

Boost Your Productivity



Boost Your Productivity

**A shortcut to getting things done
and getting your life sorted**

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About the Author

What will this book do for you?

Everybody has too much to do; the call centre operator trying to clear the backlog of calls, the CEO running for her plane to JFK, the single mother juggling the school run and her home-based proofreading service.

Nobody has enough time: not the vicar trying to produce a great sermon for Sunday and see all those who need his attention; not the nurse trying to cover a large ward, nor the manager of the small corner shop.

A lot of people are worried. They can't say "no" as their job is on the line. They are already working very long hours. They are exhausted, the email won't go away and Twitter, which seemed so much fun at first, is now just a right pain.

Relax, help is at hand. Thoughtful, yet pragmatic. Practical and easy. Home and work. That's *Boost Your Productivity*: a primer for getting your life sorted, getting everything back on track and doing what is really important to you, not just who or what is shouting at you loudest.

Here's the structure of **Boost Your Productivity**

Section 1: The Philosophy. We're not going to dive in with lists, plans and continually saying "no". We know it's got to be deeper than that. This will be a vital introduction.

Section 2: Decide Your Bigger Picture. It'll all come together if we know what the bigger picture is: that starts here.

Section 3: Set Your Compass. And continues here.

Section 4: Make the Right Stuff Happen. And this is how we make our goals, plans and vision a reality on a day-to-day basis.

Section 5: Being More Productive at Work. The simple ideas that really do make a huge difference at work.

Section 6: Getting Things Done Despite People. It'd be so easy if it weren't for other people. How to get them thinking your way.

Section 7: Getting Things Done in a Virtual World. How to use the cleverness yet ignore the demands of the digital and virtual worlds.

Section 8: Being More Productive at Home. How to get it all done and be happy in your personal life.

Section 9: Paradoxical Productivity. Now you have a great system, a few little curiosities to add to your skill portfolio.

Section 10: Your Action Plan. Your personal checklist to success.

The majority of the sections will start with the big idea (e.g., stopping other people taking up your time unnecessarily) and then explain how to address that challenge in more detail. There will then be a mini case study: those at home or work with the same challenges you have, that we all have; this gives you a chance to see how they practically implement the concepts. We'll also make sure your toughest questions are answered before a final summary. Everything in this book is tried and tested: it is both pragmatic and practical. We encourage you to start using the ideas immediately as that's the way this digital version was designed.

Read on . . .

1

The Philosophy

The Challenge

No, please don't skip this section! The word "philosophy" is perhaps a little daunting especially when you were just seeking some simple, pragmatic methods of getting more done, reducing the torrent of email and having some quality time with the children during the working week. The latter – *practical tips* – we will definitely, absolutely provide. And soon. But if you truly, deeply want to achieve – or return to – a state of peak productivity where you are achieving what you want to achieve, living the life you wish to live and not feeling exhausted doing it, a bit of philosophy is important. *Go on: it's not so bad. You'll see!*

No? Really, no? Then skip to Section 4 where you will find practical tips galore. But please, do come back to this section when you have been reassured that such practical help is provided. *This* is the section that will ultimately allow you to understand where the **real breakthrough in your personal productivity** will be made.

The Detail

Philosophy? Yes, because there are some deeper questions we need to answer:

What do you mean by productivity?

Most begin to look at the field of “time management” and question their productivity because of overload: they find they simply cannot keep up with assignments and tasks without digging into their personal time and although they are willing to do that for a while, the consequent cost for quality of output, their most important relationships and their health increasingly becomes something they are not willing to accept. And much time management advice attempts to solve such challenges with “quick fix” tips, which rarely solve the true dilemma: the problem simply keeps coming back. We do want to solve it once and for all and it does require a robust answer to “*what do you really mean by productivity?*”

Thus: are you considering the bigger questions?

Because clearly at one level “being productive” is doing what you are paid to do if you are an employee. Or successfully running your business if you are self-employed. However that is only one dimension; in a simpler world it was reasonably straightforward to consider it in that way. But in the New World of Work – to which we are all exposed – of severe competition, 24 by 7 working and increasingly less distinction between “home” and “work” there are other implications we need to ponder, such as: Where is your career going? And how are you maintaining important friendships? And looking after

your health? And managing your finances, not just for now, but also for the future? Perhaps if you are delivering on your quarterly targets you are being efficient (getting things done). But if you have become ill in the process you have not necessarily been effective (getting the right things done).

Do you know that it's pretty easy but it will require you to "be different"?

Much of time management "methodology" was first created in that simpler world. A world where we did less multi-tasking, where we had far fewer interrupts and putting it more bluntly our expectations of what we might do and achieve were much lower. But such approaches are no longer powerful enough: we need something that works for our very different lifestyles. And here's the tough bit: to be truly productive we will have to say "no" to a lot of things; we will have to address the digital dilemma of a world which floods into our brain at every opportunity. We will need to recognize that productivity is as much about our personal wellness as it is about our willingness to create a great list.

Thus, you are "productive" if:

- You hit your *work goals*, as that is what you are paid to do . . .
- but at the same time you *maintain your health* . . .
- and in particular, *stress is at a minimum*.

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- You have a longer-term picture of *where your career is going*: you have set your
- *Personal Compass* with its consideration of all aspects of your life: relationships, future finances, simply having fun
- You are not just *efficient* (i.e., getting things done) but also
- *effective* (getting the right things done).
- And the approaches you use to being productive are not only
- “*top down*”, i.e., consideration of the “big picture” *Personal Compass* but also
- “*bottom up*”, i.e., the day-to-day practicalities, for example, of running a family.
- You are feeling good, and
- you are contributing to your business and your community.

The Story

Things had not been at all easy for Karl since 2008. He and his family lived in Detroit, Michigan, USA and he had always been the main “bread-winner”. But from a well-paid job in the automotive industry he had been effectively

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downsized to a job that was well below his skill level and, particularly worryingly, had no real prospects of promotion or a secure career. And this with three growing children and college fees looming. There had been no family holiday for the last four years, the household food budget was really straining at the seams and the house needed significant repairs. Karl and his wife, Barbara, had always been pretty organized: there was a family board in the kitchen with the kids' timetables, general shopping list and a list of repairs to be done on the house. But it struck them that they were really not thinking deeply or creatively enough: they had to do something to get out of this rut. They were both frustrated that they seemed to have no time to think about what they really wanted or how to get what they needed. In fact, perhaps they could be a lot more productive.

We'll return to Karl and his family in future sections.

The Q&A

To be honest I've never been that brilliant at "time management". Isn't this "philosophy" just going to make it even more complicated?

Bear with us: it'll ultimately make it simpler. Guaranteed!

Isn't that story about Karl and Barbara more to do with how they can become successful?

And that's the point. Real productivity is not just about a well-managed diary, a well-listed Moleskine notebook and a well-categorized inbox. It is about getting the success you want, otherwise you simply become a machine managing lists.

The Solution

1. In a very demanding New World of Work, being “productive” is no longer just about a well-managed list.
2. It is about your philosophy of how you will cope in an ever-more demanding world!

2

Decide Your Bigger Picture

The Challenge

Having philosophized a little it is time to get practical and we can approach this in two ways. We could start to reveal true productivity for us by going “top down”, i.e., working out what we really want to do in our lives and create some plans from that. This obviously ought to be the best way; in fact how could you do it any other way? It’s just that unfortunately it is not always grounded enough in reality and our wonderful plans of setting up a coffee shop in Brighton (when we have no funds, no experience and there are very tough trading conditions) become lost in our inability to schedule planning meetings, follow up on those who have offered to help, or find the critical mails in our overloaded inbox. Or we could go “bottom up”, which is a practical, pragmatic way: we simply concentrate on keeping our inbox down to a minimum, managing conference calls and getting away by 6:00 pm every day. Only trouble is, somewhere along the way we realize we don’t know quite why we are doing it any more. Clearly an ideal approach would be one which uses both and that’s the one we will take. This section and the next will be “top down” and then we will flip to “bottom up”. You’ll then have the best of both or even *all* worlds.

The Detail

The “bottom up” approach is concerned with the day to day realities of what is happening now, what needs to be dealt with now and who is shouting loudest: broadly speaking what is important and what is urgent. Important and urgent we will call IN time as you are working *in* your business, you are busy *in* your life. There is necessarily little reflection, little full consciousness and much scrambling to “do” things. The “top down” approach suggests slow down a moment. Consider, what is important and not just urgent? Your health? Next year’s business? Your daughter’s future secondary school? Work *on* it now while it is not urgent as that makes it easier, allows more reflection and planning. In fact you are investing, you are working *on* yourself.

IN time is clock time: you are up against the clock and the schedule. ON time is compass time as you need to choose your direction.

When you set your compass, there are six main directions to set:

Compass Point 1: Your Career

Consider, you will be more productive if with Compass Point 1: or career . . .

1. You work hard to discover what you really want to do. Clearly if you love what you do much “work” will not seem like work and productivity benefits will naturally flow.

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2. You clarify what you wish to achieve when doing what you want to do. We will spend more time in a later section on “explicit conversations” or in other words knowing exactly what you have to do. “Sell more”; does that mean revenue or profit or a combination of both? Or just gain market share at any cost?
3. You become very good at what you do. Sometimes we don’t know what we “really” want to do. Sometimes we don’t know what our “passion” really is. No worry: just become “rock star” good at what you do anyway. Two things happen: the first being that your productivity soars, be it running difficult meetings, doing coaching or pitching to senior audiences. And secondly, more bizarrely, you often discover your passion as sometimes *passions are made not born*.
4. You deploy great productivity practices. And these we will reveal in a later section.

Compass Point 2: Your Wellness

Equally, you will be more productive if with Compass Point 2 or wellness, you look after yourself so that you have great energy, clear concentration and undivided focus. We have all been in the position that we are so tired or distracted we can only work half-heartedly and with little energy. The four main contributors to Compass Point 2 and hence your productivity are:

1. Meditation: Take time out to look after your best thinking.

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2. Exercise: We don't conserve energy by not taking exercise, we simply stop generating it. Get good brisk, CV energy every day to boost your productivity.
3. Diet: Minimize those foods which mess with your brain chemistry such as overdosing on sugar.
4. Sleep: ensure that you are 100% alert by clearing sleep debt.

The remaining four directions: **personal finances, relationships, fun and contribution** we will consider in the next section.

The Story

Karl and Barbara realized they had missed a trick. They were hard workers and they were pretty well-organized but they had never quite addressed at what they wanted to work hard and around what they needed to be organized. As it was the first week of the long holidays, all of the children were off to their respective summer camps. Usually Karl and his wife would have used that time to do some house redecoration but this time they decided to do some reflection: it was Personal Compass time.

The Q&A

But surely you have to agree so much of this stuff is beyond our control? I don't enjoy what I do but it does pay the mortgage.

Of course. And we have all been there. But sometimes we create a tension that needn't exist: a tension of something not necessarily being what we "chose" to do and therefore we cannot love it. If we let go of that tension and decide to get really good at it, we can find we do have a love for the work. Even clearing tables. And our productivity soars.

The Solution

1. Productivity is about "top down" and "bottom up".
2. Each approach needs the other's perspective to be truly effective.
3. The "top down" vision needs the "bottom up" pragmatics.
4. And the "bottom up" pragmatics needs the "top down" direction.
5. Direction is about Personal Compass of which there are
6. Six main directions

The first two are career and wellness. Both of which need to be critically examined.

3

Set Your Compass

The Challenge

So you are starting to boost our productivity by reflecting “top down”, i.e., what is your vision? What are your big goals? What are you really trying to do with your time on this planet? And then such “big picture” stuff can be converted into plans and tactics, tasks and actions, and augmented by some practical approaches, tips and techniques, for coping with the increasing day-to-day busyness of everyday life, the “bottom up” approach.

Let's continue with setting your Personal Compass, a process that does allow you to gain a bigger picture but on the other hand is grounded in reality.

The Detail

We have set two compass points so far:

Compass Point 1: Your Career

You work hard to discover what you really want to do; you clarify what you wish to achieve when doing

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what you want to do; you become very good at what you do and you deploy great productivity practices.

Compass Point 2: Your Wellness

You execute M-E-D-S: meditation, exercise, diet and sleep. (See *Bags of Energy*, ISBN 978-0-857-08515-3)

Let's now consider the remaining four directions on your Personal Compass: **personal finances, relationships, fun and contribution:**

Compass Point 3: Personal Finance

You will be more productive if:

1. Your finances are in order. Decide to know:
 - a. What is coming in;
 - b. What is going out; and
 - c. Set yourself a budget to avoid over expenditure; and
 - d. Thus avoid the distractions of money worries.
2. You know qualitatively what you are trying to achieve. Have a good and detailed discussion on the difference between standard of living and quality of life. The first is more about the stuff you accumulate, the second more about the choices you make. Chase the latter: it is more easily accessible and a lot cheaper than the former.

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3. You know quantitatively what you are trying to achieve. Calculate your personal balance sheet (your assets minus your liabilities) and monitor each year. Essentially you are trying to increase its value year on year.
4. You are able to “let go” of money being your sole motivator and that of course is rediscovering Compass Point 1 or career.

Compass Point 4: Relationships

You will be more productive if:

1. Relationships help you rather than hinder you.
2. You work hard to build clear, strong relationships with those at both home and work.
3. You have honest discussions about expectations on both sides of the relationship. Sit down, talk and listen. If at work, book time (on the phone if necessary) and discuss the way you will work together.
4. You never assume anybody can mind read.
5. You talk, listen and agree the way forward.

More help on this in Section 6, by the way.

Compass Point 5: Fun

You will be more productive if you are having fun:

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1. What is fun for you?
2. What did you used to do and enjoy before you got too busy/felt you couldn't afford it/had too many responsibilities?
3. How much fun can you have whilst keeping it simple and easy?
4. How much fun can you have without spending money?

Compass Point 6: Contribution

You will be more productive if you are “giving back”, if you are helping others:

1. Not because it saves you time: it'll take some time.
2. Because it gets you to really appreciate the time you do have.
3. And because it gets you to understand the difference between the vital few, i.e., that which actually is very important and the trivial many, i.e., that which only appears important because of its current urgency.

The Story

It was an intensive couple of days as Karl and Barbara worked through the six compass points. But it was cathartic.

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There were discussions they had never had, conversations they had avoided and obvious things to do (calculate their personal balance sheet) and good ideas that had never struck them before (quality of life as a goal rather than simply standard of living) but best of all they realized they could get out of this mess. They could hugely boost their productivity to create the life they wanted. Busyness and “we have no time” were crazy feelings: they had been spending too much time struggling from day to day, so much so that they really had not been able to see the wood for the trees. There was plenty more to be done just on relationships, for example. They had family and they had friends and contacts they could approach. And they were intelligent but had got so tired and down that they had stopped thinking. They now needed to apply their very good organizational skills to a clearer, better vision. This could be done.

The Q&A

Isn't the danger with a big picture approach that you begin to introduce ideas that are simply not possible, simply not going to happen?

There is always that danger, there is always that concern. And there is no easy answer to it. But what is important is that we can never be truly productive unless we do look up at the horizon, unless we do think longer term and unless we do ask ourselves some of the fundamental questions. Having (solely) our email optimized is not productivity.

As I read about the personal compass I realize that I have lots to do: I was hoping to find ways to create less to do in my life not more, so how does that work?

You will: you are doing some upfront investment work to make life easier. It's simple really: you can work at the tactical level and you will just get busier and busier. Or you can sort out a strategy for you, which makes things easier and simpler. That's the approach we are taking. Of course we have to do some important mental work to sort the strategy first.

The Solution

1. Productivity is about “top down” and “bottom up”.
2. Each approach needs the other's perspective to be truly effective.
3. Direction is about Personal Compass of which there are six main directions.
4. Career, wellness, personal finance, relationships, fun and contribution.

4

Make the Right Stuff Happen

The Challenge

So now you know what is important to you: at work, at home, at play. You have our direction/s. You know what the right stuff is. How do you make it happen? With a remarkably simple tool: the **master list** and a remarkably simple process: the 10-minute **daily review**.

The Detail

For all aspects of your life you now know what is important to you as a result of reviewing the six compass points. You have tackled issues as varied as how you might care for your aging mother (in relationships), how to build up more capital to allow you to retire a little earlier (in personal finances) and when to start your own consultancy (in careers) and so on. Now you clearly want to make this all happen. Here's how . . .

- 1. The monthly review.** Once a month, set aside 20 minutes and review your Personal Compass. For each compass point ask questions such as:

- a. What are the key priorities for this aspect of my life?
- b. What actions can I therefore identify?
- c. How might the priorities of this compass point interact with the priorities for another compass point?

Once the review has been completed and each compass point has been considered and balanced with the other points actions will be identified. These actions are captured on your **master list**.

2. **The master list.** This is your definite document of what you want to do and have to do, home and work. It is not a “to do” list which tends to be very short-term focused and so often just about work. Your master list is generated not by anxieties nor by who is shouting loudest but by consideration of your Personal Compass. Your master list is your “flight deck” in that it allows you to consider what is important and how that might be addressed. The master list is open, i.e., it is never completed, fully ticked off, nor closed down: it is simply your overview document, your consideration document, your possibilities perspective.
3. **The daily review.** Spend 10 minutes at the end of every day reviewing your master list and firstly breaking down anything, any task, which is big, chunky and/or daunting. This will ensure they become brain and time friendly. Then when you are doing your daily review you will be prioritizing against what truly needs to be done rather than

what is easy because you have made sure that all tasks are easy. Once you have done your breaking down, select that which needs to be done tomorrow and also that which you want to do tomorrow and create your closed list.

- 4. The closed list.** Your closed list is built around three things: firstly from your schedule; is there anything already in your diary that needs to be allowed for, e.g., a team meeting? Note that. Secondly, had you at a previous daily review already scheduled something for this day, e.g., long-term preparation for the conference? And finally is there anything you would wish to add from your master list? Those three aspects create your closed list; closed in the sense that your goal is that all will be ticked off and accomplished by the end of the day.
- 5. Break, break, date and scheduling ahead.** The more you break big chunks and daunting tasks down immediately the more they are likely to get done.
- 6. Anticipate.** The more you anticipate, the easier you are making your life in the future.
- 7. Crises and the unexpected.** There will be crises and there will be the unexpected. But (1) the more you are managing your day and not the other way around the more likely to be able to allow some time for that crisis; (2) the more you anticipate, the less likely there is to be a crisis; and (3) if a crisis reveals something has gone wrong which should

have been working smoothly then realize that a system has broken and needs to be fixed.

The Story

Vip's time management had not really evolved since his school days. It was reactive and it was now. If something was presented to him as needing doing he would "get it done" as soon as possible. He loved getting stuff "out of the way" so that he could concentrate on his own things. To the external world he had always appeared very productive. At school, he would do homework immediately and tick it off and or hand it in. Long-term assignments were done within a week.

At college this system worked pretty well. Sometimes there was a bit of juggling with competing priorities. And sometimes a current girlfriend got a bit annoyed that his work seemed to come first, even before her birthday celebration, but overall it worked in a simple, linear world.

His school and college productivity coupled with a bright mind had resulted in a pretty impressive CV and a lot of excellent references from tutors and vacation work employers about his ability to "take action", his "focus", etc. He got a place on the prestigious Carnegie-Goldhinde Bank Scheme for outstanding recent graduates in the banking sector. That's when the problems started: his life was no longer linear and simple. He had a live-in girlfriend, he had multiple priorities and he had one or two people reporting for him. His life had – almost overnight – become multi-layered and complex and he didn't know how to cope with it.

Things needed to change.

The Q&A

I love the plan. But surely my boss or one call from the Boston office would wreck it at a stroke?!

Bear with this: we're going to tackle this soon, Section 6 to be specific.

I'm not sure I like the sound of one list. I get that it ensures everything gets considered. But what about the weekends?

Good point. Remember that when you do your daily review, you are considering your closed list for the next day. On a Friday why not create your closed lists for Saturday and Sunday?

The Solution

1. Review your Personal Compass once a month.
2. Identify actions that need addressing and capture them on your master list.
3. Review your master list once on a daily basis. Break, break, plan and date.
4. Create your closed list.
5. Work your closed list.

5

Being More Productive at Work

The Challenge

So now you know what is important to you: at work, at home, at play. You now have your direction/s. You know what the *right stuff* is. And now you are making it happen with a remarkably simple tool, the **master list** and a remarkably simple process: the **10-minute daily review**. How can we now further boost our productivity at work? Read on.

The Detail

1. **Less is more.** *Fewer initiatives, shorter meetings and fewer slides.* There are only so many hours in the day and yet the nature of the modern business is to try and always “add” more to the day. There are always new initiatives, longer meetings with more people across more countries and more slides in every slide deck. But why? “*Well, business is more complex*”, they say. But complexity is best solved through looking for simplicity. “*Because it is easy*”, they know. The digital revolution makes it easy to throw up another website and generate more slides and conference call across the world. Of course, but

that doesn't necessarily make it effective. *"We're busy and so we tend to show the first pass of our thinking which is generally not our best,"* they are honest enough to admit. Take time to refine an idea. So Rule 1: Less is more. Strip processes down and seek the simplicity and the wisdom beyond the clutter and obscurity.

- 2. Respect others: think RoI, return on investment.** If you draft a mail poorly, copy it to 12 people unnecessarily then maybe 10 of those people have had their time wasted unnecessarily and even the two who really do need to read it have lost time trying to understand what you want, what the point really is. Once again less is more (see above) and add to this respecting the time of others. Think of the return on their investment. Two keys for making a more powerful mail are firstly, make best use of the subject line; consider it the most extreme of executive summaries; and secondly, consider writing an executive summary to open your mail, especially long ones; and thirdly, make it clear the action that you're seeking. Rule 2: Think RoI.
- 3. Batch processing.** Rather than responding to mails as they come in, get on with work, concentrate on the meeting and then sit down and process all your mail in one concerted effort, i.e., batch process it. The rhythm and focus will allow you to get more done. Rule 3: Batch process.
- 4. Send cohesive not fragmented mails.** For those to whom you write, set up a word document

and sweep all necessary communication into that. Don't keep interrupting them but send a summary at various points during the day. Rule 4: Cohesive, not fragmented.

5. **Inbox empty: Delete, file, master list.** And once you do process your inbox have a goal of keeping it empty, keep it to one of three decisions: delete a mail or file a mail (into the necessary category) or action the mail by noting it on your master list. Rule 5: Inbox empty by delete, file or ML.
6. **Forward View. At the time period change, take a sweep of what is coming up?** Change of day, change of week, change of quarter, ask: what do I need to be considering, what do I need to be anticipating? Rule 6: Check the landscape.
7. **Every 45 take 5; Take 45 for lunch.** Approximately every 45 minutes, stand up stretch, take a walk and sip some water. At lunchtime, take a proper break away from work. Rule 7: Stay sane.

The Story

You'll remember Vip? Of course: nice guy and what we might call linear productive, i.e., very productive when there is only one dimension to his life and he can follow a simple policy of 'do it and do it now'. Of course as his life becomes more complicated and less one dimensional, it becomes less and

less possible for him to literally “do it now” and rarer and rarer for him to only have one priority or consider.

But as you know, Vip is a man of action so he:

- 1. Dumps all lists, yellow stickies, half-started notebooks and distils them all down into one master list.*
- 2. He reviews this master list daily on his 45-minute train journey home; he is lucky to always get a seat and so it is easy to work on. It also helps him wind down and shut down that working part of the working day. He carefully broke down anything that was large and/or daunting. Once a month he did a major review, which was of his personal compass. This he always extends to the morning commute to give it enough reflective time.*
- 3. He thus created his closed list for the next day.*
- 4. He totally transformed the way he worked: he flipped his perspective from “how can I quickly get rid of this now?” to “how can I do the best possible job on this now” so that it doesn’t just crop up again in the future. He crafted mails better, writing clear up-front summaries and explicit calls to action.*
- 5. He broke his addiction to the inbox. It was now a tool, no longer a “raison d’être”.*
- 6. Finally, he started to look after himself and took breaks but with no loss of productivity at all. Quite the reverse.*

The Q&A

I still go back to an earlier point: what if my boss doesn't agree with many of the above working practices? They may be good for you but he/she wants things NOW?

You have been very patient! Next section . . .

The Solution

1. **Less is more.** Use less time, provide the essential data, make it easy for people.
2. **Think RoI.** Don't just think now, think long term.
3. **Batch process.** Do your job. Then do email.
4. **Cohesive not fragmented.** The complete story in one easily absorbed message.
5. **Delete, file or ML.** Aim for inbox empty.
6. **Check the landscape.** What's coming up. Especially that about which I can do something now.
7. **Stay sane.** Take a break.

6

Getting Things Done Despite People

The Challenge

You are organized. You know your goals. You are making the right things happen on time. **But other people!** They physically interrupt by “dropping round”. They digitally interrupt with emails, which they re-send if they don’t get an immediate response. They bring chaos to meetings. They make you feel guilty when you go home on time. And they gossip instead of getting work done.

Yes, it would be easy to be productive if it weren’t for other people.

The Detail

Here are some ways to deal effectively with people:

Tip 1: Do not accept behaviour that is hindering the productivity of you and others. Arriving late to meetings, not replying to request for information, being a gossip . . .

Tip 2: People cannot mind read. No, they can't. We think they can; we believe they know exactly what they are doing. We believe they realize they are totally off tangent at the team meeting, wasting our time when they keep "dropping by" and CCing us in on every wretched mail they send. But they probably don't; we need to tell them.

Tip 3: Seek privacy when looking for behaviour change. So: you need to tell them. Do it privately: people are always more receptive. That means you often can't tell people immediately and you may have to wait several hours for a convenient time.

Tip 4: Be clear on the change you want, why you want it and with evidence. Then tell it clearly and factually, thus:

You: *"I wanted to chat to you about your frequent drop-bys to my cubicle. Obviously I love talking to you but they have got to stop as I'm simply not getting any work done."*

Them: *"Boring old you."*

You: *"No, not boring, just pragmatic. I need to get work done so I can get home on time – I have a far longer commute than you – and I need to get work done to keep this job."*

Them: *"Ok, then, but how am I going to keep you up to date with things?"*

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You: *"Let's meet for coffee mid afternoon and you can bring me a list of everything which has come up and we will review together."*

Tip 5: Understand aggressive vs. assertive vs. passive behaviour. The conversation above, demonstrates you being assertive. You are demonstrating (and seeking) adult-to-adult behaviour. You have been polite and persistent. If you had become rude, e.g., shouted at your colleague in public, sent an email in block capitals then your behaviour would have become aggressive. But if you had neglected your own feeling and needs you might have become passive.

Tip 6: Be prepared to work for the long term. Be persistent. Behaviours rarely change overnight. But they can change over a few weeks. Work at it.

Tip 7: Accept the fear. Yes, you may feel anxious pushing back on an aggressive project manager who only has his milestones in life. You may feel anxious that he will try and ensure you are seen as being difficult. But do not be fearful of the short-term conflict that you might have to endure. Be really fearful of what happens if you have to live with such behaviours for years. Sort it out now.

The Story

Alice absolutely loved doing a great job for people. She always had and she was pretty sure she always would. She'd been

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a brilliant PA, a superb business assistant and now had her own team of men and women who handled all facilities and associated operations for a medium-sized software company in Milan, Italy.

Friends had often said she was taken advantage of: worked too hard and too long. But she'd never seen it that way: she loved her job and loved doing it well. She had no degree, poor school qualifications and was now doing very well for a great company and she was well respected. Or probably was. It had to be said that the theme of being taken advantage of as far as work was concerned was starting to haunt her. She had a gorgeous company car, but it wasn't so much fun driving into the underground car park at 6:15 am. And she was hardly enjoying it when truly worn out driving home around 8:15 pm. The stock price was great but she hardly had time for her kids, never mind selling a few shares and enjoying some retail therapy. Online shopping was very convenient: she'd bought a fabulous, expensive swimsuit in 10 minutes this morning at the start of a delayed meeting, but frankly where was the real fun in that?

No: it was time to push back. Here's how.

- 1. She sketched out a diagram: her at the centre and all her primary contacts around the perimeter of the paper.*
- 2. She then drew a line connecting her and each contact.*
- 3. Above each line she wrote what was working.*
- 4. Below each line what needed to change.*

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5. *She mailed each person asking for a 30-minute meeting just to discuss “how they might work even more effectively together”.*
6. *She started having the meetings: some were easier than others.*
7. *But all achieved what she wanted: a better working relationship and in particular more respect for herself.*

The Q&A

But what happens if you have to deal with someone who is frankly aggressive and you talk to them and they don't change?

They probably won't, not straight away anyway. They have been using an aggressive behaviour for some time and it has worked for them. It'll take time to get them to realize that approach is not going to work with you. Keep at it, be polite, be persistent and you will get what you want.

But what happens if somebody simply does not agree with the feedback that you are giving them, e.g., does not agree that they are not working to the standards required which is affecting your productivity?

You need evidence that you can talk through with them.

The Solution

1. Do not accept behaviour that is negatively affecting the behaviour of you and others.
2. People cannot mind read.
3. Seek privacy when looking for behaviour change.
4. Be clear on the change you want, why you want it and with evidence.
5. Understand aggressive vs. assertive vs. passive behaviour.
6. Be prepared to work for the long term. Be persistent. Behaviours rarely change overnight. But they can change over a few weeks. Work at it.
7. Accept the fear.

7

Getting Things Done in a Virtual World

The Challenge

It's challenging enough getting things done, actually getting the *right* things done in a real world: real people sitting in a real room, real bits of paper and real lists of real milestones. But what happens when everything increasingly goes virtual and digital? What happens is that if the virtual, digital world is used with skill, our productivity can soar. But if it is not, it can plummet to the murkiest of murky depths. Read on for the danger areas.

The Detail

- 1. Email isn't free.** We've been living with it for perhaps 20 years or so and it's now totally ingrained in our lives. It's fast, it's ubiquitous and damn it, it's free. But only two of those three are true: it's not free. Every email sent has enormous consequences for the recipients. In an old world of work messages had overheads: typists, time to ensure

correct layout and spelling, time to consider sheer courtesy. It meant that messages were considered and not wasted. Now they are easy and standards are low. Consequently for so many people time is wasted every single day. Imagine if every mail needed a postage stamp and you had a small daily budget and thus you had to make every mail count and you could save money by sending fewer. Send fewer. CC fewer. That's real productivity.

- 2. Easy doesn't mean it's working.** The virtual and digital world allows us across the world conferencing, e-learning and websites to answer our questions. They're easy to set up and they save the money of needing or transporting people. But it doesn't mean it's working. You can answer the multiple-choice questions on the leadership module, you can log in to the conference call. But you are not really there. You are certainly not in a leadership mindset, you are definitely not really part of the call. Always go back to the real objective: what are we trying to do here? Of course, save money. But no money has been saved if the call is unsuccessful. Insisting on working towards the real objective is real productivity.
- 3. Fast often means really slow.** A quick email appears to solve the problem; it is after all a lot quicker than a phone conversation and a lot quicker than face-to-face. But three weeks down the line, it's clear that the person who received that email didn't really understand the brief and the

consequences of that lack of understanding are now unravelling. Fast in this case has meant really slow.

- 4. Digital doesn't necessarily mean connection.** When we are trying to get something done we need to connect logically and emotionally. An email might do a reasonable job with the logical connection; but it will be very poor with the emotional one.
- 5. New isn't always better.** The world of social media loves newness. And every so often one of the new approaches is a winner and takes off. But for all the success stories there are plenty of distractions and time consumers if we are not careful.
- 6. Cheaper where? And when?** It's a tough old world out there: all organizations are desperately seeking to save money, of course. The cost of flying people to meetings is obvious and therefore can be saved by stopping them. The value of a group of people getting together and becoming a team is, in one sense, priceless, but certainly very difficult to measure and therefore it isn't. Thus it can never override the cost of the air ticket.
- 7. Your greatest asset is still your thinking.** The virtual and digital world has still not replaced that, so long as you get some time and space to use it. But if you allow it to, the brave new world of the electron will drown out your thinking.

The Story

Juan had been told he had been recruited by the up-market kitchen company, Kool Kooker, from Denmark because he was a people person. Although the Nordic look was very slow to take off in Madrid, it was an increasing trend driven by the desire for simplification in busy lives and the growth of the minimalist urban professional. Working from very cool showrooms in central Madrid, not far from La Plaza del Sol, Juan was building a good client base of cash-rich, time-poor professionals. It was all names, conversation and the occasional text: he called it “intimate selling”. People like him and once “sold” they were loyal to the Kool Kooker brand.

If only he could get his bosses in Denmark to understand “intimate selling” and real productivity in business. They loved efficiency. The Monday morning 9:30 (a little early for Juan to be honest) conference call with him and all the other subsidiaries in Milan, London, Paris and (it always amazed him) Athens. What a nightmare! He hated the call. Nobody had any passion: it was just about the numbers.

Nobody was learning, nobody was improving and Juan was sick of it. He’d never met most of his colleagues. He argued and cajoled that they should have a chance to get together. “The suits” (be they open-necked shirts) balked initially at the cost. But it eventually happened. Productivity, and consequently business, soared as they shared best practices, ran trainings and just learnt to respect each other.

Easy really.

The Q&A

You paint a rosy picture of the get-together Juan organizes. As the CEO of a medium-sized business we stopped such conferences long ago as they ate most of our T&E budget for the quarter and just generated hangovers and large bar bills. How can it work?

You're right, of course. It happens. But that's not because getting together doesn't work: it's because some safeguards and guidelines have to be put in place so bonding can occur without things going over the top. If done properly the return on such an investment is worth it.

The Solution

1. Email isn't free.
2. Easy doesn't mean it's working.
3. Fast often means really slow.
4. Digital doesn't necessarily mean connection.
5. New isn't always better.
6. Cheaper where? And when?
7. Your greatest asset is still your thinking.

8

Being More Productive at Home

The Challenge

If work has become amazingly sophisticated and demanding in the last 20 years, the home has transformed even more. Whereas once the home could be treated as a genuine refuge from the daily onslaught of (what were once) memos, meetings and being on the road, the tyrannies of the modern workplace: email, conference calls and international time zone working have chased many of us beyond our front door. Facebook and Twitter are fun but they demand our time. Work isn't just brought home, it continues at home. And in addition we have our very own team to manage: children with homework and school trips and party requests. Spouses who have had a lousy day. And an aging parent on the other side of the country who needs our help.

The Detail

1. **Switch it off.** Agree with your family that there will be times when the technology is switched off. For example: at family mealtimes, when you are

watching a movie, when you are having an important conversation. The world will not fall apart if a mail is not responded to for 90 minutes. A phone call can be returned after the movie. But what about your aging mother who must be able to get hold of you now? Give her a special ring tone: that's where technology is very helpful. So Guide 1: Switch it off.

2. **Be here now.** When you are at home, be at home. When at your son's judo lesson, *be* at the judo lesson. Think about other things before or after the event, but not in the event. You will be so much more productive, never mind that life will be so much more enjoyable. Guide 2: Be here now.
3. **Zone.** Decide with yourself and/or your partner and/or your children, certain zones. Thus you and your partner "zone". This is your time, external phone call free, being a couple again, not two people living together running separate lives. Or "your zone", when you are working on your water-colours and do not want to be disturbed. Zones encourage peak productivity in the zone; without a zone, productivity is diluted and enjoyment diminished. Guide 3: Zone.
4. **Rituals.** A routine or ritual supports productivity. The simplest is of course leaving your car keys in the same place so that whenever you leave the house/flat you can pick them up immediately. What rituals might help you? Payday is when you talk about the finances, perhaps? Without fail, you do

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your master list on the train on the way home.
Guide 4: Establish rituals.

5. **Talk to plan.** One handy ritual is the diary “sweep”. Take your respective diaries and review what is coming up; talk each other through your personal plans. Business trips, weekend walking with a college friend, father’s 90th birthday. Share and consider the implications; avoiding surprises keeps you productive. And happy. Guide 5: Talk to plan.
6. **Add one, drop one.** Your life is busy enough. When you add an activity, consider what other one you will drop. Seek enjoyment in the depth of mastery of a few things rather than the buzz of an increasing stressful schedule. Guide 6: Add one, drop one.
7. **Spring clean?** Once a year, walk the house. Garage to shed. Attic to garden. Study to kitchen. Declutter, rethink and simplify. Guide 7: Spring clean.

The Story

Maria’s 40th birthday was a reflective one. There was so much that was going well in her life but she still felt so out of control. She did have money. She did have a loving family. She did have her health. And then it dawned on her one day as the sun came out and she went to her wardrobe to find a simple pair of shorts: what should have been a simple

decision was worse than the strategy decisions she had to make every Monday morning at 08:45 at the Flight Deck meeting.

It was time to Spring Clean. Not just her clothes but her life. It took three months in total, but she felt reborn. No hyperbole.

The Q&A

I love the points you make but they do seem to be very dependent upon age and where you are in your life. What an earth can I do about our three teenagers who in their various ways are addicted to their technology and we are lucky to get a civil word out of any of them, any time of day or night?

Take it slowly. Be respectful: you are of course right, a teenager's world is so different – rightly so – from our own. But do agree one or two “perfectly reasonable” rules such as no phone at the supper table. Perhaps TV off at breakfast time. Most people from toddlers to adults love quiet and down time once they have had a proper chance to experience it and compare it with the frenetic buzz and stress of digital activity.

The Solution

1. Switch it off.
2. Be here now.

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3. Zone.
4. Establish rituals.
5. Talk to plan.
6. Add one, drop one.
7. Spring clean.

9

Paradoxical Productivity

The Challenge

Surprisingly, paradoxically, productivity isn't always what we think it might be.

The Detail

- 1. Yes is No. And No is Yes.** When you say **yes** to staying late and eating pizza with the team to get the pitch done, you say **no** to kids' bath time. When you say **yes** to a poorly-run meeting you say **no** to your sanity. *Any yes has many no consequences.* When you say **no** to your yoga class, you say **yes** to less focus during the day. When you say **no** to coaching sessions with your team, you say **yes** to possible employee demotivation. *Any no has many yes consequences.* Yes is often No. And No is often Yes. Just so long as we remember for true productivity.
- 2. By hand, in person.** As soon as Alexander Graham Bell invented the first telephone, people realized although it was brilliant and handy it was, well, a

bit odd. There was a sort of barrier. It was difficult to “connect” with a person sometimes. Living in the world where the electron is king we are well aware of the same potential challenge with email. That’s why sometimes, paradoxically, it is more productive to drop a handwritten personal note. Or if at all possible see the person, in person. The time “wasted” is of course recovered many times over in a clearer understanding, a better bond and a mutually agreed way forward.

3. Beyond a certain point, that which is helpful and optimized can often become a hindrance and punishing.

This is particularly true in the world of productivity. Thus the list is a marvellous and simple device to ensure recollection, to allow overview and to encourage prioritization. However it can seduce you into thinking the list is your sole world and encourage the forgetting of other potentially critical areas. It takes worthwhile discipline to recognize that any worthy system we have established which becomes too well-oiled, too efficient, too squeaky clean is maybe losing its effectiveness.

4. Brain beats chip. You know the children’s game: rock, paper, scissors? Of course.

Sure, rock beats scissors. And scissors beats paper. And paper beats rock. But, human brain always beats chip. Carbon beats silicon. Hands down. Every time. Ensure your brain is refreshed, watered, oxygenated and full of the best nutrients. Then email becomes part of the support team not a task-master. Meetings become a useful component of

decision-making not a dreaded drudgery and work-life balance solves itself. *Carbon beats silicon.*

5. **Quick now means slow later.** As with so much in the realm of true productivity, *the attempt to save time now very often causes significant loss of time and thus productivity later.* Not planning a meeting saves time for the organizer until the meeting overruns and no clear decisions are obtained. Doing a rush proposal allows more time on the PowerPoints for the next pitch but the proposal is rejected because of fundamental errors of fact. Not spending coaching time with each member of the team saves hours each week until your priceless high performer resigns. Try a new paradigm. *Slow now means quick later.*
6. **Hands and heart.** You can do the keyboarding. You can project the slides. You can write the pitch. *But if you are not engaged, they are not engaged.* Productivity will plummet. *Ensure hands and heart are fully tuned-in, switched on and fully committed.*
7. **Reclaim your unique advantage.** Electrons may be quick but they aren't always clever. Until the 80s, man/woman was king of the working environment as nothing was faster than his/her brain. Typing pools, paper and snail mail made sure of that. But one day email, mobiles, virtual and NOW arrived. We tried to keep up with it. We failed. We got stressed. We missed the big picture. Reclaim your unique advantage. At regular intervals: stop and think. *Nobody does it like you do it.*

8. **Know your rhythm.** Sometimes doing email first when you get into the office is the worst thing you can do. Processing email is often mechanical whereas at that time your thinking is at its best. Early: think, create and solve. Do email, routine team meetings and conference calls later on. Know and follow your rhythm rather than just the Siren's call of pure urgency.
9. **Use a wall planner, not your phone to plan.** Increasingly our diary, our schedule, our agenda is available to us on our phone. It's handy for entering appointments and reminders. Handy for checking today. But it's poor, very poor for anticipating and forward planning. That screen size simply does not allow great perspective. It does not allow the intricacies of what is happening in July to be recognized and identify implications for next week. That's where the traditional wall planner is still so useful. Expansive. It can be scribbled upon. Viewed collectively by the team. Much productivity is about planning, anticipation and spotting of interdependencies. Use the best tools to help you. And sometimes that'll be a wall planner.
10. **Fewer people.** Assemble fewer people in your meeting, on your conference call, in your project team. Fewer people means speed, decisions and ownership. But doesn't that exclude people? Are we forgetting to be fully inclusive? *Fully inclusive is for kindergarten.* Get real. Productivity in business is about tough decisions by focused individuals taking

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account of objectives, multiple views and consequences. Yep, fewer people. Always.

The Story

As they reflected on the Paradoxical Ten, Juan at Kool Kooken loved Number Seven: electrons may be quick but they aren't always clever; he made this into an A4 poster and circulated it to all the offices. Alice in Milan really got One: Yes is No and No is Yes. Vip knew he needed to live and breathe Four: Brain Beats chip and Five: Quick Now=Slow later. Karl and Barbara really needed to engage both hands and heart, Number 6, for their dreams to be realized.

The Solution

Meditate on the Paradoxical Ten and decide which simple shifts you can make to boost your productivity.

10

Your Action Plan

The Challenge

It won't get any easier at work or at home. The good news is that we have unfolded a strategy which will work now and in the future as it is based not just on techniques but also on a sound philosophy. Here is your complete checklist to **Boost your Productivity**.

The Detail

1. In a very demanding New World of Work, being “productive” is no longer just about a well-managed list, it's about the way you think, the way you approach and the way you manage that world. You are productive if:
 - You hit your *work goals*, as that is what you are paid to do, but . . .
 - at the same time you also *maintain your health*, and . . .
 - in particular, *stress is at a minimum*.

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- You have a *longer-term picture* of *where your career is going*: you have set your
 - *Personal Compass* with its consideration of all aspects of your life: relationships, future finances, simply having fun . . .
 - You are not just *efficient* (i.e., getting things done) but also
 - *effective* (getting the right things done).
 - The *approaches you use* to being productive are not only
 - “*top down*”, i.e., consideration of the “big picture” Personal Compass but also
 - “*bottom up*”, i.e., the day-to-day practicalities, for example, of running a family.
 - You are feeling good.
 - You are contributing to your business and your community.
2. The top down approach encourages us to set our Personal Compass, to choose our direction. There are six main points on the Personal Compass:
- **Compass Point 1: Your Career.** *You will be more productive if you work hard to discover what you really want to do; you clarify what*

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you wish to achieve when doing what you want to do; you become very good at what you do and you deploy great productivity practices.

- **Compass Point 2: Your Wellness.** *You will be more productive* if you execute M-E-D-S: meditation, exercise, diet and sleep.
- **Compass Point 3: Your Personal Finances.** *You will be more productive* if your finances are in order; if you know qualitatively what you are trying to achieve and have had a good and detailed discussion on the difference between standard of living and quality of life; you know quantitatively what you are trying to achieve by calculating your personal balance sheet; you are able to “let go” of money being your sole motivator and that of course is rediscovering Compass Point 1 (career).
- **Compass Point 4: Your Relationships.** *You will be more productive* if you work hard to build clear, strong relationships with those at both home and work.
- **Compass Point 5: Fun.** *You will be more productive* **if** you are having fun.
- **Compass Point 6: Contribution.** *You will be more productive* if you contribute, as it constantly reminds you of the difference between the vital few, i.e., that which actually is very

important and the trivial many, i.e., that which only appears important because of its current urgency.

3. To execute the top down approach:

- Review your Personal Compass once a month.
- Identify actions which need addressing and capture them on your master list.
- **The master list.** This is your definite document of what you want to do and have to do, home and work.
- Review your master list once on a daily basis. Break, break, plan and date.
- Create your closed list.
- Work your closed list.

4. To shift to bottom up thinking, employ the seven rules of productivity at work:

- **Rule 1: Less is more.** Take less time, provide the essential data, make it easy for people.
- **Rule 2: Think RoI, return on investment.** Don't just think now, think long term.
- **Rule 3: Batch process.** Do your job. Then do email.

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- **Rule 4: Cohesive not fragmented.** The complete story in one easily absorbed message.
 - **Rule 5: Delete, file or ML.** Aim for inbox empty.
 - **Rule 6: Check the landscape.** What's coming up. Especially that about which I can do something now.
 - **Rule 7: Stay sane.** Take a break.
5. To get things done despite people, aim to live by the seven tips of working with people:
- **Tip 1:** Do not accept behaviour that is negatively affecting the behaviour of you and others.
 - **Tip 2:** People cannot mind read.
 - **Tip 3:** Seek privacy when looking for behaviour change.
 - **Tip 4:** Be clear on the change you want, why you want it and with evidence.
 - **Tip 5:** Understand aggressive vs. assertive vs. passive behaviour.
 - **Tip 6:** Be prepared to work for the long-term. Be persistent. Behaviours rarely change

overnight. But they can change over a few weeks. Work at it.

- **Tip 7:** Accept the Fear.
6. Remember the seven realities of the virtual and digital world:
- Email isn't free.
 - Easy doesn't mean it's working.
 - Fast often means really slow.
 - Digital doesn't necessarily mean connection.
 - New isn't always better.
 - Cheaper where? And when?
 - Your greatest asset is still your thinking.
7. To stay sane at home:
- **Guide 1:** Switch it off.
 - **Guide 2:** Be here now.
 - **Guide 3:** Zone.
 - **Guide 4:** Establish rituals.
 - **Guide 5:** Talk to plan.

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- **Guide 6:** Add one, drop one.
 - **Guide 7:** Spring clean.
8. But above all remember that the world of productivity is a paradoxical one:
- Yes is No. *And No is Yes.*
 - By hand, in person.
 - Beyond a certain point, that which is helpful and optimized can often become a hindrance and punishing.
 - Brain beats chip.
 - Quick now means slow later.
 - Hands and heart.
 - Reclaim your unique advantage. At regular intervals: stop and think.
 - Know your rhythm.
 - Use a wall planner, not your phone to plan.
 - Fewer people.

About the Author

Nicholas Bate is passionate about supporting people to ensure they *realize* and *release* their true and full potential. It is the simple purpose of his organization, Strategic Edge.

After a career in sales and marketing in the IT industry, culminating in leading sector marketing for Research Machines, Oxford, UK, Nicholas launched Strategic Edge.

A pioneering “thought leader”, Nicholas has introduced and worked with his clients on a range of simple yet powerful concepts which help with the challenges such as ever-demanding productivity, work-life balance and new routes to innovation and competitiveness.

He has produced and teaches five pioneering courses:

1. Personal Excellence
2. Brilliant at the Basics of Business
3. Personal Presence
4. Leadership Excellence
5. Instant MBA

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Consistently rated as an inspirational yet highly pragmatic keynote speaker, Nicholas teaches around the world (UK and continental Europe; USA and Canada; Asia) and is particularly skilled at working in an experiential and engaging manner.

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This edition first published 2015

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Registered office

John Wiley and Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

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ISBN 978-0-857-08509-2 (ebk) ISBN 978-0-857-08508-5 (ebk)
ISBN 978-0-857-08510-8 (ebk)

Set in 11 on 14pt StoneserifStd-Medium by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited