

The Freedom of Discipline

Barry Schwartz, a social scientist at Swarthmore, has written a book called *The Paradox of Choice*. In his view, our nearly unlimited options in cellphones, salad dressing, toilet paper, even careers (dotcom entrepreneur? painter? firefighter?) create suffering for people as they try to find the best option in each of these areas.

Schwartz is primarily concerned with people as consumers (single-ply or two-ply? creamy or chunky? organic or free-range?). But I'd argue that his thinking also applies to people as producers – as workers and employees who must attend to overflowing email boxes, endless to-do lists, stacks of paperwork, and continual meetings. How do you choose what to do? How do you select one item from the four-page to-do list?

It's simple – too simple – to say, “just focus on the most important item.” It's not always clear which is the most important. And besides, what's unimportant for you might be absolutely essential for someone else.

More to the point, the act of constantly choosing among the options on your to-do list is itself both time-consuming and fatiguing. (Do I answer email now or later? Do I begin writing Sarah's performance review, or should I review the latest budget numbers?) When you're constantly spending time and energy making choices, when you never have the option of running on autopilot, you impair your ability to think creatively. You get so mired in making small decisions that you can't free your mind to attack the really big stuff. As the psychologist William James said,

The more of the details of our daily life we can hand over to the effortless custody of automation, the more our higher powers of mind will be set free for their proper work. There is no more miserable person than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision....

I've written before how standard work can help make you more productive precisely because it automates simple tasks, in keeping with James' recommendation. But there are other ways to reduce the constant decision-making, too: by designating time in your calendar to handle specific tasks or projects.

Rather than carrying around a to-do list that provides you with nearly infinite choice about what to do at any moment, block out time in your calendar to handle the important stuff. When you've pre-committed to tackling the first draft of the press release at 2pm on Tuesday, “the higher powers of mind will be set free” to focus on that task when the time comes, rather than on the decision about what task to do.

How do you do this? Get into the habit of reviewing and processing all the stuff you have to do with your calendar open. It doesn't matter whether you do it once at the end of the day or several

times during the course of the day: the key issue is that you put a stake in the ground and choose a date, time, and duration for the task.

This, then, is the freedom of discipline: you discipline yourself to “live in” your calendar and follow your own pre-determined directions. You’ve reduced the number and frequency of the decisions you have to make so that you have the freedom to think deeply.

To some extent, your to-do list reduces the number of decisions you need to make. But it doesn’t work that well, because it only addresses half the problem: What do you need to do? However, it doesn’t account for the very real limits on your time -- when can you do what you need to do? A calendar entry tied to a specific date, time, and duration is the only way to address your boundless commitments in light of your very bounded time.

Undoubtedly, you’ll still have to modify your calendar. Nothing ever goes according to plan, and when there’s a crisis with a major customer, whatever it is you planned on doing goes out the window. But if you can eliminate some of the choices during the course of each day (prepare my expense report? confront my manager? order new toner for the copier?), you can eliminate the constant mental juggling of tasks, enhance your productivity, and reduce your stress.

Barry Schwartz states that “the choice of when to be a chooser may be the most important choice we have to make.” By embracing the discipline of your calendar, you’ll liberate yourself from having to make choices all the time. And in a world where attention and focus are the most valuable commodities, that’s a priceless kind of freedom.