

Executive Skills Aren't Just for Kids

By Roxanne Turner, PmP, BCC

Are you “smart but scattered?” Do you relate to any of the following: Losing keys? Constantly asking for extensions? Missing deadlines? Does it always feel like someone is angry with you because you forgot to do something or are consistently late? Are you always feeling guilty or disappointed in dropping yet another ball? Or somehow sort of managing yet always feeling discombobulated because you constantly fret you are forgetting something? Or by the time the weekend rolls around you are fried and then, somehow, it's Sunday night and you feel behind the eight ball before the week has even started? There is hope!

I've found *The Smart but Scattered Guide to Success, How to Use Your Brain's Executive Skills to Keep Up, Stay Calm, And Get Organized at Work and At Home* by Peg Dawson, Ed.D., NCSP, and Richard Guare, PhD to be a great resource in untangling the daily chaos of everyday life. Executive skills are the skills that help you get through the day to day and to achieve your goals or bigger aspirations. By understanding your brain through the lens of executive skills, you can thrive versus just survive. With the knowledge of what executive skills are along with additional clarity around your strengths and weaknesses, you can be more effective with the tools or strategies you implement. This book is full of ah-ha moments! At the end of the day, it's hard to apply a plan if you are unclear about the underlying cause or reason.

If you are interested in a quick start on how best to utilize *The Smart but Scattered Guide to Success*, I am going to show you how to use this book. There is no right or wrong way to read and implement this book, but it can be most helpful if you focus on the sections that are most relevant to you at this very moment in time and how you may consider referencing it in the future. Are you ready for the Cliff-note version and rolling up your sleeves in the name of efficiency? Success isn't defined by a straight line, so join me as I give you a road map getting started and understanding your executive skills while you are firmly in the driver's seat.

Understanding your executive function profile:

First, take the executive skills questionnaire found on pages 20 -21. Second, bring your curiosity. And third, leave the judgment at the front door. These three things are crucial in shifting your perspective from a place of shame to understanding so you can be more effective in the strategies you choose or don't choose. The more knowledge you have of the architecture of your brain the more it will lead to ah-ha moments. With the information from this test, you can better observe your daily actions through a lens based on skills and not faults. You will have practical information regarding your top three strengths and top three weaknesses in executive skills. Now what?

Let's start backwards:

I have often found that the results of the executive skills questionnaire really aren't much of a surprise to my clients. The question people have is what to do with this information. I would suggest starting backward by priming the brain. Start by reviewing chapters 8 – 19, which define and describe each of the executive skills. Pick the executive skill weakness from the test that you think is causing you the biggest frustration at home or work and start there.

The beginning of each chapter provides a summary of the skill itself. After identifying the skill, you can decide to read the chapter from start to finish as it has been laid out or...start with the story of what the practice of this executive skill looks like. Which parts resonate? Highlight them. I really like the debrief of why a particular practice worked after each story. Two big themes throughout are setting realistic expectations and bringing others into the fold. You are not alone in this journey and it takes time and practice.

With this information on how to practice the skill, skip back to the beginning of the chapter to review the section entitled, "What you can do about it." You can utilize the worksheet that is provided and check out the different tools or strategies mentioned in this section to decide which one resonates the best as a launching point.

If you like to get into the details, look at the section about "What we know about it." For example, in chapter 16 on flexibility, I find it fascinating that an individual's level of flexibility is fully established by age 8 or 9. It reminds me about my unchanging uniform at that age which consisted of a polo shirt with the top button buttoned and tightly tucked into my corduroy [OP shorts](#) (Please keep in mind it was the 80's). This little tidbit helps me acknowledge how far I have come and why giving me time to think through a possible change of plans works much better than springing it on me last minute.

Taking inventory:

Executive skills affect all aspects of our home and work lives and, most importantly, the relationships we have with the people in each. If you are interested in getting a better handle on what that looks like, check out the chart, "The Impact of Your Strengths and Weaknesses" on pages 27-28.

It's worth taking the time to understand how your executive skills play off each other so you can better reflect on how you were able to have success despite some of your weaknesses. For instance, you may have strong time management and planning skills so keeping your day on task is not a problem. However, if your weakness is flexibility and all of a sudden you have an unexpected car emergency like needing to get a new tire, it can throw off your whole day and possibly your entire week. The reason being it

is difficult for you to make adjustments to your plan, so you most likely throw your hands in the air and say, "Forget it! The day is ruined!" You get nothing accomplished except getting through an entire season of some sitcom on Netflix. If this sounds at all familiar and you are looking to better recognize how one executive skill affects another, check out pages 30-32.

To gain an alternative perspective of what your weak executive skills might look like in real life, the "What it looks like in practice" section in each chapter on Executive Skills provides great examples of how weak executive skills affect work or in-home performance. With each story, the individuals had to first understand how, when, and how often they were or weren't doing a particular task by making observations and collecting data to develop their baseline or starting point. An example would be losing your keys twice a day every day of the week. So, to get an idea of your starting point ask yourself some of the following question: How are you currently doing things or not doing things? With this information, you can better decide the best course of action for making appropriate modifications or changes.

It is worth a note here on the executive skill of emotional control with respect to when it is an impairment versus just a weakness. Some tell-tail signs that emotional control is impairing the quality of your work and life include: debilitating anxiety that prevents you from doing the things you want or desire to do; flying off the handle at the smallest things; property damage as a result of anger; or small chores like doing the dishes or getting out of bed seems impossible and feeling overly exhausted. If any of this resonates, please consider reaching out to a mental health counselor. (p. 141)

What's the low hanging fruit, e.g., the easy wins?

Need a confidence builder and some small wins? I suggest you dive into Chapter 3, which provides you with tips on how to modify your environment to your advantage so you can taste some success. One thing to keep in mind is that it is about interdependency, which is where individuals have shared goals in common, and each individual's outcomes are affected by the actions of the others. This means being willing to ask for help and support. Stop doing it the same way and all by yourself!

Chapter 3 helps us understand we're not alone as Dr. (Peg) Dawson goes through her own stories of struggle and how to mitigate them. Throughout the book, Peg shares her own strengths and weaknesses as they relate to executive skills, which is frankly quite refreshing. For example, Peg talks about one of her weaknesses--organization. This plays out at home with a kitchen closet becoming cluttered over time. The messy closet becomes a point of contention for her husband, so they devise a plan to resolve the situation that works for them both. She completes a task he is not fond of like wrapping Christmas presents, and he cleans out the kitchen closet, which is one of his strengths. (p. 192)

You too can be successful, and the best part is you get to define what success is. It's about understanding that success is a process.

Permission for the workaround:

As Dr. Peg Dawson and Dr. Richard (Dick) Guare noted on p. 33, sometimes the workaround will get you to your target faster: "Because we're big believers in exerting no more effort than is necessary, the place to start in grappling with your executive skill weaknesses is to look for ways to *work around them*. This can be done by modifying your environment either to support your weak executive skill or to reduce the negative impact of that weak skill."

I have to admit I am a huge fan of the workaround. My father, Dr. Stephen Turner, was a navigator in the Vietnam War flying the huge [C130 cargo planes](#). My father didn't talk much about his experiences during the War, but when he did share, it was usually a story about how he found workarounds within the system to solve problems.

One such story involved complaints by the soldiers on the front lines that they didn't have enough toilet paper. So, my father decided to wrap all of the cargo they were to deliver on each flight in toilet paper to supplement the military's all too skimpy rations. He always had a Cheshire cat grin when he said, "Technically I wasn't breaking any rules since they never told me how we were supposed to wrap the cargo for protection." So, if you are like my father, then you will love learning about executive skill workarounds.

How do old dogs learn new tricks? With a lot of effort and a lot of treats! And there is a long-term payoff!

So, you have made the decision that you want to roll up your sleeves to make an intentional change. It's time to review the level of effort. The place to start is on page 85 where they discuss this concept. Effort isn't necessarily based on the level of difficulty; it is more about how you perceive that task which makes it effortful. For instance, the thought of putting away laundry can be considered a highly effortful task even though its actual difficulty is relatively low.

Page 90 includes a discussion of the time to inventory those low and high effortful tasks by first looking at chores. Peg provides a sample of her own list: Can you see common themes in these tasks? What can you do to make it more palatable? This is where you will go to the chart on p. 94, "Your Coping Strategies," where Peg shares how she manages those more effortful chores with different coping strategies.

By looking at developing these skills or finding coping strategies to be more successful, your future self will thank you, especially if you add physical activity and mindfulness to your tool belt: "What is clear to us is that the more you do to strengthen and preserve

your executive skills, the more likely you are to age well.” (P. 275) Who doesn’t want that?

Product versus process:

By having better awareness of our patterns through executive skills, you can look at the weakness as a skill deficit versus the idea that you are somehow broken.

For instance, with work, the more you understand about the job and how your executive skills map into it, the better you will be able to recognize what’s satisfying about the work you do and what is frustrating about it. By taking the time to look at your job requirements from an executive skills perspective you can begin to identify how your executive skills profile impacts your work. As Peg and Dick say, “And then look at those sore spots and try to figure out ways to make it less frustrating.” (P. 64) By doing this process it can provide you a broader perspective and, hopefully, the realization of the things that you do right and how you can mitigate those weaknesses.

Here is the reality check-- it takes time and practice to change patterns and develop new habits. For instance, lifestyle habits are not conquered in a month. It can take up to a year to see those changes take root. You are developing skills, so keep those practice sessions brief in the beginning. Throughout the book, you read example after example of how this was the key to the individual’s success. Think of each coping strategy you try as a personal experiment, and if it doesn’t work, make modifications or scrap that plan and start over. You learn through doing which means there will be missteps and failures. Your determination and persistence got you here, didn’t it?

I hope this book brings you insight into how some of your life’s experiences have brought you success. Through executive skills knowledge you can acknowledge your strengths more effectively, give yourself permission to not be good at everything, and find ways to manage that work specifically for you.