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## **ARTICLE** **TIME MANAGEMENT**

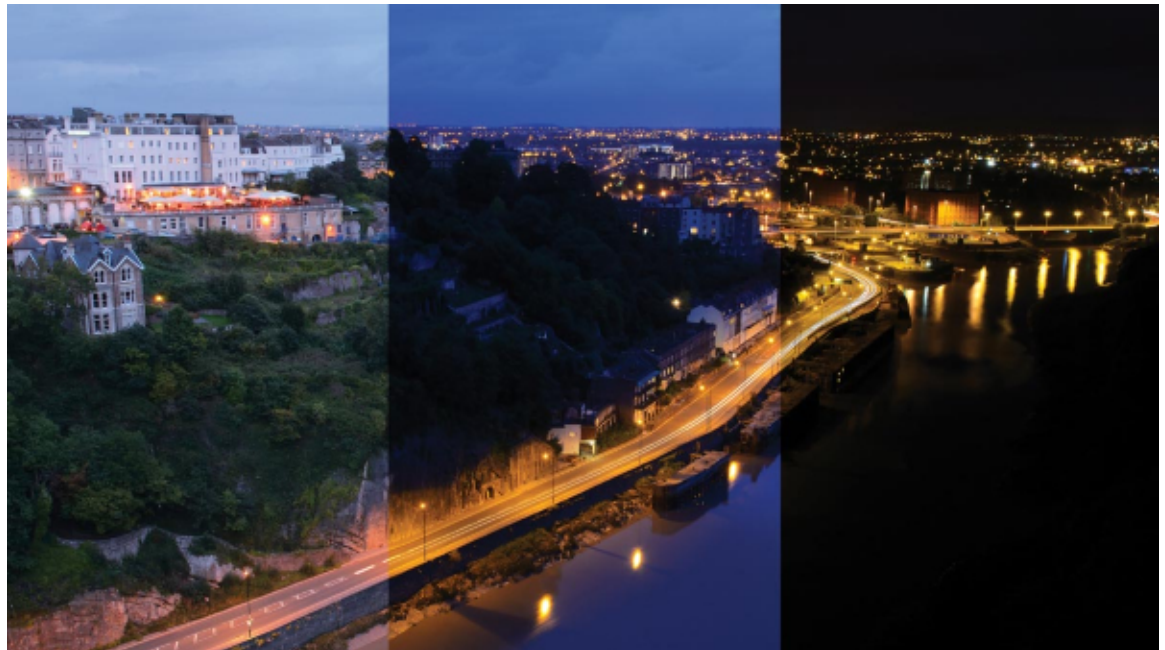
# An 18-Minute Plan for Managing Your Day

*by Peter Bregman*

TIME MANAGEMENT

# An 18-Minute Plan for Managing Your Day

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Yesterday started with the best of intentions. I walked into my office in the morning with a vague sense of what I wanted to accomplish. Then I sat down, turned on my computer, and checked my email. Two hours later, after fighting several fires, solving other people's problems, and dealing with whatever happened to be thrown at me through my computer and phone, I could hardly remember what I had set out to accomplish when I first turned on my computer. I'd been ambushed. And I know better.

When I teach time management, I always start with the same question: How many of you have too much time and not enough to do in it? In ten years, no one has ever raised a hand.

That means we start every day knowing we're not going to get it all done. So how we spend our time is a key strategic decision. That's why it's a good idea to create a to do list and an ignore list. The hardest attention to focus is our own.

But even with those lists, the challenge, as always, is execution. How can you stick to a plan when so many things threaten to derail it? How can you focus on a few important things when so many things require your attention?

We need a trick.

[Jack LaLanne](#), the fitness guru, knows all about tricks; he's famous for handcuffing himself and then swimming a mile or more while towing large boats filled with people. But he's more than just a showman. He invented several exercise machines including the ones with pulleys and weight selectors in health clubs throughout the world. And his show, *The Jack LaLanne Show*, was the longest running television fitness program, on the air for 34 years.

But none of that is what impresses me. He has one trick that I believe is his real secret power.

Ritual.

At the age of 94, he still spends the first two hours of his day exercising. Ninety minutes lifting weights and 30 minutes swimming or walking. Every morning. He needs to do so to achieve his goals: on his 95th birthday he plans to swim from the coast of California to Santa Catalina Island, a distance of 20 miles. Also, as he is fond of saying, "I cannot afford to die. It will ruin my image."

So he works, consistently and deliberately, toward his goals. He does the same things day in and day out. He cares about his fitness and he's built it into his schedule.

Managing our time needs to become a ritual too. Not simply a list or a vague sense of our priorities. That's not consistent or deliberate. It needs to be an ongoing process we follow *no matter what* to keep us focused on our priorities throughout the day.

I think we can do it in three steps that take less than 18 minutes over an eight-hour workday.

**STEP 1 (5 Minutes) Set Plan for Day.** *Before turning on your computer*, sit down with a blank piece of paper and decide what will make this day highly successful. What can you realistically accomplish that will further your goals and allow you to leave at the end of the day feeling like you've been productive and successful? Write those things down.

Now, most importantly, take your calendar and schedule those things into time slots, placing the hardest and most important items at the beginning of the day. And by the beginning of the day I mean, if possible, before even checking your email. If your entire list does not fit into your calendar,

reprioritize your list. There is tremendous power in deciding when and where you are going to do something.

In their book *The Power of Full Engagement*, Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz describe a study in which a group of women agreed to do a breast self-exam during a period of 30 days. 100% of those who said *where and when* they were going to do it completed the exam. Only 53% of the others did.

In another study, drug addicts in withdrawal (can you find a more stressed-out population?) agreed to write an essay before 5 p.m. on a certain day. 80% of those who said *when and where* they would write the essay completed it. None of the others did.

If you want to get something done, decide when and where you're going to do it. Otherwise, take it off your list.

**STEP 2 (1 minute every hour) Refocus.** Set your watch, phone, or computer to ring every hour. When it rings, take a deep breath, look at your list and ask yourself if you spent your last hour productively. Then look at your calendar and deliberately recommit to how you are going to use the next hour. Manage your day hour by hour. Don't let the hours manage you.

**STEP 3 (5 minutes) Review.** Shut off your computer and review your day. What worked? Where did you focus? Where did you get distracted? What did you learn that will help you be more productive tomorrow?

The power of rituals is their predictability. You do the same thing in the same way over and over again. And so the outcome of a ritual is predictable too. If you choose your focus deliberately and wisely and consistently remind yourself of that focus, you will stay focused. It's simple.

This particular ritual may not help you swim the English Channel while towing a cruise ship with your hands tied together. But it may just help you leave the office feeling productive and successful.

And, at the end of the day, isn't that a higher priority?

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