



■ BLOCKS · NO. 01

# Time blocking, without rebuilding your whole life.

A calendar is not a to do list with better manners. It is the moment you stop promising and start deciding.



FOUR PARTS, FOUR COLOURS, ONE EACH

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A field guide for people with too much to do.

Method, evidence, and the part nobody writes: what to do when it breaks.

## BEFORE YOU START

# Read this page and you already have most of it.

If you never turn another page, here is the guide compressed into nine lines. The rest of the book is the same idea, slowed down enough to survive a bad Wednesday.

- **A list is a promise. A calendar is a decision.** The list can hold forty things because it never has to say when. That is exactly why it never empties.
- **You are not failing at focus, your day is shaped against it.** Observed office workers spent about eleven minutes on a thread of work before switching or being interrupted, and touched almost twelve different threads a day.
- **Switching leaves a residue.** Part of your attention stays on the thing you left, especially if it was unfinished. You carry it into the next task and pay for it there.
- **The relief comes from planning, not from finishing.** The best evidenced idea in the book, and the one most people get backwards.
- **Blocks are longer than you think and fewer than you want.** Two to four hours of genuinely blocked work is a strong day, not a lazy one.
- **Your estimates are wrong in one direction.** Always short. Plan for the day you usually have, not the one you deserve.
- **Half your blocks will break.** That is the normal operating condition, not a failure of character. Chapter 8 is the whole reason this guide exists.
- **Alone it is a habit. In a team it is an agreement.** Anyone who can put something on your calendar can undo your morning.
- **Start with one block tomorrow.** Not a system. One block, ninety minutes, named after a real piece of work.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Parts one and two are the argument and the method, worth reading straight through once. Part three is the repair manual, worth keeping. Part four is for anyone who does not control their own calendar, which is most people in a team.

Every number in here is traced to a primary source, listed on page 25 with a note on how much weight it can carry. Where the popular version of a statistic is shakier than it sounds, we say so.

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**PART ONE**

# Why the list keeps growing.

Before the method, the diagnosis. Four chapters on what is actually wrong, because a habit built on the wrong diagnosis is abandoned by the second week.

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- 01** A list is a promise, a calendar is a decision
- 02** Eleven minutes
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## CHAPTER 01

# A list is a promise. A calendar is a decision.

Your to do list has never told you no. That is not a small flaw in an otherwise good tool. It is the whole problem, and every other symptom comes downstream of it.

A list has no denominator. You can add a fortieth item at four in the afternoon and the list accepts it without complaint, because a list only records that something should happen. It never has to answer the second question, which is **instead of what**.

A calendar cannot avoid that question. A day has a fixed number of hours and they are already claimed by something, even if that something is unnamed. The moment you put a piece of work into an hour, you have said no to everything else that could have occupied it. That is uncomfortable, and the discomfort is the feature.

This is why people who describe themselves as bad at time blocking are usually not bad at calendars. They are unwilling to say the no. The block feels like a lie the moment they write it, because they know forty things cannot fit, and rather than choose they go back to the list, which lets them keep all forty alive at once.

**Time blocking does not create more hours. It makes you spend them on purpose, and lets you see what you gave up.**

## What you are actually trading

It helps to name the trade honestly, because the guide is not going to pretend it away.

### WHAT A LIST GIVES YOU

- Everything stays possible
- No confrontation with capacity
- Adding is free and feels productive
- You are never technically behind

### WHAT A CALENDAR GIVES YOU

- A real answer to what happens now
- Evidence of what a week can hold
- A reason to say no that is not about willpower
- An end to the day that is actually an end

Notice that the list column is not empty. Lists are genuinely good at capture, and this guide will not ask you to give yours up. It will ask you to stop treating it as a plan. A list is where things wait. A calendar is where things happen. Most people ask a single tool to do both and then wonder why they feel behind in the morning.

### THE ONE LINE VERSION

Keep the list for capture. Move the deciding to the calendar. The friction you feel when you do it is not a sign it is wrong, it is the arithmetic you have been avoiding.

## CHAPTER 02

# Eleven minutes.

In 2005, three researchers followed twenty four information workers with stopwatches and recorded every switch they made. The picture that came back is the most useful thing you can know about your own day.

## 11 min 4 sec

The average time a worker spent on one connected thread of work before switching to another or being interrupted. The standard deviation was larger than the average itself, at 18 minutes 9 seconds, which tells you how uneven those stretches were.

MARK, GONZÁLEZ & HARRIS, CHI 2005

### 11.7

Distinct threads of work touched in a single day, on average.

### 57%

Of those threads were interrupted before they were finished.

### 2.3

Other threads visited, on average, before an interrupted one was picked back up.

Read those together and a shape appears. It is not that people were lazy or scattered by temperament. It is that the working day, left to itself, arrives pre chopped. Eleven minutes is not long enough to get properly into anything demanding. And more than half of those short stretches did not even get to end on their own terms.

The resumption figure is the quiet one. When work was picked back up on the same day, which happened for 77 percent of it, the worker had passed through roughly two other threads first. You do not return to a task, you return to a task **through** two other tasks, each of which leaves something behind.

#### A NUMBER YOU HAVE PROBABLY SEEN, AND SHOULD NOT REPEAT

You will find "it takes 23 minutes and 15 seconds to recover from an interruption" almost everywhere. It traces back to a 2006 interview with one of the authors above, not to a published finding with a method attached to it. The underlying research on fragmented work is solid and worth citing. That specific figure is not, and we have left it out.

### Why this matters for a block

If eleven minutes is the ambient rhythm of an unmanaged day, then a block is not a productivity flourish. It is a deliberate act of aggregation: taking twelve scattered fragments that would have gone to six different things and forcing them to land on one. That is the entire mechanism. Everything else in this guide is logistics.

## CHAPTER 03

# The residue you carry.

The cost of switching is not paid at the moment you switch. It is paid afterwards, quietly, in the work you thought you had moved on to.

In 2009 Sophie Leroy published a set of experiments on what she named **attention residue**. People moved from one task to another under controlled conditions, and their performance on the second task was measured. It was worse: less accurate, slower, shallower. The interesting part is that it did not recover after a brief settling in period. The degradation persisted through the second task.

**You do not arrive at the next task. You arrive with the last one still running in the background, and you do the new work with what is left.**

## The condition that makes it worse

Residue is not uniform. It is strongest when the task you left was **unfinished, under time pressure, or emotionally charged**, which is a fairly precise description of the average interrupted day.

So the value of a block is not only the protected hour. It is **how the hour ends**. A block that closes at a natural stopping point leaves far less behind than one cut off by a timer mid sentence.

### 1 End on a landing, not a cliff

Give the last five minutes of any block to closing: finish the paragraph, commit the change, write the one line that tells tomorrow's version of you where you were. It costs five minutes of the block and saves more than that from the next one.

**In practice** Set the block for 90 minutes and treat the last five as the landing, rather than setting 85 and pretending.

### 2 Write the residue down before you move

When you cannot finish, externalise what is still running: the open question, the next step, the thing you were about to try. Chapter four explains why this works, and it is not just memory.

**In practice** One sentence on the task itself, not a separate note. It has to be waiting where you will land next time.

### 3 Put the transition inside the block

Back to back blocks guarantee residue, because the switch happens with no space to close anything. Ten minutes between blocks is not slack, it is the mechanism working.

**In practice** Book blocks 50 or 80 minutes long on the hour, not 60 or 90. The gap is the point.

## CHAPTER 04

# The plan is the relief.

Almost everyone believes the mental weight of an unfinished task is lifted by finishing it. There is good evidence that it is lifted by deciding when you will do it, which is a much cheaper operation.

In 2011 Masicampo and Baumeister ran a series of studies on unfulfilled goals. First they reproduced the familiar effect: an unfinished goal intrudes. It produced intrusive thoughts during an unrelated reading task, made goal related words more mentally accessible, and degraded performance on an unrelated anagram task. The unfinished thing was, measurably, taking up room.

Then they added one step. Some participants were asked to make a **specific plan** for the unfulfilled goal. Not to do it. Not to make progress on it. Just to plan it concretely.

## The interference disappeared.

Making a specific plan eliminated the activation and interference effects of the unfinished goal. And the effect was mediated by how earnest the plan was: the participants who showed no interference were the ones who genuinely intended to carry the plan out.

MASICAMPO & BAUMEISTER, *JPSP*, 2011

Sit with that for a second, because it reframes the whole practice. If you are lying awake with fourteen open loops, the intuition is that you need to work harder tomorrow to close them. The evidence says the loop closes, cognitively, when it gets a real slot. **Blocking your Thursday is not administration you do before the work. It is a large part of the benefit.**

It also explains the feeling people report after a first honest planning session: not accomplishment, which would be unearned, but quiet. Nothing got done. Something got decided, and that was enough.

### The word doing the work is "specific"

The literature on **implementation intentions**, plans shaped "when X arises, I will do Y", points the same way. A 2006 meta analysis across 94 tests and more than 8,000 participants found a medium to large effect on goal attainment,  $d = 0.65$ . A 2024 update across 642 tests found the picture more conditional, which is what usually happens to a finding after twenty years. The direction held.

What has not held up is the vague version. "Work on the report" is not a plan and does not buy you the quiet. "Tuesday 9 to 11, first draft of the report, at my desk" is. The calendar is simply the most natural place to store a plan in that shape, because it forces the when and refuses the vague.

#### WHAT THIS CHANGES ABOUT YOUR EVENING

If tomorrow is unplanned, tonight has fourteen open loops running. Five minutes with the calendar is not five minutes of extra work at the end of a long day. On this evidence, it is the thing that lets you stop working.

**PART TWO**

# The method.

Four shapes of block, the sizes that actually survive contact with a working day, and a daily ritual short enough that you will still be doing it in March.

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- 05** Four ways to block, and when each one works
- 06** How long a block should be
- 07** The thirty second plan

## CHAPTER 05

# Four ways to block.

"Time blocking" is used as one word for four different techniques that solve four different problems. Most people who bounce off it were simply using the wrong one for their week.

## 1 Task batching

FOR THE FRAGMENTS

Collect the small similar things and run them in one pass. Invoices, expenses, code review, the eleven replies that each take four minutes. Individually none of them justifies a block. Together they justify one, and running them in sequence means you pay the setup cost once instead of eleven times.

**The trap:** batching demanding work. Two hard things are not a batch, they are two blocks. Batch by how little thought a thing needs, not by category.

**Use it when** your day dies by a thousand small cuts and nothing big is actually late.

## 2 Day theming

FOR THE MANY ROLES

Give each day a centre of gravity. Monday is planning and people, Tuesday and Wednesday are build, Thursday is clients, Friday is close and cleanup. You are not forbidding other work, you are declaring a default so that the question "what should today be about" is already answered.

**The trap:** it needs a week that is roughly repeatable. If your Tuesday is unrecognisable from one week to the next, theming will only make you feel behind.

**Use it when** you wear several hats and the switching between them, not the work itself, is what exhausts you.

## 3 Timeboxing

FOR THE THINGS THAT SWELL

Fix the duration in advance and treat it as the constraint: ninety minutes on the deck, then it ships as it is. The point is not speed, it is that a fixed box forces you to decide what the work is actually for, usually within the first twenty minutes.

**The trap:** this is where the old line about work expanding to fill the time gets quoted. That comes from a 1955 satirical essay about the civil service, not from a study. Timeboxing does work, but treat it as a decision forcing device, not as a law of nature.

**Use it when** the work has no natural end: research, tidying, polishing, anything that could always be a bit better.

## 4 Deep work blocks

FOR THE ONE THING THAT MATTERS

A long, defended, single subject stretch on the piece of work that actually moves something. No batching inside it, no second task held in reserve. This is the one that pays for the whole practice, and the one that gets sacrificed first.

**The trap:** treating it as the default shape. Most people cannot sustain more than one or two of these a day, and building a schedule that assumes four is how you end up believing the method failed.

**Use it when** the important work has been sliding for a week while the urgent work got done.

## Choosing between them

You do not pick one and marry it. In a normal week you will use three of the four, and the skill is diagnosing which problem you actually have on Monday morning.

| IF YOUR WEEK FEELS LIKE                               | THE PROBLEM IS                                                         | REACH FOR                                                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Busy all day, nothing to show</b>                  | Fragmentation. The small work is eating the hours the big work needed. | <b>Batching</b> the small, then one <b>deep block</b> for the big. |
| <b>Exhausted by mid afternoon, not by the work</b>    | Role switching. You changed hats nine times.                           | <b>Day theming</b> , even loosely applied.                         |
| <b>Everything takes twice as long as it should</b>    | No natural stopping point, so the work keeps going.                    | <b>Timeboxing</b> , with a stated output at the end.               |
| <b>The important thing has not moved in two weeks</b> | Urgency is winning. It always will, unless the calendar intervenes.    | One protected <b>deep block</b> per day, first thing.              |
| <b>Other people's meetings own your day</b>           | This is not a personal method problem. See part four.                  | A shared rule, not a better habit.                                 |

### START WITH ONE, NOT FOUR

If you are starting this week, put a single deep block on tomorrow morning and batch the small work into one afternoon slot. That is it. Theming and timeboxing are refinements and they will still be there in a fortnight, when the first two have either taken hold or told you something useful about your week.

## The mistake underneath all four

Every one of these techniques fails the same way: the schedule is built for the day you wish you had. It assumes no one will message you, nothing will go wrong, and you will have the same appetite for hard thinking at four in the afternoon as at nine in the morning.

That last one is worth a note. In the 2005 observation study, working stretches in the morning were measurably **shorter** than in the afternoon, which is the opposite of the folk wisdom that mornings are the protected time. That is one study of twenty four people in specific offices, so do not build doctrine on it. But it is a good reason to check your own pattern for a week before you commit your best work to a slot chosen by reputation rather than evidence.

## CHAPTER 06

# How long a block should be.

Two sizes cause most of the failures: the block that is too short to be a block, and the day that is too full to be a day.

| LENGTH       | WHAT IT IS HONESTLY GOOD FOR                                                                                                                                                                       |
|--------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 25 to 30 min | One small defined thing, or a batch of near identical fragments. <b>Not</b> a block for thinking work. It sits below the ambient fragmentation of a normal day, so it buys you nothing structural. |
| 50 min       | The workhorse. Long enough to get in, short enough to fit between commitments, and it leaves ten minutes on the hour for the landing.                                                              |
| 80 to 90 min | Real depth. This is where the work that needed to be held in your head at once actually happens. One or two a day is a strong day.                                                                 |
| Half day     | Only for work that has a genuine warm up cost: a hard debugging session, a first draft, a design pass. Rare, and worth defending loudly when you schedule one.                                     |

## The 60 percent rule

Do not block more than about **60 percent of your working hours**. On a seven hour day that is a little over four hours of blocked work, and it will feel like giving up when you first write it down.

It is not. The remaining 40 percent is where the day's actual events live: the thing that broke, the question that could not wait, the meeting that ran over, the twenty minutes you spent recovering from all three. A day blocked at 100 percent is not an ambitious plan, it is a plan that is guaranteed to be wrong by eleven in the morning, and a plan that is always wrong stops being consulted. That is how the habit dies.

### THE FAILURE THIS PREVENTS

Nearly everyone who abandons time blocking abandons it in week two, for the same reason: they blocked every hour, reality took four of them, and the plan became a daily record of falling short. Blocking less is not lowering the bar. It is the difference between a plan you keep using and one you stop opening.

## What a realistic blocked day looks like

Count it: three hours and fifty minutes of work you blocked yourself, in a working day of seven and a half hours. That is 52 percent, inside the rule. Even after the meetings you did not choose, two hours and twenty minutes are still deliberately unclaimed.



A dashed edge is a block you put there. A solid edge is an event someone else can see. The coral line is now, and it is the only thing on the page you do not control.

## Why it is shaped this way

- **The hard thing goes first, and it goes twice.** Two passes at the same piece of work in one day beats two different pieces, because the second block starts warm. The morning does the thinking, the afternoon does the finishing.
- **The gaps are not leftovers.** The quarter hour at 10:30 is the landing from chapter three. Without it the meeting at 10:45 collects the whole unfinished draft and carries it into the room.
- **Everything small lives in one place.** One batch at 15:00, in the part of the day when careful thinking is expensive and sorting is cheap.
- **The longest gap is the one at the end.** From 15:50 to 17:15 nothing is claimed. That is where the day that actually happened gets absorbed. On a calm day it becomes a third block, which is a bonus and not a plan.

## CHAPTER 07

# The thirty second plan.

A daily ritual survives only if it is shorter than the resistance to doing it. This one is four questions, in an order chosen so that the hard part happens while you still have the energy for it.

## 1 What is already true about tomorrow?

Look at the meetings first, before you have any hopes. This is the honest denominator: if four hours are already committed, you are planning three, and knowing that now prevents the fiction.

## 2 What is the one thing that must move?

One. Not three. The single piece of work that, if it advances, makes tomorrow worth having. Name it specifically enough that you could tell whether it happened.

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**Test** "Work on the proposal" fails. "Proposal, section two written" passes.

## 3 Where does it go, and how long does it get?

Put it in an actual slot, in the part of the day when you are reliably good at that kind of work. Then add the correction from chapter nine, because whatever length you first thought of is short.

## 4 What is the batch, and what is not happening?

One slot for the accumulated small things. Then, briefly and deliberately, notice what you have just decided will not happen tomorrow. That is the part everyone skips, and it is the part that makes the plan real rather than aspirational.

## When to run it

At the end of the day, not the start. Two reasons, and the first is the one from chapter four: an unplanned tomorrow keeps its loops open all evening, and a specific plan closes them. Planning in the morning means you carried the noise home for nothing.

The second is quality of judgment. At half past five you know what today actually held and what it cost. At nine the next morning you have forgotten, and you will plan optimistically.

### IF YOU ONLY KEEP ONE HABIT FROM THIS GUIDE

Keep this one. Ten minutes before you close the laptop, four questions, out loud if it helps. It is the highest return per minute of anything in these pages, and it works even in the weeks when every single block gets destroyed.

**PART THREE**

# When it breaks.

Every guide stops at the perfect week. This is the part that decides whether you are still doing this in three months, because the perfect week is not the one you are going to get.

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- 08** The day that is ruined by ten in the morning
  - 09** Why your blocks are too short
  - 10** The Friday reset

## CHAPTER 08

# The day that is ruined by ten in the morning.

Something broke, someone needed you, and the plan you made last night now describes a day that is not happening. What you do in the next four minutes decides whether the habit survives the month.

Before any technique, one thing worth internalising: **this is the normal case, not the exception**. More than half of all work threads in the observation study were interrupted before they finished. A method that only works on undisturbed days is not a method.

The instinct is to abandon the plan and go reactive for the rest of the day. That is the most expensive move available, because you do not only lose today. You lose the evidence that planning is worth doing, and next Tuesday you do not bother.

**A broken plan is not a failed plan. It is a plan that told you the truth early enough to do something about it.**

## The four minute triage

### 1 Declare the day broken, explicitly

Out loud, or in a line of text. Ambiguity is what does the damage: half pretending the plan holds while quietly doing something else gets you neither.

### 2 Rescue one block, not four

Save the single most important block. Move it, shrink it if you must, but keep one. A day with one honoured block is a day the method worked, and your sense of this is built out of these moments.

**Shrinking is allowed** Ninety minutes becoming fifty is a win. Ninety becoming nothing is how it dies.

### 3 Move the rest with a date, not into the void

Everything dropped goes somewhere specific: a slot later in the week, or back on the list, unscheduled and honestly so. What it must not do is silently evaporate, because that teaches you the calendar lies.

**Why this matters** Chapter four again: rescheduled work stops occupying you, vanished work does not.

### 4 Write one line about what broke it

Not for self improvement, for pattern detection. Four weeks of these lines show you what a single Tuesday cannot, and it is usually structural: a recurring meeting, one person, a system that fails on Thursdays.

## The five ways it usually breaks

After the third or fourth week, most breakage sorts into five buckets. Each has a different fix, and applying the wrong fix is why people conclude the method does not suit them.

| WHAT HAPPENED                                  | WHAT IT ACTUALLY IS                                                   | THE FIX                                                                                                |
|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>A genuine emergency</b>                     | Rare. Real. Nothing is wrong with your system.                        | Triage, rescue one block, move on without a story about it.                                            |
| <b>Someone booked over your block</b>          | Not a personal failure. A permissions problem.                        | Part four. The calendar has to say no on your behalf.                                                  |
| <b>The work was much bigger than the block</b> | Estimation, every time. See chapter nine.                             | Correct the estimate, and split the task until a piece fits.                                           |
| <b>You did not want to start</b>               | Usually the task is vague, not that you are undisciplined.            | Rename it to the first concrete action. "Open the file and write the header" is a block you can start. |
| <b>It happens every week at the same time</b>  | Not breakage. Your real schedule, disagreeing with the one you wrote. | Stop blocking that slot. Give it to the thing that always takes it.                                    |

## The one about guilt

There is a specific feeling that comes with looking at a calendar full of blocks you did not honour, and it is worth addressing directly because it is the actual reason people delete the whole thing.

A block is a decision made yesterday with yesterday's information. When today's information turns out to be different, the decision is not a debt you defaulted on. It is an estimate that got updated, which is what estimates are for.

If it helps, change what you count. At the end of a week, do not count how many blocks survived. Count whether the one thing that mattered each day moved. Most people find that number is much better than their sense of the week, and the gap between the two is precisely the guilt talking.

### THE REALISTIC TARGET

Somewhere between half and two thirds of blocks honoured is a genuinely good week for someone in a normal job with colleagues. If you are hitting ninety percent, you either have unusual control over your time or you are not blocking the work that actually matters.

## CHAPTER 09

# Why your blocks are too short.

Not sometimes. Systematically, in one direction, and knowing about the bias does not fix it. Which is why the correction has to be mechanical.

In 1994 Buehler, Griffin and Ross surveyed thirty seven students about their honours thesis, in the final semester, on the one project they knew intimately.

## 33.9 days predicted

Against an actual average of **55.5 days**, about 64 percent longer, on the one project they understood best in their lives.

BUEHLER, GRIFFIN & ROSS, *JPSP*, 1994

The useful detail is what happened when the researchers pushed. Students also gave a best case, 27.4 days, and a worst case, of 48.6 days. Reality came in at 55.5: **the average outcome was worse than their own worst case.**

### Three corrections that work

#### 1 Use the outside view, not a better inside one

Do not re examine the task and think harder. That is the inside view, and it produced the bad number. Ask instead: how long did the last three things like this actually take?

**Requires** that you record actuals. Ten seconds at the end of a block. Chapter ten is where they get read.

#### 2 Apply a fixed multiplier, and do not negotiate it

Start at 1.5 on your first instinct, adjust after a month of real data. It must be mechanical because the bias survives knowing about it: given the chance to argue, you will argue this particular task down.

**In practice** Your gut says an hour, you block ninety minutes. Every time, without a case by case debate.

#### 3 Split until a piece genuinely fits

If a task cannot fit in a block, the problem is usually the task. "Write the report" is a project wearing a task's clothes. Cut until you can picture the first sentence you would type: that means it is small enough.

#### THE COMPOUNDING VERSION OF THIS

Underestimation does not break one block, it pushes every block after it. That is the real reason for the 60 percent rule: the unblocked 40 percent absorbs the error instead of cascading it.

## CHAPTER 10

# The Friday reset.

Fifteen minutes at the end of the week, doing the one thing the daily ritual cannot do: looking at the pattern instead of the day.

The daily plan is tactical and it is necessarily short sighted. It cannot tell you that Thursday afternoons have never once survived, that a particular project has quietly eaten forty percent of your month, or that the thing you keep moving forward has now been moved eleven times and is telling you something.

## The five questions

1. **What actually happened?** Not what you planned. Open the week and read it as a record. This takes three minutes and it is usually mildly surprising.
2. **How far off were the estimates?** Pick the three biggest misses. You are looking for the ratio, because that ratio is your multiplier for chapter nine.
3. **What broke the blocks, and did it repeat?** The one line notes from chapter eight, read together. Once is an event, three times is a structural feature of your week that should be scheduled rather than fought.
4. **What has been moved more than twice?** Anything moved three times is not waiting for time, it is waiting for a decision. Either give it a real block next week or take it off the list honestly. The half life of a permanently postponed task is what poisons a system.
5. **What is next week's one thing?** Before the week fills up with other people's requests, claim the hours for the single piece of work that matters most. Monday morning is already too late.

### QUESTION FOUR IS THE ONE THAT PAYS

Most people can do the first three from memory and skip the fourth because it is uncomfortable. It is also the only one that shrinks the list. A system where things enter and never leave will eventually be abandoned, no matter how good the blocking is.

## Do it before you leave, not on Sunday night

Same logic as the daily ritual, one scale up. A week that is closed on Friday is a week that stops running in your head on Saturday. A week left open gets carried through the weekend and quietly taxed for two days, and the plan you make on Sunday evening will be worse anyway, because by then you have forgotten what the week actually cost you.

## PART FOUR

# With other people.

Alone, time blocking is a habit and it either sticks or it does not. In a team it is an agreement, and no amount of personal discipline substitutes for one.

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## CHAPTER 11

# Blocking in a team.

Almost everything written about time blocking assumes you control your own calendar. Most people do not, and telling them to try harder is not advice, it is an accusation.

If any colleague can drop a meeting into any open slot, your blocks are decoration. You can defend them by declining, which costs you social capital every single time, or you can change the structure once so that the calendar does the declining for you. The second is the only one that scales past a fortnight.

## 1 Blocks are visible, and they are busy

COST: AN AFTERNOON

A focus block that shows as free is not a block. Everyone's blocks appear on the shared calendar and mark them unavailable, with a title specific enough that a colleague can judge urgency: "Deep: Q3 pricing model", not "Busy".

The specificity is the part that makes it socially survivable. "Busy" invites the question. A named piece of work usually answers it.

## 2 A shared window nobody books into

COST: ONE MEETING TO AGREE

Pick one recurring window, for instance every morning until eleven, or all of Wednesday, where the team does not schedule internal meetings. Not "tries not to". Does not.

The shared version works far better than the individual one for a reason worth stating: when it is your personal rule, protecting it makes you the difficult one. When it is the team's rule, protecting it makes you compliant. Same behaviour, opposite social cost.

**Start narrow** Two mornings a week that genuinely hold beats five that everyone breaks by Tuesday.

## 3 Booking links carry the rules

COST: A SETUP, ONCE

When people book you through a link that already knows your focus windows, your minimum notice and your daily meeting cap, you stop negotiating each time. The boundary is expressed once, in configuration, rather than repeatedly, in awkward messages.

This is also the only version that works with people outside the team, who cannot see your calendar and are not party to your agreements.

## 4 Workload is visible before it is a problem

COST: A HABIT, WEEKLY

Blocking makes individual capacity legible for the first time, and a team that can see who is already at capacity stops assigning by guesswork. The reason work lands on the wrong person is almost never malice, it is that nobody could see.

**The tell** If your team says "I thought you had it" more than once a month, this is the missing agreement.

## CHAPTER 12

# The arithmetic of a meeting.

A thirty minute sync with six people does not cost thirty minutes, and it does not cost three hours either. The real number is larger, and it is almost never counted.

Take a meeting at 11:00. The obvious cost is six people times thirty minutes. Then add what part one says sits around it.

| COMPONENT                                                                              | PER PERSON | SIX PEOPLE    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|---------------|
| The meeting itself                                                                     | 30 min     | 3h 00         |
| The approach. The stretch before it, too short to start anything, spent waiting        | ~10 min    | 1h 00         |
| The residue. Degraded attention on whatever comes next, per chapter three              | ~10 min    | 1h 00         |
| The split. A morning that could have held one 90 minute block now holds two short ones | varies     | the real cost |

The first three lines already double the nominal cost, from three hours to five. But the fourth is the one that matters, and it is not additive. It is a change of shape.

**A meeting in the middle of a morning does not take thirty minutes out of it. It takes the morning out of it, and hands back two fragments.**

Two forty minute gaps are not one eighty minute stretch. The cost of getting into the work is paid twice, and forty minutes does not reach half the depth of eighty.

## Three rules that follow directly

- **Push meetings to the edges.** The same meeting at 09:00 or 16:00 costs a fraction of what it costs at 11:00: it removes time from the day instead of cutting it in half. Applied to a team's recurring meetings, this is the largest single gain available.
- **Cluster rather than spread.** Three meetings in a row cost one interruption. The same three spread out cost three, and destroy every block between them.
- **Count the room, not the meeting.** Before adding the sixth person, ask what the invitation costs them. Optional attendance is a real answer, but only if declining is genuinely normal.

### ONE CAVEAT, STATED HONESTLY

The minute figures above are reasoned estimates, not measurements. The direction is well supported, the exact size for your team is not. Use it to make an invisible cost arguable, not as a number to quote.

## APPENDIX A

# The one page checklist.

Print this. The rest of the guide is the argument for it.

### Every evening, ten minutes

- ☐ Look at tomorrow's meetings **first**. That is the real denominator.
- ☐ Name **the one thing** that must move, specifically enough to verify.
- ☐ Give it a slot, in the part of the day you are actually good at that work.
- ☐ Multiply your instinct by **1.5**. Do not argue with yourself about it.
- ☐ One slot for the batch of small things.
- ☐ Check you are under **60 percent** blocked. If not, remove something.
- ☐ Notice, deliberately, what will not happen tomorrow.

### Every block

- ☐ One subject. No second task held in reserve.
- ☐ Last five minutes are the **landing**: close, commit, leave a note for next time.
- ☐ Ten minute gap before the next one. The gap is the mechanism, not slack.
- ☐ Record what it actually took. Ten seconds.

### When the day breaks

- ☐ Say it out loud: the plan is broken. No half pretending.
- ☐ Rescue **one** block. Shrinking it counts as saving it.
- ☐ Everything dropped gets a new date or an honest removal. Nothing evaporates.
- ☐ One line on what broke it.

### Every Friday, fifteen minutes

- ☐ Read the week as it happened, not as planned.
- ☐ Three biggest estimate misses. Update the multiplier.
- ☐ What broke blocks, and did it repeat? Schedule the repeats instead of fighting them.
- ☐ Anything moved three times: give it a real block, or drop it honestly.
- ☐ Claim next week's one thing before anyone else claims the hours.

#### IF YOU ARE STARTING TOMORROW

Do the evening ritual and put **one** ninety minute block on the morning. Nothing else on this page. Add the rest once the first has held for a week.

APPENDIX B

The weekly template.

Fill it by hand on Friday. **Dashed edge for a block you put there, solid for an event someone else can see**, the same rule the app uses. Leave roughly 40 percent of it empty on purpose: the white space is not a failure to plan, it is where your week actually happens.

Week of

Day

Week

Month

|       | MON | TUE | WED | THU | FRI |
|-------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 08:00 |     |     |     |     |     |
| 09:00 |     |     |     |     |     |
| 10:00 |     |     |     |     |     |
| 11:00 |     |     |     |     |     |
| LUNCH |     |     |     |     |     |
| 14:00 |     |     |     |     |     |
| 15:00 |     |     |     |     |     |
| 16:00 |     |     |     |     |     |
| 17:00 |     |     |     |     |     |

THIS WEEK'S ONE THING

NOT HAPPENING THIS WEEK

## APPENDIX C

# Sources, with an honest note on each.

Productivity writing has a citation problem: figures get repeated until they sound settled, and the study underneath often turns out to be an interview, a blog post, or nothing at all. Every number in this guide was checked against the original. Where the evidence is thinner than the confidence usually attached to it, the note says so.

**Mark, G., González, V. M., & Harris, J. (2005).** *No Task Left Behind? Examining the Nature of Fragmented Work.* *Proceedings of ACM CHI 2005.*

**Used for** the 11 min 4 sec average, the 11.7 threads per day, 57 percent interrupted, 77 percent resumed same day, 2.3 intervening threads, and the morning versus afternoon note. Direct observation of 24 information workers. Small sample, specific workplaces, and it is now twenty years old, which arguably makes it conservative rather than outdated.

**Leroy, S. (2009).** *Why is it so hard to do my work? The challenge of attention residue when switching between work tasks.* *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 109, 168 to 181.

**Used for** chapter three in full. Controlled experiments, a well replicated idea, and the source of the term attention residue. We describe the direction and the moderating conditions rather than quoting an effect size, since the size varies by design.

**Masicampo, E. J., & Baumeister, R. F. (2011).** *Consider it done! Plan making can eliminate the cognitive effects of unfulfilled goals.* *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101, 667 to 683.

**Used for** chapter four, which is the spine of this guide. Worth one caveat: this is social psychology from the period now under scrutiny for replication, and one of the authors has had other work contested. The core finding aligns with the much larger implementation intentions literature below, which is why we lean on it, but treat it as strongly suggestive rather than settled.

**Gollwitzer, P. M., & Sheeran, P. (2006).** *Implementation intentions and goal achievement: A meta analysis of effects and processes.* *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 38, 69 to 119. And: **Sheeran, Listrom & Gollwitzer (2024),** *The when and how of planning,* *European Review of Social Psychology*, 36.

**Used for**  $d = 0.65$  across 94 tests and more than 8,000 participants, and for the 2024 update across 642 tests. The commonly cited 1999 American Psychologist paper introduced the idea but is not the source of the number, which is a mistake worth not repeating.

**Buehler, R., Griffin, D., & Ross, M. (1994).** *Exploring the planning fallacy: Why people underestimate their task completion times.* *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67, 366 to 381.

**Used for** 33.9 days predicted against 55.5 actual, the best and worst case figures, and the 99 percent confidence result. 37 students, so a small and specific sample, but the planning fallacy has been reproduced very widely since across many domains.

**Parkinson, C. N. (1955).** *Parkinson's Law.* *The Economist*, 19 November.

**Deliberately labelled as what it is:** a satirical essay about the British civil service, not a study. Cited in chapter five only to note that the famous line about work expanding to fill the time has no experimental basis, whatever the productivity internet implies.

**The "23 minutes and 15 seconds" recovery figure.**

**Not used.** It traces to a 2006 magazine interview rather than a published finding with a stated method. The underlying fragmentation research is solid and is cited above. The specific number is not, and it is probably the most repeated unsourced statistic in the field.

# The plan is the relief. **Somewhere to put it** is the rest.

UnaTask is a task manager where the list and the calendar are the same surface. Tasks on one side, the day on the other, drag one into the other. Built for teams, so a block your colleagues can see is a block they do not book over.

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## **Blocks No. 01 · Time blocking, without rebuilding your whole life**

Published by UnaTask. Written to be read once and kept for the checklist on page 23.  
Share it freely, print it, hand it to the colleague who books over your mornings.

Next in the series: **No. 02, The first blocked week**, a day by day protocol, including what usually goes wrong on the Wednesday.