If there’s one experience that fundamentally defines the modern working professional it’s trying, and failing, to get more work done. It took me six minutes to write that last sentence because between starting and ending I opened four new tabs, including an interesting Harvard study on how our inability to focus is making us miserable. But as a matter of deepest principle, your resident economist will never let personal inadequacy prevent him from offering advice. Stick to the following guidelines and you’ll be able to clock off at lunchtime:

**1. Put your long-term self in charge**

Thomas Schelling, who invented behavioural economics decades before it was a thing, encouraged his readers to think of themselves as two selves: a weak-willed short-term self and a far-sighted long-term one. Your short-term self is like a rat in a maze: it will run in random directions, or wherever it smells food, with no regard for the bigger picture. The trick to better life decisions, says Schelling, is for your long-term self (when it’s briefly in control) to drop your short-term self into a carefully structured maze, channelling your primal, impulsive actions towards inevitably good results.

For example, if your short-term self is left with any choice at all between writing a report and wasting time on the internet, it will inevitably choose the temptations of the web. As a result, Schelling says that it’s rational for the long-term self to yank the router out of the socket so that the short-term self won’t have internet to distract it. (If you like your dramatic gestures a little less dramatic, the Self Control app lets your long-term self simply block distracting websites that might tempt you later). Similarly, apps like Beeminder and Stickk let your long-term self create “commitment contracts” which will pressure your short-term self into achieving your deeper goals.

**2. Remember Pareto**

The Pareto principle, certain management thinkers will tell you, is that 20% of the work always gives you 80% of the results. They’re wrong, however, about the universality of the numbers. Pareto was making an empirical observation about some specific situations, for instance, that a “vital few” of the peapods in his garden were providing him most of the peas. The general concept it embodies, though – that if you just do the most important work you’ll get most of the results, and that a large amount of trifling work doesn’t add very much at all – is often true outside the vegetable patch.

As such, it’s easy to do double the work in half the time by doing 20% of the work for two-and-a-half different projects and thereby getting 200% of the output afters 50% of the hours.

**3. Copy other people’s hard work**

We have reached a stage in civilisation where, no matter how weird or obscure or pointless the thing you’re trying to do is, somebody out there has already done it. In the last two decades, technology has provided you with the means to find out how. You’re going through 14,000 photographs and hand-cropping each of them to exactly the size of a postcard? It’s your life, my friend, but if you google it, someone will teach you how to automate that mind-numbing task. You desperately need your spreadsheet to convert horsepower into decibel-watts? That’s a stupid thing to do, but you can bet somebody else has already stupidly done it. Ninety percent of our civilisation’s current misery could be abated if people just learned to search for somebody else’s solutions to any given problem, copied those solutions, and then napped for the rest of the day. With apologies to Reinhold Niebuhr, always remember this modern Serenity Prayer: “Lord grant me the humility to Google the things I do not know, the courage to pester my friends about the things I cannot Google, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

**4. Understand the true cost of distractions**

We can all agree that sleeping for seven hours straight is much better than sleeping for six hours, getting woken up by a car alarm, then sleeping for another hour. In a similar way, working for 30 minutes, being distracted by an annoying colleague, then working for another 40 minutes is in no way as good as an uninterrupted 70-minute stretch.

There are two key reasons why this is the case. First, certain types of work involve fixed starting costs: it takes a certain amount of time to gear up for a new session, regardless of how long that session turns out to be. Second, certain types of work have non-linear relationships between time taken and productivity. 30 squared + 40 squared is not equal to 70 squared – in fact, it’s only equal to 50 squared. So if your productivity goes up with the square of time taken, and you break up a 70-minute block of work into 30 minutes and 40 minutes, you’ll lose almost half your productivity, even if the interruption itself takes basically no time.

**5. Use work to avoid work**

John Perry, a Stanford philosopher, wrote one of the few good things ever written about procrastination, when he said that “the procrastinator can be motivated to do difficult, timely and important tasks, as long as these tasks are a way of not doing something more important.” The decoy task, says Perry, needs to have clear but spurious deadlines and be of high but spurious importance. It does the job of a father figure: you’ll never live up to its expectations, but your futile attempts to impress it might anyway be quite fruitful. For example, I’m supposed to be writing a novel, which makes writing this article much more enjoyable.

**6. Find a job you actually want to do**

Maybe, just maybe, the reason we find it so hard to get anything done is that most of the things we do just fundamentally don’t need doing. Maybe all the productivity lifehacks out there are ultimately missing the point: we’re avoiding our work because our work is pointless. “Choose a job you love and you’ll never have to work a day in your life,” said either Mark Twain or Confucius, or probably neither (I would google it, but my long-term self has pulled the router out of the socket).

[**Uri Bram**](https://www.1843magazine.com/contributor/8388)is contributing editor at [The Browser](https://thebrowser.com/) and the author of “Thinking Statistically”

ILLUSTRATION  **JAMIE EDLER**