

Time Hacker's Handbook

• CHAPTER 3 •

AVOID A FALSE START WITH A PREMORTEM

The best way to recover from a false start is to avoid one in the first place. And the best technique for doing that is something called a “premortem.”

You’ve probably heard of a postmortem—when coroners and physicians examine a dead body to determine the cause of death. A premortem, the brainchild of psychologist Gary Klein, applies the same principle but shifts the exam from after to before.¹

Suppose you and your team are about to embark on a project. Before the project begins, convene for a premortem. “Assume it’s eighteen months from now and our project is a complete disaster,” you say to your team. “What went wrong?” The team, using the power of prospective hindsight, offers some answers. Maybe the task wasn’t clearly defined. Maybe you had too few people, too many people, or the wrong people. Maybe you didn’t have a clear leader or realistic objectives. By imagining failure in advance—by thinking through what might cause a false start—you can anticipate some of the potential problems and avoid them once the actual project begins.

As it happens, I conducted a premortem before I began this book.

I projected two years from the start date and imagined that I'd written a terrible book or, worse, hadn't managed to write a book at all. Where did I go awry? After looking at my answers, I realized I had to be vigilant about writing every day, saying no to every outside obligation so I didn't get distracted, keeping my editor informed of my progress (or lack thereof), and enlisting his help early in untangling any conceptual knots. Then I wrote down the positive versions of these insights—for example, "I worked on the book all morning every morning at least six days a week with no distractions and no exceptions"—on a card that I posted near my desk.

The technique allowed me to make mistakes in advance in my head rather than in real life on a real project. Whether this particular premortem was effective I'll leave to you, dear reader. But I encourage you to try it to avoid your own false starts.

EIGHTY-SIX DAYS IN THE YEAR WHEN YOU CAN MAKE A FRESH START

You've read about temporal landmarks and how we can use them to fashion fresh starts. To help you on that quest for an ideal day to begin that novel or commence training for a marathon, here are eighty-six days that are especially effective for making a fresh start:

- The first day of the month (twelve)
- Mondays (fifty-two)
- The first day of spring, summer, fall, and winter (four)
- Your country's Independence Day or the equivalent (one)
- The day of an important religious holiday—for example, Easter, Rosh Hashanah, Eid al-Fitr (one)
- Your birthday (one)

- A loved one's birthday (one)
- The first day of school or the first day of a semester (two)
- The first day of a new job (one)
- The day after graduation (one)
- The first day back from vacation (two)
- The anniversary of your wedding, first date, or divorce (three)
- The anniversary of the day you started your job, the day you became a citizen, the day you adopted your dog or cat, the day you graduated from school or university (four)
- The day you finish this book (one)

WHEN SHOULD YOU GO FIRST?

Life isn't always a competition, but it is sometimes a *serial* competition. Whether you're one of several people interviewing for a job, part of a lineup of companies pitching for new business, or a contestant on a nationally televised singing program, *when* you compete can be just as important as what you do.

Here, based on several studies, is a playbook for when to go first—and when not to:

Four Situations When You *Should* Go First

1. If you're on a ballot (county commissioner, prom queen, the Oscars), being listed first gives you an edge. Researchers have studied this effect in thousands of elections—from school board to city council, from California to Texas—and voters consistently preferred the first name on the ballot.²
2. If you're *not* the default choice—for example, if you're pitching against a firm that already has the account you're seeking—going first can help you get a fresh look from the decision-makers.³

3. If there are relatively few competitors (say, five or fewer), going first can help you take advantage of the “primacy effect,” the tendency people have to remember the first thing in a series better than those that come later.⁴
4. If you’re interviewing for a job and you’re up against several strong candidates, you might gain an edge from being first. Uri Simonsohn and Francesca Gino examined more than 9,000 MBA admissions interviews and found that interviewers often engage in “narrow bracketing”—assuming small sets of candidates represent the entire field. So if they encounter several strong applicants early in the process, they might more aggressively look for flaws in the later ones.⁵

Four Situations When You *Should Not* Go First

1. If you *are* the default choice, *don’t* go first. Recall from the previous chapter: Judges are more likely to stick with the default late in the day (when they’re fatigued) rather than early or after a break (when they’re revived).⁶
2. If there are many competitors (not necessarily strong ones, just a large number of them), going later can confer a small advantage and going last can confer a huge one. In a study of more than 1,500 live *Idol* performances in eight countries, researchers found that the singer who performed last advanced to the next round roughly 90 percent of the time. An almost identical pattern occurs in elite figure skating and even in wine tastings. At the beginning of competitions, judges hold an idealized standard of excellence, say social psychologists Adam Galinsky and Maurice Schweitzer. As the competition proceeds, a new, more realistic baseline develops, which favors later competitors, who gain the added advantage of seeing what others have done.⁷
3. If you’re operating in an uncertain environment, *not* being first can work to your benefit. If you don’t know what the decision-maker

expects, letting others proceed could allow the criteria to sharpen into focus both for the selector and you.⁸

4. If the competition is meager, going toward the end can give you an edge by highlighting your differences. “If it was a weak day with many bad candidates, it’s a really good idea to go last,” says Simonsohn.⁹

FOUR TIPS FOR MAKING A FAST START IN A NEW JOB

You’ve read about the perils of graduating in a recession. We can’t do much to avoid that fate. But whenever we begin a new job—in a recession or a boom—we can influence how much we enjoy the job and how well we do. With that in mind, here are four research-backed recommendations for how to make a fast start in a new job.

1. Begin before you begin.

Executive advisor Michael Watkins recommends picking a specific day and time when you visualize yourself “transforming” into your new role.¹⁰ It’s hard to get a fast start when your self-image is stuck in the past. By mentally picturing yourself “becoming” a new person even before you enter the front door, you’ll hit the carpet running. This is especially true when it comes to leadership roles. According to former Harvard professor Ram Charan, one of the toughest transitions lies in going from a specialist to a generalist.¹¹ So as you think about your new role, don’t forget to see how it connects to the bigger picture. For one of the ultimate new jobs—becoming president of the United States—research has shown that one of the best predictors of presidential success is how early the transition began and how effectively it was handled.¹²

2. Let your results do the talking.

A new job can be daunting because it requires establishing yourself in the organization's hierarchy. Many individuals overcompensate for their initial nervousness and assert themselves too quickly and too soon. That can be counterproductive. Research from UCLA's Corinne Bendersky suggests that over time extroverts lose status in groups.¹³ So, at the outset, concentrate on accomplishing a few meaningful achievements, and once you've gained status by demonstrating excellence, feel free to be more assertive.

3. Stockpile your motivation.

On your first day in a new role, you'll be filled with energy. By day thirty? Maybe less so. Motivation comes in spurts—which is why Stanford psychologist B. J. Fogg recommends taking advantage of “motivation waves” so you can weather “motivation troughs.”¹⁴ If you're a new salesman, use motivation waves to set up leads, organize calls, and master new techniques. During troughs, you'll have the luxury of working at your core role without worrying about less interesting peripheral tasks.

4. Sustain your morale with small wins.

Taking a new job isn't exactly like recovering from an addiction, but programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous do offer some guidance. They don't order members to embrace sobriety forever but instead ask them to succeed “24 hours at a time,” something Karl Weick noted in his seminal work on “small wins.”¹⁵ Harvard professor Teresa Amabile concurs. After examining 12,000 daily diary entries by several hundred workers, she found that the single largest motivator was making progress in meaningful work.¹⁶ Wins needn't be large to be meaningful. When you enter a new role, set up small

“high-probability” targets and celebrate when you hit them. They’ll give you the motivation and energy to take on more daunting challenges further down the highway.

WHEN SHOULD YOU GET MARRIED?

One of the most important beginnings many of us make in life is getting married. I’ll leave it to others to recommend whom you should marry. But I can give you some guidance about when to tie the knot. The science of timing doesn’t provide definitive answers, but it does offer three general guidelines:

1. Wait until you’re old enough (but not too old).

It’s probably no surprise that people who marry when they’re very young are more likely to divorce. For instance, an American who weds at twenty-five is 11 percent less likely to divorce than one who marries at age twenty-four, according to an analysis by University of Utah sociologist Nicholas Wolfinger. But waiting too long has a downside. Past the age of about thirty-two—even after controlling for religion, education, geographic location, and other factors—the odds of divorce *increase* by 5 percent per year for at least the next decade.¹⁷

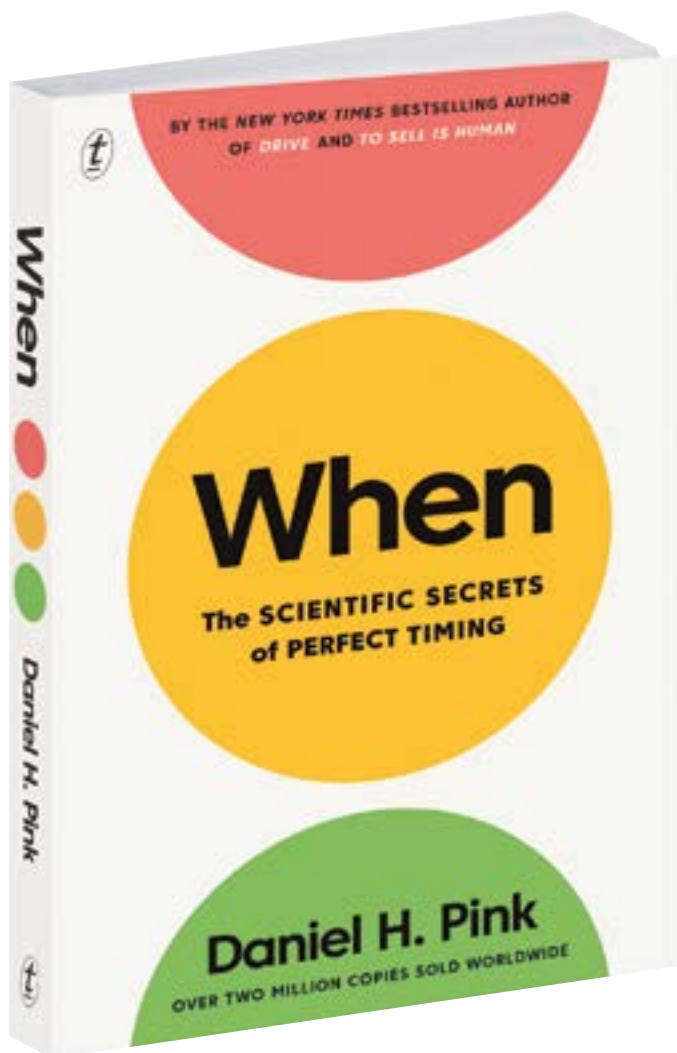
2. Wait until you’ve completed your education.

Couples tend to be more satisfied with their marriages, and less likely to divorce, if they have more education before the wedding. Consider two couples. They’re the same age and race, have comparable incomes, and have attended the same total amount of school. Even among these similar couples, the pair who weds after completing school is more likely to stay together.¹⁸ So finish as much education as you can before getting hitched.

3. Wait until your relationship matures.

Andrew Francis-Tan and Hugo Mialon at Emory University found that couples that dated for at least one year before marriage were 20 percent less likely to divorce than those who made the move more quickly.¹⁹ Couples that had dated for more than three years were even less likely to split up once they exchanged vows. (Francis-Tan and Mialon also found that the more a couple spent on its wedding and any engagement ring, the more likely they were to divorce.)

In short, for one of life's ultimate *when* questions, forget the romantics and listen to the scientists. Prudence beats passion.



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