

## HELPING LEADERS THINK AND WORK SMARTER



# Get Rid of Brain Clutter

Feeling overwhelmed?  
You're not alone.

Most of my clients express concern about being able to manage their time well. But better time management isn't the only solution to feeling overwhelmed.

## You may have a case of “brain clutter.”

When you're feeling stressed and unproductive, your first instinct might be to look for a better system:

- A better system to manage your time
- A better system to manage your projects
- A better system to manage your life

But before you blame the system, first check to see if you have excessive mental friction and brain clutter.

As Brigid Schulte explains in her book, *Overwhelmed: Work, Love and Play When No One Has the Time*, “Getting a handle on overwhelm was not just about creating more space and order on my calendar and in my office, but doing the same in my mind.”

Eliminating mental friction will create that space and order in your mind.

### Typical causes of mental friction include:

- Ambivalence, indecision and self-doubt
- Tolerations
- Unfinished projects
- Random mental clutter

Clearly difficult personal matters (i.e., dealing with a death in the family, divorce, career transition, etc.) can temporarily influence your ability to manage yourself. Cut yourself some slack during these times.

## Action steps you can take to help you unclutter your brain

### 1. Ambivalence and Indecision

In a study published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, researcher Frenk van Harreveld discovered that “When ambivalence is high, choice is unpleasant because of the uncertainty about the consequences of the choice.”

All of that unpleasantness leads to procrastination. The simplest way to reduce ambivalence is to be very clear about what's most important to you, and narrow it down to just a few priorities. When you aren't constantly caught up between competing priorities, you have more energy to take action.



If you have multiple roles in your life, your priorities will shift throughout the day.

## Action Step: **DECIDE**

Decide on your priorities for specific periods of time and you will increase focus and productivity. For example, choose one high-priority focus for your first hour of work, followed by 30 minutes of another priority, like knocking things off your to-do list, or handling email.

When you're clear about your priorities, you reduce the number of decisions in favor of automatic routines and processes. Making decisions in advance like this helps alleviate decision fatigue.

For example, when you know that you want to exercise each day, make a plan so that you don't have to use precious decision-making capabilities to decide when, how, and where you're going to do it.



**One in four small business owners believe that just one extra hour in the working day is worth more than \$500.**

*huffingtonpost.com, August 2012*

## 2. Tolerations

Tolerations are those things that bug you, but not enough for you to do anything about. When they pop into your awareness, they start an inner dialogue that's annoying. Tolerations could be as simple as a messy desk or software you need to update. Or they could be as major as an unsafe car you commute in every day.

## Action Step: **LIST**

To eliminate tolerations, first become aware of them. Make a list of everything that's bugging you - the stuff you're putting up with. Choose three things to fix or change this week. Set aside a specific amount of time each week to eliminate tolerations.

Some tolerations can't be fixed as much as they need to be accepted. Fix or change what you can, and choose to accept the rest.

## 3. Unfinished Projects

About 10 percent of the energy consumed in an average household is used by chargers and devices plugged in but not in use, simply waiting in standby mode. In fact, many electronics and appliances (like your TV) will use more energy in the 20 or more hours per day they're off, but still plugged in, than during the time that they're actually on and in use.

Drifting from project to project without purposefully completing the task you're working on is like leaving chargers and electronics plugged in - you are using mental energy to stay "plugged in."

**80% of 1000 people surveyed stated that after leaving the office, they worked at home for an average of 7 hours a week. 38% routinely checked work emails at the dinner table.**

*Good Technology, 2012*

## Action Step: **UNPLUG**

Identify projects that need to be paused and unplugged for now. While it's fairly easy to know if a discrete task is complete, it can be more difficult to do for larger on-going projects. Choose a stopping point in advance.

**Time management isn't about packing in more activity to fit in your day. It's about keeping out potential activity that doesn't belong.**

Set clear boundaries. Keep the clutter out from the start.

## 4. Mental Clutter

This is the stuff floating around in your mind that has no permanent home. It's the things you need to do, the things you want to remember, the special dates, a funny story. It's easier to keep a space neat when everything has a place. Same with your mind.

**Sleep deprivation is now costing U.S. companies \$63.2 billion a year in lost productivity. Exhaustion makes employees less efficient, even in the time it takes to read email. They are also more irritable and more likely to explode.**

*Harvard Medical School, 2013*

### Action Step: **CAPTURE**

Have a calendar, a master to-do list or a place to jot down random things that pop into your mind that you want to remember. When you rely on your memory to keep track of your tasks and grocery list and someday projects, your brain quickly gets overwhelmed.

Get all of this information out of your head and onto paper or an electronic file. This frees up space to concentrate on the tasks that really matter to you.

Recognizing and reducing mental friction and brain clutter is a process. It doesn't need to happen all at once to see immediate changes in productivity and feelings of energy. Change one small thing, then another.

As author Schulte learned, "Clearing the clutter in my head and the guilt that hung over every halfhearted decision has given me more peace of mind than any elaborate time management system."

### A Special Word About Mindset

These are the thoughts or beliefs that keep you from being most effective.

If you struggle with time management, you might unknowingly be sabotaging yourself with beliefs like this:

"I've got to do the work myself or it won't be done right."

"This is going to take a long time."

"I've just got to work harder."

Some of these accompanying judgmental beliefs might sound familiar to you:

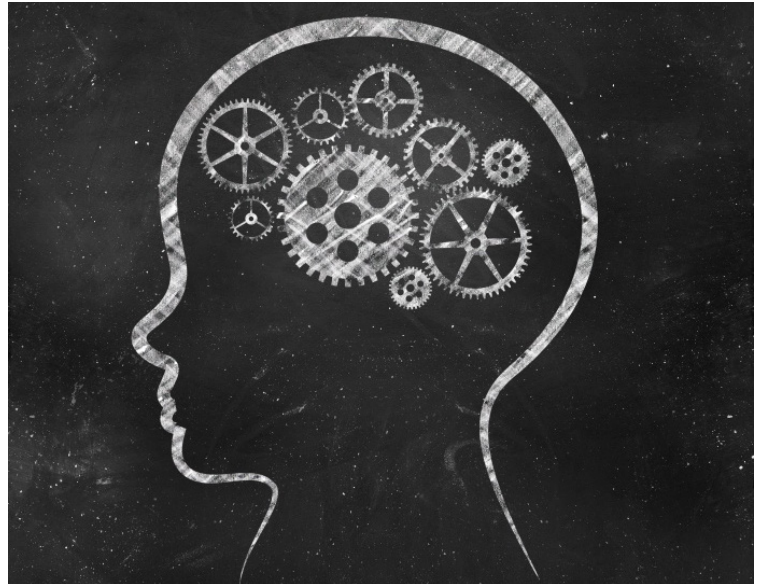
"I'm terrible at time management."

"I'm too busy and can't get anything done."

"I can't handle everything on my plate."

These kinds of judgmental beliefs about yourself set you up for big challenges when going unchecked. Don't be too hard on yourself. Change how you view yourself.

Many people are unaware of what is secretly working behind the scenes in their own minds to their detriment. So we work to uncover not only beliefs that are counterproductive, but beliefs that can be more empowering and create more efficiencies in their work.



### Some examples include:

"I will hand off to other resources to help me get the job done."

"I can get the work done in half the time."

And one of the most radical: "I can work less and get more done."

Imagine what can be possible when you actually believe that work doesn't have to be so hard.

Often the feeling of overwhelm is a sign to check your beliefs and make adjustments.

No ideal system or process will work for you if you don't



have the right mindset in place to drive your actions.

Believe your time is highly valuable. Like anything else you truly value, you'll want to protect it.

**To manage your time, you must guard it.**

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**According to management expert, Peter Drucker, one essential practice for managers is knowing where their time goes. He suggests the following:**

- 1. Know what tasks don't need to be done at all. What would happen if they never got done?**
  - 2. Determine what tasks on your list can be done better by someone else. Do you really have to do them all yourself?**
  - 3. Identify how you might be wasting other people's time. How can you work with others more efficiently?**
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## **Action Step: SCAN**

Do a mental scan to check the thoughts or beliefs in your head that might be holding you back. You're probably unaware of them. Changing your beliefs can be challenging. But a good first step is to increase your awareness - to notice your thinking.

What do you believe is possible for yourself?

As Henry Ford said, "Whether you think you can, or you think you can't, you're right."

**Declutter  
your brain today.  
Start by  
managing your mind.**

Gayle Lantz

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## **About Gayle Lantz**

Gayle Lantz is a leadership expert and founder of WorkMatters, Inc., a consulting firm designed to help leaders think and work smarter.

A sought-after consultant, executive coach, facilitator, and speaker, Gayle works closely with executives and leadership teams

to expand their vision, think and act strategically, and inspire change.

Through consulting, coaching and assessment services, Gayle's clients gain insights about themselves to overcome blind spots, build leadership capability and achieve results more quickly and easily. They also learn how to select, develop and retain talent in their organizations.

Together, Gayle and her clients increase business results and help make work matter at every level of the organization. These clients have included NASA, Microsoft, MassMutual, Southern Company, Lockheed Martin, BBVA Compass Bank as well as small and mid-sized firms.

Gayle also runs senior executive roundtable groups comprised of executives from non-competing industries. Participants meet regularly to exchange ideas, sharpen executive leadership skills and gain objective perspective to help them grow their business.

Before starting her own business in 1998, Gayle worked as an executive in the insurance, financial services and investment industry. She most recently held an officer-level position with TIAA-CREF, a leader in its industry, serving those in the academic, medical, cultural and research fields.

Gayle's articles and/or quotes have been featured in a variety of national and global business publications including BusinessWeek, Harvard Management Update, Wall Street Journal Online, FastCompany.com, CEO Online and The New York Times. She is also author of the award-winning book *Take the Bull by the Horns: The Busy Leader's Action Guide to Growing Your Business... and Yourself*.

Gayle is a graduate of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. She lives in Birmingham, Alabama, and has been honored as one of Birmingham's Top 10 Women in Business.