Doing more in less time

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INTRODUCTION

'The ability to focus will be the superpower of the 21st century.'
(Cal Newport)

More and more incentives

When I wrote my final thesis for my communication studies in 1992, it was difficult to get information. I traveled halfway across the Netherlands to interview people and had all the information (on paper, of course) on a few shelves next to my desk, neatly arranged alphabetically. I was happy when I had captured another document. Nicholas Carr wrote in 2011 in his book: *The Un-deep - How Our Brains Handle the Internet* that we have twenty times more information available to us than twenty years ago. By now we are almost ten years on and many social media richer. In 2018, 3.8 billion people worldwide sent 281 billion emails every day. Getting enough information these days has become the last problem you have to worry about. The challenges lie in an entirely different area: exactly what information do you need? How can you store information so that you can quickly find it again? How do you keep an overview? And how do you keep peace of mind?

Infobesity, being online 24/7, office gardens and working from home In school, you probably didn't learn how to deal with the increasing "infobesity. In school, you learn all about a field or profession. Then you start your first job and suddenly the emails, apps, meetings, ad hoc requests and phone calls come. Your brain is not set up for the enormous flow of information you are confronted with and becomes overstimulated. They did not teach you how to deal with this during your training. The possible result is that, despite the large amount of information, you function less instead of better.

This is compounded by some other challenges that have arisen over the past few decades. First, we can be online 24/7 and you may be online much of the day. As a result, you read notifications of new emails, apps and social media throughout the day. As a result, you may also be busy with your work all day and not taking enough breaks.

The location where we work also poses a challenge. Until recently, we sat collectively in open-plan offices that gave off a lot of jabs, interference and noise around you. This all took a lot of energy, making you tired faster. The corona crisis solved part of this problem in an unexpected way because we started to work at home much more. But working from home also has its challenges, such as the demarcation between work and private life.

Because of the challenges mentioned (infobesity, being online 24/7, office gardens and working from home), organizing your working life has become a profession. Thirty years ago, you could still let everything that happened in your work happen to you. There was much less information, you had your own workplace, and breaks were still "gifted" to you by society, in that you could hardly work (and store) outside office hours.

If you let everything get to you these days, chances are you will drown.

The challenges mentioned above mean that more and more people are finding it difficult to achieve their goals in the multitude of stimuli. Perhaps a similar struggle for attention is taking place between your big goals and projects on the one hand and all the small actions and emails on the other. Do your larger goals often lose out? A pity, because they are often the things that provide the in- spiration for your work. The reverse problem, where you give attention to that one big project, but ignore all other tasks and e-mails (or even the rest of your life), doesn't work either. Then you are promoted after four years, but your employer has fired you, your partner has left, and you are out on the street with no money.

Four perspectives integrated

Much has been written about working efficiently and achieving your goals. This has been done from a variety of perspectives. I will mention here four that I think are relevant:

- The workings of our brain: how does it work? What are its strengths and weaknesses when it comes to processing stimuli and how can you respond well to them?
- Behavior: how can you put into practice the knowledge you have about realizing your goals and the assumptions based on them? This is the "bottleneck" for actual change.
- Information flows: how can you get all the information that is on handle your coming well, so that you create overview from the multitude of emails, whatsapps, verbal requests, phone calls, meetings, and so on.
- ICT: there are countless tools that can make things easier for you make to achieve your goals.

The above perspectives have been addressed by numerous-lous authors. So why this book? There are three main reasons.

First of all, until now I miss a book in which the four perspectives mentioned above are written in an integrated way. It is precisely the integration of the different perspectives that leads to real change. In this book (and on my web site www.efficiencyexpert.nu), knowledge about dealing with your brain, behavior, information flows and ICT tools is integrated into a solution to achieve your goals that really works. Because organizing your information flow without using the possibilities of ICT does not work well, but using an ICT tool without knowing how to process information well does not work either. And if you support your workflows well with ICT, but don't take into account the strengths and weaknesses of your brain and behavior, it still doesn't work.

A second reason for writing this book is that with the thousands of people I have trained and coached, I have experienced in practice which solutions usually work and which do not. I have con- tinuously refined the four perspectives (your brain, behavior, information flows and ICT tools) from that experience into an optimal solution to realize your goals.

A third reason for writing this book is that many people I coach and train ask for it. I postponed it for a long time (that's also what this book is about: 'conquer your procrastination...'), but once a coachee asked me: 'When are you going to write that book? Then I won't have to gather all the knowledge myself!", I decided it was time to get started.

Is this a book for you?

Over several decades, I have trained and coached thousands of people who had difficulty achieving their goals. This was often at the expense of their job satisfaction and often their happiness in life. Perhaps you too wonder why you are unable to achieve your goals in your (working) life. This book gives you answers to this question.

This book is written for you if you are a knowledge worker, employed, entrepreneur or self-employed. In recent years you have had to deal with less and less information on paper. That's why in this book I put less fo- cus on that as well. Sometimes you work with at least one colleague in the same room. Regularly you work at home or in a separate concentration room. You are aware that your work could be organized differently, but you do not know how to put this into practice. You are looking for tools and tips.

Achieving your goals is customization. You are the starting point; from there you can look for solutions that fit your way of working. I explicitly invite you to read this book in the same way. Don't just apply all the advice you read in this book to your own work. Experiment with it, give it time and then pick out what you can use and what suits you.

What can you expect from this book ?

The strength of the work I do is that it is practical and concrete. That is also the approach of this book and the related website. My goal is not only to tell you what you can do, but also how you can do it. In other words: concrete tools which you can apply immediately in your work and which have an immediate positive effect on your functioning. All the solutions described are best practices, extensively tried, tested and improved. In this book I describe which criteria apply to a tool, how five important tools (Outlook Tasks, Google Tasks, Things (Apple), Todoist and paper) score on these and show you what each tool can look like in practice. But which technical steps you can use to set up your tool is not described in this book, but in a book linked to it.

website. There are three reasons for this:

- Electronic tools are constantly evolving through al- ler updates. That means that what I tell you about the set-up of the four tools mentioned could already be outdated tomorrow. Knowledge that is so dynamic belongs in a dynamic environment as far as I'm concerned: a web site where I can continuously adapt the information to the latest updates.
- I have chosen to describe five tools, ter-
  w hat you are normally going to use only one. That would make a good portion of this book irrelevant to you.
- A description of how to smartly in- a particular tool
  focus, is useful but rather boring material. It would make this book lackluster.

I do not pretend to be complete in this book. For example, there are many tools on the market today that make it possible to collaborate with other people. In this book I will discuss how to integrate these tools into your own overview of your work. This does not require going into detail about the functionality of these tools.

If you want to gain more insight into whether you can improve the organization of your work, you can take the time management test. Go to www.efficiencyexpert.nu → Test & Tips → Time Management Test - Take the test now. Afterwards you will immediately see your score.

The structure of the book

This book begins with a "Manual for Your Brain" where you will encounter five brain laws. There you will read about the "why?" for the solutions to achieve your goals. You'll read those solutions in the four chapters that follow.

In Chapter 1: "From Infobesity to Overview," I will cover how to deal with the first challenge I have discussed in this introduction: dealing with infobesity. Using a roadmap, I describe how to effectively handle infor- mation and how to choose an appropriate tool to accomplish this in practice.

In Chapter 2: "Getting a Grip on Your Goals," you will read how to organize and realize your larger goals and projects from the roadmap.

In Chapter 3: "Gaining Time," you will read how to "capture" the time needed to achieve your goals.

In Chapter 4: "Keeping Your Brain in Top Shape," I discuss solutions to the other challenges I mentioned above: being able to be online 24/7, office gardens and working from home.

In the chapters I will give many practical examples in some large and many smaller cases. The chapters

are each concluded with "practical tips," concrete handsums that will help you work even easier and faster.

The four perspectives to realize your goals (your brain, behavior, information flows and ICT tools) are discussed in this book as integrated as possible. However, there are accents per chapter. In the part before: 'Manual for your brain' your brain is of course central, just as in chapter 4. Chapters 1 and 2 are mainly about processing your information flows. Chapter 3 is about both information flows and your brain. The "drag" angle recurs in all chapters. Because all the tips become really valuable if you can apply them easily and permanently.

I wish you as much fun reading this book as I had writing it!

Jan-Dirk Reijneveld

MANUAL FOR YOUR BRAIN

In training sessions, I often show a slide with four images: of a pressure washer, a drill, a kitchen machine and our brain. I then ask about the similarities and differences. One similarity, as far as I'm concerned, is that they are all "tools. One difference is that our brain does not come with an instruction manual and the other three tools do. Of course, that would also make a bit of a mess at birth, but I also mean it seriously: most of us know little about the strengths and weaknesses of our brain. As a result, we often work in ways that don't quite fit, if at all. Under the motto "better late than never," here as-another guide to the brain, in the form of five brain laws. Starting with the most important: "Switch as little as possible.

SWITCH AS FEW AS POSSIBLE

'If you only do one thing at a time, you have time for everything in the course of the day; but if you want to do two things at once, a year is not enough.'
(Lord Chesterfield, 1694-1773)

Do the following test: take a stopwatch and write down the letters and numbers below. The first time, write down all the letters first, then all the numbers. The second time, write first the "S," then the "1," then the "W," then the "2," then the "I," and so on. Record the time both times.

S	W	I	T	C	H	T	A	S	K	E	N
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12

On average, with the second method, if people write down the letters and numbers alternately, it takes them 30 to 40 percent longer. That's because on a very simple level it is switch-tasking: continuously switching between tasks. In addition to that, it costs most people not only more time, but also more energy and some start making mistakes. If switch-tasking on such a simple exercise already takes so much, you can imagine how inefficient it is when you start doing it on more complicated tasks.

Each time we switch from one task to another, our brain remains partially "filled" with the task we were working on. Mark Tigchelaar uses the term "attention residue" for this. Because of this attention residue, you are not with your whole attention on the new task, you work slower, make 20 percent more mistakes and even your IQ drops, according to Tigchelaar:

> 'Even a brief glance at our e-mail or phone temporarily lowers our intelligence by ten points and takes our brain at least a minute to return to a normal intelligence level. In other words, if we get sixty emails a day and read them every time they come in right away, we spend an hour of our working day at the thinking level of an eleven-year-old. If we are working on a more complex task, or if the interruption requires a little more thought, the recovery time can add up considerably. For example, after one short phone call, it can easily take 15 minutes before we are fully back in the flow.'

Therefore, the first brain law is, "Switch as little as possible. You can apply this law to your work in many ways. I sometimes say, "Your brain can only be in one position at a time. Examples of a possible state of your brain are:

- Doing thinking work
- Emptying your inbox
- Prioritize
- Communicate
- Scanning newsletters

Over the course of this book, you'll see that applying the brain law "Switch as little as possible" has implications both for dealing with your inbox and other information and for when and where you work. The main goal of this brain law is to ensure that you have undisturbed time in your life. Then your brain gets the space to do thinking work, without having to switch to your inbox, colleagues wanting something from you in between, and so on.

Multitasking

To properly understand "Switch as little as possible," you must realize that switch-tasking is different from multitasking. Multitasking means that you do two things at the same time, switch-tasking that you continuously switch between tasks. You can multitask, provided the tasks are simple. For example, you can take a walk while talking on the phone with a customer at the same time, because walking does not require conscious attention.

The funny thing is that multitasking can even be good for your concentration. For that, you have to realize that you are always using your brain 100 percent. The only question is where-before. Suppose you are working on a task for which you only need 70 percent of your attention. Then your brain is basically going to seek distractions to fill the remaining 30 pro- cent. However, if you start doing a simple second task that requires (part of) that 30 percent of your attention, your concentration actually increases. Because your brain is then already (almost) 100 percent filled with tasks, it no longer seeks distractions.

I apply this myself when making phone calls. Then I always walk, which requires just enough attention to keep my attention on the phone call. Unconsciously, I also see the patterns in the floor where I walk, put my feet on lines or a square shape in the floor in a certain way. While talking on the phone I suspect I've walked thousands of miles (and worn out several pairs of shoes I'm afraid). In face-to-face conversations, of course, I don't walk; people would go crazy. Then I keep my con- centration on the conversation by making notes or notes on my notepad.

YOUR BRAIN NEEDS REGULAR BREAKS

'When I travel in a carriage, or walk after a good meal, or during the night when I cannot sleep - it is on those occasions that ideas flow best and in abundance.'
(Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart)

Belgian neuropsychiatrist Theo Compernolle distinguishes three parts in the decision-making part of your brain:

- Your reflex brain, which stands for reacting;
- Your reflective brain, which represents concentration;
- your archiving brain, which stands for archiving (storing, looking up and discarding insights and informa- tion).

Your reflex brain and reflective brain
Your *reflex brain* dates back to prehistoric times. It likes to react quickly and is always in the here and now. In prehistoric times it was very functi- onal. For example, if a wild animal came after you, you had to react quickly and not first think, 'Hey I see a lion over there, that's quite a dangerous animal, what should I do? Maybe I should run fast...' Because then you probably would have already ended up in the beast's mouth. Using your reflex brain takes little energy, but it is also lazy. For example, if you have a problem with four possible solutions, you choose the easiest solution. And that, of course, is not always the best solution.

The *reflective brain* developed later in evolution. It is the thinker in your head, which is good at focusing on one thing at a time. If you let your reflective brain look at the above-mentioned problem with the four possible solutions, it will, for example, look for a fifth solution because it is not satisfied with the first one.

ste four. Your reflective brain needs undisturbed time and takes a lot of energy. When you get tired, it no longer functions properly and your reflex brain takes over.

Archiving brain

My main concern now is the third brain mentioned above, the *archiving brain*. This is the librarian in your head. It consists of a huge archive in which all your knowledge and experiences are stored. New knowledge and experiences are combined with it. Your archiving brain is active only when the reflex brain and the reflective brain are not ac- tive. That is when you are taking a break or sleeping. You may recognize that you wake up in the morning with an inspiration or a solution to a problem you are struggling with. That's when your archiving brain has been active. Free productivity is what I always call it.

Therefore, Brain Law 2 reads, "Your brain needs regular breaks. Only if you take enough breaks and sleep can your archiving brain process all the information that comes along and come up with creative solutions. In my experience, many people in our 24-hour society do not take adequate sleep and breaks.

Your archiving brain works unconsciously, you can make it work better by taking breaks, but you have no influence on how it works, on what processes take place there. It is therefore also called our unconscious brain. Ap Dijksterhuis, in his book *The Clever Unconscious - Thinking with Feeling,* compares the processing capacity of our unconscious, our archiving brain, with that of our conscious. Our consciousness can process about 60 bits per second, while our unconscious, archiving brain can process about 11.2 million bits per second: 200,000 times as much. Cal Newport says about this in his book *Deep Work*:

> "The theory is that your consciously thinking brain is comparable to a home computer, on which you can run carefully written programs that then give the right answers to bounded problems, while your subconscious mind is then Google's vast datacen- tra, in which statistical algorithms work their way through terabytes of disorganized information and over time spit out surprisingly useful solutions to difficult problems...

No wonder that various experiments show that people who rely on their unconscious to make decisions usually make better decisions than people who try to arrive at decisions very consciously, rationally. There is a nuance to this: if there is little information, then the limited capacity of the conscious is not such a problem and may lead to a better decision than one made by the unconscious. But when more information becomes available, the quality of conscious decisions quickly diminishes, om- that it, with its limited capacity, cannot handle the large amount of information.

GREAT IDEAS COME AT AWKWARD TIMES

"I make my decisions purely on emotional grounds, the arguments I look for afterwards.
(Aad Muntz)

If you apply the previous brain law, "Your brain needs regular breaks," and take sufficient breaks from your work, you will find that one of the consequences is that your brain starts generating more and better ideas. And that's where we encounter the following brain law: 'Great ideas come at inconvenient times.' When you are in a conversation with a potential client about a construction project, you think about buying a carton of milk, granola and a bag of apples at the supermarket tonight. And when you're at the supermarket, you think about calling that contractor about the bid for that construction project. Both useful ideas, but the timing is a bit un-convenient. So make sure you always have something with you where you can record the useful part of your thoughts, so they don't get lost. An additional advantage is that the idea does not get stuck in your brain. This allows you to stay in the "here and now" with your attention and you don't come home with pears instead of apples. And you're not during the con- cert you've been looking forward to for so long thinking, "I mustn't forget to call Kevin about that construction project.

Why exactly does your unconscious, archiving brain supply all those ideas, why doesn't your conscious brain? Ap Dijksterhuis gives the metaphor of a flashlight:

> 'In the conscious, the lamp is bright but the beam is very narrow, illuminating a small area brightly. In the unconscious, the beam is less bright but much wider, so that a much larger area is (somewhat) illuminated.

becomes light. For that reason, the unconscious is more creative, coming up with unusual, unusual, and original solutions more often.'

The usefulness of a goal

You can give your archiving brain, or your unconscious, a little incentive to come up with those great ideas by having a goal. For example, "I want to know the best people to approach for the New Construction project team. Research shows that a goal like this spurs your unconscious into action. I sometimes play with it myself when I have an issue that my conscious thinking (remember, with a capacity of 60 bits, while the unconscious has a capacity of 1.2 million bits) can't figure out. Then I literally say to myself before I go to sleep (the main purveyor of great ideas), "Archiving brain, come up with a trick. Obviously with a wink, but by speaking the command literally and out loud I hope to spur the unconscious/archiving brain on a bit more. Sometime before I get out of bed the next morning, the eureka moment often follows. If it is the right solution, I feel it immediately. Try it out.

Give your unconscious a command.

The 4 B's

Okay, by setting a goal you have arranged for your unconscious to get to work for you. But how do you make sure that your unconscious actually passes the idea on to your conscious? This is where the pause moments come in. Because your unconscious mainly passes ideas on to your consciousness when there is space in your consciousness. Not surprisingly, of course. As

As you have read above, this space is mainly there when you sleep and when you take a break, that is, when you are not working hard. In this context I sometimes speak of the 4 B's: bed, bath, forest and bus. If you are walking, sitting or lying there, these are the moments when you are not working and therefore have space in your brain. Of course there can also be space in the shower, in the garden and on the train, but these are not three-letter words that start with a 'B'.

Using these 4 B's does increase the chances of a great idea entering your consciousness, but unfortunately it is not a guarantee. Sometimes your unconscious is just very stubborn and refuses to pass on a particular idea to your consciousness. With goal setting and the use of the 4 B's you can increase the chance, but ultimately your unconscious decides when the time is right to pass the idea on. Incidentally, a training participant once suggested a fifth "B" to me: bar. It probably depends on the nature of the refreshments whether your archiving brain does its work there as well.

Showers

One film director told me in an interview that he often takes a shower when he gets stuck in his work, often for up to an hour. When he is done showering, he usually knows again how to proceed with the film project he is working on.