



"The money is rolling in, but are we achieving anything?"

This chapter covers the “I’m too busy, I’m in a meeting” phenomenon. The difference between business and personal intelligence. What Tick Achieve does and does not mean. The power of the tick symbol. What achieve means and why achievement is not an endgame. Professional time wasting and why it happens. The need to see through the red mist of apparent busyness. Addiction to work and the modern curse of Work In Progress. How to think more and worry less, and how being organized lets you take it easy. Why outcome is more important than output, and why action is more important than activity. The first principles of cause and effect: “If I do x, then y will happen. . .” Why well-written lists matter and an outline of how to Tick Achieve.

“I’m too busy, I’m in a meeting.”

Business intelligence?

It always used to be said that military intelligence was one of the best oxymorons around, along with deeply shallow and living death. But now it would appear that business intelligence is a new candidate. For every superbly run company that really knows what it is doing, there appear to be several more who cannot get even the simplest tasks done without a fiasco. Is this because they have inherently poor practices and systems, or is it simply because the people they employ cannot get things done in their own right? If it is the latter, then we may be facing a much more widespread problem – one in which millions of people are losing the art of getting things done.

There seems to be no shortage of personal intelligence, but still people struggle with completing all the things they intend to. The best-laid plans often remain just that: plans. And yet there is little to beat that feeling when you’ve

cleared your desk and there's nothing on your to-do list. It's brilliant. And I strongly believe that you can have a much better life if you get stuff done effectively. Once you get the hang of it, life gets so much easier, and you can really make yourself tick. Sleep better and worry less. Learn how to celebrate little bits of progress, look down your list, tick off a job well done, and shout *Tick Achieve*.

***Tick Achieve*: what does it mean?**

Let me explain. To be able to tick a task off a list and move on to something else is at the very centre of human happiness. How so? Because humans are only happy when they do things. Sitting around just existing doesn't suit our make up. We have to feel that something is happening, and frequently it is much better that whatever it is has been self-generated. It's fine to enjoy the efforts of others, so long as you are contributing yourself, otherwise you would simply be the passive recipient of other people's ideas and actions.

Tick Achieve is my phrase for getting things done. It represents a thing well done, and a springboard for forward motion. It means you have delivered on your promise, whether to someone else, or to yourself. It means that you are the kind of person who always does what they say – a superb reputation to have. And it means that you never have to sit around saying “*I wish...*” or “*If only...*”

What does *Tick Achieve* not mean?

Let me be crystal clear at the outset what *Tick Achieve* does not mean. It does not mean the relentless pursuit of achievement at the expense of all else. It does not mean fighting your way to the top and pushing everybody else

aside. It is not a mantra for irritating over-achievers who lack a generous view of the world. It is not a platform for bragging or gloating. It is simply a method by which individuals can get the small things done. Do enough of those, and the larger things start to fall into place too.

What is a tick?

Before we move on, let's just dissect the two words. Tick is a fascinating word, and has many meanings. Apart from parasites, alarm clock noises, twitching faces and colloquialisms such as giving someone a good ticking off, I want to highlight the two definitions that most help in the context of *Tick Achieve*.

Tick:

1. a moment or instant
 2. a mark used to check off or indicate the correctness of something
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Our life is full of moments. They all add up to days, months and years. Everything happens eventually, so long as you make it. And for those who make nothing happen, then what is the point of getting up in the morning? Fulfilment lies in the actual completion of things that contribute to your happiness and accumulate over time to a general feeling of well-being and achievement.

A physical tick, as in a near-V-shaped mark made with a pen to designate assent or completion, is a perfect distillation of a moment well spent. What a superb little symbol it is. It is positive. It means yes. It means go. It means job done. It means permission to move on. Just in two flicks of a pen. So my intention with *Tick Achieve* is to

draw a straight line link between the symbol and the job done, so that you can derive maximum satisfaction from the progress that you make every day.

What does achieve mean?

To achieve comes from the old French word *achever*, to bring to an end. But over time it has gained some other subtleties that we will examine carefully in this book. Some modern interpretations of achievement have become sullied with the phenomenon of *over*-achievement, and much of the nastiness that can come with it.

Achieve:

1. bring to a successful conclusion
 2. accomplish
 3. attain
 4. gain as by hard work or effort
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Levels of achievement, and whether they are desirable or not, are hugely determined by the nature of the task, the number of them and the manner in which they are achieved. At bare minimum, the purpose of *Tick Achieve* is to equip you with the attitude and ability to complete simple, short tasks. The majority of these will be personal, and hugely to your advantage in leading a more fulfilled life. The same principles can also be applied, albeit in a stronger and more sustained form, to work ambitions and to complete more ambitious projects in life. That's about as far as *Tick Achieve* wants to go. This is not a manifesto for the relentless pursuit of status, the stockpiling of ludicrous amounts of cash, or the creation of a platform for transparent celebrity. We have enough over-rich people thumbing their noses at the rest of the world as it is.

Achievement is not an endgame

Who is to say if someone else is happy or not? We all know that a poor man can be significantly happier than a rich one. It's all relative. Simple jobs well done can generate far greater satisfaction than complicated ones that end messily, or that never end at all. If I am a recovering alcoholic, then to end the day without having had a drink is an achievement. If I am a soldier who has had his leg blown off and replaced with a prosthetic limb, then if I take my first step today, that's an achievement. If I am an overworked administrator and I complete a hundred tasks in a day, that's an achievement. You will know what represents an achievement to you, and each part of it might seem quite humble and insignificant. But if it matters to you, then it matters. There is no endgame. You don't have to end up a millionaire or ruling the country. We can all *Tick Achieve* and derive huge satisfaction from it.

Professional time wasting

It's an odd thing, but millions of people actually want to waste time. Think about it. You don't know how much time you have on this planet. You might get cancer or be killed in an accident tomorrow. So why would you want to hang about? Of course it depends to a degree on your level of ambition and ingenuity, but everybody wants to achieve something, even if it is to save enough for a holiday this year, be well regarded by their partner, or have a satisfied customer say thank you.

So why is it that so many people waste time? Some just can't see the point in getting on with it. They think it's all futile. Personally I think that's a shame and a lost opportunity. Every social study ever done shows that indolent people

increase their happiness when they are given the chance (or a shove) to do something constructive. But in business, there is a much more cunning application of time wasting that is now quite commonplace. Many have spotted it, but few have said it out loud:

Most businesspeople want to waste time.

Before you send the lynch mob round to object to this apparently outrageous assertion, consider the following examples. They are all based on the universal law that the longer something takes, the more it costs.

1. Consultants

In their highly thought-provoking book *Dangerous Company*, James O'Shea and Charles Madigan highlight the extreme caution needed when dealing with management consultants. Over a series of rather shocking case histories, they tell of how consultants have been paid by the number of client staff they put out of work, how they have often replaced them in their own jobs and, crucially, how projects that were originally regarded as quick fixes have been dragged out for years. They warn against fuzzy concepts like "world class", which cannot be defined or measured, and creating a "consulting fantasyland", which sounds reassuring to companies but doesn't actually get them anywhere. There is a summary of the book in the Appendix.

Just before he died, James McKinsey, founder of today's massive consulting firm, poignantly confessed that making real decisions in business is actually a lot harder than getting paid to advise people what to do – sometimes it is fine to admit that you don't have all the answers. Better that than hanging around only to discover that you don't.

2. Lawyers and accountants

If it's complicated, it will take a long time, won't it? That's why many technical professions surround themselves with impenetrable jargon. Lawyers and accountants are two particularly guilty parties. If you can't understand what they are talking about, then you have to have their services. It's a deliberate policy called obfuscation.

Obfuscation: The act or an instance of making something deliberately obscure or difficult to understand.

The papers are full of examples every week of legal and monetary cases that have dragged on for years. Each side is trying to run rings round the other and wrap them up in red tape and complication. The longer it goes on, the more they get paid.

3. Builders

Builders are a classic example of a trade where time equals money. The cost of the materials can be ascertained approximately even by the purchaser, so the only flexible variable is the time taken to complete the job. And of course, you can't abandon the job before it's finished because your home won't have a roof, or whatever vital element is left missing.

I could go on. There are many specific businesses where it pays to waste time. The practice is also rife in general commerce. If you really want to *Tick Achieve*, you need to see this strange smokescreen for what it is, and work out whether you have become caught up in it yourself. I call it red mist.

Seeing through the red mist

Stage one in getting more done yourself is to realize that many people don't want to get things done. It sounds strange but it's true. As well as the professions above, there are millions of people in general commerce whose main objective is to do as little as possible. It's human nature. You only have to analyse the number of sick days after Bank Holidays and weekends to prove the point statistically.

"They intoxicate themselves with work so they won't see how they really are."

Aldous Huxley, quoted in *The E-Myth*

But there is a much more insidious angle to non-doers in business. These are the people who are in the office all the time, looking as though they are frantically busy, when in fact they are achieving little or nothing. This is what the Italians call the "English Disease". A lot appears to be happening because everyone is rushing around, but nothing really is. That's the red mist. The tragedy of this is that a huge number of people who do this do not even realize that they are doing it.

Addicted to work

Workaholism is now a recognized phenomenon. In New York, they have Workaholics Anonymous groups whose aim is to help people who work compulsively. In a supreme twist of irony, many members are apparently too busy to attend. A 2007 survey by the Center for Work-Life Policy, a New York-based non-profit group, revealed that 45% of executives were "extreme" workers (*Sunday Times*, 10 June

2007). And yet there is no correlation between all this extra “work” and any increase in productivity in companies. The advent of technology that keeps people in touch every hour of the day creates the impression of busyness, but doesn’t actually contribute to anything. The best one can say about it is that there can be a link between high levels of work activity and high self-esteem. But in truth, this is all part of the red mist too. Pejorative words such as workaholism simply get replaced with driven, energetic or ambitious in an attempt to make them sound beneficial.

The modern curse of WIP

All of which amounts to a lot of rushing around, but is anything actually getting done? And if so, are they the right things? In many instances, there are undoubtedly too many balls in the air at once. As a colleague of mine once observed: *“There are fifteen balls in the air on this project, and two of them are mine.”*

WIP is the contemporary acronym for Work In Progress. And what a disaster it is. So pervasive has this phenomenon become that it is almost a discipline in its own right. To highlight the futility of WIP, consider this. A task is only of value if it is finished. The longer it isn’t, the worse things are. Many modern businesspeople would do well to remember that. As Fergus O’Connell states in his excellent book *Simply Brilliant*: “Things either are or they aren’t.” There is a summary in the Appendix. Hiding mountains of unfinished work under the broad banner of WIP is hopeless.

“The middle of every project looks like a disaster.”

Rosabeth Moss

Yes, but have you actually done it?

Dreamers, and those who are incapable of completing anything, spend their whole life saying “*I’ve got a great idea!*” whilst simultaneously being ridiculed by their colleagues and friends as being pathologically incapable of getting anything done. The indolent husband whose wife points out that he still hasn’t put the shelves up after three years is more than just an invention of comedians. It’s a very common problem.

How to think more and worry less

It’s about time we started valuing mental activity as much as, or more than, physical activity. A carefully applied thought can achieve far more than an infinite number of meetings. Individuals need to realize this, and companies really should have worked it out years ago. Fretting about issues and generating a big head of steam has no beneficial effect on the outcome. In fact, the opposite may well be true. The knack lies in a calm assessment of the situation, and a judicious application of the right remedy. This may only take a few minutes. And if it did, what on earth would all those supposedly busy executives do for the rest of the week?

How being organized lets you take it easy

This is where a massive distinction becomes evident between those who want to get things done and those who don’t. In the main, individuals want to get things done in their personal lives. So do self-employed people,

because if they don't, they don't get paid, and in some cases there is no one else to do it anyway. The ones who don't want to get things done usually work for companies. That's because they are going to get paid the same amount regardless of what they do. But they can't let it appear as though nothing is happening, so they generate activities to cover it up. It's that red mist again.

What sorted individuals and self-employed people have worked out is that the more organized they are, the easier they can do their work. That means less stress, quicker delivery and, fantastically, more free time. This is the polar opposite of the corporate executive who, if they finish their work too efficiently, simply get given more. That's why they spin it out. So if you are a company person, you will have to try extra hard to shed your work habits and make some changes in your personal life. We will look at all this in the coming chapters.

Outcome not output

So, assuming you do want to get things done (otherwise why would you have read this far?), we need to get to grips with some of the things that prevent people from doing just that.

"I am rather like a mosquito in a nudist camp. I know what I want to do, but I don't know where to begin."

Stephen Bayne, quoted in Getting Things Done

Making a start is half the battle, and we will look at this in some detail. If there is a lot confronting you, it can be hard to know where to start. The amount of output you generate

is irrelevant. When it comes to getting things done, we are interested solely in the outcome. That may well mean only doing the bits that can directly affect the outcome, not all the other static that seems related but isn't central.

Action not activity

Confusing action and activity is a common thing. Much activity is essentially pointless. It may appear to contribute to the main objective, but in fact it doesn't. In truth, lots of people intentionally fool themselves in this respect. They want to believe that things are complicated to justify the fact that they haven't yet done them, or that it is taking a long time to do. Displacement activities are common too. So much of what is going on is either intentionally disguised to look as though it matters, or even worse, the doer of the activity genuinely believes it will help when in fact it won't. We will work hard to try to disentangle this problem.

"Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning a lion wakes up. It knows it must outrun the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death. It doesn't matter whether you are a lion or a gazelle, when the sun comes up, you'd better be running."

African proverb, quoted on Radio 4

Cause and effect: first principles

At the heart of solving the inertia problem is the ability to determine genuine cause and effect. It's a hell of a skill and

many people simply don't have it. It is essential to master the basic art of working out what will happen if you do something, or to put it simply:

"If I do x, then y will happen . . ."

This works on three crucial dimensions:

1. If I do x, then y will happen: I want y to happen.
2. If I do x, then y will happen: I do not want y to happen.

If you are a mature *Tick Achiever*, then you will have worked out the direct link between x and y, and more often than not you will elicit the response in example number one. You do something and expect something to happen. That's why you did it.

If you don't think much about your actions, then you will often experience the state of affairs in example two. You do plenty of things, but they don't lead to the action or reaction that you want or expect.

But much more crucially in the context of *Tick Achieve* is the third possibility:

3. If I do x, then y will happen: y is irrelevant to what I want done.

Herein lies the crux of most people's problems when it comes to getting things done. They work pretty hard. They initiate lots of things. They even finish lots of things. And those things have no bearing whatsoever on the main point.

Most of what people do has nothing to do with the main point.

What's on *your* list?

That's what this book is all about: working out what matters and what doesn't. This will enable you to do less and get more done. As well as mastering the basics of cause and effect, we will look at the dreaded subject of lists. These are usually at the core of anyone's activity, and they have a lot to answer for. Call them what you want: to-do lists, checklists, action lists. They all amount to the same thing – a prompt for you to get things done. And if the list is confusing or unhelpful, then the resulting action will be too.

How many times have you thought of something crucial to do and then forgotten it completely? That's why people invented lists. And very useful they can be too. If, and only if, they are written properly and used effectively. Put thirty things on a list, and it becomes too daunting. Put three things on it, and there's no point in having a list at all.

In truth, most lists are randomly assembled. They do little to help you get things done. After all, that's the only point of a list. We will look at the art of great list writing in detail in Chapter 5. As a trainee I used to annoy all my colleagues by ticking everything off before I went to the pub. It's not a competitive thing – it's so you can enjoy your free time safe in the knowledge that you've got things under control.

How to *Tick Achieve*

So, to recap on the main points of this introductory chapter:

- There is no point in appearing to be busy, when you aren't actually getting anything done.

- Much so-called business intelligence isn't that intelligent.
- It will help you to "unlearn" many business practices to liberate more of your personal intelligence.
- A tick is a great symbol of getting something done.
- Small achievements are more important than the pursuit of something grandiose.
- As such, achievement in the lofty sense of the word is not an endgame in itself.
- Many businesspeople actually want to waste time, either because they want to charge more or because it fills their time and they get paid the same anyway.
- You need to see your way through this red mist to something clearer.
- Many people are addicted to work as an end in itself – don't let that be you.
- Work in progress is a misleading smokescreen for a job not done.
- Perpetual dreamers never get round to doing anything – don't let that be you.
- The more you think, the less you will have to do.
- The more organized you are, the more you can take it easy.
- Outcome is more important than output.
- Action is more important than activity.
- Most of what people do has nothing to do with the main point.
- It is crucial that you understand cause and effect when it comes to your actions.
- "If I do x, then y will happen..." holds the key to almost everything.
- The manner in which you construct your lists will have a fundamental bearing on your ability to get things done.

What's to come?

The book contains lots of techniques tried and tested on scores of individuals over the last 25 years. To give you a taster, they include:

- ***Talk straight.*** The more you waffle, the less clear you are about what you really need to do. This is the theme of the next chapter.
- ***Leave it out.*** The more you exclude, the easier it is to get the important things done. We look at this in Chapter 3, which explains how to write an anti list. That's a list of what you are *not* going to do.
- ***One in a row.*** Little things can make a massive difference, and you only need small steps to make progress. Don't let the so-called big picture paralyse what you are trying to do. We celebrate this in Chapter 4.
- ***Tick Achieve.*** By Chapter 5 we are ready to work out how to turn this into a way of life. We also examine the art of great list writing.
- ***Look lively.*** None of this works unless you apply the right levels of energy and application to the task in hand. Don't be fooled though – we are more interested in mental than physical energy. Chapter 6 explains how it works.
- ***Outthink yourself.*** With some judicious self-realization, you can counteract your failings. It's not difficult. Chapter 7 outlines tripwires and fail-safes that make sure you never forget anything.
- ***Progress not perfection.*** Many people never get things done because they are striving for perfection, which never arrives. Chapter 8 establishes the distinction between once-in-a-lifetime nirvana and the millions of other things that just need to get done.

- ***Making business tick.*** Chapter 9 attempts to draw all this together and suggest how it can usefully be applied in a business context.
- ***Make yourself tick.*** And finally we round off with all the personal applications of how you can *Tick Achieve* and a summary of the overall method.