

We want to hear from you. Please send your comments about this book to us in care of zreview@zondervan.com. Thank you.

ZONDERVAN

What's Best Next

Copyright © 2014 by Matthew Perman

This title is also available as a Zondervan ebook. Visit www.zondervan.com/ebooks.

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, *Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Perman, Matt, 1976-

What's best next : how the gospel transforms the way you get things done / Matt

Perman.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-310-49422-5 (hardcover) 1. Work—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2.

Labor productivity. I. Title.

BT738.5.P48 2013

248.4—dc23

2013026880

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*. Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Any Internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Published in association with the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Associates, Inc.

Cover design: *Faceout Studio*

Interior design: *Matthew Van Zomeren*

Printed in the United States of America

13 14 15 16 /DCI/ 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

<i>Foreword by John Piper</i>	11
<i>Preface: Busting the Twelve Myths about What It Means to Get Things Done</i>	13

INTRODUCTION

<i>Why We Need a Uniquely Christian View on Productivity</i>	17
--	----

Part 1

First Things First:

Making God Supreme in Our Productivity

1. WHY IS IT SO HARD TO GET THINGS DONE?	35
<i>Introducing the villains</i>	
2. WHY EFFICIENCY IS NOT THE ANSWER	43
<i>Putting effectiveness over efficiency</i>	
3. WHY WE NEED TO BE GOD-CENTERED IN OUR PRODUCTIVITY	51
<i>How seeking to be productive without God is the most unproductive thing in the world</i>	
4. DOES GOD CARE ABOUT GETTING THINGS DONE?	61
<i>Why knowing how to get things done is essential to Christian discipleship</i>	

Part 2

Gospel-Driven Productivity:

A New Way to Look at Getting Things Done

5. WHY THE THINGS YOU DO EVERY DAY MATTER.	73
<i>Productivity is really about getting good works done</i>	

6. PUT OTHERS FIRST: LOVE AS THE GUIDING PRINCIPLE FOR ALL OF LIFE	85
<i>The gospel calls us to put others before ourselves; this is not only right but also the way to be most productive</i>	
7. HOW THE GOSPEL MAKES US PRODUCTIVE	103
<i>The only way to be productive is to realize you don't have to be productive</i>	
8. PEACE OF MIND WITHOUT HAVING EVERYTHING UNDER CONTROL	117
<i>Don't turn productivity into a new law: productivity and Philippians 4</i>	
9. THE ROLE OF PRAYER AND SCRIPTURE IN OUR PRODUCTIVITY	123
<i>God-centered character as the foundation of all productivity</i>	
10. THE CORE PRINCIPLE FOR MAKING YOURSELF EFFECTIVE	131
<i>Know what's most important and put it first</i>	

Part 3

Define: Know What's Most Important

11. WHAT'S YOUR MISSION? HOW NOT TO WASTE YOUR LIFE	147
<i>Setting a God-centered direction for your life</i>	
12. FINDING YOUR LIFE CALLING	169
<i>Discovering why you are here, and how vision differs from mission</i>	
13. CLARIFYING YOUR ROLES	179
<i>Our roles are not simply areas of responsibility, but callings from God</i>	

Part 4

Architect: Create a Flexible Structure

14. SETTING UP YOUR WEEK	195
<i>The (almost) missing component in GTD</i>	
15. CREATING THE RIGHT ROUTINES	209
<i>The six routines you need to have</i>	

Part 5

Reduce: Free Up Your Time for What's Most Important

- 16. THE PROBLEM WITH FULL SYSTEM UTILIZATION 223
Avoiding the ringing effect and why you need to reduce
- 17. THE ART OF MAKING TIME 227
Delegating, eliminating, automating, and deferring in the right way
- 18. HARNESSING THE TIME KILLERS 241
Harnessing multitasking, interruptions, and procrastination

Part 6

Execute: Do What's Most Important

- 19. WEEKLY PLANNING 257
If you can do only one thing, this is it
- 20. MANAGING EMAIL AND WORKFLOW 265
The five steps for processing your work
- 21. MANAGING PROJECTS AND ACTIONS 275
How to connect your actions to your life so they actually get done
- 22. DAILY EXECUTION 289
Nine principles for making things happen every day

Part 7

Living This Out

- 23. PRODUCTIVITY IN ORGANIZATIONS AND SOCIETY 301
Why we must care about productivity in all of life
- 24. THE GREATEST CAUSE IN THE WORLD 311
Productivity, world missions, and how our faith relates to our work
- CONCLUSION 325

Toolkit

- Recap: What's Best Next in 500 Words 329*
- Knowing What's Best Next: The Easy Reference Guide 331*
- Recommended Reading 333*
- The Online Toolkit 337*

<i>Learn More and Pass This On</i>	339
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	341
<i>Notes</i>	343

Introduction

Why We Need a Uniquely Christian
View on Productivity

*Every Christian must be fully Christian by bringing God
into his whole life, not merely into some spiritual realm.*

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT GETTING THINGS DONE and making ideas happen, with less friction and frustration, from a biblical perspective.

Which immediately raises some questions.

Does God actually have anything to *say* about getting things done? Is it even possible to have a biblical perspective on such a practical subject like how to get things done? And should we even care about it as *Christians*, or is it unspiritual? Is God smiling on us when we are making ideas happen and being productive, or does he wish we were out sharing the gospel instead?

But first things first. We can't neglect what's right before us.

IT'S HARD TO GET THINGS DONE

Most of us feel that we have way too much to do and too little time to do it. As David Allen points out, the process of managing our work is often messy and overflows its banks. "Behind closed doors, after hours, there remain unanswered calls, tasks to be delegated, unprocessed issues from meetings and conversations, personal responsibilities unmanaged, and dozens of emails still not dealt with."³ And as Scott Belsky notes, "While the tendency to generate ideas is rather natural, the path to making them happen is tumultuous."⁴

This is especially unfortunate because we are living in an incredibly

I know he meant well. But I was looking for real help. Yet all I got was what seemed like an overspiritualized dismissal.

Many of us have experienced similar push-back from well-intentioned Christians when seeking to learn about practical subjects. A friend of mine who has a lot going on but is doing it all very well was told by one of his pastors that he should take it easy and not do too much because it “causes worry.”

And sometimes when things get overwhelming, it is suggested that we need to “take a retreat with Jesus.”

But maybe we’ve had enough retreats with Jesus. Maybe Jesus wants us to learn how to get things done. Further, we often come back from such retreats with loads of new stuff to do. How do we make those things actually happen? We need to know how to execute—how to get things done and manage ourselves. Developing a great vision for the next quarter or year or season of our lives and ministries will not help much if we don’t know how to translate that vision into action.

In fact, I would argue that this downplaying of the practical is not only discouraging but actually an (unwitting) failure of *love*. It’s a failure of love because part of the biblical conception of love is giving *practical help* to those who need it, and in our modern society this more and more needs to involve concrete insight on how to get things done and stay above water without burning out or ignoring your family.

WE NEED A CHRISTIAN APPROACH (... BUT NOT LIKE THAT)

Of course, there is a right way and a wrong way to develop a Christian approach to something. Unfortunately, Christians these days often have a reputation for taking the wrong approach.

For example, we’ve all heard of the proverbial “Christian” painter. He’s the guy who goes around trying to get work painting your house not because he’s a good painter, but simply because he’s a Christian. He thinks that being a Christian makes up for the fact that he doesn’t do good work.

That’s not what I mean when I say we need to take a Christian approach to productivity!

So, if you want to get solid biblical instruction on how to get things done and understand the things you do every day in connection with your faith, where do you turn?

That’s why I’ve written this book.

Introduction

THE AIM OF THIS BOOK

My aim in this book is to reshape the way you think about productivity and then present a practical approach to help you become more effective in your life with less stress and frustration, whatever you are doing.

I want to help you live the life that God has called you to live, and to live it with maximum effectiveness and meaning. If you are an executive, I want to help you be a better executive. If you are a homemaker, to be a better homemaker. If you are a pastor, to be a better pastor. If you are a creative professional, to be a better creative professional. If you are a missionary, to be a better missionary. And if you don't know what life God has called you to live, I want to help you find it.

Along with that, I want to equip you to do good in radical, creative ways for the cause of missions, ending extreme poverty (it can be done!), and bringing justice to the oppressed. To do this you don't have to move to Africa but, because of technology, can be involved from right where you are. I want to show you that serving God in the things you do every day *and* going beyond to be engaged in God's global purposes is the life of greatest joy and peace—*not* seeking personal peace, affluence, wealth, or success.

This book is also for those who do not share my faith perspective. Since the gospel is the truth of how God reconciled us to himself, fundamental to doing anything in a “gospel-driven” way is doing it in a way that builds bridges with those who do not share our faith, taking their needs into account and writing in a way that can serve them rather than *simply* writing for other Christians.

Hence, even if you are not a follower of Christ, there is much in this book that you can benefit from. My hope is that seeing what the Scriptures have to say about a concrete subject like productivity will encourage you to consider the claims of Christ, who is at the center of this book. But whichever way you choose, I'm glad you are reading this book and I hope you find it helpful.

WHY WE NEED TO CARE — GREATLY — ABOUT PERSONAL PRODUCTIVITY

We are going to see many new reasons to care about getting things done in this book, and a new twist on some common reasons. Here are a few I want to highlight at the start.

1. Bad productivity approaches are annoying! People are crying out for better approaches to getting things done. They are frustrated not

only with the amount they have to do and the difficulty of balancing it all, but also with the approaches they've been taught (or just made up) to get their work done.

It is my contention that bad approaches and productivity systems (and having no system is itself a system!) are one of the chief causes of our frustration. With a bad system, it's hard to get things done with a sense of confidence, relaxed control, and purpose.

The frustration of bad productivity approaches is not a small matter that we can just work around, for we can't run our lives without *some* sort of approach to getting things done. The issue is not whether we have an approach to personal productivity; the issue is whether our approach is a good one or a bad one.

2. Managing ourselves well is foundational to all we do. The importance of these things becomes even more clear when we realize that our ability to lead, manage, spend undistracted time with friends and family, and do everything else we do depends largely upon a skill that goes *underneath* all of those things and makes them all possible—the cross-functional skill of knowing how to manage ourselves.

For example, on the work side of life, Peter Drucker points out, “Executives who do not manage themselves for effectiveness cannot possibly expect to manage their associates and subordinates.”⁶ He then adds, “Management is largely by example. Executives who do not know how to make themselves effective in their own job and work set the wrong example.” Likewise, Steven Hayward points out that “rare is the successful leader or executive with a chaotic mind or chaotic habits.”⁷

We weren't made to simply respond to stuff all day, but to take action and move things forward. If we don't give attention to the discipline of personal effectiveness but instead let the flow of events determine what we do, we will likely fritter ourselves away doing all sorts of urgent things that come our way while never getting to the truly important things.

On the personal side of life, few have captured the tragic effects of poor personal management better than Mark Schultz in his song “Do You Even Know Me Anymore?” The second verse is especially poignant: “I turned around to see my son; well I remember his first birthday; now he's twenty-one. I missed his life; I missed it all.”

That's tragic. A lot of times we blame this on misplaced priorities. For example, lots of people like to take shots at the poor guy who spent

Introduction

too much time at the office. But I'd like to say a (partial) word in his defense. I think one of the chief reasons some people spend "too much time at the office" is actually because they don't know *how* to do any different. Learning the skill of getting things done helps us avoid this fate.

As we will see in this book, managing yourself well involves more than just getting more done faster. It also involves knowing what the right things to do are—the realm of personal leadership. If we aren't heading in the right direction in our personal lives, we may accomplish our goals only to find out that we were going down the wrong road the whole time.

Mark Schultz gets at this idea in his song as well. The speaker reflects on how time has passed and wonders how he got where he is. Then he says, "I dreamed my dreams; I made my plans; but all I built here is an empty man." He had his plans, but they didn't take him where he thought.

In order to avoid the tragedy of the empty self, we need to know our purpose and direction in life. The last thing anyone wants is to end up having it all, only to realize they have nothing (cf. Luke 9:23–25).

3. A good productivity approach enables us to be more effective in doing good for others. As Christians, we are here to serve (Matt. 20:25–28). When we are being productive, we are actually doing good works, which is part of the purpose for which God created us (Eph. 2:10). A good approach to getting things done reduces the friction in doing good and also *amplifies* our ability to do good. The result is that we can be of more benefit to others with less snags, stress, and confusing systems.

In other words, getting things done, making ideas happen, and being productive are all ways to make a difference in people's lives. As Christians, we ought to care about this and be excited about it, for it is not only exciting in itself, but one of the chief ways God is glorified in our lives.

4. Knowing how to get things done is a component of our sanctification. Since productivity includes serving people and doing good works, it is actually a component of sanctification and Christian discipleship.

Growing in holiness doesn't mean running to the hills to make your own clothes and grind your own wheat until Jesus comes, but living

the everyday life that is right in front of you for the glory of God. And, interestingly, our everyday life is the arena of projects and tasks and goals and calendars and email and meetings and strategic planning and all of these very “practical” things—that is, productivity. Since our everyday lives are the arena of our sanctification, knowing how to get things done thus puts us squarely in the realm of sanctification and discipleship. It is therefore a critical tool for living the life God calls us to in this current era.

5. Knowing how to get things done enables us to fulfill God’s call to *make plans for the good of others.* This is one of the most exciting reasons to me. The biblical call on our lives is not to do good randomly and haphazardly. Rather, God calls us to be proactive in doing good—even to the point of *making plans* for the good of others.

For example, Isaiah 32:8 says that “he who is noble *plans noble things*, and on noble things he stands.” We often think of doing good simply as something we are to do when it crosses our path. But Isaiah shows us that we are also to *take initiative* to conceive, plan, and then *execute* endeavors for the good of others and the world. (And this requires, of course, actually knowing *how to plan* and actually make our plans happen!)

6. Knowing how to get things done is a component of a complete worldview. When we think of a Christian worldview, we typically think of theology and philosophy. But theology and philosophy are not the only components to a holistic worldview, for no worldview is complete without a perspective on how to live in the world. Thus, part of our worldview must include the issue of “how to get things done.” This includes the disciplines of personal management, personal leadership, organizational management, and leadership.

7. Managing ourselves well enables us to excel at work and in life. As Christians we might be tempted to downplay this idea, but it matters! Knowing how to make yourself effective will also likely have benefits in terms of your career advancement. As time management expert Julie Morgenstern notes, “Workers who can consistently decide with clarity and ease which tasks are most important when under pressure are the most prized in every organization. Highly focused in pressure-cooker situations, they rise to meet the challenges of an opportunity-saturated workplace that demands tough calls at every step. Not surprisingly, these employees are also the most calm.”⁸

Introduction

THE ROAD TO THIS BOOK

I've always cared about getting things done, but I didn't always give much thought to having a good *process* for getting things done. For a while, this worked. I went through all of college and seminary without even using a calendar, let alone a to-do list (though I did create a list of assignments once). Yet at one point in seminary I took forty-eight hours (sixteen classes) in a nine-month period, and one semester I completed all of my assignments in the first six weeks so that I could have the rest of the semester free from obligations. I used the time to work more and, I think, to do more reading.

But then I started my first full-time job at a ministry called Desiring God, and my first task was not so small: launch a nationwide radio program while managing the church bookstore and conference bookstores at the same time. Shortly after that, leading the web department was added to my plate as well.

In these circumstances, I found that my default practices for getting things done just didn't work. If I was going to do my job well (or even stay afloat), I realized that I had to become more deliberate about how I got things done.

Up to that point, my focus had been learning the Bible and theology. In college I spent most of my days reading theology, talking about it with my friends, writing articles to remember what I wrote, and debating atheists and Jehovah's Witnesses for fun. This helped me gain a firm theological grounding. I then went to seminary because I liked studying the Bible, wanted to add formal study on top of all the studies I had already done on my own, and wanted to prepare for ministry. Now I was in ministry, and I found that there had actually been a gap in my preparation—I hadn't learned about the discipline of personal productivity.

Since I had always read a lot, I decided to find the key books on productivity and then develop an overall approach and system to keep track of what I have to do and stay focused on what is most important.

The two linchpins of my system were David Allen's *Getting Things Done* and Stephen Covey's *First Things First*. I found that Covey was stronger at the higher levels (mission, values, and roles), whereas Allen was stronger at the lower levels (projects and actions). So I created an approach that integrated the two, together with my own insights.

With this productivity approach, I was able to run those three depart-

ments at the same time while leading a complete redesign and reengineering of our ministry website on the basis of sound principles of usability. The release of the new website was a turning point for our ministry, and within four months our most important web stats nearly quadrupled.

Learning more about productivity eventually had a surprising side effect, however: my workload increased even more! David Allen says, “The better you get, the better you’d better get” and that was exactly my experience. Being at a ministry where resources are limited and funds are scarce, I made up for the lack not only by using the productivity methods I had learned to work smarter but also by just plain working harder and longer since I loved my job so much.

At one point, for example, I was regularly pulling ninety-hour weeks. Often I pulled two all-nighters in a row; one time I even pulled three all-nighters in a row (my personal record).

I believe there is value in working hard and in working a lot, and I enjoyed it. But that pace was simply not sustainable. Even when I brought my hours down, I was still relying too much on brute force and high energy to get things done. Also, my wife and I had two young kids by this time, and it just wasn’t going to be possible to keep doing this. I wasn’t even altogether sure my life was going in the direction that I wanted it to.

This pressed me to refine my approach to give a greater place to prioritizing—an approach that focused not primarily on doing more things in less time but rather on doing the right things in a flexible way. It was at this point that I also realized that I had to be more deliberate about thinking biblically about this issue.

The pushback I had received from some in the ministry when I developed my productivity approach was discouraging, but it also helped me. After my pastor made the unfortunate “first grade” comment about productivity, for example, I asked myself what he was really trying to say. My conclusion was that what he really meant to say was simply this: Don’t leave all of your theological learning behind; make sure you think about all of this explicitly in relation to God.

My solution was to go back and look more fully at what the Scriptures have to say about productivity and how we have to anchor our understanding of getting things done within the full biblical vision of the Christian life altogether. This involved looking afresh at what the

Productivity Highlights (and Lowlights!) in My Life

I tend to overload myself, which is part of what led me to seek a productivity approach that is both God-centered and minimizes the friction in getting things done:

High school: Produce and star in a fifty-six-minute movie with a friend of mine who aspires to a career in filmmaking. It is a huge success (for our school!). As is my custom, I seek to follow it up by making not one but two more movies—at the same time, and along with my friend who is also making another movie, for a total of three. I almost overwhelm myself and can't run track that spring as a result, but the movies get done.

College: Attend college on a presidential scholarship with a full ride which, when combined with the other scholarships I get, means I actually get paid to go to college. Spend fourteen hours a day reading, writing, and discussing theology and the Bible with my friends. I leave hardly any time to study for my actual classes, but keep the scholarship with, I think, the smallest GPA margin ever.

First job after college: Almost get fired from my first job because my desk is “too neat,” which probably means I'm “not busy enough.” A few weeks later, I actually get fired for refusing to illegally sell insurance without a license. The job wasn't a good fit—this is a blessing.

First vacation after college: At some point shortly after college, embark on a mountain bike journey on the White Rim Trail of the Canyonlands with one of my brothers. It's a three-day, 100+ mile ride. Most people have someone drive a jeep with supplies behind them. But we take all our supplies in our backpacks and hook eight gallons of water on to each of our bikes, not realizing that each gallon weighs eight pounds—thus adding sixty-four pounds of weight. This makes it painful and excruciating to ride up and down all the hills. By the end of the first day, we are too exhausted to keep going. We have to carry our bikes up a thousand-foot cliff on

a trail meant for hiking in order to get out of the canyon.

Seminary: Take sixteen classes (forty-eight hours) in a nine-month period and do so without using a calendar or to do lists, with the exception of a single list of all my assignments for the second semester. In that semester, finish every assignment in the first two months.

First job after seminary: My first full-time job after seminary is to launch a nationwide radio program while redesigning a major website at the same time. Realize that playing it by ear is not sufficient and decide to get a planner. At one point I'm running three departments at once and regularly working ninety-hour weeks. Regularly pull all-nighters, at one time pulling three in a row.

Redesign of a major ministry website: After developing my productivity approach, launch a complete redesign of a major ministry website. Web stats almost quadruple within four months.

Scriptures have to say not only about productivity but also about work, justice, mercy, and love (which are far more related to productivity than we often think).

Second, I took to the road to interview major Christian leaders on how they got things done. (You will see highlights throughout this book.) Third, I continued to do a lot of reading, and finally, I continued to refine my approach based on what I had learned and through lots of trial and error. Hence, in this book you are going to hear not just about what works but also about some of the pitfalls and interesting mistakes I made as I developed this approach. I hope that I can spare you some of the difficulties I went through!

The key for me was going back to the Scriptures. It wasn't until I more fully understood God's purposes for our lives and how they relate to the things we do every day that I was finally able to prioritize more effectively, get off the hamster wheel, and feel confident that the things I was getting done were actually the things God wanted me to get done.

Introduction

GOSPEL-DRIVEN PRODUCTIVITY

The result of my quest is what I call *Gospel-Driven Productivity*. (That's just a fancy name for what the Bible has always taught about getting things done.) Gospel-Driven Productivity (GDP) is centered on what the Bible has to say about getting things done while at the same time learning from the best secular thinking out there—and seeking to do this with excellence and original thought, rather than simply taking over secular ideas and adding out-of-context Bible verses. This is what, I believe, God calls us to do.

The essence of GDP is this: We are to use all that we have, in all areas of life, for the good of others, to the glory of God—and that this is the most exciting life. To be a gospel-driven Christian means to be on the lookout to do good for others to the glory of God, in all areas of life, and to do this with creativity and competence. Further, being gospel-driven also means knowing how to get things done so that we can serve others in a way that really helps, in all areas of life, without making ourselves miserable in the process through overload, overwhelm, and hard-to-keep-up systems.

In other words, we are to put productivity practices and tools in the service of God's purpose for us, which is that we do good for others, in all areas of life, to his glory.

There are three preliminary things to recall before I summarize what we will see in each part of the book:

1. *This is about all areas of life.* This isn't just about your work life, though it is about that. Our personal lives should be given just as much attention and intentionality as our work lives. This book aims to help you in all areas of your life, because every area of your life is a calling from God.
2. *Getting "things" done is a slight misnomer.* The reason is that God calls us to do more than just get things done. He calls us to build people up and do many intangibles just as much as we are to do concrete, immediately measurable things. When I talk about getting things done, I almost always have this wider sense in mind.
3. *The importance of structure and method.* I've read a lot of books on productivity that have many great tips, but which I found hard to apply because there wasn't a clear and simple way to

relate them together. I've sought to avoid that here by reducing everything to a few principles and a four-step process. This will enable you to integrate the tips together and more easily apply them to your situation.

Why We Need to Begin with God

Part 1 shows us why it's so hard to get things done, why the typical ideas about efficiency don't work, and how the only way to be ultimately productive is to live our lives for God.

Guiding Principles for a Productive Life

What happens when we look at productivity in light of God and the gospel? Part 2 answers this question and shows how the gospel changes the way we get things done altogether.

This section unpacks the key purposes and mindsets behind GDP. One of the most important things we will see is that the chief guiding principle for being productive is actually *love*. It may seem counterintuitive, but seeking the benefit of others before ourselves is not only what God requires of us but also is the way to be most productive. This is true not just in our personal lives, but also in our work lives. *Generosity* is at the heart of true productivity in all areas of life. This is what the Scriptures teach and, interestingly, what the best business thinkers are also showing. Further, a life of doing good for others is actually the most exciting life, for God calls us to find ways of doing good with a sense of creativity, competence, and adventure.

We also will look at how the only way to be productive is to realize we don't actually have to be productive (our goal is to please God, not appease God), and how the gospel continues to give us peace of mind even when everything is blowing up around us.

The DARE Model

Parts 3–6 are the practical heart of the book. They give us the process behind gospel-driven productivity. We will see that there are four steps for leading and managing yourself for effectiveness: define, architect, reduce, and execute.

1. *Define*. This means not only knowing where you are going, but also knowing your criteria for deciding that altogether. This

Introduction

is not just a matter of clarifying your values. It is a matter of identifying the right values to have, and basing our lives—our entire lives, especially right here at the center—on those values that God and his Word lift up as central.

This brings us into the realm of mission, vision, roles, and goals. The essence of defining can be summarized this way: Define what's most important in your life based on what God says, not first on what you (or others) think. This is the only way to build a life that lasts and thus is truly productive (Matt. 7:21–27; Prov. 3:5–6; 14:12).

2. *Architect*. Once you've identified the most important principles, goals, and ongoing priorities in your life, you can't just leave it at that. You have to weave these things into the structure of your life through a basic schedule, or time map, because intentions are not enough. A bad (or nonexistent) structure for your life will undo the best of intentions. Setting up a flexible framework for your life also frees you to be less dependent on lists, which was an especially welcome benefit to me once I figured this out. The essence of the architecture step can be summarized this way: Structure your life by living your life mainly from a flexible routine, not a set of lists.
3. *Reduce*. After creating this structure, often you'll find that making everything fit is the biggest obstacle. This doesn't necessarily mean you've architected wrong; it just means you need to reduce. You need to know what's most important (define), weave it into your life (architect), and then get rid of the rest (reduce).

But you don't get rid of the rest by simply letting balls drop. Rather, you do it by creating systems and using tactics that ultimately expand your capacity. This brings us into the realm of the core practices of day-to-day time management, including delegating, eliminating, automating, and deferring (the DEAD process we will learn), as well as how to turn time killers back on themselves by harnessing them rather than being defeated by them.

The essence of reducing can be summarized this way: Reduce on the basis of what's most important, not on the basis

of misguided notions of living a minimalistic life, and do this by implementing systems that enable you to ultimately expand your capacity overall.

4. *Execute*. This is the stage of making things happen in the moment. It is easy to think of execution as synonymous with productivity, but in reality it is actually only the last step. When you have done the previous steps (define, architect, and reduce), the path is clear for efficient and enjoyable execution. This section will look at the best tactics for making things happen every day.

Conveniently, these form the acronym DARE—which reminds us of the all-important guiding principle that underlies all of this, which is that we should have a *sense of adventure* in doing good. That is, we should be radical and risky and creative and abundant in using our effectiveness to make life better for others. (And, that this is the most exciting life.)

The Results

Part 7 will show us that we need to understand productivity not simply in the sense of personal productivity but also in a broader sense—seeing it as about making our organizations, cities, and society as a whole more productive as well. We will also see that one of the chief things we should seek to do with our increased productivity is to take action to help lift the poor out of poverty, because this is at the heart of the righteousness God requires.

Most of all, we will look at what the Bible teaches about the results of GDP in the world. We will see that as we are productive in a gospel-centered way, God transforms our workplaces, communities, cities, and the entire world for the advancement of the gospel and the good of the world.

In other words, the ultimate result of GDP is the transformation of the world socially, economically, and spiritually, to the glory of God. For as we seek to do good for others to God’s glory, the light of the gospel shines through our words and deeds. The result is the transformation of the world. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, “If only every Christian in the Church today were living the Sermon on the Mount [which is the anchor of GDP], the great revival for which we are praying and longing would already have started.”⁹

Introduction

A WORD ON DOING THIS ALL WRONG

This book is also for screwups and failures! No gospel-centered approach to productivity would be worth its salt if it didn't have at its root what the gospel itself has at its root: helping imperfect people. There is a place for mistakes, screwups, and failures here, not to mention the times when circumstances almost inevitably create chaos and challenges in our lives that are beyond our control.

Likewise, I'm not going to promise that everything will go perfectly for you if you simply master the things I'm talking about. The mark of a truly helpful approach to productivity—and life—is that it keeps you oriented and keeps you going even when everything around you seems to be falling apart. This is a productivity approach for imperfect people in an imperfect world, but with a perfect God who is leading them to what one day will be a renewed world of perfect joy, peace, and righteousness.

BEING PRODUCTIVE IN READING THIS BOOK

Last of all, let me say a word on how to use this book as productively as possible. When a book is simply a long block of text, I find that it makes it hard to grab quick nuggets at a glance. For some subjects, that's great and I enjoy it. But when reading about productivity, we need our books to give us quick access to the core insights. So that's how I've designed this book.

I have designed this book so you can feel productive in reading it, and so that if you want, you can open the book to almost anywhere and find some helpful, immediately applicable things. That's why there are lots of headings, call-out boxes along the way with key tips, a summary box at the end of each chapter, and a toolkit at the very end.

So does God have anything to say about getting things done? Yes, quite a bit. Let's take a look.

PART 1

First Things First

MAKING GOD SUPREME IN
OUR PRODUCTIVITY

*What does it profit a man if he gains the
whole world and loses or forfeits himself?*

— Luke 9:25

CHAPTER 1

Why Is It So Hard to Get Things Done?

How the world of work has changed; and
introducing the villains

The knowledge worker cannot be supervised closely or in detail. He can only be helped. But he must direct himself, and he must direct himself toward performance and contribution, that is, effectiveness.

— Peter Drucker, *The Effective Executive*

WHY IS IT SO HARD TO GET THINGS DONE?

A reader of my blog and a highly successful woman in the business world recently said to me: “I am so overwhelmed right now with my work. The worst part is that I still haven’t found a system for managing everything that works well for me and that I’m happy with.”

Another friend of mine, this time someone who works at a ministry, recently posted on Facebook: “Is this for real? I’m leaving the office at a normal time!?! Too bad it doesn’t count when you bring work home.”

Most of us can relate. We have too much to do and not enough time to do it. We feel overstressed, overworked, and overloaded. And thanks to new technology and media, we have more coming at us than we ever did before. But the problem is deeper than this. The root of the

First Things First

challenge lies in a major shift our society has undergone in the nature of work itself.

THE RISE OF KNOWLEDGE WORK

What Is Knowledge Work?

Until a few decades ago, we were predominantly an industrial economy. In that era, work was clearly defined for most people. If you were a farmer, for example, you had fields to plow, cows to milk, and equipment to fix. The work was hard and might involve long days, but (most) tasks were generally straightforward and self-evident. (Not to mention that you probably had someone show you the ropes before you took over full responsibility.)

With the shift to a knowledge economy, the nature of work has changed. Unlike in the industrial era, in which tasks were generally self-evident, the essence of knowledge work is that you not only have to *do* the work but also have to *define* what the work is.

For example, if you are painting your house (a form of manual labor), you can see right away where to brush next. But when you get a hundred emails a day (a form of knowledge work), most of which do a pretty poor job of getting to the point, the next actions don't usually come to you predefined. You have to figure out *what* to do with each email, then figure out how to fit that in with all the rest of your work that you have had (or have yet) to define.

Most of us haven't paid sufficient attention to the skill of defining our work clearly. This is why it so often feels like our workdays never stop. When you don't have your work clearly defined, there can never be any finish point.

Knowledge Work

"Knowledge work" is a term coined by Peter Drucker, which means work that consists primarily of creating, using, and communicating knowledge, as opposed to manual labor. Any work whose focus consists of generating ideas, communicating, and leading (which includes your personal life and family) is knowledge work.

Why Is It So Hard to Get Things Done?

What Is Unique about Knowledge Work?

Knowledge work is about creating and utilizing knowledge, but it is more than that. For when your work consists in creating and using knowledge, there is an important consequence: by definition, it must be primarily self-directed.

Peter Drucker points this out well: “The knowledge worker cannot be supervised closely or in detail. He can only be helped. But he must direct himself, and he must direct himself toward performance and contribution, that is, effectiveness.”¹

The freedom this gives us is a fantastic thing. But there is also a challenge.

What Is Challenging about Knowledge Work?

Some people think that knowing how to get things done is obvious—that it just comes naturally to people and that therefore we don’t need to spend much time on it.

But that’s not the case. In more than fifty years of consulting, Peter Drucker pointed out that he never found a “natural,” someone who is instinctively effective. *Every* effective person he encountered—and as perhaps the greatest consultant and business thinker of the twentieth century, that’s a lot—had to work at becoming effective.

Brilliant insight, hard work, and good intentions are not enough. Effectiveness is a distinct skill that must be learned. Some people are more inclined to it than others, and everyone is naturally built to be capable of effectiveness, but effectiveness is something we learn—like reading.² Drucker says it well: “To be reasonably effective it is not enough for the individual to be intelligent, to work hard or to be knowledgeable. Effectiveness is something separate, something different.”³

Scott Belsky, founder of Behance (whose mission is “to organize the creative world”) and author of *Making Ideas Happen*, makes the same point. Belsky’s focus has been the creative world (also a form of knowledge work), where there is often a notion that if you have a great idea, it will naturally turn into reality. In contrast, Belsky writes, “Ideas don’t happen because they are great—or by accident. The misconception that great ideas inevitably lead to success has prevailed for too long. . . . Creative people are known for winging it: improvising and acting on intuition is, in some way, the haloed essence of what we do and who we are. However, when we closely analyze how the most successful and

First Things First

productive creatives, entrepreneurs, and business people truly make ideas happen, it turns out that ‘having the idea’ is just a small part of the process, perhaps only 1 percent of the journey.”⁴

Belsky adds later, “The ideas that move industries forward are not the result of tremendous creative insight but rather of masterful stewardship.”⁵

So it takes more than just enthusiasm, great ideas, native talent, and hard work to get things done. It takes a method.

THE VILLAIN OF AMBIGUITY

Ambiguity in Defining Our Work

Knowledge work therefore brings us face to face with the first villain in this story: ambiguity. Ambiguity is not necessarily a villain in itself. It is a good thing that knowledge work has at its essence creating clarity out of ambiguity and making good decisions (i.e., determining what’s best next). But when we don’t know how to *do* knowledge work, ambiguity becomes a villain because it ends up frustrating us, making life harder, and sometimes defeating us. It’s like jumping in the pool without knowing how to swim. Jobs today are not as clear as they were in the industrial era, yet we haven’t been taught the skills of navigating this context, learning how to define our work, and managing ourselves for effectiveness.

Further, the most effective knowledge era strategies don’t drop from heaven fully defined. We have to figure them out—and that happens by trial and error. As a society, we are still figuring out the best practices for navigating knowledge work—which means we encounter a lot that don’t work and many problems along the way.

There are other factors as well:

- We change jobs more frequently.
- We have more nonroutine tasks than ever before.
- Many in highly specialized vocations, such as doctors, engineers, web developers, business analysts, pastors, and so forth, are taught in great detail how to do the activities of their job itself (thankfully!), but they aren’t taught much about the *process* for managing their work, managing others, and leading others.

So with the shift from the industrial era to the knowledge era, we now need to decide more than ever what to do, when to do it, and how to do it.

Why Is It So Hard to Get Things Done?

Ambiguity in Defining the Direction of Our Lives

The issue of ambiguity doesn't simply affect us at the level of defining our work; it also affects us at the level of defining the direction of our lives. Our current era is unlike any in history. We have more choices and opportunities before us regarding what to do with our lives than we can even comprehend. Many of us (myself included) have found it hard to know what to do with our lives. And when we've sought out guidance on how to navigate that territory, there hasn't been much to find.

Many are still on that journey, trying to figure it out as they go. That can work, but it's a tough road. Others are blowing it altogether. Too many Christians in their twenties are living in their parents' basements playing video games. That aside, too many people at all stages of life are unclear on what they should be doing. We need to know how to make good choices at this level without expecting to have a map that tells us every detail. This is also part of what it means to manage ourselves, and part of what we will cover later in the book.

THE RISE OF MASS CONNECTIVITY

The rise of knowledge work has happened over the last sixty or so years. We have experienced an even greater revolution over the past fifteen years or so: the rise of mass connectivity. Distance is no longer the barrier it once was. As Tim Sanders has put it, it used to be that "relationships were for the most part geo-bound, and only a handful of people comprised your entire business network."⁶ Today, our networks run into the hundreds and thousands, and we can connect with people all over the world through email, Facebook, Twitter, and more.

And we can do this no matter what we are doing. We can be in the back yard camping, on a run (my least favorite time to receive calls), or in a meeting. We can even text internationally. When I was in China recently, it almost felt like I was hardly gone because I could stay in instant communication with my wife through texting (though, unfortunately, I racked up a pretty high bill).

The proliferation of technology has not only increased our daily load of information; it has astronomically increased the rate of change in society and in the world of work altogether. As Tim Sanders notes, "before the information revolution, business changed gradually and business models became antiquated even more slowly. The value progression

First Things First

evolved over decades and double decades. You could go to college, get an M.B.A. and work for forty years, and your pure on-the-job knowledge stayed relevant.”⁷

Today, however, our skills become outdated more quickly (except for the macro, *cross-functional skill* of getting things done!). We not only need to keep up with all the information coming our way on a day-to-day basis, but we also need to keep our skills and knowledge up to date with the massive changes that are rapidly occurring at the level of work and society.

This is a fantastic thing and has implications for how we do everything. It has also resulted in a whole lot more to manage—which leads to the second villain.

THE VILLAIN OF OVERLOAD

Just as something good (the rise of knowledge work) brought us head-to-head with the first villain, so also the rise of mass connectivity, though an excellent thing, brings us head-to-head with a second villain: overload.

Massive overload.

In 2008, the web contained one trillion pages. That has risen at an exponential rate, such that in 2013 the quantity of information on the internet began doubling every seventy-two hours. *Every* seventy-two hours—every three days—the amount of information online doubles.

In 2010, 95 trillion emails were sent (about 260 billion per day). That averages to about 153 emails per user per day (there were about 1.86 billion internet users at the beginning of 2010). Currently 92 million tweets are posted per day and 2.5 billion photos are uploaded to Facebook every day.

This amount of information is overwhelming—not simply at an aggregate level but at an individual level (I think most of those 95 trillion emails came to my inbox). We are all feeling this. It is almost impossible to keep up.

How do we make good decisions in the midst of this overload? And how do we keep this overload from sinking us? We can't just float along, like a ship without a rudder, expecting things to go well. We need to take initiative and learn how to navigate this and get things done in spite of the obstacles.

Why Is It So Hard to Get Things Done?

WE NEED TO LEARN HOW TO *WORK*

Here's the bottom line: We are using industrial era tactics for knowledge era work. And that doesn't work.

We need to give more focused attention to learning how to work. Not just the specific content of our jobs but the overarching, cross-functional skill of how to get things done in general—what David Allen calls “high performance workflow management.”⁸ This can make getting things done more relaxed, simple, and *possible*.

In other words, there are actually two components to doing our work. There are the job skills *themselves*—creating financial statements, writing web content, preaching sermons, leading meetings, and so forth—and then there is *the process of how to do work in general*.

We've done pretty well as a society at learning how to do the content of our jobs. But we haven't been so great at learning the overarching process of how to manage our work: how to keep track of what we have to do, make decisions about what's best to do next, keep from overcommitting ourselves, and do all of this in the midst of seventy-five emails, twelve phone calls, and eighteen interruptions a day.

In past eras, this wouldn't have been such a big deal. But today it is because of the rise of knowledge work and the consequent ambiguity, coupled with the overload that comes from mass connectivity.

EFFECTIVENESS CAN BE LEARNED

I mentioned earlier that effectiveness must be *learned*. Here's the good news: Drucker found that everyone who worked at becoming effective succeeded. And that's what Belsky found as well. Effectiveness has to be learned and, fortunately, *can* be learned.

If we are going to learn effectiveness, we need to do it right. Many people make a wrong turn here, however. In the next chapter, we'll learn what the answer is not.

The Box

Core Point

The reason it's so hard to get things done is that we have transitioned as a society from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy, but we haven't updated our strategies and tactics to align with the nature of knowledge work. The result is that we are unprepared to meet the challenges of ambiguity and overload.

Core Quote

When we closely analyze how the most successful and productive creatives, entrepreneurs, and business people truly make ideas happen, it turns out that “having the idea” is just a small part of the process, perhaps only one percent of the journey.

—Scott Branson, *Making Ideas Happen*

Further Resources

David Allen, “A New Practice for a New Reality,” chapter one in *Getting Things Done*

Peter Drucker, “Effectiveness Can be Learned,” chapter one in *The Effective Executive*

Immediate Application

Do you know what your job is? Whether you are a student, in the workforce, or a stay-at-home mom, give thought to identifying the primary purpose of your work, then write it down.