

Create a Stop Doing List

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For at least twenty years, I have been signing checks. In every business I have started or managed, it was just one of those responsibilities that went with the territory, or so I thought. After all, shouldn't the boss have ultimate responsibility for how the income was being spent?

About three years ago, on my return from a speaking tour, I took note of the stack of mail and invoices on my desk. It was substantial. Even though our regular bills (telephone, utilities, etc.) were paid automatically, there was still a small pile of envelopes on my desk every day awaiting my attention. Contractors needed to be paid, bills approved, staff paid, and so on. It would take me at least twenty to thirty minutes just to go through all the bills, write the checks, and then a few more minutes to file everything. It was a distraction I didn't need and took time away from more client-focused tasks.

I decided to fight my habit and, for the first time, give my manager signing rights to our account. My plan was to create a prudent compromise: she would deal with items under \$500, and I would sign off on larger items. As we walked to the bank to sign the necessary signature cards, it dawned on me that setting such a low signing limit would still keep me busy, and didn't really demonstrate my trust in her. After all, if I trusted her to sign every small item, I *should* trust her to sign all of the checks.

So I decided to increase the limit to \$1,500. Again, it was a compromise that still tied me to the process.

Finally, as we reached the doors of the bank, it dawned on me how dumb this was. Here I was, trying to get rid of responsibility, but still hanging on to it. It was time to not only delegate the task, but to give complete autonomy along with it.

So I removed the signing limit completely.

Now, with full authority to deal with any payment (on paper and online) delegated to my manager, I have a *real* solution. Not only have I reclaimed the



time, this is one less task on my list and one less pile on my desk. I should have done it ten years ago.

Author Jim Collins once shared how to put a stop to work and responsibilities that you are not passionate about, are not genetically encoded for, or what I like to refer to as “Just-Plain-Dumb.”

Just-Plain-Dumb

If you are ever going to truly increase your success, you need to first increase your capacity. Like trying to cram more clothes into an already full suitcase, there are always some non-negotiable limits on life. And those limits won't increase until you either buy a new suitcase (expensive) or reduce your pile of clothes (not always easy). Think of it this way: when you empty your ‘must-do’ vessel of real, assumed, or Just-Plain-Dumb obligations and duties, you naturally allow new and better opportunities to flow your way.



The ‘must-do’ disease plagued me for years, and I was continually filling my bucket of responsibilities faster than I could empty them. This never-ending cycle of complete-one, add-two-more tasks, often led to chaos, poor decisions, stress, and missed opportunities.

When I was in survival mode all the time, I couldn't see, much less entertain, different, more selective, or strategic approaches.

But just like the feeling I get when I donate to charity clothes I haven't worn in years, or when I purge my list of unnecessary tasks, it is like a weight has been lifted. Almost immediately, I can start to contemplate new and better directions.

Now consider your habits: are you a list builder, or do you intentionally create gaps in your schedule? Are you growing your success by pushing harder to accomplish even more in a day, or are you increasing your capacity?

Doing Less to Get More

Here is my current Stop-Doing list. Take what you want from it, and then create your own. Have fun with this. Look for repetitive tasks that someone else can do, that you don't have to do, or that you simply don't want to ever

do again. And then find a new solution for getting them off your list, permanently.

Working Through Breaks. It's a mind trick: you think that if you work head-down, without a break, you get more done. Watch NBA or NHL players—how long could they perform at their best if they weren't taking breaks? In fact, they are coached on how to take breaks so that they can quickly and completely recover. Without those breaks their performance would slide and so would their score. Learn from the pros and use breaks to maximize your results.



Being Anchored to Email. Don't fill gaps in your day by repeatedly checking your Inbox. No one is impressed, and you are just keeping yourself busy. Remember, "Those who don't have goals are ruled by those who do." If email is your vice, you have given your power over to the sender. A better strategy is to only work on email when you are ready to commit at least 10 minutes to only email. Mixing email with 'real work' without a clear separation of focus is a recipe for disaster.

Worrying. Don't get me wrong—I pay attention to what's important, and at times I become concerned about what needs to be changed. But I avoid worry. Repeatedly worrying about what might or might not happen, based on guesswork about the future, is a wasted investment. If I screwed up, I'll deal with it. In the meantime, I choose to live in the present. We always have a choice—choose to not worry.

Seeking Perfection. The first iPod was far from perfect, yet Apple now owns more than 70% of the world portable music market share. It's the same for any success story. Perfection is a luxury that should be pursued by musicians, rocket scientists, and surgeons; all the rest of us are measured by quantity, quality and, we hope, innovation.

Faking Delegation. It's counter-intuitive, but people want more responsibility and autonomy—but they don't always show it. Get out of your own way and pass the ropes over to the person who should be doing the work. You will be free to work on other things and they will be happier campers.

Needing to Finish Books and Magazines. There are over 23,000 new books published every month in the US alone—does it really matter that you didn't finish one of them? Here's my rule of thumb: if it's taking me longer than a week to finish the book, it's either not good enough, not interesting enough, or I don't need it enough.

Procrastinating about Health. It's no wonder that one out of four men, and one out of three women, who survive a heart attack, will die within the following year, most often of cardiac arrest or another heart attack—they are still procrastinating about their health. Staying healthy takes less effort and time than you think. Make it easy, convenient, and fun, and make it a habit as soon as possible.

Bringing Work Home. Set aside days of the week that are 'No Guilt Days'. No work comes home, and you enjoy total family time and down-time. You will be more refreshed and ready for the next day, and have less guilt (most nights you don't do all that you planned anyway).

Staying Busy. It's hard to be strategic if you're crazy-busy all the time. I choose to enjoy breaks during the day, to have my evenings for my family, and to have 'down time' where I read a novel or play my guitar. And I am constantly surprised how a half hour of break can pay back hours of focus time.



Reading the News. In a ten-day study, researchers recorded both negative and positive statements used in the evening news. Not surprisingly, they found there were more negative statements than positive ones in every broadcast, in fact, ten times more. So why—as you start your day or as you are winding down in the evening—would you want to hear what's going wrong in the world? Instead, I have a solution: if you want to know what is going on in the world, guess—you're probably right.

Here are some other activities to consider adding to your Stop-Doing List:

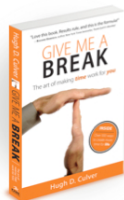
- Watching excessive TV
- Spending every evening at home on the computer
- Chairing meetings that someone else could chair
- Attending meetings you don't really need to be at
- Avoiding conflict because you are worried that addressing it will only make it worse
- Over-eating, or eating food that you know doesn't serve you
- Constantly checking, emailing, and surfing on your phone
- Playing safe when sharing your opinions

- Procrastinating on exercise
- Working through breaks and skipping opportunities for Me-Time
- Saying 'Yes' before considering the impact on you and your family
- Thinking you are too old for: taking that course, sky diving, going on a date, learning how to type, travelling through Asia...
- Beating yourself up with negative thinking (do yourself a favor and change that recording)
- Getting stuck thinking you are right

"Curious things, habits. People themselves never knew they had them."

Agatha Christie

*This report is our way of sharing with you.
If you find this advice helpful please share it with someone who you think
could benefit as well.*



Hugh Culver's business adventures have included a private airline, real estate, tourism and consulting to leading organizations like: Imperial Oil, Shoppers Drug Mart, Royal Bank of Canada, Suncor, Telus, and the Red Cross.

Hugh is the author of *Give Me a Break – the art of making time work for you*. His presentations guide thousands of people each year to work smarter and live better in the Age of Distraction. Learn more about Hugh at www.HughCulver.com

