# Chapter 5



# FILTER ONE –
# TO DO OR
# NOT TO DO

If we are to do the right stuff, then we need to filter out anything that isn't. And we want to do this both in work and in the rest of our lives.
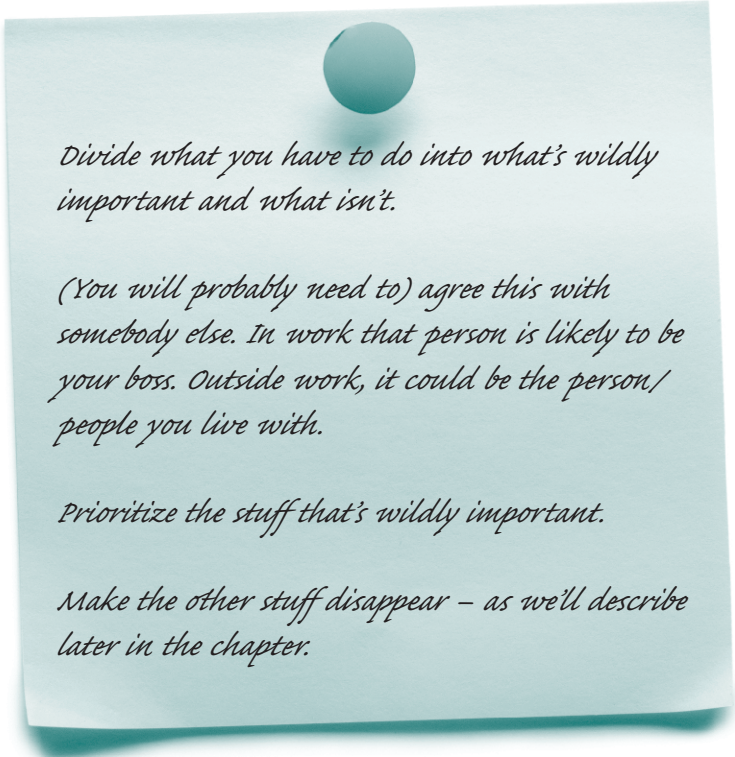
Filter #1 is where we do this – where we make the crucial decisions about what to, and what not to, invest our precious time in. This filter says that we need to learn to prioritize viciously. As we will see, this will result in some things going through the first filter and some things being stopped. For the things that get stopped, we need to have a way of making them disappear so that they don't continue to annoy us. We discuss these two things in turn.

# Prioritizing viciously

Let's get prioritizing out of the way first because I think there's some confusion about what this really means. Sometimes you hear people say "I have 5 priority one things to do, 17 priority two things and 49 priority three things to do". That's *not* prioritizing.

Prioritizing is taking a list of things to potentially be done and saying, "If I could only do one thing on this list, what would it be?" That then becomes your #1 priority. You then take the remaining list and ask the question again. "If I could only do one thing what would it be?" That becomes your #2 priority. Then you take the remaining list, ask the question again, and so on until the list is prioritized. Thus, each item is either more important or less important than each other item and you can't have a joint priority – a 7A and 7B, for example.

What this means in reality then, is that some things are wildly, massively, unbelievably important and lots of stuff . . . well, just isn't. So what you do is this:

*Divide what you have to do into what's wildly important and what isn't.*

*(You will probably need to) agree this with somebody else. In work that person is likely to be your boss. Outside work, it could be the person/people you live with.*

*Prioritize the stuff that's wildly important.*

*Make the other stuff disappear – as we'll describe later in the chapter.*

And then how do you make it work? How do make sure that you stick to doing just the right stuff? And what happens if someone challenges what you should and shouldn't do? Maybe your partner keeps asking you to do something that you believe is not a good use of your time. Or your boss gives you a task that you think won't really add any value. There are two things you need to do then, on an ongoing basis. You must:

- Consciously stick to only doing the "right stuff".
- Continually question what that "right stuff" is.

# Consciously stick to only doing the "right stuff"

When you're asked to do something – be it at work or in the rest of your life – that is wildly important, you give it time, energy, commitment, skill, expertise, knowledge, passion, goodwill, love even – all that good stuff that you're capable of.

However, if the thing you're being asked to do is not on your wildly important list, then you make it disappear. Religiously. Every time. And you need to be strict about this. Don't wimp out. And if anybody complains or has a problem with this, you say quite clearly, "I explained – we agreed – these things matter, these things don't matter".

# Continually question what that "right stuff" is

Okay, so you're making a conscious effort to just do the right stuff. But there's still more you can do to tighten your focus onto only doing the things that truly matter.

There will be some stuff on your wildly important list that will clearly always be there. In my project management business, for example, I have just two priorities – in the order shown:

1   Delivering services to existing customers.
2   Bringing in new business.

These are never going to change as long as I continue to do this job. And it wouldn't make sense for either of them to be dropped from my list. These will always be my wildly important things. And you will have similar things on your list that are no-brainers.

But there may be other things on your list that you're not so sure about. You suspect that even though they might seem important, they may not be: you're not convinced. Your theory is that they don't really add value and are not a good use of your time. Or it may be that your boss, for example, has decided that *everything* you do is wildly important.

In either of these cases, here's what you can do. You want to test your theory. You want to prove for once and for all, whether something is wildly important or not.

The only way you can truly test whether something is wildly important is to *not* do it – and see what happens. If the sky falls, then clearly it was important. If it doesn't, then it wasn't. So here are some ways you can do that.

[ If the sky falls, then clearly it was important. ]

Start with the things that have the lowest priority on your list. Let's say that there's a meeting you go to every week and you're not convinced that attendance there is a good use of your time. Now let's be clear, I'm not saying that all meetings are a waste of time. Some meetings are immensely useful, solve problems, move projects forward, take decisive action and so on. But I think I'd have to say that, in my own experience, about 80% of the meetings I've been to over the course of my life have been a complete and utter waste of time. But maybe that's just me.

Also, let's be equally clear – the reason we're proposing to opt out of this meeting is not so that we can simply skive off. It's that we think the meeting is not a good use of our precious time and that we're proposing to reinvest that time into something more useful and important.

Anyway, back to your meeting. If you think the meeting might not be a good use of your time, then don't go. Notice too that there are many ways not to go to a meeting:

- The absolutely best way is to say you won't be able to attend because you're doing this other, more important thing instead. (And you could ask if somebody could take notes on your behalf.)
- Another good way is to be upfront and have a quiet word/send a message to the person running the meeting or to your boss explaining why you think it is not a good use of your time.
- You could also say, "Can I do my bit first?" and then leave.
- Or you could say, "Call me if you need me".

Okay, so you don't go to the meeting. As a result of this, one of two things will happen. Either the sky will fall – because the meeting *was* incredibly important and your attendance there was crucial . . . or else it won't. If the sky fell, then you have your answer. But if the sky didn't fall, then it means you got back a tiny piece of your precious life for something more important. More significantly though, this means that your presence at the meeting maybe isn't all that important. And since there is now a precedent for you not going, you can not go again. And maybe over time, your little victory becomes a much bigger victory as you stop going to that meeting altogether.

# "A LOT OF PEOPLE THINK I'M A LAZY BUM!"[17]

The quote is from Daniel Day-Lewis, widely regarded as one of the greatest screen actors in the world. Yet in the last sixteen years he has only made six films. He says of the long periods he spends between films: "It's that period of time that allows me to do the work [the film making]. So these two things [the filming and the breaks between filming] are indivisible. They're part of the life that allows me to explore the work in a way that satisfies me."

He does less (the breaks between films) so he can do more (the extraordinary performances he gives in his movies). (And if you're unconvinced about this, go see Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*.)
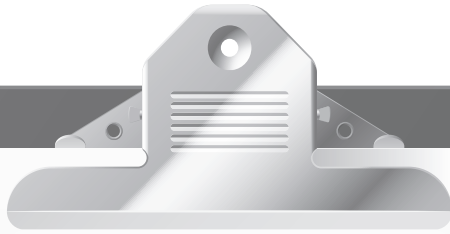
Suppose there's a report you do every week or month and you're not convinced that people read it. (Again I'm not saying people shouldn't write reports. Some reports provide vital information to the organization. But lots of reports get written just because . . . well, they've always been written.) So don't send it out and see how long it is before anybody notices. Suppose it's a weekly sales report sent to a team and it's ten days before you receive a message from somebody asking where the sales update is. First, this suggests that issuing the report once every couple of weeks would be sufficient. Second, maybe the person who chased after ten days is the only person who needs to receive it. So as well as freeing up another bit of precious time, you have also found out what is important (or not so important) to somebody else.

Yet another example of testing the boundaries is that there may be something that is part of your job that has been done a certain way for as long as anyone can remember. In our company, for example, we once had the Monday morning sales meeting. This was a *terrible* meeting. First of all it was first thing on Monday morning. Second, it was about sales and if sales weren't going well, that coupled with it being a Monday morning was enough to depress anybody. Finally, there could be up to ten people at it and it regularly lasted two to three hours. Eventually, we gave up on it. We found a different, far less time-consuming way of achieving what the Monday sales meeting achieved.

Finally, all of this shouldn't be just confined to work. As we've seen, work contains a whole bunch of stuff that doesn't matter that much. But this has to be even more true of life outside work where there is so much "noise" in our lives these days. The endless usage of social media, keeping up with your favourite TV programmes, having to manage all the details of family life, just the bare necessities of keeping the domestic show on the road – cooking, cleaning, shopping, chores etc.

Lots of the things that soak up our time should not be done. As always, let me be clear. I'm not encouraging anyone to live in squalor or not take care of their families. But I'm not the first person to point out that it doesn't actually matter if the house doesn't get vacuumed every day or the kids don't have a bath every single night, or that the world won't actually stop turning if you miss an episode of your favourite TV soap opera or don't get time to read that morning newspaper you bought.

I remember when I first got married, my wife and I used to do a supermarket shop every week. By the time we got there, had done what we had to do and got home, it had generally wiped out a Saturday morning. Not only that, it wasn't that much fun, trawling around a vast supermarket and then joining the inevitable long queues as everybody else did what we were doing. Over a month, these Saturday mornings amounted to two and

a bit full days. And not any old days but weekend days – in some ways, the most precious days of all.

We eventually wised up. We switched to a supermarket shop once a month. Then, each day, one of us would pick up any things that we needed. Generally these were fresh things like meat, fruit, vegetables. We would buy these in a local market or corner shop or some specialist shop.

The result? First of all, we saved the best part of two weekend days a month. Second, we ended up throwing out a lot less stuff because it had gone past its use-by date. And finally, we ate and drank much better because we found all kinds of interesting shops and things in those shops. (I lived in France for eight years and there, most people shop for food every day. The French have got that right.)

There's a lot of living to be done. Don't let all this other stuff get in the way.

So, in summary, whether in work or in life generally, if there are things that you believe are not a good investment of your time, test your theory. You'll soon find out and may be able to push some things from the "Wildly Important" list to the "Isn't" list and every time you do that, it will be a sweet little victory indeed.

# Making it happen

Ultimately, it's going to be what you do or don't do every day that determines the success of all this. So in the box that follows is the way to make sure that each day works out as you wanted it to. (If you're familiar with and use Stephen Covey's "first things first" and the "four quadrants",[18] then that would also achieve the same result for you.)

### DO LESS – Plan Your Day to Get the Right Things Done

At the end of each day (i.e. last thing before you go home), take your list of things to have to be done tomorrow and categorize them according to this scheme:

### Do Less – Say No in Work and in Life

For the next week, say no religiously to the things that are not wildly important. Every time you succeed, chalk up a little victory. Every time you fail, ask yourself why you did and figure out how you're not going to do so next time.

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**A** – I have to do this tomorrow. I cannot go to bed tomorrow without this thing having been done. Planets will collide; stars will fall if I don't get this thing done.

**B** – It would be nice to get this done tomorrow but I don't have to.

**C** – Realistically, I'm not going to get this done tomorrow.

**D** – I can delegate it. It gets done and you don't do it. Nice!

Then, when you get in tomorrow, do all the D's, all the A's, and go home.

"What about the B's?", I hear you ask. "Never put off till tomorrow what can be done today." Isn't that the old saying? Well, actually on this one, Thomas Jefferson, to whom this is credited, got it wrong. Here's a much smarter analysis. If it didn't have to be done today, then it lies in the future. If it lies in the future, there's always the possibility that things may change and that it will turn out we don't have to do it. And what a tragedy then to have put our precious time into it. Now admittedly, this doesn't happen very often but how sweet when it does.

Two further points here, just to round this off. What happens if the end of the day comes, you're going home and one of your A's wasn't done? Then clearly, it wasn't an "A" in the first place. The more severe/ferocious you can be when choosing A's, the better this will work for you.

And what happens if something new comes in during the day? Well then, you need to categorize it as an "A", "B", "C" or "D" and act accordingly. (But don't forget that there's always the possibility to negotiate it and trade it for one of your existing A's – "I can do this (the new thing) but then I can't do that (an existing thing)".)

# Making things disappear

Remember that picture we had back in Chapter 3 with all the stuff we're asked to do going in the top of the funnel? The stuff that doesn't make it through the first filter has to be made to disappear. If it doesn't, we can picture it eventually clogging up the mouth of the funnel.

The way you're going to make it disappear is in the simplest way imaginable – you're just going to say "no" to it. To be precise, you're going to say "no" *nicely* to it.

I teach an online course on *The Power Of Doing Less* and here's what one participant emailed me recently on this issue of saying "no" and the liberation that comes with it. "I found myself declining a 3 hour each way road trip with 3 kids under 6, and soon after, a 2 hour each way version of the same, just half an hour ago. Love that feeling of relief!"

Paradoxically – and contrary to what you might have expected – not doing something requires work. That work comes from having to make the thing disappear. What we want though, is for the amount of work required to make it disappear to turn out to be far, far less than the work that would have been required, had we done it.

Some things should not be done at all. However, it's not enough to say we're not going to do it. We need to find a way of making it disappear so that it doesn't keep bobbing around and causing us to have to deal with it over and over again.

[ Some things should not be done at all. ]

**The way to make something disappear, is to say "no" nicely to it**

"I can't do that 'for personal reasons'."

"That's not really my area of expertise." / "Charlie would be a better man to do that."

"Can you let me think about that?" (And – ideally – hope it goes away.)

"No thank you."

"I can't do that because I'm left handed!"

"I can do this (the thing you're being asked to do), but then I can't do that."

"You're going to have to talk to my boss about that."

"That's not part of my job description."

"I'm kinda busy or gotta deadline (or whatever) at the moment – could you come back to me about that say, tomorrow?"

"I've got a work/home thing to do."

"I've got a headache."

"Why don't we do something fun instead?" (More for use in your personal life than at work!)

"I don't have the time."

"I'm sorry, I wouldn't be comfortable doing that."

"Sorry, we've got a prior engagement/other plans."

"That's not one of my priorities at the moment."

"I won't be able to do that any time soon."

"It'll be next week (or whenever) before I can get to that."

# Ways to show you don't want to be disturbed

Buy or make a sign that says "Your lack of planning is not my emergency" and hang it up in your office. (I have actually seen some somebody walking towards somebody's cubicle, seeing that sign and then veering away!)

Go somewhere where you won't be disturbed. The absolutely best way to do this is to find some place where people don't expect you to be. Your hope is that "out of sight, out of mind" will occur and they won't ask you to do things as a result. This then means that you can spend the time you gain on important things. So – go to another part of the building, another floor, a different section or department. Book a conference room and work from there. Work from the coffee room/cafeteria/restaurant. Work in a nearby coffee shop, if there is such a place. Work from home, if that's an option. And if it's not, start to agitate to make it one.

Close your door. This assumes (a) that you have a door and (b) that it's usually open so that when it's closed, people know there's something serious going down.

Put on a pair of headphones while you sit at your desk.

Don't answer your phone.

Pretend you're out. "Stop, drop and roll" as someone I loved used to say – this for callers at your front door.

Divide the day up into periods of red time (say 10:00–12:00 and 14:00–16:00). Then, if somebody comes to you at 9:50, you give them 10 minutes of your time, energy, commitment, "Sit down, what can I do for you?" kind of thing. Somebody comes at 10:00; you ask if they could come back at 12:00.

When somebody comes to interrupt you, say, "I'm really involved in this at the moment"/"I have a really tight deadline" (irrespective of whether you do or not)/"I'm really trying to get my head around this problem right now"/ "I'm trying to split the atom at my desk"/whatever – "is there any chance you could come back in an hour?" In my experience, almost everybody respects this, nobody takes offence and guess what? Well, sometimes they don't come back at all! And sometimes when they do come back, they have several things they want to talk to you about. (I think we all know people who could be described as "serial interrupters".)

Only check your email once or twice a day. This is a well-worn piece of advice, as is turning off the thing on your computer that goes "bing" every time an email arrives.

# Ways to sift out the timewasters

Write an out-of-office that reads something like this. "I'm going on holidays and won't be back until <date>. When I come back, I'll be emptying the contents of my inbox. So please contact me on my return." (Life *is* actually too short to go through several hundred emails, most of which are no longer relevant.)

Say, "Could you send me an email on this?" This, for example, is what support desks do all the time – the idea of "take a ticket". This is the first test they're setting you, to see how serious you are about your problem. If somebody isn't prepared to write you an email about something, you can fairly safely assume that the thing is probably going to go away.

Say "sure" and then do nothing – on the basis that if it's important they'll ask again (or come and check how it's going or something like that) and if it's not, then clearly it is something that can be resolved without you.

Don't return a missed call if the caller hasn't left a voicemail. It's clearly not that important.

Show them how overloaded you are. If you're interested, email me and I'll send you a simple Excel tool for calculating this.

Rather than simply saying "yes" to anything, aim to question the deadline given to you every time. Double the deadline and ask, "Would that do?" So, for example, somebody comes to you at noon and says, "Could you have that by close of business today?" ask, "Would it do tomorrow morning?" Or somebody says, "Could you review that sometime over the next week?" say, "Not sure if I could get to it in a week. I could do two weeks". You'd be astonished how often people say, "Yeah, that's fine – thanks". And we've all had the experience of busting our ass to get something done only to find the person for whom we did it saying, "Yeah, great. That's great. It would have done next week, though".

Deal with an email only once. Do one of four things to it – reply, forward, file, delete. Don't leave it languishing in your inbox were it will only continue to torment you.

A good friend of mine told me this. I pass it on and you can make up your own mind about it. I'd suggest it's a very extreme measure for very extreme circumstances. (My friend has only done it *once*, for instance.) Declare email bankruptcy i.e. send out a blanket message (like an Out Of Office response) saying the server died and you have lost everything. Tell your contacts that if they had a high-priority request with you to please resend it and you will address it as soon as your system has been restored. The *one* time my friend did this returned a 90%+ reduction in "demands". Most of the emails he got were ones of condolence!

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# WANT TO BECOME RICH?
# DO NOTHING

Want to become rich like Warren Buffett? The billionaire investor and chairman of Berkshire Hathaway is well known for this piece of advice: "Don't sell your stocks. Instead buy and hold."

Buffett reckons that people sell stocks far too quickly and for all the wrong reasons. Rather than thinking like investors, they jump from sector to sector and stock to stock in the hope of making a quick killing, all the while trying to avoid being dashed on the rocks.

The trouble with this kind of trading is that the cost of so much activity wipes out any chance the investor has of reaping the rewards of owning the stocks. To invest like Warren Buffett, you have to get to that point where you *can* reap the rewards – which can take time.

When his stock is undervalued Buffett *does nothing*; he holds onto it rather than sells. This approach has made him richer than Croesus.

# WHAT IF YOUR JOB IS COMPLETELY UNPREDICTABLE?

You may be one of those people who is in a very event-driven job. By this I mean that much of your time is spent responding to unpredictable requests that come in to you. Maybe you (wo)man a helpline or support desk. Or maybe you manage a team of people who can come to you out of the blue with queries or issues.

People in such jobs tend to say that saying "no" nicely is not for them and they just have to deal with everything that comes along. That may be true but there are still things you can do to get more control over what you put your time into. So if you're a person who is in such a job, this one is especially for you – because . . . it's possible to plan for the unexpected.

Really?

Yep. And you could start right now.

Each day for five days, record how much of your time goes into these interruptions. Let's say it looked something like this – in hours:

| Mon | Tue | Wed | Thu | Fri |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 5 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 7 |

Add these hours up and you get 20. Divide by 5 (the number of days in the week) we get 4. So this says that on average you spend four hours a week dealing with interruptions. So plan for that from now on. Put four hours in your schedule every day for dealing with interruptions. (And keep track of it because maybe it varies over time. Maybe it's seasonal or to do with certain time of the month/year/quarter.) If you know that some of your time every day is going to go on interruptions, the daftest thing of all is to pretend that the time for dealing with interruptions is zero.

I recommend this hugely to anyone in such a job.

Deal with an email only once. Do one of four things to it – reply, forward, file, delete.

## **Do Less** – Practise Saying "No" Nicely

Choose five ways of saying "no" nicely. Try to implement each of these at least once over the course of one day.

" 'It just shows what can be done by taking a little trouble,' said Eeyore. 'Brains first and then hard work. Look at it. That's the way to build a house.' "

[ – A.A.MILNE, *The House at Pooh Corner* ]