

Getting More Done With Microsoft Outlook®

More Productive Now LLC
12154 Darnestown Road, #415
Gaithersburg, MD 20878

Phone: (800) 373-2310

Fax: (240) 780-9161

Web: <http://www.moreproductivenow.com>

Email: info@moreproductivenow.com

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The *More Productive Now!*[™] Approach

The *More Productive Now!*[™] program that you'll learn in this book is for busy people who want to be more organized and productive in their daily lives.

The program teaches a set of simple techniques and tools, and also enhances your use of technology, most notably Microsoft Outlook, to help you rapidly get control of your life.

The *More Productive Now!*[™] (MPN) methodology is not designed as a cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all approach. It is a set of principles and best practices that's meant to be personalized. The idea is that it's a system you can adapt to your world – use what works for you and don't use what doesn't work.

However, I do recommend that you try out the new methods and practices contained in this book before you dismiss any of them. You may find some ideas or suggestions that might not make sense to you initially, or may be counter to what you've been doing to date. But the concepts and practices that make up the MPN system have been used by many people and have been proven to work; so chances are if you try them out, and give them a fair chance to work, you will find them valuable. You may even come up with a variation that's all your own!

The Promises of MPN

Using the MPN approach, you will:

- Stay on top of your to-dos, e-mail, and workload
- Manage your commitments so that you can devote all of your attention to each task as you are doing it
- Work at a high level of efficiency and effectiveness
- Feel calm and relaxed around your task and project management

These are the proven results that have been experienced by those using the MPN methodology.

KISS

Remember the old “KISS” theory? One of the hallmarks of the MPN system is its simplicity. What I’ve found after nearly three decades of studying and working with time management and personal information systems is that most approaches are much too complicated. While they look good in theory, when you attempt to put them into practice on an everyday basis, you find that they require too much time and effort to maintain – exactly what you don’t want from something that’s supposed to help give you more time and focus!

Thus, in defining both the MPN methodology and its implementation using Microsoft Outlook, I’ve focused on keeping the system and its maintenance simple and straightforward.

A “Whole Life” System

When implementing a system to manage tasks and time, many people tend to focus on the work/job/employment aspect of their lives. However, as we’ll soon see, it’s important to include every facet of your life – work, personal, family, civic commitments (church, volunteer organizations, etc.) – anything you are involved in. So as you proceed through this book, be sure to be thinking broadly in terms of all of areas of your life.

What You Won’t See

There are a few ways in which the MPN methodology differs from other more traditional time management systems you may have tried. Let’s look at a few of these distinctions.

MPN does not begin with overall life values and goals

Some time management systems begin with the “big picture”; they recommend starting out by focusing on one’s overall life values and goals. I believe that approach is actually backwards. First, it’s hard to focus on the big picture when the details of one’s everyday life feel out of control or overwhelming. Second, focusing on overall goals simply creates *even more things to do*, on top of the current set of tasks which is already lacking organization and management.

Instead, the MPN approach focuses on getting a handle on the “everyday stuff” – the overwhelming number of tasks and e-mails that are causing you to feel stress. Once you have control over everything in your life, and are feeling less stress and less overwhelmed, you are free and have more space to step back and look at the big picture of your overall goals and values.

MPN does not explicitly prioritize all tasks each day

Traditional time management systems tend to advocate the strict prioritization of all tasks, usually in the form of sitting down at the start of each day and deciding an *exact* priority order of items, as in:

Call Robert Smith re. Tanner proposal	A1
Write up summary of 1/5 EC meeting	A2
Follow up with C. Benz on Ford project	A3
Make reservations for Phoenix trip	B1
Get referral for painter from Dan Wells	B2
Clean out Inbox	C1

The problem with this approach is that it doesn’t fit with the large volume, fast pace, and high variability of today’s work environment. What is an “A1” now may not be an “A1” 90 minutes from now – something else may have entered the picture, or may have jumped up the scale in priority. And you don’t want to be spending your time and energy administering your time management system by continually moving items around your list, rather than working on the items themselves.

As you’ll see, MPN does include prioritization of tasks; just not this strict “A1-A2-B1-B2” type of approach. One of the cornerstones of MPN is its simplicity, and its task prioritization is a good example of this philosophy.

MPN has a different way of thinking about “Due Dates”

Some time management systems advocate assigning a due date to every task. MPN does not take this approach. Instead, I advocate assigning a due date to a task *only when it absolutely has to be done on or by a certain date*. If you have a meeting scheduled for next Thursday morning, and you have a report to prepare for the meeting, then it would be appropriate to assign a due date of next Wednesday for that item, because it has to be done by then.

But you’ll find that the majority of tasks actually live in the realm of “I need to get that done currently” or “now” or “as soon as I can”, or in the realm of “I’m not going to be doing that just now”. For these items, assigning a due date is not necessary and in fact can be counterproductive for several reasons:

- *Logistically*: The odds are that you will not get everything done that you planned to do on a given day. If you have a due date assigned to a number of items that are not completed on that date, you will end up wasting precious time adjusting and tweaking due dates on these items.
- *Psychologically*: If you do not get everything done that you marked as due for that day, it will be obvious as the due date stares you in the face, and you’ll tend to beat yourself up for it: “Darn, I planned to do those three things today and I didn’t get them done!” Even worse, by default in Outlook, when a task goes past due, **it turns red** – so not only are you chastising yourself for not getting an item done, but Outlook is yelling at you, too!

Again, I encourage you to *only assign a due date when an item must be done by a specific date*.

Different role for the Calendar

Several time management systems use the Calendar as the place to record and manage your tasks. This means that all of your tasks will be date-based.

This practice has all of the negative aspects detailed in the “Due Dates” section above: you are forced to spend time moving tasks from date to date, and psychologically you take a hit when you do that.

You will of course want to use the Outlook Calendar to record your meetings and appointments – activities that are *explicitly* time-based as well as date-based. But MPN uses the Task component of Outlook to record and manage your to-dos. As we'll see, that is the best place for this function, and does not have any of the drawbacks that come with using the Calendar.

The “Core Problem”

When you ask people why they feel overworked and overwhelmed, most people will say, “Because I have too much to do and not enough time to do it!”



This answer represents the common wisdom. But after studying the topic in depth, I can assure you with confidence that ***it is a myth!***

Instead, I state the core problem facing today's busy and harried workforce as follows.

The main source of overwhelm is that we don't have a clear, concise record of everything we need to attend to, maintained in writing in one consistent location, outside of our brain.

When we address the above issue, we will have created a system that allows for the achievement of the promises stated at the beginning of this chapter. We're going to spend the next set of chapters looking at this problem statement in detail, and devising a system that addresses and solves this problem statement – a system that works for you!

MPN Principle #1: Stop Using Your Head

We're going to examine the last part of the problem statement first, namely (as we discuss portions of the statement, I'll highlight them in **red**):

The main source of overwhelm is that we don't have a clear, concise record of everything we need to attend to, maintained in writing in one consistent location, outside of our brain.

This first principle says that you want to **write down or record** those things you need to attend to, and not attempt to **remember** them.

Why?

The reason is because the human brain is not effective at storing and retrieving things that we need to remember. It may remind you of something when it's not the appropriate time to be reminded, and it may fail to remind you of something when it *is* the right time.

This occurs due to the way the human brain operates. When you store a piece of information in your brain that you want to remember, it's filed in memory in an "associative" way; what that means is that it's eligible to be retrieved when something that reminds you of it, or that you associate with it, comes into your consciousness.

But there is no correlation between the time at which this association/retrieval process occurs and the appropriate time for that piece of data to be brought into your consciousness! Here is a typical example. Your boss asks you to get some statistics on the Orlando and Smith Project you've been working on. As a result of his request, your brain's thought process may look something like:

"Get me the latest numbers on the Orlando & Smith project"



Orlando... That reminds me of the time I went to Disney World with the kids

Kids... That reminds me – my daughter got her driver's license and is bugging me for a car



Car... That reminds me – my car is making this banging noise – got to take it to the mechanic



Mechanic... Ugh, that's going to cost me an arm and a leg



Arm and a leg... That reminds me – my brother-in-law sells insurance and says he can save us an arm and a leg



Brother-in-law... That reminds me – I gotta call him to schedule a golf date for this weekend



Now... What was it that my boss asked me to do??



As you can see, the brain does not possess an effective, reliable reminder mechanism. Therefore, it's counterproductive to try and use it! Instead, record every item that you need to attend to someplace outside of your brain. This practice serves to quiet the ineffective reminder mechanism.

Even better, when you stop using your brain to store reminders, you calm it and free it up for much more effective use: thinking creatively, developing new possibilities, bringing ideas into fruition. These are the processes that the brain really excels at, and where you are making the most use of its power.

Go All In

Looking back at our problem statement:

The main source of overwhelm is that we don't have a clear, concise record of **everything we need to attend to, maintained in writing in one consistent location, outside of our brain.**

I do literally mean **everything** here. To truly quiet the brain's ineffective reminder mechanism, you want to make sure you are actively working to record 100% of those items you need to attend to. You can't fool your mind: if you are recording 90% but are still mentally storing 10%, your brain will still be working in high gear to remind you of every bit of that 10%. Make sure you are not mentally holding onto any tasks and are recording everything when it comes into your mind as a to-do. (I'll talk later in the book about effectively capturing these items when you're not at your PC.)

And as I mentioned at the start of the book, **everything** also means "all aspects of your life." Don't limit what you record to just work- or job-related items. In order to quiet the brain's counterproductive reminder functions, you want to record every task outside of your brain, regardless of the context of that activity.

One Place

Going back to our problem statement:

The main source of overwhelm is that we don't have a clear, concise record of everything we need to attend to, maintained in writing in one consistent location, outside of our brain.

It's critical that you only have one location in which you record all of the things you need to attend to. If you are recording 100% of these items, but are maintaining multiple lists, you are still in danger of missing things you need to attend to and making your brain work overtime thinking about them.

First, you are being inefficient in having to monitor and maintain multiple lists.

Second, what if the thing you need to do is on List C, and you looked at List A and List B, but neglected to check List C? Oops!

So it's important that you use one and only one location to record and manage these things you need to attend to. Of course, in the case of the MPN system, that location is your electronic servant, Microsoft Outlook.