



168

Hours

The Blank Slate of Time

Laura Vanderkam

Questioning an Unquestioned Truth

It is an unquestioned truth of modern life: we are all starved for time. With the rise of 2-income families, extreme jobs, and the ability to log on to the world around the clock, we can barely find time to breathe.

At least that's the way the story goes. Yet there are some people who don't seem to feel this way. Not only do they have full personal and professional lives, they often claim they could fit more in if they wished!

How do these people do so much with their time? How do they do so much and not even feel stressed about it?

A few years ago, I started interviewing these people. You know the kind: men and women who work full-time, raise six kids, do triathlons. I wanted to learn their secrets.

Here's what it boils down to. They spend their time focused on their core competencies—that is, the things that they do best and that other people cannot do nearly as well. For most people, this is nurturing their careers, nurturing their families, and nurturing themselves (getting enough sleep, exercising, and engaging in personal passions like volunteering that boost their souls). They ignore, minimize or outsource everything else.

When you live this way, it turns out that most of us have a lot more time than we think.

Adding It All Up

While many of us think about our time in blocks of 24-hour days, I believe that it's more useful to think in terms of "24/7," a phrase people toss about but seldom finish the math of. There are 168 hours in a week.

That number comes as a surprise to most people, which is funny if you think about it. Most of us do live our lives by weekly schedules. Anything you do once a week happens often enough to be important to you, whether it's church, a strategic thinking session at work, your Sunday dinner with your parents, or your softball team practice. The weekly 168-hour cycle is big enough to give a true picture of our lives.

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And it is big. Think about it. If you work 50 hours a week—far more than time-use studies find the average American works—and sleep 8 hours a night (56 hours per week) this leaves 62 hours for other things. That's plenty of time to hang out with your children and your spouse, to exercise the 2.5 hours per week the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends, to volunteer or take up a hobby, or to just read or relax. And that's all while getting enough sleep! Even if you work 60 hours, that still leaves 52 hours to fill as you choose.

Time Stress

But that raises the question: if we have so many hours, why do we feel so starved for time?

I think the answer is that most of us aren't very strategic about our hours. We tend to live life as it comes at us, which in our distracted world happens very fast. We don't think about how we *want* to spend our time, and so we spend massive amounts of time on things—television, Web surfing, random conference calls or meetings, housework, errands—that give a slight amount of pleasure or feeling of accomplishment, but do little for our careers, our families, or our personal lives. We spend very little time on things that require more thought or initiative, like nurturing our kids (not just plopping them in front of the TV), exercising, or engaging in deliberate practice of our professional crafts. We try to squeeze these high-impact activities around the edges of things that are easy, or that seem inevitable merely because we always do them or because we think others expect us to. And consequently, we feel overworked and under-rested, and tend to believe stories that confirm this view.

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Logging Your Time

But what if we approached time differently? What if we viewed our 168 hours as a choice? What if we filled in the things that mattered most—personally and professionally—first?

To figure out how best to use the 168 hours we all have each week, it helps to know how you're using them now. If you want to get out of debt, you track your spending. If you want to lose weight, you keep a food journal. To use your time better, you need to track your time by keeping a time log. You can create a spreadsheet with spots for all 168 hours (or download one from My168Hours.com). Write down how you're spending your time for at least a week.

It may take time to get in the habit, but I can guarantee the results will be eye-opening. Over the past few years, I've had dozens of people (including myself) keep these logs. We've discovered a few things:

- Almost all of us work less than we think. This is a well-known problem in time-use research. Some time diary studies have found that the average person claiming to work 70, 80, 90 or more hours per week is actually logging less than 60!
- We have a fair amount of leisure time, but we don't think ahead for how we want to use it. So we wind up doing the easiest thing possible: watching TV. Unfortunately, TV doesn't make people feel particularly relaxed and rejuvenated, the way "true recreation" should.
- When we're spending time with family members, we're often trying to do other things: checking email, picking up the house, puttering around (e.g. flipping through the Pottery Barn catalogue when you are not in the market for a sofa). While most of us claim that our families are our top priorities, our actions don't really indicate this. Indeed, even parents who are not in the paid workforce, or who work part-time, spend less time interacting with their children than they think they do.

Creating a Full Life

Keeping a time log can be a disconcerting experience, but as the saying goes, the truth will set you free. Once you know how you are spending your time, you can make changes to spend your time better.

First, ask yourself what you'd like to be doing during the 168 hours you have each week. What work activities would have the most impact on your career and your organization? What activities could create happy memories for you and your children? Great ideas include reading together, volunteering together, going on excursions like canoeing trips, or even just building forts in the backyard. How can you nurture your relationship with your spouse, using your time to become reacquainted as friends and lovers, not just co-parents hashing out the administrative details of your house? How can you spend your hours nurturing your own soul – praying or reading religious texts, exercising, singing in a choir, leading a scouting troop, or even listening to Wagner on your commute?

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Happy, effective people block these high-impact activities into their 168 hours first. They let the distractions of this modern world happen around these priorities. They spend their hours nurturing their careers, their families and themselves.

And then—this is the fun part—they try to get everything else off their plates.

If you hate housework, do as little as possible! Outsource tasks if you have the cash, and if not, just lower your standards. Why spend 15 minutes after the kids go to bed picking up the playroom if it will just get dirty again? Use the time to read, write in your journal or cuddle with your spouse.

At the office, don't mistake things that look like work for actual work. If you can play Facebook games or surf the web while you're on a conference call, chances are you didn't really need to be on that call. Ignore it and see what happens. My guess is that the earth will not crash into the sun.

If you hate to commute, then figure out a way to commute as infrequently as possible. Get a different job. Work from home. Or you can turn this chore into a pleasure by carpooling with your spouse or a friend, or by listening to all the works of Shakespeare on audio book (or reading them, if you're on a bus or train).

Happy, effective people ... spend their hours
nurturing their careers, their families
and themselves.

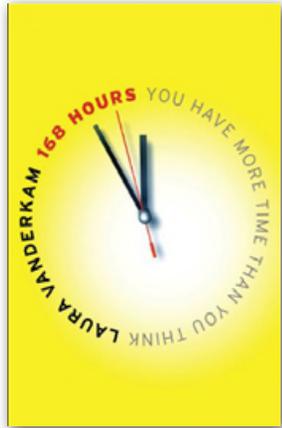
Being Honest

When you spend your time nurturing your career, your family and yourself, and outsource, ignore or minimize everything else, you'll discover that 168 hours is plenty of time to live the life you want. So whenever you find yourself saying "I don't have time to do X, Y, Z," try changing your language. Instead, say "I don't do X, Y, and Z because it's not a priority."

Often, that's a perfectly adequate explanation. I could tell you that I don't play the violin because I don't have time, but that's not true. I have time. In any given week, I have 168 hours. If someone offered to pay me a million bucks to learn how to play the violin, you can bet I'd sign up for lessons! Since that's not going to happen, I can acknowledge that I don't think learning to play the violin is the best way I could be spending my time.

But playing a musical instrument is one thing. Let's raise the stakes. It requires more courage to say "I don't play with my children because it's not a priority."

If it's true, then it's true, even if it's not politically correct to say. Be honest. Own that truth. Maybe you don't like being around your children. Maybe they don't like being around you. Maybe your spouse is already doing a great job in this department. Maybe you honestly believe that the income you provide, the service you do for society, or the joy you gain by working during the entirety of your children's waking hours is a bigger priority than interacting with them. There could be many good reasons for this. There are probably some bad ones too. Nonetheless, this is a choice, and not a matter of lacking time. When you say "I don't have time," this puts the responsibility on someone else: a boss, a client, your family, capitalism, society. The power slips out of your hands. **"It's not a priority," turns those 168 hours back into a blank slate, to be filled as you choose with the things you decide matter.** 📖



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Get more details or buy a copy of Laura Vanderkam's [*168 Hours*](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Vanderkam is the author of *Grindhopping: Build a Rewarding Career Without Paying Your Dues*. Her journalism has appeared in *The Huffington Post*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Scientific American*, and *Reader's Digest* among other publications. She lives in New York City with her husband and their two young children.

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