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How to Say No to Busywork and Supercharge Your Career

Figure out what professional projects matter most—and ditch office chores that don't help you get ahead

By Rachel Feintzeig Follow

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Join that committee. Plan a lunch for the summer interns. And while you're at it, can you help that guy in marketing prep for next week's presentation? He'll be delivering it, of course.

The chorus of asks has always been there, demanding our time. But as we head back to offices, it's harder to hide from the busywork. Colleagues are eager to unload administrative tasks once absorbed by a shrinking population of executive assistants. Bosses feel pressure to check off requests from their superiors for yet another report or spreadsheet. And you're just the person to do it.

"There is so much work that is being done that no one even looks at," says John Matthews, who runs his own management-consulting firm, Gray Cat Enterprises, in Raleigh, N.C.

How do you identify which requests are valuable, and which are mere scutwork that doesn't move your career forward and gobbles up time? And how do you say no without killing your reputation as a team player? Especially when you like being known as the person who does it all—and fear your boss won't be happy if you don't.

Mr. Matthews, who serves as an interim executive for businesses in retail and financial services, starts by asking his teams what's "duplicative, redundant, stupid" about their jobs.

"Let's get rid of it," he says.

Don't approach your boss and say, "I hate doing this," Mr. Matthews cautions. Instead, explain you've been thinking about better ways to deal with those TPS reports. Then lay out some options—reasons why another team should do them instead, or why they're just totally unnecessary.

When Ravi Raman, an executive coach in Minneapolis, works with clients who are burned out, he often finds they're stuck in a torrent of work that's not what they were hired to do. One product-management leader at a tech company realized she was spending more than 20% of her time on diversity training and interviewing candidates for other teams—important jobs, but not what her bosses wanted her to focus on, it turned out. Once on track for a promotion this past

February, she was told she hadn't done enough big, strategic work to earn it, Mr. Raman says.

When sizing up ancillary projects, he advises: "Ask yourself: If I did this, who would care?"

Not that these decisions are easy. Women are asked 44% more often than men to do "nonpromotable work," and they're 50% more likely to say yes, according to a study from Lise Vesterlund, an economist at the University of Pittsburgh, and her co-authors of a book about avoiding dead-end work. Requests for employees of color to help fix companies' diversity and equity failings, often without additional compensation, skyrocketed after a national conversation on race in 2020, coaches told me.

Some extra tasks—mentoring younger colleagues, for example—can be deeply meaningful and important, even if they don't inflate your salary or bonus, or immediately affect the company's bottom line. And saying no can be risky. Help out never, and you'll likely get fired, from what Dr. Vesterlund has seen.

Instead, put some rules into place. You'll only spend an hour planning this return-to-office event; you won't write more

than three letters of recommendation a month. Any requests that would push you over that quota get an immediate no, she advises. Prepare the response in advance: You can't do it, you're sorry, but here's an idea for someone who can help.

Another boundary to set: If you receive a request that goes to more than 10 people, wait. See if someone else raises their hand first, Dr. Vesterlund says. Failing that, suggest the team establish a rotating schedule, so everyone takes a turn.

When Shalini Stewart was recently asked to work on a big new project in her job at a software company, her first thought was, "It's too many hours for a human." Then her boss told her to take a look at her calendar, and start crossing off stuff.

"I feel like I learned this secret," says Ms. Stewart, who lives in Alexandria, Va. That 90-minute meeting where she might speak for five minutes? Easily scrapped. That weekly one-on-one? It would work just as well once a quarter.

After all, so much of our work can slip into corporate performance over time, routines we keep following because they're so well-worn. When a big opportunity arrives, think

of it as a reminder of what's worth your time, not another task threatening to implode your busy schedule.

"Damn, I really don't need to be doing a lot of these things that I'm doing," Ms. Stewart realized.

You can also try negotiating, says Deepa Purushothaman, a former managing partner at Deloitte and co-founder of nFormation, an online community for professional women of

color. Yes, you can serve on this panel now, but next year you'd like a plum role on the compensation committee. Or push back by getting more information.

"Will it be reviewed in my year-end review? How are we going to measure it?" Ms. Purushothaman suggests asking.

It's not just cubicle-dwellers who have to worry about deciphering what matters and what doesn't. For years, comedian Sammy Obeid did all kinds of free work in hopes of getting a paid gig down the line. It was thrilling to finally reach the point in his career where he could turn down some offers.

But it was hard, too. He'd wrestle over decisions, unable to sleep. Sometimes, he'd make the wrong call; he once turned down the chance to write for a comedian who ended up striking it big, and said no to a guy looking for a sketch partner.

"Instead of jumping to the occasion, I declined. These comics are famous now," says Mr. Obeid, who splits his time between Los Angeles and the Bay Area. "Who knows. They could have put me in their shows," he says.

Some people just can't let the scutwork go. John Frehse, who runs the global labor-strategy practice for consulting firm Ankura, takes about 130 flights a year, speaking and advising companies around the world about things like supply-chain issues and vaccine-manufacturing materials. He has an assistant ready to help with administrative tasks. Yet, he insists on doing his own expense reports, a menial task that chews up as many as three hours a week.

He loves having control over the minute details and the feeling he gets when he clicks "Submit." Finally, something that can be totally completed, checked off the list, an unmitigated success.

"You put a bow around it and it goes away," he says. "We all need small wins every day."

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