MIND MANAGEMENT

NOT TIME MANAGEMENT

Productivity When Creativity Matters

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MIND MANAGEMENT

NOT

TIME MANAGEMENT

ALSO BY DAVID KADAVY

The Heart to Start: Stop Procrastinating & Start Creating

Design for Hackers: Reverse-Engineering Beauty

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BONUS MATERIAL

I'VE WRITTEN this book to last for years, but technology moves quickly. If you want to know which tools I currently use to make the most of my creative energy, sign up for my newsletter at kdv.co/tools

CHAPTER 1

MIND MANAGEMENT, NOT TIME MANAGEMENT

Things are not difficult to make;
what is difficult is putting ourselves in
the state of mind to make them.

–CONSTANTIN BRANCUSI

"THERE'S ONLY twenty-four hours in a day." The conclusion we're supposed to draw from this common observation is: If there are only so many hours in a day, you should make the most of each of those precious hours. Time management, it seems, is critically important.

When you start managing your time, you find you really are getting more done. You're keeping a calendar, so you don't forget things. You're building routines, so you can get repeating tasks done faster. You're learning keyboard shortcuts for the apps you use every day. You may even start saying "no" to some opportunities, so you can make better use of your time.

But it becomes harder and harder to get more out of your time. Your calendar becomes jam-packed with a kaleidoscope of colored blocks. You start "speed reading," and listening to audiobooks and podcasts on 3x speed. You start cutting out all but the most essential activities that move you toward your goals. No more lunches with your friends – you'll eat at your desk.

Next, you figure, you can get more out of your time if you do two things at once. So you start multitasking. You're checking your email while brushing your teeth. You're holding conference calls while driving to work.

You start searching for extra bits of time, like loose change under couch cushions. You used to sleep eight hours, but now you'll sleep five. You can check emails at family dinners. You can steal extra hours of work on your laptop after everyone in the house has gone to bed.

You're tired all the time. There's not enough coffee in the world to keep you going. Your anxiety levels are sky-high, and you're becoming forgetful. You're always in a rush.

With each new tactic you learn, each new "life hack," each new shortcut, life gets more hectic. You would start outsourcing some of the load, but you're so busy and so exhausted, you can't even explain what's keeping you so busy. The harder you try to get more out of your time, the less time you have. Even if you did have the time, you wouldn't have the energy.

Until one day you realize: *"There's only twenty-four hours in a day." Maybe that doesn't mean what I thought it meant?*

I thought it meant I should get the most done in the least amount of time possible.

What I'm learning is, if there's only twenty-four hours in a day, that means there's a limit.

I can only get so much out of my time. "Time management" is like squeezing blood from a stone.

THIS STORY is not too different from my own. For my

entire adult life, I have been a productivity enthusiast, with time management as one of my key strategies for getting more done. It started in college. As a graphic design student, I learned all the keyboard shortcuts for Photoshop. I used training software to learn to type faster. When I graduated and got a job, I constantly experimented with different ways of keeping a to-do list and prioritizing my tasks. I pontificated with any colleague who would listen about how to cut down on the number of emails in my inbox. One thing I loved about working in Silicon Valley was that there was no shortage of tech geeks with whom I could swap tips on the latest productivity apps.

Eventually, I ran out of ways to get more done in less time, and my quest went on a detour. That led me to embark on the adventure I'm sharing in this book.

FOUR YEARS ago, I found myself sitting on the bare hardwood floor of my apartment in Chicago, eating lunch from a takeout container with a plastic fork. I had no furniture, no plates, no silverware. I had sold my last chair to some guy from Craigslist fifteen minutes prior.

I was about to embark on my most audacious productivity experiment yet. As I looked around at the three suitcases which housed my final remaining possessions, and the painters erasing from the walls any trace that I had lived there for seven years, I was trying to wrap my head around one fact: That night, I would fall asleep in another country. For the foreseeable future, I would be a foreigner – an *extranjero* – in a land with a checkered history, where I barely

spoke the language.

It all started, six years earlier, with an email. It was the kind of email that would trip up most spam filters. I wasn't being offered true love, millions of dollars from an offshore bank account, or improved performance in bed. I was being offered a book deal.

I had never thought of myself as a writer. In fact, I hated writing as a kid. As I considered accepting that book deal offer, every author I talked to warned me: "Writing a book is extremely hard work, with little chance of success." But I figured, *How hard can it be?*, and signed my first literary contract.

I DIDN'T know how to write a book, but the most obvious method was: time management. I needed to make sure I had the time to write the book.

In an attempt to meet my tight deadline, I used every time management technique I could think of. I scheduled writing sessions on my calendar. I developed a morning routine to start writing as quickly as possible after waking up. I "time boxed," to limit the time I would spend on pieces of the project.

Still, I didn't have enough time. I fired my clients. I cancelled dates and turned down party invitations. I started outsourcing my grocery shopping, my meal preparation, even household chores. If there was anything I had to do myself, I made sure to "batch" it into blocks of time when I could do it all at once.

Writing the book became my one and only focus. I

cleared away any time I could, and I dedicated it to writing.

But it still wasn't enough. I spent most of my day hunched over my keyboard, rocking back and forth in agony. I felt actual physical pain in my stomach and chest. My fingers felt as if they had been overtaken by rigor mortis. I struggled to write even a single sentence. I was spending plenty of time on my book, but I wasn't getting anything done.

MY CASE of writer's block was so bad that, weeks after signing my contract, I accepted a last-minute invitation to go on a retreat to Costa Rica. Logically, it wasn't the best use of my time, but I desperately hoped that a change of scenery would work some kind of magic.

A few days into the trip, I was more worried than ever. According to my contract, if my manuscript wasn't twenty-five percent finished within a few weeks, the deal was off. Yet I still hadn't written a single word. Unless a miracle happened, I would write a check to the publisher to return my advance, and I would humiliatingly face my friends, family, and blog readers to tell them I had failed. Does that sound like a lot of pressure? It was.

I went for a walk, so I could feel sorry for myself, by myself. I was dragging my feet down the gravel road, head hung down and arms crossed over my chest. *How could I be so foolish?*, I wondered. Not only had I committed to writing a 50,000-word book – with detailed illustrations – despite having little writing experience beyond a few blog posts, but I had wasted time and money going on this retreat.

Then, I heard someone call out. I looked up, and on the next road over was a man waving and yelling, *¿¡Como estáááás!?* I had briefly noticed the man moments before. His fists had been wrapped around the simple wires of a fence, his arms stretched out in front of him as he leaned back in ecstasy, singing to himself. I had felt vaguely embarrassed for him, assuming he didn't know someone else was around.

As the man motioned for someone to come to him, I hesitated. It looked as if he was motioning to me, but that seemed unlikely. Yet I looked around, and saw nobody.

I had just passed a fork in the road, and the fence the man stood behind was on the other side of the fork. I didn't want to backtrack, because I felt I should return to the house and try to write. But I felt rude for ignoring his friendly invitation. So, still not sure what he wanted, I reluctantly retraced my steps and walked over to the man.

What followed was the first conversation I ever had entirely in Spanish. Though, I'm using the word "conversation" loosely. The man – Diego was his name – taught me the words for the sun, the beach, the rain and the sea. It turned out Diego just wanted to chat.

My conversation with Diego was refreshing. I was used to everyone ignoring each other on the crowded streets of Chicago, but here was a man who wanted to talk to someone on the next road over about nothing in particular. I was suddenly in such a relaxed state of mind that, after bidding Diego farewell, it was several minutes before I noticed I was going the wrong way. I had continued down Diego's side of the fork in the road. When I realized this, I panicked at the

prospect of getting lost in a foreign country, but then I shrugged it off and decided to keep going. It turned out I got back to the house just fine anyway.

Between the pep talk I had gotten from my friend Noah Kagan – as described in my book, *The Heart to Start* – and my conversation with Diego, I felt as if I had turned over a new leaf. I set my laptop on a desk in the interior balcony of the house. There, looking out at the sapphire blue Pacific Ocean, I had my first breakthrough writing session. What once seemed impossible, now seemed easy. After an hour of writing, I had most of a chapter drafted. It suddenly seemed as if I might make my deadline after all.

THAT RANDOM conversation on a gravel road in Costa Rica became the seed of an idea that would eventually drive me to sell everything I owned and buy a one-way ticket to South America.

I had discovered that making progress on my first book wasn't so much about having the time to write. It was about being in the right state of mind to do the work at hand. I had discovered that today's productivity isn't so much about time management as it is about mind management.

WELCOME TO THE CREATIVE AGE

The shift didn't happen overnight. Throughout the course of writing my first book, I still got stuck all the time. But it became abundantly clear that I had picked the low-hanging fruit in managing my time. There were instead opportunities

to be more productive, with less pain, in managing my mind.

After all, why was it that I was banging my head against the wall twelve hours a day? Why was it that, seemingly out of nowhere, I would suddenly start making progress? Sometimes, I would do an entire day's writing in only fifteen minutes. The only problem was, I had to sit at my keyboard all day to find that fifteen-minute window in which writing would suddenly come easily.

If only I could sit down, do that fifteen minutes of writing, and get on with the rest of my day!, I thought.

I'm sure you've experienced this before. You were working hard on something, but not making progress. Maybe you were writing a book, maybe you were learning a language, or maybe you were simply making a tough life decision. You kept pushing, but it felt as if you were getting nowhere. You abandoned the project multiple times. But then, as you were on the edge of burning out, everything clicked. You had a fruitful writing session, you suddenly understood your new language, or that decision that once seemed impossible now seemed easy.

Writing my first book was a creativity pressure cooker. That's what it took for me to realize that I needed to manage my mind, instead of my time. But as I reflected on the experience, I saw that this also applied to other aspects of my life and work. In my career as a designer, I had often spent weeks thrashing about, sure I would never reach a solution – only to have that solution appear out of nowhere. As an entrepreneur, I had struggled to choose a direction, only to have the best choice become clear after "sleeping on it." As

a marketer, I had agonized over how best to expend limited resources, only to later feel confident about my cohesive plan. I could see parallels in learning to dance Salsa, play guitar, or speak Spanish – even in making big life decisions.

Most people's idea of productivity is to be able to produce a lot of something. To *do* a lot. Follow a series of steps, and you're done. Do it over and over again.

But, more and more, if it can be completed in a series of steps, there's no point in doing it. AI and automation are poised to eliminate forty to fifty percent of jobs within the next decade or two. It's the jobs in which people follow a series of steps that are the most at-risk. AI expert Kai-Fu Lee says it's the "optimization-based" jobs that will be taken over first. Jobs such as loan underwriters, customer service representatives, even radiologists. Jobs that involve what Lee calls "narrow tasks," such as finding the ideal rate for an insurance premium, maximizing a tax refund, or diagnosing an illness. Tasks involving optimizing data will be the first to go.

Which jobs are safe from the reach of AI? According to Lee, it's the jobs that require creativity.

When many people think of "creativity," they think of watercolor paintings or macramé. But creativity expands way beyond those examples. Scientists who study creativity define it as coming up with something both novel and useful.

According to Lee, if you have to think across different subjects, if you work in an "unstructured environment," or if the outcomes of your work are hard to measure, the work you do will be relevant far into the future.

These days, the mental work that matters isn't about

following a series of steps. It's about finding your way to a novel and useful solution.

EACH NOVEMBER, aspiring writers set out to write a novel – the book kind of "novel" – in a month. It's a collective event called NaNoWriMo, short for National Novel Writing Month. Since 2013, in parallel to NaNoWriMo, computer programmers have been participating in NaNoGenMo – National Novel Generation Month. They try to generate novels using code.

In the 2019 NaNoGenMo, some novels were written by an AI model once considered too dangerous to be released to the public. Yet the novels were still not even close to making sense. In fact, this AI model could hardly write a coherent sentence. AI expert Janelle Shane tweeted, "Struggling with crafting the first sentence of your novel? Be comforted by the fact that AI is struggling even more." The sentence this AI model generated for Janelle: "I was playing with my dog, Mark the brown Labrador, and I had forgotten that I was also playing with a dead man." Not exactly Tolstoy.

You can type 50,000 words in a day. A computer can generate 50,000 words faster than you can blink. Yet, you can think up a 50,000-word novel in about a month. A computer can't do it at all.

Your edge as a human is not in doing something quickly. No matter how fast you move, a computer can move faster. Your edge as a human is in thinking the thoughts behind the doing. As entrepreneur and investor Naval Ravikant has

said, "Earn with your mind, not your time."

This is true if those thoughts become the words in a novel, or if those thoughts help you learn a new skill that you add to your repertoire. It's true if you're an entrepreneur building a world-changing startup, or a social worker helping a family navigate the benefits available to care for an aging parent.

YET MANY of us approach productivity today as if it's the speed of production, not the quality of our thinking, that matters.

You could trace this attitude back to Frederick Taylor. More than a century ago, Frederick Taylor revolutionized productivity. Today, the remnants of "Taylorism" – as his methods came to be known – are ruining productivity.

THE END OF TIME MANAGEMENT

As the nineteenth century was turning to the twentieth century, Frederick Taylor grabbed a stopwatch. He stood next to a worker, and instructed that worker on exactly how to pick up a chunk of iron. *Bend in this way, grab the iron in this way, turn in this way.* Over and over, Taylor tweaked the prescribed movements, until he had the perfect combination of movements for moving a chunk of iron efficiently.

As if he were programming computers, Taylor then taught those prescribed movements to the other workers in the yard of Bethlehem Steel. Their productivity skyrocketed. It quadrupled, in fact. "Scientific management," aka "Taylorism," was born.

Taylorism swept through the industrial world, and brought productivity forward by leaps and bounds.

What we now think of as "time management" is a child of Taylorism. Before Taylorism, workers weren't thinking about time. When most of the population was working on farms, they weren't deciding what to do and when to do it based upon the movement of a stopwatch hand. They were asking themselves when the sun would rise or set, when it would rain, or when the first frost would come. When would the cornstalks be up to your knees or waist or chin? These questions were not questions of seconds or minutes or even hours. They were questions of days and weeks and sometimes months or years. Most of the day, most people didn't even know what time it was.

Taylor's big contribution to productivity was that he thought of time as a "production unit." Add more time, get more output. Add more work within that time, get more output. What Taylor did was fill the available time with the most efficient movement possible. When he taught those movements to every worker in the steelyard or in the factory, it made them more productive.

Today, we still think of time as a "production unit." This attitude is so ingrained in our culture that we're hardly aware of it. It's the "water" that we, the fish, swim in. We wake up to an alarm – we've tweaked our wake-up time so that we can wake up as late as possible, and still get to work on time. As we drive to work, our navigation system calculates exactly how long it will take – given the traffic conditions – for us to arrive. At work, we diligently fill out our time sheets, so our

employer can bill clients for our time. If you're reading this book on an e-reader, there's probably an estimate at the bottom of the screen telling you how long it will take to finish this chapter. Everything around us is set up with the assumption that time is extremely valuable. That whatever your goal, if you reach it in less time, that's a good thing. That if you spent time on something, that means you performed a valuable service. "Time is money," as they say.

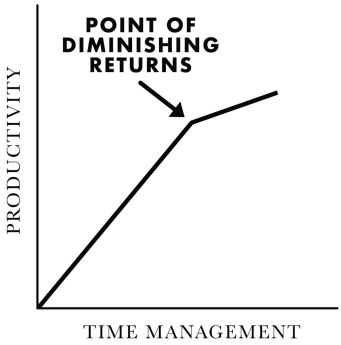
But there's something we're forgetting when we treat time as if it were money. Even Taylor knew this fundamental truth. It's that any "production unit" has its limits. Exploit any resource enough, and you'll eventually stop getting benefits.

Taylor was filling his workers' time with efficient movement. But Taylor noticed that if he tried to fill *all* of his workers' time with efficient movement, he didn't get what he expected. If he wanted to get a full day out of a worker who was moving chunks of iron in the yard, Taylor needed not only to prescribe movement to that worker – Taylor also needed to prescribe rest to that worker.

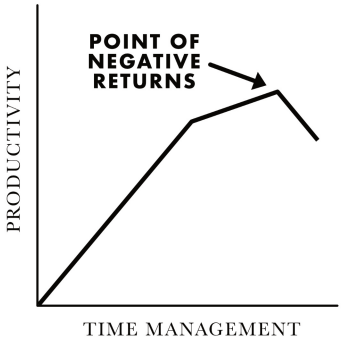
So, at some point, time was no longer the only resource for Taylor to optimize. Taylor had to leave some time empty to truly get optimal output from his workers.

There's a concept in economics known as "the point of diminishing returns." That's the point at which each additional production unit doesn't get you the same output as the previous production unit. Say your worker moved five chunks of iron in ten minutes. In the next ten minutes, he only moves four chunks of iron. The worker is tired, and

can't keep up. The *return* you're getting for each additional production unit is *diminishing*.



There's a further concept in economics beyond the point of *diminishing* returns. It's the point of *negative* returns. This is where the additional production unit doesn't just bring you lower returns than the previous production unit – it actually causes your total output to be *less* than if you had not added that production unit at all. Say instead of the worker moving five chunks of iron in ten minutes, you order him to move an incredible eight. But after an hour of working at this pace, the worker collapses on the floor. If you hadn't been such a greedy boss, the worker could have worked all day, and moved a lot of iron. But now, he's already exhausted.



It's relatively simple to use time more efficiently when you're following a series of steps. Experiment with filling time with those steps, and you'll find the right mix of work and rest.

But in today's world, where creative thinking is key to being productive, you can't get more output simply by optimizing time.

Still, in this demanding and fast-paced world, it's as if we have no choice but to cram our schedules, to multitask, and to always be in a hurry. Any opportunity we can find to do things faster, with less waiting, or to "kill two birds with one stone," we have to take it.

This has driven us to "time worship."

TIME WORSHIP

Time has become our "God value." Author Mark Manson describes a God value as the "top of our value hierarchy," and "the lens through which we interpret all other values." Our God value is the most important factor by which we decide to choose one thing over another.

As time worshippers, saying "yes" to a meeting invitation that fills empty space on our calendar is clearly better than leaving that space empty. More events in less time is better, and we can't imagine what we'd do with empty space on our calendar.

As time worshippers, struggling once again to speed read seems worth it, because moving your eyes over more words in less time is clearly better than moving your eyes over fewer words in more time. Never mind if we immediately forget

what we've just read, never apply it to our lives, and kill any pleasure we once took in the act of reading.

As time worshippers, when we're multitasking, it at least *feels* as if we're doing more things in less time – even if research shows we're merely wasting time and energy switching between tasks over and over.

Our time worship drives us to do strange things to save time. There's an app called Exit Strategy, which helps New Yorkers save time while riding the subway. Exit Strategy shows you which subway car to get on so that when you reach your destination – wait for it: you can exit the station faster. It sounds like an obscure idea, but Exit Strategy has earned its developer a small fortune.

In my college dorm, I had a neighbor who was running every time I saw him. The first time I saw him, I thought he must be in a rush. But the hundredth time, I figured something must be up. When I finally did get to ask him – when he wasn't running – why he was always running, he reasoned: "It saves time." Not surprisingly, he was an engineering major.

I'm no stranger to employing weird tactics myself in order to save time. Are you ready for this? I've actually taught myself to press the elevator button for my floor – like a no-look pass – by looking in the mirror in the back of my apartment building's elevator. I save a tiny amount of time because I don't have to turn around before I press the button.

Saving time is not without value. According to Exit Strategy, burying your face in their app will "shave *minutes* off

every subway trip" (emphasis mine). I estimate that my ingenious no-look elevator button press saves me a grand total of two seconds a week. I suppose my neighbor did save time – and got exercise – while running all over campus, but what did he do if he saw a friend? Decide that stopping and talking for a minute would be a waste of time?

To each their own, but time worship permeates American culture, affecting the way others treat you, no matter how much you try to forget about time: That friend who always shows up late because he can't risk being early. The waiter who slams down the check before you've finished chewing your last bite, then hovers over your table impatiently. The woman behind you in line at the supermarket who loudly groans after you commit the mortal sin of stealing three seconds from her day by dropping your credit card. The root of all of this incivility lies in praying to the false God of time.

When you choose a "God value," all your decisions optimize for one thing, at the expense of everything else. What other things could you think about or do while leaving a subway station at a normal pace? What valuable college relationships did my neighbor miss out on by running all the time? Which neighbors would invite me to parties if I didn't make a fool of myself in the elevator?

You can cut calories toward a healthy diet, but at some point you've cut too many calories. You can save time toward a productive life, but at some point you've cut too much *life*. Thirty percent of working Americans are apparently so short on time that they now get less than six hours of sleep.

That reduction from the recommended eight hours is not only enough to kill their creativity, it also increases their risk of high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, cancer, and other serious illnesses. Additionally, it leaves many with no choice but to consume copious amounts of caffeine, driving a downward spiral of less restful sleep, stunted memory formation, and further health risks.

WHEN YOU SAVE TIME, KEEP IT

As desperate as we are to get more out of our time – as if our hourglasses were filled with golden dust – it's surprising how little respect our culture has for time. People are actually offended if you leave time unplanned for, unused, or empty. We say people with time-consuming hobbies or interests have "*too much* time on their hands." While that time is on their hands, apparently they should fight it – perhaps by using the practice of "time *boxing*." If they still can't pound something productive into the empty time on their schedule, they should do more than fight time. They should "kill" time.

Yet when someone has the opportunity to steal some of our time, they change their tune. We have the gall to refer to unused time as "free" time. Do we call our unused money "free" money? No! Ironic, in a world where "time is money."

Time is apparently money when your boss is using it, yet somehow it's "free" time when it's leftover for you to use. Most companies allow coworkers to see each others' calendars, for the sake of seeing that unused time. That way, others can fill gaps in our day by scheduling meetings. Entrepreneur and author Jason Fried cleverly calls it "calendar

Tetris." Our time is "free" for them to take. This practice is so widespread, there's now an app called Look Busy, which fills your calendar with fake events, so your coworkers can't steal more of your time.

This flippant regard for people's time is perpetuated by the false notion that time is a commodity. Time management wisdom will tell you that once time has passed "you can't get it back."

Here comes a counterintuitive concept, so you might need to read it twice: Time you don't use now pays dividends in the future. Consider that Bill Gates came to the realization that Microsoft should create its first web browser during one of his "think weeks" in a secluded cabin, or that Google's greatest products – including Gmail and AdSense – were created during the "20% time" when engineers could work on whatever they wanted.

If those examples are still too industrious to convince you, consider that Stephen King recommends novelists put their first draft in a drawer for six weeks before daring to review it, that Elizabeth Bishop took such long breaks on projects that twenty years elapsed between her starting and finishing one of her poems, and that Malcolm Gladwell says "the first task of a writer is to create enough space and time for writing to emerge." *Catch 22* author Joseph Heller would often lie down and "just think about the book all afternoon – daydream, if you will." George Carlin recommended that everyone do a little daydreaming. "Just sit at the window, stare at the clouds," he said. "It's good for ya." His own advice helped him become one of the greatest stand-up

comedians ever, by anyone's estimation. Or, consider that Marisol would sit so still for hours at a time – like one of her sculptures – that spiders built webs between her arm and torso *on a regular basis*. As *The Color Purple* author Alice Walker said, "In order to invite any kind of guest, including creativity, you have to make room for it."

When we have extra money, we save a "nest egg." That nest egg will earn interest and become more valuable in the future. As these examples clearly illustrate, the time we leave unused in the present can have the same effect. Time spent doing nothing today reaps benefits tomorrow. So, when you save time, keep it.

Clearly, our use of time management has surpassed the point of diminishing returns – and the point of negative returns. To do the creative thinking we need in today's world, we need a different way of getting things done.

THE TWO FALSE ASSUMPTIONS OF TIME MANAGEMENT

The "time management" paradigm makes two false assumptions that are at odds with what it means to be productive in today's world.

The first false assumption time management makes is that time management treats time as a commodity. "Everyone has the same twenty-four hours in the day," you'll hear people say. It's as if you could line up those hours like bushels of corn, or blocks of frozen orange juice concentrate – each unit the same as the previous unit. But that's far from true.

A few years after writing my first book, I worked with

behavioral scientist and *Predictably Irrational* author Dan Ariely. Dan wanted to use his behavioral science knowledge to design a productivity app, with the guidance of my early theories on mind management. (We later sold the app to Google, where some of the features we came up with became a part of the Calendar app.)

One observation that quickly became clear to us is that when you look at each of those twenty-four hours in a day, one unit of time is very different from another unit of time. Rhythms within our bodies and within the world around us make each hour different from the next. Some hours are better for thinking analytically. Other hours are better for thinking creatively. As I'll explain in the following chapters, all hours are not created equal.

The second false assumption that time management makes is that being productive is about producing. "Producing" is right there in the word "productive." Time management in its most basic form is about producing the maximum output in the minimum time.

Yet the impact of what you produce in one minute can vary greatly when compared to the impact of what you produce in the next minute. The impact of one product versus another can be night and day.

You could write a novel that sells zero copies, or you could write a novel that sells a million copies. You could start a business that fails, or you could start a business that changes the world. You could create a marketing plan that doesn't move the needle, or you could create a marketing plan that puts your product on the map.

The *time* you spend on one result versus another may be exactly the same. You can work just as hard on the novel that sells zero copies as the novel that sells a million copies. Both novels may have the same number of words. Both novels may be free of misspellings and grammar mistakes. The thing that determines whether what you produce does extraordinarily well or extraordinarily poorly is the quality of your ideas.

When you're moving chunks of iron, you can easily connect the work with the results. You pick up the iron, and you've moved it closer to its destination. But when you look at how ideas happen, you can't connect the quality of those ideas to the time you spend on them. Yes, with any novel, you're going to have to spend some time moving your fingers on the keyboard. But the juicy idea behind the novel that sells a million copies may come out of nowhere.

Neuroscientists can give people a creative problem to solve. In an instant, as I'll talk about more in the next chapter, those people can go from having made no progress on the problem, to solving the problem. You can see the "aha" moment in their brains. It takes no time to have an idea, yet you have that idea in that instant because of things you did long before. Just ask opera singer Marian Anderson, who said – when learning a new piece of music – "What has appeared useless labor for days becomes fruitful at an unpredictable moment."

In creativity, unlike in moving chunks of iron, action and result are hard to connect. Maybe your brain is better-suited to having an idea because you took a vacation last month.

Maybe it's because you got a massage a couple days ago. Right before you had the idea, a woman walked by wearing a funny-looking hat, and that sparked the moment of insight. Yet the true seed of the idea may be a book your mother read to you when you were five. The idea appeared to come randomly, but your past knowledge and experience, mixed with the right mental conditions, set the stage for the idea to happen. As the great sculptor Constantin Brancusi said, "Things are not difficult to make; what is difficult is putting ourselves in the state of mind to make them."

Being productive today isn't about typing faster so you can write more words in less time, or shoehorning as many meetings into your schedule as possible. Like planting a seed in nutrient-rich soil, and feeding it the water and sunlight it needs in order to grow, today's productivity is about creating the conditions within your mind to have valuable thoughts. Being productive today isn't about time management, it's about mind management.

BEYOND TIME MANAGEMENT

Fortunately, some productivity experts have taken us beyond the time management paradigm, recognizing that not all time is created equal, and that you can get wildly different results from the same time investment. You can prioritize what you will and won't spend time on with the "Eisenhower method" of choosing the not-urgent-but-important over the urgent-but-not-important, as made famous by Steven Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. You can choose to do the few things that bring you most of the results, using the

"80/20" or "Pareto" principle, as popularized by Tim Ferriss's *The 4-Hour Work Week*. You can cut out all but the most essential things in life, as espoused in Greg McKeowan's *Essentialism*.

Additionally, some experts have already built the foundation for mind management. My personal favorite productivity system, David Allen's *Getting Things Done*, helps free up your creative energy by putting all the inputs in your life into a "trusted system." It's what Maura Thomas would call *Attention Management*. More recently, Cal Newport identified that in an age with unprecedented sources of distraction, it's those who can cultivate *Deep Work* who will get an edge.

All these ways of thinking about productivity are valuable in their own way. Even time management is valuable, up to a point. But mind management picks up where all these methods leave off. Time management optimizes the resource of time. Mind management optimizes the resource of creative energy.

Consider this passage from *Getting Things Done*. It's what Allen calls "The Four-Criteria Model for Choosing Actions in the Moment," which is a method for deciding what task you can do at any given moment: "At 3:22 on Wednesday, how do you choose what to do? At that moment there are four criteria you can apply, in this order: context, time available, energy available, and priority."

Yes, in any given moment, when you're deciding what you can get done, the "context" is important. For some things, you need a computer. Other things, you can do on your phone, while standing in line. Another factor determin-

ing what you can get done is the amount of time you have available. Finally, you'll choose the higher-priority action over the lower-priority action.

But the "energy available" is also critically important. Sometimes your mind is better-suited to think creatively. Other times it's better-suited to think analytically. Sometimes you're in the mood to do some research. Other times, you're better off taking care of some pesky details.

Elite athletes warm up before a big game. They wouldn't expect to roll out of bed and perform at their peak. Yet too many of us treat our to-do lists as if anything is possible at any moment. What if, at 3:22 every Wednesday, you didn't have to decide what to do? What if you managed your creative energy so well that, instead of staring, puzzled, at your to-do list, it was obvious what you should do at that time. This level of mastery is possible with mind management.

If you want to immediately get a taste of what it's like to use mind management, here's a simple exercise for you: The next time you set out to be productive, ask yourself, *What work am I in the mood to do right now?* Then, ask yourself, *What do I need to do that fits that mood?*

Too many of us live by the to-do list. We look at what needs to be done, then try to force ourselves to do it. It's no wonder why, even if we have the time, we rarely have the energy. But when our mental state is aligned with the task at hand, suddenly everything is easier. Our projects drive forward swiftly, as the barriers that once caused procrastination dissolve, one by one. If you've ever experienced the perfect

alignment of mental state with activity, you know what I mean. To get into flow, you need to go with the flow.

But sometimes, something simply needs to get done now. In these cases, you can ask yourself, *What mood would be most conducive to doing this work?* Then, ask yourself, *When was the last time I felt that way?* Finally, see if you can replicate the conditions that put you in that mood. It may seem impossible at first, but just as a hand can learn to effortlessly form chords on a guitar, contorting fingers into positions that once seemed to defy the limits of the human body, you can learn to trigger changes in your mental state – especially with the help of the tools I'll share in this book.

WHY I MOVED TO ANOTHER CONTINENT

I was asking myself these questions, about my mental state and the task at hand, time and time again throughout writing my first book. Soon, patterns emerged in my process. I noticed that the right mood for certain types of work happened at certain times of day. I developed a grab-bag of routines and rituals I could pull from when I needed to change my mood. Additionally, I began to notice hidden boundaries in my thinking. Tasks that once seemed as if they were one task turned out to neatly separate into several tasks, each promoted by their own separate mood.

Once I was done with my book and reflected on the process I used to finish it, I found that much of what I had intuitively discovered was supported by the latest creativity research. I pored over books and research papers on neuro-

science and psychology. The findings were strewn about, but I saw the pieces all fit together. I realized I had on my hands the beginnings of a reliable yet flexible system for creativity.

Yet as I tried to formalize what I had learned and apply it to my life and work, I realized that to truly push the limits of mind management, I needed to make a big change.

One day, I was in my home office in Chicago, struggling to write. I wanted to reference an article I had written previously, so I went to fetch the link. Ten minutes later, I realized that I was still reading my old article. It sounds self-obsessive, but I have reliably found, as a writer, that most of what you write, you can't stand to read yourself. But if you've written something really good, you'll want to read it over and over again. That was what was happening. I had gotten sucked into my own writing. *Why can't I write like this today?*, I asked myself.

Later that same week, I was reading another older article, and the same thing happened. I searched my mind for the commonalities, *What separates my good writing from the rest of it?* I realized that I was sitting in Chicago, but I had written neither of these articles while in Chicago. I had written these articles while in South America. I then reflected on all my best work from the previous few years. I realized I was producing all my best work while I was in Colombia.

For the previous three winters, I had spent a couple months in Medellín. The former home of the infamous drug lord Pablo Escobar, and the former murder capital of the world, Medellín has since drastically reduced its crime rate and become a popular destination for so-called "digital

nomads": people who work online, and spend a few months in one destination after another. I didn't visit Medellín as part of a regular rotation in between other digital nomad destinations such as Bali or Budapest. I merely visited to escape a couple of the worst months of Chicago's brutal winter.

I didn't know at the time what it was about Medellín that allowed me to do better work, but I knew I had to find out. At this point, it had been a few years since launching my first book, *Design for Hackers*. I had made some attempts to write another book, but I had failed.

When I finished writing my first book, I felt both an incredible sense of peace, and an incredible sense of horror. I felt at peace because I had accomplished something I had set out to do. It was a gigantic to-do item that had been marked "done." But I felt horror because I was certain I would want to write a book again. In the wake of the project lay a trail of loneliness, depression, and neglected relationships.

There was no way I could repeat that process. Still, I desperately wanted to write another book. As Maya Angelou supposedly said, "there is no agony greater than bearing an untold story inside you." Yet Viktor Frankl, who suffered the horrors of concentration camps, paraphrased Nietzsche by saying anyone who discovers their creative work "knows the *why* for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any *how*."

By accident, I had discovered the *why* for my existence – I wanted to write books. But I had already bared a painful

and self-destructive *how* – a *how* that I knew was ultimately counterproductive. If I wanted any chance at a happy life, and if I wanted any chance at doing better work, I needed to change something about my *how*.

So, I set out to make the best possible use of my creative energy. To do so, I needed to move to another continent.

FROM A TIME MANAGEMENT WORLD TO A MIND MANAGEMENT WORLD

In this book, I share a cohesive and flexible system for managing creative energy. This is my proposal to humanity to let go of the notion that we can squeeze more from our time. Instead, let's think about how to get more from our minds.

We'll start, in the next chapter, with the single building block of creative thinking – the moment of insight. If we understand what a creative insight is, and how insightful thinking differs from analytical thinking, we can know how to create the conditions for insight to happen. We'll find your Creative Sweet Spot, so you can do your best creative thinking when the time is right.

Then, we'll break down the creative process. Creative work is so unpredictable because progress doesn't happen linearly. Instead, our creative projects iterate through the Four Stages of Creativity. If we learn what these stages are, and how to create room for them, we can stop struggling to achieve solutions, and start letting those solutions come to us.

Then, we'll talk about mental states. Just as there are many hours in the day that you use to manage your time, there are various mental states that your mind inhabits. I've

identified Seven Mental States that effortlessly move creative projects forward. I'll show you what those mental states are, and help you identify how to match your mental state to the task at hand, or vice versa.

Next, we'll learn how to leverage the power of Creative Cycles. You'll learn to see the natural ups and downs in the creative process, and the natural ups and downs in your own creative energy – as well as in the world around you. By timing your efforts according to Creative Cycles, you'll make more progress with less sweat.

Then, we'll wrap all of this into Creative Systems. Creative Systems turn your projects into repeatable systems – repeatable systems that are flexible enough and that provide enough space to account for the fickle nature of creative thinking. You'll learn how to design Creative Systems that allow you to do some of your best thinking when you aren't actively thinking, and that feed into one another, turning tiny actions into big outcomes.

You can plan the perfect system, but it's only useful if it can stand up to the unexpected and unplanned. In the final chapter, you'll learn about Creating in Chaos. Learn how to keep your projects moving forward when life's inevitable chaos gets in the way. In fact, learn how to recognize the creative opportunities presented by that chaos, and capture and cultivate those opportunities to make use of them the next time you're racking your brain for ideas.

I'm not a professor at an Ivy League university. I'm not a productivity consultant. I'm not a journalist for a major newspaper. Nor do I aspire to be any of these things. I'm just

another creative, trying to make my ideas real before I leave this world. As with all of my books, I'm writing it to solidify these concepts in my own mind, and hopefully help you while I'm at it.

So, I'll be presenting these concepts the same way I discovered them – through my own experiences. I'll take you along on my journey, from the soaring skyscrapers of Chicago, to the rolling green hills of Colombia, to the blistering desert heat of Arizona. You'll be there with me from my highest highs to my lowest lows. I don't expect this will be like any productivity book you've read before. It will make you laugh, and it might even make you cry. I know writing it did both for me.

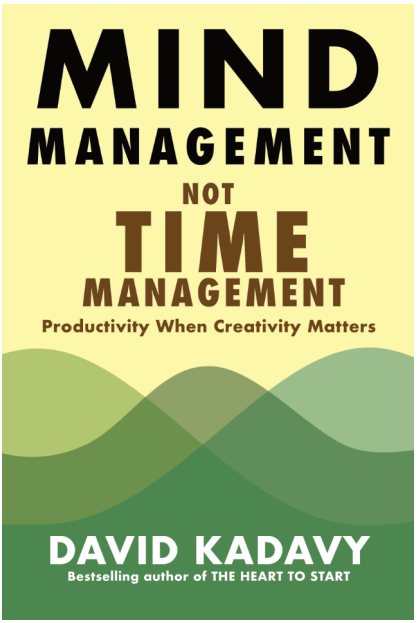
You don't have to move to another continent to start managing your *mind* instead of your *time*. Consider me the subject of an experiment, of which you can now reap the benefits. It would have been impossible for the average American, living in American culture, to live according to what I discovered in the process of building this system. If you want to kill creativity: Get five hours of sleep a night, fight traffic for two hours a day, and start each day with a piping hot thermos of a psychoactive drug. This is the unfortunate and inescapable reality of most Americans today.

Some of what I present may seem impossible in today's "time management" world. Consider this book a blueprint for the future – my proposal for us to ease back on our time management world, and start building a "mind management" world. It won't be a cultural shift that we can all make

at once. Implement what you can from this book. One day, I dream that workplaces, schools, and public spaces will start working not according to what gets the most output out of the least amount of time, but instead according to what contributes to the appropriate mental state for what we're trying to achieve. We'll stop forcing adolescents to go to school early in the morning, when their biological clocks still want them to be in bed. We'll let go of time worship and stop making decisions because it's the most efficient use of every resource *except* creative energy. Employers will stop forcing people to work in noisy, open-office environments – vulnerable to interruptions that can break any state of focus they might be able to achieve. We'll start showing respect for the invaluable resource of creative energy.

Let's return now to the beginning of my experiment in redesigning my life to manage creative energy, instead of time. To prioritize creativity, I needed to intimately understand creativity, and to find where my best ideas lie. I needed to find my Creative Sweet Spot. It wasn't until after I moved to Colombia that I realized exactly what made it the perfect place to manage my mind.

KEEP READING



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