



First Steps: Free Up Your Time

Why this comes first

Before you fix anything in your business, you need the time and focus to make those fixes. These six steps help you find those hours.

Time is the one resource every owner runs short of, and much of it leaks away without being noticed. Messages, meetings and quick tasks break the day into small pieces, so the important work never gets a solid block. One study cited by cognitive neuroscientist Dr. Sahar Yousef found the average knowledge worker stays on one screen for under a minute before something pulls them away.

The steps below are drawn from Dr. Yousef's work on focus and productivity. They cost nothing, take minutes to set up, and most people feel a difference within the first week.

Step 1: Measure where your time goes

You can't fix what you haven't measured. Think of it as a blood test for your workday: get the numbers first, then decide on treatment.

- Check your phone's screen time report (Settings, then Digital Wellbeing on Android or Screen Time on iPhone). Note your daily total and how many times you pick up the phone.
- For three working days, jot down roughly how your time was spent: meetings, email and messages, focused work, interruptions.
- Note the time of day you feel sharpest and when you feel sluggish. You'll use this in Step 4.

No judgment here. These tools are designed by experts to be hard to put down, so a high number is normal. It's just your starting point.

Step 2: Cut the noise

It's far easier to remove distractions than to force yourself to focus harder. Dr. Yousef's comparison is a radio: you get a clearer signal by reducing the static, not by shouting louder.

- **Turn off non-essential notifications.** Keep calls and messages from key people; silence the rest.
- **Set your phone to grayscale.** In Dr. Yousef's lab, professionals who did this for three weeks used their phones about an hour less per day. That's roughly seven hours a week back.
- **Put the phone out of sight during focused work,** face down in another room if possible.
- **Close the email tab and second-screen distractions** while working on something important.

Step 3: Pick your Most Important Tasks

Each morning, choose one to three **Most Important Tasks (MITs)**: the work that actually moves your business forward. Ask yourself: what will I thank myself for later?

Everything else is a **Least Important Task (LIT)**: quick emails, approvals, small orders. LITs feel productive because you can tick them off fast, but they rarely move the needle.

- Do MITs in your best uninterrupted block of time.
- Fit LITs into the gaps between meetings and calls.
- If you can't tell which tasks matter most, step back and ask where you want the business to be in five years. The next step toward that is your MIT.

Step 4: Work in timed sprints at your best hours

Work expands to fill the time you give it (Parkinson's Law). A timer creates a finish line and keeps you moving.

1. Pick one MIT and break it into small chunks with rough times (for example, 20 minutes outlining, 15 minutes on numbers).
2. Set a timer, typically 25 to 60 minutes.
3. Work only on that task until the timer ends.

Schedule these sprints for your peak hours. Dr. Yousef's research describes three patterns:

- **Morning people**: sharpest early, fading through the day.
- **Evening people**: strongest in the afternoon and evening.
- **Two-peak people (the majority)**: a morning peak, an afternoon dip, then a second wind.

Use your notes from Step 1 to see which you are.

Step 5: One task at a time

The brain doesn't truly multitask; it switches, and every switch costs time and energy. Dr. Yousef calls the leftover clutter from the last task "attentional baggage."

Try her quick test: time yourself writing "I'm a great multitasker" and then the numbers 1 to 20. Then do it again, alternating one letter, one number. Most people are dramatically slower the second time.

- Finish a task, or reach a clear stopping point, before starting the next.
- Before switching, jot a one-line note of where you left off, then close that tab or file.
- Batch similar small tasks (all calls together, all emails together).

Step 6: Take real breaks

Scrolling your phone between tasks isn't a break. Dr. Yousef compares it to lifting lighter weights between gym sets instead of resting: the muscle never recovers.

Research she cites found the best breaks, in order:

1. Time outdoors or looking at nature
2. Simply doing nothing for a few minutes
3. Worst: scrolling social media or news

After each focus sprint, step away for 5 to 10 minutes: a short walk, a look out the window, a



coffee without the phone.

Your first week

Start small. Tick these off as you go.

- ☐ Day 1: Check your screen time report and write down the numbers
- ☐ Day 1: Turn off non-essential notifications
- ☐ Day 2: Switch your phone to grayscale
- ☐ Days 1 to 3: Note how your time is spent and when you feel sharpest
- ☐ Day 3: Choose your MITs for tomorrow before ending the day
- ☐ Days 4 and 5: Run one timed focus sprint per day at your peak hour, phone in another room
- ☐ Days 4 and 5: Take a phone-free break after each sprint
- ☐ End of week: Check your screen time again and compare

Want help putting this to work?

Once you have a few hours back, the next question is where to spend them. That's what a Diagnostic Map does. Together we look at every part of your business and rank the improvements worth making first. If you'd like to talk it through, call me. Your Step 1 notes give us a head start.

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Credit

The ideas in this guide are drawn from Dr. Sahar Yousef, a cognitive neuroscientist and lecturer at UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business, who runs the Becoming Superhuman Lab ([faculty profile](#)). They were discussed in her interview on The Diary of a CEO podcast. Figures quoted are as she reported them.