.in.america/index.html>

lives. A good time out can reenergize and refocus you to win, and vacations are great opportunities to do just this.

Marisa Mayer, CEO of Yahoo, is known for taking a one-week vacation every four months.⁶ For her, the reward for four months of head-down work is getting one week off to play. Critically, though, time off is not just about playing. As Mayer says, it's really about recharging. We need time off to make our time "on" really count.

Although we often hear the importance of starting things, we easily forget that starting only works if we take regular stops as well. A break can help you do just that – especially if you make it digital.

⁶ <http://www.businessinsider.com/successful-people-who-barely-sleep-2012-9>

Digitally Disconnect

When I started tracking the time I spent online, one of my clear goals was to reduce that time. I wanted to be more productive, with less wasted time spent staring at a flat screen. I've often found that if I'm not being productive in the middle of my day and find myself on my dreaded Internet loop (Email, Twitter, Instagram, CNN, Email, Twitter, Instagram, CNN, Repeat), stepping away from my computer is the single best thing I can do to refocus my priorities.

On the weekends, I take the same approach. By keeping my computer off for at least one full day – and hopefully two – I can “detox” my brain enough so that, come Monday morning, I'm excited to dive back in.

Stepping away also makes the heart grow fonder, of course.

A few years ago, I started to explore the idea of taking longer digital breaks or “digital detoxes”, and along the way I learned a number of key lessons about how important getting away from our screens is, and how to create truly effective digital detoxes. Here are some keys:

Decide What Kind of Break It Will Be

The first key step in any break-taking is figuring out what exactly you're taking a break from. A break from social media? A break from email? A break from the Internet at large? A break from all flat-screens? There are a variety of different types of digital breaks. In *The Winter of Our Disconnect*, Susan Maushart eschewed all flat screens from the house for six months – but allowed herself to use her computer outside of the house for her writing. Baratunde Thurston left the Internet for 25 days – and turned off text messages. One person I read about allowed one email check per day. I have done different breaks in different ways.

The key is define what the break is in specific terms.

Set Your Break Boundaries and Stick to Them

Boundaries are always tough, and your break boundaries are just as challenging. Even on a social media break, say, you might wake up one morning with an insatiable itch to scroll Facebook for the teams of babies born in your network overnight. Don't do it. A break is a break, and if you've decided to take one, uphold your boundaries.

A total tech blackout is sometimes a good thing. One year, I took a 12-day complete digital break, for example, and loved almost every minute of it. It felt like a true digital detox in every sense of the word. The first couple mornings I could practically feel the shakes as I tried to reach for my iphone to scroll my emails and tweets before getting out of bed. My only "cheat" was to receive text messages if something crazy happened and I had to get online.

Another year on vacation, I decided I wasn't into such a total blackout, so instead I did a very scaled back version of a detox, staying off my computer but checking emails occasionally on my iphone. Since I rarely respond to many emails on my iphone, it kept me out of the email fray.

Prepare Beforehand

Depending on the level of intensity of your digital detox, you've got to plan. Write blog posts, schedule social media updates, and set auto-responders on your email addresses alerting folks. Especially if you are going offline for more than few days, making sure that you've got a good auto-response is key. Importantly, you've got to do it right in order to encourage folks to not expect a response, and not try to contact you

through other means. On my 12-day total digital detox, I encouraged folks in my auto-responder to “Text me if it’s urgent.” The result? A number of non-urgent texts coming to me on vacation. Next time, I’ll know to use *much* stronger language.

Alert the Important Folks

There are folks that just might need to know when you're stepping out of life for a little while. Friends and family that might wonder why you're not responding at once to every long cat pic they send? A client you're working with on a project due after your break will end? An assistant who will need to help out just a bit more while you're away? All these people need to be in the loop -- and doing so beforehand (and then reiterating with an out of office response message that conveys clear information on when you'll be back and how to deal with thing while gone) is essential.

Have a Back Up Plan

There is always the chance that someone really needs to get in touch, and so it’s a good idea to have a backup plan. Whether that means hiring someone to help out (or tasking a current hire with the job), or checking

texts on occasion for urgent messages, think of the way that you'll feel both digital disconnected and responsible at the same time.

Working better is about stopping more, and don't let anyone tell you differently. Stop the madness, get the break you need, and watch your productivity soar.

Conclusion:

The Do Less Method is the way I approach a world in which we have too much to do and too little time.

At its core, I believe that the Do Less Method truly teaches us that when push comes to shove we actually *do* have enough time. More than enough.

I believe that doing better work is never about doing *more* work. I believe it so strongly, in fact, that I'm on a Mission (with a capital M) to change the way we think about work. To wake us up to the time we waste in conference rooms and cubicles getting nothing done, and to help us learn to do better work, in less time, with more time to breathe, play, and live.

The key to winning at work is working smarter, doing less, and living more.

Do Less, to do more.

About the Author

Claire Diaz-Ortiz is an author, speaker, and technology innovator who has been named one of the 100 Most Creative People in Business by Fast Company. Claire was an early employee at Twitter, Inc., where she led social innovation.

In Claire's time at Twitter, she was called everything from "The Woman Who Got the Pope on Twitter" (Wired) and "Twitter's Pontiff Recruitment Chief" (The Washington Post) to a "Force for Good" (Forbes) and "One of the Most Generous People in Social Media" (Fast Company).

Claire is the author of several books, including [Twitter for Good: Change the World One Tweet at a Time](#), [Greater Expectations: Succeed \(and Stay Sane\) in an On-Demand, All-Access, Always-On Age](#), and [Hope Runs: An American Tourist, a Kenyan Boy, a Journey of Redemption](#).

She is a frequent international speaker on social media, business and

innovation and has been invited to deliver keynotes and trainings at organizations like the Vatican, the US State Department, Verizon, South by Southwest, TEDX, and many others.

She writes a popular business blog at ClaireDiazOrtiz.com and serves as a LinkedIn Influencer, one of a select group of several hundred global leaders chosen to provide original content on the LinkedIn platform.

Claire holds an MBA from Oxford University, where she was a Skoll Foundation Scholar for Social Entrepreneurship, and has a B.A. and an M.A. in Anthropology from Stanford University.

She is the co-founder of Hope Runs, a non-profit organization operating in AIDS orphanages in Kenya.

She has appeared widely in television and print news sources such as CNN, BBC, Time, Newsweek, The New York Times, Good Morning America, The Today Show, The Washington Post, Fortune, Forbes, Fast Company, and many others.

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