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## ***Don't Let Perfection Be the Enemy of Productivity*** ***– By Alice Boyes***

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**Link :** <https://hbr.org/2020/03/dont-let-perfection-be-the-enemy-of-productivity>

Productivity isn't about getting more done. It's about what you get done. Three aspects of perfectionism can interfere with your ability to prioritize the most important tasks.

### **1. You're reluctant to designate decisions as “unimportant.”**

There's an argument that, for unimportant decisions, you should either decide quickly or outsource the decision.

But perfectionists have a hard time designating decisions as unimportant. They like to be in control of everything. Why? Because imperfections bother them more than they do other people. If something goes wrong, perfectionists might feel explosive frustration or a niggling sense of irritation that's hard to ignore, and they don't want to take that risk.

Sometimes, perfectionists are so accustomed to micromanaging that it doesn't even occur to them that any decision is unimportant. They're blind to it. They habitually and automatically classify everything as worthy of their full effort.

Solution: In modern life, decision fatigue can be intense. A perfectionist can learn to love giving up control over some choices if they pay attention to how good it feels to be relieved of the decision-making burden. Try [using heuristics to quickly decide](#) or delegate with the expectation that you will get much faster and pretty good decisions overall but not perfect ones. For instance, one of my heuristics is: if I've thought about doing something three times, I will get on and do it without further deliberating. For a useful decision-making matrix, see [this tweet](#).

### **2. You feel morally obligated to overdeliver.**

The belief that you need to beat expectations in any situation can manifest in many ways.

Let's say someone offers to pay you \$1,000 for a service. If you're a perfectionist, providing \$1,000 of value might not seem like enough. You might think that you need to give what your competitors would charge \$1,500 for because you want to outperform. You think: “If I don't overdeliver, I'm underdelivering.”

Or if you judge that 24 hours is a respectable timeframe in which to respond to a colleague's email, you might set your own bar at within six hours. The key point is that you believe what's generally reasonable doesn't apply to you, and your own standard needs to be different.



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Sometimes this line of thinking comes from wanting an excessive cushion; for instance, you think “if I aim to deliver 1.5X or 2X value for all the services I provide, then I’m never going to under-deliver.” It can also be driven by anxiety, insecurity or [imposter syndrome](#); for instance, you think the only way to prevent anyone from being disappointed or unhappy with you is by always exceeding expectations. Perfectionists also sometimes imagine there will be catastrophic consequences if they fail to overdeliver; for example, they worry a client won’t want to work with them if they take a day to answer an email request, even if it’s a non-urgent query and they’re happy with everything else.

**Solution:** Have a plan for how you’ll course-correct if you notice these thought patterns. Understand what it’s costing you to always aim for outperformance. What else don’t you have time, energy, attention, and willpower for? Perhaps your own health, your big goals, or your family. If you assess that the costs are significant, try having a rule of thumb for when you’ll overdeliver. For instance, you might decide that in three out of ten situations in which you have the urge to do so, you will, but not in the other seven.

Situation-specific habits can help you, too. For instance, if a reporter sends me more than six questions for an article they’re working on, I’ll generally answer six or so questions in detail, and either minimally answer or skip the others. (I probably give *better* answers using this strategy because I focus on the areas in which I have the most interesting things to say.)

### **3. You get excessively annoyed when you aren’t 100% consistent with good habits.**

When perfectionists want to adopt new habits, they tend to fall into one of three categories. They bite off more than they can chew and their plans are too onerous to manage; they avoid starting any habit unless they’re 100% sure they can hit their goal everyday, which leads to procrastination; or they take on only those habits that they can stick to no matter what.

Flexibility is a hallmark of psychological health. You need to have the capacity to take a day off from the gym when you’re sick or just got off a late flight, even if it [means breaking a streak](#). You should also be able to shift away from habits that were once important to your productivity or skills development but that you’ve outgrown. Maybe as a beginning blogger, you vowed to always post three times a week, but now that’s burning you out or, as a new real estate investor, you always attended a monthly meetup, but now you get little out of it.

Sometimes the more-disciplined behavior (deviating from an ingrained habit or pattern of behavior) looks like the less-disciplined one (taking a break). But when conventional self-discipline turns into compulsion, perfectionists may actually be held back by it.



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**Solution:** Have a mechanism in place for checking that you're not sticking to a habit just because you're worshipping at the altar of self-discipline. If you've never missed a workout in two years (or any other habit), it's likely there were some days when getting it done wasn't the best use of your time. Regularly review the opportunity cost of any activities or behaviors you diligently do to make sure they are currently the best use of your physical and mental energy.

Perfectionism is often driven by striving for excellence, but it can be self-sabotaging if it leads to suboptimal behavior like continuing habits beyond their usefulness, overdelivering when you don't have to, or overthinking every decision you make.

We often think of “virtual work” as working with someone located outside an office, or in another city or country. This type of work is on the rise: a [2017 Gallup report](#) found 43% of American employees work remotely; in [another survey](#), 48% of respondents reported that a majority of their virtual teamwork involved members from other cultures.

However, virtual work also encompasses how we are turning to technology to conduct business with *nearby* colleagues, sometimes within the same building or campus. At a large consumer-products firm where we've been conducting research, an HR director recounted the changes she witnessed in employees located in two buildings a few miles apart. “Ten years ago, we would regularly drive between buildings to meet each other, but today, we almost never do; meetings are conducted by videoconference and everything else is handled on e-mail and IM.”

In our interview and survey research, we find that people tend to significantly underestimate the proportion of their work that is virtual, largely because they believe virtual work occurs outside the office. But it's important for us to recognize the true extent of virtual work, because successful virtual work demands a different set of social and interpersonal skills and behaviors than face-to-face work.

Research consistently indicates that virtual work skills – such as the ability to proactively manage media-based interactions, to establish communication norms, to build social rapport with colleagues, and to demonstrate cooperation – [enhance trust within teams](#) and [increase performance](#). Our surveys indicate that only about 30% of companies train employees in virtual work skills, but when they do, the training is more likely to focus on software skills and company policies than on social and interpersonal skills. Our findings are similar to those of a [2006 survey of HR leaders](#) on training of virtual teams, suggesting that while technology and virtual work itself has advanced dramatically in recent years, our preparation to work virtually has not.

[Our recent review](#) of 30 years of virtual work research shows that the most effective workers engage in a set of strategies and behaviors that we call “virtual intelligence.” Some people tend to be naturally more adept at working virtually than others; yet, everyone can increase their virtual intelligence. Two specific skill sets contributing to



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virtual intelligence are 1) establishing “rules of engagement” for virtual interactions, and 2) building and maintaining trust. These skill sets are relevant to all individuals who conduct virtual work, including coworkers in the same office who interact virtually.

### **Establishing “rules of engagement”**

When working with someone face-to-face, the “rules of engagement” for your work together most likely evolve naturally, as you learn the best times of day to connect, where to hold productive meetings, and the most effective meeting format. In virtual work, however, these “rules of engagement” typically require a dedicated conversation.

At a minimum, virtual colleagues should discuss the following rules around:

- *Communication technology.* Once you know you’ll be working virtually with someone on a regular basis, initiate a short conversation about their available technology, and agree on the best means of communication (e.g., “We’ll e-mail for simple, non-urgent matters, but get on Skype when there is something complex that might require us to share screens. Texting is fine if we need to get in touch urgently, but shouldn’t be used day-to-day.”)
- *Best times to connect.* You might ask your virtual co-worker, “What times of day are typically better to call or text? Are there particular days of the week (or month) that I should avoid?” Establishing this rule early in a virtual work relationship both establishes respect for each other’s time, and saves time, by avoiding fruitless contact attempts.
- *How best to share information.* If you’re collaborating on documents or other electronic files, establish a process to ensure you don’t inadvertently delete updates or create conflicting versions. File-sharing services such as Dropbox can help monitor revisions to jointly-owned documents (often called “version control”), but it is still wise to establish a simple protocol to avoid lost or duplicated work.

### **Building and maintaining trust**

Two types of trust matter in virtual work: relational trust (trust that your colleague is looking out for your best interests), and competence-based trust (trust that your colleague is both capable and reliable).

*To build relational trust:*

- Bring a social element into the virtual work relationship. Some people do this by starting conversations with non-work-related questions, such as “How are things going where you are?” or “How was your weekend?” Avoid making questions too personal, and don’t overwhelm your colleague with extensive details of your life. Keep it simple and sincere, and the conversation will develop naturally over time.
- Let your enthusiasm and personality show in your virtual communications. Keep it professional, but try adding a little of your own ‘voice’ to give your virtual colleague a sense of who you are, just as they would have in a face-to-face meeting.

*To build competence-based trust:*

- Share your relevant background and experiences, indicating how these will help you support the current project. For example, on a new-product development



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project, you might say, “I’m really looking forward to contributing to the market analysis, as it focuses on a market that I researched last year on another project.”

- Take initiative in completing tasks whenever possible and communicate that you’re doing so with periodic update e-mails. Doing this shows commitment to the shared task.
- Respond to e-mail quickly and appropriately. We risk obviousness in making this point, but many virtual work relationships fail due to inconsistent e-mail communication. Silence works quickly to destroy trust in a virtual colleague. We recommend replying to non-urgent e-mails within one business day (sooner if it’s urgent). If you need more time, send a quick acknowledgement of the e-mail, letting your colleague know when you will reply.

As the use of technology for all types of communication has become ubiquitous, the need for virtual work skills is no longer limited to telecommuters and global teams; it now extends to those of us whose work never takes us out of the office. Making a concerted effort to develop these skills by setting up rules of engagement and establishing trust early can feel uncomfortable, especially for people new to the idea of virtual work. Most of us are used to letting these dynamics evolve naturally in face-to-face relationships, with little or no discussion. Yet, workers with higher virtual intelligence know that these skills are unlikely to develop without explicit attention, and that making a short-term investment in developing the virtual relationship will yield long-term benefits.

