Thirty years ago, I picked up my first paycheck. It wasn't a check, in fact—just a small collection of bills and coins in an envelope, my wages for working as a clerk in a local supermarket. On the face of it, it wasn't a great job. It was poorly paid, and certainly not glamorous. I stacked shelves, mopped floors, and wore a company-issued uniform marked with stains from its previous owner. The manager was gruff and kept an eye on the store from a booth high above the shop floor. And yet, somehow, I liked it. There was camaraderie among the staff, and even the occasional night out together. I took pride in pleasing customers with my speed at the register. I felt useful.

Six years later, I landed a far more upscale role as a researcher at an economics institute. I had my own office and a surprisingly large number of recycling bins all to myself. But I soon felt strangely miserable. I couldn't get anyone to pay attention to my work, and I drifted. I wrote an enormous, earnest report—on economic development in post-Communist Europe—that I'm pretty certain nobody read. I was dealing with what we'd these days call a “first-world problem,” and I knew I was lucky to have the job. But it became hard to summon the energy to turn up to work every day. And at that point in my life, I didn't know how to turn it around. I treaded water till my contract was up, then quietly moved on.

Over the course of my life, I've done a lot of different types of work, some of it worse and some of it better than those two early jobs of mine. I've been a hotel maid, receptionist, and waitress. I've had demanding careers as an economist, a management consultant, and an executive coach. I've worked in the private sector and the public sector; I've been part of a huge global company and I've launched my own tiny start-up. And through it all, I noticed the same thing over and again: that the
quality of my day-to-day experience wasn’t necessarily defined by my title. It was possible to have good days in “bad” jobs, while the more prestigious roles didn’t always correlate with great contentment.

That paradox seeded my lifelong curiosity about what it takes to flourish at work, both mentally and emotionally. It became something of a personal cause as I sought to find the right way to handle the increasing intensity of my professional life—and even more so once I noticed how my colleagues and clients often felt frustrated and worn down, making it hard for them to function at their best. In fact, survey after survey suggests that half (or more) of all employees feel disengaged in their work. Add to that the off days experienced by those of us who generally feel motivated and happy, and we’re looking at a lot of lost human potential. Yet we often talk about professional dissatisfaction as if it’s a casual disappointment, something to be endured until the weekend rolls around, and perhaps joked about with friends. (“What happened to you today?” “Oh, work, you know.” “Ha ha. Me too. Have a drink.”)

So I’ve devoted much of my career to figuring out how to improve our chances of saying a cheery “yes, thanks” when we’re asked “Did you have a good day?” My twelve years with McKinsey & Company (the management consultancy) helped greatly in my pursuit of that goal, since it gave me the opportunity to find out what everyday life was like inside hundreds of workplaces. I specialized in projects that helped organizations shift their culture in a more positive direction, which meant I spent a lot of time studying behavior, attitudes, and processes. And whenever I could, I’d ask my clients the same three questions: What does a good day look like for you? What about a bad one? What would it take to have more good days? Then, I’d get to work, helping them turn their bad days into better days. Sometimes that would involve coaching individual leaders; other times, I’d convene large groups to help them rethink the way they worked together. Repeatedly, I observed how fairly small changes—for example, fine-tuning the way people set priorities or handled disagreements—could result in major improvements to performance and job satisfaction. It was uplifting to see.

Throughout those years, my work leaned heavily on the growing body of behavioral science findings on what it takes for human beings to thrive. My first career was in economics, but I became deeply interested in developments in the other behavioral sciences, too, so I
did some additional training in psychology and neuroscience. Then I spent countless hours reading academic articles and books (more than six hundred at last count) in the three disciplines, looking for findings that I could translate into actionable advice for my clients. And that abundance of research and practical experience is the bedrock of *How to Have a Good Day*.

**SO WHAT IS A GOOD DAY?**

Over the years, I noticed some common answers to my “what is a good day” question—answers that resonated with the small delights of my humble supermarket job. First, people often talked about getting a buzz from feeling productive, and from knowing that their efforts counted toward something worthwhile. The best days also tended to involve people feeling confident that they were doing a fine job, and that they had the support they needed from others. Finally, people talked about good days leaving them feeling more energized than depleted, overall. I don’t mean that the work wasn’t physically or mentally tiring—just that it gave back enough enjoyment and motivation to make up for whatever it was taking out of them.

Of course, whether we get to have all that agreeable stuff on a given workday is partly the result of luck. If we’re handling a cranky colleague or a crisis, it’s obvious that we’re not entirely in control of the way the day feels. But my experience has led me to a heartening conclusion: we have more room to maneuver than we generally realize. The secret lies in learning some of the science explaining how the brain works, and why people behave the way they do. Less of the day seems driven by chance once we understand some of the forces that shape our choices and our emotions, and once we recognize how our thought patterns can affect everything from our perception of reality to the moods of those around us. Grasp these essentials, and it becomes far clearer how to bring the best out of ourselves and others. And that puts us in a much stronger position to create the kind of day we really want to have.

For example, an executive who shares his story later in the book talks about starting to have “unexpectedly great meetings” after he learned something that behavioral scientists know well: that even small challenges to a person’s sense of competence will put their brain on the defensive, making it harder for them to think clearly (in turn creating something of a self-fulfilling prophecy). In his meetings, the executive’s
take-no-prisoners personal style had inadvertently been triggering this
defensive reaction in the people around him, and it was causing a lot of
tension. But once he tweaked the way he expressed his views, the qual-
ity of his interactions changed within moments.

Elsewhere in the book, another seasoned professional tells us about
“suddenly” securing new promotion opportunities after trying out new
science-based techniques to sharpen her focus and self-confidence. We
hear about a leader who delightedly discovered hidden talents in her
team after acting on research showing that people think more creatively
when given a particular type of space to think. Once an entrepreneur
learns a little about the brain’s reward system, he finds he can say no to
to people while making them feel almost as good as if he’d agreed to their
requests. And so on.

*How to Have a Good Day* is all about the ways we can create more
of these sorts of lucky breaks once we know more about the science of
our magnificent minds.

**ABOUT THIS BOOK**

I’ve arranged the book around seven building blocks that echo the
themes in people’s answers to my “good day” question. First, there are
two sections designed to give you a strong foundation for everything
you’re doing, by showing you how to set the right kind of priorities and
make the best possible use of your time. Next, you’ll find three sec-
tions that explain how to transform more of your tasks into a pleasure
and a triumph, by helping you to ace every interaction, maximize your
creativity and wisdom, and boost your personal impact. Finally, I’ve
written two sections on ways to maintain your joie de vivre throughout
the workday, by showing you how to boost your resilience in the face of
disappointment, and laying out strategies for generating more energy
throughout it all.

As a bonus, you’ll find advice at the back of the book showing you
how to use the book’s insights to improve two fixtures of modern work-
ing life: meetings and emails. There’s also a handy checklist to help you
use the book’s tips to reinvigorate your morning-to-night routine.
SCIENCE, STEPS, STORIES

Throughout the book, you’ll find a blend of scientific evidence, practical techniques, and real examples from people who’ve used those techniques in their own lives. Let me say a few words about each of those.

First, every piece of advice in How to Have a Good Day is backed up by rigorous scientific evidence from psychology, behavioral economics, or neuroscience. I’ve taken care to focus only on findings that are widely accepted and have been replicated by multiple research teams, though I’ve sometimes picked out quirky experiments that manage to illustrate a particular point while raising a smile (or a groan). My aim has been to keep the science as simple as it can be while remaining correct. To help with that, in the “Science Essentials” section which appears right after this introduction, I’ve written a short guide to three big cross-cutting themes that frame every idea in the book. That’s all you’ll need to navigate this fascinating evidence with ease.

The central purpose of the book is to translate all that science into step-by-step techniques for improving your day-to-day life. Each chapter is designed to allow you to quickly find the advice you need, because the practical pointers are highlighted with bullet points; each chapter also ends with a box that summarizes its advice for quick reference. I’ve laid out the chapters in a sequence that I hope is helpful—but if you’re wrestling with a specific challenge at work right now, you might choose to flip ahead to material that speaks directly to your current concern. Skipping around should work, especially if you’ve first read the Science Essentials section.

As I’ve already hinted, you’ll also hear real stories from dozens of successful people who describe how the advice in this book has helped them improve their working lives. Together, they represent most major industries and span every continent of the world (except the coldest one). Some are at the peak of their careers, while others are on their way up. I’ve used their real names in all but a couple of cases, although I’ve not included their surnames or organizations to keep them from being deluged with requests for advice once their wise ways are made public. I hope you’ll find them as inspiring as I do. And in case you’re wondering, I do take my own medicine every single day—so I’ll also share some examples of times that these techniques helped me flourish in my career.
SPREADING THE WORD

As well as showing you how to be in top form, How to Have a Good Day can be used to help you bring the best out of people you lead, manage, or collaborate with. Most of the techniques here can be used in groups, to improve team interactions, or provide structure for important meetings—whether or not you refer to the science behind the techniques. (If you would like to gather colleagues together to talk about the book’s suggestions, you’ll find materials to help you facilitate group discussions at www.howtohaveagoodday.com.)

I’ve also seen the book’s advice make a positive difference in settings beyond conventional workplaces. Whether you’re a college student or a community volunteer, a retiree or a homemaker, you can use the principles in this book to boost your effectiveness and your enjoyment of the day. Many of my clients have even confided to me over the years that these techniques have improved their marriages and strengthened relationships with children and friends. Some grin when I ask them how it’s going, telling me they’ve surreptitiously used their nearest and dearest as guinea pigs before trying out new approaches at work. So do have some fun experimenting with these suggestions, wherever you are.

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We all face things we can’t change. But behavioral science is sometimes startling in showing us just how much influence we have on the way we experience the world. When we choose to take this evidence on board, the effect can be nothing short of transformational. We can exert more control and start to enjoy more “well-planned luck.” And as a result, we can all have many more good days. Now let’s get started.
HOW TO HAVE A GOOD DAY

FIRST OF ALL...

PRIORITIES
Set intentional direction for your day

RELATIONSHIPS
Make the most of every interaction

PRODUCTIVITY
Make the hours in the day go further

THINKING
Be your smartest, wisest, most creative self

INFLUENCE
Maximize the impact of all you say and do

THEN IN EVERY TASK...

PRIORITIES
Set intentional direction for your day

RELATIONSHIPS
Make the most of every interaction

PRODUCTIVITY
Make the hours in the day go further

THINKING
Be your smartest, wisest, most creative self

INFLUENCE
Maximize the impact of all you say and do

...AND THROUGHOUT THE DAY

RESILIENCE
Sail through setbacks and annoyances

ENERGY
Boost your enthusiasm and enjoyment

THINKING...

INFLUENCE