Regardless of where you’re working or whether you’ve recently had to change your routine, time management is essential for everyone to master. But mastering your calendar doesn’t mean there aren’t challenges you’ll still need to overcome. It’s difficult to manage your time when you feel overwhelmed, exhausted, or unmotivated or when you’re operating in reactive mode.
If you don’t address these issues, time management probably won’t make a
difference. One strategy I’ve been a huge fan of is something called attention
management. Explained by speaker, trainer, and author Maura Thomas, it’s
a simple concept to get behind.

“Attention management offers the ability to consciously direct your
attention in any given moment, to be more proactive than reactive, and to
maintain control rather than inadvertently relinquish it,” she explains. “It’s
about regaining control over your attention and thereby taking control of
your life. Attention management empowers your productivity.”

In short, it’s deliberately choosing what gets your attention. You’ll not only
be more productive, but you’ll also increase the quality of your life because
you’ll have more time and energy to devote to what’s truly important.

Adopting Attention Management

There are three ways to make attention management part of your daily life:

1. Know your priorities.

The first step in managing your attention is identifying your priorities so you
aren’t wasting precious time or energy on anything that isn’t moving you
closer to your goals. But what if everything you’ve scheduled or placed on
your to-do list is considered a top priority? I have a method that may help
you answer that question.

For starters, ask yourself whether everything is really a priority. Even if
something on your to-do list is important, does it really deserve your
attention at this very second? Not always. That’s why I apply a priorities matrix, mainly the popular Eisenhower Matrix, to determine where and when my focus should be.

Simply create a four-quadrant box to place each of your tasks in one of the following boxes:

- **Urgent and important:** These are your top priorities, and they deserve your attention right now.
- **Important, but not urgent:** Schedule these tasks when you have the time. Once they’re in your calendar, you won’t forget about them, but you don’t currently have to devote your attention to them.
- **Urgent, but not important:** These can be delegated to someone else to free up your mind and schedule.
- **Neither urgent nor important:** Drop these from your to-do list and calendar entirely because they’re not worth your attention.

2. **Put yourself back in control.**

Attention management, according to a piece Thomas wrote for Harvard Business Review, is a “deliberate approach that puts you back in control.” It does this by forcing back distractions and manipulating your focus so you can make room for your priorities.

The first common external factor sapping your attention is technology. Thomas suggests that tech should serve you, not the other way around. Eliminate push notifications as a first step, she says, and keep your phone silent and put away when it’s time to focus on work.

I’d also close unnecessary programs, windows, or applications on your computer. Utilizing apps that block distracting websites or apps during certain hours can be a big help.
The second external factor that you have control over is your work environment. Thomas recommends setting boundaries with others, whether it’s your co-workers or your family while you’re working from home. You can do this by putting on headphones, placing a “do not disturb” sign on your door, and working from a quiet location. You could also share your calendar so people know when you’re available and when you aren’t.

Also, make sure you’ve set up a motivating and **productive work environment**. This is different for each of us, but it takes into consideration factors like the lighting, temperature, and color of your workspace. A cold or poorly lit office is better suited to being a bedroom than an office. You should also keep your environment free of clutter. Invest in items like plants, **standing desks**, or other tools that make it easier for you to stay at work.

As for internal factors, Thomas says you need to control your behavior and thoughts. For example, she recommends opening just one window on your computer and giving your full attention to that task until it’s done or you’ve reached a good stopping point.

And take frequent breaks throughout the day; unplug for at least an hour. I’d even go so far as to say that you should never start your day with devices — **going online first thing in the morning** can damage your brain.

As for your thoughts, this may be the most challenging because minds were meant to wander. Thomas suggests noticing when your mind is veering off. She says, “If you think of some important small task while you are doing focused work, jot it down on a notepad and come back to it later.” You can also do this with research you want to conduct or feedback you need to pass along.

Another way to tame your wandering mind? Mindfulness training can **strengthen your attention and reduce distractibility**. Amishi Jha, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Miami and the director
of contemplative neuroscience for the UMindfulness Initiative, has found that exercises like mindful breathing and walking are both effective.

### 3. No more multitasking or task-switching.

What harm can it do to check your email notifications, texts, or Slack messages? A lot, actually.

According to a University of California Irvine [study](https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnhall/2020/04/19/why-attention-management-is-the-secret-sauce-to-success-during-the-pandemic-and-after/#34cbfab), “it takes an average of 23 minutes and 15 seconds to get back to the task.” Moreover, as Cal Newport explains in *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success In A Distracted World*, “that quick check introduces a new target for your attention. Even worse, by seeing messages you cannot deal with at the moment (which is almost always the case), you’ll be forced to turn back to the primary task with a secondary task left unfinished. The attention residue left by such unresolved switches dampens your performance.”

The solution? Stop multitasking — focus on only one thing at a time. The most effective way to do that is to block out time for deep work, preferably when you have the most energy and concentration. When you’re in an energy lull, use that time for “shallow” work, like responding to messages.

Identifying your priorities, controlling distractions, and single-tasking are all proven ways to better manage your time. But they’ll also help you manage your attention so you’re saving your energy and focus for what matters most.

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