Give Me a Break
The art of making time work for you.

BONUS NOTES
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It’s not the minutes that make a life,
but the life in the minutes.
Hello!

I hope that this Bonus Notes are a valuable addition to the keynote that I recently shared with you. Drop me a line at hugh@hughculver.com and let me know!

**Plan like a Pilot (ACTion Plan)**

The problem with most planning is not so much lack of *intention*; it is more an issue of *perspective*. The planning retreat was all about the coming year (or half-year, or quarter). The crisis on Tuesday is all about Tuesday. So when you are putting out the fire about late shipments, it’s hard to be thinking about the new scheduling software that was you were talking about last September.

In his book *First Things First* Stephen Covey likens the problem to trying to walk down the street while looking through the telephoto lens of a camera. You have an intense focus on what is right in front of you, but miss out on a larger perspective.

To solve this problem, you need a more workable action-oriented perspective, which is(drum roll please): the week. Okay, I know this doesn’t sound revolutionary, but stick with me. This is actually the most revolutionary change my clients make in planning and in how they think about time.

When you plan for the week you can include long-term strategies and goals with the more immediate needs of the day. We call this the Action Plan, because it is all about what is going to create action for you moving your Boulders forward.

In my work, moving Boulders forward toward completion can translate into more sales, better staff performance, lower costs, fewer missed deadlines and (best of all) less stress for me. Boulders can also include coaching staff, resolving conflicts, improving customer service and other non-sales-related and non-client-related goals.
Creating a list of high-priority goals for the week will be one of your most valuable systems. It will keep you on track with what is important, and it will prevent you from spending your time on low-priority Sandbox tasks. Your Action Plan will give you targets to work toward, and a reason to get back on course after every interruption. It will also break the larger Boulders down into Pebbles, making previously daunting tasks more achievable.

There are four steps to creating your Action Plan:

1. **Review** last week’s Action Plan. I recommend that you allow at least fifteen minutes for this exercise every Friday afternoon. This is a good time to stop, review, decide what items you want to transfer forward to the next week, and what items you want to drop and then create your Action Plan. There are at least four choices you can make with each decision:
   - **Do it now.** Here’s a quick rule of thumb: If you estimate that the task can be completed in less than two minutes don’t bother recording it on your Day Plan. Simply complete the task and move on.
   - **Defer it.** Later today? Record it on your Day Plan. Later this week? Record it on your Action Plan.
   - **Delegate it.** Use this as an opportunity to train or coach someone else on your team or outsource the work.
   - **Dump it.** Decide that this is not important and cross it out.

2. Identify the Boulders that you want to complete, or to move ahead to next week. This is your chance to reflect on your progress with long-term goals, and to look at what you need to get done. If you did not manage to complete a certain Boulder last week, it may not have been presented in achievable, bite-sized chunks. Go ahead and break your Boulders down to one or two Pebble-sized chunks that can be managed within the week.

3. Define the list to make sure it is full of SMART goals.

4. **Post** - make sure your list is visible where you refer to it throughout the day. You can post the list at your desk, in your Day-Timer or in Microsoft Outlook Tasks. Outlook Tasks is a great place to record and keep track of your Action Plan, especially if you learn how to use Categories (note that to view categories you have to make a one-time selection by clicking on View > Arrange by > Categories).
When you arrive at work Monday morning and all your planning is complete, you become focused and excited about starting to work on your goals. Participants in our Reclaiming the Clock seminars tell us that adopting the Action Plan system is one of the most important improvements to their effectiveness at work and at home.

**Invest in Energy**

You are energy and everything you do in the day either replaces that energy, or depletes it. What are you doing every day to recharge and create the kind of energy you need to have a great day?

Are you taking care of the basics? Get enough sleep, exercise regularly and eat a good breakfast. All the mental machinations in the world can’t overcome the drag of an engine that’s running on empty. It’s pretty simple: if you neglect your body you will pay the price in terms of concentration, energy, emotions and health. The trick is to pay attention to how you fuel your engine with a routine. If it’s convenient, affordable and enjoyable, you’ll probably stick with it. Here are some of the basics.¹

- **Stay hydrated.** Coffee and tea don’t hydrate you; in fact they are diuretics that draw water out of your cells. You maybe noticed that drinking more tea can actually leave you with a dry mouth. Pounding back the mugs of java or sipping your favorite leaf brew makes for sluggish circulation - your heart has to work harder, and your body starts to redirect blood away from areas not vital for survival (like the brain). A simple solution is to start the day with a large glass of water. That will get you off to a great start. Then, you need to match every cup of coffee or tea with a glass of water.

- **Exercise at least thirty minutes per day.** Okay let’s get real about exercise. First fact: most people are never going to commit to a regular exercise routine. Second fact: people will commit to something they enjoy. No wonder TV wins over exercise, and so does reading, eating, Internet and a host of other distractions.

It may not be a scientifically accurate research study, but every time I ask an audience if they would like to be in better physical shape virtually all hands go up. This leads to

¹ Obviously, you need to always seek professional medical advice before attempting any significant change in diet or fitness.
the third fact: almost everyone wants to be in better physical shape.

So the desire is there, but not the will. The mismatch is that exercise sounds like work, not something to be enjoyed. The solution should be obvious: make exercise something you enjoy. First make a commitment to a goal. What’s it going to be: look better in the mirror, run that ten-kilometre race, complete the cycling tour or just feel better in the morning? Next start a new routine that you actually look forward to enjoying. Combine listening to an audio book or podcast with your walk or while on the stationary bike. Join a riding club, sports team or hiking group. Or stretch your self (literally) with yoga, Tai Chi or Karate. There are hundreds of options that provide alternative ways to exercise in unique ways.

Once you have the ‘why’ clearly defined, you just need to stick with your plan. Three steps: pick the goal, commit, start and don’t stop. It’s like an Olympic athlete once said, “There’s only two times you need to exercise to be prepared for the Olympics: when you want to and when you don’t.”

**WALK A DOG IT’S GOOD FOR YOU**

After over twenty years of training for marathons and pretty consistent long workouts Riley made me cut back on my workouts. Riley is our new dog and dogs (as I quickly learnt) need a lot of exercise. So my runs and long bike rides have turned into morning and night walks - every day. And here’s the surprise: sixty to ninety minutes of brisk walking (we run together on weekends) is a lot of exercise. And, even though, it wasn’t the regular, more intensive workouts I was used to it was more consistent and it was a lot of hours with a leash. So I did some research.

It turns out those thirty minutes of brisk walking, just five days a week is a fantastic fitness program! In a longitudinal study of 72,000 female nurses this amount of exercise is associated with a thirty to 40% lower risk of heart disease, reduced risk of breast cancer and type 2 Diabetes. A similar study related this level of exercise to a twenty to 30% lower risk of gallstone surgery in women and half the risk of strokes in men. And the list goes on for general health benefits, like: lower risk of hip fracture, arthritis, colon cancer, mood swings, impotence, depression and osteoporosis.

Not bad results for the equivalent time as watching the evening news.

**Eat for long energy.** In the morning skip the pop tarts and go for complex carbohydrates (whole grain bread, cereal) with protein (yogurt, cottage cheese or

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2 Based on the twenty year Nurses’ Health Study of 72,000 female nurses.
3 A Harvard study of more than 60,000 women ages 40 to 65.
4 According to a Harvard study of more than 11,000 men.
5 Be sure to check with your doctor on the level of exercise that’s best for you.
skim milk) and fruit. Stay off the high-sugar-content sweets, cereals or pastries. There is a reason why ‘sugar’ is first on the list of ingredients for most of these goodies and it’s not because they are good for your health.

Your objective is to fuel up for the next four to five hours, so think long-term. The quick hit of pastry or muffin with coffee might work short-term, but you’ll be hitting an energy low soon after.

Sleep to recharge. The jury is out on how long, but the verdict is that long term too little is obviously not good, but nor is too much either. If you aren’t getting the sleep you need you need to get it right and you probably need a professional’s advice. When you get this one right, it is a catalyst for all aspects of your health.

Pack a snack. Here’s quick re-frame my wife gave me years ago: muffins, that staple of mid-morning snacks, are nothing more than cake wrapped in paper. Yuck, that re-frame has stuck with me for years, and has kept my paws off many a treat. Let’s face it: most snacks we eat during the day aren’t designed to give us slow-burn energy. Healthier alternatives, like fruit, nuts and raw vegetables have to be more convenient than the vending machine. Every day (even when travelling) bring an interesting variety of healthy goodies and experiment to find what makes you feel best when you need to be at your best.

Balance your Life

Stephan Rechtschaffen, co-founder of the pioneering self-development Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York, wrote eloquently about the need for us to resist becoming an ultra-efficient ‘doing machine’ in his book, Timeshifting. “The time management taught at business seminars is essentially designed to make you more materialistically productive.” warned Rechtschaffen. “If God could take the seventh day off to rest, then a half hour a day doesn’t seem much to ask of ourselves.”

Here is a quick exercise to check in on how your time is getting used. Read the following list and put a checkmark beside the symptoms that you might recognize feeling in a typical day at work:

___ Other people’s agendas are driving my day.
___ My typical day is so chaotic and unpredictable that my plans quickly become meaningless.
___ Interruptions run my life; I have a hard time finding five minutes for myself.
___ I feel guilty if I’m not always busy.
___ As soon as I finish one task or meeting I always go straight into another.
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I feel like I am on a treadmill, and the days don’t seem to change or improve.

I find I am checking email on my Blackberry at restaurants and at home when I should be enjoying time off.

I know I should be taking more time to think and plan, but I don’t.

I work through the weekend, that’s the only time when I can finally get work done.

I notice my attention span is getting shorter and I’m having trouble focusing for more than a few minutes.

The only quiet time I get is in the washroom.

If any of these statements describe you, then I am going to suggest that you are not operating at you full potential. Constantly going faster, packing more into your day and rushing from task to task is not a receipt for success. In fact, something must be getting sacrificed.

I like to create what I call ‘Me-Time’ in my day. Me-Time is like a pit stop; it is your opportunity to slow down, take stock, recharge and get focused for what lies ahead. You can use it do nothing and relax, or to tidy up your work area or to check on your plans. This is your time to use in a way that will make the next hour and the one after that more effective and more enjoyable.

Sometimes I use this time simply to get re-oriented to my Action Plan for the week and check on my plan for the rest of my day. Or I can use it for brainstorming and getting creative about some new direction I want to take the company. But more often than not I use it to do nothing but relax into a meditative state and quiet my thoughts.

Here are some simple ideas for how you can build Me-Time into your week:

1. SCHEDULE REGULAR ME-TIME

Regardless of the focus, you will have more success if you schedule Me-Time and not leave it to the whims of attitude or the mercy of others. I know scheduling time for yourself may sound somewhat regimented, but ask yourself how many times did you intend to take a break in the day, but instead kept on working? In fact, a colleague once commented that most people are never late for a meeting with another person, but they will often skip a meeting with themselves. It’s time to change that prioritization.

Maybe a little discipline is not such a bad thing once in a while.
Remember the financial planner who told me he didn’t take appointments on Thursday afternoons? Rather than hoping some free time would appear, he actually blocked research time into his schedule. We should all do the same.

My technique is to schedule at least thirty minutes (one hour is better) of Me-Time every week in my Action Plan. When you do this, be specific about the goal you want to work on and set the time, just like a meeting you might book with a client. It can be in smaller chunks, but it should add up to at least thirty minutes.

Let others know that this is a meeting you are booked for and do not let anyone override it. By scheduling this time you send an important message to your subconscious that you are important enough to have time just for you.

2. BOOK YOURSELF OUT OF THE OFFICE

I love those 360-degree real estate tours where you move your mouse and get to view the whole condo or living room in a house. You get to see everything that’s there and get a quick impression of what the room is like. Do that now: slowly spin around in your chair and take in your office space. Are you are surrounded by reminders of work that needs to be attended to: reports to be read, papers to be filed, phone message slips, voice mail waiting for you, emails to be read, etc? Just being in that environment can be distracting.

To create Me-Time I often cross the street to a café, order a tea, and just let my mind relax and take the attention off the unfinished work. I don’t take my cell phone, just my laptop. The only commitment I make is that I will focus on just one Pebble that needs my attention and I will reach some kind of conclusion. For example, I might edit a chapter in this book, work on a new feature for my web site, some committee work, notes on a draft proposal or do a mind map for a new project.

I look forward to these little escapes; they make me feel more productive, even though I am only working on one thing. And I return to my office feeling refreshed and re-focused.

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When you’re on top of everything it’s hard to get to the bottom of anything.
-LINDA STONE, coined the phrase “continuous partial attention”
3. TAKE A ME-TIME WALK

As an avid runner I know that physical activity of any kind stimulates centers in our brain that allow for creative thought and increased positive mood. A brisk walk of even fifteen minutes will increase your heart rate, release endorphins that reduce pain and give you a feeling of well-being. Heading out for a quick four-block tour in the middle of the day can turn your dull feeling of work pressure around and return you to the office feeling more positive and focused.

In his book, Walking Your Blues Away: How to Heal the Mind and Create Emotional Well-Being, Thom Hartman promotes the value of walking for changing the emotional energy around a problem and for finding new solutions. He recommends that you choose one topic or challenge and stay focused on it throughout your walk. When you find yourself drifting off topic, remind yourself to refocus on that one topic.

As you walk, notice how your issue begins to morph and change. It could be a subtle change in feeling or a new solution begins to bubble to the surface. Toward the end of your walk, anchor your new feeling or solution by recording the new direction or action you are going to take.

I was doing this one day as I ruminated about a staffing issue. I had just received notice that my main employee was going on maternity leave - permanently. She was the glue that held together hundreds of details and her departure would be a huge loss.

The usual remedies started to come up: replace her, look at temp services, etc. As I walked I allowed these knee-jerk solutions to quiet and I chose instead to just be with the question, “What do I really want?” and not, “What is the solution?” It was freeing to not jump into solution-creating mode. I started to notice the walk more, taking in the fresh air, enjoying the physical movement and feeling my feet as they carried me into a nearby park.

After about ten minutes, the thought of replacing her began taking a back seat to envisioning my ideal day - what I really wanted. I started to picture simpler surroundings at work, with less paper and fewer filing cabinets, fewer wires and boxes humming away doing who-knows-what. It was freeing!

By the time I was returning to my office, I was convinced that the solution was not about replacing my employee; it was about becoming free of the complexity of my current office set-up. Within a few days and with her help we had crafted a plan to sell or give away all the furniture, phones, most of the computers, to take any non-
essential papers and files to recycling, and to move the company to a one-person office. We also made a new work plan for the operation of the company, and began actively outsourcing as much work as possible.

I’m convinced that none of these solutions would have come to me if I had stayed in my office making lists. I needed to break free from my usual patterns of problem solving and to ask a different set of questions.

It only took ten minutes of walking to get the process started but it opened a new world for my company. Two weeks later virtually all the unnecessary furniture, phones, fax machine and computers were either sold or given to charity. I also hauled more than twelve huge bags of old files, records, reports and paper out of the office to be recycled. It was like a metaphor for mental clarity: the more paper that was removed, the freer my thinking became.

The moral of the story is: when in doubt, take a hike.

By the way, walking is also a wonderful alternative to a traditional sitting meeting. I have found that there can be less tension, more positive energy and even more honesty in a walking meeting.

4. CREATE MINI ME-TIME BREAKS

We often treat our days as a series of highlights - the big meeting, a good meal, an outing with the kids - while ignoring the time in between. But the in-between moments are the bulk of our lives.

—THICH NHAT HANH, author and peace activist

When the workload is up and your Day Plan is bulging with demands on your time, you can use these simple techniques to create mini Me-Time breaks throughout the day:

• When the phone rings, use that as a cue to relax. Take a deep breath, center your focus on only that moment, release any anxiety or worries and allow your thoughts to quiet. It only takes a moment, but it can make a world of difference to you and how you sound on the call.

• Set your arrival time for appointments to five minutes early. Instead of rushing to arrive on time to meetings, plan to arrive early. Use this free time to compose your thoughts, update your daily planner or plan the outcomes you want from the meeting. Do this and you may notice that you are one of the few people grounded and thinking clearly for the first ten minutes.

• After you finish one task, pause for a moment before beginning another. One habit I have picked up this year is to enjoy a mini-celebration after a particularly difficult task has been accomplished. I just take a moment to
stand, stretch and pause to reflect on what was accomplished, and to feel pride for overcoming my procrastination habit and getting it done. It doesn’t have to be a big deal, but allow your conscious mind a moment to register the good feelings associated with the extra effort you put in getting the work done.

• Stay focused on the present. While waiting for a website to load up, your computer to reboot, an elevator to arrive or a light to turn green, simply notice what is going on around you and inside you.

  Are you tense? How is your breathing? What are your thoughts? The act of focusing will bring you to a new level of awareness. You will find that you are less scattered in your thinking and more able to truly attend to the task at hand or the person you are meeting with.

You are the author of your day - if you choose to be. Or as mega-author Wayne Dyer puts it, “Our lives are the sum total of the choices we make.” The trick, it seems, is to make more conscious choices that are designed to create more success for us and others, rather than unconscious choices based on habit, fear or resistance.

And now that you are pumped to make more conscious choices, how about choosing to get some things off your list?

Hugh Culver is an author, speaker, and athlete. His remarkable messages about working smarter and living better are sought after by leading organizations like: Imperial Oil, Shoppers Drug Mart, Royal Bank of Canada, Suncor, Telus, and the Red Cross, as well as four universities and four colleges. Learn more about Hugh at www.HughCulver.com