



THE SCIENCE OF **SAYING NO**

ISAIAH HANKEL EXPLAINS WHY TO-DO LISTS DON'T WORK AND HOW SAYING YES LEADS TO BURNOUT, WHILE SAYING NO - AND EVEN NEVER - INCREASES OUR SELF-WORTH AND PRODUCTIVITY

Many of us create lists as a means to give us focus in a work context. Writing them gives us a sense of productivity, but lists seldom lead to practical results. In fact, they often have the effect of reducing productivity - and initiative.

There are three scientific reasons why to-do lists limit

success. The first is that they are too varied. The average to-do list contains some tasks that will take 10 seconds to complete and some that will take 10 hours. The average person will automatically focus on crossing off the 10-second tasks so they can receive, as soon as possible, the psychological payoff and

dopamine release that comes with it. Tedious, yet important tasks, like writing a business proposal, will stay on the list for a very long time.

The second reason why lists fail to work well is that they lack both context and hierarchy. This means the tasks that are most important to you right now will take top priority, even

if they are a low priority overall. Simultaneously, the tasks themselves do not provide any information about the best time to complete the task or how long each will take.

The third reason why to-do lists prevent success is that they offer too many options. The greater the number of options you have, the fewer

decisions you are likely to make, and the same holds true for your to-do list. The more action items you write down, the less likely you are to decide on any one of them, and the less likely you are to take action.

In *The Art of Choosing*, Sheena Iyengar, a professor at Columbia University, discusses a study she conducted in a supermarket offering customers samples of jam. Every hour or two, the team switched from offering a selection of six jams to 24. Regardless of the size of the assortment, the average customer tasted only two jams. Moreover, 30% of the people who had sampled from the smaller assortment decided to buy jam, while only 3% of the people who had sampled from the large assortment decided to buy. Offering four times as many choices reduced sales tenfold.

The power of no

So, to-do lists dismantle productivity. In a business context, learning to say no protects productivity. Saying no also helps you prioritise.

The fastest way to figure out what's important to you is first to know what's not important to you. This is true even in the smallest matters in life. For example, I may not know what I want for dinner, but I definitely know what I don't want. The process of elimination helps narrow down what really doesn't matter.

In a work context, do you know when to say no? You've likely been encouraged to say no only to things that are unhealthy or dangerous. But being unable to say no to healthy, but undesired things is linked to increased

overwhelm, stress and lack of productivity.

Saying no is a pragmatic choice, scientifically proven to enhance self-control and self-preservation. The University of Nottingham published a meta-analysis of 83 studies showing that saying no increased self-control over destructive, unhealthy or wasteful activities, and promoted successful goal attainment and protection against decision fatigue.¹ Conversely, the same study linked lapses in the ability to say no to a host of social and behavioural issues.

A second study, published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, reinforced the fact that saying no is critical to reaching your goals in life.² However, the study found that it's not just that you say no, it's *how* you say no that matters.

Sidestepping conflict and other passive avoidance techniques, such as saying I can't or I don't want to instead of no, will not help you achieve your goals any faster. In fact, refusing to say no firmly and directly was found to be disempowering and inversely proportional to goal attainment.

So, if saying no is the secret to success, why do so few people choose to say it? A Columbia University study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* reveals that saying no causes stress and is interpreted by the brain as a negative event due to a complex mixture of fear of rejection, fear of hurting someone's feelings and fear of disconnection.³

Very simply, we don't say no because we are afraid. We're afraid to lose respect, connection and acceptance. The anticipation of this

can be more influential in making a decision than anything positive that might be gained. As a result, most people just shrivel up and say yes because it feels safer at the time.

The key to saying no more is realising the practical cost of saying yes too much. When you overcommit and let people push you around with their agendas, you damage your self-confidence and self-integrity. You also move yourself further and further from your goals.

The solution is to maintain a pragmatic mindset. Anything you lose by saying no once can easily be attained by saying yes in the future and, if it can't, it wasn't worth having in the first place.

Going beyond no

Once you start saying no to the things you don't want, you'll be able to see the things you do want more clearly. What is valuable in your life right now? How are you going to protect this value? The answer is not to say yes to more and more things. Instead, the only way to permanently protect what is truly important to you is to go beyond no, to never again.

A non-negotiable is simply something you will never compromise. The word never has irresistible force. But you have to mean it. You have to take it seriously and never, ever break it. If you take them seriously, you can use non-negotiables to organise and prioritise your day.

Bookending your days with non-negotiables is a proven way to infuse yourself with greater focus and a greater sense of urgency throughout the day. For example, you're never going

to skip waking up at 7am to go to the gym. (This is bookend number one.) And, you're never going to stay online past 9.30pm. (This is bookend number two.)

Once you bookmark the beginning and ending of your days, you can add additional bookmarks throughout your day. You're never going to check your phone before lunch and risk the possibility of getting sucked into a friend's drama. You're never going to check email more than a certain amount of times a day.

There's real freedom in refusing to compromise on yourself. Taking a hard stance in your life with a handful of non-negotiables will force you to work within strict, pragmatic boundaries, which will, in turn, allow you to use your sense of urgency to your advantage. It will also enable you to align your most important tasks with your peak hours of mental energy. 📌

NOTES:

¹ Hagger, MS, *et al* (2010) 'Ego depletion and the strength model of self-control: a meta-analysis'. *Psychology Bulletin*, 136(4): 495-525. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20565167

² Patrick, V and Hagtvedt, H (2012) "'I don't' versus 'I can't': When empowered refusal motivates goal-directed behavior". *Journal of Consumer Research*, 39(2): 371-381. www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/663212?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

³ Flynn, F *et al* (2008) 'If you need help, just ask: Underestimating compliance with direct requests for help'. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95(1): 128-143

This is an edited extract from *The Science of Intelligent Achievement: How Smart People Focus, Create and Grow Their Way to Success*, by Isaiah Hankel, PhD (published by Capstone, January 2018).

Isaiah Hankel is an entrepreneur. He writes on mental focus, behavioural psychology and career development

