

Stop List Bulge

Hugh D. Culver

We are creatures of habit. Every day we walk, talk, think, worry, and go to work in a very similar way as yesterday. No problem there, if you are getting and doing everything you want in a day. But what if your list is bigger than your time? Maybe you notice that you are great at adding “To-Do’s”, but half of your list never seems to get a line drawn through it?



There is no end of things to keep you busy. At work there are client needs, bosses needs, improvement needs, committee needs and the list goes on. Everybody I know wants to know how to get more things on their list done. And then there are the changes you want to create in your personal life. The bookstores are bulging with great advice from well-meaning authors (like me), that tell us that we need to: meditate everyday, exercise, plan for our financial future and be the ultimate husband/wife and parent. Yikes—how can we do all this and have time to sleep?

It’s all good stuff—if you had endless amounts of time and nothing else on your plate.

I have discovered in my life that all the ambition and great ideas in the world are worthless unless I have a discipline that helps me to be effective at planning and getting things done. Just think of all the people you know that talk about the changes they want to make in their life, but never seem to make any headway. The problem is that they lack the tools to plan and complete. Without these tools they are destined to be dreamers that are always frustrated by their inability to move great ideas forward to completion.

"Never mistake activity for achievement."

John Wooden

Let’s look at ways to actually do more of the right stuff and avoid list bulge.

CHOOSE BETTER

The reality is we can’t do it all. Nobody can, not Branson, Oprah, or Buffett, or you—nor should we try. When that new, cool, “Must-Do” comes across your consciousness, pause and think before you make it a “Will-Do”. At the point of choice you can save yourself a lot of time and grief.

When I am travelling I usually have time to read magazines, listen to podcasts, and get ideas for my business. Often I find myself scribbling these little nuggets on a notepad, or tearing the article out of the magazine and already

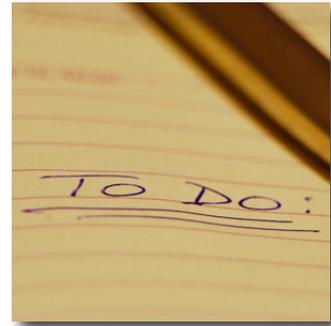
formulating how I will put them into action. There's nothing wrong with that—until I try to find the time to do it.

On one recent trip I made notes on: creating a new “Thank You” card to go to clients, adding an automated assistant to my web site, and using Google to search for potential association clients for my keynote speaking business. All good ideas—and any one of them could chew up many hours of time to research, create, and perfect.

Instead I use the one-week rule. If it still sounds good at the end of a week, it might have merit and I'll take it to the next step. If after one-week other things have taken priority, or it no longer grabs me, I move on. It obviously wasn't important enough and, fear not, there will be plenty more great ideas to follow.

PLAN BETTER

An interesting exercise is to look at how long tasks stay on your list waiting for some attention. In one study the longest that some tasks were on To-Do lists was 27 days! That's 27 days of thinking about the task, choosing to skip over it, rewriting it the next day and then going through the same routine over and over again every day—that's a mind-numbing habit!



Often I delay getting started on a task because of how I recorded it. If the task looks like hard work - or it will consume a lot of time - I will put it off. One trick I have developed is to always record tasks (in my Day Plan or Action Plan) so they provide specific direction and look like they could be completed in twenty minutes or less (obviously some activities, like meetings can take longer).

For example, “phone Jim and get quotation” will always get more action from me than “research new venue options” or “work on event budget.” When my brain hears language like “research”, “investigate”, “fix”, “deal with” or other vague wording it interprets it as heavy lifting. After all, if you have a steady stream of emails shouting at you, work on you desk calling your name and a phone that keeps ringing while would you try to tackle something that is undefined and sounds like a lot of work? I know I wouldn't.

A good exercise is to scan tasks on your list today that you have procrastinated about this week and then check out your wording. If you see some vague abstract description it could be that a tighter, more specific description would have got you started.

“Adventure is just bad planning”

Roald Amundsen

WORK FROM ONE LIST

This might seem obvious, but it's worth mentioning: work from only one list. In my book *Give Me a Break* I describe my Plan like a Pilot system of the Action Plan (for the week) and Day Plan (for the day.) I have found that this system keeps me focused on the right work and motivated and focused.

When I work with clients I see some habits that hold them back and multiple lists can be the biggest anchor. When you have a day timer, lists on your computer, notes recorded on your phone, stickie-notes to remind you of important details and a note pad with scribbles from the last meeting you are in trouble. There is no way you can claim to be focused, goal-oriented and effective if you allow your lists to propagate like rabbits.

“Try not. Do. Or do not. There is not try.”

Yoda

The first change you should make with your lists is to break work into at least three categories: today, this week, and long-term. Cramming everything onto one list just creates list overload and doesn't serve you.

Next you need to decide what tools you need to use. A common strategy (if you can call it that) is to have one big journal-like book that doubles as a day planner. Everything goes in there like a big suitcase with all your responsibilities unsorted, unprioritized and (probably) unfinished.

I recommend that if you are a Microsoft Outlook user that you become familiar with Outlook Tasks. This is a simple way to record your goals for the week and your longer-term goals. Learn how to set up categories and you will be even more successful. Good categories are: “Action Plan (for the week)”, Boulders (long-term)”, Reading, Training Committee, Research, Finance, etc.

On a Mac you can use the tasks feature in iCal or some third-party tool. The important change to make is to separate your work into what you need to be looking at today, a short list of priorities to accomplish by Friday and long-term Boulders you have a focus on.

DROP STUFF

You can't keep cramming clothes into an already full suitcase—physics are against you. And you can't keep adding things to your Day Timer when you don't have enough time for what's already there.

The solution is to be just as good at growing a “Stop Doing” list as you are at growing your “To-Do” list.

I remember when our kids were younger a friend had a family policy of a toy-for-a-toy. If a child wanted a new toy, and the parents agreed to it, then one toy they already owned had to be donated to charity. What a great lesson and what a great idea for reducing the clutter in the house.

I describe the Stop Doing list more in my book *Give Me a Break*, but here are a few tips:

What can go? Often the habitual, routine, and common tasks are just carry-overs from last week. Do you really need to still be doing these tasks? Start your Stop Doing list with a review of the tasks on your current To-Do list by asking these questions:

- If I wasn't doing this anymore what would happen?
- If I was creating my ideal job, would this be on my list?
- If I wasn't doing this anymore, what would I be able to do instead?

Challenge “because”. It might be that you have always cut your lawn, done your own taxes, or answered your phone at work—just because. “Because” is just an excuse for skipping critical thinking.

Saying “I’ve always done it that way” is like the story of the now-adult daughter asking her mother why she always cut the turkey in half before baking it only to learn that it was because when *her* mother was a young girl the ovens were much smaller.

“ ‘Someday’ is a disease that will take your dreams to your grave with you.”

Tim Ferriss

Delegate more. Whether you are in business for yourself or not you should avoid work that someone else can do at half your salary. Delegate to them and you free up your time (plus they might even be better at it than you are).

It’s all about creating capacity. If your time-vessel is always full, you have very little capacity for taking on valuable new opportunities to learn (like that evening course you want to go take), explore (like phoning your customers for advice on how to serve them better), and grow (like creating exciting goals for the next quarter).

GET FASTER

Sometimes the Peter Principle (work expands to fill the time allotted) gets the better of us. By simply getting more efficient with a routine task you might discover a hidden time saving.

Start by finding one time consuming activity you do habitually and speed it up; shoot for the same results, but in less time. I'll give you three to work on here and you might want to also look at: exercise, writing, cooking, and meetings.

Reading. We do it everyday, but how many of us actually excel at it? The average person reads at about 200-300 wpm (1/2 to 1 page per minute). What if you could double your speed, without a loss of comprehension? That would mean you could read faster, retain the flow of the content better, and consume more information in a month. Pretty cool.

There are lots of simple improvements you can make to read faster. In my book *Give Me a Break* I describe the system I use. You can also get a great system from free-time guru and author Tim Ferriss at www.bit.ly/spdread

Email. In one generation we have gone from a nascent technology to Email being so commonplace it's considered a necessary work skill and even could be a person's (groan) full time job. Getting faster at emptying the Inbox seems obvious, but most people never improve their efficiency. Four quick improvements are:

1. **Visit less often.** Don't allow Email to fill gaps in your day, or you'll always be a victim of other's goals. Create a schedule (I try to work on Email only four times a day), do concentrated work, and in between—turn it off.
2. **Pre-sort and read on priorities.** Create simple rules to move new Emails into folders. Then read your emails starting with the most important folder first.
3. **Get off unwanted lists.** Unsubscribe—enough said.
4. **Use the phone.** Don't let Email replace good old phone calls. When in doubt about how they will react to your missive—pick up the phone.

Typing. The average computer user can type at about 33 words per minute. With a little focused practice, speeds can increase to between 50 and 70 wpm. Think of all those Emails, reports, agendas, or inter-office memo that you could create in far less time.

Here's a quick way to get your fingers flying: take a free on-line typing test (www.typingtest.com), next create a goal (like increase by 20% in one month), take an on-line lesson for 10 minutes once a week for a month, at the end of the month test again. Now, here's your incentive: if you type for about one hour a day (most of us are at least double that) a 20% improvement is the equivalent of one week a year less time spent typing.



“ Create a definite plan for carrying out your desire begin at once, whether you’re ready or not, to put this plan into action.”

Napolean Hill

Stopping list-bulge can mean more of the right stuff gets done and you have less stress. But, it’s unlikely it will happen without a new strategy.

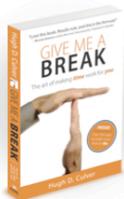
Here’s what I recommend. Use any one of these for one week and then notice the results. Notice an improvement-great keep going. Isn’t making a big difference-no problem, move on to trying a new one. The trick is to be consistent with the application of the new strategy and to pay attention to the small changes.

One small change, done consistently and done well could make a one big change to your success and stress level long-term. Sounds like a good investment!

“ Be faithful in small things because it is in them that your strength lies.”

Mother Teresa

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If you find this advice helpful please share it with someone who you think
could benefit as well.*



Hugh Culver’s business adventures have included a private airline, real estate, tourism and consulting to leading organizations like: Imperial Oil, Shoppers Drug Mart, Royal Bank of Canada, Suncor, Telus, and the Red Cross.

Hugh is the author of *Give Me a Break – the art of making time work for you*. His presentations guide thousands of people each year to work smarter and live better in the Age of Distraction. Learn more about Hugh at www.HughCulver.com

