

Professional Practice Playbooks

Thinking Space

Leave some time for your
mind to catch up.

A series of horizontal lines for writing, with a teal line crossing through the middle.

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THE STARTER

A meeting ends. You check messages. A problem stalls. You open another tab. You go for a walk and put on a podcast.

Each choice makes sense. Together, they leave little time to think without taking in something new.

You may recognise the alternative: a design problem looks different while washing dishes, or a conversation becomes clearer on a quiet walk. Stepping away can leave room for another perspective.

For the next two weeks, choose one familiar activity; a walk, making coffee, or household chores; and leave it free of added content.

Aim for fifteen minutes, several times a week. Treat that as a starting point, not a threshold.

Keep your phone out of reach. Skip the podcast and feed.

Let your thoughts move without giving them an assignment.

If an idea feels worth keeping, jot down a few words and continue.

Restlessness may show up. So may unfinished work or an awkward conversation. You do not have to turn every thought into a task. There is no requirement to produce an insight.

At the end of two weeks, ask:

Did anything become clearer?

Did I see a problem differently?

Did I notice something I had been too occupied to consider?

Keep one ordinary part of your day unfilled. See what you notice.

THE GAP YOU KEEP FILLING

You finish a piece of work and have a few minutes before the next meeting. There is nothing urgent to do, so you check the team channel or your email. Someone has shared an article. You open it, follow a link, and arrive at the meeting with another three things to read later.

At lunch, you catch up on industry news. On the way home, you listen to an interview. When a question occurs to you, you look it up immediately.

Much of this is useful. Keeping current is part of technical work, and curiosity is often what brought you to it. The difficulty is that useful input can occupy every available gap just as easily as entertainment can.

You can end a day well informed and still unsure what you think.

When learning becomes the default

There is always another explanation to read, tool to investigate, or approach to compare. Sometimes that is exactly what the work

requires. Sometimes you already have enough information to take the next step, but taking in more feels easier than sitting with what remains uncertain.

Consider a design decision you keep reopening. Another comparison may help. But the unresolved question might be which compromise you are willing to accept. More information and time to consider that information serve different purposes.

The same applies outside work. You can read extensively about managing your time while never pausing to consider why so much of it goes to commitments you no longer want.

Thinking space begins with noticing that distinction: am I looking for something I need, or am I filling the available moment?

Why an empty moment can feel awkward

With nothing arriving, you may feel an urge to check something. You may remember an unanswered message, revisit a conversation, or simply feel bored.

There does not have to be a hidden explanation. Checking is familiar. Waiting is less engaging. And sometimes an unresolved concern really is easier to avoid when there is something else to read.

You do not need to diagnose the impulse. For this practice, noticing it is enough. You can feel the urge to fill a moment and leave the moment alone.

WHAT SPACE CAN MAKE POSSIBLE

Perhaps you have spent an afternoon working through a problem, only to see a different approach while cooking dinner. Or left a tense meeting and understood your own objection halfway through a walk.

These experiences are a reason to make room for pauses. They are not a promise that every pause will produce an answer.

Three possibilities make the experiment worthwhile.

Making sense of what happened

A technical discussion can move quickly from question to decision to action. You leave knowing what to do, without being sure you understood everything that happened.

Later, away from the discussion, you may notice that two people were using the same term differently. Or that the team agreed on an implementation while holding different assumptions about the problem.

There is a personal version too. A colleague's comment bothered you, but the next meeting started before you could consider why. In a quieter moment, you may find words for the concern. Those words

can help you decide whether it needs a conversation or can be left alone.

Seeing another approach

Focused work matters. So does recognising when you have been circling the same approach for too long.

Stepping away gives you an opportunity to return with a different view. You might question a constraint you had treated as fixed, recognise a simpler option, or realise that you need to ask someone for help.

Sometimes nothing changes. The problem still requires careful work, a missing fact, or another person's expertise. A quiet walk need not justify itself by solving it.

Considering direction

The most useful thought may have little to do with the immediate task.

You might notice that the work you enjoy has gradually disappeared from your role. That being available has become a habit you never chose. That a supposedly temporary pace has become your normal week.

These questions deserve room alongside questions of execution. Being effective at the work in front of you does not automatically tell you whether you want to keep doing it.

Leave room for things beyond work as well: a friendship you miss, something you want to make, an ordinary pleasure you have stopped making time for. The practice does not need to earn its place through professional output.

PROTECT ONE ORDINARY WINDOW

Start with a part of the day that already exists.

A familiar walk is a good option. So are washing dishes, folding laundry, or sitting outside after lunch. Choose something simple enough that your attention can move freely, while remaining attentive to whatever the activity requires.

Aim for about fifteen minutes, several times a week. This is a practical starting point. If your available window is shorter, begin there. You are choosing something you can repeat during an ordinary week.

Give the window a clear boundary

For the first two weeks, keep the arrangement simple:

Choose a recurring occasion, such as the walk after lunch.

Leave out feeds, messages, reading, podcasts, and music.

Put your phone somewhere inconvenient to check.

Let the activity end naturally, or use a timer if that helps.

Leaving out audio makes the experiment easier to understand: you get to experience that part of your day without accompanying content. You can decide later what arrangement suits you.

Choose a window when you can reasonably be unavailable. If your work includes on-call duties or immediate response requirements, use a different part of the day.

Let your attention move

You do not have to sit still or make your mind blank. Notice your surroundings. Follow a thought for a while. Let it give way to something else.

Resist setting yourself an assignment before each window. “I must solve this before I get back” brings the same pressure into a different location.

You may think about work throughout one walk and barely at all during the next. Both fit the practice. An uneventful fifteen minutes also counts.

WHEN SOMETHING SURFACES

An unfinished task may come to mind. So may a mistake, a difficult conversation, or a question you have been putting off.

You can acknowledge it without acting immediately. Remembering an email does not oblige you to draft the reply on the spot. Recalling a disagreement does not require you to settle it before you get home.

If something needs attention, you can return to it afterwards. The window is not a substitute for a decision or a conversation.

Nor do you need to persist with a thought that keeps going in the same distressing circle. Bring your attention back to the activity or your surroundings, shorten the window, or stop. Discomfort is not a measure of progress.

Capture lightly

Occasionally a thought will feel worth keeping, and trying to remember it will occupy the rest of the window.

Write a few words, then continue.

An index card or small notebook works well. “Check volume assumption” may be enough to recover a technical idea later. “Ask Sam what changed” may be enough to remember a conversation you want to have.

If you use your phone, make the note and put it away. Leave evaluating, expanding, and organising the thought for another time.

You do not need a record of every session. Capture is there to help you let go of a thought, not to create another reporting task.

KEEP THE EXPERIMENT SMALL

The main obstacle may be the feeling that you could be using this time better.

A podcast gives you something tangible: an argument, a technique, a recommendation. An unfilled walk may give you nothing you can name. It is easy to conclude that the podcast was the better use of the time.

Let that question stay open for the two weeks. You are finding out what happens when one small part of your day has less arriving in it.

If you miss a window, take the next one. If the same slot repeatedly fails, choose another. If checking your phone ends each attempt, leave it farther away. Adjust the arrangement to fit the life you have.

At the end of two weeks, look back once:

Was the window workable?

Did anything become clearer, at work or elsewhere?

Did the time feel worthwhile even when no useful idea appeared?

Your answer may be modest. Perhaps you enjoyed walking without listening to anything. Perhaps one persistent concern became specific enough to address. Perhaps you noticed little difference and want to try another time or activity.

Use that experience to decide what to keep. There is no need to turn it into a streak, score, or new obligation.

Technical work offers an endless supply of things to learn and problems to solve. A full life offers plenty more. You can stay interested in all of it and still leave some time unfilled.

Choose one ordinary window. Give yourself room to think.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil Charles brings decades of experience across government, consulting, and academia. He helps technical professionals: employees and independent consultants alike, develop the judgment, communication, and working habits that turn expertise into effective professional practice.

Through the *Professional Practice Academy*^{*} and *The Practice* newsletter[†], he shares practical lessons learned along the way, helping professionals make room for thoughtful work and build rewarding careers.

The *Smart Consultant Academy*[‡] and the *Smart Consultant newsletter*[§] bridges the gap between technical expertise and running a thriving consulting practice.

^{*} <https://professionalpractice.academy/>

[†] <https://proskills.substack.com/>

[‡] <https://thesmartconsultant.academy>

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