



Execution: Getting Your Work Done

BY SUSAN R. JOHNSON, MD, MS

Work, not contemplating work, is what brings satisfaction.

—Kenneth John Atchity

In past columns, I have described several methods that support improved personal work productivity—among them decluttering the work space, setting priorities, organizing work into projects, keeping lists, planning the week, and so on. These methods are valuable for the early stages of a project, but none of them results in any actual work getting done.

Work is done when action is taken, and getting yourself to take action is the biggest productivity challenge of all.

Barriers to taking action include perfectionism, indecision, lack of information or tools, and of course, “not enough time.” In this column I will present guidelines for how to think about taking action, how to analyze your own procrastination, and some tricks for getting started.

But before I do that, I need to address a belief that adds to the overwhelmed feeling many of us live with—and that itself makes taking action more difficult. This belief says that you should be able to finish your work. In fact, you cannot; work never ends. Thus, you must immediately give up the idea that you can “get caught up,” be “on top of things,” or be “in control.”

Consistent execution is the key to achieving your priorities, and it remains the most challenging aspect of personal productivity.

Action Principles

1. Use *next action thinking*. The next action is the very next physical action you will take to move toward a desired outcome—call, e-mail, buy, talk to, write, read, search, dictate, and so on. The outcome can be big or small—setting up transportation for an upcoming trip, sub-

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mitting an R01, or putting together a bar mitzvah. In a nutshell, the next action is the next thing to do.

To demonstrate the power of the next action, here are three pairs of items. As you read them, decide which of the pair you would be drawn to do first.

- A. Plan trip for Hawaii meeting
- B. Search American Air web site for flight (business class) to Honolulu departing September 22 and returning October 1

- A. R01
- B. Write a first draft of specific aim 1

- A. Plan bar mitzvah
- B. Call ABC Caterers (123-222-9876) re: availability on October 15

I'll assume that you chose “B” for each; so let's analyze why this was so. First, I hope you deduced that for each pair, “A” represented the desired outcome, and “B” was an action needed to achieve that outcome.

Occasionally, looking at the outcome on a list will lead you take action (for example, if the R01 is due next week), but under most circumstances it is more likely to lead to feeling overwhelmed, and your brain—which prefers taking the path of least resistance—will prefer to do “call John for a lunch date.”

The trick is to take your projects and identify the next small thing that needs to be done so that your brain will be attracted rather than repelled.

This concept is simple, but it can take practice to get it right. The key is to define the next action at the right level of “granularity.” Putting an almost-the-next-action on your list is almost as action-stopping as using the outcome itself. Take the previous example of “call the caterer.” If you don't know which caterer you want, or what the phone number is if you do, or the date of the event, your brain is more likely to avoid that item *because, as written, it cannot be done*. A real next action is something you can do without doing something else first, and as written, it should include enough detail so that when you look at it you don't have to think, or look elsewhere for information, but you can simply act.

Next actions should begin with an appropriate action verb. Poor choices include “think,” “plan,” and “decide.” Although these may be the things you need to do on a particular project, none is an action. Instead, figure out the next action you will take to achieve thinking, planning, or deciding. For example, before you can decide, you need to talk to your partner, or check the date of the next event, or estimate your cash flow for the next few months. In order to plan, you may need to write a list of pros and cons, or talk to someone, or get information from the Internet.

To test if you have identified a real next action, ask yourself: “Could I do this *right now* if I had the time?”

2. Use—don't lose—short unscheduled bits of time. Many of us think that important work requires large amounts of uninterrupted time. Once you get the hang of defining next actions, you will see that many of them can be completed in a matter of minutes—or even seconds. Stephanie Winston, in her field study of top-level business executives, found that these CEOs commonly think of the day in 10-minute

segments—and the aim is to get as much done in each segment as possible. If you start the day with a list of next actions that reflect your current work, you too will be able to fit actions into every opening in your day, no matter how small.

Remember that this approach applies to writing as well—even 15 minutes of writing, done every day, will lead to more productivity than “waiting until the time is right.”

3. Begin before you are ready. Robert Boice observed in his work with academic faculty that they often put off writing, or preparing for teaching, because they “weren’t ready”—that is, they said they didn’t yet know what they were going to write, or how the class should be focused, or the event was too far in the future, and so on. The advice to “begin anyway” is based on the idea that it is the *act* of working that allows you to discover what you think. This model, the basis of an effective method of teaching writing, recommends that you start a writing project by *writing*, not “thinking.” You can write anything that comes to mind, and as you see your thoughts develop on paper, you will see the inconsistencies, the gaps, the best organization, and then be able to edit to a final product. None of this is possible while the thoughts are still swirling around in your head.

The same approach works for other projects as well. Once you have an idea of what you want to accomplish, you will usually be better off by starting to take actions in that direction, rather than spending a lot of time planning the whole project in detail. Taking early action—before you are ready—leads to a timelier, more nuanced plan, and helps you identify roadblocks and problems much earlier, so they can be handled without affecting the final deadline.

Tricks to Jump-Start When You Have Ground to a Halt

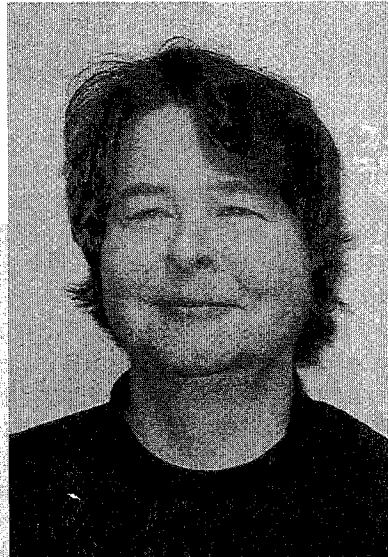
A body in motion remains in motion.

—Newton’s law

Perhaps you have had the experience of feeling so overwhelmed at how much you have to do that you are unable to do anything. Here are some “tricks” to help get you start-

ed. Most of the time Newton’s law will take over, and propel you forward.

- ❖ Set a timer for five minutes, and promise yourself you will work until then, but that you can stop then if you like.
- ❖ Choose a task at random, and complete it.
- ❖ Keep a “reverse” to-do list as you work: start with a blank sheet, and record each task that you complete.
- ❖ Put the materials for the task on your desk, and look through them.
- ❖ Maybe you need a break: Get out of your office for 10 minutes or so and take a walk.



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Procrastination

What about tasks, or even whole projects, that you simply can’t seem to face? Many books have been written on procrastination, as well as its psychological underpinnings. If procrastination is a long-standing pervasive problem that affects a large part of your life, you should consider professional evaluation—that is too serious to ignore. But if you tend to put off only certain kinds of tasks, but not most of them, you can probably address the issue yourself.

Here are three questions you should ask when you seem to be putting it off a particular task:

1. **Is this task really the very next action?** If it’s not, remember that you really can’t do it yet. Sometimes the fix will be simple: Look up the phone number and you can make the call. Ask Bob for the updated draft, and you can finish the manuscript. Download the software upgrade, and the calculations can be done. Sometimes the answer is more complicated, as when you realize you don’t actually know how to do the task. But, once you have faced this fact, you can step back and make a plan to figure it out—which will lead to a new next action.
2. **Does this task (or project) really need to be done at all?** Answer “no” to this one, and you get to cross something off without doing anything! How could this happen? The project that that task is attached to is no longer relevant, or needs to be postponed. There is a simpler way to do the work, and this task is not needed. You have changed your mind about the task or project. Or perhaps you already did the task and just forgot to cross it off the list. When I review my own action/task list, I find that at least 10% of the items can usually be deleted for one of these reasons.
3. **Am I experiencing an emotional block?** Perhaps you feel anxious about the prospect of calling a person on your list, or the bigger project to which the action is attached is overwhelming, or, you really dislike doing that task. There is no quick fix for these emotional blocks, but admitting to yourself that this is the problem often allows you to move forward.

Consistent execution is the key to achieving your priorities, and it remains the most challenging aspect of personal productivity. It becomes easier when you have defined all your desired outcomes, and have identified the next action for each. Having this list of predetermined actions allows you take advantage of small windows of opportunity during the day—a few minutes here, half an hour there. Each successfully completed task increases your energy, making the next one even easier. You’re on your way! ❖