wishful thinking

Time Management

for Creative People

Manage the mundane - create the extraordinary

Mark McGuinness
www.wishfulthinking.co.uk
@markmcguinness

First published on www.businessofdesignonline.com

Some rights reserved

This e-book published by Mark McGuinness, London 2007

Text © Mark McGuinness 2007

This e-book is published under a Creative Commons licence which allows you to copy and distribute the e-book as long as you keep it intact in its original format, credit the original author and do not use it for commercial purposes.

Web: www.wishfulthinking.co.uk

Blog: www.wishfulthinking.co.uk/blog

E-mail: wish@wishfulthinking.co.uk

Important note about the illustrations

The images in this e-book are licensed from www.istockphoto.com for use within this document. If you wish to use them elswhere you should obtain a licence from www.istockphoto.com

Image credits:

p.1 www.istockphoto.com/ldf

p.4 www.istockphoto.com/demarco-media

p.7 www.istockphoto.com/foued42

p.10 www.istockphoto.com/kativ

p.14 www.istockphoto.com/claylib

p.17 www.istockphoto.com/tmcnem

p.21 www.istockphoto.com/ju-lee

p.25 www.istockphoto.com/leggnet

p.28 www.istockphoto.com/arlindo71

This e-book contains no affiliate links.

Contents

1. Why you need to be organised to be creative 4

2. Prioritise work that is ‘important but not urgent’ 7

3. Ring-fence your most creative time 10

4. Avoid the ‘Sisyphus effect’ of endless to-do lists 14

5. Get things done by putting them off till tomorrow 17

6. Get things off your mind 21

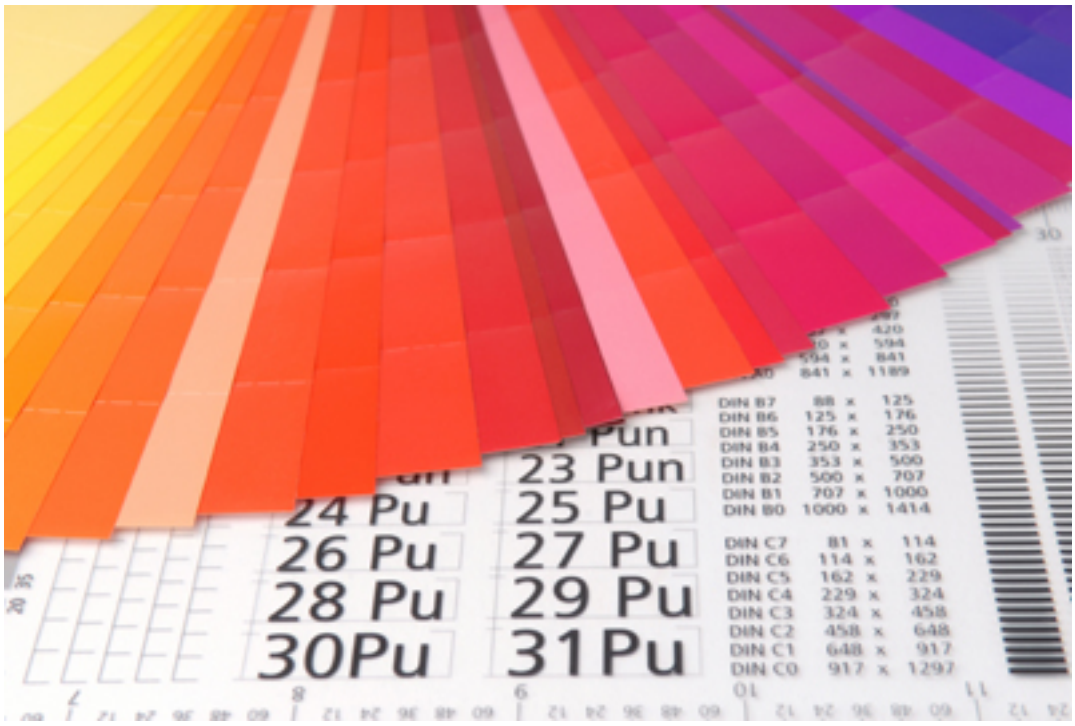
7. Review your commitments 25

8. Resources to help you get things done 28

9. If you found this e-book helpful... 31

10. The author and publisher 32

1. Why you need to be organised to be creative



"Be regular and orderly in your life so that you may be violent and original in your work."
Gustave Flaubert

So you start the day full of enthusiasm. You're excited about a new piece of creative work and itching to put your ideas into action. Firing up your computer, the familiar stream of e-mails pours into your inbox, burying the ones you didn't get round to replying to yesterday. Scanning through the list, your heart sinks – two of them look as though they require urgent action. You hit 'reply' and start typing a response to one of them… 20 minutes later you 'come round' and realise you've got sucked into the e-mail zone and have been sidetracked by interesting links sent by friends, as well as writing replies about issues that aren't a priority for you. You minimize the e-mail window and get back to your project…

After 15 minutes you're really enjoying yourself, getting into your creative flow – when the phone rings. Somebody wants something from you. Something to do with a meeting last week. You rummage through the papers on your desk, searching for your notes. You can't find them. Suddenly your heart leaps as you lift up a folder and find an important letter you'd forgotten about – it needed an urgent response, several days ago. 'Hang on, I'll get back to you' you tell the person on the phone, 'I'll ring you back when I've found it'. You put the phone down and pick up

the letter – this needs sorting immediately, but you remember why you put it off – it involves several phone calls and hunting through your files for documents you're not sure you even kept. By now, you've only got half an hour before your first meeting and you've promised to ring that person back. . Your design stares at you reproachfully. The e-mail inbox is pinging away as it fills up – already there are more messages than before you started answering them. Your enthusiasm has nosedived and the day has hardly begun. Creative work seems like a distant dream.

. . .

Is this a familiar scenario for you? Swap the design software for a wordprocessor and I've been there a hundred times. In an ideal world we'd be putting all our time and energy into creative work, but the realities of modern work often seem to be conspiring against us. And in lots of ways the scenario is getting worse. The wonderful thing about modern technology is the amount of communication and information-sharing it facilitates. And the awful thing about modern technology is the amount of communication and information-sharing it facilitates. We are deluged with new information and connections, via telephones, webcams, instant messengers, e-mail, websites, blogs, newsletters, wikis, and social networking technology. The list gets longer every year. And with Blackberry and the mobile internet you can have data and demands coming at you 24/7. No wonder people are starting to run workshops on 'digital stress'.

All of which is bad enough whatever your line of work. But if you're a professional artist or creative, it's even more damaging. Concentration is essential for creative work - certain stages of the creative process require single-minded focus on the task in hand. When we're really in the zone, we experience 'creative flow' – the 'almost automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness' that psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has identified as characteristic of high-level creative performance. Interruptions, multi-tasking and the anxiety that comes from trying to juggle multiple commitments – these are in danger of eroding the focused concentration that is vital for your creativity.

If you're worried about the effect of all those interruptions, frustrations and distractions on your creative work, this e-book is for you. Over the next seven chapters I will offer you some principles and practical methods for maintaining your creative focus under pressure, and for managing the stream of information and demands so that it informs and stimulates your creativity instead of drowning it out.

And that means being organised.

There, I've said it. Organisation, structure, discipline and habit – these often seen as threats to creativity. Not to mention corporate-sounding phrases such as 'time management' or 'workflow'. We like to think of creativity as a space for untrammelled imagination, free from all constraints. Yet while freedom, rule-breaking and inspiration are undoubtedly essential to the creative process, the popular image of creativity overlooks another aspect: examine the life of any great artist and you will find evidence of hard work, discipline and a hard-won knowledge of the rules and conventions of their medium. Choreographer Twyla Tharp, who directed the opera and dance scenes for the film *Amadeus*, has this to say about the film's portrait of Mozart:

> The film *Amadeus* dramatizes and romanticizes the divine origins of creative genius. Antonio Salieri, representing the talented hack, is cursed to live in the time of Mozart, the

> gifted and undisciplined genius who writes as though touched by the hand of God… Of course this is hogwash. There are no 'natural' geniuses… No-one worked harder than Mozart. By the time he was twenty-eight years old, his hands were deformed because of all the hours he had spent practicing, performing, and gripping a quill pen to compose… As Mozart himself wrote to a friend, "People err who think my art comes easily to me. I assure you, dear friend, nobody has devoted so much time and thought to composition as I. There is not a famous master whose music I have not industriously studied through many times."

This passage is taken from Tharp's excellent book *The Creative Habit: Learn it and Use it for Life*, in which she argues that 'routine is as much a part of the creative process as the lightning bolt of inspiration, maybe more'. It's an inspiring, challenging and very practical book that deserves a space on the shelf of anyone who takes their creative work seriously.

I'm not suggesting that all artists and creatives need to be 'organised' in a way that would satisfy a corporate boss. You might get up at noon and work at home in your dressing gown, in a pigsty of a living room. You might check into a different hotel room every day and work on the bed. Your creative process and working habits might look like total chaos to an outsider, but if they work for you, that's all that matters. And there will be some method in the madness – patterns in your daily activities that are vital to your creativity. These are the things you need to do to keep your imagination alive – whether it's sitting at a desk by 6am, using the same pen, notebook or make of computer, hitch-hiking across America, putting rotten apples in your desk so that the scent wafts into your nostrils as you work, or sitting in your favourite café with a glass of absinthe.

In this e-book, I will offer some suggestions for keeping the tide of external demands at bay and helping you to develop a truly creative routine and rhythm to your working day. I won't offer you a rigid system or any 'best practice' nonsense – just some principles and suggestions for you to try out and adapt as you see fit. As well as drawing on my own experience and study of the creative process, I'll refer to some well-known time- management systems and suggest what I think they have to offer creative professionals.

The next seven chapters will look at specific elements of personal organisation and time management, while the final chapter will be a list of further resources.

Questions

What is your attitude to organising your creative work? Do you see organisation as soulless, uncreative routine or as a necessary, helpful part of your creative process?

What effect does feeling muddled and disorganised have on your creativity?

Which areas of your work would you like to be more organised about?

What do you like about chaos? Where in your work do you want to give chaos and randomness free rein?

2. Prioritise 'important but not urgent' work

A couple of years ago, I was facing a brick wall. I was in the second year of a part-time Master's degree that was essential for my business. I was invited to edit an issue of Magma, one of the top poetry magazines in the UK – as a poet, this was a chance I couldn't turn down. I was also getting married, which took a fair amount of preparation too – and that was one opportunity I was definitely not turning down! Meanwhile, I somehow had to keep my business going, keep my clients happy and fund all these extra-curricular activities.

As if that weren't enough, I discovered this new phenomenon called blogging – or rather, discovered that people were using it to spread their ideas and promote their businesses, rather than just to write about their cat's breakfast menu. It looked like a perfect medium for me – I loved writing, I had ideas I wanted to get into circulation, and I loved connecting with new people. But where was I going to find the time?

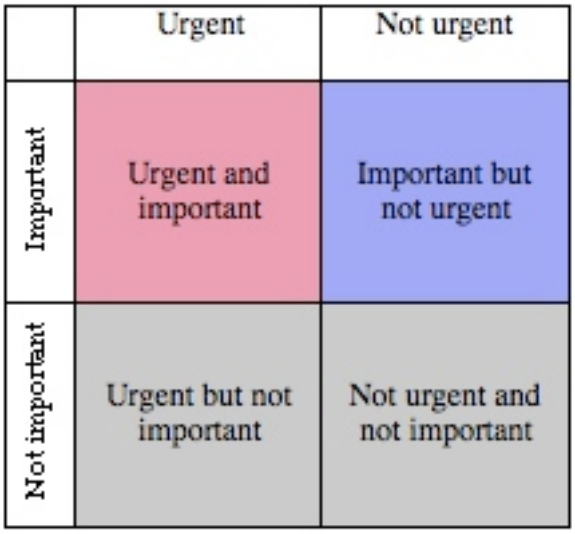
I'd already made a reluctant deal with myself to put my poetry-writing 'on-hold' until the end of the MA (on condition that I resumed afterwards, which I'm now doing with pleasure). But I was still faced with the seemingly impossible task of finding quality, focused time, away from interruptions, to write my essays, read poetry submissions with the care they deserved, and start a blog. After scanning my diary and surveying the tasks in hand, I was faced with a depressing conclusion.

I was going to have to get up early.

There was simply no other time in my schedule – or not the quiet, uninterrupted time I needed for my work, without the intrusion of phone calls, e-mails, meetings and classes. I had never considered myself one of nature’s early risers, and working from home much of the time had allowed me the luxury of avoiding early starts for commuting. On a good day I’d be up by 7.30, on a bad day it was closer to 8.30. Still time to get a reasonable amount of work done by starting at 9.00 – but I was faced with an unreasonable amount of work, so drastic action was called for.

My new start time became 6.30am. If you want to know how I managed this, read Steve Pavlina’s excellent post How to become an early riser. Here, I’m more concerned with the effect – since making the change, I’ve edited a postbag of 2,500 poems into Magma issue 34, achieved a distinction in my Master’s, and created the Wishful Thinking blog which has transformed my business and opened up many new creative avenues for me to explore. I’ve also written some poems I’m pleased with (at the moment, anyway) and which are gradually making it into publication. Most importantly of all, I made it to the wedding on time!

I’m not listing the above to blow my own trumpet, but to illustrate the value of ring-fencing time for your own creative work, in the midst of more urgent demands. It would have been easy for me to justify turning down the poetry magazine because I was too busy. It would have been even easier to put off starting the blog until I had more time. I could even have reasoned my way into stopping or deferring the Master’s. But the thing is, there will always be something ‘urgent’ taking my attention away from my own creative initiatives. Yet when I look back over the last couple of years, the time when I’ve created most value, for myself and my clients, has been those first hours of the day I’ve spent writing blog posts, essays, seminars and poems. It’s the creative wellspring that feeds into all the coaching, training, presenting and consulting I do when I’m face-to-face with clients.



Enough about me. How can **you** find time to achieve your creative ambitions?

Prioritise work that is ‘important but not urgent’

In his book The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, Stephen Covey classifies work tasks according to whether they are important or urgent.

Covey points out that many of us spend too much time on tasks that are **urgent and important** (the red square in the diagram) – in other words, staving off emergencies by rushing around to solve problems or responding to others’ demands at short notice. Sometimes this is unavoidable – ‘deadline magic’ can spur us on to feats of creative production we wouldn’t otherwise attempt. This can be an exciting and productive experience – but it’s up to you whether you want to work like this most of the time. The example of the computer games industry – where extended ‘crunch’ times can mean endless overtime to meet a deadline – suggests that prolonged deadline magic can turn into deadline misery, with a significant impact on morale and efficiency.

Covey’s solution is to prioritise work that is **important but not urgent** (the blue square in the diagram). Though this is hard to do on any given day, it is the only way to ensure you are **making progress towards your own goals and dreams**, instead of merely reacting to what other people throw at you. And over time, the more you are dealing with important things before they become urgent, the fewer ‘urgent and important’ tasks you will have to deal with.

The most obvious way to do this is to work on your own projects first every day, even if it’s only for half an hour. Whatever interruptions come along later, you will at least have the satisfaction of having made some progress towards your own goals.

It’s obviously not just a question of time – you also need to **ring-fence your attention** so that you can devote your full attention to your creative work, without being knocked off course by distractions. The next chapter will look at how some highly creative people have achieved this, and what you can learn from them.

Questions

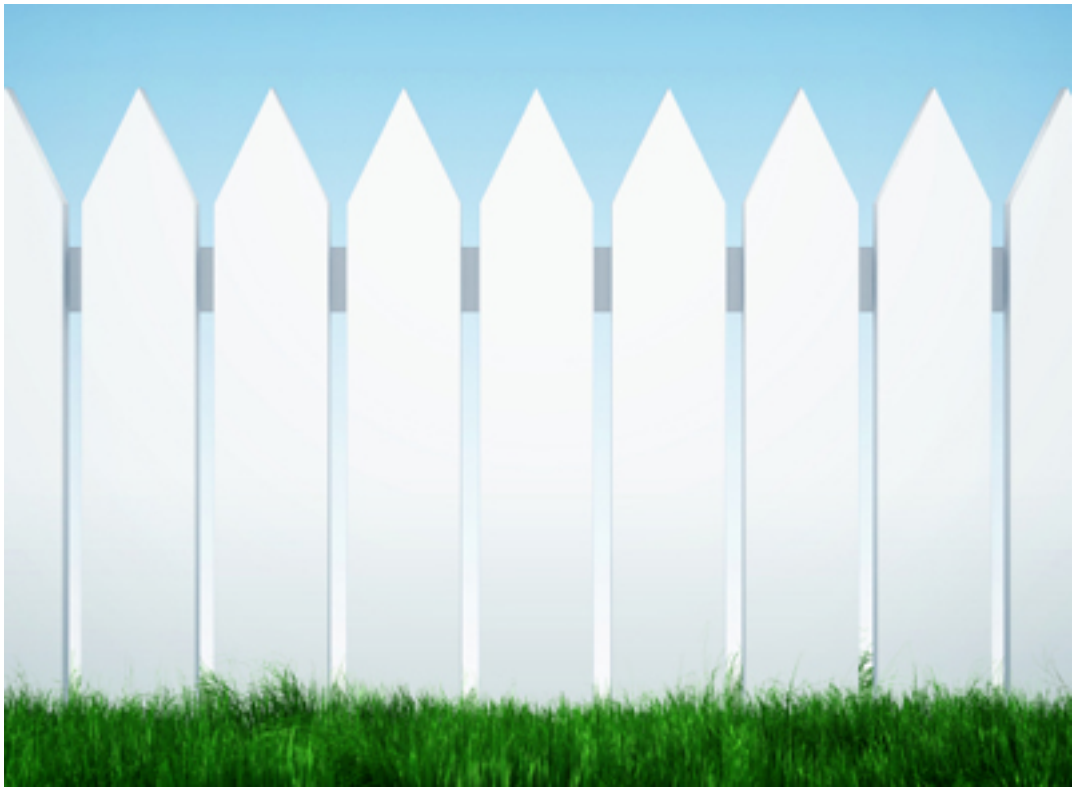
Think of the achievements you are most proud of, and that have added most value to your life and work. When you were working on them, how many of them fell into the ‘important but not urgent’ category?

How do you feel at the end of a day where you have made even a little progress towards a cherished goal?

How do you feel at the end of a day that has been totally swamped by others’ demands and urgent tasks?

What difference would it make to your life if you devoted more of your time to ‘important but not urgent’ work?

3. Ring-fence your most creative time



We've looked at the importance of prioritising 'important but not urgent' work. But how do you actually do this, and maintain the laser-like focus required for concentrated creative work, in the midst of all the demands and distractions of your working life?

Pick your most creative time of day

In my last chapter, I talked about my decision to get up early to write, before the onslaught of phone calls and other distractions. Apart from the lack of external interruptions, I write first thing in the morning because (once I'm up) that's the time of day when I'm most focused and alert. I experience a greater mental clarity in the first couple of hours of the working day than at any other time. As a writer, that quality of attention is my most valuable asset, so I've learned to guard it carefully. If I start ploughing into e-mails, reading blog feeds or doing mundane tasks such as accounts, then I'm squandering my most precious resource.

Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope puts me to shame with his habit of getting up at 5.30 to write his novels before breakfast. But early morning isn't the most creative time for everyone. We all have our own daily rhythms of alertness and rest. ProBlogger Darren Rowse says that 10am to 12pm are his "golden hours" for "thinking creatively and getting things done". Fellow blogger and

author of *The Four Hour Work Week* Tim Ferriss writes blog posts in two phases, at different times of day:

> Separate brainstorming (idea generation) from synthesis (putting it all into a flowing post). I generally note down 10-15 potential points for a post between 10-10:30am with a double espresso, select 4-5 I like and put them in a tentative order from 10:30-10:45am, then I'll let them marinate until 12am-4am, when I'll drink yerba mate tea, craft a few examples to match the points, then start composing. It's important to identify your ideal circadian schedule and pre-writing warm-up for consistent and reliable results.
> The Four Hour Work Week Blog

Writer Maya Angelou makes a similar distinction between time for writing the first draft and for revising it:

> I get up about five… I get in my car and drive off to a hotel room: I can't write in my house, I take a hotel room and ask them to take everything off the walls so there's me, the Bible, Roget's Thesaurus and some good, dry sherry and I'm at work by 6.30. I write on the bed lying down – one elbow is darker than the other, really black from leaning on it – and I write in longhand on yellow pads. Once into it, all disbelief is suspended, it's beautiful…
>
> After dinner I re-read what I've written… if April is the cruellest month, then eight o'clock at night is the cruellest hour because that's when I start to edit and all that pretty stuff I've written gets axed out.
>
> (From *Creators on Creating*, Ed. Frank Barron, Alfonso Montuori, Anthea Barron)

Ring-fence your attention – get yourself in the right state of mind

Maya Angelou's writing habits might seem eccentric, but they actually make complete sense. Writing in a hotel room effectively separates her writing time from the rest of her life, eliminating distractions and ensuring that she can enter a highly creative state of mind whenever she wants to.

My first professional training was in hypnotherapy, which taught me how sensitive the nervous system is to 'triggers' in our environment. The more intense the original emotion and the more unique the trigger, the stronger the emotional reaction will be. For example, if you think of a song you used to play with your first boyfriend/girlfriend, you will probably start to feel some of the emotions you felt with him/her without even hearing the recording. Supposing the song were Bowie's 'Moonage Daydream', you might get something of the same nostalgic/romantic feeling by listening to other glam rock songs, but not as strongly as whenever you hear the opening chords of 'Moonage Daydream' itself.

Looking at Angelou's account, she obviously experiences strong emotions whenever she is writing. And by confining her writing to a special place and time, she has trained her nervous system to associate her creative state with unique combination of different triggers – the early morning drive, the hotel room, blank walls, the Bible, *Roget's Thesaurus*, dry sherry, lying on the bed and yellow paper. No wonder she is in the 'zone' soon after entering the room!

Looked at from this perspective, many of the supposed eccentricities of creative people seem perfectly logical and reasonable. Here is Stephen Spender describing the working habits of himself and his fellow poets:

> Schiller liked to have a smell of rotten apples, concealed beneath his desk, under his nose when he was composing poetry. Walter de la Mare has told me that he must smoke when writing. Auden drinks endless cups of tea. Coffee is my own addiction, besides smoking a great deal, which I hardly ever do except when I am writing.
>
> (from *Creativity*, ed. P.E. Vernon)

Can you see how each of the poets is using a particular stimulus to trigger his creative state?

Maybe you have a special place you go to for focused creative work – a secluded office, a particular chair, a seat in your favourite café. Or you may have a favourite notebook, pen, software application or make of computer – using other tools doesn't feel quite right. Once you get into the habit of using these triggers, they form a kind of ritual, or process of self-hypnosis if you like, to help you reach that state of focused absorption Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls 'creative flow'.

I don't go as far as Maya Angelou, but I do have a morning ritual to help me get into the right frame of mind for writing. A cup of tea first, then filter coffee. Tea goes in the blue china 'Maneki Neko' mug. Coffee in a different cup, covered in Japanese calligraphy, from Kyoto (a city with wonderful associations for me). If I'm drafting poetry, the Mac is banished from the desk. I write on sheets of A4 with a black 0.5mm Muji pen. For other writing, I use the Mac and switch on Isolator to black out the whole screen except the window I am writing in.

Even if you have to work in the middle of an office, there are things you can do to minimise distractions and interruptions. Switch off your mobile phone. Put the landline on answerphone. Close your e-mail application. If the office noise is distracting, try listening to music on your headphones. Set up a signal (e.g. a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on your desk) to let your colleagues know they will interrupt you at their peril. Keep a notepad open and write down any tasks to do with other projects that occur to you while you are working. You can then consult the pad and get on with them after you have finished. (Writing them down will get them off your mind and leave you free to focus – more on this in Chapter 6.)

Finally, if you find yourself starting to procrastinate, here's an excellent tip from Mark Forster. Say to yourself: 'I'm not really going to start working on this piece, I'll just open up the file and look at it…'

Questions

When is your most creative time, when you are most alert and find it easy to focus?

If you could arrange your ideal schedule, what time would you ring-fence for focused creative work?

How close to your ideal schedule can you get within the constraints of your current situation?

Do you have a special place for creative work?

What physical triggers (such as pens, paper, computer hardware or software), rituals or routines do you use to get yourself in the right state of mind?

4. Avoid the 'Sisyphus effect' of endless to-do lists

Imprisoned in the ancient Greek underworld as punishment for his earthly crimes, Sisyphus was famously tortured by a never-ending task. He was condemned to roll a huge rock up a hill – only to watch it roll back down and have to start all over again.

Sound familiar?

Let's have another look at the scenario from the first chapter:

> So you start the day full of enthusiasm. You're excited about a new piece of creative work and itching to put your ideas into action. Firing up your computer, the familiar stream of e-mails pours into your inbox, burying the ones you didn't get round to replying to yesterday. Scanning through the list, your heart sinks – 2 of them look as though they require urgent action. You hit 'reply' and start typing a response to one of them… 20 minutes later you 'come round' and realise you've got sucked into the e-mail zone, and have been sidetracked by interesting links sent by friends, and getting involved in issues that aren't a priority for you. You minimize the e-mail window and get back to your project…
>
> After 15 minutes you're really enjoying yourself, getting into your creative flow – when the phone rings. Somebody wants something from you. Something to do with a meeting last week. You rummage through the papers on your desk, searching for your notes. You can't

find them. Suddenly your heart leaps as you lift up a folder and find an important letter you'd forgotten about – it needed an urgent response, several days ago. 'Hang on, I'll get back to you' you tell the person on the phone, 'I'll ring you back when I've found it'. You put the phone down and pick up the letter – this needs sorting immediately, but you remember why you put it off – it involves several phone calls and hunting through your files for documents you're not sure you even kept. By now, you've only got half an hour before your first meeting and you've promised to ring that person back. Your design stares at you reproachfully. The e-mail inbox is pinging away as it fills up – already there are more messages than before you started answering them. Your enthusiasm has nosedived and the day has hardly begun. Creative work seems like a distant dream.

There are two big problems with this way of working:

1. You are at the mercy of interruptions

Whenever you sit down to focus on your own work, you never know when your concentration will be broken – by an e-mail, a phone call, a request from a colleague, or even by yourself, when you suddenly remember something important that you've forgotten to do. Almost as bad is as the interruptions is anticipating them – you can never really relax and focus, because you know you could be derailed at any moment.

When I trained in hypnosis one of the things I learned was that if you want to create amnesia, you should keep interrupting people and/or change the subject. The hypnotic explanation is that memory is dependent on your state of mind, so when you change your focus, you're changing your state of mind – which makes it hard to remember what you were thinking about before. Think of a time when you were chatting to a friend in a restaurant or at a party and someone came over and interrupted you with a question – when they left, you both turned to each other and asked 'What were we talking about?'.

The bottom line is that **interruptions destroy your concentration**. And loss of concentration = loss of creative work. If you're not careful, you can end up in permanent 'reactive mode' – spending your time responding to others' demands and all the things you have to do instead of the one thing you really **wanted** to do today.

Let's face it, the interruptions aren't going away anytime soon. If they did, it would be a bad thing – it would mean you had no clients, colleagues, customers or collaborators. Obvious short-term fixes are to close your e-mail application, switch your phone onto answerphone mode and put a 'do not disturb' notice on your office door – as recommended in my previous chapter on how to **Ring-fence your most creative time**. But you can't do this all the time – and it doesn't solve your second big problem…

2. The 'Sisyphus effect' – a never-ending to-do list

The 'Sisyphus effect' is the result of endless to-do lists, which in turn are created by a constant stream of incoming demands. We start the day full of enthusiasm, but by the end of it, we've taken on so many new commitments that the to-do list is longer than when we started.

Productivity expert Mark Forster makes an excellent and (to me) surprising point about motivation:

> What is the best way to motivate yourself for your daily work? Obviously, enjoying your work and having a clear vision are very important, but I don't believe they are the most important things for keeping going during the daily grind. On the contrary, I believe that what gives us the most energy is the feeling of being totally on top of our work. If you are totally on top of something you have the energy to do it even if you don't particularly like the work.

I hadn't thought about it like that before, but on examining my own experience, I think he's right – when I'm faced with a limited number of things to do in a day, even if they aren't all particularly exciting, I generally feel motivated enough to get through them. But if I'm faced with a vaguely-defined, open-ended list of tasks, I can feel a sense of hopelessness and my energy drops. I can even find myself paralysed by inaction when faced with 3 or 4 really exciting pieces of work, if I don't think there's time to do them all.

You need to give yourself room to breathe!

Faced with the twin problems of unpredictable interruptions and the Sisyphus effect of never-ending tasks, you need to give yourself room to breathe, keep a clear head and stay focused on what you want to achieve. In short, **you need to install a buffer between others' demands and your response**. Otherwise you'll end up in permanently anxious and unproductive 'reaction mode'.

On the other hand, you need to find a way of fulfilling your commitments and giving others what they need from you within a reasonable timescale. Otherwise you'll quickly gain a reputation for unreliability and pay the penalty.

How can you manage this? I'll present one solution in the next chapter – a surprising and counter-intuitive idea that has transformed my own working life…

Questions

What effect do interruptions have on your creativity?

Do you recognise the Sisyphus effect? What does it do to your motivation levels?

What difference would it make to your working life if being derailed by others' demands was the exception rather than the rule?

What difference would this make to your creativity?

5. Get things done by putting them off till tomorrow

In the last chapter, I described the problems created by a never-ending stream of incoming demands: on the one hand, the constant interruptions can destroy the concentration required for creative work; on the other, endless to-do lists create the 'Sisyphus effect' – a feeling of hopelessness and demotivation.

In his excellent book *Do It Tomorrow*, Mark Forster provides a provocative and elegant solution to these problems, which transformed my working life. He suggests we create a buffer between incoming demands and our response – by making 'do it tomorrow' our default response to all requests. Not 'tomorrow' as in 'tomorrow never comes', but 'tomorrow' as in 'tomorrow'. Not today or the day after tomorrow, but tomorrow.

For example, here's Mark's solution to the never-ending stream of e-mail. In this system, on a typical day you only have to deal with one day's worth of e-mails – i.e. those that arrived yesterday:

1. Supposing you received 40 e-mails yesterday (once you've weeded out all the spam) – the first thing you do is move these 40 e-mails into a folder marked 'action'. These are the only e-mails you are going to deal with today.
2. Sit down and answer them all in one batch. Or at most, two or three concentrated bursts of effort.
3. Any e-mails that arrive in your inbox are collecting there for tomorrow – whatever you do, **don't** get caught up in responding to them, or you will find yourself back in Sisyphus' shoes, facing an endless task!

Of course there will be exceptions – sometimes you will receive an e-mail that has to be answered today – e.g. from your boss, demanding an urgent document by 5pm. But these should be the exceptions, rather than the general rule. Mark argues that most tasks are not nearly as urgent as we think they are – ask yourself 'Will there be a disaster if I don't answer this until tomorrow?' and the answer is usually 'no'.

'Doing it tomorrow' has several benefits:

- **Dealing with e-mails in one batch is more efficient**. You can get into 'e-mail mode' and zip through them in one go.
- **It's more motivating to deal with a finite number of e-mails than an ever-expanding inbox**. In other words, it cuts out the Sisyphus effect and presents you with a manageable task instead of a never-ending one.
- **Today's e-mails can't interrupt you** – because you're not going to respond to them today. I experience a feeling of relief each time I look at an e-mail containing a request and then 'let go' of it and return to the task in hand – confident that I will deal with it tomorrow.
- **You answer e-mails in a better state of mind** – so you're much less likely to take on unnecessary commitments by agreeing to something in order to get rid of the e-mail. You are also likely to make a more thoughtful and helpful response.
- **It doesn't really matter how often you check your e-mail**. Personally I can see the benefit of only checking e-mail once a day, but I'm not disciplined enough to resist, especially if I'm waiting for something important. This way, I can check my e-mail as often as I like without getting caught up in responding to it.
- **You deal with the difficult e-mails**. Most of us have a few 'tricky' e-mails that we put off answering for various reasons. But this system means you answer all the e-mails that came in yesterday – so you end up clearing out the difficult ones and getting them off your mind.
- **You know when you're finished for the day!** Once you've answered yesterday's e-mail, you're finished with e-mail today – how good will that feel?

The same principles apply to other communication channels: post, phone calls, text messages, commitments you take on at meetings. They all go into the in-tray for tomorrow. So at the start of every day, you know exactly how much you have to do to keep abreast of your commitments –

once you've dealt with a day's worth of e-mail, post, phone messages and verbal requests, you're free to get on with more interesting things. Like that design you've been itching to get back to.

N.B. This only applies to the reactive side of your work, i.e. requests coming in from others. Work initiated by you is a different matter – see the chapter on **Ring-fencing your most creative time**. Mark Forster suggests that you prioritise your own goals by devoting the first part of the day to a 'current initiative' of your own. But be wary of putting all your ideas for new initiatives into the in-tray for tomorrow, especially if you are the type of person who has a lot of ideas – I tried doing this when I first read Mark's book (not carefully enough) and put my back out by trying to do an absurd amount of work each day!

Yes but…

- **My in-tray already has hundreds of e-mails in it** – so did mine. Mark Forster suggests that you take all these e-mails and put them in a folder labelled 'Backlog'. Voila – an empty inbox! You can now implement the system by dealing with one day's worth of e-mail at a time. You should also set aside dedicated time to work through the backlog – because you have limited the size of the backlog, it can only get smaller, so every e-mail you deal with brings you closer to a cleared backlog.
- **People expect me to respond to them today**. Then manage their expectations. Sometimes it's a case of 'training' others to learn not to expect an instant response. On average, you're actually more likely to get back to them quicker using this system, since you're not overloading yourself by trying to answer everything as it comes in.
- **My boss expects me to respond today!** This is trickier. If you're lucky, your boss will listen to reason – you can explain your new system and s/he will be impressed by your efficiency and agree to wait until tomorrow unless it's really urgent. If not, then you can at least apply the system to everyone else you deal with.
- **I've got too much coming in!** Mark Forster is pretty blunt about this one – if you've got too many demands coming in on a regular basis then you need to scale down your commitments by saying 'no' and/or delegating more. It's not easy, but it's easier than carrying on with an impossible task.
- **I've got too many other things to do!** Beware of stuffing your diary so full of meetings and client appointments that you don't have time to do the rest of your work. And you don't need to keep up every single day. If I'm running a seminar all day I certainly won't be processing all my e-mails and post when I get home! They can definitely wait until tomorrow.

Mark covers all these objections (and more) in his book, *Do It Tomorrow* – he also offers many more invaluable suggestions, so if you're intrigued by the idea of 'doing it tomorrow', I highly recommend you get hold of a copy.

Do it tomorrow – or next week?

Mark Forster's 'do it tomorrow' system works for me, but it may not be right for you. Your work might follow different rhythms. 'Do it next week' might work better for you. Another productivity guru, Tim Ferriss says it's possible to manage by only checking e-mail once a week!!!

The key principle is to create a 'buffer' between the information and demands that are coming at you, and your response. That way you can get out of reactive mode, avoid the Sisyphus effect and spend more time on the kind of work that really inspires you.

Questions

What difference would it make to your work if you knew every morning how much work you had to get through that day?

Apart from 'do it tomorrow' how else could you create 'buffers' between incoming demands and your response?

6. Get Things Off Your Mind

So you're sitting at your desk, trying to focus on a piece of creative work – but it's hard to concentrate, there's something nagging at your attention. Suddenly it pops into your mind – you've forgotten something urgent! Or even worse, you get a phone call or an e-mail out of the blue demanding to know why you haven't delivered on a promise. Or you notice a post-it on the floor, which has fallen off your monitor, containing a reminder to DO SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT… by yesterday.

If this happens to you often enough, you get used to living with a constant low-level anxiety – scanning your memory, your desk, your e-mails, you post-its, your scattered to-do lists – as you worry that you've forgotten something important. When you agree to do something, you may write it down – but can you be 100% sure you'll notice the note in time to do it? Or if you're out and about and make a commitment, how can you be sure you'll remember to put it on your to-do list when you get back to the office? Wherever you go, whatever you're doing, somewhere at the back of your mind you're wondering whether you've forgotten something vital that could blow up in your face at any moment.

How about this for an alternative?

> What if you could dedicate fully 100 percent of your attention to whatever was at hand, at your own choosing, with no distraction?

> It's a condition of working, doing, and being in which the mind is clear…
>
> Most people give either more or less attention to things than they deserve, simply because they don't operate with a "mind like water".

No, it's not an ancient Zen text – these words are lifted from David Allen's best-selling book on productivity, *Getting Things Done*. When I read this section of the book, I grasped the true value of having a system for managing your workload – not merely to be more productive but to **reclaim your own mind by clearing out unnecessary mental clutter** caused by trying to keep track of all your work commitments.

Before discovering the Getting Things Done system, I would typically have several to-do lists on the go at once, on different sheets of paper, not to mention the post-it notes stuck to my monitor. But I wasn't in the habit of writing **everything** down, so there were always several items I had to remember at any one time. I was vaguely aware that the effort to remember – and anxiety about forgetting – was taking up valuable mental energy and clouding my mind. I resented this all the more, because I had experienced the opposite. I had been on retreats where I had experienced a wonderful mental clarity and peace of mind after several days of silent meditation. But each time the retreat ended, I was frustrated when this clarity was eroded by the demands of everyday life.

When I read David Allen's book, I saw the possibility of experiencing the clarity of a 'mind like water' in the midst of my daily work. Apart from the obvious emotional benefits, I could see that it would help my creativity – the 'mind like water' state sounds very similar to creative flow as described by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: 'an almost automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness'.

So how does David Allen suggest we can achieve this state of mind while dealing with the pressures of work?

Set up 'buckets' to capture your commitments

'Buckets' are physical or virtual containers where you capture important information, demands and commitments so that they can't 'leak' away and be forgotten. You should have as few of these as possible, but as many of them as you need.

Here are my buckets:

- **A plastic in-tray** for incoming letters, business cards, papers, meeting notes, scribbled to-do lists, etc.
- **My e-mail inbox**
- **The inbox on iGTD** – the software I use to manage my to-do lists
- **My two answerphones** (one mobile, one landline)
- **The 'Drafts' folder on my mobile phone** – I always carry my phone with me, so if I have an idea or make a commitment when I'm out and about, I write a text message to myself and save it in the drafts folder.

Important:

- **Put ALL your commitments into these buckets**. Even if I think I can remember a task easily, it will take up valuable mental space – if I put into one of these buckets, I will get it off my mind.
- **NEVER put a commitment anywhere but in your buckets**. If I don't put it in one of the above places, I have to assume it won't happen. So I've trained myself to do it. This was a bit odd at first, now it's almost automatic and I feel a slight sense of relief each time I get something off my mind and into a bucket.

Benefits

- **When you get things off your mind you can forget about them and give your full attention to whatever you're doing in the moment** – such as your creative work.
- **You'll stop forgetting important things** – the number of commitments I've forgotten has dropped dramatically since using this system.
- **You'll stop worrying about forgetting things** – see above.
- **You can easily review your commitments** – so you're less likely to take on more than you can manage.

So am I now living in a constant state of blissful peace and clarity? Not quite. If that's your goal then it's hard to beat the monastic routine. But I've definitely removed one big source of stress from my life – the effort of remembering important commitments and the danger of forgetting them. I've been using the 'buckets' system long enough to know that once I put a task in a bucket, I won't forget it. So once I've made a note, I can stop thinking about it and concentrate on whatever I'm doing right now.

Yes but…

- **I don't like the idea of having to write down all my commitments** – Neither did I. But once I tried the system, I found the benefits easily outweighed the effort. Now it's become a habit and I hardly notice it.
- **It's all very well capturing all this stuff in buckets, but how do I know I'll do anything about it?** That's what the next chapter is about…

Questions

What difference would it make to your life if you knew you would never forget another important commitment?

What would it be like if you could get your commitments off your mind and stay focused in the present?

What difference would it make to know that you could review all your current commitments by looking in 5 or 6 convenient ‘buckets’?

What buckets do you / could you use to capture your commitments?

7. Review your commitments

So you're ring-fencing your creativity, avoiding the Sisyphus effect of endless to-do lists and getting all your commitments off your mind and into buckets. So what happens next?

Obviously, there's no point capturing all those to-do items unless you're going to do something about them. Which means regularly 'emptying the buckets', reviewing your commitments and deciding what to do. How you do this and how often is up to you, but here are a few principles to bear in mind.

Why should you review?

1. First, and most obviously, to make sure you actually **do** the tasks on your to-do lists!
2. If you don't review the lists regularly, you'll soon stop trusting them and won't be able to use them to get things off your mind.
3. To think about how you're going to approach your work. It's tempting to 'get going' first thing in the morning, so you feel like you're getting things done – but whenever I do this, my day is always less productive and more stressful than on days where I take 10 minutes to review my commitments and decide how I'm going to tackle them.
4. It helps you step back and see the 'big picture' of your work, weigh up priorities and make decisions about your next steps.

5. Whenever you review your upcoming work and are confident you can get it all done, it will be a weight of your mind and your energy level will rise. If you review and find that you are **not** confident of getting it all done, then the review will be even more valuable – better to find out now than later on!

When should you review?

In his book *Getting Things Done*, David Allen suggests that you review your to-do lists as often as you need to in order to feel on top of things. I do a mini-review every morning when I look through my e-mails and other in-trays (from yesterday of course).

A larger-scale weekly review is one of the cornerstones of the Getting Things Done system. David Allen describes the weekly review as a time to:

- Gather and process all your 'stuff'
- Review your system
- Update your lists
- Get clean, clear, current and complete

I'll be honest and say I don't do the review every week. Some weeks simply feel too busy, other weeks I'm so caught up in what I'm doing that stopping to review seems like an unnecessary interruption. But whenever I do make time for it, I always feel better – the review gives me a clear sense of where I am and what I'm doing. I nearly always find something important that was in danger of slipping through the cracks. After finishing the review, I'm full of renewed enthusiasm for my work. So maybe I'll do it this week after all…

How should you review?

In his book, David Allen gives detailed instructions on performing a weekly review. But it's really up to you how you do it – the review is about doing whatever you need so that you feel on top of your work.

Here's what I usually do:

1. Empty all my 'buckets' (For a definition of buckets see the previous chapter, **Get things off your mind**.)
2. Review my diary.
3. Review my to-do lists, deleting anything I've done or am not going to do.
4. Decide on my priorities – which projects do I really want to move forward in the next week? How will I find time for them?
5. Backup my computer and blogs.

It's important to empty your buckets by **making sure you have a record of each task in a place where you will find it when you need to**. It's up to you how you manage your to-do lists – you might like to have one big list or several, on paper or in digital format. David Allen suggests you have different lists for different contexts – e.g. a list of phone calls to make by the phone, a separate list of things to do when you're in town etc. . .

I use iGTD to manage most of my lists – it's designed for the Getting Things Done system and allows me to assign tasks to both projects (e.g. 'Blog ideas') and contexts (e.g. phone calls or e-mails). When I empty my buckets, I transfer any tasks from meetings, answerphone messages, notes etc. to iGTD. There's no need to do this for e-mails, as the e-mails themselves serve as reminders of the tasks – I'm not finished until the inbox is empty.

Reading through that last paragraph, I realise how geeky I must sound! Well, I'll let my friends be the judge of that. The system probably sounds like a lot of work, but I hardly notice it any more. It took a while to get used to this way of working, but now it works so well for me, I take it for granted. Dealing with tasks in this way has almost become automatic, leaving my mind free to think about more interesting things.

On the subject of geekiness, it will probably come as no surprise to learn that Getting Things Done and similar systems can become an obsession with some enthusiasts. If you're not careful you can spend so long reviewing and tweaking your system that you never get round to actually doing the things on your list… Having said that, I've found the time I've invested in investigating these systems and changing my working habits has been repaid many times over. I hope this e-book helps you make your working life more productive, enjoyable and creative.

In my final chapter I'll point to some useful books, software and websites to help you fine-tune your own personal organisation system.

Questions

How often do you review your commitments? Daily? Weekly? Never?

What difference does it make when you make time to review?

What difference does it make when you're 'too busy' to review?

How do you review? Any tips you'd like to share?

8. Resources to help you get things done

In this e-book I've given you my take on time management and how it can help or hinder creative work. In doing so, I've taken elements from different systems, having assimilated them over time and adapted them to my own needs. If you are keen to investigate these systems, please make sure you try them one at a time! Otherwise you'll end up confused. It's worth devoting some time to working with a system until you know it really well, before deciding whether you need to add to it. The following are all resources I've used myself.

My 'GTD' delicious bookmark

My GTD del.icio.us bookmark is where I bookmark any web pages I find with useful material about time and workflow management. ('GTD' stands for 'Getting Things Done'.) If you subscribe to the RSS feed for this bookmark then you'll receive new recommendations as I find them.

Books about the creative process

The Creative Habit – Learn it and Use it for Life, by Twyla Tharp
Very down-to-earth, very practical, very inspiring. The famous choreographer shares her working

routine and argues passionately that inspiration doesn't come without a lot of perspiration, discipline and hard work. Highly recommended for anyone who takes their creativity seriously.

Creativity – Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention, by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
Classic study of the creative process, based on the idea that peak creative performance is characterised by the state of creative flow, in which distractions are tuned out and there is a single-minded focus on the work. Achieving more creative flow is one of the main reasons for a creative person to learn about time management.

Creators on Creating, edited by Frank Barron, Alfonso Montuori, Anthea Barron
A rich collection of first-hand accounts of the creative process, including some fascinating descriptions of creators' working habits. Contributors include Leonardo da Vinci, Brian Eno, Ingmar Bergman, Isadora Duncan, Richard Feynman, Rainer Maria Rilke and Frank Zappa.

'Do it tomorrow' – Mark Forster's approach

Do It Tomorrow and Other Secrets of Time Management, book by Mark Forster
If you're pushed for time and want a book on time management that will deliver results fast, this is the one I recommend. The book is deliberately provocative, prompting you to reconsider working habits you take for granted and full of non-obvious suggestions that make complete sense once Mark has explained his reasoning. Not only that, the ideas work and can be applied almost immediately.

Mark's system is not as complex as David Allen's (see below) but that doesn't mean it's less powerful, it's just different. It may well be all you need.

Mark also writes a lively and useful blog, Get Everything Done and provides a selection of Time Management Articles.

'Getting Things Done' – David Allen's system

Getting Things Done - How to Achieve Stress-Free Productivity, book by David Allen
David Allen's 'Getting Things Done' is a powerful system with legions of devoted fans. It's not for the faint-hearted however - once you've read the book it takes 2-3 full days of work to capture all of your commitments and set up the system. Having done this, I would definitely say it's been worth the time and effort, even if it means sacrificing a weekend.

David Allen's website - lots of resources, including free articles, a blog and forums.

Productive Talk Podcast - Merlin Mann Interviews David Allen about his system.

Getting Things Done Guru David Allen and His Cult of Hyperefficiency - Wired Magazine feature on the origins of Getting Things Done.

Getting Design Done - excellent piece about the Getting Things Done system and Creativity, from D. Keith Robinson at Graphic Define.

Implementing GTD for Creative Work? Merlin Mann of 43 Folders responds to Keith Robinson's article and asks whether GTD and creativity are compatible - prompting an interesting discussion in the comments.

Software

If you're a Mac user, Isolator will help you concentrate on your work by blacking out everything on your screen except the menu bar and the application you are currently working in. I gather Dropcloth does the same for Windows.

I use iGTD to organise my projects and 'to do' lists. It's flexible and reasonably user-friendly.

When I had a PC I used Thinking Rock which has similar functionality.

Blogs

43 Folders is a hugely popular GTD blog, run by Merlin Mann. A vast archive of tips and techniques for improving your productivity. I'm tempted to say I don't know how he finds the time, but I'll resist.

Lifehacker is a constant stream of potentially useful productivity tips, many of them tech-oriented, e.g. Manage a to-do list with your iPod touch. There are lots of posts published every day, but it doesn't take long to read - I just skim through the headlines until I find something useful.

Lifehack.org is another deservedly busy and popular productivity blog, run by Leon Ho and his team.

The Four Hour Work Week - As the title of his book *The Four Hour Work Week* suggests, Tim Ferriss offers a radical and provocative approach to rethinking your work and life. It goes far beyond time management and is a stimulating read for anyone who feels overloaded with work and wants to spend their time doing more interesting things. I first heard about Tim's ideas through this interview with Darren Rowse of Problogger.

Stationery

The Behance team specialise in helping creative professionals 'make ideas happen'. They espouse a philosophy of 'productive creativity', embodied in their Action Method and in their range of products for capturing and processing creative ideas. I blogged about their Action Pad for creative meetings a while ago.

There's an argument that having good quality tools will encourage you to use them more. Since buying some Moleskine notebooks earlier this year I've definitely noticed my fingers itching to scribble down more creative ideas and lines of verse.

9. If you found this e-book helpful...

Share it with a friend or colleague

If you know someone else who might find this e-book helpful, feel free to send it to them. Under the terms of the Creative Commons licence, you are free to copy and share this document, as long as you do not sell it, and as long as you keep it intact and credit me as the author.

Subscribe to the Wishful Thinking blog

I write the Wishful Thinking blog to share tips and inspiration for creative professionals, based on my experience of coaching artists and creatives since 1996.

You can have the latest blog posts delivered to you (free, of course) via RSS or E-mail. (If you're new to RSS, have a look at my What is RSS? page.)

Join the discussion on the original blog series

The chapters of this e-book were originally published on Business of Design Online, which offers a wealth of resources from specialist authors, about the business side of working in the design industry. Click on the headings read the posts on BoDo and join the discussion in the comments.

1. Why you need to be organised to be creative
2. Prioritise work that is 'important but not urgent'
3. Ring-fence your most creative time
4. Avoid the 'Sisyphus effect' of endless to-do lists
5. Get things done by putting them off till tomorrow
6. Get things off your mind
7. Review your commitments
8. Resources to help you get things done

Subscribe to Business of Design Online

Subscribe to Business of Design Online to receive more information, tips and advice on the business of graphic design, via RSS or E-mail.

10. The author and publisher

Mark McGuinness - Author

Mark is a poet and a business coach who runs Wishful Thinking - a specialist consultancy for creative professionals and agencies, studios and other companies in the creative industries sector. He writes the Wishful Thinking blog to provide practical tips and inspiration for creative professionals of all descriptions.

Mark originally qualified as a psychotherapist and has an MA in Creative & Media Enterprises from the University of Warwick, UK. His poetry blog is Mark McGuinness|poetry. E-mail Mark.

Business of Design Online - Original Publisher

The text in this e-book was originally published as a series on Business of Design Online, which provides a wealth of information, tools and techniques for successfully managing and marketing a design practice.

BoDo was conceived and created by three seasoned professionals, hailing from three continents – Catherine Wentworth, based in Bangkok, Thailand, Jeanette (Jay) Wickham, based in Melbourne, Australia and Neil Tortorella, based in North Canton, Ohio, USA. Along with their various additional skills, each is a communication designer who've run their own businesses for many years.

On BoDo you'll find continuously updated resources for running a design shop, including select e-books, business forms, excellent articles and more. The team contributes regular blog posts along with guest authors who will share their business experiences.

Wentworth and Tortorella were also instrumental in the development of Creative Latitude (CL), a popular resource site for designers, writers and other creatives. BoDo and CL will be sister sites,

complimenting each other in terms of audience and content. While BoDo is targeted to those who are just setting up their business, CL is targeted toward those with a a few years experience.