

# Two secrets to getting more done in less time

By Angela Booth

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You're completely bogged down with work. This week you must complete three client proposals, and two of your staff are out sick. You feel you have a better chance of sprouting wings and flying than getting those proposals done. From experience, you know that each proposal will take around four hours to do. However, you just don't have those 12 hours to spare. You decide that you will have to call your clients, tell them that you're overwhelmed, and assure them that you will deliver the proposals next week.

What can you do when you've got way more work than you can get done? Whether the reason you're overloaded is that you're a procrastinator or someone who takes on more work than she can handle, these two techniques will work for you.

Double your output and get your work done in half the time

What if you could complete each proposal in two hours? Can't be done? What if someone were to offer you a \$1,000 bonus if you completed each proposal in two hours, could you do it? What if they offered you \$10,000? Without any doubt, if someone offered you \$10,000 to complete those proposals, you'd do it. Our work always expands to fit the time we allot to it. You can get your work done in half the time. The key is to have confidence in yourself. You need the initial confidence to at least try it and to believe that you can do it.

There are a couple of tricks you can use. The first trick is to focus all your energies. You do this by relaxing, yet also becoming alert at the same time. It sounds paradoxical, but it's

a meditative process, and it only takes a couple of minutes.

Try the exercise below, just once, immediately before you start work on something that requires concentration. You'll be amazed at how much more work you get done. The exercise is drawn from Chi Kung, a Chinese meditative exercise form which is used in martial arts.

Read the exercise through a couple of times to get a sense of it.

The focusing exercise (two minutes)- should be done where you can see a clock, immediately before starting work on a task which requires concentration.

The first couple of times you do this exercise, you may spend half the allotted time getting your posture right. With practise, you can get into position within a few seconds, and focus on relaxing.

Stand up straight with your feet shoulder-width apart. Relax your knees; don't lock them. Hold your head up, and imagine there's a string fastened to the crown of your head, which is pulling your head up. You should feel slightly taller. Relax your shoulders. Keep your eyes open, but lower your gaze, so you're looking slightly downward.

Put your right hand across your navel, with your fingers spread. Your right thumb should form a straight line across your navel. Put your left hand across the fingers of your right hand, also with fingers spread. Relax both hands.

Relax your forehead, the corners of your eyes, and your jaw.

You're now standing straight and tall, but relaxed. Put your attention in your body, directly behind your navel, and breathe in and out from there. Feel as if your abdomen is gently expanding as you breathe in, and relaxing as you exhale.

Stand for two minutes.

Start on your project immediately.

Nibbling at your task: you can eat an entire elephant one small bite at a time

The second trick to doubling your output is to work in small time periods. Fifteen minutes is ideal, although you can also choose ten minute time periods. The reason for this is that each project has three primary time periods: Start Time, Middle Time, and End Time.

In Start Time, you're feeling your way into the project. You're collecting materials and organising your work. If it's a report you're writing, you may spend an extended period working on the introduction. (And you're worried you won't complete the project on time.) Start Time is difficult because you're fighting inertia, and also because you're uncertain of the project. Whatever its length in real time, Start Time seems to drag.

In Middle Time, you're used to the project, and working steadily through it. Chances are that in Middle Time, boredom will be the biggest danger. Middle Time is the longest stage of any project.

Finally you reach End Time. You're almost done. You work quickly, racing to the finish line. No matter what its length in real time, End Time feels short. It feels good.

When you deliberately work on a task in short periods of time, each period lasting no longer than fifteen minutes, you eliminate both Start Time, and much of Middle Time. Start Time is eliminated because of the fact that you're only doing this task for fifteen minutes, so you don't dither, you simply work because you know the fifteen minutes will soon be over. You also eliminate the dragging boredom of Middle Time: you don't get bored because you tell yourself you can stand anything for fifteen minutes.

Combine the focus exercise and fifteen minute bites to halve the time you spend on your projects

The focusing exercise is the key. It gathers your energy and puts you in an alpha state. You're relaxed, yet completely alert. It's important to do the exercise standing up. Do the exercise before each of your fifteen minute time periods.

You may be wondering how you split the time if you're working on three projects. You can split them up in any way that makes sense to you. You can choose one project, and work to completion with it in fifteen minute sessions, breaking up the sessions by your focus exercises, and doing something else for ten minutes to an hour in between, say having a meeting or making some phone calls. Or, you can work on all three projects at once, working for fifteen minute sessions on each.

These two techniques are simple, but they work.

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