

# NOTE TO SELF: TURN OFF EMAIL



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‘Every day we allow our time to be stolen and we don’t react. Time is far more important than money, yet we place so little value on it.’

Everyone knows that time is more important than money, in a vague sort of way. Wasting our time is something that haunts pretty well everyone over the age of 25. Are we really using our time well, in ways that lead us to feel rewarded by our efforts and not just spent by them?

Cyril Peupion, a French/Australian business consultant, works with corporations including Westpac, AMP, Suncorp, Optus and Commonwealth Bank to improve their bottom line by transforming the office habits of the people working for them. Years of working closely with business people – deleting 1000s of emails and chucking out bin loads of documents – led Peupion to realize something very simple. None of these people had been taught how to work. They had degrees and qualifications coming out their ears, but when the clock struck 9 and they sat down at their desk they felt the same momentary rush of panic and guilt on opening their inbox as the most junior staff member in their respective departments.

On the face of it *Work Smarter: Live Better* is a business self-help book. But really it’s a help yourself book. It’s not a comforting read that reinforces all our pre-held beliefs. It’s a call to arms against the modern bugbears that daily threaten to undermine our performance in whatever sphere we happen to be working

They knew what to do, they understood what was expected of them, but they had scant idea – though they only admitted this to Peupion in confidence – about how to go about doing it. Despite their starred CVs and richly varied work experience, no-one had ever sat down with them, side by side at their desks, and talked them through what to do when they flicked on their computer each morning. How to organise their time and their files, of course, but even more crucially, how to prioritise their work so that they could focus on projects tied to their long-term performance, rather than just responding to whatever was most urgent.

On the face of it *Work Smarter: Live Better* is a business self-help book. But really it’s a help yourself book. It’s not a comforting read that reinforces all our pre-held beliefs. It’s a call to arms against the modern bugbears that daily threaten to undermine our performance in whatever sphere we happen to be working, whether it’s running a small business, teaching a class, heading a professional group, finishing an assignment, or completing a structural survey of the Tasman Bridge. Distraction, stress, and general ineffectiveness are the modern bugbears that prey on us all.

What, Peupion asks, is the difference between a distraction and an interruption? A distraction is caused by oneself (losing a chain of thought after a newly arrived email goes ping), whereas an interruption is caused by the world (overhearing colleagues gossiping in the corridor outside your office). In an open-plan office research suggests that workers are interrupted on average every three minutes. Up to 30% of office workers’ time is taken up with responding to or recovering from interruptions – and even more if the time taken to get focused after being distracted is included.

Cyril Peupion is no finger-pointing coach, the kind of person you can hardly wait to leave you in peace with all your hard-fought for bad habits. All the same he’s very ambitious, and derives his motivation from the pleasure he gets from skilling people to work better. ‘I hope this book will help you to be more effective, to perform better at work and feel more in control in both your professional and personal life. Ultimately my goal and hope is that this book changes your life’. When I first read this I thought, as you’re probably thinking, that Peupion is trying to sell more books by touching a common nerve. But of all the books I’ve read on this subject (and as a woman with ambitions and children I’ve read quite a few) this one has had more impact on the way I actually work than all the others put together. Reading this book has given me skills and priorities that I desperately needed - though previously had been too embarrassed to admit needing.

*Work Smarter: Live Better* is a book, and this is an article, so I’m not going to summarise its contents here. Instead I’m going to focus on some principles that touch on everyone’s experience of work – email, efficiency versus effectiveness, and planning. Although the principles apply to business, given that we’re all caught up in the business of life, they’re just as applicable in the kitchen as in the office.

Peupion starts with email, that modern blessing and daily curse, depending on what mood you’re in. We’ve all heard people who roll their eyes and brag about the number of emails sitting in their inbox. But however many 100s or 1000s of emails they boast of, they can’t compete with Peupion’s Gold Medal winner with 55,000 emails, Silver Medal winner with 33,000, or Bronze winner with a mere 28,000. Having 55,000 emails sitting in his inbox didn’t reduce this professional to the office wheelchair. He continued to command a high salary and was able to meet all his targets. But it did mean that each time he sat down at his desk he felt stressed. How could you not, if every time you answered your mobile you had to suppress the fear that it might involve any one of those 55,000 emails?

So, what to do? Peupion has three simple rules that, like all rules, are much easier to endorse than to carry out. Rule number one is to batch your emails, setting aside specific times of the day when you turn into a 'processing machine' and respond to, file, or diarise as many emails as possible within a given space of time. Between these times he urges you not to look at your emails and, most importantly, to turn off the red envelope and accompanying ping on your computer. (I told you his rules were deceptively simple.)

Rule number two is 'one touch one decision'. As soon as you touch an email, opening it up on your screen, Peupion urges you to act on it - rather than leave it idling in your Inbox for the later that never comes - either by replying, deleting, or making a meeting with yourself to deal with it. Initially making a meeting with myself was, for me, a foreign concept - implying a maturity that I struggled to own. However if you can do this, if you can have an aerial view of your week, and can dedicate a task to 11am this Thursday and, come Thursday at 11am can honour it, then you're halfway to securing a work-life balance.

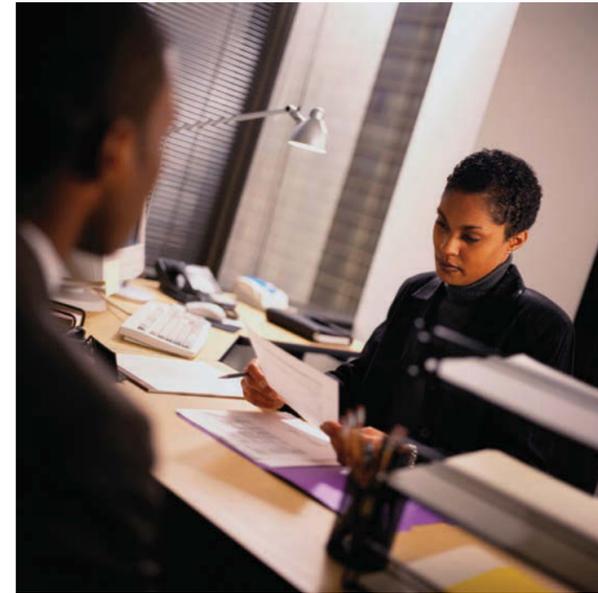
And the third email rule? It's to practise these steps again and again, Peupion reckons for 21 consecutive days, until you reap the rewards and internalise the steps as habits. Simple? Yes. Difficult? Incredibly so.

But of course there's no point being impressively efficient about how you do things - managing your files, fighting distractions, putting systems into place to streamline your work flow, if you're not clear about what you're doing and why you're devoting precious time to it. The degree to which you feel stressed at work doesn't relate, in Peupion's opinion, to the amount of work you have to do, but to the way you handle your workload. The biggest heffalump trap, for anyone who faces multiple demands, is to work hard all day on small urgent tasks only to come to the end of it and realise that you haven't had time for the big things - the large projects that are more important for your long-term performance than the urgent tasks that puncture your day.

This is the age-old problem of not being able to see the wood for the trees. Except that the problem is bigger these days, because there are now so many trees to see past if you're to grasp the wood beyond. There is now, Peupion suggests, more information in a Sunday paper than an average person in the 18th century came across in his whole life. Whether or not this is factually true it does get at something powerful about the level of knowledge saturation we're now subject to, and the stress that so easily accompanies it.

Our performance at work is, for Peupion, very much tied to our ability to discriminate. It's a direct reflection of our ability, in the midst of conflicting demands, to say yes or no to the right things. True leadership, of the kind described in this book, is about having the skills and confidence to lead ourselves to the point of achieving our own goals, something that inevitably involves saying no to the things that won't lead us to them. But for many of us the ability to discriminate, to say no to the small things in order to say yes to the big things, belongs to the realm of fantasy. Like the reluctant teenager who's up till the small hours finishing his assignment the morning before the cut-off date, it's often easier to work to external deadlines than to plan our own schedule and stick to it. It's simpler to be bossed about by other people's demands, than to respond to our own priorities, our own scale of value and importance.

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We become stressed, Peupion believes, not because of how much we have on our plate, but because we have no clear sense of how to deal with what life serves up on it. Our subconscious mind is full of unattended tasks that float to the surface as nagging reminders, before sinking back down into the morass. For example I know that amongst other things I need to get my daughter's passport application witnessed, send a chatty email to friends I'm in danger of losing touch with, and dream up something for the last week of my kids' school holidays. But I have no clear sense of when, or even if (bar perhaps the passport application), I'll get around to them.

In other words most of us lack a system for getting things done. Peupion is somewhat disdainful of a favourite way of imposing order on the chaos of our subconscious mind - a list. While he's sympathetic to the satisfaction of ticking items off a list, lists by their nature can be added to at whim, with little regard for how long each item might take. Most of us, he suggests, compile lists to reassure ourselves. They reflect our optimism, not our realism. In any case a list is just that - a list. It doesn't assume a system, either practical or evaluative, for dealing with what's on it.

For years Peupion was reluctant to write a book about how to work more efficiently and effectively. He was sceptical of writing about his practice with clients, when in his mind so much of its value lay in carrying it out, not in discussing or even understanding it. His rules and observations are fairly easily communicated, whereas the harder part - acting on them - just is much tougher. In his opinion it required real persistence and face-to-face contact. But as it turned out Peupion was wrong. It has been possible to explain his methods, and for readers to be both inspired by them and prompted to act on them.

Having said that, I probably wouldn't have sought out this book if I hadn't caught Cyril Peupion talking on ABC radio, in his light and pointed manner, the tone he also adopts in his very readable book. Assuming that you can't afford the thousands of dollars it would require to have Peupion sit alongside you at your desk, and assuming you don't work for a corporation enlightened enough to pay for it, this book is definitely the next best thing.

And even if Peupion doesn't convert you completely his book may still prompt you to change one small thing - turning off the ping of new emails at the bottom of your screen, perhaps, or reducing the number of times you check your Inbox. Then having changed this one small thing, you may be encouraged further down the track to make another small change. Besides often it's the small changes that feel the biggest, and so incur the most resistance. Like writing a weekly work plan, for example, which is something I felt wary of at first but now embrace. Different from a diary in which I keep a note of places I'm supposed to be and people I'm planning to see, a weekly work plan is a projection of my own vision for the week ahead, independent of external demands.

Because if you're inspired to change just a few small things about the way you work, and if you can persist in doing them for long enough for these to become habits, before you know it you'll be working smarter and, hopefully, living better.