



Book The Power of Less

The Fine Art of Limiting Yourself to the Essential

Leo Babauta
Hyperion, 2008
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Recommendation

The next time you’re sitting at a red light, note how many of the drivers around you are talking on cellphones or text messaging. Do your co-workers scurry about, occasionally pausing to converse, even though they’re clearly preoccupied? Most people seem resigned to living in the fast lane, where stress and multitasking are unavoidable realities. Not Leo Babauta, even though he is the father of six children. Babauta believes you can stop the insanity by simplifying your life. His strategy for restoring order is based on six productivity principles, starting with setting limits, since it’s impossible to do everything. If you examine your core beliefs, values and goals, Babauta says you can begin trimming away things that complicate your life and focus on what’s really important (even if a three-item main project list seems a little short to you). Although the author does not break new ground, *BooksInShort* believes his suggestions and ideas are reassuring and helpful. Plus, it's nice to know that someone has conquered the daily chaos.

Take-Aways

- Living without limitations leads to a chaotic existence.
- Successful people have the ability to focus.
- You can form good habits in 30 days if you follow the right steps.
- Resist the urge to multitask – it’s usually frustrating and nonproductive.
- Habitually checking your e-mail or surfing the Internet is a tremendous waste of time. Check your e-mail twice a day.
- Staying in the moment allows you to find meaning in mundane tasks.
- Learning to say no will help you scale back your commitments.
- A cluttered work space or a messy home is distracting and energy-draining.
- Achieving your goals requires sustained focus, effort and motivation.
- A “Simple Projects List” will make your life more manageable. Start with three things to do. Don’t add more until those three are done.

Summary

Why Less Is More

Many people focus on time management to beat the hectic pace of modern life. You may think you can fit more into a 24-hour day, but that approach never yields satisfactory results. You inevitably will get overstressed and will spend too much time performing relatively unimportant tasks. Living a more sensible life means setting limits and focusing on essential things. Follow the six principles of “simple productivity”:

1. “Set Limitations”

Limitations are the cure to feeling beleaguered and overwhelmed. The key is determining which goals, obligations or responsibilities influence your life the most so you can focus on them. Ask if a work assignment significantly affects your job or career, or has an impact on your life a month or two from now. Living without limits may seem attractive, but it actually creates chaos. Choosing among five flavors of ice cream is easier than selecting from fifty.

“Going from a limitless life that’s overwhelming and not very effective to a life with limits, focus and power is an incredible transformation.”

Limits allow you to narrow your options and concentrate your energy. Setting boundaries can work in any area of your life, but it is particularly effective in the workplace. Many people feel inundated with e-mail, phone calls, projects, meetings and responsibilities. Establishing limits, such as checking your e-mail two times a day instead of forty, may feel awkward at first, but once it becomes a habit, you’ll find that aspect of your life more manageable.

2. “Choose the Essential”

Defining the essentials in your life requires careful self-examination of these components:

- **Principles** – Consider your values, morals and ethics. Most people live their lives according to a specific set of core beliefs.
- **Objectives** – Zeroing in on short- and long-term goals helps you decide whether your specific actions are moving you in the right direction.
- **Priorities** – What are your main personal and professional concerns? What is really important?
- **Consequences** – At home and in the office, evaluate the effects of your decisions and behaviors. Some things have more impact than others.
- **Wishes vs. requirements** – Do you really need those expensive sneakers? Much of what you think you want is nonessential.

3. “Simplify”

Most people can name at least 10 goals they’d like to realize in the next few years, but tackling them all at once will likely guarantee failure. Achieving worthwhile objectives requires commitment, concentration and effort. So choose a single aspiration you can reach in six to twelve months and break it down into “subgoals.” For example, if you want to attend grad school, you first need to figure out what you want to study. Determine which schools offer the appropriate curriculum. Creating a step-by-step plan makes the process of attaining a goal more manageable.

“You just have to eliminate everything that’s not essential.”

Use a “Simple Projects List” to handle daily or short-term obligations. List every project in your life. Pick the top three. Put the rest on a waiting list. Focus on completing these three items, so you get things done instead of becoming bogged down. Don’t tolerate distractions.

If your co-workers are holding up a project or you’re awaiting management input, switch to another project on your list. Break your projects down into tasks. Carrying out tasks daily moves you closer to completion.

“The real focus of any project should be in getting it done. Completion.”

Ideally, you would control your projects list, but often your boss is the decision maker. Share your strategy and explain its benefits. In many instances, your boss will allow you to implement your plan. If not, ask him or her to select the projects you should focus on, since – like everyone else – you have limited time. If your boss won’t accept that reality, it may be time to look for another job.

4. “Focus”

To succeed at work or to live a meaningful life, you must cultivate the ability to focus. Willpower is important, but it’s not enough if you cannot stay on task. Obsessing about the past or worrying about the future disrupts your ability to concentrate on the present, the only thing you can control. Maintain a positive outlook; negative thoughts can defeat you and knock you off track.

“It’s easy to set goals, but extremely difficult to achieve them if they’re goals worth achieving.”

The frantic pace of modern-day society has made multitasking a way of life. People talk on their cellphones while driving. Your boss gives you two new priority assignments when you’re in the middle of working on another one. Juggling three or four balls at once may be commonplace now, but it’s neither healthy nor productive.

“Anytime you find yourself procrastinating on an important task, see if you can break it into something smaller.”

Focus on one thing at a time. Identify your most important task at work each morning and make sure you do it. If possible, don’t answer your phone, surf the Internet or read your e-mail. Learn to discipline yourself. Be aware of your thought patterns. If you find that you are becoming distracted or discouraged, get up and take a walk or have a healthy snack. Then come back with renewed vigor and focus. Celebrate your successes.

5. “Create Habits”

Life-altering changes result from developing new habits. You can cultivate a good habit in 30 days by following these steps:

- **Choose a habit** – Pick just one a month. Select a habit with significant influence. Start out with an easy habit – like clearing your desk. Commit to 10 minutes of daily exercise, since 30 minutes may be unattainable at first. Make sure your progress is measurable.
- **Commit your plan to paper** – Write down the steps you intend to take each day and when you’re going to perform them. An obligation encourages follow-

- through.
- **Publicize your intentions** – Tell people about your new initiative. E-mail your friends and co-workers, or set up a blog.
- **Report your progress** – Let everyone know whether you are attaining your daily goals. You'll enjoy their acknowledgement if you're succeeding, and their valuable feedback and encouragement might help if you're struggling. Rejoice in your successes.

6. "Start Small"

Take a series of organized steps to carry out the six principles. Don't allow routine tasks to interfere with your major goals or projects. Attend to paperwork and phone calls first thing in the morning. Get them out of the way so you can have a productive day. Although technology has improved communication, e-mail and the Internet tend to imprison many people. Frequent visits to your in-box or favorite Web site can create havoc during a busy workday. Simplify your approach to reduce distractions and increase efficiency. Use these tips to navigate e-mail more effectively:

- **Less is more** – Unless your job requires hourly e-mail monitoring – such as receiving orders from customers – only check e-mail twice a day, at around 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.
- **Prioritize** – Millions of people turn their computers on in the morning and immediately check their e-mail. That allows e-mail to dictate their schedules. Paying attention to your projects, goals and tasks is much more important.
- **Turn off and tune in** – Pull the plug on the ping or flashing signal that alerts you to the arrival of a new e-mail. All that does is interrupt your work.
- **Fight the urge** – Breaking the e-mail habit means trying your best for a week or two. Make a sign as a reminder of your commitment. Resist the urge to check habitually.
- **Filter, filter, filter** – Find a reliable program to keep spam out of your in-box. Notify family and friends that you'd rather not receive jokes and other useless e-mail.
- **Reply, divert or delete** – Decide what to do with each message: Reply right away, send it to a particular sorting folder or delete it. Don't just let stuff sit in your in-box.
- **Reply in brief** – See if you can keep your e-mail answers shorter than five sentences.

"The less clutter, the less visual stress."

You can also modify or break the habit of Internet surfing. The idea may seem daunting at first, but try disconnecting from the Internet for an hour. Devote your full attention to your work. Do your online research before you start your task. Disconnecting from the Web may make you feel vulnerable and insecure, but with practice you'll become more comfortable and productive.

The Commitment Dilemma

Simplifying requires examining your commitments and deciding which ones are dispensable. Most people have a long list of obligations, including family, work, hobbies and social, civic and religious groups. You may not realize how many until you take inventory. After you've assembled your list, ask how each one affects your life, adds value and fits your priorities. Select the five or so you love most and eliminate the rest.

"Learn to move at a slower pace and you will be happier, and just as importantly, you will become more effective and productive."

You'll probably have to inform someone that you can't follow through on a previous commitment. You may even feel a bit guilty, but now you are the first priority. Your goal is to shed every nonessential obligation. Learning to say no will help you avoid regaining unwanted commitments. Be up-front and polite, but stick to your guns. Explain that you just don't have time.

"Make gradual changes, in a series of small steps over time, and you're more likely to stick to those changes than if you attempt a big change all at once."

Don't rush through life. Scheduling back-to-back appointments is guaranteed to make you frantic and raise your stress level. Slow down. Appreciate every task – even the mundane. Focus on what you're doing, even if it's washing the dishes. By staying in the moment, you can find pleasure and meaning in anything. Practice doing nothing at all – not even watching TV or reading a mystery novel. You're allowed to be lazy sometimes.

Everything in Its Place

A messy, disorganized work space interferes with your ability to focus, compromises your effectiveness and wastes valuable time. Cleaning up your desk will eliminate distractions and increase your productivity. You'll feel more comfortable sitting at an orderly desk that isn't piled high with papers, manila folders and junk mail. Begin the decluttering process by taking everything off your desk except the computer, phone and other necessary equipment. Grab a handful of papers from your pile and go through them one by one. Throw them out, file them, pass them on or act on them. The key is to avoid returning them to the pile. Go through each drawer and shelf. Keep only what you really need. Trash the old breath mints, dried-up pens and candy wrappers. Minimize bric-a-brac. A couple of family photos are fine, but you probably don't need your bowling trophy or that Chinese restaurant menu. Discard old magazines and newspapers, catalogs, outdated sticky notes and bills older than a year. Praise yourself when you finish a drawer. Open it and revel in its uncluttered state.

"Simplifying isn't meant to leave your life empty – it's meant to leave space in your life for what you really want to do."

A neat home contributes to a peaceful state of mind. Give everything a place. Put things away promptly. Get rid of the stuff that seems to keep surfacing. If clutter is a chronic problem, examine your buying patterns. Do you really need that item or are you simply enjoying the shopping experience? Are you an impulse buyer? Do you find yourself in stores at least once a week? Look at your patterns. To avoid rash purchases, give yourself a little time and see if the feeling passes.

Stay Motivated

Whether your goal is a neater desk, a healthier lifestyle or a better job, motivation is the crucial ingredient. Keeping up the daily energy and excitement needed to reach your objectives may be challenging, but these tips can help you sustain your motivation:

- **Go slowly** – An all-or-nothing attitude is the quickest way to sabotage a diet or exercise program. Gradually reduce your sugar intake instead of going cold turkey. Start by running a half-mile, not three miles. You'll disappoint yourself if you're too ambitious.
- **Focus on the positive** – Don't let the size of a task or goal overwhelm you. Push aside negative thoughts. Concentrate on benefits. Think how great the achievement will feel.
- **Seek inspiration** – Talk to people who have accomplished the very objectives you're seeking. Reading success stories will keep you energized.
- **Give yourself credit** – Keep a diary and note your progress. Seeing how far you've come is a great motivator.

About the Author

Leo Babauta, the creator of ZenHabits.net, a widely read blog, lives in Guam with his family. He is the author of *Zen to Done*.
