THE THOUGHTFUL HUSTLE

The Insider

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Busy Isn't the Same as Done

Why you can feel rushed off your feet all week and still finish nothing, and the small shift that changes it. Plus the woman who wrote her first novel at 70, and why slow was never the same as behind.

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A note from Colin

Welcome back. Last month I nudged you to build a little app over a quiet weekend. A few of you did, and I loved the emails. One in particular stuck with me: *"Colin, I started three things. I've finished none of them. I feel busier than ever and I've got nothing to show for it."*

That's not just you. That's me too, most weeks. So this issue is about the thing underneath that. Not time, exactly. It's that our attention gets pulled in ten directions, and ten half-done things feel a lot like failure. The good news is genuinely freeing: finishing one small thing beats starting ten. Let's get into it.

COVER FEATURE · PRODUCTIVITY & FOCUS

Busy Isn't the Same as Done

Why a busy week can still leave you with nothing finished

You sit down on Sunday evening, tired, and try to remember what you actually got done that week. You were busy. But when you try to name one finished thing, you come up short.

That gap, between feeling busy and being done, is not a personal failing. It's how attention works, and there's real research on why. An information scientist called Gloria Mark, at the University of California, spent years timing office workers. After a single interruption, it took people an average of 23 minutes and 15 seconds to get back to what they were doing at full focus. Twenty three minutes. From one interruption.

Think about a normal afternoon at the kitchen table. You start writing your little newsletter. The phone buzzes. A grandchild calls. The kettle. Each time, that clock starts again. You were at your desk three hours. You did perhaps forty real minutes of the thing you sat down to do. You weren't lazy. You were interrupted, over and over.

The other half is our own doing, and it's the bit we can control. We switch. We tell ourselves we're being efficient by juggling three jobs, and we're doing the opposite. Researchers reported by the American Psychological Association estimate that flicking between tasks can cost as much as 40% of your productive time when the work is anything complicated. It's an expert's estimate, not a stopwatch reading, but you've felt it yourself. Do one thing at a time and it flies. Do three at once and all three drag.

> *You do not need more hours. You need fewer things happening at once.*

That's a much easier problem to fix, because it costs nothing and you're in charge of it. The most productive week you'll have this month isn't the one where you start six things. It's the one where you pick one small thing, protect it for a short stretch, and actually finish it. One finished thing you can see beats six open loops rattling around your head.

REAL-LIFE STORY · MOTIVATION & MINDSET

The Woman Who Wrote Her First Novel at 70

She did one thing, at her own pace, past the age everyone had written her off



ILLUSTRATION · ONE THING, FINISHED, AT HER OWN PACE

I went looking for someone who proves the point of this issue, and I found her in our own back garden, so to speak. Her name was Mary Wesley, and she was English.

For most of her life, Mary was not a famous writer. She was not a writer at all, really, not in the way the world counts it. She had a difficult marriage, money worries, and long stretches where nothing much was going her way. She wrote a couple of children's books in her late fifties that came and went without much fuss.

Then, at the age of 70, she published her first proper novel for grown-ups, *Jumping the Queue*. She was 70, an age when most people are told, gently or otherwise, that their productive years are behind them. What happened next is the part I love. She didn't write one book and stop. Over the next decade or so she wrote a string of bestsellers, ten of them, and sold around three million copies. One, *The Camomile Lawn*, became a television series you may well remember.

I'm not telling you this so you'll go and write a novel. The lesson is that Mary Wesley didn't succeed by doing ten things. She did one thing. She sat down and finished a book, then finished another. She wasn't busy in the scattered way we've been talking about. She was focused, on one thing at a time, and she kept her own clock rather than the world's.

She started late by every normal measure. It turned out not to matter one bit.

Sources: Kirkus Reviews, "Discovering Novelist Mary Wesley, Late Bloomer"; Penguin Random House author profile (first adult novel *Jumping the Queue*, 1983, at age 70; ten bestsellers; around three million copies sold).

HOW-TO · PRODUCTIVITY & FOCUS

How to Actually Finish One Thing This Month

Not ten things. One.



ILLUSTRATION · ONE THING, ONE PROTECTED HOUR

No special apps, no willpower you haven't got. Here's a way that works.

1. Name the one thing, out loud. Not "grow my newsletter." Too big, never done. Something you could actually complete: "write and send three newsletter issues," or "list my first item for sale." Small enough to finish. Write it on a scrap of paper and leave it where you'll see it.

2. Give it one protected hour. Not your whole diary. One hour, once or twice a week, phone in another room, door shut. A single uninterrupted hour beats a whole scattered morning.

3. Do that one thing, and only that. When the hour starts, no email, no "I'll just check." If your mind wanders, and it will, gently come back. You're doing one thing well, which is the faster road anyway.

4. Keep a "done" list, not just a to-do list. At the end of each session, write down what you actually finished, however small. Most of us only keep a list of what's still undone. A short list of done things is proof you're moving.

5. When it's finished, stop and notice. Sit with the fact that you finished. Tell someone. Reply to this and tell me, I mean that. That's how you build the habit of finishing the next one.

Do this for one month, with one thing, and you'll end October with something you can actually point at. That's worth more than a busy year with nothing to show.

FEATURE · MONEY-MAKING IDEAS

You Don't Need Another Course

You need to finish the last one

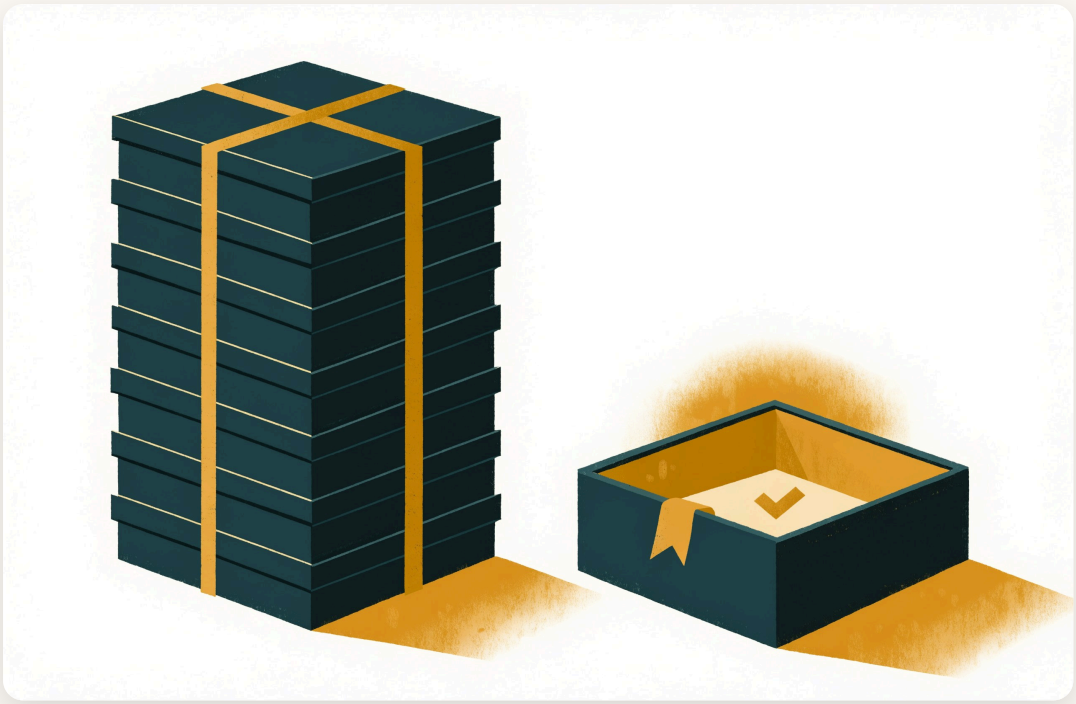

ILLUSTRATION · FINISH THE ONE YOU ALREADY OWN

I want to say something that goes against my own interest, because it's true and it matters. Most of us, when we feel stuck, go and buy another course. Another guide, another "system," another webinar promising this is the one that finally makes it click. It feels like progress. And then, mostly, we don't finish it.

I'm not guessing. On the big self-paced course marketplaces, the share of people who actually finish is often under 15%, and on the free open courses it can run as low as 5% to 15%. Put plainly: most people who buy a course never finish it. It's an uncomfortable truth, and I've been guilty of it more times than I'd like.

That's not because people are lazy or the courses are all rubbish. It's the exact thing this issue is about. Buying is easy and finishing is hard, and buying gives you the little hit of feeling like you've done something without the effort of actually doing it.

The course you already own, half-watched, is worth more than the new one you're about to buy.

You've already paid for it. The value was never in the buying. It was always in the finishing. So before you spend another penny on another programme this month, ask yourself one gentle question: is there one I already own that I could actually finish? Not collect. Finish. If the answer is yes, that's your one thing for October, sorted. And it's already paid for.

Source: published research and platform data on online-course completion (typical completion of roughly 5%–15% on free open courses and often under 15% on self-paced marketplaces).

MOTIVATION & MINDSET · AUDIENCE EMPATHY

Slow Is Not the Same as Behind

They only look alike from the outside



ILLUSTRATION · YOUR OWN PATH, YOUR OWN CLOCK

There's a quiet fear that sits under a lot of this, and I want to name it because I feel it too. It's the sense that everyone else is further along. That while you're carefully finishing your one small thing, the whole world is racing ahead, and you're being left behind because you're too slow, too cautious, too late to the party.

Let me offer you a different way to see it. Slow is not the same as behind. They only look alike from the outside, and from the inside they feel completely different. Behind is scattered, anxious, ten things half-done, nothing finished. Slow is calm, deliberate, one thing at a time, actually getting there. One of those is a trap. The other is how nearly everything worthwhile actually gets built.

Mary Wesley published her first novel at 70 and became a bestseller in her eighties. Was she behind? By the world's clock, hopelessly. By her own, she was right on time, because she was the one doing the work. The people who'd raced ahead of her at 30 weren't writing her books. She was.

You're not in a race against the loud, busy people online. Half of them are as scattered as the rest of us.

You're in a much quieter contest, and it's only with yourself: did you finish one real thing this month, or not? Finishing one small thing, slowly, on your own clock, is not falling behind. It's the whole game. And you're allowed to play it at exactly the pace that suits you.

COLIN'S PICKS

Worth Your Time This Month

Where a link is an affiliate link, I say so plainly

FREE · NOT AFFILIATE

1. The AI Library: free, and mine

My growing, free library of small, beginner-friendly AI tools and Custom GPTs, shaped by what readers ask for. If you're picking your one thing this month, some of these help you do it faster. → **onlineskillsacademy.com/ai-library/**

LICENSED PROGRAMME

2. 30 Day Income Boosters For The Over 50s

This one fits this issue better than any other pick. A paced programme built for exactly this audience, one small income idea at a time, nothing all at once. The opposite of overwhelm, which is rather the point this month. → **maturemoneymail.com/30-profit-boosters**

AFFILIATE

3. Systeme.io: the free all-in-one platform

Still my top pick for a beginner who wants to actually put something in front of people, an email or a simple page, without juggling five different tools. One place, a genuinely free plan, no card required. It's where I moved my own newsletters.

AFFILIATE · THE FUN ONE

4. 1980's AI: a bit of creative fun

Now for something daft and lovely. A training programme that teaches you to make AI video reels, dressed up in a big, cheerful 1980s theme, all neon and nostalgia. The skills carry across to any kind of video, not just the retro stuff. I even made a little reel of my own grandchildren with it and grinned like a fool watching it back.

Don't take my word for what these skills can make. I've been having a proper laugh building a whole channel of 1980s nostalgia reels, every one made with what this training teaches: **youtube.com/@SamanthaRemembers**

The honest caveats, because I'd never send you in blind: it's free to start and you can work through the early lessons without paying, which is plenty to see if you enjoy it. To go further you'll need two things I want you to know up front: a paid Claude account (a monthly subscription to the AI I use), and later, some credits you buy to render the images and videos. So "free to start" is true, but it isn't free all the way through, and I'd rather you heard that from me. If a bit of creative fun with video appeals, give it a go. If not, skip it with my blessing. → **app.1980s.ai/register?ref=cmtn1g2kv0006l104hqq90eqc**

NEWS & TRENDS

What's Moving

- **One interruption costs you 23 minutes, not one.** After being interrupted, people take an average of over 23 minutes to get back to full concentration on the original task (Gloria Mark, University of California). One protected hour is worth more than a whole open-door morning.
- **Most people never finish the course they bought.** On the big self-paced platforms, completion is often under 15%, and on free open courses as low as 5% to 15%. It's not about ability. It's the gap between buying (easy) and finishing (hard). The cheapest win is finishing something you already own.
- **"Doing more at once" is quietly going out of fashion.** After years of multitasking being sold as a virtue, the research caught up: juggling complex tasks can cost up to 40% of productive time (American Psychological Association). Our generation was single-tasking all along.



That's Issue 6. You don't have a time problem, you have a too-many-things-at-once problem, and that one's fixable for free. Pick one small thing, give it one protected hour, and finish it. See you next month.

Colin

Quick Reference

- The focus method in one line: **one thing, one protected hour, phone in another room**
- Keep a **"done" list**, not just a to-do list, and notice when you finish something
- My free AI Library (small tools to help you finish faster): **onlineskillsacademy.com/ai-library/**
- A paced, one-thing-at-a-time programme: **maturemoneymail.com/30-profit-boosters**
- The fun one (AI video reels; free to start, paid Claude + credits to go further): **app.1980s.ai/register?ref=cmtn1g2kv0006l104hqq90eqc**
- See the kind of reels these skills make: **youtube.com/@SamanthaRemembers**
- The weekly newsletter (free): **onlineskillsacademy.com/hustle**

The Thoughtful Hustle Insider

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