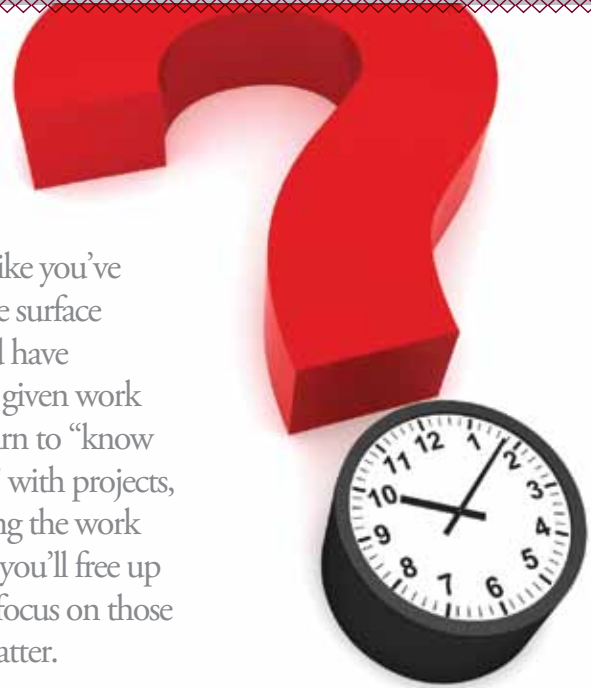## CAREER TIPS
Mission Complete! 5 Ways to Know When You're Done with What You're Doing

Do you often feel like you've barely skimmed the surface of what you should have accomplished on a given work day? When you learn to "know when you're done" with projects, tasks, and everything the work day throws at you, you'll free up a lot more time to focus on those things that truly matter.

The curse for many of us modern-day movers and shakers is that we never seem to have enough time to do everything that needs doing. There simply aren't enough hours in the work day (or even the work week!) to accomplish everything on our to-do lists. Worse yet, when we finally do get on a productivity roll, there always seems to be a distraction (or two, or three) waiting in the wings to throw us off course. But the reality, says Jason Womack, is that we could actually accomplish a lot more each day if we would just learn to recognize and acknowledge when we're *done* with what we're doing.

"One of the biggest time wasters we all face is spending too much time on those things that don't require it," says Jason Womack, a workplace performance expert, executive coach, and author of the new book ***Your Best Just Got Better: Work Smarter, Think Bigger, Make More***. "When we do so, we lose the time we actually should be spending on more difficult or time-intensive tasks. But when you learn to recognize when you're *done* with a task, you'll have valuable minutes and maybe even hours added back into your day."

"It often seems that we put off the most important things on our to-do lists until we feel like we have the 'time' to work on them," notes Womack. "When you learn to recognize when you're done with projects, big and small, you'll immediately find that you have a lot more time than you thought you did. Time you can use to focus on those things that truly matter."

The key is to develop strategies, tactics, tools, and processes to consistently and incrementally improve performance at work. Managing workflow, getting more done, on time and with fewer resources and less stress is what every worker wants. Here are some insights into why we tend to do what we've always done—and how we can break out of the patterns that hold us back.

Stop majoring in the minors. Many of us spend a lot of time on those projects and tasks that are easy for us. Then, we convince ourselves that we "just didn't have enough time" to get to the harder stuff. But when it comes to knowing when you're done and freeing up time during your day, completing these easy tasks quickly and efficiently is essential.

"Before you start your work day, think about what your high-leverage activities are and what your low-leverage activities are," says Womack. "For the low-leverage activities, force yourself to move through them as quickly as possible. With these tasks—for example, writing an email to a colleague—perfection isn't necessary, and there's no need to waste time wringing your hands over every word. When you can

accomplish these minor tasks more efficiently, you'll have the time you need to do those major tasks justice."

Don't overwrite emails. Much of your time—probably too much—each day gets eaten up by email. Make a conscious effort to keep your emails as short and sweet as possible. "Get to the point quickly and use action verbs in subject lines so that both you and the recipient know what needs to happen before the email is even opened," advises Womack. "And while long emails waste the time it takes you to write them, keep in mind that the person receiving the email doesn't want to have to spend so much time reading it either. Chances are your boss doesn't want or need a three-paragraph rundown of how your client meeting went. He just wants to know if the client is happy and continuing business with you."

Quit over-staying at meetings and on conference calls. Often meetings and conference calls will take as long as you've allotted for them. Set an hour for a meeting and you're sure to go the full hour. "Pay close attention to how much of your meeting is actually spent focused on the important stuff," notes Womack. "If you spend 15 to 20 minutes at the beginning or end of the meeting discussing your coworker's golf game, then next time reduce the amount of time allotted for the meeting. And always know the meeting's or call's objectives before you begin. That way you can get to them right away."

Set your own deadlines and stick to them. It's very easy to get distracted or sidetracked by

things you think you should do or things others think you should do. "Having a self-imposed deadline will help you ignore those distractions," says Womack. "If a colleague calls you about a non-urgent task, you can let him know you've got a 3:00 p.m. deadline that you have to meet. There's no need for him to know that it's self-imposed! And then as 3:00 p.m. draws near, start wrapping up that particular task."

Know when it's time to ask for help. Have you ever been stumped by a certain project or task? Did you walk away from it for a while and then come back to it hoping you'd suddenly know what to do? Sometimes knowing when you're done is knowing when you, specifically, can't take a project any further. "You simply might not have the right expertise to completely finish a certain project," says Womack. "And that's okay. Wasting time on something you're never going to be able to figure out is much worse than asking for help!"

"When you put in place steps to help you know when you're done, you'll be surprised and pleased with how much, you can get done," says Womack. "It will truly free up time in your day that you can use to focus on areas where it's really needed. As a result, you'll have a more gratifying work day and you'll be happier overall."

Jason W. Womack, MEd, MA, has worked with leaders and executives for over 16 years in the business and education sectors. He provides practical methods to maximize tools, systems, and processes to achieve quality work/life balance. ●