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Juggling Elephants
Getting to It

Accomplishing the Important, Handling the Urgent, and Removing the Unnecessary

Jones Loftin and Todd Musig
To our families,
who are always the it for us.
There were many times during the past four years when we wondered if *Getting to It* would ever get done. We found ourselves constantly reaching into the manuscript itself for guidance and the motivation to stay focused on the writing and editing of the message. This finished book, however, would never have been completed without the help of some incredible people with whom we shared the journey and to whom we are eternally grateful.

It was Dr. Spencer Johnson who gave us the initial motivation and direction after we had the idea for *Getting to It*. We will forever remember his excitement, encouragement, and sage advice over dinner in San Diego several years ago. He has always taught us to “keep it simple, because people trust the simple,” and we have tried to follow his words with this book.

To say we have the best literary agent in the world is not a fair statement. We have the best coach, cheerleader, reviewer, constructive critic, and literary agent in Margret McBride. She never ceases to surprise us
Acknowledgments

with her insight and ability to look at the big picture of writing and publishing books. Her assistant, Faye Atchison, is no less amazing. Faye’s attention to detail with proposals and contracts helped all of us keep our sanity. And her personable nature makes her a delight with which to work.

We are extremely excited to be a part of the HarperBusiness imprint. It became clear to us very quickly that Hollis Heimbouch and Colleen Lawrie got “It.” From support of this project to jacket design to editing and marketing, we are thankful for their vision of what this book can mean to so many people.

For the message of any book to be received well, it must be written well. Dennis Mathis of Close Readers was invaluable in the initial edits of the manuscript, making the flow more natural, the words more descriptive, and the concepts more clear.

From our early days of talking with Dr. Johnson we have known that feedback, while painful, is essential to creating a superior book. We are so appreciative of friends, family, and clients who read different versions of our manuscript and took the time to provide input that made the book stronger and of greater value.

Finally, we cannot end this acknowledgment without saying thanks to two other groups of people. We can never repay our wives, Lisa and Wendy, for putting up with our wild ideas and being patient as we
spent time away from each of them to make this book a reality. And to our children—Alex, Sydney, Vashti, Tayva, and Jacquelyn—it is you who gave us the daily validation that time is too precious to be focused on anything other than that which is most important.
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Getting to It
Chapter 1

What Is It?

In your struggle to get it all done, what’s not getting done?

At any time of day, do you find yourself saying “When I get time, I will . . .” or “One day when things are different . . .” and then realizing how familiar that sounds? Do you reflect on the past five years and become frustrated because you’ve yet to accomplish all the things you promised yourself you’d get to by now?

What if a high percentage of your tasks and actions were actually contributing toward accomplishing those things that matter to you? What if you felt as if you actually had time to help other people, giving full attention to the needs of coworkers and customers?

What about life outside of work? What if you actually enjoyed taking your children to their activities and got your errands done in a quarter of the time it takes
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you now? What if some of the chores on your list became more enjoyable because you’re confident in your ability to get your most Important Things done?

Would you laugh more often and feel more at ease? Would you feel respected and appreciated by clients, friends, neighbors—and even, wonder of wonders, by your teenage children?

Would that be enough of a reason for you to continue reading this book?

What if your schedule allowed more time for personal growth, and you could finally give a higher priority to relaxing and enjoying life? What benefits might result from having the time and enthusiasm to pursue the passions that energize you, inviting you to tackle the long-postponed “if only” items on the bucket list of things you’d like to experience in your life?

It’s not that you haven’t tried to become more organized and efficient many times in the past. You might even use a daily planner or manage your to-do list electronically. You may have a smartphone with buttons worn away from your furious attempts to answer all of your e-mail on the go.

It’s possible that other people already admire you as someone who has it all together. Do you privately wonder how much longer you can maintain your pace and your reputation for always delivering on time? Are you often merely getting by rather than thriving, hoping that something (other than retirement or winning the
What is It?

lottery) will come along to rescue you from this stormy ocean of hurry, deadlines, and the constant juggling act of balancing never-ending work and life demands?

What Is It?

There is a solution to help get you focused and pointed in the right direction. In a word: it. Define it. Plan it. Focus on it. Get others excited about it. Celebrate it. And then plan for the next it. Consider this definition:

**Main Entry:** It

**Pronunciation:** \( \text{\textasciitilde} \text{it} \)

**Function:** Noun/pronoun followed by action

**Date:** Today

**Definition:** The most Important Thing

It will save you from the avalanche of possibilities that await you every day at work. It will make the difference in your reaching your full potential and your desired level of success. It will help you develop and appreciate supportive, positive relationships. It will guide you in defining who you are as an individual and as a professional, and in clarifying what is important to you.

“That’s it,” you say?

Yes, that’s it. It’s that simple.

Asking yourself, Of all the paths I could take, which
is the most important at this moment? may at first seem simplistic and obvious, and no different from what you do now.

The problem, you tell yourself, isn’t in deciding what must be done; often circumstances or other people have made those decisions for you. The problem is in all the steps required to actually accomplish a number one priority.

For example, a marketing director might identify IT as a badly needed strategy for launching the company’s new product. That part was easy. Execution is something quite different. Finding the time to devote to IT, getting people who are currently overloaded and already moving in twenty different directions to focus on IT, and securing the necessary financial resources from an already strained budget are far from simple tasks. The very next step after IT has been defined can result in frustration and delay. Maybe, in this example, the marketing director senses that a sales incentive strategy—a whole new, complex IT—has to be developed to support the new marketing strategy. How does he decide which is the priority?

As you will see in the chapters to come, identifying IT isn’t just the first step in a process, it’s every step.

Constantly stepping back and analyzing what’s driving your choice of IT is more than just a useful exercise, it’s critical. Clarity of thought and purpose is necessary not only in determining IT, it’s essential to
It: of everything you could do in the next moment, the most IMPORTANT THING.
efficiently organizing all the steps required to accomplish it.

Certainly, defining one it at the outset is crucial. Getting it wrong can have disastrous consequences for individuals as well as entire organizations. Also, leaving it undefined can cause priorities to be at cross-purposes with one another, making your days busy but rarely productive or meaningful.

Consider a few examples:

• The week you had a deadline approaching for a report, you chose to work on less important tasks because you weren’t thrilled about working on it.
• Upon walking into your office in the morning, you turn on your computer and open up your e-mail. Nine hours later, you have spent the entire day basically managing your e-mail as it comes into your box. Nothing of significance has been accomplished.
• Your child is riding her bike without training wheels for the first time. When she calls, “Look at me!” you call back, “I see you.” But the fact is, your preoccupation with office work had your mind a thousand miles away, and you hadn’t actually seen her first wobbly minutes as a bike rider.
• Taking an hour for yourself to engage in your favorite hobby or just relax creates guilt and anxiety, because you constantly feel as if there’s something more important you should be doing.
What is It?

So where do you begin? How do you ensure that you know what it is and that you have the opportunity to work on it today?

Types of Its, and the Need to Identify Them

At the risk of sounding like Dr. Seuss: There are big its and little its, easy its and difficult its. There are its that make you want to get out of bed in the morning and its that make you want to hide under the bedcovers all day.

Its can be classified according to their time scales. Long-term its might range from your lifetime achievements (becoming successful parent, a loving spouse, a pillar of the community, a world-class musician) to goals that require only a year or two to accomplish. For organizations, a long-term it could take five or more years to complete.

Short-term its are goals you want to accomplish in six months to a year. You may find that this type of goal setting is the most typical kind in your life—losing weight, overcoming that hitch in your golf swing, repainting the house, learning Italian. Since childhood, you’ve learned the importance of working day by day toward such goals: you can’t become fluent in Italian the night before your flight to Rome. For organizations and entrepreneurs, short-term its—implementing a new software system, relocating manufacturing to a
Getting to It

new building, or securing funding—may take one to three years to accomplish.

Daily its are the “here and nows.” Most often, they’re in competition with a thousand other demands on your time and energy. Over the course of a day, you may encounter numerous paths that could be taken, but probably only two or three really lead to completing today’s it.

It’s important to define it frequently as you move through your day. Routinely defining it creates an opportunity to ensure you are on the right path, prepared to accomplish the most critical task of each moment. Consider these examples:

• Look at successful athletes. They never stop focusing on doing their best, whether in competition or during practice.
• Think about productive coworkers around you. Factoring out lunch, breaks, and interruptions, they rarely focus on something other than their work.
• Watch any true artist (painter, dancer, singer, musician, etc.) display his or her skill. When performing, they don’t allow any thoughts to enter their minds that are not related to creating a stellar performance.

Such people spend an enormous amount of their time and mental focus thinking, planning, and evalu-
What is It?

...ating every motion toward one purpose: the successful accomplishment of their overriding task or goal.

When you identify your It for any period of time, you start a process of planning to make It successful. Just asking, What is my It in the next minute? sharpens your focus and helps ensure the right things get done in those sixty seconds.

The longer the period of time needed to accomplish It, the more detailed the process and strategies might need to be to ensure that It gets done. As we mentioned earlier, Its come in all sizes.

Let's examine the need to focus on It with a situation that might occur in the typical workday of Sam, a manager at a large insurance company. His It for the next sixty minutes is to craft a job description for a new position within his department. He begins with the best intentions, reviewing his notes and data from the past six months. Three minutes into this demanding mental task, he hears the ding of an e-mail notification and glances up to see whom it's from. He doesn't read the message, but it's now on his mind, and he keeps wondering if he should check it out. He chooses to return to his primary task, but the mere act of thinking about e-mail has gotten him off track. He rereads what he's written, picks up his train of thought, and adds a couple of sentences. Then his phone rings. He doesn't answer it, but he looks to see who it is. It's Belinda. His mind races as he wonders what it is that Belinda might
want. He resists the urge to answer the call because he knows he needs to get this job description done!

Sam is now thirty minutes into his it. Some superb ideas are taking shape . . . just as Julie approaches him about a vacation-scheduling issue. Sam would like to put Julie off, but he knows he’s been avoiding her about this for a few days. Sam tells her he has only twenty minutes before his next meeting, but he’ll try to help her. After a brief review of the department’s vacation schedule, Sam grabs his materials and leaves for the meeting.

At the end of the day, when Sam reflects on the fact that he never completed drafting the job description, he may rationalize that he had too many interruptions, too many real-world priorities that couldn’t be ignored. Is that true, or could he have made different choices and focused on his goal?

Was his office the best place to work on it? Was there a different place where Sam could have avoided the interruptions of nearby coworkers, a ringing phone, or e-mail notifications? What if he had closed his e-mail program before he started it? And what about the coworker whose own priority was the vacation-scheduling issue? Could he have delegated this issue to her, asking her to talk to the two people with a conflict and see if they could find their own compromise? And the ringing phone—could he have established with his associates a reputation for responding quickly to voice
mail, but on his own schedule? The bottom line is, there probably was much Sam could have done to accomplish his IT of drafting a job description if he was more consistent about staying focused.

**Two Reasons for Your Struggle**

Before we get too far along with the concept of IT, let’s take a step back and look at two possible root causes of the average person’s struggle to stay focused and productive. Each will be fleshed out more in the chapters that follow.

To better understand the first basic cause, picture in your mind a mental funnel that you take with you everywhere you go. Your funnel is determined by your education, experiences, and environment—representing all possibilities that exist for you. This funnel helps you capture all of the things you could do or become. Poured into this funnel are a variety of opportunities, tasks, dreams, big ideas, and plans. Your daily interactions and activities affect what goes into it: what your parents expected of you; your plans when you finished high school or college; the thoughts you have about starting a new business, working in a large organization, volunteering for causes, doing something creative, building your own home, or selling everything and moving to New Zealand to raise sheep—all flow into your funnel.
Because a funnel narrows at the bottom, all of these possibilities vie to become it. But without a structure or process to manage them, you struggle to determine what is important, urgent, or unnecessary. “That’s my world,” you could say. “Every day is full of a million things I could do.”

You’re right. In fact, your funnel may be so full that it often overflows. Some possibilities may get pushed to one side because of interruptions, delays, relationships, or changes—and never make it through the funnel. The key to resolving this struggle then becomes determining the answers to these questions: What am I putting into my funnel? and What is actually coming out of my funnel and getting done?

A failure to audit what is getting into the funnel and not strategically focusing on what actually is coming out (getting accomplished) can cause disastrous results. Consider the budding entrepreneur and wannabe successful small-business owner. The list of all the activities that are required to start up or keep the business going can be endless. Activities like getting a business license; finding a location; buying a computer system; learning to use that system once you buy it; setting up an Internet connection; building a Web site; selecting health insurance, liability insurance; doing payroll, state taxes, federal taxes; designing and printing business cards; getting a post office box and a postage machine; buying packing materials, office supplies,
office furniture, office equipment (fax, photocopier, a server, a phone system); opening a banking account; putting money in the banking account, hiring help, keeping the help happy and don’t forget the all important: taking out the garbage. As you can imagine, there are a lot of tasks being dumped into that funnel. Oh, and in the meantime, you need to come up with a product, manufacture the product, and, most important, find customers who will actually pay you money for the product. It’s so easy to get caught in all the “stuff” that it takes to start and run a business that a lot of entrepreneurs fail because they don’t focus on the key items like finding paying customers.

As the owner of your life, you can fall into the same trap:

- “You are so busy making a living that you forget to have a life” (Dolly Parton).
- You get caught up in the “thick of thin things” and forget about what truly is important.
- You focus so much on the process or means to the end of doing things that you overlook the question, Why am I doing this?

Not having a plan also contributes to your failing to get your priorities accomplished. If you don’t create a plan (and follow through with it) to tackle your priorities, something else will flow in to fill the void. We call
this the Law of the Vacant Lot: if you don’t plan for and act on how you will use a vacant lot, nature or squatters will move in and make those decisions for you. Weeds grow, trash accumulates, and unwanted creatures may even begin to make your vacant real estate their home.

The same principle applies with respect to how you use your time. If you don’t determine the most important use of your time and act accordingly, something less desirable will consume it.

You can see this law in action in the way some people use e-mail. They say, “When the e-mail system goes down, everything stops. There’s nothing we can do.” But ask yourself, if that were true, how did anything—including the Hoover Dam, the interstate highway system, the eradication of smallpox—get accomplished before the invention of e-mail? While there are some organizations, positions, or situations that absolutely depend on e-mail communications, in most cases people have simply allowed e-mail to usurp a large part of their day and have allowed it to become their business’s sole source of communication. The end result is that a few urgent items get done and lots of unnecessary tasks are undertaken, but not enough genuinely important tasks get accomplished.

In the training program we based on our book *Juggling Elephants*, participants are asked to identify their poor time-management habits. One participant said, “Social media.” He explained, “I spent two hours on
If you don’t plan for and act on how you will use a vacant lot, nature or squatters will move in and make those decisions for you.
social media the other night when I really didn’t mean to.” He said he had intended to log on for only about ten minutes, but the time simply got away from him.

Without a well-conceived plan for how you’re going to spend your time, almost anything can arise to distract you from what you really want to accomplish.

The Law of the Vacant Lot also can remind you that failing to choose it right now has additional consequences: the task grows more difficult when it’s necessary to backtrack from an unwise decision, remove obstacles that have materialized, and then proceed to make your desired outcome a reality. Saying things such as “When I’m older . . .” “When the children grow up . . .” “When I have more energy . . .” or “When my job is less stressful . . .” might only make pursuing it more difficult whenever “when” finally arrives. Needing first to get older, younger, thinner, smarter, or richer . . . there are plenty of excuses for not getting started on it. Every moment spent waiting to work on it might result in something you never intended taking root on your vacant lot.

Napoleon Hill, the author of *Think and Grow Rich* and one of the pioneer philosophers in the field of personal success, gave some wonderful advice when he wrote, “Do not wait; the time will never be ‘just right.’ Start where you stand, and work with whatever tools you may have at your command, and better tools will be found as you go along.”
It’s Time to Get to Work on It

Is the value of it becoming clear? Think of the difference it would make if you identified the most important of the possibilities facing you in every moment of every day—and worked to accomplish it. Okay. “Every moment” may seem a little unrealistic, but what if you were able to increase your focus on the important by 20 to 30 percent. Wouldn’t that make a difference in what you accomplish?

As Sam Nunn, the former US senator from Georgia, wrote, “You have to pay the price. You will find that everything in life exacts a price, and you will have to decide whether the price is worth the prize.” The question for you is: What price are you paying for allowing things of lesser importance to dominate your schedule instead of spending more time on those you care most about?

Michelangelo, the Italian Renaissance painter, sculptor, architect, poet, and engineer, is famous for his fresco painting on the ceiling of the Vatican’s Sistine Chapel and for his sculptures the David and the Pieta. Centuries after his death, his works still express his exceptional power, persistence, and passion. Few of us can imagine the level of intensity of purpose it takes to chisel an entire sculpture from a huge block of marble. Michelangelo clearly knew the value of it.

He wrote about his work process, “I saw the angel
What price are you paying for allowing things of lesser importance to dominate your schedule instead of spending more time on those you care most about?
What is It?

in the marble and carved until I set him free . . . The sculptor’s hand can only break the spell to free the figures slumbering in the stone.”

Are you ready to break the spell that’s been keeping you from it? Prepared to create the productive workdays, strong relationships, or personal achievements that are stuck within you? Grab your chisel, and let’s get to work on accomplishing the important, handling the urgent, and cutting away everything that’s not it.
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