

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Routines, Not Ruts

By Douglas E. Welch

Over time, one of the most troublesome parts of any high-tech career can be the routine that is a large part of any computer job. Day in and day out, you punch the same buttons, change the same tapes and answer the same support calls. You might think that routine is killing any affection you might have had for your job.

In fact, if you use routine in an appropriate way, you will find that it can give you the freedom and flexibility to rise above the day-to-day humdrum realities of your job and reach for something more.

Getting It Down

Routines are something you build over time. After several months or years, certain actions become almost automatic. Use this to your advantage. Whenever and wherever you find a routine, look for ways to hone this routine to the finest edge. What might have taken you an hour to complete in the past can eventually be whittled down to minutes. Improve each of your routines until they occupy the absolute minimum number of minutes in your day, while still performing them in the best way possible. Quality should never suffer, of course.

Now comes the fun part. Take each of the minutes of work that you have trimmed from your routines and apply them to doing something new, or learning something new. By reducing your routines to a bare minimum, you open up the time for entirely new avenues of experience.

I can assure you, though, that if you are feeling oppressed by the routine nature of your job and do not address these issues, you will soon find yourself looking for a new job or even a new career. Routines can never be removed, so it is up to you to manage your routines, instead of letting them manage you.

What to Do?

Now, the hard part: What do you do with this newfound time? What have you always wanted to do in your career or your life? Have you wanted to investigate programming in Perl? You get 30 minutes or more while the tape backup

system prepares new tapes. Carry your Perl book with you and hit a few exercises while the system resets. Keep a Web page behind your backup log so you can read up on the latest developments in your field. Take a few minutes to jot down some notes about a project or business you might want to start. Don't let those precious minutes slip by. They can be the stepping-stones to a better place.

Perhaps you have projects that have languished due to the routines that are out of control. Use this time to move each of them one step ahead. Don't try to accomplish each project in one fell swoop. Find the "next action" that needs to be done to move a project ahead—and then do it. This next action could be something as simple as making a phone call or sending an e-mail. Actions like these are easily accomplished in the minutes you squeeze from the refinement of your routines. (For more information on time management and deciding on "next actions," check out David Allen's book, *Getting Things Done*.)

Finally, you might find that the most productive thing to do with this extra time is search for a new job. There is nothing wrong with being dissatisfied with your job. There is, however, a big problem if you are dissatisfied and not looking for a way to make things better. If you have found that the routine nature of your work is driving you crazy, and you can't seem to find a way to make it better, polish up your résumé and start looking. Finding a new job will not be easy, but it won't be as damaging to your psyche as working at a brain-numbing job day after day.

Routines may be a part of every job, high-tech or not, but there are ways to use routines to your advantage, refining them to their most precise elements. This will free up precious minutes that can be used to improve yourself, move projects forward or even find a new, and better, job. It may be difficult to change your attitude about the routines in your life, but you can use them to your advantage instead of letting them dictate the direction of your job and your high-tech career. □

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