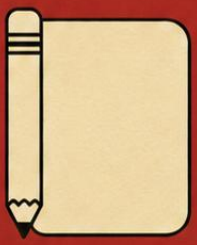
Solve your problem with a wink

I Was Supposed to Work by My Own Rules. Where Did I Write Them Down?

How to Set Your Working Hours and Define the Scope of Client Projects When You're Self-Employed



Max Paradox

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PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

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CONTENTS

INTRO 5

Chapter 1 - Professional Freedom, or Why Does My Calendar Have More Bosses Than I Do? 10

Chapter 2 - A Client Messages, So I Answer. Where Does the Compulsion to Be Immediately Available Come From? 18

Chapter 3 - "It's Just a Small Revision," or How a Project Expands Without Your Consent 27

Chapter 4 - "I'll Be More Organized" and Other Magic Spells That Don't Solve the Problem 36

Chapter 5 - Working Hours Exist, but Nobody Has Ever Seen Them. Not Even You 45

Chapter 6 - The Fear of Saying "No," or How to Stop Accepting Every Project with a Desperate Smile 54

Chapter 7 - Five Messaging Apps, Three Phones, and One Person on the Brink of Digital Madness 64

Chapter 8 - Putting Rest on the Invoice, or Why a Day Off Feels Like Losing Money 73

Chapter 9 - Your Week Has an Owner. It's Time to Put That Person in the Calendar 82

Chapter 10 - What Exactly Is the Client Buying? A Guide to Managing Projects Without Guesswork 91

Chapter 11 - Urgent as of Yesterday? How to Handle Rush Jobs Without Selling Your Weekend 102

Chapter 12 - Clients Can't Read Minds. How to Manage a Project So Nobody Has to Guess What's Happening 112

Chapter 13 - How Much Is Your Availability Worth? Because "I'm Always Reachable" Isn't a Charity.....123

Chapter 14 - One Page of Rules That Could Save Half Your Working Life.....132

Chapter 15 - The Client Who Doesn't Respect Boundaries. What Do You Do When Politeness Stops Working?.....142

Chapter 16 - When Money Is Tight and Your Calendar Is Bursting. How Do You Set Boundaries During Difficult Times?.....152

Chapter 17 - I've Broken My Own Rules Again. How to Get Back on Track Without Throwing Your Calendar Out the Window.....162

Chapter 18 - The First Signs of Chaos Returning. How to Spot the Problem Before You End Up Living at Work Again.....172

Chapter 19 - Your Business Changes, and So Do Your Rules. How to Stay Organized When Life No Longer Fits Your Schedule..... 181

Chapter 20 - I'm Finally Working by My Own Rules. And I Even Know Where I Wrote Them Down 191

INTRO

It's 9:47 p.m. You're sitting on the sofa, theoretically relaxing, or at least that's what it would look like in a photograph taken by someone who couldn't see your phone. A message from a client appears on the screen: "Hi, sorry to bother you so late, but I just have one quick question." You know that sentence. You also know that "one quick question" can be the beginning of a conversation that could easily justify its own project number, schedule, and budget. Nevertheless, you reply. After all, you're self-employed. You decide when you work. And you've just decided to work while watching a television series whose plot you haven't understood for the past three episodes.

When you started your business or began working for yourself, everything looked different. You imagined freedom, flexibility, and no manager checking whether you'd accidentally gone to lunch seven minutes early. You were supposed to choose your projects, set your hours, and organize your day around your own needs. Instead, you've discovered a surprising phenomenon: it's possible to have no boss and still have a dozen or so people behaving as though they've collectively purchased a subscription to your availability.

One client messages you on Sunday. Another expects revisions "immediately," even though they sent the necessary materials three weeks late. A third begins the conversation with "It's really just a tiny thing," then presents requirements resembling the construction specifications for a small airport. And you? You try to be professional, helpful, and flexible. So flexible, in fact, that if entrepreneurs were

made of rubber, you'd already have your quality certification.

The problem isn't that you enjoy your work or care about your clients. Those are perfectly reasonable reasons to run a business. Trouble begins when flexibility stops being your choice and becomes everyone else's expectation. You no longer decide when you're available. You simply react whenever someone decides to make use of your time. You don't define the scope of a project. You allow it to expand gradually, like yeast dough left in an excessively warm kitchen.

The most insidious part is that there's rarely one enormous disaster. Usually, it starts innocently enough. Once, you answer a message after hours because the matter genuinely is urgent. Another time, you make an additional revision without charging because the client is nice. Then you accept a Saturday project because you happen to need the money. Each decision seems reasonable on its own. Only after several months do you notice that your calendar resembles a shopping mall parking lot on the last Saturday before Christmas. Every space is occupied, nobody knows who's in charge, and you're driving around looking for somewhere to park.

Perhaps you've already tried to change things. You turned off notifications, but an hour later you checked your messages to make sure you hadn't missed anything important. You decided to finish work at five, but at 4:58 a client called. You promised yourself that next time you'd refuse additional revisions, yet when the moment arrived, you heard your own voice saying, "Sure, no problem." There was, of course, a problem. It was sitting opposite you, drinking coffee, and booking your Friday evening.

Situations like these don't necessarily mean you lack character, assertiveness, or organizational talent. Often, they mean something much more ordinary: the rules of working together exist only in your head. Your client doesn't know them because you've never clearly explained them. Sometimes you don't follow them yourself because you haven't decided what to do when an exception arises. And exceptions have a remarkable ability to multiply. Allow one through, and soon the others are lining up, taking numbered tickets.

Your own rules, however, shouldn't be a decorative set of regulations that you write on Monday and ignore from Tuesday onward. They should help you make everyday decisions. What time do you start working? When do you take calls? How quickly do you respond to messages? What exactly is included in the agreed price? How many rounds of revisions do you allow? What happens when a client changes the requirements halfway through a project? And most importantly, who decides that something is urgent? Because if the answer is "everyone except me," it's worth taking a closer look at how this business is structured.

This isn't about building a fortress that clients can enter only after completing seven forms and presenting an access pass. Good working relationships need communication, not barbed wire. The point is predictability. Clients should know when they'll receive a response, what they'll get as part of a project, and what additional requests will mean for the agreement. You should know when you can close your laptop without feeling as though you've just committed an act of professional high treason.

Of course, reality can be more complicated than an elegant calendar filled with colorful blocks. Some clients

genuinely require a quick response. Some industries operate in the evenings or on weekends. There are months when every project matters to keeping your business financially afloat. You can't always say no without consequences, and boundaries established without considering these circumstances may look wonderful only on a motivational poster. That's why you need rules suited to your actual way of working, not somebody else's vision of the ideal entrepreneur who finishes work at three every afternoon and peacefully tends to a bonsai tree.

In this book, we'll look at how to regain control over your availability and the scope of the projects you accept without creating unnecessary conflict with clients. You'll learn to distinguish genuine urgency from pressure caused by someone else's poor organization. You'll see how to establish contact hours, communicate working arrangements, and respond to requests that go beyond what was originally agreed. There will also be room for more difficult situations: clients who don't respect boundaries, financial uncertainty, your own feelings of guilt, and those moments when you break your own rules because doing so seems convenient at the time.

You won't be promised that everyone will start respecting your time tomorrow. People don't change their habits simply because you've published new availability hours. Change requires clear communication, consistency, and sometimes an uncomfortable conversation. Some professional relationships may need to be renegotiated, and some projects will stop looking attractive once you honestly calculate how much time they consume. These aren't always pleasant discoveries, but they're considerably better than

running a business in which the revenue belongs to you while the calendar belongs to everyone else.

To begin with, you don't have to change your entire way of working. Over the next few days, simply notice three situations: when you respond to someone despite having planned to rest, when you agree to a task outside the established scope, and when you postpone your own affairs because you're worried about a client's reaction. Don't judge yourself immediately. Write down what happened, why you made that decision, and what it actually cost you. This will help you see where rules are most urgently needed, rather than creating a comprehensive policy that covers everything except the real problem.

Being self-employed doesn't mean having complete control over the world. It does, however, mean having the opportunity to consciously establish the conditions under which you make your time and skills available to others. You don't have to be available all the time to be professional. You don't have to do everything to deserve payment. And you don't have to apologize for having a personal life in addition to running a business.

So if you've somehow lost your own rules along the way, don't worry. We're not going to search for them beneath a mountain of invoices or among messages marked urgent. We'll establish them again, in a way that makes them usable even when the phone is ringing, a client is applying pressure, and the bills are waiting to be paid.

Because if you're working by your own rules, it's probably time you finally knew what those rules were.

Chapter 1 - Professional Freedom, or Why Does My Calendar Have More Bosses Than I Do?

Monday, 9:15 a.m. You open your computer, pour yourself a coffee, and prepare to work on a project that was supposed to be finished last Friday. At last, you have a peaceful morning ahead of you. No meetings, no mandatory briefings, no manager looking over your shoulder. You can work at your own pace. This is exactly what you appreciate about running your own business. At 9:17, the first client calls. At 9:24, a second sends a message asking about a deadline. At 9:31, a third suddenly remembers a minor change to a project that they'd absolutely love to see before noon. At 10:05, you realize that you've already done an enormous amount of work, yet you haven't spent a single minute on the task you intended to start your day with.

If someone asked who sets your schedule, you'd probably answer that you do. After all, you don't have a boss, you choose your own clients, and nobody has to sign a permission slip before you can leave the office. The problem is that formal independence doesn't always mean genuine control over your time. You can run your own company, issue invoices, and decide entirely for yourself whether to buy a new office chair, while simultaneously living according to a schedule dictated by other people's needs. It's rather like buying a car, becoming its legal owner, paying for the fuel and insurance, and then handing the steering wheel to your passengers. Everyone points in a different direction, while you wonder why you've once again run out of time to reach your destination.

Running your own business gives you the ability to make decisions, but it doesn't automatically provide the rules for making them. When you're employed by someone else, at least some of the organizational framework is established in advance. You know when the working day begins, who assigns tasks, and which responsibilities come with your position. When you work for yourself, you have to establish these things independently. If you don't, an organizational vacuum appears, and clients, deadlines, random requests, and your own anxieties will rush to fill it. Nature supposedly abhors a vacuum. So does a self-employed person's calendar, especially once everyone discovers that they can add tasks to it without asking the owner.

Who Really Decides How Your Day Goes?

Imagine two people doing similar work. Both are sole traders, both serve several clients, and both have a comparable number of projects. The first starts work at nine, plans the most important tasks, and checks messages during designated periods. The second also starts at nine but immediately opens their email, messaging app, and list of missed calls. Within an hour, they've answered seven messages, made two phone calls, and agreed to additional revisions. By the end of the day, both people may be equally tired, but only one feels they've been following their own plan.

The difference doesn't necessarily come from stronger willpower or some exceptional talent for time management. The first person has decided which events are allowed to change their schedule and which should wait. The second treats almost every new message like an instruction from a superior. Not always consciously. They've simply spent years learning to react quickly because a fast response was

associated with professionalism. A client has written, so you have to reply. They've called, so you have to answer. They've asked for help, so naturally you should help. When you make decisions like these a dozen or more times a day, they stop being exceptions. They become your way of running a business.

It's worth separating three things that we often lump together: working hours, availability, and delivery deadlines. Working hours are the periods during which you actually perform your tasks. Availability determines when people can contact you and reasonably expect a response. A delivery deadline specifies when the client should receive the agreed result. These three elements may overlap, but they don't have to be identical. You might work on a project in the evening because that's when you concentrate best, without offering an evening telephone support service. You might respond to messages until four in the afternoon and send the finished material the following morning. The mere fact that you're sitting at your computer doesn't mean you're available to every member of humanity who happens to have your phone number.

This distinction is particularly important for people who chose self-employment precisely because they wanted flexibility. If you work best between eleven in the morning and seven in the evening, you don't have to pretend that you're ready at eight every morning for a board meeting of your one-person corporation. You may, however, need regular contact hours for clients. Flexibility then applies to how you organize your work, while predictability applies to how you cooperate with others. The two can coexist perfectly well. Trouble begins only when you present the absence of fixed boundaries as a benefit and then act

surprised when clients use that freedom in whatever way suits them best.

The Invisible Cost of Always Being Available

Every interruption seems small. Answering a message takes a minute, a phone call takes three, and checking an attachment might take five. But the time spent responding doesn't show the full cost. If you're working on a demanding project, you first have to remember where you left off, reconstruct your train of thought, and get back into the task. This doesn't always take long, but the more complicated the work, the more important uninterrupted concentration becomes. Ten short interruptions can leave an entire day fragmented, even when the total time spent talking looks relatively harmless.

There's also an emotional cost. When you haven't established your availability hours, every message requires a separate decision. Should you answer now or later? Will the client be unhappy? Perhaps it's urgent? Could you lose the project? On the surface, you're managing communication. In practice, you're conducting endless negotiations with your own sense of duty. Your phone lies on the table, behaving like a miniature operations manager who doesn't even have to pay you a salary to organize your day effectively.

Many people only discover this mechanism when they're supposed to be resting. You're having lunch with loved ones, your phone vibrates, and you immediately feel the urge to check the screen. You haven't even read the message, yet you're already thinking about work. Even if you don't respond, the notification can remain in your mind. You wonder what it's about, how quickly you'll need to react, and whether tomorrow might be too late. Officially, you're off

duty. In practice, part of your attention is still at work, although nobody will be receiving an invoice for it.

This doesn't mean every entrepreneur must disconnect their phone at precisely four in the afternoon. Some professions, projects, and situations require being on call or responding quickly. What matters, however, is whether that availability was deliberately planned or happened by accident. If you support a client's critical business process, you can establish the conditions for responding to failures. But when a client expects an answer on Saturday because that's when they finally found time to read your proposal, their convenience doesn't automatically have to become your obligation.

A Daily Audit Without Pretending to Be a Detective

Before you start introducing new rules, examine what actually happens to your time. Looking at your calendar isn't enough, because many interruptions never make it onto the schedule. You probably don't create an appointment titled "Random fifteen minutes spent explaining to a client where the save button is." Nevertheless, situations like this regularly influence the course of your day.

For three to five typical working days, record your main activities in a simple document or notebook. You don't need specialized software or laboratory-grade precision. Four categories are enough: work on agreed tasks, client communication, administrative matters, and unplanned activities. Whenever you make a significant change of activity, note approximately when you started and finished. Pay particular attention to moments when you interrupted planned work because of someone else's request.

Your notes might look something like this:

- 9:00-10:10 - Preparing a project for Client A.
- 10:10-10:35 - Unplanned phone call about a new assignment.
- 10:35-11:00 - Answering messages and sending documents.
- 11:00-12:15 - Returning to Client A's project.
- 12:15-12:50 - Additional revisions to previously completed work.

The record itself doesn't tell you which activities were necessary and which were unnecessary. The phone call might have brought in a valuable project, and the revisions might have resulted from your own mistake. The point is to establish how much time you devote to planned activities and how much you surrender to reacting to whatever comes up. If you discover that unplanned communication consumes most of your day, another task-list application won't solve the problem. You need rules defining what may interrupt your work and under what circumstances.

After a few days, also examine what happens outside your official working hours. Do you check messages after dinner? Do you prepare proposals at weekends because there wasn't enough time during the week? Do you sometimes postpone rest to complete an additional task without agreed payment? Don't treat the answers as evidence of personal failure. They're information about how your business operates. If similar figures concerned material costs or unpaid invoices, you'd probably consider them important. Your time is a resource too, even if it doesn't appear as a separate line in your accounting records.

The First Rule: Not Every Request Is an Instruction

One of the most useful changes can be introduced before you've even developed a complete schedule. When a new request arrives, stop automatically treating it as a task that must be completed immediately. Instead, determine whether it requires attention now or whether it has merely reached you now. That's a fundamental difference. A client may send a message at ten in the evening because that's when they're working. It doesn't mean they expect a reply at ten in the evening. Perhaps they haven't thought about your availability at all. They've simply sent the message and gone to bed, while you begin your nighttime analysis of their needs.

If you're unsure, you can establish the expected deadline rather than guessing. Saying, "I've received your message and I'll get back to you with an answer by noon tomorrow," is far more specific than nervously starting work without understanding the situation. You don't even necessarily need to send such an acknowledgment outside your contact hours. When the rules are clear, clients know when to expect a response. That's precisely why communicating your availability matters more than proving every day that you can reply faster than an automated system.

At this stage, it's also worth examining your own promises. If you tell clients, "I'm available pretty much all the time," you can't later assume they'll somehow guess the exceptions. If you say, "Feel free to call about anything," people will also call about matters that could comfortably wait until tomorrow. This isn't necessarily a sign of disrespect. Often, they're simply using the terms you've presented to them. Changing those terms requires a clear message, not the silent hope that everyone will suddenly start thinking exactly as you do.

Owning a business doesn't give you the ability to control every situation. Clients will still have urgent matters, deadlines will still change, and some weeks will turn out to be considerably more difficult than others. You can, however, establish rules for responding to those events. That's where genuine independence reveals itself. Not in the fact that nobody gives you orders, but in your ability to distinguish an agreed obligation from someone else's proposal to change your plans.

At the end of the week, open your notes and identify the three biggest sources of unplanned interruptions. Don't try to fix all of them immediately. Choose one over which you have genuine control. It might be checking email at designated times, reserving uninterrupted time for your most important project, or ending client communication at an agreed hour. Test the change for several days and see whether it improves the flow of your work without neglecting important commitments.

Your own rules begin to work when they influence specific decisions. They don't have to look impressive or be printed on an elegant poster above your desk. They should allow you to look at a new message and calmly decide what to do with it. Because if you don't make room for your own work in your calendar, someone else will be delighted to fill that space with their own concerns.

And they probably won't even bring coffee.

Chapter 2 - A Client Messages, So I Answer. Where Does the Compulsion to Be Immediately Available Come From?

Imagine you run a small web design company. On Wednesday at 6:36 p.m., you receive a message: "Hi, could you take a quick look at something?" There's no information about a system failure, a deadline, or the scale of the problem. Your computer is already switched off, and dinner has just appeared on the table. Nevertheless, you feel that familiar little stab of anxiety. If you don't reply, the client might think you're ignoring them. If you do reply, they'll probably ask you to check the website. You'll open your computer, log into the system, and shortly afterward discover that the issue concerns moving an image a few pixels. The world would have survived this imperfection until morning, but your evening has just been placed under remote management.

Interestingly, the greatest pressure doesn't always come from the client. Sometimes you add expectations to their message that they never actually expressed. You see a question and hear an order. You see a notification and imagine dissatisfaction, the loss of a business relationship, and a dramatic conversation about service quality. Within seconds, your mind can produce a complete simulation of a business crisis, even though the only established fact is that someone asked whether you could take a look at something. Impressive efficiency, especially for an analysis department that nobody hired.

To regain control over your availability, you need to understand why it's so difficult not to react. Simply setting working hours isn't enough if every notification triggers guilt. You can have a beautifully prepared schedule, an automatic reply, and a phone switched to focus mode, yet still find yourself checking your inbox every few minutes. Restricting communication through technology won't solve the problem if the rule operating inside your head remains unchanged: a good business owner responds immediately.

When Speed Starts Pretending to Be Quality

When you're first starting a business, responding quickly is often a sensible strategy. You have relatively few clients, you're eager to earn their trust, and you want to demonstrate that they can rely on you. You answer the phone after two rings, reply to messages almost immediately, and have no difficulty finding time for an extra conversation. The client is happy, the relationship develops, and referrals begin to appear. Behavior that initially helped you build your business receives positive reinforcement. You start believing that your constant availability is precisely what makes you a valuable service provider.

Later, the number of projects increases, but your approach to client service remains unchanged. You still try to answer everyone immediately, even though you have more responsibilities and fewer free hours. Your days become increasingly tense, and you explain to yourself that this is simply what growing a business looks like. In reality, you may be trying to run an established company according to rules that were appropriate when you had two clients and plenty of free time. It's like a restaurant with fifty tables still taking reservations through the owner's personal phone. As long as three people call, the system looks excellent. When

fifty people call, it starts resembling a psychological endurance competition.

It's important to distinguish response speed from the quality of cooperation. What clients generally need most is reliable delivery of the agreed work, compliance with established deadlines, and information about significant changes. Lightning-fast replies can be a pleasant bonus, but they don't replace those fundamentals. You can answer within five minutes and still deliver late because you constantly interrupt your work. Equally, you can respond within an agreed window, deliver results on time, and give clients a greater sense of security than someone who is permanently online but whose project completion date remains a mystery.

The problem begins when you haven't established any response standard at all. A client doesn't know whether a message sent at two in the afternoon will be read an hour later, in the evening, or the following day. You don't have a clear rule either, so you try to compensate for the uncertainty by responding instantly. Under these conditions, every message becomes a miniature examination of your professionalism. And because these examinations take place without warning, you can be called upon to answer questions even during a family lunch.

The Fear of Losing a Client Has Its Reasons

It's easy to tell business owners to stop worrying about other people's expectations. Following that advice becomes much harder when a substantial portion of your monthly income depends on working with one particular person. If a single client accounts for half your company's turnover, worrying about their dissatisfaction isn't absurd. It has an economic justification. So there's little point pretending that

all you need to do is bravely switch off your phone and repeat to yourself that everyone should respect your boundaries.

In this situation, you need to distinguish between genuine risk and imagined risk. Genuine risk may arise from an agreement specifying a particular response time, the nature of the service you provide, or earlier conversations in which the client explicitly stated that rapid communication was important to them. Imagined risk appears when you assume a negative reaction without any specific evidence. A client writes in the evening, so you conclude that they must receive an answer that same evening. You don't test this assumption because even asking about expectations seems dangerous.

A useful approach is to have a conversation that turns assumptions into agreements. You might say, "I'd like to organize our communication more clearly so I can deliver projects more efficiently. As a rule, I respond to messages on working days until four in the afternoon. Are there situations in our cooperation that genuinely require a faster response?" This isn't a declaration of war or a unilateral announcement that customer service has officially ended. It's an invitation to clarify actual needs. You may discover that the client is perfectly happy with an answer the following day. Or perhaps they need rapid contact once a month, on the day an important piece of material is published. In either case, you'll gain information that allows you to organize your work sensibly.

If a client expects constant availability outside normal hours, it's worth treating that availability as a separate element of the service. Being on call requires remaining ready to respond even when nobody contacts you. It limits