

THE EXPERT ENERGY ENGINE

EXTRACT: CHAPTER 9

MASTER EXPERT

HOW TO USE **EXPERTSHIP** TO
ACHIEVE PEAK PERFORMANCE,
SENIORITY AND INFLUENCE IN
A TECHNICAL ROLE

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“In order to carry a positive action, we must develop here a positive vision.”

Dalai Lama

CHAPTER | 09 |

The Expert Energy Engine

How do we spend the right time on the right tasks to increase the value we add to the organization?

IN THIS CHAPTER, WE WILL EXPLORE:

- The resources we have at our disposal that are in least supply are time and energy. It's impossible to create more of them... or is it?
- Techniques to assess where we currently spend our time and energy and where we would like to invest these resources to create greater value for the organization.
- The Expert Energy Engine, and how to deploy it effectively to regain control of our own time and energy.

ONE OF THE PRIMARY shifts between the lower levels of Expertship and operating at Master Expert level is the shift from a focus on immediate, responsive, short-term tasks to one characterized by longer term, strategically oriented, proactive initiatives. This is an easy thing to describe, but in the authors' experience, it's a very difficult transition for most experts to make.

Many experts tell us that they feel inundated with a deluge of requests that don't represent the best use of their time and capabilities. They don't feel like they have the right or liberty to decline many of these requests as there generally isn't an alternative resource available or an alternative department that can complete the task. The net effect is that the volume of immediate

tasks keeps experts tied up and distracted from the more significant value-adding activities that they might otherwise engage in, which also provide them with greater fulfillment.

Spending the right amount of time on the right things for the right reasons is a defining talent of Master Experts. Many call this skill “time management” or “advanced prioritization.” We like the idea of “energy management” since we don’t, in reality, manage time. We simply choose what we direct our energy (our time and attention) toward. We determine what is most deserving of our energy and, when required, direct appropriate levels of energy toward the appropriate tasks.

The frustration for experts comes not just from the fact that our skills are wasted on basic tasks but from people wasting our time and sapping our energy. Experts need lots of energy to be innovative and creative. Spending energy on low-value tasks destroys our ability to have the right amount of energy available to make a bigger difference.

“In most organizations, the amount of expert work is increasing, but expert resources are reducing.”

Let’s take Peter as an example of the many experts we meet. He receives upward of 400 emails a day. This can take up to 50 percent of his workday, with a further 25 percent (on average) of his day being consumed by meetings of one sort or another. This leaves him, at best, with two to three hours to actually produce all of the work outputs that he’s paid to deliver, and that includes him working through until 6.30 p.m. or later four nights per week. These unpaid additional hours aren’t in his contract, but Peter feels the culture of his organization expects this additional effort from him.

Peter feels that he’s constantly behind in most of his projects and is struggling to meet deadlines he didn’t set and often was not consulted about. He needs coffee to get through the day, he no longer gets to the gym, and he rarely spends quality time with his family. When he finally arrives home weary from the day, he reclines on the couch in front of the TV until it’s time to go to bed. After a few hours of sleep, it all kicks off again the following day.

Peter’s story isn’t uncommon. With our digital devices connecting us 24/7 to the office and the often unreasonable expectation of a prompt response to all digital communication, all employees, experts included, are maxing out in terms of their capacity to process and properly attend to all of the information and requests coming at them.

Most organizations don’t have an over-supply of qualified experts, and invariably, the volume of inbound requests for the expertise of experts is completely disproportionate to the number of experts available. In most

organizations, the amount of expert work is increasing, but expert resources are reducing. These factors create a focus that is reactive and typically more transactional, with the experts responding to the tactical requirements of others, who are often oblivious as to what sorts of value the organization might truly derive from its experts if they were otherwise directed.

As experts, we alone might realize the contribution we could make that might be of greatest value. Oftentimes, those we report to don't have adequate knowledge to see where our time is being wasted. Therefore, it's our responsibility as experts to take charge of where our time is spent. We cannot depend on anyone else to sort this out for us.

Many of the experts we work with believe it simply isn't possible to gain control of their time and their energy. They believe organizational design and poor management have consigned them to a life of overworked misery forever. We beg to differ.

Changing the Polarity

AS WE DISCUSS IN many chapters of this book, experts live complicated and multi-faceted professional lives. We typically have many masters, most of whom never talk to one another. We have responsibilities on multiple projects simultaneously, which mysteriously all have deadlines that clash. We have huge workloads and not enough time to complete them. We have no one obvious to delegate these tasks to.

“The Expert Energy Engine helps experts take back control of their working lives.”

We all know this, but perhaps it hasn't dawned on all of us yet that we have far more agency than we might suppose and, as such, share responsibility for our lives feeling so out of control, overwhelmed by workload and responsibility, and misunderstood.

Effective prioritization of our energy on activities that add high value is actually our responsibility. If we wait for multiple masters to sit down and plan this all out for us, we will be waiting forever. And indeed, many of us have been waiting forever.

The **Expert Energy Engine** (see Figure 9.1) is a seven-step process to help all experts take back control of their working lives—and often their wider lives as well. There are many time-management models out there, and we've morphed some of the best into our process, which is designed specifically for experts. The following seven steps represent a 15 to 20-minute planning process that is to be conducted weekly, or at least regularly.

Capability: PERSONAL IMPACT

The Expert Energy Engine

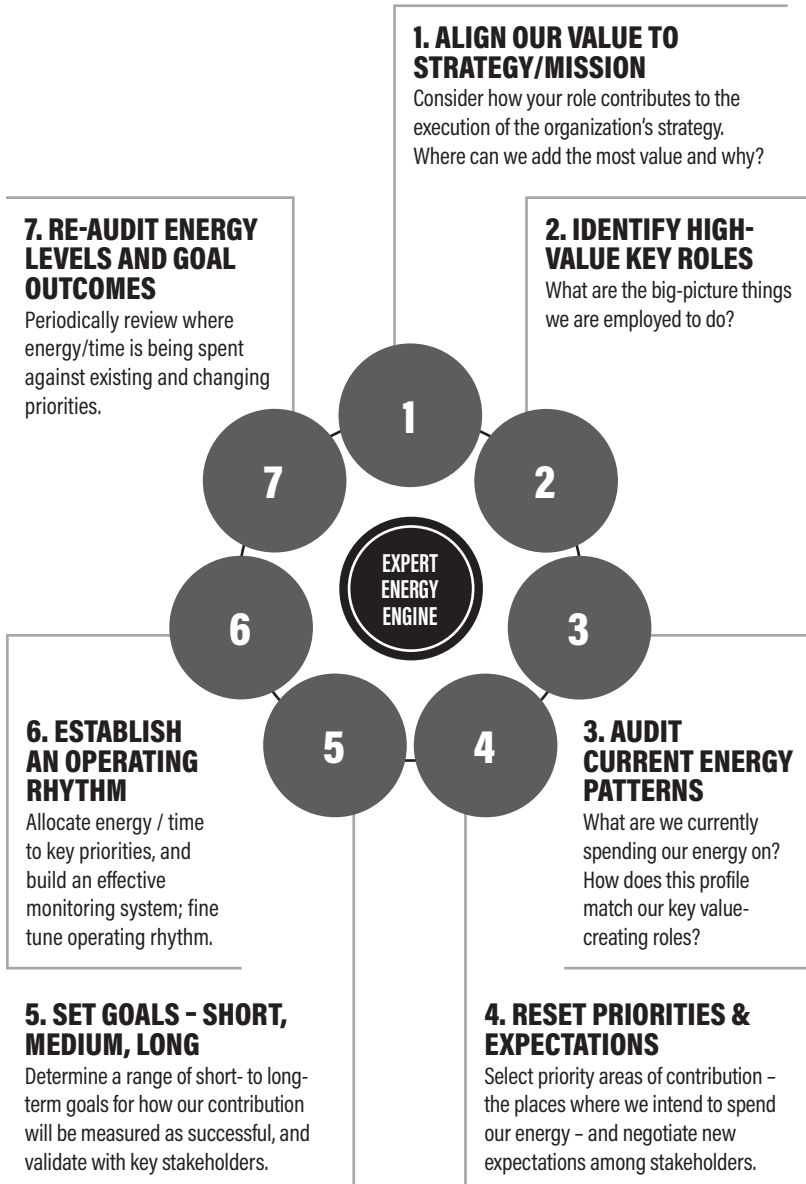


FIGURE 9.1: The Expert Energy Engine

Step 1: Align Our Value with Strategy/Mission

Our planning session needs to begin with thinking through how our role contributes to the execution of the organization's strategy and purpose. Where can we add the most value, and why? What are our long-term goals and measures of success?

This is our 70,000-foot question. It connects the work we do with how we directly or indirectly help the organization we work for execute its strategy and achieve its purpose or mission. Did you know that the idea of a 70,000-foot perspective comes from the height a U2 spy plane flies at, giving it a 550 km view of the horizon, which is a very long way out in front (see Chapter 48 for our graphic on this concept)?

We might want to start with an even wider lens, looking at where, as an expert, we want to contribute holistically, and then consider the contribution we're making to our current organization as a milestone along that road. The broader our thinking can be about contribution at this stage, the better. This is because we're seeking our "true north," which is where, in the bigger picture, we're going and why. The idea is to invest a few minutes, whether each week or month, but at least once a quarter, reflecting on how effectively our time and energy are currently being devoted to achieving high-value impact.

Key questions: What do we want to achieve overall? What things matter most to us? We could explore such questions from a whole-life perspective if so inclined, or we could simply consider such questions from within a purely professional frame of reference. What do we ultimately want to deliver by way of value? What's our vision for ourselves and our function(s) over the next two or three years? Naturally, such reflection sits alongside evaluative questions, such as "To what extent are we on track?" This sort of personal inquiry helps inform our long-term goal setting and eventually cascades down into setting targets for the week ahead, as well as the necessary summoning of the discipline it will take to execute these and push back on distractions from our preferred focus.

Step 2: Identify High-Value Key Roles

The second step is to consider all of the different roles in which we would need to be active in order to make headway toward our overall contributions to the execution of the organizational strategy or purpose.

These can include roles outside of work, such as spouse, parent, neighbor, community volunteer, and so on. Our energy levels at work are likely to also be significantly impacted by the extent to which we're using our non-work time productively.

At work, most experts have multiple roles. We may have a primary role that is specified in our job description, but this only represents one aspect of what we actually do and are expected and need to do.

“One expert amended this to ‘helping others solve technical problems that they ought to be able to solve themselves.’”

We may have several responsibilities or projects, all of which need some degree of input, and some, even high-value ones that happen to not be urgent, may be suffering from neglect or under-investment. There may be all kinds of informal roles, such as coach, knowledge curator, thought leader, networker, innovator, and so on, that warrant our attention. The purpose of this step of the process is to brainstorm all of our roles and then to determine which of them are of the highest value and would benefit from the setting of specific goals to be accomplished within a given time period. Typically, it’s the coming week, but sometimes it’s over a longer period. What would success look like in the long term, medium term, and possibly short term?

Step 3: Audit Current Energy Patterns

In this third step, we assess where we’re currently spending our time and our energy. There is only one way to do this: conduct a simple audit by measuring for several weeks what tasks and activities we’re actually spending our time on. Our advice to experts isn’t to over-engineer this process. Simply use a spreadsheet or pencil and paper to note down what time has been spent throughout the day. We recommend doing this four times throughout the day: mid-morning, lunch, mid-afternoon and at the end of the workday. We can usually estimate quite accurately what we have spent the last two to three hours on.

Having worked with many experts and people leaders in the last few years, the authors can attest to both the value and the surprise involved in this exercise. We suspect you won’t quite believe how quickly you can identify huge portions of time that get wasted each week. Or at least how much time is spent relatively unproductively as our attention was diverted from our highest priorities.

Once a clear pattern has been established, it’s possible to start categorizing activities and tasks. For example, one category of energy consumption that chews up an inordinate amount of time might be “helping others solve technical problems.”

One expert amended this to “helping others solve technical problems that they ought to be able to solve themselves.” This expert reacted to the

insight that this activity was taking up 20 percent of her time by spending a month mentoring and training this group of colleagues. The end results were that this category of energy consumption diminished by over 75 percent. This investment in *knowledge transfer* really paid off (see Chapter 46). These categories of sub-optimal tasks will vary depending on the role of each expert.

Once we're clear on where we actually spend our time (usually alarmingly different from where we previously thought we spent our time), then we're ready to embark on the next step.

Step 4: Reset Priorities and Expectations

This step is where the hard work begins. Taking the results of our work in step 2, identifying where we can add the most value, and combining this work with the results of step 3, where we spend our time, most experts need to reset their priorities. To do this, we've come up with a simple list:

- What do we need to do more of?
- What should we continue doing?
- What must we stop doing?

This last question is where there is usually a requirement for some courageous conversations (see Chapter 11). In order to allocate more energy to high-value activities, we have to stop doing low-value activities, even though these may be activities that our stakeholders have grown accustomed to us delivering for them. The courageous conversations will be about resetting the expectations of these stakeholders because, given our new priorities, we regretfully no longer have the resources to complete these tasks for them. Following each of these steps is critical for this to be effective. Without established high-value alternative activities that are connected to the organizational strategy and purpose, we can't plausibly argue the case for ceasing or reducing the delivery of service to others.

Letting stakeholders down gently is a subtle art and calls for careful planning. We suggest using the I-GRROW model, which is described in Chapter 48).

Step 5: Set Goals - Short, Medium, Long

We have now worked out which roles we need to focus on. The next step involves establishing very specific goals to be achieved within each role across various timeframes.

What constitutes short, medium and long term will vary by role. Often, achieving long-term goals requires some very specific actions and outcomes to be achieved, usually by the end of this week or month.

This planning process requires us to identify something that represents a stride forward, focused activity leading to a worthwhile outcome that likely wouldn't otherwise be undertaken or delivered. For instance, if we want to add more value to our technical cohort and increase others' capability or commitment, perhaps with a view to delegating some lower value responsibilities to these colleagues, then we might set ourselves a goal to coach these colleagues.

The long-term goal is for them to become trusted and competent in carrying out new activities. A short-term goal might be to gain their buy-in, develop a coaching plan, and commence coaching sessions. For example, "I will work with Angela on refreshing her Lean Sigma skills with a view to her picking up project X from next month onward." And we would do the same (set a worthwhile goal) for each of our other prioritized roles.

We recommend starting with long-term goals first, then contemplating what steps need to be taken to eventually achieve that goal. On a weekly basis, we recommend that you identify and diarize one high-value goal for each of your key roles and build the entire week around these priorities.

Step 6: Establish an Operating Rhythm

The next step, which, in our experience, is one that most experts don't give enough attention, is to start populating our calendar with suitable time allocations for carrying out the necessary activities in support of the goals we have set in the previous step.

"How do we defeat the energy thieves?"

The idea is that the things that matter most should not be at the mercy of the things which matter less. These critical tasks must claim a place of priority in the calendar before the week fills up with less important or less valuable stuff. For many of the experts we work with, this is a significant behavioral change. Often, experts use their diaries only for meetings and reminders, not for allocating time to specific tasks.

Over time, this kind of approach will allow for a gradual displacement of lower value activities with elective high-value activities. It's never going to be possible to do everything, but this method will mean that our focus can truly be on the highest value actions rather than being deluged by lower value tasks and having our true (but often unprioritized), potentially highest contribution eclipsed. Now the other things will have to make way for our chosen (and, because of excellent stakeholder engagement, *agreed*) priorities.

One of the authors, Alistair, has a reasonably complex role. He's the leader of the business, and he's allocated 25 percent of his time to this task. He's also a working consultant (25 percent), the chief marketing strategist (20 percent), and has an important business development role (30 percent).

Alistair has established that his natural operating rhythm is monthly. That is, in any one week, he can't achieve this balance between all of these roles. Some weeks, for example, he's running Expertship programs all week, but over the month, balance is achievable.

He uses color coding in his diary so he can easily identify which of these roles are being under- or over-serviced.

There are some months, of course, where consulting commitments overtake marketing activity. While this isn't a perfect state of affairs, at least it's instantly visible using this system. It enables us to rebalance our activities in the following months.

It's important to note that while we're busy trying to establish an operating rhythm that matches our chosen high-value roles and goals, others in the organization, those with quite different agendas, are busy trying to steal our energy and time. We have some suggestions on how to defeat *energy thieves* in the next chapter. Energy thieves don't do this deliberately, of course. In fact, they might actually have tasks that ought to take precedence over ours.

*“Did we just go flaky?
Is there a pattern of flakiness we could
learn from?”*

The first five steps of the Expert Energy Engine are progressive methods of identifying and scheduling priorities. But a plan isn't, in itself, a cause for celebration until it's executed. A plan is no guarantee of execution or that benefits will be realized, though it typically heightens the likelihood of execution. More so than if we never conceptualized what exactly we want to happen. If we have a plan to conduct a coaching session with Angela on Thursday at 4 p.m., we have a greater fighting chance of pushing back on others' requests for our time at that moment than we would if we only had a vague notion that we would coach Angela at some point.

Of course, that doesn't mean that we slavishly stick to the plan, regardless of situations arising. If there is a genuine crisis that warrants our attention, we can always adapt and reschedule with Angela.

Stephen Covey famously suggests “exercising integrity in the moment of choice.” Exercising integrity means “making choices that are consistent with one's values.” If the plan is well-conceived then exercising integrity will usually involve pushing back on the less important matter that has arisen

and sticking to our chosen focus. But it's entirely possible that something more important but not envisioned deserves our attention. In this case, we accommodate but quickly reschedule the delayed priority.

Step 7: Re-Audit Energy Levels and Goal Outcomes

At the outset of the next planning cycle, we can reflect on the previous week or month's plan and its execution. Did we achieve all of the planned goals? Yes? Do we feel a sense of progress and accomplishment? If not, why not? Do we need to go deeper in our goal setting? If we didn't achieve our goals, why was that? Was it because of legitimate but unanticipated priorities that came up? Or did we just go flaky? Is there a pattern of flakiness that we could learn from? What do we need to do next time to ensure that the coaching session with Angela goes ahead? Is repair work needed in our relationships?

Can you imagine what kinds of results and progress we could make if we made a habit of undertaking this seven-step planning process regularly, whether weekly or monthly, over the next few months? More and more of our time will be invested in high-value activities, gradually displacing low-value activities. We'll be proactive, strategic, and develop our brand accordingly. We'll be building capability around us. Taking timely preventative action. Investing in relationships. Experiencing increased quality of life. And the top payoff is that we'll experience less stress.

There is, of course, one fundamental consequence of this analysis and planning. We're going to have to say "no" to some of our stakeholders more often. That's not comfortable or easy, particularly if they have gotten used to us simply delivering whatever they want, whenever they want it.

The next chapter is focused on the subtle but critical art of saying "no."

TAKING ACTION

Growing Our Energy Management Skills

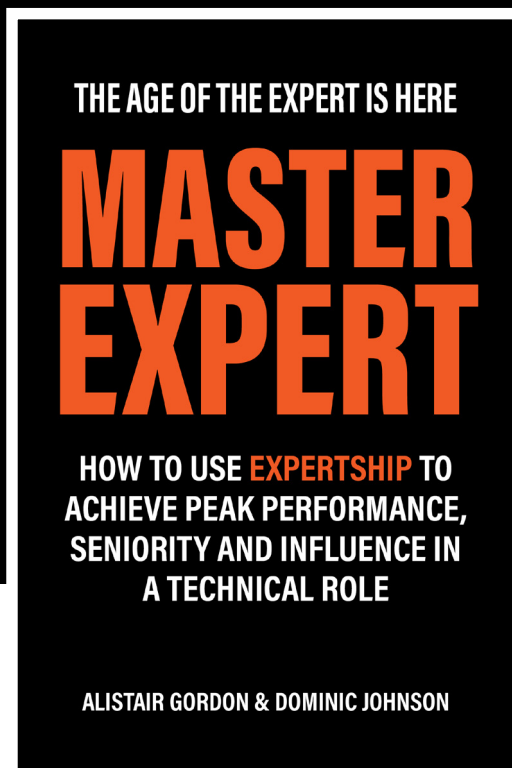
IF THIS IS AN expert skill in which you believe could help you add greater value, here is a high-level suggestion for actions to take:

▶ REGULARLY AUDIT WHERE YOU SPEND YOUR TIME

- It takes far less time than many experts believe, but keeping a register of where we're spending our time and energy is a great way of saving time.
- Deploy a simple system that suits your working rhythm to capture what you're spending your time on.
- Assess regularly whether the percentage of time between major key performance indicators (KPIs) is on track or needs adjustment.
- Explore with your leaders what percentage of time ought to be spent on each KPI and discuss key conversations that need to be had with stakeholders to rebalance your energy allocations.
- Build clear and compelling narratives that can be deployed when you need to decline tasks. Help stakeholders understand why you're required to spend energy on alternative activities rather than the ones they would like you to complete.
- Identify a sensible operating rhythm for your role and assess weekly whether you're sticking to it. If not, why not? What is getting in the way?

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