The Results Curve™: How to Manage Focused and Collaborative Time

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Welcome Letter, by Pierre Khawand

Welcome to the Results Curve™ eBook (an extract from my latest book, *The Accomplishing More With Less Workbook*). I invite you to join me in making the workplace less hectic and interruption-driven, more satisfying and results-driven instead. As the Results Curve™ indicates, *together* we can do it!

We work and live in an era marked by interruptions. The very moment we begin a task, we are stopped by emails, IMs, colleague visits, phone calls, meetings, and now, tweets and Facebook updates. The very technologies that were invented to enhance productivity have made it nearly impossible to get work done! We are bombarded by an unprecedented information overload dominated by the Internet and globalization. This overload puts unreasonable demands on our work and personal lives; as a result, we suffer, feel helpless, and our accomplishments decline. This needs to stop!

As a result of a decade of research and teaching on corporate and academic campuses, in person and virtually via web and video conferencing as well as using virtual worlds such as Second Life, my key findings on how to overcome the challenges of the information overload and how to accomplish meaningful things have been incorporated into the Accomplishing More With Less Workshop and most recently the workbook which is available at Amazon.com in paperback and on Kindle. Thousands of participants from a broad range of companies and industries, small and large, have made significant breakthroughs using the Accomplishing More With Less Methodology--you can too! In this eBook, I will share with you some of the fundamental principles behind the Accomplishing More With Less Methodology and present three solutions that can help you manage the dual challenges of interruptions and information overload.

My hope is that first and foremost you take these principles back to your workplace and have a serious discussion with your team and your management on how you can apply them as a group and help each other get the most out of your focused time and collaborate more effectively than ever before. In other words, stop the insanity that we work and live in, and accomplish more together. My hope is that this will be the beginning of a journey in which you will continue to pursue making the workplace a better place.

My not-so-secret hope is that you will join me at the workshop (in person or virtually). I want to meet you and I want you to experience the transformation. If this is not at all possible, the workbook (which is the "workshop-in-a-book") is your next best bet. We packaged the methodology in the workbook so that it is accessible cost effectively to everyone, anywhere, and anytime. Check out The *Accomplishing More With Less Workbook* at Amazon.com. Finally, here are additional ways in which you can stay in touch and become part of the Accomplishing More With Less movement:

- Join the "Accomplishing more with less" group on Facebook and on LinkedIn.
- Connect with me on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter (@pierrekhawand).
- Subscribe to my blog http://less-is-more.typepad.com
- Join the People-OnTheGo mailing list so you stay updated about future events, articles, books, and related resources: http://www.people-onthego.com
- Join our complimentary lunch & learn webinars every Thursday at noon Pacific Time: http://www.people-onthego.com

The Results Curve™: How to manage focused and collaborative time

The digital revolution should make us all incredibly efficient and productive. The tools at our fingertips — easy multimedia production software, instant and free communication around the globe, massive research power without needing to get up out of our chair — should allow us to complete tasks in hours instead of days and leave us more leisure time than we could ever have imagined. And yet this promise of efficiency seems to be just a little beyond where we are right now, somehow always eluding our grip. We can't seem to get there.
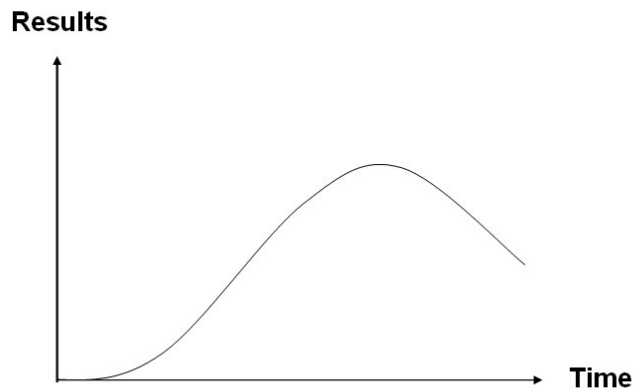
Our work environment is one of great onslaught. We struggle to get done on Friday what we had hoped to achieve the previous Monday. Why is it so difficult to do the things we really want to do? Keep on reading!

The Results Curve™

Let us start by examining how our results change with time when we are working on a task. In an ideal world, when we start to work on a task, we start to produce results, and then as we continue to work on that task, we produce more results. This continues until eventually the flow of results 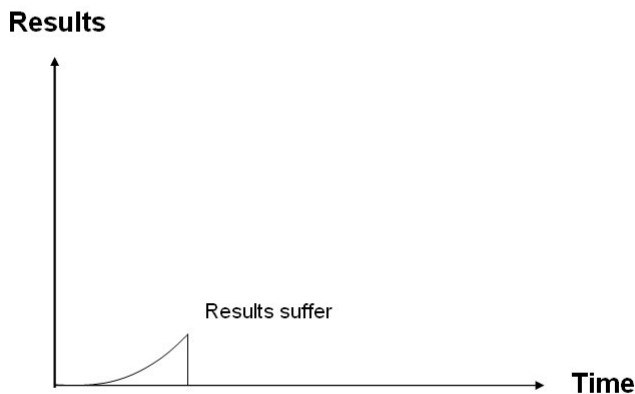begins to level off and start to diminish. Results diminish because we get tired or saturated, or because we have done what we could and now need to wait for someone else to do their part, or because we have completed the task. The Results Curve™ graph above illustrates this progression.

Working on a task

Results

Time

Now let's get back to real life. What happens in the real world after we spend a few minutes on a task? We get interrupted!

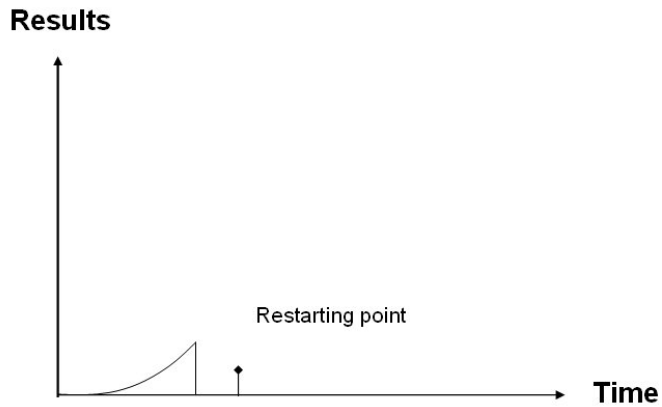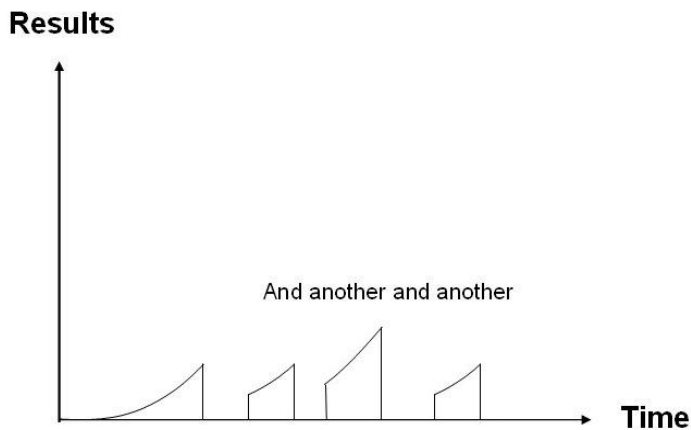**Working on a task**

Results

Results suffer

Time

E-mail arrives in our inbox and we feel this irresistible urge to check it out, or an instant message (IM) pops up with a compelling proposition. Then there's the phone ringing or a chatty colleague or eager boss stopping by. When an interruption takes place, it prematurely ends the progress on the task at hand as shown in the graph to the left.

Post-interruption, when we resume our work on this task, are we going to start at the same level where we left off? Unfortunately not! Our mind needs to re-retrieve the relevant pieces of information that were let go of during the interruption and reconstruct the logic and relationships that were

Working on a task

Results

Restarting point

Time

previously established. This means we will suffer a setback at the restarting point as shown above.

Working on a task

Results

And another and another
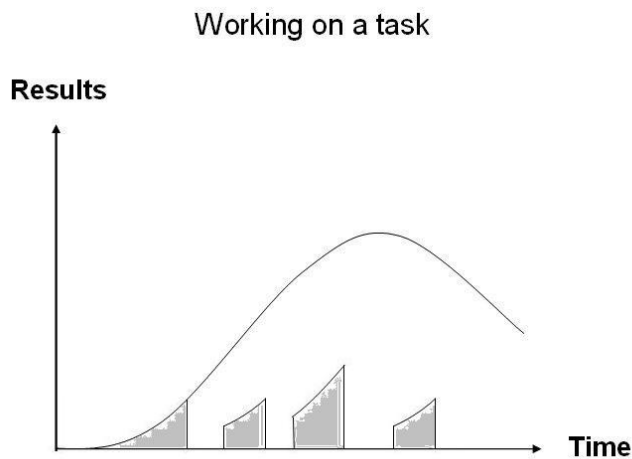
Time

This is our life: a life of interruptions.

We start making progress again, but a few minutes later, another interruption pulls us off task, and our results suffer again. This pattern repeats itself time after time as the calls, emails, and IM's continue. Interruptions are no longer the exceptions in the digital age – they are the norm. The graph on the left illustrates this phenomenon.

A Life of Interruptions

Working on a task

Results

Time

If we compare the actual results that we are getting, represented by the shaded areas in the graph below, to the potential results that we could realize if we could manage to focus on one task, represented by that beautiful uninterrupted Results Curve™, the outcome is nothing less than shocking:

Our life has become a series of frequent interruptions intermingled with small bursts of work in which our ability to achieve anything of quality has been highly diluted. We are preventing ourselves from reaching the potential results area in the graph by letting interruptions take us off track and deprive us from using our gifts.

The Myth of Multi-Tasking

While some of us take pride in our ability to handle multiple tasks at the same time, and even believe that we are actually accomplishing more as we multitask, in reality there is no such a thing as true multi-tasking when it comes to the human mind. What we are really doing is task switching. Yes, some of us who are highly gifted can walk and chew gum at the same time. But those are autonomous functions — something that goes on in the autonomous part of our nervous system. It's our brain's ability to digest our food without asking us to think about it, or the part that keeps us breathing even though we're fast asleep. But when it comes to the limitations of our conscious brain, we cannot do two demanding things at once. Sorry, but there it is.
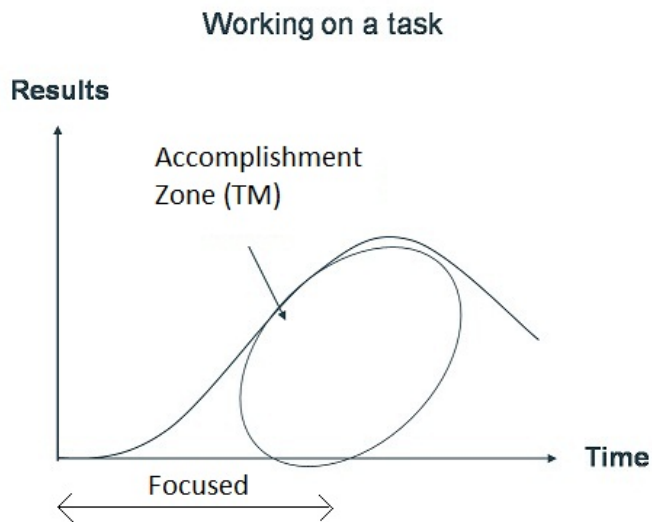
The cost of task switching is immense. In addition to the tangible cost of time, and the less tangible but significant opportunity cost, we also suffer individually and collectively from increased stress and less than satisfying work conditions as we race

from one thing to another all day long and generally feel at the end of the day that we haven't actually accomplished much at all.

The Accomplishment Zone™

Accomplishments don't come from working a few minutes here and there. Accomplishments come from those periods in which we have the opportunity to engage in focused and purposeful work. In order to accomplish meaningful results, we must stay focused long enough to reach the area of greater results in the Results

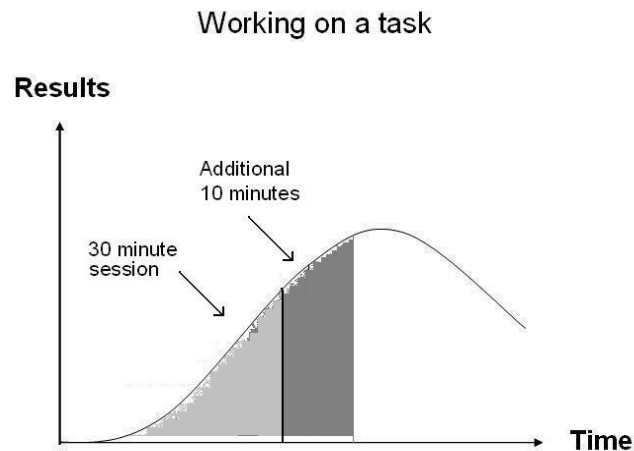Curve™ before we switch to another task or allow ourselves to be interrupted. This is the Accomplishment Zone™.

In the Accomplishment Zone™ we allow ourselves to experience deep thinking and creative problem solving. Here is where our brains can use their awesome power to discover hidden relationships between the parts as well as new and creative insights about the whole. This is where we can solve tough problems. This is where breakthroughs lie!

How Much Uninterrupted Time is Enough?

For most of our challenging work, it will be valuable for us to choose a consistent target time period that will get us into the Accomplishment Zone™ on a regular basis. In our workshops we've had participants indicate a preference for a 30 minute work period, while others want an entire hour. My suggestion is that we aim for an uninterrupted 40 minute period. My belief after working with thousands of people on productivity issues and challenges is that while 30 minutes is reasonable and achievable, after 30 minutes of focused work, the "engine" is now fully warmed up and functioning optimally, so those extra 10 minutes are "pure" performance. Those 10 minutes are all in the high-potential area. We must grab them while we can.

Working on a task

Results

Additional 10 minutes

30 minute session

Time

The Collaboration Zone™

When we create our Accomplishment Zone™, we block out interruptions great and small, including those that come from others in our work group. How do we make sure though that our own high performance time doesn't come at the expense of others?

After our highly focused session, in which we've "turned the world off" and focused on one important task, it will be time to switch gears and "turn the world on" again and engage into our collaborative activities. This is the Collaboration Zone™.

In the Collaboration Zone™, we handle e-mail messages, check voice messages, answer IM requests, and make ourselves available for virtual and in-person interactions. The Collaboration Zone™ can even include a social or private break. The collaborative

session can be 10, 15, 30 minutes, or even longer, depending on how much collaborative work is necessary.

Working on a task

The Collaboration Zone™, shown in the graph above, is just as important as the Accomplishment Zone™. Together they satisfy the need to accomplish individual tasks and the need to connect and collaborate with the rest of the world. They help us resolve this ongoing conflict between focus and connectivity.

The collaborative session can also be energizing and enriching as we find out what went on out there while we were focusing on an individual task. It also brings a healthy dose of realism as we observe and collect data from an ever-changing environment. It helps us get back to our next focused session with a higher level of enthusiasm and better perspective. The collaborative session, together with the focused session, are the yin and yang of success in today's workplace.

The Killer Bs

What are the interruptions that keep us out of the Accomplishment Zone™? Our workshop participants are quick to point out e-mail, IM, phone calls, people dropping by, and our need or desire to take all sorts of breaks. But let's assume that we have all of these under control (which we will address later in this eBook). Let's say we've got a system for our e-mail and other digital interrupters. We've got a sign up so no one drops in on us. The phone is taking messages. So we're safe as far as these potential interruptions are concerned. Now are we going to be in the Accomplishment Zone™ without interruption for 40 minutes?

Well, not exactly. That is because none of the above mentioned interruptions capture the single and most noteworthy enemy of us successfully controlling our precious 40 minutes. There's one interrupter left, and it doesn't come from the outside. This interruption is our own wandering thoughts. The #1 killer of the Accomplishment Zone™ is us! Our own wandering thoughts are by far the primary cause for interrupting our current task and derailing us into new and often unrelated territories.

Thoughts are powerful

Thoughts can be valuable and relevant to the task at hand. We need those thoughts to do our work – to imagine, to evaluate, to think and create. But the way our minds naturally work means that our thoughts aren't always directed to the task at hand. When our thoughts help our work, we are controlling them. When our thoughts take us away from our work, they are controlling us.

Imagine me working on budget projections for the quarter. As I try to think about how much I should allow for online advertisement, my gaze drifts up as I contemplate what the right number might be. My gaze settles on the photo on my desk. Me in Paris. What a lovely trip that was last year. Except for the price of gas. I can remember that gas station where I stopped to fill up. I can see the numbers flashing past 90 euros. No question Hertz should be renting hybrids or electrics. I then start browsing the internet to see if anyone is renting hybrids in Europe.

I've gone from the photo lying on my desk, to browsing the Internet for the next 10 to 20 minutes. It is not inconceivable that while browsing the Internet, I notice that a new e-mail has arrived in my inbox. I hear the beep and take a look at the new e-mail message and start to reply to it. Meanwhile, I glance at the spam filter folder, and notice that there are number of new messages there. I abandon the e-mail message and start going through my spam filter. Another 10 or 20 minutes go by. Suddenly I realize that I am way off track, and ask myself the question "What the heck was I working on?"

Focusing on Task A

I call the work we are trying to accomplish Task A. Task A represents the work that is our most important work. It's what we want to do. It's what our team wants us to do, too. If we do all our Task As, we accomplish all of our life's desire. Accomplishment lies in racking up those Task As. Ideally, in the Accomplishment Zone™, we would focus on Task A and perform activities related to Task A until Task A is finished or until we've at least made significant progress on it.

In essence, our well-behaved mind would have thoughts related to Task A which are shown in the diagram below as Thoughts A1, A2, and A3.

Our mind working on a task (Task A)

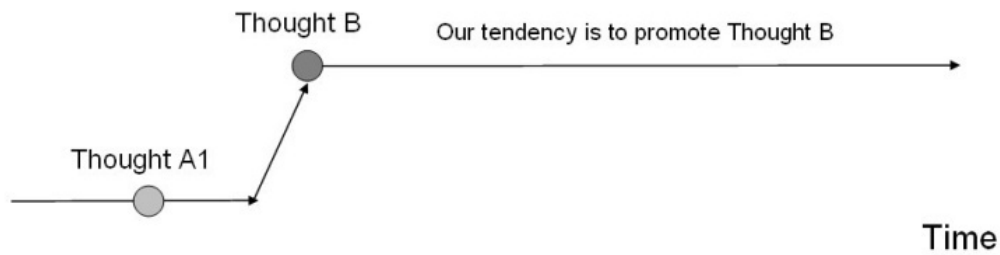Thought A1　　　　Thought A2　　　　Thought A3

Time

Promoting Killer B

Unfortunately, reality tends to be a little different from this ideal. Typically, soon after we start working on Task A, Thought B comes along. What in the world is Thought B doing here? Who knows, but it's here. What do we do when thought B comes along?

As shown below, more often than not, when Thought B comes along, we are likely to get kidnapped by it. We shift our line of thinking to Thought B while abandoning Task A. Thought B is a threat to continuing to work on our goal which is Task A. Thought B is dangerous. Thought B is in fact, a Killer B. Seriously — a kind of thought so bad we call it a "killer?" Yes. It's that bad.
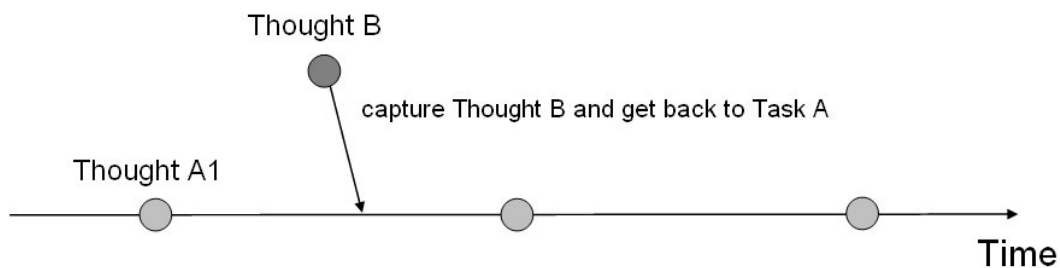
Thought B pops up in our mind

When we give our attention to Thought B and begin to think about what it means, and begin to make associations for it, and begin to play with it, we let Thought B take over our consciousness. Until we can regain control of our senses, we have abandoned work on Thought A and Task A.

Capturing Killer B

What options do we have other than promoting Killer B? What would be a more constructive option? We could "capture" Killer B, so we can free our mind from it and return to it later if necessary.

Where do we capture Killer B? On the "Capture" page in a paper journal (for a better understanding of the paper journal and how we use it to supplement the electronic tools, please refer to *The Accomplishing More With Less Workbook*). The primary purpose of
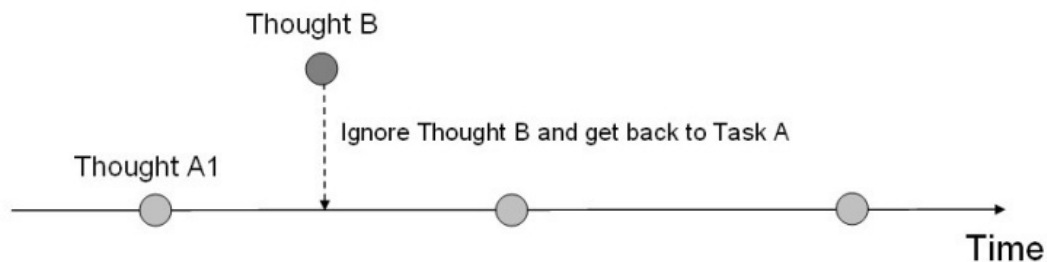
the "Capture" page is to capture Killer Bs as quickly as possible and return to the task at hand.

Paper? How analog! Why not capture Killer B in electronic format? Why not file it where it belongs right away? Isn't this what the "touch once" theory has been promoting in the workplace for years?

The problem with capturing the errant thought in an electronic format is that it takes too much time. It pulls us away from Task A long enough to truly derail us. This would be the equivalent of reinforcing Killer B. If we truly believe that Task A is important, and we are serious about getting into the Accomplishment Zone™, we want to spend the least amount of time on getting Killer B out of the way. We live in a different time environment that requires different measures. We are no longer talking in terms of minutes but of seconds.

This means there is no time for opening or activating a desktop application, accessing the Web, using a stylus or touch screen, organizing, prioritizing, or philosophizing. There is only time to capture 3 to 5 key words, in 3 to 5 seconds, on the one and only Capture page, in the one and only paper journal, by the one and only *me*, in my own handwriting that no one else needs to understand. The Capture page in the paper journal is the path to the Accomplishment Zone™.
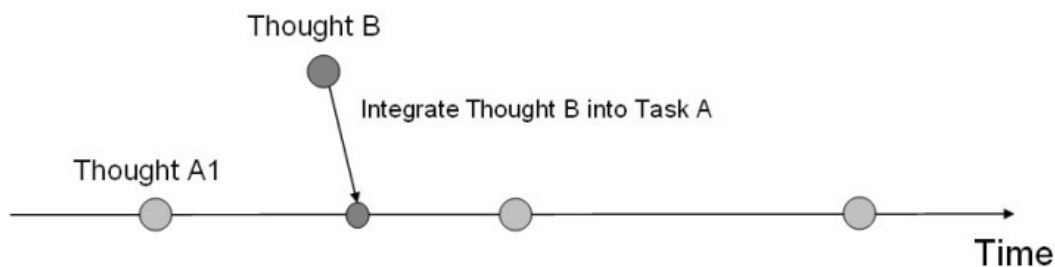
Ignoring Killer B

Are all thoughts worth capturing? Thankfully not. Otherwise, some of us would spend most of our time capturing the multitude of thoughts that keep popping up into our busy and creative minds.

If we determine that Killer B is just a random thought and is not worth capturing because its future value is insignificant, it makes more sense to ignore it and get back to task A as soon as possible, as illustrated above.

Turning Killer B into Useful B

It is possible that Killer B proves not to be a "killer" after all. It may be that Killer B has some value to add to Task A. This is actually the way our mind works sometimes. It unexpectedly brings an interesting thought that may not be directly related to Task A but that has some correlation to it and some applicable insights. Perhaps another approach to solving a problem that is key to Task A, or a relevant issue that we hadn't identified before. In this case, it is best to "integrate" the useful aspects of Killer B into Task A, and therefore turn Killer B into Useful B, as illustrated above.

Resisting Killer B

Sometimes, when we notice that we have been the victim of Killer B, and have been promoting Killer B or even actively contributing to its success at pulling us off Task A, we get into self-blame. The self-talk that we engage in can range from "I shouldn't be thinking about B right now" to the other extreme, which might be "I am a loser for

thinking about B" or even "I will never get it right" and "I never get *anything* right," as our thinking grows increasingly irrational.

This is what we call "resisting" Killer B. Resisting Killer B is active—it's another form of promoting, and is just as harmful to our accomplishments. But resistance is a choice, and we can make another one. One way to do so is to reframe the resistance and reword the resisting thoughts. Instead of "I shouldn't be thinking about B," the alternative might be "I am glad that I noticed that I was thinking about B, and now that I did, I can get back to Task A." Reframing turns this problem into an opportunity.

How Do We Stay Focused?

Awareness alone is not enough to consistently keep us from running afoul of the thoughts that threaten our focus. We need more tangible and practical techniques to help us develop the ability to focus and cultivate "focus" as a habit.

First Technique: Using a timer

Not any timer – a countdown timer. Setting the countdown timer for 40 minutes (or whatever time period we choose) and then pushing the Start button has significant implications.

Just the fact that the timer is running seems to drastically heighten our awareness of time and allow us to quickly notice when we deviate from our task. It's as simple as that. It is fascinating that such a simple and easy tool can have such an impact on our focus, but it does. Buying a countdown timer may very well result in the biggest return on investment that we can ever achieve.

The Timer Creates Purpose

The timer helps us put a stake in the ground and declare that we have officially started the task at hand. Without such a clear signal it is easy to stay noncommittal, starting one task but then casually withdrawing from it to start another one. It is possible to keep testing task after task, escaping from the ones that are more difficult or less desirable, and sneaking into tasks that are easier (and, just as likely, less crucial) – I call this "task hopping!"

The timer puts an end to unproductive task hopping. It forces us to spend our time more purposefully on the task that we consciously select. This is a giant leap to become more purposeful. If you are thinking the timer is "just" another tool, and an expendable one at that, think again! The timer is revolutionary.

The Timer Creates Accountability

In addition to creating purpose, the timer also creates accountability. Now that the timer has started, in 40 minutes we are going to know clearly if we accomplished what we intended. The timer also helps us estimate time better in the future. Knowing how long it takes to accomplish any given project in such a time-crunched era is a rare and highly desirable skill.

The timer prompts us to move things forward

During the focused session, the timer improves the quality and efficiency of our work. It prompts us to face the issues, make decisions, and move things along as opposed to dwelling on issues and staying indefinitely in analysis/paralysis mode. In other words, the timer accelerates our pace and helps us equal or even beat the speed at which things are happening around us. What a competitive advantage that can be!

The timer as a stress relief mechanism

The timer signifies that we have given ourselves permission to be where we are for the time period we have chosen. Now we can more easily give up the guilt or anxiety that we would otherwise experience for not being somewhere else and not handling all the other things that need to be handled. With the timer, we are able to put everything else on hold because we have more "officially" chosen a path, and most importantly a path based on purpose instead of a reactive one. The timer is the official seal of approval for our purposeful choice.

With the timer and the 40 minute sessions, instead of feeling guilty and anxious, we feel challenged to complete our carefully selected mission. Instead of taking on "life" and feeling overwhelmed and trapped, now we are taking on 40 minutes, and feeling hopeful. We are fully engaged and facing the issues for 40 minutes with a visible and bright light shining at the end of tunnel. What a relief!

The happy sound of accomplishment

The happy sound of accomplishment is only 40 minutes away, and when it is heard, we are likely to experience a range of thoughts and feelings, the most prevalent of which is likely to be satisfaction.

Stopping is critical at this juncture. Even a brief moment of acknowledgement goes a long way. This can take any form that is appropriate for the context. Sometimes a few minutes of letting our mind freely wander and allowing thoughts and feelings to surface can do the job. Sometimes this may require a more significant break and potentially some physical movement that gets us re-energized.

Which timer works best?

Any timer will do, but not all timers are equal. Timers that are software applications that can run on our computers are easy to find and many of them are free. However they tend to hide behind other applications on our busy computer desktops and therefore their role as a persistent reminder of time tends to diminish. Also, in a world of everything-electronic and everything-virtual, a physical item is likely to stand out and be noticed. In addition, an object that we can manipulate with our hands is likely to awaken and evoke motor skills that will add to the quality of our overall experience. All these factors considered, a physical countdown timer is best.

Second Technique: Micro-Planning™ each 40 minute session

Creating a brief outline at the beginning of each 40 minute session listing key steps that we need to get done in order to complete the selected task can make the session as successful as it can be, as illustrated in the example below:

Task	Update projections
Micro-Plan™	Download the latest spreadsheet
	Review the most recent guidelines
	Update the formulas accordingly
	Regenerate PivotTables and graphs
	Upload updated version
	Schedule meeting to review with team

Ideally the Micro-Plan™ is handwritten in just a minute or two in the Notes section in the paper journal (mentioned above).

Just like the timer, which appears to be a simple and perhaps expendable tool on the surface, Micro-Planning™ is a powerful technique that can help us stay focused, and if and when we have to deviate to take care of urgent issues, the Micro-Plan™ helps us restart our task with the minimum amount of effort and the fastest recovery time.

As we get deeper into our task, the Micro-Plan™ can continue to evolve and serve as the short-term parking lot for new potential steps or related ideas that would otherwise derail us from the current steps. Our mind stays fully available for the core issues we are processing now. The Micro-Plan™ and the journal become our thinking pad and the extension of, and support system for, our short term memory, which tends to be challenged as information continues to relentlessly invade our mind space.
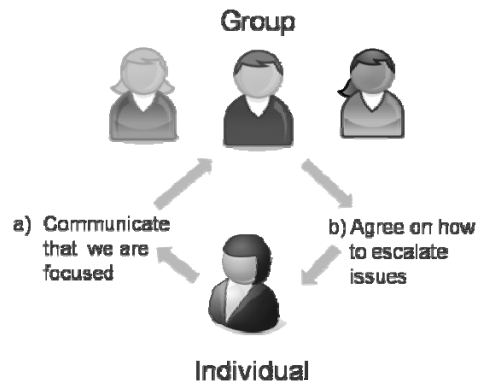
Micro-Planning™ and the timer work together to help achieve focus, purpose, and results that will add up to meaningful accomplishments.

Third Technique: Turning Off External Interruptions

It sounds simple, and it would be if all external interruptions were within our control. Wishful thinking! Indeed, we can turn off the e-mail beep, forward the phone to voice mail, and indicate that we are busy or "away" in our Instant Messaging status, which we should do during our focus sessions. But it is much more difficult to switch off the people who stop by, the noise or conversations around our work area, and most importantly the urgent and critical requests that come from bosses, colleagues, customers, family and friends, not to mention the blame and guilt that come from not being available to handle all of the above promptly.

The answer to these external challenges is certainly not simple but it is an area where we have more influence than we tend to believe. To better manage these group-inflicted interruptions, it is imperative to a) find an agreed upon way in which we communicate to our team that we are focused (whether it is putting up a sign in our work area, or setting our IM status appropriately), and b) find an agreed upon way in which our team can escalate critical issues to us when such issues come up (whether it is cell phone, pager, or a special keyword in IM):

The answer also lies in negotiating effectively with the world to help align goals and priorities and to optimize how responsibilities and tasks are divided and distributed. Using collaboration technologies (such as blogs, wikis, Microsoft SharePoint, Smartphones, virtual meeting tools, virtual worlds, and many others) is essential in this effort and so is developing best practices around these technologies so they support us in this effort instead of hindering us.

In a way, *The Accomplishing More With Less Workbook* is dedicated to helping business professionals acquire the skills, and learning the methodology, that are essential for smart negotiating and for using technology effectively. To negotiate successfully, we need to have clarity, we need to have a purpose, and we need to have data, among other things. It is one thing to step into our boss's office and say: "I am overwhelmed and cannot get my work done." It is quite something else to show our boss a list of the competing priorities broken down into tasks and arranged in a timeline, with some initial thoughts on potential solutions that can serve as a catalyst for negotiation and for creative problem-solving (this is what the Immediate Priorities Matrix™ is for).
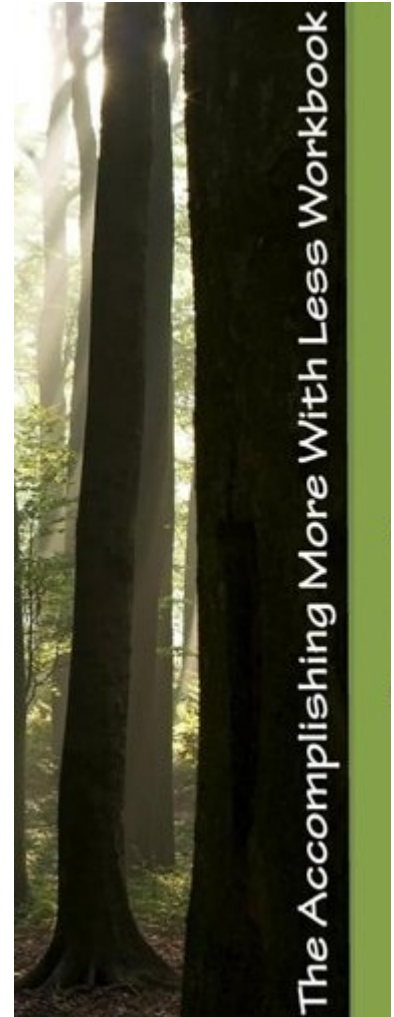
In Summary

Let us move away from feeling hectic and head towards feeling calm. Let us move away from feeling overwhelmed and head towards feeling fulfilled. Let us move away from mediocrity and head towards accomplishment. The Accomplishment Zone™ and the Collaboration Zone™ empower you to lead a life of accomplishments, 40 minutes at a time. It is compelling. It is satisfying. It is yours, now.

Next Steps

- Join me at The Accomplishing More With Less Workshop! Visit http://www.people-onthego.com for details.
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- Join the "Accomplishing more with less group" on Facebook and on LinkedIn.
- Connect with me on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter (@pierrekhawand).
- Subscribe to my blog http://less-is-more.typepad.com
- Join the People-OnTheGo mailing list so you stay updated about future events, articles, books, and related resources: http://www.people-onthego.com
- Join our complimentary lunch & learn webinars every Thursday at noon Pacific Time: http://www.people-onthego.com

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