Ep 27 Bret Atkins

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SPEAKERS

Bret Atkins, Francis Wade

Francis Wade 03:05

It's the Task Management and Time Blocking Podcast, episode 27. So you've made lots of progress in your task management in the past, you're no beginner, you probably read some books and follow its own sound ideas and found yourself getting more effective, more productive and making fewer errors, less mistakes.

Francis Wade 05:24

But lately, you feel as if you have stalled a bit. You're no longer growing in leaps and bounds the way you used to. And you missed that growth that you used to experience. That was fun, right?

Francis Wade 05:39

Now, changes come really slowly, if at all, it seems as if they're happening by accident, as opposed to by design. What can you do about this? You're tempted to think that you're the only one who's going through this and you maybe even wondering, should I give up and try something different? Because well, there are places in life where you put in some effort, and you get some results, or maybe task management, time blocking, or it's just one of those areas where you get to a certain point and you don't get any better.

Francis Wade 06:15

And then instead you go work on your karate or chess skills or something else. But is that tactic what you really want? Do you really want to give up? Do you have a choice? Other alternatives? Can you achieve further growth in your task management? So tune into this episode to hear from me and my special guest, Dr. Bret Atkins, as we solve this challenging problem together, welcome to the Task Management, and Time Blocking Podcast.

Francis Wade 07:14

And we're back. And as you may see, we brought up Dr. Bret Atkins to be my guest. And before I introduce him, let me do a couple of things. One is to let you know if you've never listened to this podcast before, kind of how it works, because it's not like your usual podcast, where you interview someone who's written a book, and they talk about the book. And it's not that.

Francis Wade 07:34

So what we do is we pick a problem, we try to find a sticky, popular, tough to solve problem. And together, we're going to go at it with hammer and tongs, using our best thinking or best ideas, everything we can think of to try and come up with some solutions that you can use a need and apply. So the first part of the program is all about breaking apart the problem, where we try to understand it from all these different angles. So we don't solve anything in the first part. Second part we go into the solving. And on the third part, we go into implementation. And our goal today is not to just rehash stuff that we already know, because we know a lot...between the two of us I think. Our goal is to actually come up with something brand new, that neither of us have thought of before, kind of create some serendipity. And if we produce a moment of serendipity, you will hear a bell I'll have to put it in actually afterwards, but it'll go off. But if we get to the point where we work, we end get to the end of the episode, we have not come up with anything brand new, that will earn the buzzer. Kind of like an end og basketball game buzzer. It doesn't mean that anything bad has happened. It just means that we got to the end of the time, we didn't come up with anything serendipitous or brand new. And that's it. But you will have learned something and heard an interesting conversation either way. So let me introduce Bret to you.

Francis Wade 09:15

So Dr. Bret Atkins. Scrolling down, teaches college courses in organizational leadership and helps us his students become more academically successful by improving their productivity. His interest began while deployed during various emergencies during the past 20 years. Dr. Atkins observed how emergency responders use methods to accomplish critical tasks within a highly limited timeframe. So he's someone who thrives on the pressure. Bret, welcome to the show.

B

Bret Atkins 09:50

Thank you very much, Francis. And I think if I really thrived on pressure, I'd still be doing that. And I'm not doing that as much these days. But it is fantastic to actually be on the same stage. With you, I've listened to your podcast that you've done independently and with some of your other colleagues and attended your Summit. probably know, maybe at least two, maybe three years. And it is an honor to be here.

Francis Wade 10:14

Oh, it's great to have you, I we've, you know, we've talked at length and having someone who is interested and thinks about these things a lot. I mean, there's, there's just so many people

is interested and thinks about these things a lot. I mean, there's, there's just so many people who are willing to put in the time and the effort, and you're clearly someone who has, which is why it's great to have you on the show, because I don't know what we're gonna get up to here. But let's jump into it and see.

Francis Wade 10:38

Okay, so I'll tell you a quick story. And the story is about someone named Roberta. So she's a true productivity enthusiast. Although she only started on her journey a year ago, she's implemented everything in GTD getting things done that she could find. But in the last few months, she's noticed the problem. She has some 300 tasks. Some people tell her that she has too many. But she see reasons she says to herself, I can't get rid of these. They're all important to add to my job, or my personal life, or my health or my family. So she tried using a waiting for, and a next action list straight from David Allen's advice. But the advice to check the list, whenever she needs to choose a task to execute next is overwhelming. She spends all of her time all of her time checking the list just to make sure that nothing has been forgotten. And checking the list means starting at the top of a list of 300 getting down to the bottom and wondering what were in the first 10 items at the top of that list of 300 are difficult to manage. So time blocking to her seems to be the answer. But David Allen was very explicit. In the book, she read it very carefully. It's a technique, he said that would create more problems than it solves. But that's not what people are seeing who actually use this approach, the approach of time blocking her initial experiments. So she's tried it the most promising but she hasn't made the switch entirely. She's still fearful. No one that she has a philosophical question. Should she follow GTD or any prescription? You know, that details behaviors? Forever? Should she do it until she dies? Or passes away? Or retires? Really? Or is there another answer here? So interesting problem, isn't it? Brett?

B

Bret Atkins 12:42

I think so. And I would be wonderfully enthusiastic to jump right into the solution. But I agree with you completely. Let's let's pick away at it just a little bit more. And see if the the multiple layers of this situation can reveal something. It may be like an idea. And the more layers we peel, the more tears come to our eyes about the situation. But I think we can learn something from it.

Francis Wade 13:07

Let's get some tears going. To our eyes. So she's very typical of people who use GTD because they got the benefit that the book prescribed. It... it things got better, just the way David Allen promised. And then they got to a level, you know, they they added more tasks, because that's what people do when they become more productive. Oh yeah, I can do more, I can do more. And then something happened. And then something happened. The So say, for sake of argument probably has something to do with the fact that she added more tasks than GTD was really meant to handle. Maybe? We'll take a look at see what do you think?

B

Bret Atkins 13:54

Certainly, you know, if you look at a typical office, we have our desk, we have the things right in front of us. But many of us also have either a physical or an electronic filing cabinet that we can go to and get some things out. We can reacquaint ourselves with something there. But we're not working out of the filing cabinet all the time, we pull out what we need, after reviewing it, and then putting it on our workspace or physical or psychological workspace and we begin to work on it there. I would also offer this about Roberta, that she's following GTD because at least in the story, that's the first book she read, or that's the first thing that she began to acquaint herself with. So what if there was another book, another system that she had developed? And that's what I found. When I got into this, I would get this book and I go, Oh, this is the best thing. There's sliced bread and there's this and that's the best thing since sliced bread as the expression goes, and then I would look at another book Can I go? Wait a minute, this book is different than this book, which, which one is right? What am I supposed to do? And I wouldn't say, Well, I have to clearly toss out this one because I've now read this one. And I would bounce around from system to system. And I said, There's got to be a better way what? And no one was telling me what to do. Because clearly, unless you pay somebody, they're not going to tell you what to do you, you know, you have a coach to help you off. And so I began to play more and more of why are these various systems out there?

Francis Wade 15:33

Right, what most coaches will tell you is, oh, just do what I do.

B

Bret Atkins 15:38

And if I can say, if, if anybody asked me, I would say, don't do what I do. But I'll tell you what I'll do what I do. And I would encourage you to ask others what they do, and then put it together for yourself. And what you find, may work, and then it may not...meaning that in time, it may not. And then you make a tiny tweak, and all of a sudden it comes back in, I will say this that we perhaps want more than we possibly could ever have. Meaning we want our system to be 99 to 100%. Efficient, or and effective. And we may never get there. If we go back to the 802-0 principle, we may only get it to 80% or so you know, three quarters of the way, which is better than many people better than the way we used to do it. Maybe not as good as we'll do it in six months. But I don't think we'll ever reach a point that we're no longer able to improve. And the reason is, what is that level, we don't have a definition of what the absolute perfect goal is. So therefore, we'll never know if we've crossed that finish line. So it's always just out there ahead of us as a as a goal, an admirable goal, but with a goal we may never reach. So if we fixate on that we may get frustrated. But if we look back and go, here's what we did, we may be happy with what we've accomplished.

Francis Wade 17:15

Right? And she's had people who've told her that she should scale back her ambitions and 300 tasks is too many. And that's a lot of the advice that's going around because people are taking people who are giving advice or using their head. Well, you're you're finding yourself running late oh, well, when I had that problem, five years ago, here's the solution I applied. And it worked for me to do what I did, still having the problem, or you probably have too many commitments. So instead, if I did, what I'm suggesting doesn't work, cut back your

commitments, because you're trying to do too much. And that's the coaching that is being given by coaches who really don't have a model, a full model. They see they see the same symptoms, and they figure that the cause has to be the same. Reason has to be the same. And so Roberto ends up kind of scratching her head saying...what? ButI don't want to do that!

B

Bret Atkins 18:18

Well, I think, yep. And she probably doesn't have to, but she may have to scale back her expectations, which will then scale back a later reality. You know, kind of think of it that way. It's like, what do I want to do? And what did I do? And then if I review what I did, maybe that will reset my thought process for the next day, which is why many people encourage those that are trying to tweak their system to journal every day. Get an idea of what did you do? What did you accomplish, if you see that you accomplished, I'm just gonna pull an arbitrary number out eight things every day, eight big things, eight little things, for big things for little things, whatever it is. And you see that over the past week, month, five months, that's all you are accomplished, then what possesses you to think that you're gonna do nine or 19, the next day, history is the best indicator of the future tense. Because that's all we've got to go on. What we have done is a pattern. So we should maintain our expectations as people that are researching themselves. You know, the unexamined, unexamined life is not worth living, that we want to measure our progress in something. If we see that our baseline is this, then there's no reason to think unless we change our pattern like an athlete, if they run a certain distance at a certain pace, they're probably going to make incremental improvements but if they don't change things for the greater than they probably won't have that leap. And I think it's the same thing for us if we keep doing the same thing, but I keep track of what you're doing. So it's not just oh, yeah, I work 55 hours a week. Oh, really? Did you measure it all with a time log? How much you work? Oh, I did, and I only work 42 hours per week. Right? So good data helps set up a good plan.

Francis Wade 20:17

Right, right. And when you don't have either data, or a model for why this is happening, you could end up like, Roberta, you know, being very, very, very confused and feeling as if Should I just stop trying to improve? Because if GTD supposed to be, for example, I'm not I don't mean to pile on GTD. But if this solution that someone suggested to me that I'm using is supposed to be the latest greatest, and it's not doing what it should, maybe I should just give up and figure that this is the best it can get, and I should just move on. And many people are doing, they just can't be bothered -- it's too much work.

B

Bret Atkins 20:56

Yep, well, let me give you an anecdote of something that I discovered that my best thinking didn't work. I tried it, it sounded like a great idea at the time, I executed it, and it failed for me miserably. Now, for others, it may work perfectly. So I had a task management system. And the brand name doesn't really matter. But it allows for someone to sort by priority by date, by topic by tag by buckets, you know, you can have these nested things. And the vast majority of them do that.

B

Bret Atkins 21:34

What I was concerned with, (and I had a today and tomorrow bucket and then some like GTS context, when I'm at my computer, when I'm in a car, you know, going somewhere, a car errand and outside shore versus an inside shore, it had these buckets.) And, you know, I was afraid that I was missing things that were buried down in there. Because like Roberta, I had several hundred things. Now this adage, the saying is, you will still have things on your to do list when you are done as in when you retire. Or when you pass this mortal coil. When you are gone, there will still be items on a to do list. We'll never finish our todo list. So if we've got to keep that in mind is that oh, yeah, there's the reality check there.

B

Bret Atkins 22:32

So I have the several hundred items. And I'm like, other things that I thought of things that I some I absolutely know, I will never do. But they were an idea, like GTD capture, get it out of your mind and put it somewhere. So you know, it's there, that trusted system that he uses, or David Allen talks about. And so I know it's there, and I feel secure in knowing that I can either browse, or I could search by some odd keyword that stuck in my mind and go, Oh, tiramisu, you know, and pull it out of my head. And if I just typed tiramisu in the software, oh, there's something that I wrote there five years ago, about tiramisu in Paris in the spring. You know, I'm making that up, too. But But I know that those things are highly unlikely to occur, certainly this week, this month this year. But I got concerned that there were things in there. Oh, what if I'm forgetting something, you know, is there something that has fallen off? And so I did this. And it took a long time to do this. And as you've said, and your colleague, Ray Sydney Smith have said, you can spend a lot of time working on your system, and not doing work. And so I spent hours extracting every single task because I had a break a great idea. I was going to put all these tasks in a spreadsheet. And then I was going to use Eisenhower, Dr. Covey's important urgent matrix, then I was going to put a mathematical value to important and urgent and then run a mathematical calculation on each of the tasks that have an arbitrary say, is that important? Yes. Is it urgent? No. So you would see one would have a higher score, and one would have a lower score. And so you mathematically do this, and then run the calculation and then sort by this by this produced value, and then it would sort my list perfectly, and I would be so efficient. Well, I spent so many hours doing that. And I played with it for a couple of weeks now. And I'm still not getting some of these things done. I'm getting the top two or three things done. Why? Because they're very important, or they're very urgent or both. But I'm not doing these other things and I'm starting to feel overwhelmed because I'm seeing this list even though I even grayed out the font I tried to turn being able to see it. I was like, Oh, I'm free.

Francis Wade 25:07

Oh, oh, oh,

B

Bret Atkins 25:12

this is Oh, this is not working? Oh, yeah, color code, you know, things are high priority, medium priority. So I'm re categorizing based on this mathematical formula. And I made a mess of that. And so I tried it for like three weeks, and I went, Okay, I'm back. And I made sure I imported

back all of those into my task system. And now, I do what I think we're going to talk about rebirth, of figuring out how often to look at this list. And then feel comfortable until the next time, a week, a month, a quarter, whatever she feels, and we feel in our own list, I feel comfortable in looking at that list and go, Yep, I'm good now. Because it's not that.

B

Bret Atkins 25:55

And think of this, Watch me carefully, or follow me because sometimes I'm hard to follow, is, it's not that you are going to get to all of the items on that list. But you're going to get to enough of the important and urgent things to fill the time available. And that comes back to it. And that would be another point that I would want to make is all of these problems that I have you have Roberta has and other people in knowledge work have... is time is the universal Friend or foe? Depends on how you think about it. You can't argue with time, you know, I maintain when I do presentations, I may use the words time management. But here's the secret. You don't manage time. If you were to manage time, I have an hourglass behind me on the on my on my desk. Okay, if you can manage time, then fix this, change this hourglass, do something with it? Oh, well, that's not what I mean, by manage time. I go well, semantically, you're saying I can convert time, I can oversee time, whatever we used with the term management. And I said, Well, you can't do that. And we may say, Oh, well, that's just that's just the words. And we don't really mean that like, oh, well, why don't we find better words, and it's task management, or it's self management, it's, I'm managing my expectations about what I can get done. I'm managing my processes, or I'm managing the number of things that I write down in my list. And one thing may be is...get a smaller list, you know that, to do lists, if you have a physical to do list, and I keep one about that size with readings, it's about the size of a pencil, it's very small. And you could write down the number of items you could accomplish in a day on that, and keep that with you. And don't worry about the 300 Plus items in the list. But I apologize, I kind of ran into a solution there.

Francis Wade 27:58

Well, it's the people who are listening to the podcast may be thinking, Oh, we're going to be advocating one system over another or one technique over another. But that's actually not not why we're here to discuss Roberta's problem. Roberto is problem is hidden in the story that I shared, which is that she actually made one jump. And now she needs to make another which is that before she picked up GTD or whatever system someone uses, you're using memory. So you're using a memory based system. And that allows you to manage a certain number of tasks, then you pick up something more formal, that allows you to use lists and sorted lists and, and that works. But the number of tasks that you are trying to manage, keeps increasing in the background. So you're not necessarily tracking most people don't track the number of tasks that they're trying to manage. But the number keeps going up anyway. And then all of a sudden, it stops working. This nice new system that replaced the one you had before. It also stops working, it stops producing the results that you want. And it's a it's a little bit like two inflection points.

Francis Wade 29:17

So the first one she had was when she went from using memory to using lists. And then the second one, which we hinted at in the story is that she now needs to go from using lists to

doing time blocking so using a calendar and bringing time in. So those are two inflection points. But here's the problem. No one talks about them. These two inflection points are seen as just, for some, a matter of taste, or a matter of personality, or culture or just luck or and I can say it from personal example because I actually jumped from one to the other went back, I went back and forth, and trying to figure out, it didn't seem to have any rhyme or reason to me why one system worked versus another way. I was time blocking for about 6-7-8 years and then it went back to using lists, tried to make GTD work, it didn't work, it was much worse than what I was trying to do. So I had to go back to time blocking, because I didn't see these inflection points. And neither does Roberta. And maybe if you're listening to this podcast, neither do you. Because we're, what we're seeing is that, you will always want to add more tasks. And as you add more tasks, you will reach the limit of whatever system you're using. And as you hit the limit of whatever system you're using, all of a sudden you start to see symptoms. And you start to wonder why. And it's a good sign. Right, right, Bret, because it actually gives you a trigger that, oh, I need to examine what I'm doing to see if I need to make... this is a sign that I need to make a change. So it's a good thing.

B

Bret Atkins 31:08

Yes, I agree completely in that part of us, part of Roberta is getting better. And part of it is a bit lagging in that. And she realizes that, however, she's realizing that if she's got quantifiable data that says, you know, you used to do seven things today, now you're only doing four and right? We can arbitrarily or non abstractly look at those four and go, Well, they're not for bigger things. They're not for more important things, everything is still the same, but you just dropped in the number of things that you've done. So that's, that's clearly something that she can look at and say, Okay, well, I can now see that there's been a drop off in productivity.

B

Bret Atkins 31:56

But remember that, you know, we've used the word productivity in industry for more than a century meaning output divided by input, where if I make the number of widgets, and I can increase the number of widgets in the same amount of time, or keep the same widgets, and decrease the number of resources or time go to make it I can say I'm more productive. But Peter Drucker, who wrote the Effective Executive, and many other books in the 60s, said that it's doing the right things. So if each of us and Roberta says, Well, I'm doing fewer things, but now I'm better at recognizing that I'm doing the important things. I'm not just, you know, typing notes from a meeting that no one is ever going to look at that it was less than very effective. But that's not very, that's very efficient, but it's not very effective.

Francis Wade 32:52

Fewer wasted tasks. Yes, yes, I will say that she's she's also losing track of fewer tasks, yes, which is some very similar to what you're saying, which is that she'd made a commitment to herself to get something done. And she in her, at some level, she said, I need to do it by a certain date, and a certain level of quality, and so on, so forth. But her ability to meet her own commitments or her own expectations. When you're in the world of memory, it's, you know, it's all, it's all random. And because you're not keeping any track of anything, you actually don't know what your baseline is.

Francis Wade 33:34

What you're doing know is that when you try something like GTD, things get better. But even if you're a GTD user, you're probably aren't using a heck of a lot of metrics to measure the things that Bret and I are talking about. So you're not really aware of like the total number of tasks, you're trying to manage the expectations that you have them get that you get them done by a particular date with a particular level of quality. You're not measuring the error rates, you're not measuring the quality of what you're doing. You're probably not, you're probably just doing. So when the problem comes. And these things start to fall apart. You're like, Well, what happened? But I think what Bret took us on an interesting line of thought, which is that maybe if you had some measurements, you would have seen the problem come in earlier. And I think that Bret that deserves a ding because never I've never thought that before. I've never never thought that GTD had measurements built into it. Measurements of quality volume, error rates and this kind of thing. Maybe it could be an early indicator that it's that the technique is coming to the end of its useful life. That maybe there's time to I know we're getting into solutions a bit here, but this is what happens when you get it. Deep, deep problem analysis is solutions start flying at you. What do you think of that thought?

B

Bret Atkins 35:02

Well, it's a couple of things. One, remember, we want to do the work. And the work is key, right? Planning and evaluating the work, especially the planning part is part of it. But it shouldn't overwhelm us. It shouldn't take, you know, somewhere between five and 15%, there's no solid number. I don't even think there's research indicating a good range of numbers, but we get a feel a gut feel for, I shouldn't spend most of my day making my task list, I should spend most of my day doing my tests. So I need to keep it at about a 95% work 5% planning, or somewhere along that that way? The other is that, you know, evaluating our work. And as you were saying that I'm thinking, oh, yeah, no one ever does Six Sigma, on their own work. I mean, that is such an involved process that you want it, you need a warehouse, so you need a manufacturing process, and a lot of throughput to do that. And so there, the old juice is worth the squeeze. And then we could do a lot of self evaluation and metrics about how well am I doing? I go, Oh, it took me five minutes to make my to do list today. Therefore, I must be more efficient than yesterday, when it took me six minutes. Right? I don't think that's a valuable piece of data. And so it's dope, you know, what are you going to do with the data, once you collect the data, that's I've run into that a lot with people.

Francis Wade 36:30

What what I hear you saying is that to be someone who...to be an effective, productive person, so you're back to the premise, which is that you're, trapped in a way. Because you have to use a system every day. You can't not use something. So you're...you can't stand away from it and study it, you have to use it every single day. And as you're using it, you're... it's producing results for you. But you're not able to step away from it and analyze it to see how well is it going? Is it near the end of its useful life? Is there something that I need to be looking at that's beyond this, and David Allen, you know, Getting Things Done doesn't anticipate that there's another system to replace it, it's presented as a solution you need, don't worry about anything else. And what we all know, in apart from the handful of zealots is that there is no one size fits

all solution anywhere. And that Getting Things Done works really well, for certain things. And in the case of our conversation today, I would say it works for a certain volume of tasks, a certain level of commitment, as a certain kind of personality also, but also the kind of person who has a lot of discretionary time.

Francis Wade 37:03

When I read Getting Things Done, and I heard David Allen speak, he speaks as someone who if you know if you know Myers Briggs, he's a P, someone who's a P as opposed to a J. There are some other time measures. Also, I mentioned in my book, I can't recall them no, but other timescales that he also fits inside of. But he's someone who has other discretionary time by virtue of the kind of work that he does, if he's able to revisit his list, and look at his whole list of 300 things and decide what to work on next. It's not a problem for him, because he has enough discretionary time. People who don't have that level of discretionary time, run into problems. But because his book doesn't anticipate that you'll ever need another system to replace the one he suggests, he doesn't give you any hint...That oh, by the way, if this diet stops working for you, you will know because ..., and you'll need to track it because .... and that's when you need to start to go look for the next diet, because that's the one that lose the next set of pounds for you because your body has gotten used to this particular diet. And it won't do for you what it didn't originally.

Francis Wade 38:15

But there's a there's an app, there's a natural kind of meta analysis that people do. But the way we do it, I think is not in a systematic way that you implied, or you wish that we did. We kind of say, well, one size doesn't fit all and we go randomly, I certainly did it this way, we randomly go looking for stuff on the internet, because we don't have a schema. We don't have a model to work with. We're just bumping into whatever we can find. And then we mix and match a bit here and we try a bit there and it's all it's not systematic. It has no measurements. It's all a random walk in the woods and good luck,

B

Bret Atkins 39:54

But I do have some, you trigger some great thoughts there. So decades ago, I got a pilot's license and every airplane has a checklist in the cockpit, a clipboard I listed the pilot has to go through. And even if it's the same type airplane, there may be subtle differences in that checklist between one plane and another plane because of something that was done something that was repaired something that was replaced in plane a that wasn't done in plane BC or through Z. The pilot has to check that checklist.

B

Bret Atkins 40:31

But there are there are consistent items in a more broad sense in that checklist that you would say, what are the what are the common factors in all airplane checklists? You could say, oh, well, they tell you to do things before you take off while you're in the air. And before you land. And before you turn the engines off. But the specifics are different. So the more that we remain

very specific, like, I'm going to do a system for a advertising executive. And other says, I'm going to do a productivity system for a professor somebody. So for a novelist, well, you could maybe come up with a very, very specific thing. But the but if you say I need to make a system for all knowledge workers, like the checklists that have to be more broad.

B

Bret Atkins 41:22

And that was one of the things that I come up with a kind of a solution in my own mind, or an analysis in my own mind when I'm reading, getting things done, and deep work, and essentialism and all these books behind me about productivity. And I'm confused about well, this is System A and I read that and then I'm reading about system B and why are they not matching up? Is there more? And exactly like you said about mixing and matching, I thought the idea was like a buffet, I go to the buffet, you go to the buffet, and we each fill our plate, we each are satiated by the time we're done. But what we put on our plate is completely different based on our needs and our preferences at that time. I don't get the same thing the next time I come to that buffet. Because I may realize, you know that stuff in the brown sauce over there. I don't know really what that is. And I don't want that anymore. So my plate may differ, my plate may differ the next time I go. So there's that. And I was like, Okay, well, now I can kind of get it, I can pick and choose from this system, that system, that system. And it works for me, until it doesn't. And then I may need to mix and match. I mean, if you're doing it a different order, I may need to throw something out completely. And now I can figure out my current system. And I think that's where we go. It's like there is no universal system. That's what you're using right now. And what you're using right now is probably different than a year ago, and probably has some differences from what you'll do six months from now. And then as I'm looking at all this material, here I go. So how can I sort it even more?

Francis Wade 43:01

But I would say and this is maybe where where people get stuck. And this is definitely getting into solutions now. Which is that Roberta doesn't have a way to think about her next improvement. Okay, so she, let's for argument's sake, say she, she, she or anybody else, we all have a next improvement. And that next improvement is the best improvement we could make. We have a way to think through our options, provided we're open to them. So let's imagine that yes, we're open to them. We don't know how to think about the next improvement. And that's a part of the problem. Because as you probably know, from if you know from from any, anybody who's who's been a part of any discipline knows that in the beginning, anything you try seems to improve, make things better. Because you're so bad. You make that first, your first list, and you've only used memory before, it's like oh my god, I'm 10 times more productive. And you're probably right, you know, you make when you're at that inflection point is like, yeah, things do get better.

B

Bret Atkins 44:22

So it's like, oh, well, we discussed earlier about the Pareto principle, the 80-20. And I came up with the Pareto peanut butter principle, that it's always easier to get the first 80% of the peanut butter out of the jar than it is that last 20 Or that last 2%. And at some point, it's not worth trying to get the last little bit.

Francis Wade 44:45

Right, right. You just throw away the peanut butter at that point. Unless you really love peanut butter.

B

Bret Atkins 44:52

Unless you have no more peanut butter in the house, then your situation is a bit different.

Francis Wade 44:58

And that could be the case for people who are listening to this podcast because, you know, we don't have average people who listen to something like this, these are the productivity enthusiasts. And they want to know more about that 20%, the peanut butter that's left in the jar. But the principle that you're describing is that it's easy to make improvements in the beginning, it gets harder to make improvements, as you become more effective. So to our language when you're managing a small number of small volume of tasks with your memory. Just about anything you do will probably help.

B

Bret Atkins 45:40

To kind of paraphrase off David Allen's quote, something like the better you get, the better you better get. I would say the better you get, the harder it is to get better. Because you've maxed out the easy stuff, the low hanging fruit now you're trying to really tweak system if you think about golf experts or golf professional golf players, that is one lesson for somebody who's never picked up a club. Oh, okay. You mean I hold it in my hands? Yes, you hold it in your hands, you hold the club in your hands. But then they're tiny. They're tweaking, just how do you how do I hold my left elbow versus my right elbow? What do I lead this little bit? And so it's takes a lot of practice to get that extra little bit.

Francis Wade 46:20

Right, right. And the advice that you give someone who is at the NFL Combine is not the advice that you give someone playing Peewee Football, right? The principles may be...at the base level be the same. But the coaching is completely different. And when you get up to the, like your Bret Favre or you're someone who is at the very highest level, at the sport. At that point, you are as good an analyst as anyone else. So if you're a tennis player, for example, like Roger Federer who just retired, he's had multiple coaches, and why well, his coaches don't really tell him what to do at that level, because he's had more experience at that level than they have. So they're there asan outside pair of eyes. And they make suggestions. And he absorbs their information into his schema, he thinks about it, and then he makes a decision as to what changes he needs to make. So in other words, he's the ultimate coach, as opposed to when you're starting out as a tennis player, and somebody is telling you hold the racket like this. And don't hold it like that. And they're very prescriptive. And that's kind of what you need when you're at the very beginning. But again, peanut butter principle, as you get to that last bit, I'm

gonna have you know, Roger Federer is that last 1% of peanut butter, that that is really hard. That's impossible to get to, most people have given up long before, but he wants that little 1%. Because that 1% is what allowed him to beat Rafael Nadal.

B

Bret Atkins 48:05

Well, and if you look at swimmers and runners, that the difference between first and second place is a few hundreds or 1000s seconds, or a few hundredths of a second. And so at some point, there are other factors at play, get rid of that last peanut butter or that last thing, it could be a humid day, a rainy day, the hills on the track for a marathon runner could be different. And that's something that you can practice for but it just all the factors today are different than they were. That's why, you know, few in American baseball where you have, you know, two of the best teams going into the World Series. If the first team wins. Game one, why would they not win every single game? They're the same players, they're playing against the same players, but the conditions are different on the field in the air and in the mind.

Francis Wade 48:59

If they've studied the tapes of the prior game, and they say look, no loo, look, the way he was the ball just before he... or the way he scratches his back of his neck means he's going to... so they are studying every small thing that they could add that they're down to the they're down to the point 00 1% of that peanut butter in that jar, trying to separate it from the last other bit of peanut butter to say "If we make this small tweak we could..."

Francis Wade 49:29

The challenge for someone like Roberta from our story is that she's not living in that world that we're talking about. She's not get getting that where she is now is so far from where she was that the only thing in common is that it's another inflection point for her. That's the only thing, and that you will have nothing in common sorry there's somethine else...She's seeing similar symptoms. So she's seeing...Again, to use the professional baseball analogy... if you're in the World Series, and you lose three games in a row, and you haven't lost three games in a row since the first week of the season. You can't quite go back to the first week of the season and say, Well, what did we what was happening, then? That's not happening now. Because now it's totally different, you're at a totally different level of accomplishment. And what you used back then probably won't really work that well, now that you're, you've, you've obviously corrected for a whole bunch of things, and you're at a whole 'nother level of accomplishment.

Francis Wade 50:37

So she now needs to think, Okay, I am at an inflection point. I'm seeing some of the similar symptoms. But that's the only similarity. I need to go find answers somewhere different. Now, it strikes me that that decision to go find answers somewhere different is where people really struggle. That kind of commitment. Doesn't come ready. And there's no one there. There's no

one telling you..."Oh, sounds as if you. You're at the last last 1% of the peanut butter." They're like what? "It sounds like you you know, you can't use the big old spoon that you used to get the first 80%. You got to gotta use something different to get to that next level"

B

Bret Atkins 51:28

Think tip of the knife, right!

Francis Wade 51:30

I think professional athletes intuitively know what we're talking about. Because they live in such a competitive environment. They get a lot of feedback. They have a lot of numbers around them a lot of data telling them things, they have a lot of people talking to them and their level of expertise. And the way they analyze you know wish the way they wish task management could be analyzed the way the NFL Combine puts together ... are you familiar with the Combine Brett? Oh, well, it's been for my for my listeners as well.

Francis Wade 52:05

So the NFL Combine, is (there are Combines for different sports.) But for the NFL, they take the rookies or the would-be rookies, ones who want to go into the draft. And they bring all from all over the country and bring them to one place. And they run them through a series of tests. So they throw the ball under these different conditions, they catch the ball and they run, they sprint, they lift weights, they jump they do all these different things. So you end up with a composite measurement of that person's abilities. And the scouts use the composites to determine "Okay, well, this guy, he's really good, it's really good at this, he's not so good at that, he needs development here. He's weak in there, he's overweight over here, he's a little short over here, his body fat is...." It gets down to ridiculous levels of the half of a half percent of peanut butter, to separate these top athletes from each other. And you know they have them for all the different positions. And I believe all the major league sports have combines of different kinds. But the if you're a player, you're given this detailed feedback about your abilities, your physical makeup, your everything, and you use it to now design your program. So it has a benefit to you as well, as the scouts. But it's used on both sets. But the point is it generates all this information. In Task Management we're just like winging it.

Francis Wade 52:13

We're all on our own pretty much. I mean, you have seminars and webinars and books and tons of magazine articles about it. But there's really nobody sitting over your shoulder saying, "Okay, I want you to move your left shoulder this way, I want you to get up five minutes earlier today." It's a lot of self discipline into it. And so people who have the discipline to say I'm getting better, getting better now I observe "I'm not getting better as quickly as I was. What's the proble/? I could be like the many things we've suggested, there could be literally a defect in the system, or you're ready for another piece of the system. Or it's just harder to get to that last little bit of extra oomph.

Francis Wade 53:58

The game changes on you, it's just like being in academia, isn't it?

Francis Wade 54:25

You do well in your exams, because it's the same formula, you know how to study and pass exams. And then they say, okay, great. You got three years to either put up or shut up and you're like, huh it's like, "Whoa, I know how to study for exams. What's this?" Oh, now, you're writing a thesis. You're in a whole different world altogether. And your advisor lives in China, and the other one is sick, and so you're on your own and they're not going to help you too much. So good luck.

B

Bret Atkins 55:00

When I tell my undergraduate students who are, you know, they, they're asking questions about graduate school and go, "Well, what's the difference?" And I said, well, in undergraduate, we basically like open your minds and just pour information in. And you are expected to spit it back out to us. And I don't tell them, but it's actually what's called Bloom's Taxonomy. It was developed in the 1950s. And so in your master's program, you will begin to learn that there are other ways to learn. And there are other sources of knowledge. It's not just a textbook. And so they get really introduced to journal articles. And the write up of one fact that has been cited in one study, and how to begin to accumulate this knowledge. And so they're learning that that's how it's done. And then in the doctoral programs, they learn to do it themselves. And so at the end of a doctoral program, the student is told you now know how to learn new information, how to discover new information that's never been in a book that's never been observed before you have the tools. So now the responsibility is on you to now go find new information that goes into papers, which goes into books.

Francis Wade 56:15

Right, and, and, as you know, as an academic, there are still people who don't make that switch.

B

Bret Atkins 56:23

They're wanting it to be given to them. But at one point I'd like to kind of come back on to... And they don't get it. "Dr Atkins, just tell me what I need to know, what I need to do". You need to know what you need to do. Yep. But about all the material that's out there, and what the other conclusion that came to about our analysis of it was what we actually use the term and academics call our research called meta analysis. It's an analysis of existing analyses, existing studies. And so I took that to say, well, we've got all this research out there some it's formal, some of it's just anecdotal and books I've written about it. And I said, Is there a meta analysis of all this time management and personal productivity research? And I said, well, not really, per se that's done. But then I came up with the buckets that they seem to fall into, and then use the

acronym for M meeting, mindset or motivation. It's like, why are you doing this thing that you're doing? Energy, which is completely about the body? Are you getting the adequate sleep, you need hydration, nutrition, exercise, and then team are not time but task management? What processes are you using to get these things done? And then "A" for attention? Which is all in the mind? Are you sharp, because have you got plenty of sleep. And so how you can see how all four work together. But what I found is nearly all the systems and all the articles about systems fall either entirely, or it can be categorized in those four.

B

Bret Atkins 58:10

And one of the four or that they do overlap, so that you have better attention if you turn off your phone, and don't get distracted by notifications. And if you don't look at your phone at night, you get better sleep, therefore, you're kind of touching a couple of buckets. But the idea is, while I would never tell a person, well, this is the system you need to do. And use, I would say, these systems do fall in these buckets of mind, body and energy. And and then you're working on a particular task. And that seems to be that approach.

B

Bret Atkins 58:51

And then the the other one was as maybe Roberta gets more and more sophisticated, that you go from Oh, that app, that piece of software, is the thing that's going to do it for me. And so yeah, that is tactile, I can touch it. You know, it's and I can I can hold it all right here. I can hold that up in my hands, figuratively. And then tactical is what is my system that I'm doing on an hour by hour or daily basis. So it's just a little step in complexity from one app to multiple apps or multiple things that are working. And then strategic is how am I approaching my entire process of task management? And then philosophical is why am I doing what I'm doing to begin with? What is my mission here on earth? What am I? What is my goal in life, my North Star, and so you can see that becomes a lot more complicated and higher thinking and abstract than "What app am I using". So a person does even without thinking about it. They do progress in this way. I agree or the staircase of complexity. And at some point in moto, your self motivation speakers are way up here. They're saying, Oh, you can do it, you've got the power in your mind...unlock the secrets. And while other people, you know, the the listicles, that you see are five apps you have to download before Christmas Day or before the new year. And so you can see the two different methods. And I think there's this continuum that we're always going to be walking up and down. But ultimately, if we don't have that Northstar, if we don't have that, Why am I doing what I'm doing, then this other stuff is not going to be used as well as it could be.

Francis Wade 1:00:40

Right? Right. I absolutely agree that we're on the on, on the continuum you described and, and others, that the difficulty for Roberta is that she doesn't know that. She, she, she's she she's? Well, the were wrote, the story is that she's she's replaced one thing with another. And that's all she's done. She's not seeing the continuum, and she's not seeing the journey. And she's not seeing a life after GTD per se.

B

Bret Atkins 1:01:11

And she's not listening to your podcast yet.

Francis Wade 1:01:16

But if she knew, she could do the kind of searching in the four areas that you described, because back to the back to the idea of the combine, there's, there's not all this data, you're not you don't have this rich environment telling you how you're doing, you're really left kind of scratching your head wondering, you may go read academic literature, you may go read books, the academic literature on the books don't even there's no connection between the two, for the most part, they're two totally different worlds. And you're left having to kind of construct answers for yourself. Now, if she even knew that, that where she's headed is unchartered territory, and that there's a bunch of continuum that she's she she now needs to know that she's always been on. But guess what? No, you actually need to know it. So you can actually manage it, we could give her some freedom.

B

Bret Atkins 1:02:09

Yeah, and rather than get so fixated on some specific tool that says, either by their thought, or the developers thought, or a writer's thought, Oh, this is the magic pill, touch this and everything will be okay. I think it's best to kind of not look at that one airplane checklist, but to go much broader and go, "What do I need to know to fly this plane safely and land it even more safely? What are the broader aspects that I can kind of look at the philosophical and the strategic items?" And then two items, two concepts come to mind that are used in Japanese business, and one is kaizen, that is continuous improvement. And she's kind of doing that by saying, Oh, this just doesn't seem to work. She's realizing that, that there's need for improvement. And so the physical process, the mental process is to be in the life to be in the mindset that I did this today, can I do it better tomorrow, whatever better is defined in. And then the other concept is Muda. In MUDA, and that is waste. The Toyota system talks about that, it could be waste of time, wasted money, wasted resources, the waste of a missed opportunity, waste of physical distance that you have to walk to go pick up a tool, when you could just move toolbox closer to you. And now you've wasted less time going back and forth to the toolbox. And so these two, almost polar opposites of continuous improvement, and reducing the amount of waste whatever system you use, however, you come back from the buffet table of productivity, I think is her best way to go.

Francis Wade 1:03:51

Well you're talking my language, because I'm a... I was trained in, I'm an industrial engineer by background - operations research, industrial engineering. So all we did in my early days, was talking about just in time, that was all I focused on for the first part of my career. And those principles, you're quite right, they're they're really powerful. It's just that they're not dwell in the world of physical objects. We're in the world of psychological objects, tasks. And boy, this world is, you mentioned the different disciplines that made up Meta. The Disciplines don't even talk to each other in academia, you know, there's all these silos and they don't with respect to what we want them to say to us. There's all these gaps between that don't get addressed. So unfortunately, Roberta is kind of like...she doesn't really have a schema, does not have like a path. And hopefully, you know, through our discussion by just saying that she doesn't have one

which is basically saying, we all are struggling when it comes to making steady progress, having one sort of mental model for how you make progress. And seeing how that, knowing that we need to manage it ourselves. Knowing that there's no answer out there to give you... that you need to craft it of your own, you need to put it together using different sources. It needs to be multi pronged in the way that you said, you're on a continuum. As you improve your skills and natural one, and you will keep wanting to add tasks, which puts pressure on the whole thing, you know, it's not like, you stay the same. And that's it, you, you want to do more, which adds a pressure to keep, keep improving and keep. So you put all those together, maybe that's the sum of the situation that we that's the state of the art right now that we could maybe do. This is it, Bret, we don't have anything else. Do we have anything else?

B

Bret Atkins 1:05:48

Occasionally, I keep a note to myself of universe things that I go. So what would I told myself if I asked myself how to do better. And the item number seven on here is do fewer things. So it is conceivable that Roberta is doing too much. If we look at it from her boss's viewpoint, or co workers viewpoint or family's view point you are too busy, and you're not making the impact that you would want to make. So, you know, Pablo Picasso did more paintings than Leonardo da Vinci, Leonardo, no, slack himself still was able to accomplish a great deal on that. So I think if we, you know, as going back to Peter Drucker is do the right things don't do more things. That's not our definition of productivity.

Francis Wade 1:06:39

Right, right. And more could actually mean less hours conceivably. For most people, for many people who are driven more probably means less hours of work. As you would traditionally think about it, and more hours of probably meta analysis,

B

Bret Atkins 1:07:00

There you get into Parkinson's Law of the time, a lot of the work is going to be filled by how much ever time there is. So I actually try to use that to my advantage of making false deadlines to myself if like, Oh, I've got eight hours to get this newsletter done, or this articles done. But what if I only had three hours, could I do it in three hours, let's see what I can accomplish in three hours. So the old joke of the most productive that we are is the afternoon before we leave for vacation. Now we're just doing things right and left, it's like, "Don't bother me."

Francis Wade 1:07:35

Everything's off, we can productive.

B

Bret Atkins 1:07:38

And if we did half that amount on a consistent basis, we would get a lot done. Now, we're kind of about to go off. Stop me. So I don't go off.

Francis Wade 1:07:50

I'll stop you as we have now more time in this episode

Bret Atkins 1:07:55

A person, a knowledge worker, can be so productive, that the entire system cannot handle their productivity. So if I was to write one article per day for my organization, but I actually wrote seven articles today, what are they going to do with this other six articles, they don't have the bandwidth or the system in place right now. If you think back of the old Lucille Ball show where they're dipping chocolate or putting things in the assembly line, that there was too much throughput, and the system couldn't handle it. So you can be too productive, I would say. So it's finding that sweet spot

Francis Wade 1:08:41

Too productive in the sense that you're you're trying to manage more tasks than your system can handle.

Bret Atkins 1:08:47

Yeah, but your output, your good output is more than the system can handle.

Francis Wade 1:08:53

Right? So Bret, I want to thank you for coming on the Task Management and Time Blocking Podcast spending time with us. This is not a topic that I've heard discussed anywhere other than right here between the two of us that there is this the peanut butter, the peanut butter effect is real in task management. And if you're a serious and you want to get down to the last few percent, then you're contending with a world that is it's not like Tennis or Football Sorry. It's it's, it's vague. It's mostly undefined. And you got to be the one to make all the decisions because there's nobody who's going to guide you down to that last few percent. I love the analogy. Love the conversation. And Bret how can folks get a hold of you and hear more about the work that you're doing?

Bret Atkins 1:09:44

So I have a blog that's intended mostly for my students on how to increase their productivity. It's called www.theproductivityprofessor.net and you'll see some essays on there. You can write me through there. I don't collect emails. I'm not selling you anything there? So it's a completely, you know, open website for finding information. So I don't save your email address. If you don't email me there. I have no idea that you were there if you just want to get in read.

Francis Wade 1:10:15

Great. Great. So Thanks, Bret. So folks, stay tuned. There's some more coming up. I'm going to I want to tell you about the next episode that we have coming up here at the podcast. So we're not done keep listening. Thanks, Bret.