

Making Big Projects Part of Your Daily Routine... and Fitting the Unexpected Into Your Day to Day



The unexpected throws us for a loop, because...it's unexpected. And the bigger projects and opportunities get delayed because... they are bigger. You change that by making the unexpected into the expected, and the bigger projects smaller. Here's how.

(Reading time 180 seconds).

The unexpected wrench thrown into the workings of our day plagues most of us periodically. It can fray your nerves and responses. In addition we often put off starting big projects because we think they require lots of time to complete – and we don't have lots of time right now. The result is important projects for your career and life can hang like a heavy yoke on your mental shoulders, instead of being positively undertaken as the key opportunities they are. To effectively address both of these challenges we need to change the way we think about and approach them.

Schedule the Unexpected

Most of us have heard the phrase we should “expect the unexpected,” and learned that it is true in our job and in our life. But what good does it do to expect the unexpected if you are not prepared for it?

If you expect the unexpected tomorrow then you should plan time in your day for it. You create that time by scheduling it in your calendar every day, just like you schedule expected appointments, meetings and other routine things. Mid-morning and mid-afternoon block a half-hour for the unexpected:

11:30 to 12:00 – “The Unexpected”
3:00 to 3:30 – “The Unexpected”

This may seem like a strange or unnecessary thing to do, but if you don't plan time for the unexpected, then when it occurs you will have to delay other commitments to address it.

Instead, with the unexpected scheduled, an unforeseen morning request by your boss or key customer that must be done today is “No problem. I should be able to look at that no later than 11:30 and get back to you on it shortly thereafter.” If other people schedule things, then show your unexpected times in your group calendar as Meeting times. We've referred to such times in the past as Mini-Me Meetings. They could also be thought of as meetings with and for the unexpected.

Writing these times in your planner for “The Unexpected” insures you don't unrealistically overbook your days in ways that cause you to overpromise and under-deliver. It's a simple way to change your thinking and actions for better results - schedule the unexpected.

Making Big Projects Into Small Ones

Because your routine time is so filled with daily expectations and distractions, major impact projects that add to or safeguard your future often get put off until you find a larger block of time to address them. Those larger blocks of time have a way of constantly getting pushed out.

A more assured way of making progress on your life-changing projects is to break them down into the smaller activities that make them up. Then schedule a small amount of time every day to make one or two of those smaller activities part of your daily routine.

Blocking thirty minutes a day for bigger projects gives you 15 hours a month, 180 hours a year. You can make a lot happen on your key projects with that much time. But even 3 to 5 minutes a day for a phone call to answer a question, an email to set an appointment, a quick retrieval of a needed file, will move you on to the next necessary thing to make progress on a big project.

That is, **IF YOU KNOW WHAT THE NEXT NECESSARY THING IS**. If you are not clear on what the smaller activities are, and what general order they need to be done in, then you can easily use up more than 30 minutes to refocus and rethink each time you start back on the project. Here's how to avoid accumulating hours of such wasted time and instead convert it to super productive time moving your big projects forward.

Typically 15 minutes of time with the Project breakdown process below will save you multiple hours, often days of rethink time and get your biggest projects accomplished now, rather than later.

1. Start by writing the name of one of your most important pending work or life projects on the top of a blank piece of paper or a Word document on your computer.
2. Quickly list every activity you can think of that might move that project forward. You will decide in the next step whether it is really necessary or not.

Think in terms of Activities that are small things that you can actually do in a relatively short time frame: Email a co-worker for data; begin the initial research required; schedule a team meeting; send this activities list to my boss for her review; call the supplier for a quote...

3. Prioritize each Activity you have listed as an A, B, or C.

- A – Must be done.
- B – Probably needs to be done.
- C – May not be necessary for me to do at all.

Work-Life Balance Lessons

By Doug May

Since becoming a father for the first time five years ago, it's been important to me to get home to the suburbs from downtown Chicago early enough in the evening to spend some time with my children before they go to bed. This is important not only because I'm a father, but because I'm a husband, too. We've all seen situations where the primary breadwinner hasn't made adjustments to an intense work schedule or lifestyle after the kids are born, and it usually doesn't end well.

Here are some of the things I've learned that help me balance my personal and professional lives:

Be flexible about where you work. I commute to and from work by train; that gives me two extra work hours per day. I triage my responsibilities with this in mind throughout the day, setting aside certain tasks for the ride into or out of the city. In addition, one of my colleagues lives in my community and is usually on the same train, so if we need to meet, we do it while the scenery zips by.

Accept that one size doesn't fit all. Before I married and started a family, my career was my top priority. Now, I also make sure there's room for me to raise a family while I support the business unit. Working from an office rather than on a job site might not have been my first choice 10 years ago, but it's a good fit for me now because it has fewer uncontrollable elements.

Let technology help, but don't overdo it. During one vacation soon after we started our family, I was spending so much time communicating with the job on my BlackBerry that my wife hid it. I needed that intervention.

Learn from those who have figured it out already. I appreciate that I'm not breaking new ground as a parent. I have friends at Turner who started this process before I did, so I've observed the adjustments they've made as well as how well they're supported by the business unit managers. Learning by their example, and knowing that my career won't suffer as my family has grown, has been reassuring and helpful.

Take advantage of the opportunities to get the work-life balance that works for you. Some will say they don't have the balance they want, but I suspect it's because they haven't done enough to make it happen. We have a lot of support in our office, from both peers and supervisors. If it's important enough to you, you'll find a way to do it.

Doug May is a purchasing manager for the Chicago business unit.

4. Prioritize each "A" option as A1, A2, A3, etc. This usually reflects the time sequencing required; which activity you have to do before you can move on to the next one.

5. Write at least your A1 Activity in your planner now, on the day you will do it. Then schedule your A2, A3 and A4 activities over the next few days. Do not overload any one day.

If in step 2 above, listing, you find that an item on your list has its own sub-activities, then treat it as a sub-project. Your activity to schedule for that "sub-project" should be a few minutes to do this same breakdown on that sub-project as you have just completed on the overall project. Sub-sort it down into small enough activities that can be scheduled and done in a relatively short time.

After you complete an activity, be sure and check that you have the next activity from your project list scheduled for an upcoming day. NEVER be without at least one small activity on your schedule for your big project...ideally one on every day.

This is the way you work your big projects into your daily routine: not all at once but an activity or two each day.

By turning your bigger projects into small daily activities and by scheduling the unexpected, you will better achieve your routine and unforeseen demands while steadily, and less stressfully, moving your most important projects forward.

Why not try it now? Take 15 minutes and break a pending project down using the steps above. You'll be pleased with the results.

Jim Bird, Publisher

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Quotes by Enoch Arnold Bennett

"A first-rate organizer is never in a hurry. He is never late. He always keeps up his sleeve a margin for the unexpected."

"We shall never have more time. We have, and always had, all the time there is. No object is served in waiting until next week or even until tomorrow. Keep going...Concentrate on something useful."

"A sense of the value of time - that is, of the best way to divide one's time into one's various activities - is an essential preliminary to efficient work; it is the only method of avoiding hurry"

Enoch Arnold Bennett (May 1867– March 1931) was an English journalist and novelist. The Clayhanger trilogy and The Old Wives' Tale are his most famous works.

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The Unexpected Is Not Always Immediate

When someone adds something to your to do's, don't assume they expect it to be done immediately, even if it's your boss. Whether giving or receiving an assignment, you should communicate how urgent it is in light of other work. It is simple and helpful to say, "Here are my current priorities for today and tomorrow, where would you like me to fit this in?" Whether the answer is, "I need it immediately," or "I'm in no rush for it. Early next week will be fine," it helps you use your time more effectively when you know.