

9. Designing Margin into Your Days

Subtract before you systematize. Everything you keep costs something to keep.

The chapter in brief

Nadia has two Tuesdays and they are the same Tuesday: same job, same two kids, same necessary work, same three meetings that genuinely have to happen. One ends with something left. The difference is architecture.

The highest-leverage move comes first, and it is the one the productivity industry ignores because it sells systems rather than subtraction: take things off the books. Only then group what survives — much of what a task costs is the loading, so batching by context is among the cheapest wins available. Then the idea that separates a designed week from a merely tidy one: buffer is not what is left over. Almost everyone schedules the real work first and fills the visible gaps because gaps look like inefficiency, until the calendar is a solid wall and one unexpected task takes the day down.

What to hold on to

- **Five moves:** cut two demands, batch one category, place three buffers, book one margin hour, write one boundary as an if-then.
- **Boundaries are contracts, not walls.** Say what you *will* do, and pre-decide the script — the moment of demand is the worst moment to compose one.
- **If you manage people, you design their weeks too.** Route on purpose; make interruption norms team defaults rather than personal favours; delegate authority, not just labour, and budget the evaluation as a real line item.

The evidence, honestly

- That responsiveness collapses as a system approaches full utilisation is standard queueing theory. The "85 per cent" figure is a directional heuristic, not a precise optimum — the right buffer depends on how variable your work is.
- The planning fallacy is robust and persists even when people are asked for pessimistic estimates, which makes buffers a correction for a reliable bias rather than a nicety. If-then planning has good support, with real-world effects more modest than laboratory ones.

THE AI THREAD Chapter 8 named the wrong rescue; this is where the right use lands. Put AI on the *demand* side, aimed at your audit's Shrink marks. Then the Chapter 7 rule governs — compress two hours into twenty minutes and instantly refill the space, and you have built no margin at all.

Your Margin Move — The Week Redesign

Take next week's calendar and make five specific moves. Not perfectly. Really. Then set a reminder thirty days out to re-take the Scorecard — the gap between the two readings is the only proof that matters, because it is yours.

Printable worksheet: ThoughtMargin.com/downloads/the-week-redesign.pdf

Carry forward. A designed week creates the space to think. It does not protect what happens inside it. · From *Thought Margin: Reclaiming the Capacity to Think in the Age of AI* by Rachael-Renée Rychling. A companion, not a substitute — the caveats that make the claims trustworthy live in the book.