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BONUS

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CAREERS

Doing More by To-Doing Less

The key to productivity, says a new time-management philosophy, is to shed those never-ending lists of chores you'll never find time to accomplish.

I'm late.

Maybe, I think as I scurry into the conference room at the cookie-cutter airport hotel, I'll become Exhibit A in the workshop I'm about to attend. According to the people running it, I'm going to learn the secrets to never feeling harried again, to achieving nothing less than "power, freedom, and peace of mind." I'm here to discover how to unleash my most productive self while quieting the neurotic self who slept too late and already—at 8:40 in the morning—feels overwhelmed.

Just 20 minutes into the \$629, two-day seminar, it's already clear that this is not the sort of time-management workshop we've all come to expect. There's been none of the hyper-organizational bilge about how, with the right filing system or planning software, I can cram more into my day. In fact, says Brian Stuhlmuller, the workshop leader and CEO of Philadelphia-based Mission Control, I must work on achieving less.

Stuhlmuller, 62, is a former executive at Day-Timer, a company that makes day planners and other organizational tools. He founded Mission Control two years ago because, he says, he came to realize that such tools could take people only so far. At that point he'd already met face-to-face with more than 300 managers from Fortune 500 companies and found that many of them regularly felt overwhelmed. Stuhlmuller concluded that they needed a new way to think about productivity, focusing not on tasks but on time—and, particularly important, on the limits thereof. "What you need," he says, "is a powerful way of dealing with what you're not doing."

The notion that you can't do everything isn't owned by Mission

Control, of course. FranklinCovey, the country's leading time-management company, says its aim is to help people do the most important things, not everything. But at the end of the day, Covey still saddles its disciples with a "prioritized daily task list." That's why Stuhlmuller's assurances of no more revolving to-do lists sound so compelling, and not just to me. Mission Control workshops have spread from 4 cities to 26; on the consulting side, the company has run seminars for Fetzer Vineyards, Microsoft, and NASA. "Everything in my life was always pending," says Mission Control grad Pat Voss, the managing director of Fetzer. Now, she notes, "my desk is clean. I'm not facing this big pile of stuff."

One of our first assignments is to ponder the insidious habit—which, we're told, we all developed as schoolchildren—of attempting to keep track of so many things. "I'm going to torture you with your habits," Stuhlmuller says. Sure enough, we sit at our desks with a surprisingly painful task: Write down everything that we feel we have to do. By the time I get to "Apologize to the postal delivery-woman"—she gets angry at me for neglecting to empty my mail-

box—I realize it's my head that's overstuffed.

Clearly, Stuhlmuller is breaking us down only to build us up. Now that we feel powerless in the face of our lists, he introduces the solution: First we must learn to focus on our “concerns,” or the most meaningful matters of life, such as holding a job and maintaining close friendships. Then we must fit these concerns into our days, which are divided not into hours but into “nows”—distinct periods, ranging from 15 minutes to four hours, devoted to completing a specific task. “It's your new currency,” Stuhlmuller explains in the invented, often bizarre language of Mission Control. “When you want to do something, you commit to do-

Stuhlmuller wants us to keep two other lists. “Not-doing-nows” are things you might be able to schedule soon. “Never-doing-nows” are things you wish you could do but realistically won't have time for. Muddled phrasing aside, the idea is liberating. Stuhlmuller, an avid fisherman, tells us that casting a line in Siberia is on his never-doing-now list. “If it doesn't happen, I won't be unhappy,” he says.

The rest of the workshop is surprisingly practical. Arlen Frew, a Mission Control trainer who runs the second day, tells us about the system's one key piece of hardware: the “capture tool.” “Your capture tool must be available at all times,” Frew says. “The

whole point is to get everything off your mind.” Thankfully, there's nothing complicated or expensive here; the capture tool can be anything from a PDA to a microcassette recorder to a note pad. The idea is simply to put everything that comes up during the day—messages, thoughts, a reminder about someone's birthday—in one place. We're told to empty our capture tool on a regular basis, sorting plans and obligations among our now lists. After a few more down-to-earth nuggets, like how to configure Microsoft Outlook to conform to the Mission Control system, the seminar comes to a close.

Now, two months after graduation, comes the \$629 question: Has my productive self

really been unleashed? Well, my beloved capture tool—a 3- by 5-inch spiral notebook—has rendered my office free of Post-Its. I'm also more likely to think through what I have time for and set aside anything that won't fit. You could almost call me focused. I've been lax, however, when it comes to transferring items from the notebook to my lists. And as for writing in entries like “Happily pick up my mail and forge a new relationship with the post office,” well, let's just say it falls under never-doing-now. Still, in a follow-up call (two group phone sessions run an extra \$75), Frew offers nothing but encouragement. “Remember,” he says, “the ability to pay attention is a function of getting other things out of the way.” The trick, it seems, is simply to take things one now at a time. — SUSAN ORENSTEIN

Putting Time on Your Side

Overwhelmed by phone calls and e-mail? Juggling too many projects? A two-day productivity course can help you manage the clock.

COMPANY	WORKSHOP PRICE	CLIENTS	THE KEY MESSAGE
Mission Control	\$629	Abbott Laboratories, Microsoft, NASA	Toss the to-do list and focus on “nows.”
FranklinCovey	\$299 (one day)	EDS, Home Depot, U.S. Navy	Schedule no more than 65 percent of your day.
Dale Carnegie Training	\$1,395	Computer Associates, GM, RadioShack	Avoid getting bogged down in minutiae.
David Allen Co.	\$695	Boeing, Fidelity, Qualcomm, Sony	Start with the goal, then plan the steps.

ing it now or in a period of nows.”

We practice. On paper, a busy day organized through the Mission Control system is pretty reasonable. From 9 to 10, I'll answer e-mail. From 10 to noon, conduct interviews for a story. From noon to 12:30, bounce ideas around with an editor. I learn what I can't do as much as what I can. Stuhlmuller encourages us to write in the “language of accomplishments,” to give our nows an empowering spin. Not “3 p.m., doctor's appointment,” but “Take care of my health at 3 p.m. by getting a physical and learning about my cholesterol.”

So when do you check off those peripheral but nonetheless essential items, like getting an oil change? Only when you can find real blocks of time for them. In addition to the nows,