

Ep 25 Emptying

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SPEAKERS

Francis Wade



Francis Wade 00:00

It's the Task Management and Time Blocking Podcast, episode 25. Like most people who do knowledge work, you have a surplus of tasks waiting for you to complete. Everywhere you look, your inboxes, to do lists and task management software are full to the brim. You want to be on top, you want to be free of any feelings of overwhelm free of a backlog, but there seems to be no way out. You ask yourself, have I created a problem for myself by writing down all my unfinished tasks? Does it make sense to save my unread emails? Why can't I just get rid of them all and pretend as if they never even happened? You wonder, maybe if I were a superstar in this area, I would never fall behind on the job of emptying my inboxes and to do list. But question is, is that even possible now? Or in the future? In this whole episode, I'll be sharing my most recent thoughts about the skill of Emptying and exploring new thinking that can help you make some headway. I'm Francis Wade, and welcome to Task Management, and Time Blocking Podcast.



Francis Wade 01:38

And welcome back. If this is your first time listening to the podcast, I just want to explain a couple things. First, is that this is not the usual kind of podcast. In that here, we actually are trying to solve a particular problem. In this case, the problem of having full email inboxes and to do lists. And, again, if you've never heard us before, you may not quite understand that we spend the first part of the podcast trying to define the problem. So we spend a lot of time diagnosing, before we actually get into solutions and implementation. And why do we do that?



Francis Wade 02:17

Well, it's not because Einstein said this. But Einstein did say, if I had an hour to solve a problem, I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem, and five minutes thinking about solutions. That's good enough for us, right? If Albert Einstein can say that, then we can actually follow it, I guess.



Francis Wade 02:35

So let's start with a story a year ago, when Anita accepted an offer of her first promotion. She imagined more time spent with employees, coaching and guiding them to higher performance and personal fulfillment. But her reality is very different. Instead, it's all about checking and responding to email. If she hated this routine, before she got promoted, she was mistaken haha.



Francis Wade 03:04

In fact, she should have rejoiced, because now it's become a three hour a day burden. This week, she's looking at a growing stack of over 3500 emails that she hasn't touched. And it's grown by 1000 in the last two months, she realizes. She's aware of inbox zero, but thinks it would never work for her. She tried converting emails into tasks, and saving them in a task management app. But that seemed to make things worse. Don't want a tactic that seems to work is to do email on weekends or holidays. Also, her sick days and vacation days have become de facto email days. These are the only times that she has to catch up. The only consolation is that the other managers agree this is the most useless part of the job and the one they could do without so she's not alone. So she started to think there's nothing she can do. But she knows that's not an answer. There's a guy in office who is so bad at responding to email that no one sends him any. Is that some kind of perverse answer or solution?



Francis Wade 04:29

So Anita is struggling with this issue. And she's not alone. Everyone, lots of people who are just like her. And as you're listening, you may ask yourself, How am I dealing with my backlog? I've got unread or read emails, emails in inboxes. I have tasks in to do lists in different places that I have captured. How am I coping? Now if you've if you've (hopefully), listened to episode 23 and 21. In this series, In episode 23, I dealt with capture points and episode 21 and dealt with capturing and actually dealt with emails. And I think it was episode 19. But if you're anything like Anita, you'll be struggling with understanding the landscape. What happens with what we call time demands as they enter your system.



Francis Wade 05:32

So let me just do a quick recap of the process that we use to study tasks here at ScheduleU and the Task Management and Time Blocking Podcast. So we start off the very beginning with a definition of a time demand. And a time demand is an individual, and internal personal commitment to complete an action in the future. So it's always internal, and it's always individual. And it belongs to you. It's kind of like a promise that you make to yourself. So in the universe of all tasks, there are the few that you have promised to yourself that you will do later. And those are the ones that we call time demands.



Francis Wade 06:15

So time demands are psychological in nature. they get created when you make a brand new

So time demands are psychological in nature, they get created when you make a brand new commitment. And when you make that commitment, things change, life changes, right? Until you make that commitment, nothing happens. So an inbox of email, collects messages. But it collects what we call potential time demands. Until you read them, they don't actually turn into actual time demands.



Francis Wade 06:50

So an email comes into an email inbox, it sits there for however long it sits. And while it's there, it's a potential time demand. Eventually, you read it. And at the point at which you read, it becomes an actual time demand if you decide that it needs to be a time demand, otherwise, you just delete it and move on. Right? Also, if you have a bright idea and decide to write it down, or capture it in your software, or your smartphone, those are our actual time demands. Why? Because you decided that you're going to execute them.



Francis Wade 07:26

So they enter your system. And what we call these places where these time demands are stored, is give them a fancy name, capture points. So your email inboxes or capture points. People pad could be a capture point, I use Google Keep as my capture point, there are the points of entry of actual and potential time demands into your system. So they come into these places, and then they sit there waiting for you to do something about them. All right, great.



Francis Wade 08:01

So Anita has a number of capture points that we mentioned, but we focused the story only on email. So she has email coming in as potential time demands, she has 3500 that she's not processed, at least, as she goes through them. She has to go through a process. And this entire episode is all about what's called emptying. So emptying is the process of converting or handling a potential or actual time demand so that it ends up somewhere else in your system outside of a capture point. What does that all mean?



Francis Wade 08:46

Well, a capture point is supposed to be a place of temporary storage, kind of like a kitchen sink. So a kitchen sink is a place that you put dirty dishes. It's not a place of long term storage, or permanent storage. I know some people, it is, but for most of is the idea of a kitchen sink is that you temporarily store dirty dishes and glasses and cutlery. And then you clean them at some later point using probably in a batch. After dinner, everybody's putting their stuff in the sink or they put their stuff in the washing machine. If you use one of those, the same idea is that a washing machine is a capture point as well. And then you clean them all at the same time or one after the other.



Francis Wade 09:38

So an inbox. or a place where you capture / write down / type in that idea that you want to save

so that you can see evidence and look at it later. That first place is a digital location or a physical location like a paper pad. Those are all capture points. And if you treat them like a kitchen sink, well, that's basically the whole idea that we'll be talking about today. Now I've kind of given away the answer here. And normally we don't do that.



Francis Wade 21:12

You're creating lists, in your task management software, you're establishing commitments, you're getting rid of a whole bunch of noise, so that you can focus on the few time demands, that would move the needle. This process of triage, this decision process deserves the best time of the day. Why? Because it sets up the entire day for success.



Francis Wade 21:36

When you jump into the day, and you don't do those activities, it makes life really hard. It leads to overwhelm where all of a sudden, during the day, things start popping into your mind, or the consequences start coming in through email, or through other means. Things start happening, because you're not managing yourself, well. Great management, maybe mastery is in my Emptying.



Francis Wade 22:07

My moving time demands from capture points into the other parts of my system is the most important activity I do every day, and I must do it every day. Okay, it's the most important recurring activity.



Francis Wade 22:25

And then just to reiterate, if in case you missed it before, it may not be the most important activity on a given day, but of the recurring activities that you do every day...this is it. There's nothing more important than this one. Okay, maybe eating.



Francis Wade 22:44

But in the world of task management, and in the world of being a professional, being a knowledge worker, this is it. It doesn't get any more important than this.



Francis Wade 22:54

So in this context, where's the real villain here? What's the real problem? Who is the source of the problem? Well, if you pause for a moment, you might say that the reason if you have a kitchen sink that's overflowing 2-3-4-5 days of unwashed plates. It's not because the kids are eating too much.



Francis Wade 23:24

Or if you're if you have an emergency room, and they are more patients coming in and you're able to manage. It's not because people are having too many accidents. It's easy to blame the source and say that's what's causing it.



Francis Wade 23:40

Your email inbox, has 3000 items like Anita's, oh, it's those people sending me all this email? Well, on a higher level than just kind of being a victim. It's really a function of your skill. And when you consider that it's your skill that makes the kitchen sink, the triage the receiving dock, the emergency room... skill, competence structure is what makes them work. Good design.



Francis Wade 24:21

So here, we're applying those lessons to our Emptying. What's the design of our Emptying? So we all do some version of Emptying. But the question I asked in my book, Perfect Time-Based Productivity is...At what level?



Francis Wade 24:35

Are you a white belt, yellow belt, orange belt or green belt? And I have to go through a whole process of analyzing your skills and figuring out where the problems are based on best practices.



Francis Wade 24:49

So maybe the real villain is not..Them Out There. It's over here with us. And if that's there's any truth to that, then the place for us to Look is in more depth. So How well am I Emptying? Am I Emptying all the way down to empty as the zero inbox, or Inbox Zero. Merlin Mann came up with that..that was basically his point. You should be emptying when you sit down to process your email, and don't leave anything behind, don't leave time demands lingering in capture points.



Francis Wade 25:32

Instead, now people have taken that to mean that it you should always leave it empty. But does that make sense? You know, there's all, as I mentioned, in a prior podcast, there's always that guy, or that woman who, you know, they respond to email superfast. Within a minute, they respond to all of their email. So you should be very suspicious, especially if they report to you. Because they're probably not being effective. And they're not being efficient. At doing anything other than checking and replying to email, they're not really doing work. They're playing the email game like ping pong.



Francis Wade 26:11

So what Merlin Mann was really suggesting was that once, twice, three times a day, whatever you decide on, when you empty, you need to empty those capture points all the way down to zero. And that's the hallmark of mastery, in Emptying.



Francis Wade 26:36

Now it probably means in order for you to have the energy to do really good Emptying if you do only once a day, say that you schedule that time, you time block the time to do your Emptying. And that when you do your Emptying you bring a lot of energy to it, you bring all of it.



Francis Wade 26:52

Its not it's not an activity that you leave behind the other important activities. Of course, there's emergencies that always happen, you may not empty that day. And you should know that the first job...order of the day, the first thing you need to attend the next day is to empty that capture point. But the point is that you empty. And then because you know you could empty emergency room, right. And then the minute you you get the last patient moving on, then more start to arrive right? Just like email, you empty. And then as you get the last email and you process it, then more email starts to arrive. And that's just the nature of the nature of the activity.



Francis Wade 27:43

These capture points, especially the automatic ones are open to the public. And anyone can send you something at any time. Now, unfortunately, that means it could send stuff to you, that's of high importance and low importance. You could get 99% potential time demands that never become actual. Which means In other words, your noise to signal ratio is 99% to one. So in the prior podcast, I talked about some some ways of thinking about improving that ratio. But for now, we're just talking about Emptying and Emptying capture points.



Francis Wade 28:20

So for example, I use a program that takes my news newsletters and puts them in a different place. So I don't need to empty because there is no potential time demands over there. I browse it as needed, like a would browse a library. But in my main inbox, and this is the battle, but my main inbox gets email that has a 50-75% chance of being signal, and has a high probability of creating a time demands as a result of its presence.



Francis Wade 29:00

Okay, that's just one technique. But below the technique that I use, and the software I use, which is called Unroll, I'll make a note of it to put it in the show notes...a slow, no show notes. Below the technique and the software is really what I want you to leave here with it is the

Below the technique and the software is really what I want you to leave here with it is the principle. There's a there's a set of principles that I'm pointing to here that the specific names and inboxes and capture points and the terminology I'm using is just kind of a way for us to really get the principles and understand them so that you can apply them to your life because there's no way you can copy what I do. And there's no way I what I do can fit you. There's no one size fits all, as you probably are well aware.



Francis Wade 29:46

But there are principles that you can't violate other principles that the most effective people are using that you also must use. So the idea of Emptying all the way down to empty, of moving time demands, from capture points to places where you can deal with them effectively...to the five that I mentioned is a fundamental structure of all human beings who do knowledge work or do any kind of work. Where they are making time demands...as long as you're making time demands...which is every adult human being. This is what we use.



Francis Wade 30:31

Now the capture points that we tend to use most as humans is our brain, we tend to use our memory most of all. And you probably know enough if you're listening to this podcast, that that's a bad idea for most people, right? And you probably are working to not use memory. And instead to use better quality capture points. Because memory is a very low quality capture point, for time demands, I probably don't have to explain that to you.



Francis Wade 31:01

So if you're the villain in this story, you want to examine the process that you currently use, establish a baseline... come up with an idea of the skills that you have. And ask yourself, How can I improve them so that I don't end up like Anita.



Francis Wade 31:26

And what Anita does is very popular. You know, her coming in on a weekend to sort of catch up and and do her Emptying when there's very little incoming time demands. We call that a Kamikaze Weekend. I mentioned this in the last podcast as well, but Kamikaze weekends don't fix anything, they're just a band aid. So empty your capture points on a schedule, empty them all the way down to zero. And stay out of the temptation of doing kamikaze weekend.



Francis Wade 32:06

Those are the three practices, I actually asked you to measure your capacity or your ability to empty in my book. But take it now, once this podcast is over, you write down the different skills that I mentioned. And think through how well you're doing at each one.





Francis Wade 32:31

Of course, you're welcome to buy my book and do it in a more formal way. And then there's other programs like our Rapid Assessment System (RAP), in which you can very quickly assess Emptying and the other 12 skills that make up your task management. You can also attend my live training new habits which I do online or in person.



Francis Wade 32:51

These are three, options that you can use to basically do a diagnostic of your emptying. So that you can find those Pareto improvements, the 20% of the improvement you need to make that will give you 80% of the results you want to accomplish or achieve. So I'd love to get some feedback or questions based on what I've said so far. Just visit my website and send me a note or contact me on social, I'm on Twitter. I'm on LinkedIn, you can link with me there. This isn't the end of the podcast. There's a little bit more coming up where I want to tell you about our next episode, and why you should tune in then. So keep listening. There's more to come.