

How to Boost Your Work IQ

A pair of dark-rimmed glasses with tortoiseshell temples is resting on a silver laptop. The laptop is on a wooden desk. A white mouse is visible in the bottom right corner. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Practical Strategies for
Performing at Your Best

RON FRIEDMAN PH.D.

How to Boost Your Work IQ

Practical Strategies for
Performing at Your Best

RON FRIEDMAN PH.D.

Contents

Introduction	4
How to Spend the First 10 Minutes of Your Day	7
Action Plan	12
Worksheet	13
The Art of Scheduling to Your Strengths	16
Action Plan	21
The Value of Chunking Activities	22
Action Plan	27
Schedule Intermissions on Your Calendar	28
Action Plan	33
View Exercise as Part of Your Job Description	34
Action Plan	39
How to Spend the Last 10 Minutes of Your Day	40
Action Plan	46
Conclusion: Three Keys to Working Smarter	47
About the Author	50

Introduction

In the summer of 1768, nearing the peak of a wildly prolific career as a scientist, musician, publisher, inventor, and statesman, Benjamin Franklin wrote a letter in which he quietly revealed a curious practice that helped fuel his success.

“I rise every morning and sit in my chamber without any clothes whatever,” he wrote, describing a habit that would later become known as his daily *air bath*. “Half an hour or an hour, according to the season, reading or writing.”

Franklin is hardly the only brilliant mind with an unusual method of working.

Filmmaker Woody Allen, who is among Hollywood’s most productive directors, has his own unique routine. While most writers simply sit at a desk, Allen spends significant portions of his workday in the shower. “I’ll stand there with steaming hot water coming down for thirty minutes, forty-five minutes, just thinking out ideas and working on plot.”

Nobel Prize-winning author William Faulkner produced his best work in silence. To ensure that his writing was undisturbed, he would physically remove the doorknob to his library and carry it with him until his day’s work was complete.

Most of us don’t have access to air baths, extended showers, or knob-less libraries in our workplace. Yet we long to be more productive. And with good reason. The nature of our work has grown infinitely more complex in recent years. Technological innovations have led to rising expectations, a 24/7 work culture, and limitless information for us to sift through, process, and act upon.

At the same time, we face an avalanche of daily distractions, from countless meetings and conference calls to the latest viral videos and breaking news stories burrowing their way to the top of our inbox. We do everything we can to maintain our focus, but the battle for our attention escalates by the day.

Now more than ever, we need strategies for being productive. So where do we start?

This ebook highlights key strategies for working smarter. In the pages that follow, you'll discover a variety of methods for making better decisions, sharpening your focus, and boosting your creativity. Unlike many works in this genre, the suggestions in this ebook are evidence-based, leveraging scientific studies on how people think, feel, and act when they're producing great work.

Given the unrelenting pace of the modern workplace, I've kept it brief. There are no elaborate experiments or complex brain imaging studies to read about. My goal here is simple: to provide you with actionable insights that you can immediately put to use.

By the time we're done about half an hour from now, you'll have a series of ideas for optimizing your workday in ways that allow you to sustain your energy, elevate your performance, and get more done.

We're about to raise your Work IQ. Let's get started.

How to Spend the First 10 Minutes of Your Day

“If everything
is a priority
then nothing is
a priority.”

–AUTHOR GARR REYNOLDS

If you're working in the kitchen of Anthony Bourdain, legendary chef of Brasserie Les Halles, best-selling author, and famed television personality, you don't dare so much as boil hot water without attending to a ritual that's essential for any self-respecting chef: *mise-en-place*.

The "Meez," as professionals call it, translates into "everything in its place." In practice, it involves studying a recipe, thinking through the tools and equipment you will need, and assembling the ingredients in the right proportion before you begin. It is the planning phase of every meal—the moment when chefs evaluate the totality of what they are trying to achieve and create an action plan for the meal ahead.

For the experienced chef, *mise-en-place* represents more than a quaint practice or a time-saving technique. It's a state of mind.

"*Mise-en-place* is the religion of all good line cooks," Bourdain wrote in his runaway bestseller *Kitchen Confidential*. "As a cook, your station, and its condition, its state of readiness, is an extension of your nervous system... The universe is in order when your station is set..."

Chefs like Anthony Bourdain have long appreciated that when it comes to exceptional cooking, the single most important ingredient of any dish is planning. It's the "Meez" that forces Bourdain to think ahead, that saves him from having to distractedly search for items midway through, and that allows him to channel his full attention to the dish before him.

Most of us do not work in kitchens. We do not interact with ingredients that need to be collected, prepped, or measured. And yet the value of applying a similar approach and deliberately taking time out to plan before we begin is arguably greater.

What's the first thing you do when you arrive at your desk? For many of us, checking email or listening to voice mail is practically automatic. In many ways, these are among the worst ways to start a day. Both activities hijack our focus and put us in a reactive mode, where other people's priorities take center stage. They are the equivalent of entering a kitchen and looking for a spill to clean or a pot to scrub.

A better approach is to begin your day with a brief planning session. An intellectual *mise-en-place*. Bourdain envisions the perfect execution before starting his dish. Here's the corollary for the enterprising business professional. Ask yourself this question the moment you sit at your desk: *The day is over and I am leaving the office with a tremendous sense of accomplishment. What have I achieved?*

This exercise is usually effective at helping people distinguish between tasks that simply *feel urgent* from those that are *truly important*. Use it to determine the activities you want to focus your energy on.

Then—and this is important—create a plan of attack by breaking down complex tasks into specific actions.

Productivity guru David Allen recommends starting each item on your list with a verb, which is useful because it makes your intentions concrete. For example, instead of listing “Monday's presentation,” identify every action item that creating Monday's

presentation will involve. You may end up with: *collect* sales figures, *draft* slides, and *w* images into deck.

Studies show that when it comes to goals, the more specific you are about what you're trying to achieve, the better your chances of success. Having each step mapped out in advance will also minimize complex thinking later in the day and make procrastination less likely.

Finally, prioritize your list. When possible, start your day with tasks that require the most mental energy. Research indicates that we have less willpower as the day progresses, which is why it's best to tackle challenging items – particularly those requiring focus and mental agility – early on.

The entire exercise can take you less than 10 minutes. Yet it's a practice that yields significant dividends throughout your day.

By starting each morning with a mini-planning session, you frontload important decisions to a time when your mind is fresh. You'll also notice that having a list of concrete action items (rather than a broad list of goals) is especially valuable later in the day, when fatigue sets in and complex thinking is harder to achieve.

Now, no longer do you have to pause and think through each step. Instead, like a master chef, you can devote your full attention to the execution.

Action Plan

The First 10 Minutes

Step 1

Devote the first 10 minutes of your workday to a brief strategy session.

Step 2

To identify important tasks, ask yourself this question the moment you sit at your desk: *The day is over and I am leaving the office with a tremendous sense of accomplishment. What have I achieved?*

Step 3

Break down each task into specific actions.

Step 4

List the actions you plan to take, starting each one with a verb.

Step 5

Prioritize your list, placing actions that require the most energy first.

Worksheet

Your First 10 Minutes

1.

The day is over and you are leaving the office with a tremendous sense of accomplishment.

What tasks have you achieved?

Task 1 _____

Task 2 _____

Task 3 _____

Worksheet *Your First 10 minutes*

2.

Next, break down each task into specific actions, starting each one with a verb.

Task 1

Action _____

Action _____

Action _____

Action _____

Action _____

Task 2

Action _____

Action _____

Action _____

Action _____

Action _____

Task 3

Action _____

Action _____

Action _____

Action _____

Action _____

3.

Finally, prioritize your list. Go back to the list above and place a number to left of each action, with “1” representing tasks requiring a lot of mental flexibility and willpower, and “5” representing those requiring very little mental flexibility and willpower.

4.

Start by working on the 1s, moving on to higher numbers as the day progresses.

The Art of Scheduling to Your Strengths

“Don’t mistake
activity with
achievement.”

– HALL OF FAME BASKETBALL COACH JOHN WOODEN

If you work with a team, chances are your inbox is often flooded with invitations. Internal meetings, client conference calls, the occasional lunch request. Assuming you have some control over your calendar, how you respond to these offers generally depends on two factors: the value of attending the meeting and your availability.

Rarely, however, do we consider a third factor in our decision-making criteria—the time of day when we are at our most productive.

By now, you've probably noticed that the person you are midway through the afternoon is not the same person who arrived first thing in the morning. Research shows our cognitive functioning fluctuates throughout the day. If you're like most people, you'll find that you can get a lot done between 9:00am and 11:00am. Not so at 2:30pm. Later in the day, it often feels like we're moving at a fraction of our morning pace.

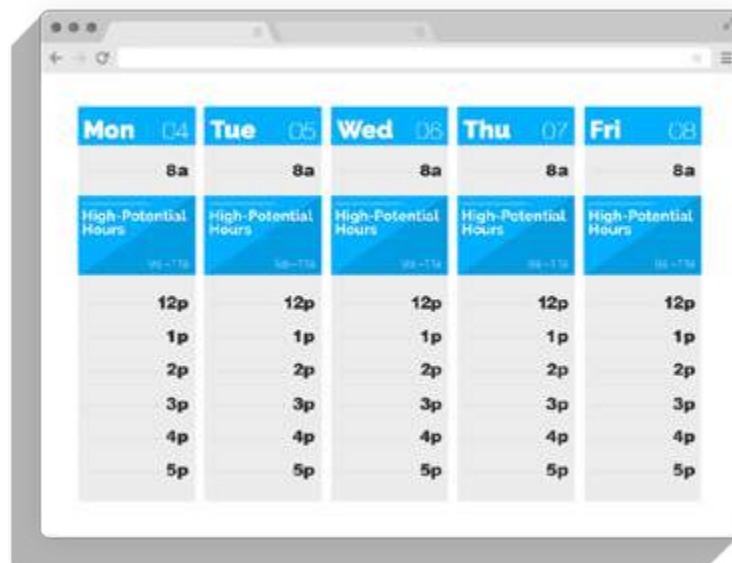
That's not an illusion. Recent studies have found that on average, people are considerably worse at absorbing new information, planning ahead, and resisting distractions as the day progresses.

The reason this happens is not merely motivational. It's biological. Our bodies run on a circadian rhythm that affects our hormone production, brain wave activities, and body temperature. Each of these variations tinker with our energy level, impacting our alertness and productivity.

Importantly, we don't all follow identical patterns. While most people do their best work in the morning (and our preference for mornings tends to increase with age), others are night owls who are more productive later in the day. Research suggests that our fondness for morning or evenings isn't simply a personal preference—it's directly tied to the time of day when our physical and cognitive abilities peak.

To get the most out of every day, you need to guard the hours when you are at your most productive. Think back to yesterday and the day before. At which points of your day did you feel at your most energetic? Chances are, these are times with the highest productivity potential.

Once you've identified high-potential hours, consider treating them differently—for example, by blocking them off on your calendar.



This discourages colleagues with access to your availabilities from suggesting these times for meetings. An additional advantage of having high-potential hours blocked off is that it prompts you to think twice before suggesting your own non-essential meetings at that time.

Proactively setting aside your best hours to get work done saves you from having to scramble later on to compensate. Use these hours for working on high-priority projects, making decisions you've been avoiding, or initiating a difficult conversation.

And, if you're the owner of a dull, 10 a.m. staff meeting, do your team a favor and reschedule it for after lunch. The afternoon is when most people's energy levels naturally dip. Lower energy levels can be disastrous for work that requires deep focus, but is considerably less detrimental in the context of other people. Having others around also naturally increases our alertness levels, helping counteract the slump in energy.

Fatigue, it's worth noting, is not all bad. In fact, the findings of a 2011 study suggest that when our minds are tired, we are more distractible and less adept at filtering out seemingly irrelevant ideas. The free association that ensues makes "off-peak" hours an ideal time for finding novel solutions.

Ultimately, the best way to schedule is to take our natural energy fluctuations into account. You can maximize your productivity by calibrating activities to the right time of day. If a task requires willpower and complex thinking, plan to do it when you are at your most alert. In contrast, if what you're after is a fresh perspective, use fatigue to your advantage by looking for solutions when your energy drops.

In either case, protect your best hours. If you don't do it, who will?

Action Plan

Scheduling to Your Strengths

Step 1

To identify your “high-potential” hours, think back to yesterday and the day before. At which points of the day did you *feel* at your most energetic?

Step 2

Place a note on your calendar, shielding future “high-potential” hours from non-essential activities.

Step 3

Plan to do your most complex work during “high-potential” hours.

Step 4

Reexamine problems in need of novel solutions when you are tired. Off-peak hours are when many of us are at our most creative.

The Value of Chunking Activities

"You can do
anything, but not
everything."

-AUTHOR DAVID ALLEN

Suppose each time you ran low on an item in your kitchen—olive oil, bananas, napkins—your instinctive response was to drop everything and race to the store. How much time would you lose? How much money would you squander on gas? What would happen to your productivity?

We all recognize the inefficiency of this approach. And yet surprisingly, we often work in ways that are equally wasteful.

The reason we maintain a shopping list and try to keep supermarket trips to a minimum is that it's easy to see the cost of driving to the store every time we crave a bag of potato chips. What is less obvious to us, however, is the cognitive price we pay each time we drop everything and switch activities to satisfy a mental craving.

Shifting our attention from one task to another, as we do when we're monitoring email while trying to read a report or craft a presentation, disrupts our concentration and saps our focus. Each time we return to our initial task, we use up valuable cognitive resources reorienting ourselves. And all those transitional costs add up. Research shows that when we are deeply engrossed in an activity, even minor distractions can have a profound effect. According to a University of California-Irvine study, regaining our initial momentum following an interruption can take, on average, upwards of 20 minutes.

Multitasking, as many studies have shown, is a myth. A more accurate account of what happens when we tell ourselves we're multitasking is that we're rapidly switching between activities, degrading our clarity and depleting our mental energy. And the

consequences can be surprisingly serious. An experiment conducted at the University of London found that we lose as many as 10 IQ points when we allow our work to be interrupted by seemingly benign distractions like emails and text messages.

The trouble, of course, is that multitasking is enjoyable. It's fun to indulge your curiosity. Who knows what that next email, tweet or text message holds in store? Finding out provides immediate gratification. In contrast, resisting distraction and staying on-task requires discipline and mental effort.

And yet each time we shift our focus, it's as if we're taking a trip to the store. Creativity expert Todd Henry calls it a "task-shifting penalty." We pay a mental tax that diminishes our ability to produce high-level work.

So what are we to do?

One tactic is to change our environment to move temptation further away: shut down your email program or silence your phone. It's a lot easier to stay on task when you're not continuously fending off mental cravings. This approach doesn't require going off the grid for a full day. Even as little as 30 minutes can have a major impact on your productivity.

The alternative, which most of us consider the norm, is the cognitive equivalent of dieting in a pastry shop. We can all muster the willpower to resist the temptations, but doing so comes with considerable costs to our limited supply of willpower.

Another worthwhile approach is to cluster similar activities together, keeping ramp-up time to a minimum. Instead of

scattering phone calls, meetings, administrative work, and emails throughout your day, try grouping related tasks so that there are fewer transitions. Read reports, memos and articles one after another. Schedule meetings back-to-back. Keep a list of administrative tasks and do them all in a single weekly session. If possible, try limiting email to 2 or 3 predetermined times—for example 8:30, 12:00 and 4:30—instead of responding to them the moment they arrive.

In some jobs, multitasking is unavoidable. Some of us truly do need to stay connected to our clients, colleagues, and managers. Here, it's worth noting that limiting disruptions is not an all or nothing proposition. Even small changes can make a big difference.

Remember: it's up to you to protect your cognitive resources. The more you do to minimize task-switching over the course of the day, the more mental bandwidth you'll have for activities that actually matter.

Action Plan

Chunking Activities

Step 1

Review the tasks you need to accomplish over the next few days. Look for similar activities that can be chunked together (for example, phone calls to make, or paperwork to complete) and schedule them for a single session.

Step 2

If possible, respond to emails at designated times instead of allowing each message to disrupt your focus.

Step 3

Alternatively, reduce the strain of constant communication by programming your email to refresh every 30 minutes, or disabling the pop-up feature.

Step 4

When your work requires concentration, schedule brief sessions during which you are electronically inaccessible.

Schedule Intermissions on Your Calendar

“What is without
periods of rest
will not endure.”

–OVID

When you're racing 90 miles an hour, the last thing you want to do is slow down.

That's how it feels on those exhilarating days when you're completely focused, tearing through your to-do list, racking up accomplishments. You just want to keep going.

You might also worry that if you take a break, you'll lose momentum and find it impossible to regain your stride.

But the research tells us otherwise. Studies show we have a limited capacity for concentrating over extended time periods, and though we may not be practiced at recognizing the symptoms of fatigue, they unavoidably derail our work. No matter how engaged we are in an activity, our brains inevitably tire. And when they do, the symptoms are not necessarily obvious. We don't always yawn or feel ourselves nodding off. Instead, we become more vulnerable to distractions.

Consider what happens over the course of a typical day at the office. The early morning hours are when most of us are at our sharpest, but as the day wears on, we inevitably lose steam. And it's at this point that we become more easily seduced by the lure of viral videos, celebrity gossip, and social media. A recent study examined the time of day Facebook users are more likely to post updates. The finding? Facebook usage builds from 9:00am through noon, dips slightly during lunch, and then peaks at 3:00pm, the precise hour when many of us are at our most fatigued.

While tiring over the course of the workday can't be prevented, it can be mitigated. Studies show that sporadic breaks replenish our energy, improve self-control and decision-making, and fuel productivity. Depending on how we spend them, breaks can also heighten our attention and make us more creative.

A 2011 study published in *Cognition* highlights another upside to sporadic breaks that we rarely consider: *goal reactivation*. When you work on a task continuously, it's easy to lose focus and get lost in the weeds. In contrast, following a brief intermission, picking up where you left off forces you to take a few seconds to think globally about what you're ultimately trying to achieve. It's a practice that encourages us to stay mindful of our objectives, and, as the authors of the study report, reliably contributes to better performance.

The challenge, of course, is finding the time to step away for 15 minutes, or—even when we have the time—getting good at dragging ourselves away from our computers preemptively, before we're depleted. One approach that can help involves blocking out a couple of planned 15-minute intermissions on your calendar, one in the mid-morning and the other in the mid-afternoon.

Next, find something active you can do with this time and put it on your calendar. Take a walk, stretch while listening to a song, or go out with a coworker for a snack. If these activities strike you as too passive, use the time to run an errand. The critical thing is to step away from your computer so that your focus is relaxed and your mind drifts. (So no, checking Facebook does not count.)

Finally, note your energy level when you return. You are bound to feel invigorated, both because you've allowed your brain some rest and because the physical movement has elevated your heart rate.

If this feels like a dereliction of duty, remind yourself that the human brain was not built for extended focus. Through much of our evolutionary history, heightened concentration was needed in short bursts, not daylong marathons. Our minds evolved to snap to attention when we encountered a predator, keeping us vigilant just long enough to ensure our survival. Yet today, we expect far more from ourselves than centuries of evolution have designed us to do.

Ultimately, the question we should be asking is not *whether* breaks are worth taking – we know they are. It's how we can better ensure that they actually take place.

Action Plan

Schedule Intermissions

Step 1

Schedule two times a day—one in the morning and one in the afternoon—for a 15 minute intermission.

Step 2

Devote these breaks to non-computer based, physical activities that are enjoyable and distancing from your work.

Step 3

Observe which tasks benefit the most from intermissions. In my experience, breaks are especially helpful when a task require deep concentration.

Step 4

Consider adjusting the number of breaks on your calendar to the type of work you are doing. For example, you might need three breaks on Mondays to keep you focused on a writing deadline, and only one on Tuesday when you are in meetings all day.

**View Exercise
as Part of Your
Job Description**

“The real reason we feel so good when we get our blood pumping is that it makes the brain function at its best.”

–JOHN J. RATEY, MD

Author of Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain

When we think about the value of exercise, we tend to focus on the physical benefits. Lower blood pressure, a healthier heart, an attractive physique. But over the past decade, researchers have slowly collected a compelling body of evidence suggesting that the larger, more immediate benefit of regular exercise is the impact it has on our thinking.

Here's a brief overview of just some of the cognitive changes you can expect when you incorporate daily exercise into your routine:

- Improved concentration
- Sharper memory
- Faster learning
- Prolonged stamina
- Lower stress
- Happier mood
- Enhanced creativity

We now have incontrovertible proof that our mental firepower is directly linked to our physical regimen. And nowhere are the implications more relevant than to workplace performance. One recent study found that employees who exercise are significantly better at managing their time, collaborating, and getting work done than their sedentary colleagues.

What keeps us from exercising more often? For many of us, the answer is simple: we don't have the time. In fairness, this is a legitimate explanation. There are weeks when work is overwhelming and deadlines outside of our control need to be met. But let's be clear. What we really mean when we say we don't have time for an activity is that we don't consider it a priority given the time we have available.

This is why the research illuminating the cognitive benefits of exercise is so compelling. Exercise enables us to soak in more information, work more efficiently, and be more productive. And yet many of us continue to perceive it as a luxury; an activity we'd *like* to do more of if only we had the time.

Instead of viewing exercise as something we do for ourselves—a personal indulgence that takes us away from our work—we need to start viewing physical activity as part of the work itself. The alternative—which involves processing information more slowly, forgetting more often, and getting easily frustrated—makes us less effective at our job and harder to get along with for our colleagues.

How do you successfully incorporate exercise into your daily routine? Here are a few research-based suggestions.

Identify a physical activity that you actually like. There are many ways to work out other than boring yourself senseless on a treadmill. Find a physical activity you can look forward to doing, like tennis, swimming, dancing, softball, or playing the drums. You are far more likely to stick with an activity if you genuinely enjoy doing it.

A series of recent studies also suggest that how we feel while exercising can influence the degree to which it ultimately benefits our health. When we view exercise as something we do for fun, we're better at resisting unhealthy foods afterwards, during subsequent meals. But when the same physical activity is perceived as a chore, we have a much harder time saying no to fattening foods, presumably because we've used up all our willpower exercising.

Invest in improving your performance. Instead of settling for “getting some exercise,” focus on *mastering* an activity instead. Hire a coach, enroll in a class, and buy yourself the right clothing and equipment. The additional investment will enhance your level of commitment, while the steady gains in performance will help sustain your interest over the long term.

Don't go it alone. You're a lot more likely to stick with an exercise regimen if it involves other people. The reason? It's harder to cancel on a friend or a trainer than to convince yourself that one night off won't hurt. Working out while socializing also makes exercise more fun, which improves the chances you'll continue doing it. Find a friend or colleague who enjoys your activity of choice and see if they'd like to join. Better yet, tap into an existing community of exercisers and expand your network.

Reframing exercise as part of your job makes it a lot easier to “leave” at 5:00pm. Remember, you're not abandoning work. You're simply taking your thinking elsewhere.

Action Plan

Exercise as Part of
Your Job Description

Step 1

Find a physical activity that you genuinely enjoy. If nothing immediately comes to mind, try this exercise: *Think back to when you were twelve. What physical activities were you most fond of?* If you liked doing it when you were younger, chances are you'll still enjoy doing it today.

Step 2

Purchase high-level exercise clothing, sneakers, and equipment. This will entice you to want to do the activity.

Step 3

Search for someone who shares your enthusiasm for the activity and make a plan for going together.

Step 4

Locate a trainer, instructor, or course that can help you and your partner improve your performance.

Step 5

Set a specific goal for measuring your progress. For example, bench-pressing 125 pounds, running a 6 minute mile, or acing your tennis opponent twice in one match.

How to Spend the Last 10 Minutes of Your Day

“A rested will is
a strong will.”

–PSYCHOLOGIST ROY F. BAUMEISTER
AND JOHN TIERNEY

Authors of Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength

How much sleep did you get last night? If the answer is “not enough” you’re hardly alone. According to Gallup’s estimates, nearly half the people you’ll run into today are suffering from some level of sleep deprivation.

We often dismiss a little morning fatigue as an inconvenience, but here’s the reality. Lacking sleep diminishes our mood, weakens our memory, and harms our decision-making all day long. It scatters our focus, prevents us from thinking flexibly, and makes us more susceptible to anxiety.

Ever wonder why problems seem that much more overwhelming at midnight than in the first light of day? It’s because our brains amplify fear when we’re tired.

When we arrive at work sleepy, everything feels harder. Simple tasks take longer, distractions become more difficult to filter out, and inevitably, motivation suffers. According to one study, we are no more effective working sleep-deprived than we are when we’re legally drunk.

It’s worth noting that no amount of caffeine can fully compensate for lack of sleep. While a double shot latte can make you more alert, it also elevates your level of anxiety and puts you on edge, damaging your ability to connect with others. Coffee can also constrain creative thinking.

To perform at our best, our bodies require rest—plain and simple. Which underscores an important point: on days when we flourish, the seed has almost always been planted the night before.

But let's face it. Most of us would love more sleep. The problem is we can't seem to get ourselves to bed on time. In part, it's because we're so busy during the day that the only time we have to ourselves is late in the evening. Combine that with the fact that we have less willpower when we're tired to force ourselves into bed and you have the perfect recipe for continued sleep deprivation.

So, how do you get to bed earlier? Here are a few suggestions.

Start by identifying an exact time when you want to be in bed. Be specific. Trying to go to bed "as early as possible" is hard to achieve because it doesn't give you a clear idea of what success looks like. Instead, think about when you need to get up in the morning and work backwards. Try to give yourself 8 hours, meaning that if you'd like to be up by 6:45am, aim to be under the covers no later than 10:45pm.

Next, do a nighttime audit of how you spend your time after work. For one evening, don't try to change anything—simply log everything that happens from the moment you arrive home until you go to bed. What you may discover is that instead of eliminating activities that you enjoy and are keeping you up late (say, watching television between 11:00pm and 11:30pm), you can start doing them earlier by cutting back on something unproductive that's eating up your time earlier on (like mindlessly scanning Facebook between 8:30pm and 9:00pm).

Once you've established a specific bedtime goal and found ways of rooting out timesinks, turn your attention to creating a pre-sleep ritual that helps you relax and look forward to going to bed. A major reason we resist getting to bed when we should is because by the time 11:00pm rolls around, the prospect of lying in bed is not as appealing as watching Netflix or squeezing in a quick game on our smartphone. Logically, we know we should be resting, but emotionally we'd prefer to be doing something else.

To counteract this, it's useful to create an enjoyable routine; one that entices you to wind down and helps your body transition between periods of activity and period of rest. Being tired does not always guarantee falling asleep quickly; first we need to feel relaxed.

How do you get in the right mindset before bed?

The answer is ultimately a personal one. What relaxes one person can exasperate another. Here is a menu of ideas to help you identify a bedtime ritual that's right for you:

Think spa.

Create a tranquil environment. Dim the lights, play soothing music, light a candle.

Read something that makes you happy.

Novels, poetry, comics. The key is to find material that sustains your attention without much effort and puts you in a good mood. (Never read anything related to work in bed.)

Handwrite a note.

One of the most effective ways of boosting happiness is expressing gratitude. You can experience gratitude while writing a thank-you note to someone you care about, or privately, by listing a few of your day's highlights in a diary.

Lower the temperature.

Cooler temperatures help us fall asleep and make the prospect of lying under the cover more appealing. The National Sleep Foundation recommends keeping your thermostat between 60 and 67 degrees.

Banish all screens.

Bright light stimulates our mind and raises our alertness. Turn off your phone, avoid your iPad, and resist watching TV.

Meditate.

Studies show that practicing mindfulness lowers stress and elevates mood.

Take a quiet walk.

If the weather's right, an evening walk can be deeply relaxing.

Experts recommend giving yourself at least 30 minutes each night to wind down before attempting to sleep. You might also try setting a reminder on your phone letting you know when it's time to begin, so that the process becomes automatic.

However you choose to use the time before bed, do your best to keep this time free of negative energy. Don't set your morning alarm right before going to bed—do it when you first wake up so that you don't feel pressured to fall asleep. Avoid raising delicate topics with your spouse.

And finally, keep a notepad nearby. If you think of something you need to do the next day, write it down instead of reaching for your phone. Do the same for any thought that pops into your head while you are trying to fall asleep. Once you've written it down, you'll find it's a lot easier to let go.

Action Plan

The Last 10 Minutes

Step 1

Conduct a “nighttime audit.” Over the course of one typical evening, write down everything you do from the time you get home until you go to bed.

Step 2

Identify “time sinks” that can be eliminated or minimized as part of your nighttime routine.

Step 3

Choose a specific time you want to be in bed.

Step 4

Set an alarm to go off at least 30-60 minutes before that time, reminding you to wind down.

Step 5

Program your thermostat to lower the temperature before bedtime.

Step 6

Do something relaxing before going to sleep. (Resist electronics.)

Step 7

Use a pen and notepad to jot down work-related thoughts, so that you can clear your head.

Step 8

Set the next day’s alarm first thing in the morning – not just before you are getting ready to fall sleep.

Conclusion: Three Keys to Working Smarter

Walk into any airport bookstore and you're bound to encounter a staggering collection of self-help titles. The last time I visited JFK, I counted well over seventy. Then I turned around and realized there were three more aisles.

Scientists like to grumble about the validity of self-help literature, half-jokingly pointing out that the fact that so many of these books exist is proof they don't work. If they did, no one would ever need to read more than one.

In my experience, self-help books frequently do offer useful suggestions, but what makes them popular is rarely the value of their advice. It's the hopeful feeling they inspire in readers that tells them success is within their reach.

In this ebook, I have tried to satisfy both the scientist and the self-help enthusiast.

Over the course of the past 6 blogs, we've explored evidence-based strategies for elevating your performance at work. We've covered everything from smarter planning, to rooting out distractions, to sustaining our physical energy throughout the day.

While much of this ebook has focused on actionable strategies you can apply immediately, if you take a step back, you'll notice three surprisingly counterintuitive principles we uncovered along the way:

The First Principle

Slowing down allows us to speed up.

Often, what gets in the way of our productivity is that we try to do too much. Multitasking, working continuously without a break, tackling email first thing in the morning. Ironically, getting more done requires that you deliberately slow things down, allowing you to bring more focus to your work.

The Second Principle

Feeling good fosters smarter thinking.

When deadlines loom, it's tempting to skip the gym, grab a cheeseburger, and work past midnight. As it turns out, all of these decisions can actually undermine productivity rather than enhance it. It's important to realize that investing in your personal health is not something you do for yourself—it's what allows you to be more effective in all aspects of life.

The Third Principle

Staying focused requires planning.

We live in a world with infinite distractions, and remaining on task is a constant battle. To produce your best work, you need to become disciplined about protecting your cognitive resources and avoiding energy drains that can derail your day. Shielding high-potential hours, batching emails, and frontloading important decisions all serve to direct your attention to the work that matters.

No matter what you do for a living, finding ways of applying these principles is likely to make you more effective.

The nature of work is changing. It's getting faster, more urgent, and infinitely more complex. And yet there's reason to be optimistic. We now have more insight into the factors that contribute to working smarter than ever before.

Now all we have to do is put them to use.



RON FRIEDMAN PH.D.

About the Author

Ron Friedman, Ph.D. is an award-winning psychologist and founder of [ignite80](http://ignite80.com), a consulting firm that helps smart leaders build extraordinary workplaces.

An expert on human motivation, Friedman has served on the faculty of the University of Rochester, Nazareth College, and Hobart and William Smith Colleges. Popular accounts of his research have appeared on NPR and in major newspapers, including The New York Times, Washington Post, Boston Globe, Vancouver Post, the Globe and Mail, The Guardian, as well as magazines such as Men's Health, Shape, and Allure.

He contributes to the blogs of Harvard Business Review, Fast Company, Forbes, 99u, and Psychology Today. To learn more about his work, visit ignite80.com and connect with him on Twitter [@RonFriedman](https://twitter.com/RonFriedman).