

PRODUCTIVITY

Stop Doing Low-Value Work

by [Priscilla Claman](#)

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In the past, time management experts would recommend that you divide up your work into A tasks, B tasks, and C tasks. The concept was to do the A tasks first, then the B tasks, then the C tasks, when you can get to them. If priorities changed, you just changed the order of your As, Bs, and Cs. Doing all aspects of a job seemed possible then, if you just followed some basic time management rules.

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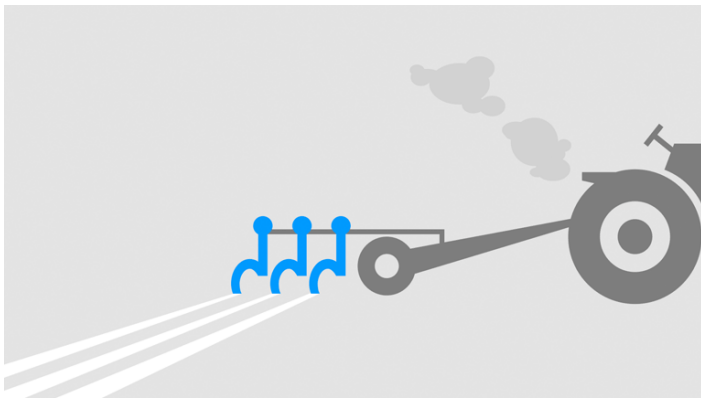
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That kind of thinking ended during the recession of 2007-2009. Between January 2008 and February 2010, 8.8 million jobs were lost. Although the jobs went away, much of the work didn't. Teachers ended up with more children in a classroom; customer service representatives ended up with more phone calls; and managers ended up with more people to manage as teams were consolidated. No matter the job, everyone ended up with a lot more work. And although there have been real gains in productivity since then, the days of A, B, and C tasks are over. Overwhelmed is the new normal.

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Therefore, it's actually a matter of professional life or death to get rid of your low-value work – tasks that mean little or nothing to customers or colleagues. Take an active approach. Design a new, do-able job for yourself. Here's *when* to do it:

- ***When you start a new job***, you have a fresh perspective on what has to be done and you can see the low-value work more easily. Take a look at everything on your plate. Propose three-month goals to your manager, getting rid of as many useless tasks as you can.
- ***When more responsibility is added to what you already do***, you have an opportunity to restructure your work and present your plan. Offer choices to your manager: "Should I lead this task force considering it will take

approximately 20% of my time? Or, should I...?"

- ***When there is a reorganization***, you have to be careful not to take on too much. People have a tendency to think they can't say no or they will be the next person laid off. But actually, after a reorganization, the survivors are critical to the organization's future success, so if you offer to restructure your own job, it will typically be perceived positively.

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- *When you have done an amazing job of something and everyone is celebrating*, it's a great time to ask for something. Ask for help reducing your low-value work from your company's productivity unit or information technology gurus.

And here's **how** to do it:

- **Vote it off the island.** A smart controller had been producing monthly reports for years that nobody read. He sent around a list of them and asked for votes for the most important three or four. He stopped producing the ones nobody used. Another approach is to ask your clients if you can *not do* something, just the way retail store clerks now ask people if they really want their receipts. The idea is simply to stop doing something that isn't important, but to check first so that it doesn't get you into trouble.
- **Automate it.** If it's low value, it's easy to automate. Just find a friend in your IT function to help you do it. Whether you are talking about scheduling, acknowledging, or making standard arrangements, there are probably existing applications that you could use. Just figure out what you want to do, and find someone to help you do it.
- **Write your own rules.** Limit what you are going to do and then make sure people know your rules. A professor decided to write personal references only for her advisees or the students in her seminars, and announced the fact to her lecture classes. It saved her hours of time.
- **Every week, block off the same time for yourself at work.** Use the time to figure out how to get rid of your low-value work. Just an hour can make a difference. Pick a time, and stick to it. Close your door, if you have one, or find a conference room. It may take a while before people learn not to interrupt you during that time, but if you are politely persistent, it will work. Or, take the pediatrician approach and hold call-in hours — let people know when you will be available for interruptions of all kinds, and when you ~~will~~ not.

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Redesign your own job. It's your job, after all. ~~Make it work for you. And stop doing that~~
low-value work.

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