

Use your 'one-day refund' wisely

Donna McGeorge

Are you always operating at 100 per cent capacity? Perhaps you use your time before and after work to catch up on emails, or stay up late into the night to play catch up with work projects?

Many of us are in need of what I call a "one-day refund" – an extra five to seven hours per week for us to reset, recharge, spend more time with our families and do activities that energise us – and this can be within our reach.

During lockdown, many of us were forced to work from home for the first time and our usual commute time to and from work was "refunded" to us to do whatever we liked with it.

Let's do the maths: if your usual work commute was around one hour each way, then you saved two hours per day, or 10 hours a week that weren't spent in a car or on public transport.

If I had asked you in 2019 what you would do with an extra day every week, how would you have answered? I don't think any of you would have said you would fill the saved time with more emails and work-based tasks.

Unfortunately, however, many of us perpetuated our already hectic lifestyles. Instead of recognising the time refund as a gift, we simply absorbed it back into our busy, out-of-control, overwhelmed lives. This meant many of us were more exhausted than when we commuted. We need to learn how to take back control of our time, so we are not operating constantly at 100 per cent capacity.

Leave a 15 per cent buffer

The first step to taking back control of your time is to aim to be operating at only 85 per cent capacity in our day-to-day lives. This may seem counterintuitive as we're often conditioned to think we need to be operating at full throttle



to be productive and get ahead. At first you may even feel guilty for putting in less effort. However, operating at 85 per cent capacity is the best way to ensure we maintain our energy resources long-term and avoid suffering from burnout.

When you leave a 15 per cent buffer in your day, you're setting yourself up for success by reserving adaptive capacity for anything urgent and unexpected which may pop up (and on many days, it will). If you're always operating at 100 per cent capacity, then you'll be caught off-guard by unexpected situations, leaving you to have to play catch-up later with the tasks you set aside.

In the context of an eight-hour workday, operating at 85 per cent capacity would mean we plan on doing around seven hours of solid work per day, leaving at least one-hour of adaptive capacity. This hour can also be used to think ahead, plan our to-do lists and review our upcoming schedule, ensuring that we feel organised and well-prepared for the following day.

Purple patches

When was the last time you had "free time" in your diary? Sometimes we end up with a bit of free space by accident when an appointment is cancelled. And how good does that feel?

One of my clients identified these rare moments as "purple patches". I encouraged him to block out these patches so he could take advantage of them any time he liked. He colour-coded the time – in purple – in his calendar.

Blocking time out doesn't mean you do nothing; it means you decide what you want to do, and you can use that time to your best advantage. You shift from reacting to what must be done right now, urgently, to being proactive and planning ahead. This is the magic that creates the appearance of being cool, calm and collected.

Create more 'thinking space'

The irony is that if we are to be more productive, come up with good ideas and reach smart decisions, we need to slow down

and do less. One way to achieve this is through the three Ds related to thinking space: decelerate, decompress and decide.

1. Decelerating is about slowing down or stopping, taking time out just to pause and be. You are off duty and beholden to no one.

2. Decompressing is about letting off the pressure. First thing in the morning, try writing down a "brain dump" list of everything you need to do that day, including work-related and personal admin tasks. This removes the need to hold everything at front of mind.

3. Deciding can happen only once we have stopped and taken stock. It's a bit like spring cleaning: we generally get better results if we take everything out and put back only what needs to be there. Because there's always a bit of chaos before control, it's important to first decelerate and decompress.

Donna McGeorge is a productivity coach, speaker and best-selling author. Her latest book, *The 1 Day Refund*, is available now.

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