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CHAPTER 4

THE 24/7 LIFESTYLE: TIME MANAGEMENT IN THE HOME OFFICE

If you used to (or still do) work in an office five days a week, you probably worked from nine to five or some variation of that, and perhaps worked overtime as necessary or brought work home to review at night. Alas, for the American worker, we don't do siestas, and we don't stroll into the office at ten o'clock—on a good day—like some of our European counterparts. Even the term “24/7” is uniquely American. Between beepers and cell phones, lap top computers and e-mail, it seems we're often expected to work around the clock, and to be accessible at any hour, day or night.

Enter the home office. Now we have an entirely new concept of “the office.” With this home office and the 24/7 nature of life, let's explore how to manage those 24 hours in a day when your desk is just a 60-second commute away.

Time . . . Where Does It Go?

Just as in the corporate office, where a busy morning will make the day fly by, the workday in a home office disappears into a vortex of time. From the moment each of the authors wakes up, to long after everyone else goes to bed, we're on the move.

Mornings, for us, are the off-to-school rush, and our days are filled with high-intensity work plus all the errands and chores of an average family. We can go from the “high” of sealing a big deal to the mind-numbing boredom of folding laundry in 60 seconds flat, because all that housework is just a step away. Because neither of us typically gets eight hours of uninterrupted work time, let alone the 10 or more hours professionals sometimes need when work piles up, we have to go back to “the office” after dinner or after

The American work week isn't really 40 hours at all. Despite computers and technology, which were supposed to help us cut down on our time in the office, the average work week creeps upward and upward. According to a study by the National Sleep Foundation, the average U.S. employee works a 46-hour work week. And a whopping 38 percent of U.S. workers clock in at more than 50 hours a week.

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our kids are in bed. We have to find this extra time, and coffee has become a nocturnal mainstay.

Don't get us wrong: We appreciate that the home office allows us a unique advantage to choose hours that work for us, or to sometimes work these late hours when family demands dictate that we do. We're not alone in dividing up our time, either. In interviewing people for this book, we found many compatriots who split their days because of children and spouses, or caretaking elderly parents. We also found a majority who had to work late hours because the "home" in the home office equation pressed in on their work time and they had to make up for that. Many people discover being a home office worker can mean a heavier schedule than they imagined when they set up that office in the spare bedroom. You can guard against this with good time management skills and being organized from the very beginning.

Organized from the Start

While we cover organization skills and ideas in the next chapter, precious time can be wasted by lack of organization. One tip we want to pass on here, though, is to try to envision organization in your home office from the very start. If you already have a home office established, you may want to spend the time to implement these ideas, because in the long run, they will shave minutes and more off your workday.

- Set up a FedEx, UPS[®], or overnight carrier service account if you ever use them for your business. Spend 15 minutes on the phone or on-line *once*, get your account, have them ship supplies right to your doorstep, and you won't have to waste time again. Don't ever sit "on hold" with FedEx or any of the other carriers. Once you are set up, you can do it all on-line, efficiently and quickly—that includes scheduling pickup, tracking packages, and ordering supplies.
- Have a postage scale and postage supplies on hand so you don't waste time on line at the post office. Again, go to the post office *once* and get all the supplies you need, along with rate sheets, and you won't have to waste time there again. This is especially important in the months of November and December, and around the dreaded income tax deadline date in April when lines at the post office are at their longest.
- Consider, depending on your mail volume and the nature of your business, getting a postage machine for bulk mail.
- Consider paying your bills on-line.

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- Organize your filing cabinets and shelving systems from the start so information is at your fingertips.
- Whatever office supplies you use, keep them well-stocked so you don't run out at deadline time.
- If you regularly send clients flowers, establish an account at a florist you can trust and pre-select choices that you like. Or set up an account online at one of the national florist companies.

Body Clock Blues: Beating Them through Time Management

One of the best things about working from home is that you can adapt your work routine to your body clock. While we understand that telecommuters often must be at a desk during the business hours of their in-office counterparts, home office entrepreneurs gain a degree of flexibility.

Respecting your internal body clock means not taking a lunch hour at noon because the rest of the world is taking a lunch hour at noon. Some days you may be hungry for lunch at 11:00 A.M. Some days at 3:00 P.M. Body clock means freedom to powernap and freedom to take a time-out at 2:30 P.M. to greet the kids as they walk through the door after school and then not return to the home office until 7:00 P.M. It can mean the freedom to work out when the gym is less crowded, to take a break to do yoga, or hit the golf course. It can mean taking off a half-day every Monday to do volunteer work or pursue a hobby or dream, or hitting the tennis court each Wednesday with your old college roommate, and then working an hour extra each of the other weekdays.

However, many of us have been slaves to the nine-to-five world for so long that we aren't even sure what our body clock is telling us. Working from home means it's time to get in tune with yourself. Let go of the world's regimentation and figure out what your work hours are going to be so you are at your peak performance.

Most people know whether they are "early birds" or "night owls." Or do they? One way to discover your true body clock is to look at your sleeping, eating, and alertness patterns on the weekend. When do you feel at your brightest? When do you sense your energy is sagging? If weekends are equally full of kids' soccer games, errands, and early-rising, but you wonder if perhaps you would do better by rising *very* early and napping later in the day, you can experiment. Or, watch your body clock on vacation. Though vacation often brings with it excess, often people (especially parents) are surprised to find that even when they *can* sleep in, their eyes open by 7:00 A.M. anyway.

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Another method to determine your true body clock is to closely examine your energy levels during a typical workday. When you find yourself combating fatigue at the same time each day, when you work from home you can schedule yourself a coffee break, a short snooze, or 20 minutes of yoga or walking. Take advantage of you being the boss—anything is possible.

Java Jolts

Whether you've decided to do a home office fulltime, halftime or sometime, another question you need to ask yourself is what working from home means to you? What kinds of time sacrifices are you willing to make? Does being home with your children mean you are willing to work at night? What does working from home do to your social schedule, entertaining, or what you call "your time"? If you're not a night owl by nature, can coffee or exercise help you adjust your body clock? Are you willing to work at night?

Just as in a corporate office, time management might mean having to attend a meeting instead of getting in a few hours on a pressing project, working from home necessitates flexibility. It helps you feel less frustrated by these kinds of sacrifices if you can remember times when a long-winded supervisor kept everyone in a meeting or the office gossip trapped you in the hallway to discuss the latest scuttlebutt. Time is managed—and wasted—in both corporate and home offices. Personally, we'd rather "waste" time having a chocolate chip cookie and story time break than another meeting with 10 colleagues talking and no one truly listening . . . and nothing productive really getting done besides griping.

Perhaps the home office is a way for you to exercise at a certain time each day, or to schedule a tee-time at the golf course. Maybe it lets you pursue an avocation. If so, see how time sacrifices here and there can help you achieve those goals. Remember to think outside the box as far as time goes. You may be surprised that many little chunks of time can actually add up to a true 40-hour workweek. Jessica Stasinis, an indexer and publishing professional, works during her son's nap time and late at night. It adds up to over a 30-hour week but is broken up entirely and never in one fell swoop. "I made this decision," she says, "and I budget my time accordingly."

Telecommuters vocally reminded us during the writing of the book that sometimes they don't have such choices. They may need to be in a home office for very specific hours corresponding to those employees in the office. However, even in cases where hours must conform to an office, having access to your files, computer, and so forth at night and in the early morning

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may allow windows of more *relaxed* time during the day. In any case, examine your motives for working from home and know that sometimes the best-laid plans go awry. When that happens, there's always caffeine and working 'til midnight. As one telecommuter recently told us, "I had planned to work this evening, but my husband had to stay late at the law office, leaving me to do bedtimes and bath. I'll be working late. Bring on the coffee."

Quiet Time

When you work in an office outside the home, you rarely have to factor in noise-level considerations in the course of the day. When you work from home, you're part of the home office family. You are part of a living organism, in a way. Every household has a rhythm, has times when the house is quiet, and times when it is bursting at the seams. You need to learn those rhythms and think about them as you make decisions about scheduling your day.

Typically, children are quiet in the morning. In the afternoons, everyone has cabin fever, or the kids are coming home from school and need to let loose with their energy for a little while. Therefore, phone calls become more thought-out. If you worked in a corporate environment, you probably never gave a thought to picking up the phone when it rang or returning calls at any particular time of the day. In a home office, phone calls may need to be returned in the family's downtime.

Even those without kids may find their dogs bark incessantly at the mail carrier at noon each day. (Erica's dog has an intense hatred, bordering on psychopathy, of the man in the brown UPS truck!) If you live in the city, in an apartment building, you may discover the garbage trucks roll at an inconvenient time or your neighbor upstairs practices his off-key clarinet at 11:00 each morning.

We found some 60-second commuters have the opposite problem—it's *too* quiet. When making the transition from an office to home, the silence may actually take some getting used to. For instance, if you are used to chatter, phones ringing, faxes rolling, printers spouting out pages, and so on in a corporate environment, the sudden silence of being home alone, especially if you are home alone all the time, may make it hard to concentrate.

In *Creating Emotionally Safe Schools* (HCI, Inc.), Jane Bluestein, an educational specialist and author, discusses how as children we learn in different fashions: Some learn by having background music, some by lying on the floor, others by having complete silence. As adults, we're probably still "hard-wired" in much the same way. We're sure you know people who work best with

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music playing and others who shut their office doors and demand silence. One of our clients has CNN running at a fairly high audible volume in his office at all times. Another client wears headphones with relaxing classical music. Regardless of your style, getting used to the quiet—or planning for it if you have kids or other noise—may be a factor you need to consider in your time management at home.

Voice Mail

While voice mail systems are covered in our technology chapter, it pays to remember that investing in a professional voice mail system or answering machine is a wise expenditure for the home office. If the household is noisy, don't try to carry on a conversation. Return the call when things settle down. You may play phone tag, but it's better than shouting over the noise. Today, with voice mail available through the phone company, or good machines offering quality sound, you can come across as very much the professional from the confines of your home. There is even a new service that makes it sound as if you have a virtual "receptionist." Don't feel compelled to pick up the telephone if a baby is crying or a dog is barking in the background for instance. Use voice mail and call when the atmosphere at home is more conducive to conducting business.

Shutting the Door, Even if You Don't Have One

Even if your home office doesn't have a door, time management has to include shutting the proverbial door. By this we mean that the temptation to lose a sense of boundaries in a home office is very real. This is two-fold.

In family situations, on the one hand, having access to you at all hours can mean your family intrudes on you so much that you find yourself stretched to your limit. On the other hand, with an office *always* there, especially if the business is your own and you feel the pressure of financially needing to make a success of your home-based venture, the temptation can be to work 24/7. Time management means, impossible as it may sometimes seem, finding time for yourself and remembering that shutting the door, or shutting your eyes and ignoring the pile of work on your desk, is both healthy and necessary.

You need to remind yourself that you are one person. You need to have a life. You deserve one. Shut the door. Turn off the computer. Go for a walk in the fresh air. *Tell your clients your office hours and stick to them.*

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Time Management in Your Personal Life

We have an entire chapter on organizing your life, from paperclips to your taxes. However, in time management, we need to give a nod to managing time between your work and personal life.

First, we are both big believers (bordering on evangelical fervor!) in day planner systems. There are many name brands out there, and they all offer add-ons and calendars that help particular businesses from telecommuters to salespersons who get car mileage allowances to those who travel and must prepare expense accounts. The organization chapter covers how to use these scheduling systems to your best advantage. Other workers favor “To-Do” lists. Still others advocate electronic and computerized scheduling systems. In terms of time management, your best defense against a day spent under the gun is careful planning—the night before. Getting your new day off on the right foot means looking at your obligations the evening before and having a game plan. Even 15 minutes the night before can save you precious time the next day.

In addition, if you’re trying to juggle telecommuting or a home-based business with a full family life, it pays to think how you can get ahead of that game and save yourself time in the long run. Whether it’s stocking up on greeting cards and wrapping paper, planning meals in advance instead of five minutes before everyone starts complaining they’re hungry, or configuring the laundry area for optimal efficiency, running your household smoothly will only help you run your business more smoothly.

Even those without children or family living at home fall prey to the errand demon. Errands are consistently named the worst “time waster,” so planning routes, paying on-line and having on-line banking, and other ideas to cut back on errands will pay off with more precious minutes in your workweek.

Save yourself time and energy by purchasing several birthday presents at the same time. If you think something is a great buy, then get three or four of them. That way you always have extra presents on hand if you’re in a crunch. Top this off with a variety of gift paper and all-occasion cards. We advocate doing things once and stocking up or planning ahead.

“Plan B”: When a Good Day Goes Bad—Very Bad

When you work from home, you need to be prepared for the unexpected. For example, you plan out a quiet workday because the kids are in school until three o’clock. An hour later, the school nurse is calling because one of your children is throwing up. Next thing you know, your perfect day is over and you are in the car driving to your child’s school.

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Successfully working from a home office depends on you being able to roll with the unforeseen surprises that will occur. If you are the rigid type or have a tendency to come undone when things don't go your way, you will be very cranky at worst—and most certainly not your most productive at best.

Try to have a “Plan B” for various home office disasters. Even for telecommuters, and those without kids, disaster on the home front can mean a lost workday. For instance, you may not have children, but that doesn't mean you won't find yourself spending half a day waiting for a car to be repaired when you were told it would only take an hour. Or that you won't suddenly have a personal emergency, trip to the dentist that turns into a root canal, and so forth. A “Plan B” enables you to salvage part of your day. For instance, we have a client who is never without her day planner. If she has to get her car repaired or go to the doctor's office, she brings it along and uses waiting room time and excessive delays to organize even *months* in advance. John Diaz, a salesman, is a firm believer in sending personal note cards to clients for holidays and thank yous. He keeps a supply of them in his glove compartment and uses stalled traffic, waiting for the oil to be changed in his mechanic's waiting area, and other typical “time wasters” as a way to maximize his day.

For those with children, sickness tends to be the ultimate “Plan B” crisis. Keep the items on the list below on hand for days when your child is home from school. It's also good idea to have the necessary medications available (i.e., Tylenol, cough medicines, etc.) so that you don't have to go running out to the drugstore with a sick child in tow. Remember, again, if you buy two or three of a common item (such as Tylenol or cough syrup) *once*, you will be saved a trip somewhere down the road that will, because of Murphy's Law, come at the most inconvenient time possible. The items on this list below can amuse a sick child so he or she doesn't demand all of your attention:

Movies

Puzzles

Coloring books

CD games

It pays to have some of these be NEW items. Why? Who doesn't like something new? A new CD-ROM game is going to amuse your child a whole lot more than one that's been played a thousand times before.

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Next, figure out what you can do in the moments your child is feeling needy or wants you close at hand. You can straighten up, sort the mail, and so forth—versus what you can do later on when your child is sleeping.

Plan B is like any office emergency system—the more prepared you are for any eventuality, the more likely it is you will not lose an entire day of work.

Top Five Time Wasters

- Telephone calls (that's what Caller ID is for!)
 - E-mails (get off everyone's joke lists)
 - Interruptions
 - Messy work area
 - Lack of a schedule
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Top Ten T-i-m-e S-t-r-e-t-c-h-e-r-s

- Keep an organized work area so you don't waste time hunting for things.
 - Plan your day ahead of time, and set yourself up the night before.
 - Keep your To-Do lists short and realistic for each day (e.g., the top two or three things you must do that day).
 - Before you take on something new, like a new commitment or exercise class, eliminate something old or that you don't need/want anymore.
 - Group tasks together (e.g., all errands, calls, paperwork, reading, filing).
 - Screen your phone calls with an answering machine or caller ID.
 - Use a hands-free head set so that you can do two things at once.
 - Use down time or "waiting room" time for planning and reorganizing, catching up on reading, and so forth.
 - Write down a phone memo with date, time, and reason for calling and record it in one place.
 - Do your hardest work during your peak hours.
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Bargaining in the Home Office Boardroom

Here's a tip for those with kids at home. Whether you bring home a briefcase full of work you must finish up or you work from home full-time, inevitably you feel the push and pull of demands on your time. We have found that when the children are clamoring for your attention, there really is little point in yelling at them or time-outs. Remember the days when you bargained in the boardroom? The same holds true in the home office. Sometimes, a simple egg timer can be a saving grace. Set it for 20 minutes and explain that you will read a story, relax with them, dance to their favorite CD with them—whatever they want—the 20 minutes is theirs. Your part of the bargain is you cannot answer the phone or do anything on your desk. The idea is to make the children feel as important to you as that briefcase full of work. For them, sometimes the Attention Monster is simply about knowing they are important to you—as important as your beeper, your phone, your computer, or your desk of papers.

In return, when the timer goes off, they must give you 20 minutes of total peace. Let them take the timer into another room and busy themselves until it goes off. While this may seem like a very simple solution, it really does work. In fact, it works so well, you may ask, *Why didn't I think of it before?*

Why does it work? Saying to a child, "I need to get this done . . . I need some time right now," doesn't give them anything measurable. It is vague. The timer gives them a measurable unit of time. By also playing for 20 minutes first, you have soothed them at a time when they really felt they needed you; consequently, they feel more secure. The amazing thing about this is that often, when they go away for "your" 20 minutes, they get so caught up in something new they forget all about the time limit. *But appeasing them, bargaining in your own boardroom, is part of the give and take of time management at home.*

Time Management and Productivity

When you work in a corporate environment, you are at the mercy of everyone else's schedule. The department head calls a meeting at 11:00 A.M., which happens to be your most "up" time of day, when you like to do sales calls. But you dutifully head to the meeting because it's mandatory.

Just as we suggest looking at your body clock to take advantage of some freedom from the nine-to-five rut, we also suggest looking at your time management in terms of productivity. Tedious tasks should be done when you are

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most tired. File when you feel you need to give your brain some downtime, not when you are at your peak. If you feel lonely and want to take time to make a phone call to a client you usually enjoy talking to, make the call when you need an energy lift. Save your peak performance times for those tasks that require your peak performance.

Only 24 Hours in a Day: Overbooking Time

There are only 24 hours in a day. We know it. You know it. So why do our day planners sometimes look as if there are 72 hours in a day? We all fall victim to overbooking from time to time.

Whether you use To-Do lists, day planners, electronic schedulers, or throw darts at a dartboard marked with client names, whatever plan you use to schedule your day needs to have a healthy dose of reality. A sure sign you've fallen victim to overbooking is when you *consistently* move projects from day to day. If half your To-Do list moves from Monday, to Tuesday, to . . . all the way to Friday, you're trying to do too much in one day—or you're procrastinating (covered in the very next section!).

When planning your day, it's wise to be ambitious. Erica consistently aims high. Her planner is chock full, but she knows if she never has to go to "Plan B," operates on all cylinders, and isn't interrupted by too many phone calls, she can "nail" her list. Does this happen every day? No, but that's why they call it life. Ambition is fine. Insanity is not.

Look at your list and ask yourself, if all the stars and planets are in alignment, if you never go to Plan B, and all of the rest of it, can you really achieve the list? If the answer is no, it's time to rein in your schedule. Why? For one thing, you may find yourself making promises to clients and sales calls you can't keep. You may miss deadlines; you may fail to return the calls you need to and so on. For another, overbooking builds into it a sense of failure. "I didn't do everything I planned to do." It may also, looking at a too-full schedule, induce anxiety, or make you feel under the gun constantly. It's not good for your psyche. Type-A personalities may thrive on this, but use caution for both your health and your sanity.

Procrastination: We Saved It for Last

We saved the ultimate Home Office Enemy—procrastination—for last. We even procrastinated about writing on this topic!

One of the toughest things about the solitary nature of the home office is procrastination. In an outside office, we all become attuned to working

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at a pace with our co-workers. We have people supervising us. We have an overall idea of how much work we are expected to accomplish each day. Working from home is solitary. Not only that, there are a thousand distractions. Joyce Lapsley, a Virginia-based consultant and trainer, says this about working from home: “Distractions/guilt about laundry, dust, etc. is one of the toughest things about working from home; that is, when I walk past a pile of dishes or laundry, I nag myself about them. On the other hand, when I’m relaxing, I feel that I should be working upstairs in the office.” The problem with these distractions is they can often lead us to procrastinate on our work. While an on-site office has “busy work” or time-wasters, too, like water cooler conversations or personal e-mails, home offers other enticements, especially, for lack of a better word, “puttering” around the house. (You putterers know who you are . . .)

Home office procrastination, therefore, can be divided into two primary categories:

1. Lack of self-direction or motivation
2. Distractions of home

Let’s tackle each of these in turn.

If self-direction is your problem and you find being alone leaves you daydreaming, not focusing, or not knowing where to turn first for a task, consider buddying up with another home office worker with a similar problem. In this new era of the home office revolution, there are *millions* of us out there. You probably know a few. Ask them if they would mind pairing up to conquer the procrastination bug. It might help to check in with someone as you would with a boss as you learn to motivate yourself, rather than having a supervisor choose the course of your day. You may even be able to do this online (see our website resources at the back of this book).

Another strategy might be to set off an alarm on your watch or an egg-timer for every 30 minutes, more or less. Chronic procrastinators can learn to value precious minutes by making them more measurable in terms of work accomplished. For instance, if you set your watch alarm to beep every 20 minutes, and it goes off and you realize you have spent the entire 20 minutes forwarding jokes on the Internet, surfing your favorite website, or daydreaming, you suddenly have a more vivid understanding of what happened in those 20 minutes—nothing! This can help train you to accomplish more by learning to set expectations for yourself for each block of time.

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Motivational tapes help some people, as does music that “gets you going.” Other strategies include mind games with yourself—or with the procrastination monster. First, you must figure out what you do when you procrastinate. In other words, if you like to make phone calls and gab with a friend for 10 minutes (or more) or you like to get up and snack (our own editor says this was one of his problems), set this up as a reward for a set period of time of solid working or the accomplishment of a dreaded task, such as filing.

Another technique is to figure out what particular office jobs you dislike the most in your home office. Do these tasks in limited intervals. Ten minutes of filing once a day is better than three hours of built-up filing at the end of two weeks. Commit to doing your least-favored tasks once a day, and don’t give yourself mental permission to leave the office until you do.

A logical option is to pay someone to do those tasks you consistently procrastinate on to the detriment of your business. Can a bookkeeper do these functions once a week? What about a college student who can file or set appointments? See the box on “How Much Is Your Time Worth?” to determine whether this is a wise approach. Don’t forget that just as you are telecommuting or setting up a home-based business, there are literally millions of others out there doing the same. Therefore, though you may hate to do your bookkeeping paperwork, you can bet the last dollar in your checking account that someone in your town or city is a bookkeeper who works from home by the hour. You may even be able to barter services.

How Much Is Your Time Worth?

When dealing with procrastination, it pays, literally, to know how much you are making per hour. Whether a telecommuter or home-based entrepreneur, you make an average hourly figure. Calculate that. Next, look at your most hated home office tasks: Filing? Bookkeeping? Appointment setting? Faxing and correspondence? Errands? Next, try to estimate what procrastinating costs you. In other words, if you put off correspondence until you have 30 letters to do, how long does it take to accomplish that—calculating a rough estimate of how much time you spent delaying, and doing other things to avoid the pile of letters (e.g., calling friends, visiting the refrigerator, etc.). Now calculate how much actual time it costs to do those letters. Not what it should cost, but what it’s really costing your bottom line. In other words, if you make \$50 an hour, and between wasting time over it, plus the actual chore of it, filing “costs” you five hours of time a week, that’s \$250. Now get pricing on how much it would cost to have this chore done by someone else. Finally, imagine your week free of this task and how much money you could make if you had extra time to place sales calls, do high-billing tasks, and so forth. Does it now make sense to pay someone to do your least-favorite work details? You may be losing money by doing them yourself!

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What about people who get caught up in cleaning the house, laundry, mowing the lawn, or tinkering on the car? Technically, they're not really procrastinating, because they're getting actual household work done, but often-times, when examined closely, people who "putter" may actually be avoiding a work task they dislike. If this is you, then designate physical household chores as a way to combat mental tiredness. In other words, you are not allowed to use peak mental performance time to do a load of laundry or fix the leaky faucet. If you're truly mentally fatigued, use that time to do a chore, but also use it to stretch, take deep breaths, and increase energy levels. Even approaching chores as a way to invigorate, such as putting on your favorite rock 'n' roll as you fold laundry or clean the kitchen, or wearing a Walkman as you trim the hedges, can be a way to conquer procrastination in both your personal and professional life.

Again, it's all about playing mind games with yourself. And discipline. You're smart. You know your own pitfalls. Look at them and combat them in clever ways that bring you the end result you want.

There, procrastination wasn't all that bad, was it?