



## News

### For Immediate Release

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### **Avoiding Death by To-Do List:**

#### **15 Ways to Stop Feeling Overwhelmed and Start Working Smarter**

*If you're like many Americans, you dread the stress and anxiety that each workday brings. Your to-do list and bursting-at-the-(cyber)seams inbox constantly loom large, leaving you little time to act on the tasks that matter most. Workplace performance expert Jason Womack explains how to get a handle on both—and maybe even find the wherewithal to finally change your life.*

**Hoboken, NJ**—If you're like many Americans, instead of spending your workdays feeling challenged and gratified, you feel overwhelmed by a never-ending to-do list, an inbox full of e-mails begging for an immediate response, and a boss and coworkers who seem to be pulling you in 20 different directions. You end every day just happy you survived without making a colossal mistake and already dreading what the next day will bring. For you, Monday through Friday (and sometimes Saturday and Sunday, too) mean a constant state of feeling overwhelmed and incapable of getting everything done.

It's true, says Jason Womack: For too many of us, feeling anxious and overwhelmed has become the new normal. But with his help you can finally get a handle on your to-do list and start working—and living—at your best.

“Most of your dread doesn't come from the work itself—it comes from how you think about the work,” says Womack, a workplace performance expert, executive coach, and author of the new book *Your Best Just Got Better: Work Smarter, Think Bigger, Make More* (Wiley, February 2012, ISBN: 978-1-118-12198-6, \$24.95). “The psychological weight of unfinished tasks and unmade decisions is huge. There is a constant feeling of pressure to do more with less. You can't change that reality...but you can make peace with it.”



Womack's book is packed with strategies, tactics, tools, and processes to help readers consistently and incrementally improve their performance at work. It teaches the fundamentals of workflow and human performance and spells out how to get more done, on time, with fewer resources, and with less stress. But more than that, it provides brilliant insights into why we tend to do what we've always done—and how we can break out of the patterns that hold us back.

“The first step to changing the way you get things done is to accept that you're never going to get it *all* done,” says Womack. “You'll always be updating your to-do list by crossing off completed tasks and adding new ones...and that's okay. When you improve the way you approach the things you need to get done, both on the job and off, you'll stop wishing things were different and start really making new things possible.”

Read on to learn more about the essential good habits you can create to become more productive and less stressed at work:

**Purge and unsubscribe.** When Womack suggests reducing your psychological burden, in some cases that means reducing your literal burden. Take some time to delete and recycle the “old” parts of your work life to make more room for the “new.” Are there tasks on your to-do list you're never going to have time to do? Do you have a calendar from 2010 still hanging in your cubicle? Get rid of them. Too many people let a backlog (paper AND digital information) pile up over time.

“Get rid of everything you can and reduce what might be coming in,” advises Womack. “Unsubscribe from e-mail newsletters, magazines, book-of-the-month clubs, perhaps even the ad-hoc committees you've joined recently. Try the ‘unsubscription’ for three months; at the end of those 12 weeks, you can re-up if you want to!”

**Block out your time and prioritize.** Ask yourself this: *How much time do I really spend each day clicking through e-mails and making my to-do list?* The answer is probably *a lot*. When you spend your day making giant to-do lists or flagging “urgent” e-mails, you'll never get any real work done. Instead look at your day and figure out where you have blocks of time to really focus and engage on what needs to be done.

Time blocking and prioritization are two important keys to daily productivity, says Womack. Look at your to-do list, figure out where you have blocks of time to act on those items, and then prioritize. “I keep my defined ‘work’ actions to 15 to 30 minutes each,” he says. “These are the ‘chunks’ of time I can use to stay focused, minimize interruptions, and work effectively.”

When you're feeling especially overwhelmed or you're on deadline for a big project, you might also designate specific “Interrupt Me” times during the day. This lets people know that you'll be working “head down” for larger blocks of the day and encourages them to “think-bunch-interrupt” so you get more done at once, instead of getting interrupted multiple times per day.

**Change how you manage e-mail.** The moment you click on your inbox, your focus goes and your stress grows, as you proceed to delete, respond, forward, and file the messages you find there. You see names and subject lines and suddenly your mind starts racing; all you can think of are the latest projects, the “loudest” issues, and the high-priority work that shows up. If you’re not careful, all you’ll do all day is manage your e-mail.

Rather than simply flag e-mails that require action, use the subject lines to catalog and organize them, suggests Womack. For example, you might put “Follow-up Call” in the subject line of an e-mail about a meeting you just had with a client. Also, don’t look at your e-mail unless you have a block of time to devote to prioritizing them and responding to them. When you are going through your e-mail, use subject lines to catalog them and organize them so that you’ll easily be able to go back to less urgent e-mails later on.

**Take technology shortcuts.** Womack writes about a client of his who easily wasted over three hours a week organizing her e-mails into the 300+ folders she had down the left-hand column of her Microsoft Outlook. And those three hours didn’t include the time she knew she’d have to spend catching up—putting most of her 7,000 inbox e-mails in those folders! Womack shared with his client a few specific features (rules and search folders) of Microsoft Outlook that would enable her to cut down considerably the time she spent organizing her e-mails.

“My client now spends less than an hour a week filing her messages,” says Womack. “And while an e-mail system is what worked for her, practically every kind of software you use daily has tricks and shortcuts that once implemented could save you a lot of time. Sit down with those who can teach you more about these systems. The more you fully understand the tools you use the easier it will be to learn even more about their features and how to use them to your advantage.”

**Break inertia.** Ever watch a freight train start to move? That first forward jolt takes the most energy; keeping the train rolling is much easier. Do some small things to get rolling on getting caught up. Then pace yourself. You’ll probably find it’s much easier to keep rolling along at a comfortable clip.

“We build up such a sense of dread that what we have to do seems insurmountable,” explains Womack. “Once you get started with something small and manageable, you almost always realize ‘Hey, this isn’t so tough after all.’ And soon you find that you’re making real progress—and it feels good.”

**Keep your BlackBerry out of bed.** Womack writes about a client who listed “Check e-mail on BlackBerry (in bed)” as part of his daily morning routine. Note that he didn’t *do* anything about those e-mails while still in bed. He waited until he was commuting to work (he had a 40-minute train ride to the office each day) to start taking action. Then, he said, he rushed through his morning worrying about the e-mails he had read in bed.

“Together, he and I designed a five-day experiment during which period he would leave his mobile device in another room and use an alarm clock to wake up instead of his phone,” says Womack. “He would shower, dress, eat breakfast, and *then* check e-mail on his train ride to work. Initially, he expressed concern that he might miss the ‘thinking about what I have to think

about' time he had built in to the early part of the day, but he was willing to give the experiment a try.

“When I called him the following week, he had good news,” Womack continues. “The experiment had worked. He was less stressed and was using his morning more productively. This change in his routine gave him a higher quality of life with less stress and increased productivity—one he didn't know was possible without falling behind in his work.”

**Always be prepared for “bonus time.”** This is a great strategy for increasing productivity. Bring small chunks of work with you wherever you go. Then, while waiting for a meeting to start or for a delayed flight to depart—Womack calls these unexpected blocks of free time “bonus time”—you'll be able to reply to an e-mail or make a phone call. In other instances, you might have enough time to review materials for another meeting or project you are working on. If you're prepared, you can also confirm appointments, draft responses, or map out a project outline.

“I can promise you that sometime during the next month, *someone* is going to arrive late for a meeting with you, cancel a meeting, or otherwise keep you waiting,” says Womack. “When that inevitably happens, you can look over your to-do list and pick something—anything—to work on.”

**Reduce meeting time lengths.** If meetings at your organization are normally given a 60-minute time length, start giving them a 45-minute time length. You'll find that what you get done in 60 minutes you can also achieve in 45 minutes. You'll also gain 15 extra minutes for each meeting you have.

“Usually, we fill the time we expect to fill,” says Womack. “Give yourself less time and you'll get it done in less time. The shorter time frame really gets you focused. All that extra time will really add up and provide you with more time to work toward your goals.”

**Figure out what distracts you.** It can be extremely helpful to discern exactly what it is that gets in the way of your focus. Identify what is blocking your ability to give all of your attention to what needs your attention. Is it the constant ding of e-mails popping up in your inbox? Is it employees or colleagues who need “just a minute” of your time? Once you have this inventory, you can begin to make subtle changes so that you wind up getting more done, in less time, at a higher level of quality.

“I look for what I call the ‘big two’ when I'm coaching clients,” says Womack. “Together we uncover just two common interruptions or distractions that are getting in the way of their getting more important work done each day. My goal is to minimize the kinds of distractions in my clients' work world that can easily pull them away from doing the meaningful, important, prioritized work they need to get done.”

**Divide your projects into small, manageable pieces.** Take one step at a time and don't worry about reaching the ultimate goal. Make use of small chunks of time. In fact, a great way to approach this is to break the yearly goals down into quarterly goals. Start planning at the

beginning of each quarter. If you worked on a goal only two hours each week (perhaps over four 30-minute sessions), you'll have a total of X hours to invest in that goal. Set milestones, decide actions, and make progress faster.

**Identify the VERBS that need attention. (And here's a hint: Smaller is better.)** Organize your to-do list by verbs in order to manage your productivity in terms of action, delegation, and progress. Actions such as *call*, *draft*, *review*, and *invite* are things that you can do, generally in one sitting, that have the potential to move the project forward one step at a time.

“If your to-do list has ‘big’ verbs—by which I mean verbs that are mentally demanding or longer term in nature such as *plan*, *discuss*, *create*, or *implement*—replace them with action steps to just get started,” says Womack. “That is, pick ‘smaller’ verbs, by which I mean verbs describing tasks that are easier to start and faster to finish. This will save you time and reduce the sense of overload you’re feeling.”

**Learn to delegate clearly (much, much more clearly).** Come to terms with the fact that you can't get it all done yourself. Identify exactly what needs to be done and by when. Over-communicate and (if you need to!) track what you have given to whom.

“Check back weekly with your ‘Waiting on...’ inventory and follow up with people who you think may wind up falling behind,” urges Womack. “Be relentless. After all, if the people you delegate to aren't productive, you won't be productive either.”

**Hold yourself accountable with end-of-day notecards.** At the end of each day, write down (on a 3x5 notecard) basic things about each day: *Who you met with*. *What you completed*. *Where you went*. *What you learned*. At the end of the month, you can use this “inventory of engagement” to identify what you want/need to do more (or less!) of.

“It is essential for you to be conscious of how much work there IS that you have taken on,” says Womack. “When you see how much you ARE doing—or how little of the right things—you will be motivated to ‘get better.’ This activity is a great way to hold yourself accountable and make sure you're really doing the things that help you make the most of your time.”

**Implement a weekly debrief.** Take time after every five-day period to stop, look around, and assess where you are in relation to where you thought you would be. Look at three key areas: 1. What new ideas have emerged? 2. What decisions need to be made? 3. How do I track this information?

“Not only does the weekly debrief help you hold yourself accountable, it allows you to course-correct if necessary,” notes Womack. “Things usually don't go the way we expect them to, so these weekly debriefs give us the opportunity to ask ourselves, *Does this still make sense? And if not, what does?*”

**Forecast your future.** Open your calendar to 180 days from today. There, write three to four paragraphs describing what you'll have done, where you'll have been, and what will have happened to your personal/professional life by then. This kind of “forecasting” is good to do

from time to time, and by spending ten or so minutes at the beginning of each month thinking about the next six months, you'll put your goals into action.

“What we think about is what we do,” says Womack. “Identifying what we'd like to experience is the first step in developing the habits and actions that move us closer to our goals. That ten minutes is the starting point in moving off the ‘thought trails’ that force you into thinking what you've always thought—and doing what you've always done.”

“We all want to enjoy what we do every day,” says Womack. “We want to get better and better, both on the job and off, and yet many people are too overwhelmed to make the key changes that will help them do so. There is no reason to remain mired in frustration and struggling to catch up. Life can be a wonderfully exciting journey, and it can start whenever we want it to start. With just a few key changes, you can be working smarter and enjoying more success before you know it.”

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**About the Author:**

Jason W. Womack, MEd, MA, provides practical methods to maximize tools, systems, and processes to achieve quality work/life balance. He has worked with leaders and executives for over 16 years in the business and education sectors. His focus is on creating ideas that matter and implementing solutions that are valuable to organizations and the individuals in those organizations.

Author of *Your Best Just Got Better: Work Smarter, Think Bigger, Make More*, Jason shows that working longer hours doesn't make up for a flawed approach to productivity and performance. Entrepreneurs need to clarify their habits, build mindset-based strategies, and be proactive. Womack's signature workplace performance techniques offer specific strategies to consistently and incrementally improve performance.

**About the Book:**

*Your Best Just Got Better: Work Smarter, Think Bigger, Make More* (Wiley, February 2012, ISBN: 978-1-118-12198-6, \$24.95) is available at bookstores nationwide and from major online booksellers.

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