

# **Time: a key resource – opportunities and difficulties**

Success is a process, a quality of mind and way of being, an outgoing affirmation of life.

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Whatever job you do, if you are in a management or executive role, you will utilise a number of resources. People, money, materials – all are important. In any particular job, one resource may predominate. But there is one resource we all have in common: time. And time is a hard taskmaster. Everyone occasionally experiences problems getting everything done, and doing it all in the time available. For some, such problems seem perpetually to exist to one degree or another; others will admit to having moments when things seem to conspire to prevent work going as planned, and a few to living in a state of permanent chaos.

Who then needs to think about time management? Everyone, potentially, can benefit from reviewing how to manage their time effectively. In any organisation many of the things that actually characterise its very nature make proper time management difficult: hierarchical structures, people, deadlines,

paperwork, e-mail, computer problems, meetings, pressures and interactions, both around the organisation and externally; all these and more can compound the problems.

This book aims to help solve the problems of time management for all those working in executive or managerial positions within organisations, whether commercial or otherwise, and who are charged with getting things done and achieving results. If you are in this category, even if you have already made strenuous attempts to organise the way you work, then you may pick up ideas that will help you achieve more. If you see yourself as having too much to do, if you have too little time in which to do it, if coping with the urgent means you never get to all the important things on your list, and you would like to be more organised and do not quite know how to go about becoming so, then this book is directed at you. If your desk is piled with untidy heaps of paper, you are constantly subject to interruptions, your deadlines are impossible and you despair of ever being able to get your head above water, then this book is definitely for you.

Time management is not optional. It is something that everyone who wants to work effectively must consider, whether formally or informally. In fact, virtually everyone practises time management to some degree; the only question is how well they do it and how it affects what they do. Yet, time management is not easy – as you may have noticed! Nor, even for those who work at it, is it something that anyone gets 100 per cent right. If you think that is a rather ominous start to a book on time management, there is worse to come. The classic author G K Chesterton wrote: ‘The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.’ So too with time management: just because it is difficult, the temptation can be to despair of ever making a real difference, and to give up on it, letting things take their course and muddling through somehow. To varying degrees, this temptation is often very strong.

## Making it work

But, and it is a positive but, you can make a difference and such a difference cannot only be worthwhile, it can have a radical effect on both job and career. Make no mistake: the effect of getting to grips with time management can be considerable and varied. It can:

- Affect your efficiency, effectiveness and productivity. This alone makes your attitude to time management very important, for it affects your work day by day, hour by hour, all the time.
- Condition the pressure that goes with any job.
- Create greater positive visibility. Time management is something that will influence how you are perceived by others within the organisation. Good time management is an overriding factor that can differentiate people of otherwise equal talent and ability, making it more likely that some will succeed better in career terms than others.

Thus, although it may take some time, getting to grips with your own personal system of time management is immensely important. Time management must be seen as synonymous with self-management; it demands discipline, but discipline reinforced by habit. In other words, the good news is that it gets easier as you work at it. Good habits help ensure a well-organised approach to the way you plan and execute your work. On the other hand, bad habits – as many of us are aware – are difficult to shift. And the changing of habits is something that may well be a necessary result of any review of how you work.

Making time management work for you is based on two key factors: how you plan your time and how you implement the detail of what you do. The first of these, which is reviewed in the early part of this book, creates an important foundation

upon which you can then build and work. The second consists of a multitude of operational factors, practices, methods and tricks, all of which can individually and positively affect the way in which you work. Such factors may be absurdly simple, for example, visibly checking your watch from time to time will tend to make visitors less likely to overstay their welcome, especially if such checks are accompanied by the appropriate look of concern. Or they may demand more complexity, for example, a well-set-up filing system can save time, ensuring that you can locate papers quickly and accurately.

Other factors may be downright sneaky, like having a private signal to prompt your secretary to interrupt a meeting with news of something demanding its rapid curtailment or your prompt departure. Furthermore, there is a cumulative effect at work here. This means that the more you adopt or adapt the tricks of the trade that work for you, the more time-efficient you become. This is a process that most of us can continue to add to and work on throughout our career. So, unless you are a paragon of time-efficient virtue, a review of whether you are working in the best possible way is nearly always worthwhile. Indeed, it can pay dividends to keep a regular eye on this throughout your working life. This too can become a habit.

## **A personal approach**

Because of the way time management works, influenced as it is by many things, what works in any particular kind of job or for any particular individual will vary. Some of the ideas you will find presented here, or elsewhere, you will be able to add profitably to your own working habits. Some will be new to you; some you will know but may not be utilising as effectively as you might. Others will be able to form only the basis of what will suit you. They will need personalising, tailoring to the circumstances in which you work, and it is always important to

consider this option with any idea you review before rejecting it.

Be careful not to reject out of hand anything that might be useful in amended form. This is an area where every small influence can assist your overall productivity. Of course, some ideas will not suit you at all. However much you tinker with them, they will not form a useful basis for the kind of way in which you work. So be it. The aim should be to review thoroughly and then use every possible way to enhance the productivity of your job. What matters is arriving at a point where you are content that, having explored the possibilities for action, you have selected, adapted and experimented with all the methods that can realistically fit in with the way you work and assist your productivity. It is you who matters ultimately, not the principles. However, do remember that anything – but anything – that can help should be considered and, unless it has a negative impact, made part of your working practice. Good time management comes from leaving no stone unturned.

## **The productivity gain**

Time may be relative, but it is a resource as valuable as any other. Yet, it is so easy to squander. Why is it that the thought and effort given to the appropriate use of other resources, money for instance, is so much greater than for time? The sheer difficulty of some aspects of time management and the power of habit explain some of this, but there is, I think, another reason.

Long ago Peter Cook appeared in a sketch about the possibility of a nuclear war, when it was said that the early warning radar would give four minutes' warning of any enemy missiles aimed our way. 'What can you do in four minutes?', asked one character incredulously. 'Some people', came the reply, 'can run a mile in four minutes!' Though sadly inadequate for the task

of escaping from annihilation, four minutes is still, well, four minutes, and it is an important principle of time management that even small periods of time can readily add up to a worthwhile amount.

Consider four minutes saved – by not running that mile perhaps. It is easy to think of it as not worthwhile. However, if the four minutes is saved by increasing efficiency on one small task undertaken regularly then, for something done every day, that adds up to more than 14 hours over a year! That is very nearly as much as two working days, and should give anyone pause for thought. What could you do – extra – with two additional working days? It is undeniably a useful amount of time and most people have probably got a dozen jobs on their list that could be got out of the way if an additional two days were really available. This thought comes from imagining what speeding up just one small regular task or perhaps avoiding wasting time, to the tune of just four minutes, can do for you. So, another significant reason why time management may be neglected is that individual small savings of time may seem unimportant. We tend to wonder what five minutes here or there matters, when what is really needed is a clear hour or day without interruptions. Yet, clearly, such short moments add up.

If this fact is recognised, and time and activities planned accordingly, then it is possible to free up considerable amounts of time. What is more, this can often be done at minimal cost. This is worth noting, as many potential improvements to efficiency do have a cost. If you want new equipment, more in your budget, or additional people, then in many organisations this needs considerable justification and may still be turned down. But your time is yours to utilise. It is an area where you can make a real difference to performance armed with little more than the intention to do so.

## Speculate to accumulate

A further point needs stating before we turn to areas of individual action. You will find that some ways of saving time, or utilising it better, do need an investment – but it is an investment of time. It may seem like a contradiction in terms, having to spend time to save time. Again, this can all too easily become a barrier to action. Yet the principle is clear: there is a time equation that can and must be put to work if time is to be brought under control. There are many ways of ensuring that time is utilised to best effect, and, while some take only a moment, others take time either to set up or for you to adopt the habit of working in a particular way.

Consider an example, one linked to delegation, a subject we return to later and to the commonly heard phrase, ‘It’s quicker to do it myself.’ When this thought comes to mind, sometimes, and certainly in the short term, the sentiment may well be correct. It is quicker to do it yourself. But beware, because this may only be true at the moment something occurs. Say someone telephones you requesting certain information, imagine also that you must locate and look something up, compose a brief explanatory note and send the information off to the other person. It is a minor matter and will take you three or four minutes. Imagine further that, to avoid the task, you consider letting your secretary do it. Explaining and showing him or her what needs to be done will certainly take 10–15 minutes of your time and your secretary’s. It really is quicker to do it yourself. Not so, certainly not if it is a regularly occurring task. If it happens 10 times a week, say, then if you take time to brief your secretary he or she will only have to take it on for less than a week and the time spent briefing will have paid off. Thereafter you save a significant amount of time every week, indeed on every occasion that similar requests are made in the future. This is surely worthwhile. The time equation here of time spent as a ratio of time saved works positively. This is

often the case, and allows worthwhile savings to be made, both to simple examples and to more complex matters where hours or days spent on, say, reorganising a system or process may still pay dividends.

So, why is it so difficult to take this sort of action? Why is the world full of people saying that it is quicker to do some things themselves? Some of the reasons may be to do with attitudes to delegation (of which more later); beyond that it is largely habit and lack of thought – and perhaps the pressure of the moment. We judge that it is possible to pause for the few moments necessary to get another task out of the way, but somehow not for long enough to carry out a briefing that would rid us of the task altogether, and ultimately make a real time saving. It is worth a thought. Become determined not to be caught in this time trap and you are en route to saving a great deal of time.

Given the right intention, and motivation, it is possible for anyone to improve their time utilisation, and to do so markedly if you have not thought about it recently. Make no mistake, however, the process does not stop there. It takes more than a review of time management and the adoption of one or two ideas to make you truly productive for life. A review can kick-start the process, but the right way of thinking must continue it. The best time managers have not only instilled in themselves good habits and so put part of the process on auto pilot, so to speak, they also view time management as an area of perpetual fine-tuning. In everything they do the time dimension is considered. It becomes a prerequisite for the various ways in which they work. And they continuously strive to improve still further – changing the way they work and what it allows them to achieve. That fine-tuning too becomes a habit.

## **Perfect time**

One final introductory point. Time management is very much



an area where the old saying ‘Never let perfection be the enemy of the good’ is entirely appropriate. However well you approach the management of your time, you are never going to be able to regard it as perfect. Nothing will guarantee that you will never be unable to find anything again, nor will it mean nothing takes longer in future than you think it will, nor that you are never interrupted again, not least at a crucial moment. Remember Murphy’s Law: that if something can go wrong or turn out inconveniently it will. Nor does it mean that you will never again find yourself saying: ‘If only I had more time...’. Indeed, in many jobs there is a creative element. You are employed to make things happen, to innovate, review and change things and to do so in a dynamic environment where it sometimes seems that nothing stays the same for five whole minutes. It is inherent in such circumstances that there will always be new things to do and that, as a consequence, you will never get to the bottom of the ‘Things to do’ list. The time to worry is not when you have too much to do, but more when you do not have enough to do.

But though perfection may not be possible, improvement certainly is. Every saving of time, every productivity gain, whether large or small, adds to the total way in which your style of working contributes to your effectiveness. Any aspect of a job can probably be changed for the better, in terms of how it is done, to use time more productively. This means that you must actively organise what you do and how you do it to produce optimum working and to be really effective. It is this process that using the principles of time management and adopting the right attitude can assist. Doing this and doing it thoroughly will benefit you and your organisation; and some of those benefits can come quickly.

*Note:* Corporate culture is becoming increasingly aggressive in its focus on productivity in the sense of hours worked. More and more people are spending more and more hours on the job, willingly or not. Yet there is plenty of evidence which states that extra hours do not translate directly into increased

productivity, not least because stress and tiredness dilute effectiveness.

It is difficult for an individual to challenge this culture, but it should not be followed slavishly. The ideas of effective time management operate within some definition of the ‘working day’, and that will vary for every individual. Just simply adding hours unthinkingly can only achieve so much. The intention here is to show that changing habits and enhancing effectiveness by adopting the right way of working pay dividends. If you do this and achieve your objectives, then maybe the pressure to just ‘put in more time’ will decrease. If you are managing other people and creating the culture then this aspect may be worth a moment’s thought (and you could do worse than to read my book *How to Motivate People*, also published by Kogan Page).