

Mind Tools Expert Voices Podcast

Episode 4: “How Do I Stop Wasting My Day?”

Rachel Salaman 00:05

Hello and welcome to the Mind Tools Expert Voices Podcast. This episode is all about knowing what to do with your day – and then getting it all done. I'm Rachel Salaman, host of our Expert Interviews.

Jonathan Hancock 00:20

And I'm Jonathan Hancock, a Mind Tools writer and editor. And once again we'll be delving into our digital archives to discover what the experts had to say to you, Rachel, about this age-old dilemma: “How do I stop wasting my day?”

Rachel Salaman 00:36

Yes, I'm sure it's a question that's been asked for as long as people have had jobs or been doing things! But it does feel a bit more important now, doesn't it – with so many of us getting to decide when and where and even how we work.

Jonathan Hancock 00:51

Yes. And, as always, we're going to split **our** work in two for this podcast. I'll start by looking at what goes **onto** your to-do list for the day. I've found some great tips from the experts about knowing what to attempt, what to avoid, and how to set yourself up for success.

Rachel Salaman 01:06

And then I'll sample the experts' advice on getting down to work – and getting it finished by the end of the day.

Jonathan Hancock 01:14

Excellent. So **we** know what we want to get done. No good putting it off any longer. Let's make a start!

Rachel Salaman 01:19

[Laughs] Absolutely. This is Mind Tools Expert Voices: How Do I Stop Wasting My Day?

Jonathan Hancock 01:28

So I suppose the first challenge is really knowing what you **want** to achieve: how do you decide which goals to go for? Well, maybe – here's a thought – maybe you forget about goals altogether! That's what Bob Tobin told you. He's the author of “What Do You Want to Create Today?” He's a fascinating guy. He had a house by the beach in California. He had his own consulting practice and expensive car.

But, as I'm sure you remember, Rachel, he explained that he left it all behind to move to Japan to follow his dreams. And he said he's so happy now, it feels like he's in heaven! He said all of that happened because he stopped focusing on goals, and started basing **his** to-do list on his dreams.

Bob Tobin 02:10

I think sometimes what happens with goals is that they make us feel kind of inhuman, in some ways. As if the goals were set by somebody else, or [as if] if we have to monitor ourselves in some way by setting goals. So I really recommend that people set, you know, set down their dreams. And I find that goals take care of themselves once you set down your dreams. If you, for example... if your dream you want to be a great professor, you don't have to say, "I'm going to do this, I'm going to do this, I'm going to do this..." You can really figure it out yourself and just focus on the greatness.

Jonathan Hancock 02:43

"Focus on the greatness" – which I love, and I may get tattooed on me at some point! I love that thought. But I did think for a minute there, hang on, is he talking about some kind of "manifesting" idea, you know? Where you dream and ask the universe and it all happens somehow? Actually he did clarify that, though, by saying that you'll still have goals; they just need to come **from** those big things that you're aiming for. So "scattergun" goals that fill up your day probably won't ever get you to the life you want.

Rachel Salaman 03:08

That's quite inspiring, isn't it? Though, of course, you need to be able to kind of marshal everything into a process that actually works, so that those dreams **become** goals.

Jonathan Hancock 03:19

Excellent: I'm glad you said that... because I have a man with a process, with a system! You did an excellent interview with Peter Bregman in New York: CEO of Bregman Partners, blogger for Harvard Business Review and lots of other organizations... and he wrote "18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distraction, and Get the Right Things Done."

Peter Bregman 03:38

There are so many distractions; there are so many... not even distractions, but **good** things to spend our time on. Too many that we can actually accomplish. So the real question that we have is, where's the most effective place to use my time? And how do I filter the other stuff out? How do I say "no" to the right things? And "yes" to the right things so that I'm being effective, not just efficient.

Jonathan Hancock 04:03

So here's Peter's system in a nutshell: think about what you want to achieve in a **year**. Then work out how that relates to what you need to do **today**. And I'll let him explain that a bit more. Like so many of the experts, actually, that you spoke to, he says it all starts by pausing. So let's all take a breath and pause... and hear Peter's system!

Peter Bregman 04:22

The first piece is to just slow down, because we can't change the tires while the car is moving. We're moving so fast, getting everything done that we possibly can, that we have no time to sort of pause and reflect. So the first part is just to pause a little bit. And then it's divided into what is your year about, what is your day about, and what is your moment about?

And decisions should really flow from that – meaning what I do in each moment should be based on what I'm doing in my day, which really should be based on what it is that I want to focus on in my year.

And I think that link is often lost. And that, rather than let things fall through the cracks unintentionally, we want to intentionally push things through the cracks that aren't going to help us focus on the things that we most want to focus on in the year.

Jonathan Hancock 05:05

So, Peter recommends choosing five areas to focus on per year, and he gets people to keep coming back to those on that monthly, daily, and even momentary level. And you might remember, he explained this physical grid that you fill out, and you keep checking. And that all takes that 18 minutes every day that makes the title of his book. I'd really recommend the interview you did with Peter to anyone who likes a system to follow. And we've got plenty of other very strategic approaches like that in the Mind Tools toolkit: things like Eisenhower's Urgent/Important Principle, you get a grid from that as well. And there's the Timeboxing approach for people who like that kind of thing.

I've certainly found it's helpful to be organized. And I'm sure it's helpful to keep checking in with your bigger dreams and your longest-term ambitions. I'm not sure, though, whether it might not be a bit demoralizing if you keep thinking: "Is what I'm doing at this moment moving me forward to the big things?" Because, if it's not, isn't that just a constant reminder that you're having to do the chores and the stuff you've got to do every day... and maybe you're **not** always moving towards your final goals in life?

Rachel Salaman 06:08

And your goals must change, surely? I mean, it's great to have an annual goal, but, really, is that going to stay the same throughout the year? It might move forwards, it might move backwards, it might just change altogether!

Jonathan Hancock 06:21

Yeah. And to be fair, Peter does allow a bit of leeway, I think, within the system. You do get to rewrite things and to tweak them as you move on. But it does, I think, take quite a lot of energy and focus (which is obviously part of his approach, isn't it?) to be constantly thinking: "Is what I'm doing now the right thing for this moment?" – let alone today, let alone the month and the year! I wondered, though, whether maybe just having, like, inspiring quotes on the wall, or even objects – you know, sometimes people have objects on their desk that remind them of their bigger goals and dreams – maybe for some people, those might also keep them connected to their longer-term plans.

Rachel Salaman 06:54

It's a little bit like the "agile" way of working, isn't it, that they use for software development – in that you have a goal, but it is accepted by everyone who's working towards it that it might change. And that's why they have the constant check-ins.

Jonathan Hancock 07:09

Very good point, yes. And again, we've got some good resources on that as well: having a good strategy, but being prepared – with your team, often – to make incremental changes as well, to keep it in the right direction... like you're moving a vehicle or a boat along. Just keep making those little changes in navigation so that you're still moving on the right track. In fact, talking of moving on the right track... the author of our next book, Francesca Gino, wrote a book **called** "Sidetracked." And this is all

about why sometimes our decisions get derailed, and how we can stick to the plan. For me, it certainly rang bells when she talked about the concept of “raising your awareness”: being honest about yourself. So raising awareness about who **you** are as a person, when you start writing things on your list.

Francesca Gino 07:55

Raising your awareness is more about stopping and thinking... about becoming more aware of the subtle influences that derail our decisions, and in particular the influence of thinking **too** positively about our competence and capability.

So if you think about the strategy that you would use in the case of losing weight, for example, which is also something that I mentioned in the book. So, in that case, you would exercise more frequently, and you would start paying more attention to what you eat. And you might go as far as using a diary where you count your own calories. And that would help you stay on track. Raising your awareness, in essence, is doing the same thing in the case of staying on track when it comes to implementing your plans. And you're being more careful of the fact that we think too highly or too positively of our competence and capabilities.

Jonathan Hancock 08:53

And she had lots of research to back that up, sadly! We are generally too positive about our own capabilities!

Rachel Salaman 08:59

I wasn't expecting her to say that! [Laughs]

Jonathan Hancock 09:01

No – but do you know what? I think that really does ring true with me, when it comes to setting lists that are just never going to happen. And I think it's a really lovely... certainly for me, it's a nice moment, to be there with a blank sheet of paper and to be putting down all these big things you're going to achieve in the day. But when it comes down to it, are you actually going to be able to do those? Especially when you think about yourself and your character... I think that's what she's saying, isn't it? Be honest; understand yourself.

Rachel Salaman 09:28

But I think we also need to be a bit careful about Francesca's advice, because some people will already be underestimating themselves. And this might make them underestimate themselves even more, and underachieve – which is no good for anyone!

Jonathan Hancock 09:43

No, that's true. And I guess a lot of our experts – probably all the experts – want people to be ambitious with their time, just realistic as well. Because they're all motivational, positive people, aren't they? They tend to be if they're writing books and talking to you about their work. So definitely they want you to get the best out of your time and effort and the most out of your day. But I suppose Francesca was just balancing that up with realism.

Rachel Salaman 10:05

Yeah, well realism is always a good idea – if you can find it within your situation! [Laughs]

Jonathan Hancock 10:11

[Laughs] Exactly. I guess it's clarity as well, isn't it? Clarity on your character, your capability... planning accordingly to that clear picture. And clarity was a big thing for Kristen Cox. She's a distinguished U.S. public official, and, with the economist Yishai Ashlag, she wrote the book "Stop Decorating the Fish" – an arresting title, which she did explain to you very clearly, I think, in the interview you did.

It's a brilliant book: a wonderful mix of practical advice, but also clever metaphorical thinking. There's a fictitious town called "Busyville" (you can imagine what life is like there!), a problem with fish stocks, people racing around thinking up solutions. Meanwhile, there's a beaver called Alex who's working away on a very natural answer to the problem. And Kristen says this all goes to the heart of so many to-do lists.

Kristen Cox 11:01

What this teaches us, we hope, is that most problems aren't worth solving. These Busyville citizens were very busy, doing lots of things and solving lots of problems. But real breakthrough happens when we know which problem really matters. What's the problem we should solve?

Jonathan Hancock 11:20

Another expert who says, pause, take a step back, work smart, not hard. I think that's definitely a theme coming out of this. And being strategic with the tasks that you put down on your list for the day. And often that means not just racing to solve every problem you can see, but planning tasks based actually on what's **not** happening in the moment, sometimes. So it's quite a thoughtful approach to work planning – and one that Kristen says might need a shift in perspective.

Kristen Cox 11:48

People react to what they know about or have insight into or have visibility into. You know, you change things you have awareness of: if you don't know about it, you're not going to change it. And I think one distinction here for me that's important is there's a big difference between achieving a goal and eliminating a problem. Eliminating a problem is about something we know about and we don't like. But achieving a goal... I have to think about what I'm not doing, what's missing. What information, product line, customer value do I **not** know about? So first of all you have to have a goal. And the goal has to be: "What do we give?" not "What do we get?"

Jonathan Hancock 12:32

I thought that was such an interesting idea of to-do lists, as well. Because it is tempting, isn't it, to look around you and see the things that need doing at that moment, rather than taking that step back and thinking: "What **isn't** being done?" And, "How can I contribute to that in some way through what I put on my list for today?" Not necessarily solving a problem.

Rachel Salaman 12:50

She had a lot of ideas packed into that clip, didn't she? Really interesting – really worth thinking about when you're thinking of the most important thing to spend your time on.

Jonathan Hancock 13:00

Yeah, and what an interesting woman as well. She talked there a lot about things like “seeing,” and “the unseen problems,” and she was very open about her disability, her sight loss – that she's blind. And you talk to her, I thought, really refreshingly about that. And she said that, actually, she's very positive about that aspect of her experience. She said that being blind has actually helped to shape her thinking about all of this.

Kristen Cox 13:24

I learned as a blind person that a lot of the things in this world are kind of made up! [Laughs] And having to question core assumptions is a really important mindset that I learned. I was grateful to learn from some mentors, because our organizations, our products, are byproducts of how we think. And if we can't think clearly, or if we can't question these assumptions that we hold true for a very long period of time, it's very difficult to create the lives we want to create.

Jonathan Hancock 13:55

How easy it is, I think, for all of us, to sometimes race into putting a to-do list together: assuming that we have to do certain things in the day, assuming that the things we see are the things that need to be solved. And she cut through all of that. Really, really refreshing.

Rachel Salaman 14:10

Yes, and a very arresting way of expressing it, too. This idea that a lot of things are just made up. I mean, it's so true, but how often do you hear someone say it like that?

Jonathan Hancock 14:21

Yes, and to make it sound so positive. It **is** a positive thing, isn't it, if you can almost take some time back, as well. And there's a concept called “time affluence” that I really liked. This was Ashley Whillans' idea. Ashley is an assistant professor at Harvard, a happiness expert, and the author of a book called “Time Smart.” As you work out what you want to achieve, she says, bear in mind this idea of time affluence.

Ashley Whillans 14:50

I define time affluence, via many other organizational psychologists, which is the feeling of having enough time to do all of the things that you both want to do and have to do. So you can see inherent in this definition is a subjective feeling that your life is under your own control – that you have enough time to do all of the things that you want to do and have to do. And I define time affluence in this way because, very interestingly, there's been this disassociation over the last couple of decades, where we're actually working **fewer** hours as compared to the 1950s or 60s (and that's true for both men and women, and kind of regardless of profession) but we feel more time stress than we ever have before.

And so that's why I look at time affluence, but just really focus on the psychological feeling of having enough time, because it's such a powerful predictor of happiness, even above and beyond how much time people actually have available to them.

Jonathan Hancock 15:51

So racing to fill up that to-do list, rushing to get lots of stuff done that you think might get you more money and advance you in your career and somehow make you feel satisfied at the end of the day... That might not be the approach at all!

Rachel Salaman 16:03

It really helps you see your to-do list differently, doesn't it, so that you do make sure that that **is** one of your goals: to feel time affluent.

Jonathan Hancock 16:12

And like so many of your guests, she had the research to back up her theories and her insights, which I thought was brilliant. In particular, about this surprising relationship (or maybe “non-relationship”) between time and money.

Ashley Whillans 16:25

In all of my data that I've analyzed, what I find so fascinating is there's a disassociation between the amount of hours that people work and how much income they have. So these more objective markers of time affluence and material affluence, and the subjective feeling of having enough time.

And so it really is this state of mind, which is great from a psychological perspective – and as I outline in the book – **because** it is something that is really in our minds, this feeling of having enough control of our lives: that we can do everything we want to do. It also means that a lot of these solutions for these feelings of time poverty, or the strategies by which we can gain time affluence, are under our own personal control.

Jonathan Hancock 17:10

And that really did make me think we should put some things on this to-do list we're making that are about getting **back** a bit more time. I thought that was a very clever, sort of circular thing, that Ashley talks about, because that could make us feel more in control, and probably happier and better able to do the other things on our list. So sometimes... I think that's great advice: look for things to do that will save you time in the future and create that greater sense of time affluence – and happiness. It's a big, big connection between that feeling and just general wellbeing.

Rachel Salaman 17:41

Yes, I think that will resonate with loads of people who maybe over the last few years have been feeling more overwhelmed with things they feel they have to do.

Jonathan Hancock 17:52

Definitely. And here's a final tip from Ashley. When you're planning your day, plan some things that you could do if you suddenly found some extra time. And I don't know about you, but that doesn't happen that often to me! But occasionally it does. And Ashley says it's a chance to choose what you do more consciously than ever. If you've got this list, whether it's a real list or just something in your head squirreled away, then if time suddenly opens up for you, you've got something there. And you've had a chance to think about how you really want to spend that moment of spare time.

Ashley Whillans 18:22

So it's really about creating a list of things that you want to build more time in your life for. And then, when you find yourself with windfalls of free time – or even planned free time off – you look to that list and say, what are the things on this list that I would rather be doing other than binge watching my favorite TV show? That's good in small doses, don't get me wrong! I definitely binge watch television. But sometimes we do it mindlessly, as opposed to purposely, and that's where this list comes in handy.

Jonathan Hancock 18:51

So “conscious bingeing.” Is that the message?

Rachel Salaman 18:54

[Laughs] Yes, that's what I take from that! The bingeing is going on the to-do list!

Jonathan Hancock 18:59

Yeah, I think it should! You'll feel more time affluent! Positive, practical advice from Ashley Whillans – rounding off my collection of experts that I wanted to bring into our conversation today.

To plan your day, they've talked about keeping your big dreams in mind; developing goals that move you forward, rather than just firefighting every day; being honest about what you – you **personally** – can achieve when you know yourself; understanding the best use of your time; and also – as you heard there from Ashley – trying to keep some time back for yourself, so that you **feel** in control, and you can achieve the plans you've made.

Rachel Salaman 19:33

Yes. And, as always, our email inbox is open for business – if anyone wants to share their reactions to the experts, or indeed supply some ideas of their own. How do **you** decide what you want to do with your time, and then put together your plan for the day? Let us know at expertvoicespodcast@mindtools.com.

Jonathan Hancock 19:55

And if you subscribe to Mind Tools, either individually or get access through work, there's a wealth of resources in the toolkit about planning your work and your life: deciding where you want to go, and setting out your steps for getting there.

And some of our most popular resources are about to-do lists and other similar techniques for getting your work done. And on that note, Rachel, I'm going to hand over the baton to you now. This podcast is about not wasting the day. And if we've decided **what** we want to achieve... come on: how do we actually achieve it? Find us some experts who can help, quick!

Rachel Salaman 20:28

[Laughs] Thanks, Jonathan – I have some, you'll be glad to hear! There is a very rich seam of tips and advice on getting stuff done in our Expert Interviews collection. And I've pulled out some great clips about how to motivate at the start of the day; how to beat procrastination; and also how to avoid distractions, once we've actually got started.

Jonathan Hancock 20:51

I could definitely do with that!

Rachel Salaman 20:53

Yes, well me too! So first up is Margaret Greenberg. She's the author of "Profit from the Positive." We heard from your experts about strategic planning, Jonathan. Margaret says we also need to do **micro** planning – every day.

Margaret Greenberg 21:10

We've been taught to believe that the way to greater productivity is: "Just do it," you know. "Just get it done and get it out the door," as I like to say. But what we found is that when we take time to just **plan** it, just plan our work, whether it's 15 minutes at the start of the day, or 15 minutes at the end of the day, we will actually be more productive. Because what the research has shown is that if we just decide, upfront, where and when we will do a piece of work, we are twice as likely to achieve it.

Rachel Salaman 21:48

Now I do tend to do the kind of planning that Margaret talked about. And for me, it works better, actually, at the **end** of each day, to plan the next day. I take a few minutes to plan what I need to do tomorrow. Somehow that makes it easier for me to "close up shop" for the day and feel good about the next work day. What about you?

Jonathan Hancock 22:08

That sounds very sensible. Maybe that's where I'm going wrong sometimes, because I tend to plan at the start of the day, probably when I'm feeling energetic and everything seems possible! And maybe that's why I sometimes set plans that are overambitious. I might try **your** way sometimes, as well. I think you're also then very close to what you **have** done. And you're probably thinking about what has to come next from each of the tasks you've done – so there's more continuity there as well. Yeah, I like that plan. I'm going to do that!

Rachel Salaman 22:36

Well, I guess – as Margaret says – it can be either at the end of the day or at the start of the day. The main thing is to do a little bit of planning. Josh Linkner had another good tip for getting in a productive frame of mind. He's the author of "Big Little Breakthroughs." And here are a couple of his useful habits. "Big Little Breakthroughs" is mainly aimed at people who need to be creative in their work, but I think these tips are useful no matter what you do.

Josh Linkner 23:06

In software engineering, they say if you want to change the output, you have to change the input. So I spend literally one minute a day just sort of gobbling up creative inputs. I might watch a live musician play on YouTube, I might look at a painting, I might read a poem... but, essentially, I'm absorbing the creativity of others to get my juices flowing.

Another thing that I do is that I spend one minute giving myself a bit of a creativity challenge. It's sort of like working out your creativity muscle. So the challenge might be something like, if I had to take 10,000 ball bearings, and market them as a new type of product, what might that be? And the goal isn't to necessarily create [a] tangible work product. It's more to give yourself creative practice in a low-

pressure situation. So just even those slight little practices on a daily basis can truly add up to pretty big material gain.

Rachel Salaman 23:59

Have you tried anything like that, Jonathan?

Jonathan Hancock 24:02

I'm not sure I've set myself specific creative tasks... Although, actually, sometimes at lunchtime I like to do a crossword, a cryptic crossword. That's possibly that sort of energizing thing there, isn't it? And physical activity for me is a big thing. I love working from home, because at lunchtime I very often get a chance to go out and have a run, which I wouldn't have done if I'd had to spend a lot of time commuting and been stuck in an office all day. And for me, that gives me that extra bit of a lift in the middle of the day. And I think it also goes back to what some of the experts on my side were saying about not getting trapped in just being really busy. But sometimes, taking a bit of time and energy back helps you achieve more on your list, in the end.

Rachel Salaman 24:39

I really liked Josh's idea about looking at videos in the name of being more productive. Might be hard to stick to one minute, though. For me, anyway!

Jonathan Hancock 24:49

Yeah, you've got to be careful with that, haven't you? I think that is a bit of an issue of our age: the accessibility to things like TikTok and YouTube videos and things that can become a distraction. But maybe it's worth trying – if you pick the right things and use them as that very conscious creativity lift, and a bit of a boost amongst a busy day.

Rachel Salaman 25:06

Yeah, worth a try. So maybe you've planned your day, you've got your creative juices flowing, or you've been for your run... but you find that there are suddenly lots of things you need to do before you can actually knuckle down to your work. And this is, of course, Jonathan, our familiar friend... procrastination!

Jonathan Hancock 25:24

Can't we talk about this later? [Laughs] Yeah, I think... is there such a thing as **pre**-crastination?! Sometimes I do things too quickly, because I don't like the fear of leaving things. Yeah, I think there are problems on both sides.

I think we've all been guilty of procrastination, haven't we? Especially if it's just a nagging thing that maybe isn't going to get you into any particular trouble or cause massive problems, but you know you've got to do it – and there are plenty of other things that are more enjoyable and quicker wins... and you just put it off.

Rachel Salaman 25:55

Yes, I do think it's universal. And that might be why I found quite a few tips for beating procrastination scattered throughout our Expert Interviews! Some of them are simple reframing tricks or mindset shifts, but they really can make a difference.

Jeffery Combs wrote a book called “The Procrastination Cure.” He says that, first, we need to be **aware** that we're procrastinating, and ideally understand **why**. Then, we can change how we approach the task by changing how we **talk** about it.

Jeffery Combs 26:32

Key to any transformation is your word choice: change your words, change your actions. But if you continue to do the same actions, in the same words, you'll get the same result. This is why... here's the number one term that leads to procrastination: “need to.”

“Need to” is a future tense with no commitment. If I say “I am,” that's now. If I say “I'm committed,” if I decide, then I will. But if I use words that are noncommittal, I'll get the same [noncommittal] result. So words are key to the transformation.

Rachel Salaman 27:04

And this reminds me of another great reframing tip, about replacing “have to” with “get to.” Do you know this one?

Jonathan Hancock 27:12

No, I haven't heard of that. What's the difference?

Rachel Salaman 27:13

Yeah, I'll give you an example. So... instead of thinking, “I **have** to present our quarterly results to the shareholders on Monday,” we would reframe that as, “I **get** to present our quarterly results to the shareholders.”

Jonathan Hancock 27:25

Oh, OK, like it's an opportunity! [Laughs]

Rachel Salaman 27:27

Exactly, exactly. So on a more mundane level, it might be something like, “I **have** to check in with the marketing team.” And then you would change that to, “I **get** to check in with the marketing team.”

Jonathan Hancock 27:37

I might try that with my teenage kids, actually. “You're never going to believe this: you **get** to do the washing up in 10 minutes!” [Laughs]

Rachel Salaman 27:44

[Laughs] Yeah, I think it's really useful. I mean, it's just a change of one word. It really makes a difference.

Jeffery, of course, in that clip, was suggesting we change “need to” to something more intentional. He also told me about an age-old trick to knuckling down, which is to reward yourself once you've completed the thing you didn't want to start.

Jeffery Combs 28:06

Let's say that you're going to perform for eight hours today. Well, reward yourself at the end of the day: reward yourself with a 15-minute meditation; reward yourself with an ice-cream cone; reward yourself... find something to reward yourself for a task well done.

Even a simple pat on your own back can be a reward – because, emotionally, we require that: we require love, we require reward, we require recognition. But to get it, you can get some of that by just being a good person, by being a good human being. But you also want to have some satisfaction in a task well done.

Rachel Salaman 28:44

I know you're not much of a procrastinator, Jonathan, but do you ever use rewards to help you motivate?

Jonathan Hancock 28:49

For me, it's sometimes just having a bit of time off during the day. Because I think I've learned that about myself – that, if I'm not careful, I can just work, work, work, and not pause. And so I think if there's a really tough thing that I might have been putting off otherwise, I'll think to myself, I'll do that and then I'll give myself 10/15 minutes back. And it might be to watch a video or do a crossword or do a bit of exercise or something... but it might just, like, five or 10 minutes just to sit down and have a cup of coffee and have a little rest! And maybe it's a bit like that “time affluence” idea that Ashley Whillans was talking about earlier? Really appreciating that feeling of wellness that comes from sometimes just stopping – which can be a reward in itself.

Rachel Salaman 29:27

Yes. And it also calls to mind that very vivid image we heard from Peter Bregman earlier, about: you can't change the wheels of a car while it's moving!

Jonathan Hancock 29:37

Yes, yeah, don't attempt that! [Laughs]

Rachel Salaman 29:39

Don't try it! [Laughs] Yeah. Well, Greg McKeown is a business consultant and the author of a best-selling book called “Essentialism.” And I spoke to him about a later book of his called “Effortless,” which is a kind of manifesto for an easy life – but, importantly, an easy **productive** life focusing on just the essential things. He told me his twist on the idea of motivating ourselves through rewards, which is to give yourself a reward while you're actually **doing** the task you need to do. Don't wait until you've done it. So, for example, he answers his voicemails in the hot tub!

Greg McKeown 30:19

By the way, that is for real. And I push the envelope even more on the hot tub strategy – and just taking calls there as well – even sometimes just holding meetings there. And it sounds, even as I say it, a little awkward, but it just goes to show how we assume that work has to be a certain type of experience. And so once you unlock the idea that, look, it's OK for the most essential work, the important work, to be more enjoyable... lots happens!

I have a CEO friend who, you know, wanted to be running on his treadmill every day, but rarely achieved it. There's a particular news program that he always likes to listen to – a podcast. And he just said, "OK, I'm only going to be allowed to listen to that if I'm walking or running on the treadmill." And so that single shift means that he doesn't miss doing it now. It's just... linked it with something he was already going to do anyway – already looking forward to. And instead of separating it and saying, "Well, I'm going to do the workout, and then I'll feel good," he just combined that. He reduced the "lag indicator," so that he experiences the joy in that moment.

Jonathan Hancock 31:35

I always wondered what that bubbling sound was when I called Greg! [Laughs] Now it all makes sense. What an image though! I mean... I think it's a really, really good idea. And I think I do it – not in the hot tub or on the treadmill, but I sometimes just naturally go and sit in the most comfortable chair in the house when I've got the hardest work to do.

So I think it does sort of come naturally. It makes sense, doesn't it? Yeah – if you're going to do something really hard, or you don't want to do, at least make the conditions as good as possible while you're doing it. Maybe I'll make myself my next cup of coffee **while** I'm doing the hard work, rather than waiting until the work is done. That's an idea.

Rachel Salaman 32:07

Yes. Another one to curb procrastination that came up a few times, actually, in our Expert Interviews, was understanding how putting things off is linked to perfectionism. We want something to be perfect, so we delay starting it in case it **isn't**.

Andy Core is a performance and motivation coach, and he's the author of a book called "Change Your Day, Not Your Life." And he was one of our experts who talked about this.

Andy Core 32:26

The pressure of trying to do things perfectly leads to procrastination. And so what I want people to do is to jettison all of that: think less about the potential outcomes, and think more about the execution. Bring your focus down to the daily level – not whether you're going to make your new sales goal or not, but how can you execute today? How can you tick the boxes today? And make sure that you just move the ball forward – move the ball down the field.

Rachel Salaman 33:09

Now this contradicts some of the things that **your** experts were saying, doesn't it?

Jonathan Hancock 33:13

Yeah, it does. The big theme of mine was: stop, take a pause.

Rachel Salaman 33:17

Think of your long-term goals.

Jonathan Hancock 33:19

Yeah. I think, as a writer, I know all too well that when you've got a blank piece of paper or an empty screen, it can be terrifying, and you want to put it off. But if you put a few words down, suddenly you're off, you're into it. And if it's something that you're trying to put off, just **starting** sometimes is the thing you need to do – even if you go back and change those first few bits.

Rachel Salaman 33:36

Yes. And I'm sure that Andy would also see the value in long-term goals. It's just what to focus on when, isn't it?

Well, Tal Ben Shahar was really interesting on this topic, too. He's the author of the best-selling book "Happier." I talked to him about a different book, actually, which was called "The Pursuit of Perfect: how to stop chasing and start living a richer, happier life."

Now, that book was all about the idea of "optimalism" – that we should just be happy if something **isn't** perfect. And if you embrace that idea, you can actually just get started on the jobs that we're putting off. And when I talked to him, he told me about the British philosopher, Samuel Coleridge.

Tal Ben Shahar 34:21

He was a self-declared perfectionist. He wrote back in the 18th century, and couldn't really get down to work, and he would procrastinate. And he would experience incredible anxiety, before putting pen to paper. So what he did, at one point, was say to himself, "OK, I'm going to write my magnum opus, my best work, toward the end of my life. Until that time, everything else is a rough draft." That liberated him, that goal freed him to enjoy the process. Because he didn't yet have to write his perfect work. Now, he never got to write his perfect work, his magnum opus. But he did get to write hundreds and thousands of [words of] beautiful prose. Why? Because it liberated him; it no longer needed to be perfect.

Rachel Salaman 35:10

You can see how taking away the pressure of being perfect might really help you get down to work, can't you?

Jonathan Hancock 35:17

Absolutely. I think I use a similar principle. Again, sorry to bring it back to running, but I do think a lot about running and improving my goals and working out how much I can do in a particular session: what's on my running to-do list, if you like. And I think, for me, not thinking that every run needs to be perfect – and in a long run, thinking every mile doesn't have to be perfect. Like, if I'm doing a marathon, sometimes I do marathons – you can have bad miles along the way and still get there. It sort of liberates you to think that not everything has to be perfect, and you can still keep moving forward. But if you try to make it perfect, that might make you stop.

Rachel Salaman 35:48

Yeah. Not only do you get more done, but you also enjoy it more. So it's win-win!

Jonathan Hancock 35:53

Yeah, be kind to yourself. I think that's a big message, isn't it, in so many aspects of life and work?

Rachel Salaman 35:58

So, once you've stopped procrastinating and started on your task, the last thing you want to happen is to get distracted. Josh Linkner, the author of "Big Little Breakthroughs," who we heard from earlier, he suggests that we think about having what he calls "untouchable days."

Josh Linkner 36:16

I smooch all my meetings and calls into four days, leaving this one beautiful day open from all distractions. I turn off the internet, I shut down my phone, my wife knows how to reach me in emergencies... and that's about it. And it gives me the space and time to really express my deep creative work. And so the key to this principle is, I'm not spending more time, I'm not actually adding more hours to my work week – I'm just reorganizing it in a way that supports the creative process.

Rachel Salaman 36:41

Do you think that's realistic, Jonathan, these days, to have an untouchable day? Sounds great!

Jonathan Hancock 36:46

I think it sounds lovely... I've found it has got harder and harder. And I think I sometimes have to really make an effort to become "untouchable" during the day. And it never lasts for very long. I mean, working from home has loads of advantages, but you are at the beck and call of neighbors popping round, of people delivering things... People can contact you in so many different ways, can't they, loads of different channels. So I do sometimes have to say, "Right, I'm going to leave the phone behind, go to a coffee shop or something, and just really carve out that untouchable time." But it never lasts for long!

Rachel Salaman 37:17

No, no, it's so true. Well, one person who knows quite a lot about avoiding distractions is Chris Bailey. He spent a year trying out dozens of productivity tips. And then he wrote about the experience in a book called "The Productivity Project." He found that consciously "rationing" digital distractions really helped – which goes to what you were saying, Jonathan. Here's what he says about email.

Chris Bailey 37:45

And so that means, you know, carving out certain blocks of time to check your email, which is one of my favorite tactics to do. I check my email once a day. This is tough to do, by the way, you know, it's easy advice to give and more difficult to practice. But it's worth the struggle a thousand times over because of how email and social media can compromise our productivity.

And, again, it goes to the idea that certain elements of our work are "springy" – in that they expand to fit how much time we have available for them. And so if you have, you know, a 20-minute gap in your day, chances are email might seep into that gap and begin to expand to fill it. And this is true with all these "low return" elements of our work. Any digital distraction is the same way.

Rachel Salaman 38:37

So that's social media – and even workplace messaging apps as well. And when I was setting up the interview with Chris, I remember getting an auto reply to my email stating that he'd be checking his email once a day, at 14:30 Eastern Time, and only then. And then I thought, “Well, you know, it's a surprise,” because you don't often get an auto response like that. But then I thought, “By telling people that that's how he handles his email, he doesn't then have to worry about not reading the emails immediately because people won't be expecting an immediate answer.” And I didn't: I read his auto response, and I thought, “OK, so I'll get an answer tomorrow – that's fine.”

Jonathan Hancock 39:16

I think that's really good. I think I gained quite a lot of control when I started looking into the notification settings on some apps. There are things you can do that stop an app sending you everything all the time. Or you can limit it to certain times of day. I mean, right now, while we're talking, I've put my phone on Do Not Disturb mode. And I think there are other times in the day when I should do that, too.

So I would say: fight back against some of the technology, and use the things that are often hidden away in the apps, in the settings of things, that will actually help you stick to your work and only use the tech when you want to.

Rachel Salaman 39:49

That's a great reminder. Another anti-distraction tip from Chris is actually to move things nearer or further away from where you're working – by 20 seconds. Twenty seconds nearer or further away, to be precise. I'll let him explain.

Chris Bailey 40:06

Twenty seconds is enough temporal distance, so that when a distraction is that far out of our way, or, you know, less than 20 seconds **in** our way, it becomes way less distracting, or, you know, impossible to avoid. So it works both ways.

And so, you know, for an example, when we keep chocolates at the bottom of our freezer so that, you know, it takes more than 20 seconds to thaw (that's a go-to method of mine, because food is my weakness, and... you know, in every part of my life!). Or, you know, it works the opposite way, too. And so my filing cabinet – I can reach it right here, it's less than 20 seconds from my desk – so it takes less than 20 seconds to file something. So I never get put off by that task, so that it's not intimidating enough for me to put off.

Jonathan Hancock 40:53

It's a practical thing – amongst all the strategies and theories, there's a really down-to-earth thing that you can do! And it reminds me of something that an expert said in our last episode about “unhooking physically” – just moving your stuff away from a difficult co-worker, for example; just creating a bit of physical space. And you can do that with your phone. You can do that with the chocolates. Yeah, straightforward, sensible – but possibly life-changing advice!

Rachel Salaman 41:18

Yes, and you can start today! So I just want to finish with some wise words from the stress expert Sharon Melnick. She's a business psychologist and the CEO of Horizon Point, Inc. I highly recommend her book "Success Under Stress" – it's absolutely packed with useful tips and insight.

One of the most memorable things from my interview with her, I thought, was what she calls the "50 percent rule." Now, this is about the fact that we can only control about half of what's happening around us, maybe more, maybe less. She said 50 percent just to indicate that there's a lot that is **out** of our control. And then we have to give 100 percent to that 50 percent! Here's Sharon.

Sharon Melnick 42:07

That 50 percent rule is: be impeccable for your 50 percent. And what that means is, take 100 percent responsibility for everything that goes on within your control, right? And really make sure that you're problem solving, and focusing on being effective, and expanding your repertoire of everything that you can do to manage your own self and your own contribution to the situation – before you ever allow yourself to, you know, focus your attention and be drained of your energy etc. by what's going on across that dividing line: what's in other people's 50 percent, or what you can't control.

Rachel Salaman 42:51

So be impeccable for your 50 percent! Less stress, more focus, and another way to stop wasting your day.

Jonathan Hancock 42:59

I love it. I'm going to go off and be more impeccable! [Laughs] And I'm going to try and remember all these numbers: we've had five-minute inputs, and 18 minutes, and the 50 percent rule, and 20 seconds away... I suppose we would, wouldn't we? We'd be talking a lot about numbers and time and measurements – because that's what all of this is about. Knowing you've only got a certain amount of time, you've got a lot of things that you, I hope, have decided you now want to **do** with that time... and some great advice there about how you actually get on and do it in the time available.

Rachel Salaman 43:27

Absolutely. And that's almost all **we've** got time for today! [Laughs] But before we finish up, we've got a little bit of feedback to share on previous episodes of Mind Tools Expert Voices.

Mind Tools coach Sarah Harvey got in touch about Episode 3, which was: What Makes a Great Team Now? And she says, "We don't need to be friends with everyone we work with. But we do absolutely need trust, support, and a sense of mutual understanding to be a great team." She says, "This is no longer a 'nice-to-have' aim. It has become an essential ingredient for success." Can't argue with that.

Jonathan Hancock 44:09

Absolutely. I think in virtual working, as well, and distributed teams, trust is more important than ever. Thank you very much for that Sarah.

And this is in from Richard McDermott who is based in Edinburgh in Scotland. Thanks for getting in touch, Richard. He said, "My favorite tip from your podcast was about asking interviewees what **they** think a role is going to be like." Do you remember? We mentioned that in the interview process just as a

good question for people to ask people who want to join the team. And Richard said, “I wish I'd known that years ago. What a powerful way to have an honest conversation about whether they have realistic expectations, and would really be able to meet them, if they got the job.” And I think he's talking there about Dana Borowka, it was – the expert who said, why not just ask people what they think the job is going to be like? Because that will reveal so much about whether they are **ready** for the job, whether they understand it, and they're the right person for it.

Rachel Salaman 45:00

Yeah, it was a really good tip. And then we've got a comment from Alison Johnson in Brisbane, Australia. She was commenting on Episode 1, which was: Can I Ask for More Pay? She says, “I work in HR. And I totally agree that learning and training are the best routes to promotion.” That's what we ended up concluding in that episode. And she says, “But, too many people do the development work without then **telling** people about it! Highlight it on your CV! Show people what you've learned to do – and that you'll be able to keep learning as you move up the organization.” Such a great point from Alison. People somehow think that, by osmosis, people will know the training and development that they've undertaken. But you actually have to tell people!

Jonathan Hancock 45:45

Yeah. “Your boss isn't telepathic” was one of my favorite quotes from that episode! And here's a great example of when you've got to actually say it out loud – sing about all the development that you've done, all the learning you've done. Absolutely.

Well, that was from Episode 1. And remember, all the previous episodes of our podcast are still there on whichever platform you're using to hear this one! And actually, if you're listening to us directly from www.mindtools.com, you just select the current episode, and you'll see there's a button there for “more episodes” at the bottom. And they're all there for you to listen back to. And we would love getting more feedback, plus workplace stories, insights and ideas, and maybe any requests you've got for future topics. Just send us an email to expertvoicespodcast@mindtools.com to get involved.

Rachel Salaman 46:30

And for articles, quizzes, videos, infographics, and **all** our Expert Interviews in full, go to www.mindtools.com to find out about joining. There's so much information there about making the most of your time. So why not see what a difference it makes for you and your team?!

In the meantime, good luck deciding on your dreams, planning your work, and getting more of it done every day!

Jonathan Hancock 46:54

And leave space on your to-do list to listen-in next time when we're back with another Mind Tools Expert Voices. For now, Rachel, our work here is done!

Rachel Salaman 47:04

See you soon!