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Start Finishing: How to Go from Idea to Done

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Maybe these blinks will inspire you to dig deeper, or maybe they're enough to start you thinking and then on to something new. However you read blinks, we hope they help you become an even brighter you.

What's in it for me? Learn how to turn an idea into a completed project!

How many ideas have excited you but never seen the light of day?

If the answer is "too many," don't worry – you're not alone. Many people are bursting with ideas but never see them through because they're waiting for a day or time when things – including their mood, energy, and everything else – *feel* right. Other people enthusiastically start working on their ideas right away but quickly lose steam when they run into challenges.

But ideas shouldn't have to wait for an ideal day *or* be packed away at the sight of the first hurdle. By applying the clear steps laid out in these blinks, you can start turning your ideas into feasible projects today.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- which ideas are your best work waiting to happen;
- whom to put on your team of supporters; and
- why crumbs are good for your project.

To do your best work, first turn your ideas into projects.

Here's a question: What does the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle have in common with the Dalai Lama, Buddhism's spiritual leader? They both teach that humans thrive through action.

But not just any action. People thrive when they do the things that their own unique experience, knowledge, and perspective prepare them for. The author calls this doing *best work.*

So what's *your* best work? If you're not sure, look for clues in the ideas that constantly nag at you. Among those ideas are the ones that will lead to your best work. In order to thrive, you need to identify which ones they are – and act on them.

The key message here is: To do your best work, first turn your ideas into projects.

When you hear the word "project," you probably think of school or work. But a project is anything that requires time, attention, and effort to complete – and life is full of them. Preparing for the first day of school is a project. So is moving to a new city.

Projects reveal your inner world. Think about it: If you find yourself dreading Mondays, that tells you a lot about what you *don't* enjoy, just as finding yourself eagerly working late on a project clues you in to what you *are* passionate about. And *best work projects* – that is, projects that allow you to do your best work – create opportunities for you to thrive.

But how do you know which idea to turn into your first best work project?

Try this simple exercise: First, write down all the ideas you're considering. These can range from creative initiatives at work to organizing the garage or going on a dream trip. Next, cross off the ideas

that don't deeply resonate with you and those you wouldn't mind letting go of.

The ideas you're left with are those that are important to you. But you still have to zoom in on *one* idea. To do this, consider the following: Which idea would you most like to celebrate completing? Which one will have the most significant impact on your life five years from now? Perhaps there's an idea for which you'd happily wake up early or stay up late – or one you'd be heartbroken to abandon.

The idea that meets most of these criteria is the one to work on first. And the following blinks will demonstrate exactly how to do this.

To complete best work projects, you need to cultivate certain qualities.

If you've ever taken on a project, you know that there are bound to be some challenges involved with it. Best work projects are no different.

A few challenges in particular get in the way of starting or completing best work projects. You can get distracted by competing priorities, for one thing. And you often have to contend with *head trash* – the thoughts and ideas that tell you that you're not capable of doing what you've set out to do. Maybe you don't have realistic plans for your projects, or you think you lack the necessary resources. Or maybe the people around you don't understand what you want to achieve and what you need to achieve it.

Fortunately, there are tools for tackling these challenges.

Here's the key message: To complete best work projects, you need to cultivate certain qualities.

Adopting certain qualities when you work will help you see your best work projects through. Depending on the challenge at hand, you might need to rally all of these qualities at once, or only a few. And the extent to which you have or lack certain qualities depends on your upbringing, personality, and overall life experience. But by choosing to cultivate a quality, you can strengthen it and confidently face the hurdles you encounter while doing your best work.

The first quality you need is *intention*. Setting clear intentions for what you want to achieve makes it easier to develop realistic plans. Next, there's *awareness,* which helps you better understand yourself and the world around you. With this knowledge, you can identify competing priorities, for

example, or find ways of maximizing your resources. You'll also need to learn how to establish *boundaries.* These will help you make time and space to work on your project.

By cultivating *courage,* you can face the various obstacles that come your way, like challenging head trash, or speaking up when you need help. In fact, a lack of courage can prevent you from even starting your best work projects. While courage gets you started, discipline – the final quality – keeps you going. Whether it's sticking to plans or maintaining boundaries, discipline helps you develop the habits you need to get your projects across the finish line.

Planning your project involves creating a SMART goal and a support network.

Ever heard the saying, "A goal without a plan is just a wish?" Well, the same can be said about a project.

Sure, sorting through your ideas and choosing one is a great first step. But if you don't know exactly how to execute it, or what you need to do so, you'll struggle to make any progress. It's a bit like swimming in the ocean without any idea where the shore is, or whether there's even a shore at all.

But just as there's a formula to help you choose an idea for your best work project, there are also steps you can follow to plan it. And it all starts with getting *SMART*.

The key message is this: Planning your project involves creating a SMART goal and a support network.

When you have a clear destination and a sense of direction, it's a lot easier to get where you want to go. To establish these, use the acronym SMART when creating your goals.

The S stands for *simple*; your goal should be simple so that it's easier to accomplish. The M refers to *meaningful*, because that kind of goal makes you more willing to put in the required work. Luckily, the idea-selection exercise helps ensure that you choose something meaningful.

But however meaningful a goal is, you won't get far without clear steps that make it *actionable*, and this is what the A in SMART stands for. And your actionable steps should also encompass the last two letters of the acronym: R for *realistic*, and T for *trackable*. Realistic means that you can access the necessary resources, such as tools and skills. And trackable points to clear markers of

progress and completion. For instance, "preventing hunger in children" isn't trackable, but "feeding 100,000 hungry kids by the year 2025" is.

Once you have a SMART goal, think about your *success pack* – the people who will help you achieve it.

You need experienced and knowledgeable *guides* for advice or inspiration, and *peers* with whom you can share ideas and experiences. Your *supporters,* such as a friend who babysits to give you some time to focus, will contribute to the project or help you do the work. Lastly, your success pack includes the *beneficiaries* who will be positively affected by your project.

Ask a maximum of five people per category to be in your success pack. List three ways they can help, and communicate with them regularly.

Think of your project as a series of smaller parts that build on each other.

Whether it's executing a bright idea or clearing out the garage, people often fail to do certain things because they don't think they have enough time. And it's easy to fall into this trap when it comes to best work projects.

But here's the thing about time: you'll never find enough of it. Instead, you have to make it. And once you've set aside time for one project, that same slot can be used for any projects that follow.

So how do you make time? You start by dividing the project into activities that you can accomplish in hours, days, weeks, and months.

The key message here is: Think of your project as a series of smaller parts that build on each other.

To understand how to divide your project into time-based activities, imagine the project as a pyramid with five levels. The base of the pyramid consists of tasks you can complete within a day – what the author calls *chunks*. Above the base, you have activities that take weeks to complete, then months, quarters, and, finally, a year. The bigger a project is, the more parts it will consist of, and the longer it will take. For example, a person starting a business would need a few days to research ideas, and a few weeks to create a business plan. Successfully launching the business would then require several months of work.

Once you've divided the project into activities, you can connect them to a timescale. This will give you an indication of how long the project will take, allowing you to make space in your schedule.

Look at your weekly schedule and carve out blocks of time dedicated to chunks of the project. *Focus blocks* are 1.5 to two hours, and are for solo work that pushes the project forward. These are key to completing the project, and you need at least three a week to build and maintain momentum. And because every project requires some admin to move it along, like making phone calls or planning, you need *admin blocks* of about 30 to 60 minutes each. Activities that involve either collaborating with others or connecting with loved ones or your success pack fall into the category of *social blocks.*

As important as productivity is, you should also rest and recharge. The last thing you want is for burnout to stop you in your tracks. This is why you should schedule one *recovery block* for every two focus or social blocks. Spend this time doing anything that recharges

you, whether that's exercising, reading, or going to a party.

"Focus blocks fuel your best work. No or too few focus blocks equals no finished best work."

Know the various factors that can slow or stop your project.

So you've prioritized and planned your project and things are moving ahead. That's great news, but regardless of how well you plan and schedule, you *will* encounter things that delay your project – or worse, stop it completely. And just as engineers have to account for the forces that slow down cars and planes, you have to be aware of the things and events that can pop up and negatively affect your progress.

Priorities, for one. Unfortunately, you're not the only one who has them; other people do too, and *their* priorities are the things most likely to slow *you* down, if you let them. Let's say that your dad calls you just as you're sitting down to work. He wants to catch up, but that quality time will come at the expense of your productivity. What can you do?

Here's the key message: Know the various factors that can slow or stop your project.

The good news is that there are ways to manage competing priorities. For things you're willing to do, it can be as simple as scheduling time; for instance, you could tell your dad you're busy and pencil in the conversation for another time. But for those things you simply don't want to do, it's best to be clear. So avoid giving someone a reluctant "maybe" when they ask if you want to do something; instead, say no right away.

The other factors to be aware of are the different ways in which projects get stuck.

One is *cascades,* which happen when a project falls behind, causing other projects to slow down or even stop. The best way to handle these is by prioritizing the project causing the cascade as well as any projects that are

important to complete. Then commit to fewer projects going forward. Limiting the number of projects also helps prevent *logjams*, which occur when you can't finish anything on time because you have too many ongoing projects. In the event of a logjam, tackle the chunks that will result in the most progress for each project.

With *tarpits*, your project doesn't just get stuck – it stays stuck. The longer this goes on, the more you'll struggle to start working on the project again. The trick to getting out of a tarpit is to start moving and then keep moving. Break the chunks of the project into even smaller tasks, and commit to completing one in the next three days – and then work on it at least twice a week.

Efficient strategies and schedules help you build momentum.

Here's a common scenario: You set yourself a big goal to work toward, like losing weight or learning a new language. The thought of actually achieving the goal is exciting, and you can't wait until you've finally done it. So you create a plan and start working on it.

But there's a problem: You can't get into a flow. Some days, you hit all your targets, but others, you struggle to do anything. You'll never reach your goal if you go on like this. To make progress, you need to build up momentum – and to do that, you need to take consistent and strategic steps. And it's the same when you're working on your best work project.

The key message is this: Efficient strategies and schedules help you build momentum.

There's only so much time in a day, but you can get a lot done by using it efficiently.

One way to do this is by *batching* or *stacking* tasks. Batching means doing similar tasks in one sitting – making calls, for instance. This reduces the time and mental energy spent switching between tasks. Stacking, on the other hand, saves time by combining different activities – say, going on a hike with people involved in your project and discussing it along the way.

While batching and stacking, don't forget the tasks you need to do but don't really want to do. These are called *frogs*, a name inspired by the author Mark Twain. Twain advised, "If you have to swallow a frog, swallow it first thing in the morning." And this is how you should handle project frogs – as soon as possible. Thinking about them for long only increases the stress and dread you

feel, taking time and energy away from your project.

Another way to increase your efficiency and momentum is by scheduling work at the right time. Contrary to the saying "The early bird catches the worm," not everyone works well in the morning. Some people have more focus and energy in the afternoon. Others do better at night. Scheduling important work for when you're most alert and energized leads to easier and more consistent progress.

Making it easy to dive back into your tasks is also great for momentum. You can do this by creating a *crumb trail* at the end of each work session. This can be a note about your next step or a task that doesn't require too much effort. If you make a habit of this, you won't lose time or feel lost at the beginning of your work sessions.

After completing your project, make time to recover, clean up, and learn from it.

After weeks or months of putting in the work, you'll finally complete your best work project!

This is a moment of relief and pride. So, naturally, you should celebrate it – not only for your own sake, but for the friends, family, and members of your support pack who cheered you on and helped you out. They also deserve a chance to bask in your success, and you can create this by announcing your achievement or marking it with a dinner or gathering.

However, celebrating shouldn't be the only thing on your agenda. It's equally important to take some time out and set yourself up for the next project.

The key message here is: After completing your project, make time to recover, clean up, and learn from it.

The excitement of completing one project might have you eager to jump right into the next one, but it's crucial to give yourself some time between them. After all, you put time, effort, emotion, and energy into projects, and the bigger they are, the more exhausted they leave you.

Taking time before starting another project also gives you the chance to do some cleaning up. Working on a project creates a mess in your physical environment, your digital workspace, and even your social life. So it's important to do some cleaning, archiving, and clearing away in each area. If you put that off, you'll likely have to deal with it during your next project, which isn't ideal.

In the physical and digital spaces, anything left over from what you've just

completed that you no longer need should be thrown away, and the rest stored for later use, or organized for easy access. In your social life, think of relationships you might have neglected, or commitments that you need to fulfill.

Another useful activity to fit into your downtime is an *after-action review*, or AAR. In the US Army, AARs are used to assess training activities and learn from them. Having your own version allows you to learn from the experience of completing a project.

To conduct an AAR, consider not just the project, but the people, processes, and tools involved. Then ask yourself what went well, what you learned, and what challenges, missteps, and lessons occurred. In addition, take note of any habits, routines, strategies, or events that really propelled your forward and made a difference. With every AAR, you'll learn

something that will make your next best work project easier to complete.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

The ideas you can never seem to make time for hint at your best work – the work that helps you thrive. By turning these ideas into projects and SMART goals, you can start doing this work. To make time for your projects, divide them into smaller chunks that you can complete in a series of weekly focus blocks. And to gain momentum, work when you have the most focus and energy, tackle unpleasant tasks as soon as possible, and create easy ways to dive back into your work.

Actionable advice:

Make your project easier by playing to your strengths.

If you're like most people, you sometimes make things unnecessarily

difficult for yourself by not leveraging your strengths – your expertise, the things you enjoy, and the things you're naturally good at. Working without these only increases your struggles and limits what you can achieve. But if you start by considering which of your strengths can be of use in a project, you can reduce the time and effort required to complete it.

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