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# Foreword

By Bob Cochran, co-creator and executive producer of *24*

If there was ever a man in need of focused and efficient time management techniques, Jack Bauer is that man. Every year, like clockwork (pun intended), he faces a day in which he has 24 hours to save the world. He's managed to do it 6 times as of this writing, but it gets a bit harder every year. At least that's what he tells me.

As a television writer and producer, I don't have to save the world (luckily for the world) but, like everyone else, I do have a limited amount of time each day to accomplish whatever must be done in order to achieve my longer term goals. And, as Jurgen Wolff suggests, focus is the key.

On any given day of a television show, while one episode is being filmed, a second is being edited, a third scored, a fourth storied, a fifth rewritten, a sixth prepped and cast...well, you get the idea. Deciding where and how to direct your energy, hour by hour, day by day, is the surest, and in fact the only, road to

success. This book will help you find that road and, more importantly, stay on it.

The book is loaded with insights and fresh approaches to the problem of managing time. A few of my favorites include applying the 80/20 rule to your own life (instead of to a corporation); recognizing harmful behavior patterns that you may be hiding from yourself; and leveraging your already-existing strengths to help you succeed in a broader range of activities. I could go on, but just glance through the pages, and you'll probably come up with a few favorites of your own very quickly.

In short, *Focus: The Power of Targeted Thinking* lives up to its title. I have a copy in my office, and the next time I see Jack Bauer, I think I'll give him a copy, too. I just hope he has time to read it.

# Introduction

## How Creating Focus Will Change Your Life

Have you ever felt frustrated by knowing that you could do a lot better in your career and the other parts of your life, but you just can't seem to do it? Have you ever been angry with yourself because you're not achieving your potential and time is slipping by? Do you have a vision of the life you'd like but no clear path for how to get there?

If those statements ring a bell, you've come to the right place. This book isn't about *what*, it's about *how*. You probably already know what you want from life (and if you don't, Chapter 1 will help you clarify it). Probably the big question in your mind is, "How do I get there from here?"

What this change requires is focus but, frankly, the world conspires to prevent you from having that kind of focus. It's not surprising that you feel scattered and distracted. You are being bombarded every waking minute with advertising messages that pull you in one

direction, the expectations of family members and colleagues that pull you in another, haunted by the ghost of goals you may have set for yourself but didn't reach for reasons that weren't your fault. On top of that, you're expected to be reachable 24/7, so any little scraps of time that you might have had for reflection are snatched away from you. Under these circumstances, it would be amazing if you were able to focus.

Well, prepare to be amazed—and amazing.

This book will take you, step by step, through the process of deciding what you really want, figuring out what has stopped you in the past, becoming aware of the disruptive influences in the way you use time (and how to fix them), and learning how to overcome the factors that hold back the majority of people. Finally, it will show you how to put all this information together into a plan you can follow again and again as you set new goals for yourself. The methods revealed in this book will become automatic habits that lead to success with less and less effort on your part.

Many of the techniques in this book are new. They are based on the fact that the old methods just don't work anymore, especially for right-brain people. The traditional time management techniques were developed during the simpler industrial age to make people doing repetitive tasks more efficient. Using them in today's atmosphere of 24/7 connectivity and constant demands leads to frantic multitasking and firefighting. The result: lots of activity, not much achievement.

If you have tried the traditional methods of time management and found them time-consuming, restrictive, and ineffective, the odds are you are a right-brain person. If you like variety, have good intuition, and enjoy new challenges but hate being trapped in old routines, this book has been written especially for you.

Today the need is for creativity, flexibility, and making smart choices. *Focus* shows you how to identify what's most important and how to direct all your energy, without distractions, to the tasks that propel you toward success.

I know the techniques you are about to learn work because they've worked for me and for hundreds of people who have participated in my *Create Your Future* workshops. I predict that you're going to enjoy using breakthrough techniques like the Alter Ego strategy for getting any task done in record time, and the MAD strategy for turbo-charging any project that is moving too slowly or in which you feel stuck. Here's a quick roadmap of what you're going to experience:

Maybe you've heard of the 80/20 principle before, but odds are you've not been shown how actually to apply it to your work and personal life. By focusing on the 20% of your life that gives you the greatest value, you increase your success exponentially—that's what you'll learn to do in Chapter 1.

In Chapter 2, you'll translate that into a big, inspiring goal, but not until you've found out the one trap that dooms most goals to failure and how to avoid it.

In Chapter 3, you'll learn how time patterns work and figure out how your time patterns have distracted you from the success of which you are capable. You'll also discover how to put more effective patterns to use.

Have you noticed how easy it is to know what to do next, but how hard it is to actually do it? Chapter 4 reveals the hidden obstacle that stops most people from reaching their goals. This is what makes people go to the gym a few times and stop and what sabotages their intentions to learn a new language or a new skill—and you'll discover a right-brain strategy for overcoming the obstacle every time it pops up in your life.

If you've been focusing on your weaknesses rather than your strengths, you've inadvertently been sabotaging your own progress. In Chapter 5, you'll see that putting your attention on your strengths is the secret known by all high-achievers, and find out how you can do it, too.

The biggest enemy of focus is procrastination. If you finally want to overcome it, the answers are in Chapter 6.

If you've ever put off doing the important things because you're not in the right mood, the innovative Alter Ego strategy in Chapter 7 is going to unlock your productivity. This one technique alone has the power to transform your effectiveness the minute you start using it.

While it's important to be focused yourself, of course you also depend on others to cooperate with you. In Chapter 8, you will read how to set boundaries, how to say no, and how to manage other people so they help you reach your goals.

Chapter 9 takes this further with specific techniques of language that reveal why most conversations are dead ends and how to transform them into persuasive communication. You'll learn how to recognize other people's language patterns and use that knowledge to establish greater rapport with them. The additional methods covered include reframing, pacing and leading, and using metaphors and stories.

The next few chapters cover the most powerful enemies of creativity and productivity: information overload (Chapter 10), mountains of paperwork (Chapter 11), the email monster (Chapter 12), endless or irrelevant meetings (Chapter 13), and deadlines and the need to handle multiple projects (Chapter 14). For each of these, you will discover new solutions.

Zooming ahead in your career can be stressful as well as rewarding, so Chapter 15 shows you how to stay calm, relaxed, and flexible so that you can stay in a state of focus.

Finally, in Chapter 16 you'll see how to put all of this into a plan of action. It recaps the key points of all the chapters that have gone before and guides you through the process of achieving your goal. You can



use this plan again and again as you set new goals for yourself in any area of your life.

Because there are some resources I wanted to share with you that don't fit within the pages of a book, I've also set up the [www.focusquick.com](http://www.focusquick.com) website. There you will find chapter bonuses such as audio guided visualisations you can download and take with you on your MP3 player, video interviews with experts on communication and productivity, and much more.

You are about to embark on a great adventure—the adventure of finally achieving the success you have been waiting for and you deserve. Let's get started!

## CHAPTER 12

# How to Tame the Email Monster

Now that you have a good handle on how to deal with information overload and paperwork, there's one more source of frustration that plagues just about everybody these days: email. On the one hand, it's a brilliant way of communicating with people around the world almost instantly, and it has revolutionized how we work. On the other, due to spam and the sheer number of even legitimate messages you get, it is also incredibly annoying and can easily pull you away from the things that should be taking up your time and attention. Not only that, sending emails can be full of pitfalls. In this chapter, you'll find the best strategies for making email the great tool it was always designed to be.

## Control the Clock

Unless you're responsible for, say, the defense of the Free World, do you really need to read every email the moment it comes in? Probably not. In that case, set a number of times each day that you will check your

email. Do you have a number in mind? Good, now cut it in half. There are very few people who really need to do this more than four times a day, and three or two times a day is even better. For starters, try this schedule:

- When you get to your desk in the morning
- Just after lunch
- An hour before the end of the day

If you have been in the habit of responding to emails immediately and are worried that people will wonder what's going on if you stop suddenly, you can turn on an automatic message, as you may do when you're going to be out of the office. It can say something like, "In order to increase my efficiency and therefore also my ability to help you, I'm now checking my emails at 9 a.m., 2 p.m., and 5 p.m. If you have something that needs my immediate attention, please give me a ring at (phone number)." That way people who do have an emergency won't feel upset, and generally a phone call is a better way of handling a super-urgent matter anyway. What you'll discover is that there are actually very few super-urgent matters.

## Your New Email Schedule

If you have trouble sticking to set times, another approach is to check email only between tasks. If you do it during tasks, it will destroy your focus.

Jot down the times of day you are going to check email from now on. Also make a copy of these times and post them on or near your computer.

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## Email Option 1: Deleting

The fastest way to deal with an email is to delete it. Obviously it's easy to do this with any spam that gets through. If too much is getting through, adjust or replace your spam filter. However, there are a lot of emails that seem like they might be interesting. These become a way of killing time instead of doing the 20% of your most valuable tasks. If you have been using them this way, consider using one of the Alter Egos you developed in Chapter 6—Attila might be a good choice—and zap ruthlessly. Here are two big categories of email that are ripe for zapping:

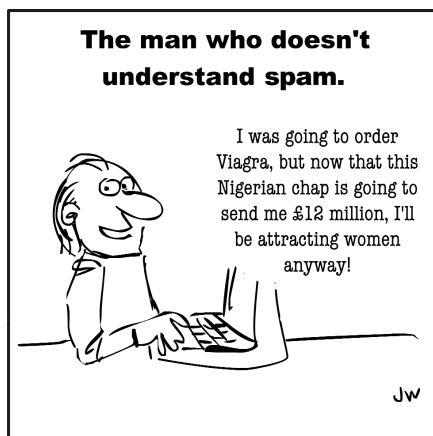
- Jokes, weird news items, cartoons, etc. Most of these are probably coming from a small number of people. You have a choice: You can zap, or you can move to a “free-time” folder. You can also send an email back to the sender saying something along the lines of, “Although the jokes and cartoons you send me are good for a chuckle, I’m having trouble coping with the overload in my email inbox, so please don’t send any more. I do appreciate the thought, and I’m sure you’ll understand.”

- Copies of emails sent to someone else, often marked “for your information.” If you keep getting information you don’t really need, these are just as bad as spam. Again, you have to train the people sending you these, with a gentle message like, “I appreciate your desire to keep me in the loop on this, but you don’t actually need to copy me on these messages.” Important: If there is a circumstance under which you *do* want to be notified, then you can add a qualifier, such as, “unless the project falls behind schedule,” or “unless you need my direct participation.”

## Your Deleting Alter Ego

Which of the Alter Egos you developed in Chapter 7 will you now use to zap irrelevant emails?

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## Email Option 2: Delegate

You've deleted; now delegate. If an email asks you to take some action, don't automatically do it. First consider whether it would be a better use of someone else's time (assuming, of course, that you have the authority to do this). If so, forward it to that person with a note saying what you want them to do. This could be as simple as, "Maria, please handle this," or it might require more detail. Then let the sender know that you've delegated it and that any further discussion of it should be taken up directly with Maria. The more you can eliminate yourself as the person in the middle, the better. This applies even to small things. For instance, sometimes I receive a message from one of my websites saying that one of the links is dead or a particular video doesn't play correctly. My first impulse is to go to the site myself and check it—even though I have no idea of what to do if it is broken. Now I just pass the email along to my tech person and ask him to let me know when it's been fixed or to notify the sender if the problem is at his end.

“You've deleted; now delegate.”

If the person to whom you want to delegate is a colleague on the same level as you, rather than a subordinate, you'll have to handle it differently; namely, you'll have to go back to the sender and convince him that Maria is the more appropriate person to handle this task. You may be tempted to handle it yourself, especially if it doesn't take too long, but

when you do that you're also establishing the precedent that you're the one to come to whenever something similar needs to be handled in the future.

If there is no person handy who can deal with the task, and especially if you are self-employed, consider whether you could outsource it to a virtual assistant or via a relevant service.

### **Your Delegation Plan**

Who can you think of, to whom you could delegate at least some of the email-related tasks that you do now?

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## **Email Option 3: Deal with It**

For the remaining emails, you can use a system of virtual folders identical to the real folders recommended in the previous chapters. Anything you need to handle today can go into a folder with the number of today's date, and then you can schedule it at the time of day that suits you best. Generally it's best to cluster these tasks rather than doing them piecemeal. If it can wait, then you can put it into a folder with another day's date and tackle it then. If it concerns something that will need your attention more than a month from now, you can put it into the folder for that month.

If you are handling several projects at once, you may want to set up a separate system for each one. When you're planning your to-do list for the following day, you can quickly go through the folders for that day and work out your schedule. An alternative, if you like to see things more openly than that, is to have a separate calendar for each project and put the tasks onto the calendars.

You may already have another way of sorting and filing your emails that you prefer. That's fine. The main point is not to let them pile up into a pile of a hundred or more that you keep having to review each time you open your inbox.

There are a couple of types of emails that are particularly troublesome:

## The Never-Ending Message

"The art of art, the glory of expression and the sunshine of light of letters, is simplicity."

*Walt Whitman, Poet (1819-1892)*

There's a great quote that has been attributed to many people, including Mark Twain and Abraham Lincoln. It's a postscript to a long missive that read, "I'm sorry I wrote such a long letter. I didn't have time to write a short one." You probably know people who write long, long emails that would be much better if they were shorter. If you're in a position to do so, you can



suggest to them that they start the email with a very short summary of the key points. If they're in the habit of sending you emails that include a long string of previous email exchanges, ask them just to summarize what has gone before. If the originator of these endless emails is your boss, you may have to suffer through them. But you can use the same techniques as you would to skim printed material: start by reading the first and last paragraphs, and the first sentence of each paragraph. Often that's enough to give you the gist of the message.

## **The Emails Someone Should Never Have Sent**

You may find yourself on the receiving end of an emotional email, something that obviously was written in the heat of the moment, or after the sender had a long, liquid lunch. If you're the merciful type, the best course of action is to pretend you never received it or let a few hours or a day go by and then email the person back, saying your inbox showed there was an email from him but you couldn't open it. The sender may see right through this ruse, but he'll be eternally grateful nonetheless.

## **The Do's and Don't's of Sending Emails**

The easiest way to know what to do when sending emails is to think about all the things that others do that really annoy you or waste your time, and then

don't do those. Here are a few specific methods that will make people appreciate getting emails from you:

## **Use the Subject Line to Give Information**

If the gist of your message is that you want someone to go ahead with a purchase that was discussed that morning, don't make the subject line, "Re: purchasing new printer" and then write more in the body of the message. In the subject line just write, "Please go ahead and purchase the printer we discussed this A.M." and leave the body of the message blank. It will save time and set an admirable example of brevity.

## **Don't Use Emails for Sensitive Messages**

If you have to tell someone his work is not up to snuff, or, even worse, that he's fired, that's not an appropriate message for an email. Go and talk to the person or at the very least use the phone. And never use emails to pass along any gossip or rumors. Emails can be printed out easily and often are. If you don't want a permanent record of what you said making its way around the office, don't email it. We read all the time about people who were foolish about what they said in emails and how it cost them their jobs or their relationships. For some reason, we think it can't possibly happen to us. That's what they used to think, too.

## **Don't Use Emails to Admit Your Mistakes**

Again, this is sensitive stuff that is best handled in a meeting. One of the drawbacks of email is that it does not convey emotional nuances, not even if you use smiley and frowny faces. Any message with emotional content is best dealt with another way.

## **Start Your Email with a Brief Statement That Makes It Clear What It's About**

An email that starts, "No, it's not a good idea" and then goes on for a while about why it's not a good idea is not very helpful if the reader doesn't know what "it" is. Remember that your email may appear in the middle of 50 or 100 others, so don't expect the recipient to remember what "it" was, and don't make him go down to the bottom of the email to reread his original message to you. Ideally your subject line has already told him this is about "Revamping the reception area"—even better, it told him, "Revamping reception—I don't agree." Then, if necessary, the body of the message can set out your three reasons for not agreeing.

## **Don't Forget the Attachments**

We've all been there: We write an email promising an attachment, forget to attach it, and then have to write an "oops" email, this time with the attachment. Simple solution: Get into the habit of attaching the file before you write the message.

## **Be Very Specific about What You Expect the Recipient to Do**

If you're sending an email requesting that the other person take action, be as clear as possible regarding what you want him to do, including deadlines if appropriate.

## **If You Are Addressing Several Projects, Send One Email Per Project**

It will be a lot easier for the recipient to file your messages in appropriate folders.

## **Treat Emails with as Much Dignity and Respect as You Would Any Written Message**

There's no reason to use colorful backgrounds, emoticons, or incorrect grammar or punctuation in business messages. Your emails send a secondary message about you and your image.

## **The Bottom Line: Stay in Charge**

Here's the key message of this chapter: Control email rather than letting it control you. It's there to serve you, not to frustrate or annoy you. You can choose whether and when to read it. You can choose whether and when to answer it. You can even train people regarding what to send you, and the best manner in which to send it. And when you send

email to others, you can model these effective behaviors so that both you and the recipient benefit. All this will prevent email from distracting you from your most important tasks.

Now that you know how to handle email without stress, the next chapter provides tools for mastering meetings and networking.

## **Website Chapter Bonus**

At [www.focusquick.com](http://www.focusquick.com), you'll find a short video about using Alter Egos to handle email.