

# Go with the Flow

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It is 2:30 in the afternoon and I feel like my brain has gone on holiday. Bags packed, out the door, nobody home and I just read a paragraph in a report for the third time (and it still doesn't make any sense). I don't know if I should keep plowing ahead, hoping my synapses have enjoyed their mid-day nap, or try a brew of caffeine. Neither choice seems likely to succeed; I'm in the afternoon doldrums with no wind in sight.

Sound familiar?

I think a common fallacy is that we think we should have the same energy throughout the day; like we are electrical motors - just plug us in and we produce. Minute after minute, hour after hour, we should be focused, concentrating on completion, and pleasant to everyone who crosses our path. Yeah, right.

“Knowing when not to work hard is as important as knowing when to.” Harvey Mackay, *Don't Swim with the Sharks*

Of course we know this doesn't happen. We have energy highs, lows and in-betweens. Our bodies respond to what we eat, when we ate and how long it's been since we've seen our pillows. And then there is also the natural fatigue that comes from solving problems, attending meetings, typing reports and grinding away the emails in your InBox.

## PERSONAL ENERGY CHART

A better approach is what I call: **Go with the Flow**. The basic idea is simple: match your work to your energy.

First ask yourself: when are you the most energetic, optimistic and ready to tackle the tough stuff on your list? You probably notice that your energy is great in the morning—you are fired up, ready to take on the world and able to focus on one conversation, one task at a time.

And then ask: when do you catch yourself semi-comatose reading the same paragraph for the third time? You might notice that around 1:30 or 2 PM you are searching for a chocolate bar, pouring another coffee, or snacking on something you will regret later. It feels like your brain has stopped firing and you are trying to give it life support.

Just like it's natural to need sleep, it's also natural for your body to cycle through energy highs and lows. It's called your Ultradian Rhythm, and it cycles every 90-120 minutes from high energy to low.

Rather than trying to jump-start your synapses during an energy slump, a better solution is to *work with* your energy patterns, and not fight what is natural. First, let's see what your energy pattern at work really is.

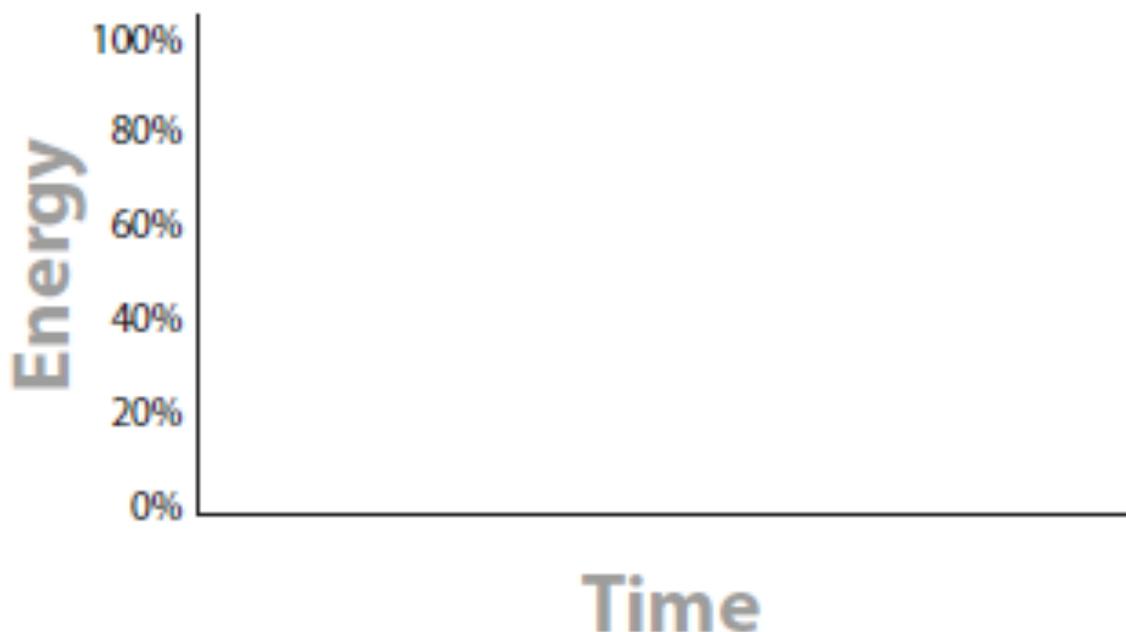
In the chart below, imagine that the horizontal line represents your time at work. The left-hand star represents when you arrive at work, midday is represented by the small triangle, and by the end of the day, when you go home, is indicated by the right-hand star. The vertical column represents your energy at a given moment. The higher up the chart, the more energy you have and the easier it is to get work done while being optimistic, productive and creative. Conversely, the lower you are on the chart, the less energy you have and the more difficult it is to concentrate on work or complete tasks.

Now think about *your* energy during the day.

- When are you the most energetic, focused, optimistic and resilient?
- When does your energy wane and you start searching for a sugar snack?

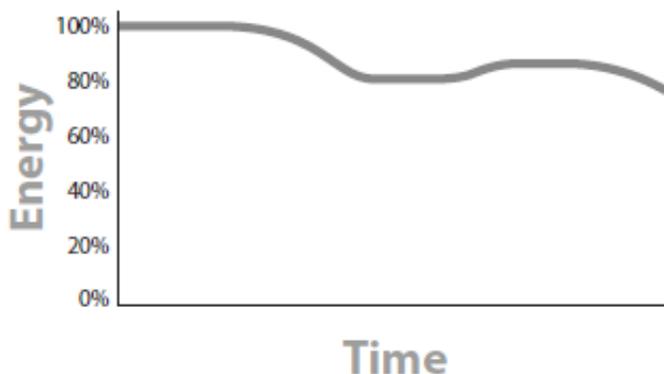
On Chart #1 draw a curve, from left to right, to represent your typical energy flow in a day. Again, the higher the line, the more energy you normally have at that time of day, and the lower the line, the lower your energy level.

### CHART #1 - My typical energy curve



The Chart #2 I am showing an average energy curve based on a study of over 2,200 Canadian workers (conducted by Accutemps) with two high-energy periods in the day.

Chart #2 - Typical energy curve



Don't fret if your chart doesn't match; this is just an example. What *is important* is to distinguish between the 'highs' and 'lows' in your day. If you are like most people, one peak time is in the morning, usually for about ninety minutes, and one shortly after lunch lasts about one hour. Again, it doesn't matter if this is true for you - I want you to just focus on where you have 'highs' and 'lows' typically in your day.

At our high-energy times our thinking is clear, we have positive energy and we are more creative. Work is easier, we are happier doing it, and we are far more likely to be efficient and successful. But how are *you* using your high-energy zones?

And what are you doing in your low-energy zones? If you are like most people, you choose what to work on based on what is routine, scheduled or most urgent.

One disastrous pattern I often see is starting the day with email. We all know that some email is important and needs you immediate response. The problem starts when we start thinking that all incoming email is more important than our goals.

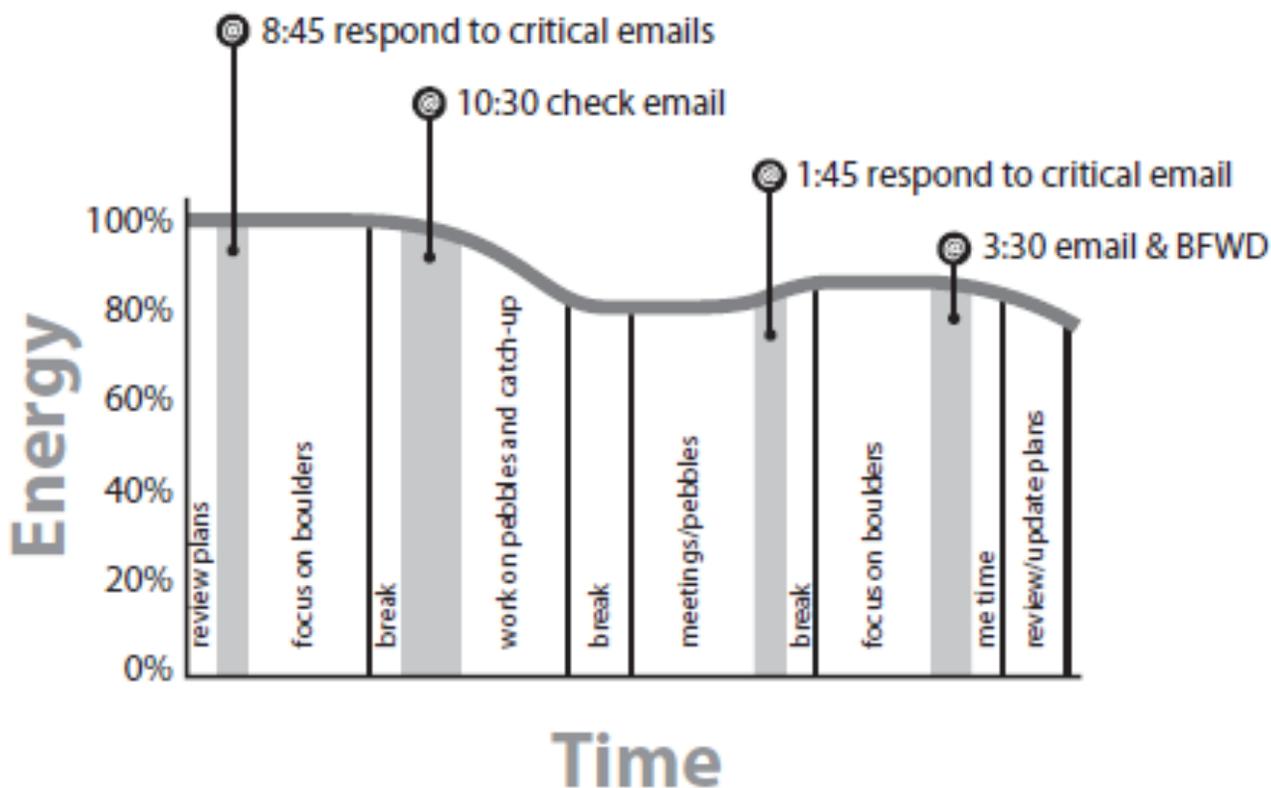
The habit of trying to respond to your emails first thing in the morning is counterproductive—it’s also easily fixed. The trick is to always be thinking about matching type of work to type of energy.

With email the solution is to quickly scan the urgent emails that need a response and then allow yourself 10 to 15 minutes to deal with those. You might get over 100 emails a day (in which case you probably also need to spend some time unsubscribing), but my guess is that only 10% actually need a quick response.

Once you have dealt with the urgent get to your planned list of priority work. Don’t cycle between focused work and email - that will slow you down and distract you - instead, stay focused.

In Chart #3 I am presenting what an ‘ideal’ day could look like. I’m suggesting this formula because, in fact, this is what I strive for when I have a day in the office.

Chart #3 - My ideal day



Here is a breakdown of my plan for the day:

- First up is a review of my plans. This is when I update what I recorded the night before (or on Friday when I left for the weekend.) Having quiet focused time for 10-15 minutes as soon as I arrive will guarantee a less stressful, more successful day.
- I try to limit my visits to email-land. I know that I want to stay current with what is coming in, but I also know that those visits every few minutes interrupt my work on Boulders. So, I try to limit myself to four major chunks of time daily for email.
  - **8:45 am** - After checking my Day Plan (for the day) and Action Plan (for the week) I check email, but only to respond to emergencies, clients, or client-related work that I know was left over from the day before. I delete, click and drag email to Tasks or Calendar or move to a folder. Total time: fifteen to twenty minutes.
  - **10:30 am** - Check email (fifteen to twenty minutes).
  - **1:45 pm** - Check email (fifteen minutes). This is a quick check for returned messages and any important new messages.
  - **3:30 pm** - Check email (thirty minutes). I spend more time composing longer responses and cleaning up the Inbox.

Total time is about one hour to one and one half hours.

- I have two crucial periods dedicated to Boulder work: before 10:30 am and before 3:30 pm. Each session will be about forty-five minutes to one hour.
- There are a couple of undedicated flex time slots built into the day for scheduling conference calls, or catching up on client work.
- The end of the day is important Me-Time for setting the stage for the following day. I like to have thirty minutes to do some reading, wrap up some Boulder work or make appointments.
- I finish with my planning ritual: check my Action Plan, update my Day Plan and acknowledge what I have accomplished. The more I focus on what is going well with my work and progress towards my goals the more excited I am about returning to it the next day.

What about consider your routines? Are you making the best use of your high-energy zones and your low energy zones? Chances are that your energy patterns are predictable, so it just makes sense to work *with them*, instead of against.

## HARNESS YOUR HIGH-ENERGY ZONES

Here are six strategies that will help you harness your high-energy zones and get more work done in less time:

1. **Protect your high-energy zones.** If you are a morning person, minimize your time on email for the first ninety minutes, close your door, and let people in your office know that mornings are when you need uninterrupted time to work on your Boulders. This time zone could represent 80% of your work if you plan for it.
2. **Reschedule meetings.** Move meetings to outside your high-energy periods. Unless they are brainstorming or problem-solving meetings, you will do everyone a favor if you hold routine meetings just before or just after lunch. If it is a creative-thinking meeting, try to schedule it before 11 am.
3. **Cluster similar tasks together.** For low-energy times, plan on clustering routine work together (email, reading reports, sending invites for meetings). Similarly, cluster your high-energy work together.
4. **Make a plan.** Always make a Day Plan for the next day before leaving the office. Make sure you know what you will work on first thing in the morning and block that time on your calendar.
5. **Complete tasks.** Before moving on to other tasks, finish the task you are working on. Avoid multi-tasking (especially in low-energy periods), focus on completion, and work on getting the Pebbles off your Day Plan.
6. **Be realistic.** Get into a habit of setting realistic targets for each time slot. Only thirty minutes? Plan for twenty-five minutes of work and actually complete it before moving on.

## GREAT CANDIDATES

The following Pebbles are great candidates to include in your high-energy zones:

- Creative planning with your team or committee
- Checking on a committee's progress since the last meeting
- Making critical phone calls that require your full attention
- Resolving a relationship issue

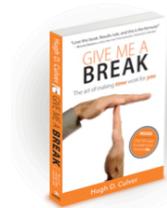
- Writing thank-you cards
- Making sales calls of any kind, or follow-up calls to clients
- Feedback, coaching and performance reviews for staff
- Interviewing job applicants
- Composing a critical communication by letter or email
- Planning an event
- Making critical budget or staffing decisions

Here's a good rule to follow: if you tend to procrastinate about some work, whether it is repetitive or not, it probably belongs in your high-energy zones. This is where I put my writing assignments, proposal writing and calls with clients.

Try this system for one week and then notice the difference. You will have to adjust it to fit your work and your style, but the principles are simple: match your work to your energy. After just one week of thinking about this and watching the results of your adjustments I'm guessing you will notice a big difference.

I know that it feels great to cross the tough tasks off my list and cruise into some flex-time knowing that the hard push is behind me. I'm hoping you will soon be getting that same feeling more often!

*This report is our way of sharing with you.  
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](http://www.HughCulver.com)

