

# First steps towards effective time management

Tomorrow is always the busiest day of the week.

*Jonathon Lazear*

There are many activities where the whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts. For instance, juggling with flaming torches necessitates more than specific movements of the hands. Avoiding burning holes in the carpet depends also on overall coordination, concentration and getting the individual movements exactly right. Time management is similar. The individual techniques, ideas and tricks of the trade will allow you to make some progress towards an effective and efficient way of working, but only approaching the process on a broad front will lead to sustained practice that will ensure continuing effectiveness. Unless the right attitude is adopted, then time management will never be more than an initial enthusiastic embracing of techniques, which are then allowed rapidly to atrophy.

Thus, time management involves not just keeping your paperwork tidy and your desk clear, but a whole way of working that underlies all your actions and interfaces with all

facets of your job. Because of this we review next a number of all-embracing rather than individual factors that need to be applied with an eye on the whole of the rest of your job and the range of tasks it entails. They start, logically enough, with the need to assess how you work now as a basis for considering action and possibly changes in the future.

## Your work mix

Whatever your individual job, whether you are manager or executive, and regardless of the type of organisation for which you work and the functional area in which you are involved, you doubtless have many different things to do; too many perhaps. These are different in nature and complexity, and involve different timescales. They range across 1,001 things, from drafting a letter or report to planning the relocation of the entire organisation to new offices or the launching of a new product. What is more, you probably have a good many things on the go at once as well as overlapping, perhaps conflicting, priorities. Often work feels just like the juggling example on the previous page, and your ‘reach’ – how much you can keep on the go at once – is an important aspect of your effectiveness. If you exceed your reach then, like the juggler, the danger is that you do not simply drop one torch but several. It helps, when considering managing all of this effectively, to categorise the many elements. There are doubtless many ways of doing this, but just four categories seem to bring some order to the picture:

1. **Planning.** This is the prerequisite to all action. Many tasks are involved: research, investigation, analysis and testing amongst others. This area may also involve consultation and ultimately the communication of plans and is, of course, the key to decision making.

2. **Implementation.** Simply stated, doing things – of all sorts – whether intangible (of which the key one is making decisions) or tangible. Specific tasks divide into two sorts. First, individual tasks. These are free-standing. They may be major or minor. For example, a writing task may entail composing a two-line e-mail or a 20-page report. Second, progressing tasks where a series of closely linked actions contribute cumulatively to achieving an overall result. Moving offices would involve such actions and such things may be more clearly visualised rather than described – indeed flowcharts provide a useful and time-efficient way of working on them. Tasks in both categories may well need to be linked to planning activity on whatever scale.
3. **Monitoring and control.** Checking may well be necessary to ensure things are being done in the best possible way and bringing the desired results. Checking may be simple, editing the draft of a report or running it through the spellchecker, for example. Or it may be complex, as are many financial control systems.
4. **Communicating and dealing with people.** This clearly overlaps with the other three categories of activity, but is inherent in the work of almost everyone. Few, if any, people work in isolation from others, and for most, the people issues, whether it is briefing them or reporting to them, meetings and other forms of communication with them, are an essential part of their work and take up a major part of their time.

In all four categories, there will or should be a strong link with objectives and achievement of results. All tasks and all actions should focus on the overall aims and are often of little significance in themselves. Effectiveness is measured ultimately by achievement. Time management must not be seen as only concerned with packing more activity into the available time, though this may be part of it; it must be instrumental in ensuring that objectives are met. It may be a cliché, but it must

not be forgotten that activity must never be confused with achievement. With this picture in mind, we can look specifically at current working practice.

## **Assessing your current working practice**

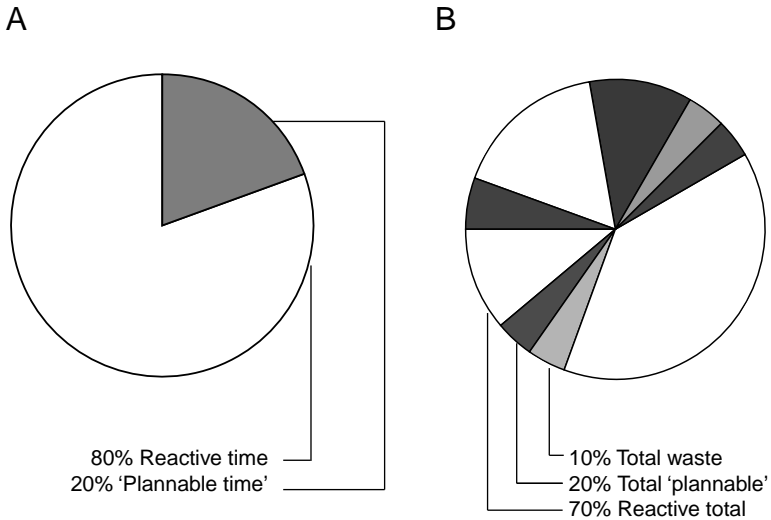
You may think that you know how you work; perhaps you feel you know all too well – warts and all. But do not be misled into thinking that considering in detail how you do things is a waste of time. Classically, improving anything implies the identification of how it is now. This gives a measure against which to judge how we might progress. Further, such an analysis can provide valuable information about where the greatest improvement may be found, all of which makes improvement more likely. This is certainly true of time management, more so perhaps because this is an area where there is a real tendency to self-delusion. If I ask if you spend too much time in meetings, you may well agree. But do you waste time doing unnecessary paperwork or do you socialise too much? Are you badly organised? Such questions are more likely to put us on the defensive, and understandably so. You are no doubt essentially efficient, but improvement may still be possible. Indeed, most people would value more time to complete their tasks and undertake their responsibilities, if this were possible. For most, it is.

To make other than superficial changes, you need to know something about your own working practices and pressures, and where time goes at present. In a complex job, many activities are involved.

### **Where time goes now**

There are two ways to consider this. The first is to estimate it,

guesstimate if necessary. This is most easily done in percentage terms on a pie chart (see Figure 2.1).



**Figure 2.1** *Planning limited 'plannable time'*

The second is to use a time log (see Figure 2.2) to obtain a much more accurate picture – literally recording what you do through the day and doing so for at least a week, longer if you can (the chore of noting things down takes only a few seconds, but must be done punctiliously).

Few people keep a log without surprising themselves, and the surprises can be either that much more time is spent in some areas than you think, or that certain things take up less time than you think – mainly the former. Some obvious areas for review usually come to mind as a result.

Again using the simple pie chart, it can be useful as a second stage of this review to list what you would ideally like the time breakdown to be. This puts a clear picture in your mind of

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

No.	Start time	Activity description	Time taken (minutes)	Priority* category				Comments
				A	B	C	D	
1								
2								
3								
4								
5								
6								
7								
8								
9								
10								
11								
12								
13								
14								
15								
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17								
18								
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20								
21								
22								
23								

\*Link these columns to any priority code you use    Total time taken (minutes): \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 2.2 Personal time performance log (example)

what you are working towards. Such a picture might even be worth setting out before you read on.

All this gives you something to aim towards and will tell you progressively – as you take action – whether that action is having a positive effect. If all the remaining review points are looked at alongside this information then you can see more clearly whether you are able to take action to improve things, and whether the points refer to areas that are critical for you. With all this in mind, we turn to what is both one of the basics of time management and perhaps its most practically important tenet.

## **Plan the work and work the plan**

Certainly any real progress with time management needs a plan. This must be in writing and must be reviewed and updated regularly; for most people this means a daily check. I repeat: a written plan and a regular check and update. It is thus what is sometimes called a rolling plan. Not only is it updated regularly, it provides a snapshot of your workload ahead at any particular moment. As such it should show accurately and completely your work plan for the immediate future, and give an idea of what lies beyond. As you look ahead there will be some things that are clear, for example when an annual budget must be prepared and submitted. Other areas are less clear and, of course, much cannot be anticipated at all in advance. At its simplest, such a plan is just a list of things to do. It may include:

- a daily plan;
- a weekly plan;
- commitments that occur regularly (weekly or monthly or annually);
- a plan for the coming month (perhaps linked to a planning chart).

The exact configuration will depend on the time span across which you work. What is important is that it works for you, that it is clear, that different kinds of activity show up for what they are and that it links clearly to your diary and appointment system. How such a list is arranged and how you can use it to improve your work and effectiveness are important, but the fact of the system and the thinking that its regular review prompts are also important in their own right. It is the basic factor in creating a time management discipline, and it provides much of the information from which you must make choices – what you do, delegate, delay or ignore, in what order you tackle things and so on. Good time management does not remove the need to make decisions of this sort, but it should make them easier and quicker to make and it should enable you to make decisions that really do help in a positive way, so that you get more done and in the best way to achieve your aims.

If this is already beginning to sound like hard work, do not despair. I do not believe that the process of updating and monitoring your rolling plan will itself become an onerous task. It will vary a little day by day, and is affected by your work pattern, but on average, it is likely to take only a few minutes. I reckon I keep a good many balls in the air and am a busy person. My own paperwork on this takes perhaps five minutes a day, but – importantly – this prevents more time being taken up in less organised juggling during the day.

## **Dealing with the uncontrollable**

A final point here is crucial. Some people, perhaps most, have a measure of their day that is reactive. Things occur that cannot be predicted, at least individually, and a proportion of the available time is always going to go in this way. Such activity is not automatically unimportant, and the reverse may well be true. For example, a manager on the sales or marketing side of



a commercial company may have enquiries and queries coming from customers that are very important and must be dealt with promptly, but will nevertheless make fitting in everything else more difficult. Sometimes the reaction to this is to believe that, because of this reactive element, it is not possible to plan or to plan effectively. The reverse is true. If your days do consist, even in part, of this sort of random activity, it is even more important to plan because there is inherently less time available to do the other things that the job involves and that time has to be planned even more thoroughly to maximise its effectiveness.

Everyone needs a plan and everyone can benefit from having a clear view of what there is to be done. If you do not have this then the work of setting it up will take a moment, but it is worthwhile and it need not then take long to keep up to date. Once it is in place, you can evolve a system that suits you and that keeps up with the way in which your job and its responsibilities change over time.

## **What kind of system?**

So far I have ignored the question of what paperwork is needed for this planning process. Many books on the subject of time management are closely linked to some specific proprietary time management system, consisting of diaries, files, binders and so on. Some even claim that the only route to time efficiency lies with their particular system. Now this may be fine if the system suits you, but I would suggest caution before taking up any particular one.

I will recommend no one system; I do not in fact use a branded system myself. This is not to say that I disapprove of them. One highly organised person I know uses one and swears by it, but I also know people who are the very opposite of organised and yet whose desks are adorned with the binders and card indices of their chosen system, so they certainly offer

no kind of panacea. Many are restrictive, that is, they can only be used in a particular way and that may well not suit you and the way you think and work. There is thus a real danger that if you use a system and some element of it does not work for you, then your use of the whole system falters. A better way is perhaps to work out what you need first, asking:

- What kind of diary do you need?
- How much space do you need for notes?
- How many sections fit the way your tasks are grouped?
- What permanent filing is necessary? etc.

Then, when you have thought through what you need and worked that way for a while (a process that will almost certainly have you making a few changes in the light of how things actually work), you can check out the systems and see whether any of them formalise what you want to do and, as they can be expensive, make the investment worthwhile. Otherwise, many people organise themselves perfectly well with no more than a diary, a notebook or a file. To end with something of a recommendation, I would suggest that a loose-leaf diary system is a good basis for many (I use a desk-sized Filofax). This combines a neat system with the flexibility to include exactly what you need, and that is what is most important. After all, it must reflect your plan and it is your time that you want to organise. Of course, another option these days is to go electronic, so any form may be on screen rather than paper; but the same thinking applies to selecting what is best.

Realism suggests that no one system is right for everyone. Even the precise kind of diary layout you choose must be a personal decision based on your needs, and what else is necessary will reflect the way you work. You must decide for yourself; I can only state that all my experience suggests that a flexible and thus tailor-made system is likely to be best.

## Setting clear objectives

Any plan is only as good as the objectives that lie behind it. Clear objectives (the text below defines these) really are important, and any lack of clarity can affect every aspect of a person's work, not least time management, sometimes doing so surreptitiously.

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### SMART objectives

Maxims advocating setting clear objectives are everywhere; they offer sound advice. You do need clear objectives, and they must not be vague or general hopes. A much quoted acronym spells out the principles involved: objectives should be SMART, that is: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timed. An example will help make this clear. A perennial area of management skill, on which I regularly conduct training, is that body of skills necessary for making formal presentations. Incidentally, any weakness in this area will waste time, tending to result in longer, and perhaps more agonising, preparation. Good presentation skills save time. But I digress.

It is all too easy to define the objectives for a workshop on this topic as being simply to ensure participants 'make better presentations', a statement that is unlikely to be sufficiently clear to be really useful. Objectives for a presentation skills course should be:

- **Specific.** To enable participants to make future presentations in a manner and style that will be seen as appropriate by their respective audiences, and which will enhance the message they put over.
- **Measurable.** In other words, how will we know this has been achieved? Ultimately, in this case, by the results of future presentations; but we might also consider that the trainer or the group, or both, will be able to judge this to a degree at the end of the event by observing the standard during practice.
- **Achievable.** Can this be done? The answer in this case will depend on the prevailing standard before the course. If the

people are inexperienced and their standard of presentation is low, then the answer may be that it cannot. If, as we assume for the sake of our developing example, they are people who are sufficiently senior, experienced and with some practice in the area of presentations, then the objectives should be achievable – given a suitable amount of time and a suitable programme.

- **Realistic.** Picking up the last point, if the time, say, is inadequate then the objectives may not be realistic. Potentially, these people can be improved we might say, but not in one short session.
  - **Timed.** In training terms, this will reflect the timing of the course. It may be scheduled to take place in one month's time, so the objectives cannot be realised before then. Also consider the duration: is a one, two or any other number of days' programme going to do the job?
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Much of what needs to be done to manage time effectively is concerned with tackling conflicts and making decisions about what comes first, and none of this is possible if there is no underlying clarity about objectives to act as a reference.

This is not the place for a long treatise on objective setting. Suffice it to say that this is important to everything in corporate life. A company functions best with clear corporate objectives, the management structure works best when individuals are clear about what it is they are expected to achieve. Consider your own position. Are there any areas that are not clear in this respect? Do objectives make for problems or conflict regarding the way you go about the job? If you answered 'yes' to the first question, then you probably did the same for the second. *Note:* you will never be a good time manager unless you have clear objectives as part of your overall job description. If you do not, this is something you must seek to resolve.

At this point, we can take stock of some of the key issues on the table. If you have an idea of where time goes now and how you really approach things, if you have a (written) plan – relating clearly to your job objectives – then you can get to

work with some hopes of being reasonably productive. But there are many factors that can work to increase that productivity. Some are not only fundamental, but are also good examples of the way in which approaches (ultimately habits) can exert a considerable and ongoing influence on your working practices. The examples that follow are all potentially of great value to the manager wanting to become truly time-efficient.

## Thinking ahead

This might appropriately be called the opposite of the ‘if only...’ school of ineffective time management. Too often people find themselves in a crisis, the resolution of which would be all too easy if we could wind the clocks back. ‘If only we had done so and so earlier...’, we say as we contemplate a messy and time-consuming process of unscrambling. In all honesty, though the unexpected can happen sometimes, crisis management is all too common, and often all too unnecessary. Coping well with crises saves time – certainly if the alternative is panic. The text below and on the following page makes some comments on coping with crisis.

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## Don’t panic

Whatever the cause and implications of any crisis situation, the rule has to be, ‘Never treat a crisis like a crisis.’ Panic implies an absence of all the usual management processes that are no less needed at such a time; perhaps they are needed in fuller measure than usual. Having a systematic approach in mind (and acquiring the habit of referring to it, albeit mentally) as a first conscious step to avoiding panic is useful. Blind, unthinking action will rarely have the precision required to rescue the situation and more damage may be done – and more time wasted – as further second-stage action becomes necessary. So, the rules are:

- Stay cool and do not panic.
- Think (and what is more, take sufficient time to think straight).
- Consider the full range of management skills that could sort out the situation (this may include simple tactics such as delegating certain straightforward actions to give you time to resolve more complex issues, and more radical solutions, such as reviewing policy).
- Make an action plan (especially important if there is any degree of complexity involved).
- Consider the control aspect of that ongoing action plan (simplistically creating a mechanism to show progress and let you know when the crisis is past).

Then considered action can systematically sort out the problem, at least as best as possible – you cannot wind the clock back. Finally, attention can turn not only to the lessons to be learnt (so as not to repeat similar disasters), but also to anything positive that might come from the whole incident.

Think positive. The Chinese ideogram for crisis consists of two characters: the first one means ‘severe danger’, the second means ‘opportunity’. Enough said. Thereafter, you need to keep things in proportion. A crisis may impose stresses and strains, and surviving the occasional one is part of most jobs – though working so that they do not occur is perhaps even more important. As Anton Chekhov said, ‘Any idiot can face a crisis – it’s the day to day living that wears you out.’

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If things are left late or ill-thought out (the two often go together), then time is used up in a hasty attempt to sort things out at short notice. This tends to make any task more difficult and is compounded by whatever day-to-day responsibilities are current at the time. If you can acquire the habit of thinking ahead – a system, as referred to above, will help you do this – then you are that much more likely to see when a start really needs to be made on something.

Some people find that to ‘see’ the pattern of future work and tasks in their mind’s eye is difficult. One invaluable aid to this

is the planning or wall chart. This enables you to create a picture of activities, and the time spans are very much clearer as you scan such a chart than when flicking through the pages of a diary. Charts come in all shapes and sizes: some are for the current year and are, effectively, large diaries; others are ruled for specific tasks, and others still are designed for you to create the detail. The large ones come with a variety of stickers to help highlight what is important; others are magnetic and can provide a permanently updatable guide to your schedule.

Whatever you do to document things, however, the key is to get into the habit of thinking ahead – at the same time and without disrupting the current day's workload. Anticipating problems and spotting opportunities can make a real difference to the way you work in the short term.

## **Spend time to save time**

Whatever actions you might consider taking to keep yourself well organised – and there are many – they tend to fall into two categories: ones simple to implement, that only take a moment, and those that inherently take some time to set up, and perhaps some time thereafter to acquire as a retained working habit. If you limit yourself to the former, you will never maximise your time management effectiveness. So, returning to an earlier example, that of saying, 'It's quicker to do it myself', in the short term the sentiment is often correct. It is quicker for you to do it, but this is only true at the moment something occurs.

Suffice it to say that this is an area that needs to become a sort of reflex. Every time you find yourself taking action based on this premise, stop and think for a moment whether you are doing the right thing. Is there a longer-term route that would be more useful? The more you do this, the more time you will save and the more you will be able to do it. There is a virtuous circle here. It stands some thought. Become determined not to be

caught in the trap implicit here, and you are on a track that will save you a great deal of time in future. This more considered approach leads logically to the next topic.

## Taking time to think

At the end of the training film *Time to Think*, the main character, a manager who has come to grips with managing his time better, is sitting in his office. A colleague comes into the outer office and begins to walk past the secretary to see him. The secretary stops him, says her manager is busy and suggests he makes an appointment to see him later. He looks past her at the manager sitting in his office (visible behind a glass partition) and says: 'But he's not doing anything....' Immediately the secretary replies that: 'He's thinking; now do you want to see him this afternoon or....' This incident makes a good point.

As a general rule it is true to say that the higher up the hierarchy of an organisation you go, you are expected to spend more time thinking, planning and decision making and the less doing other things. It is also often true that the thinking, the planning and idea generation that goes into a job are usually the most important things to be done in that job.

And what is the most difficult kind of time to keep clear and have sufficient of? Time to think will rank high. Make no mistake: many jobs demand a degree of creativity and this is something that is as important to a small change of approach or system as it is to some more radical development. My work in training seems to indicate that the pressurised workplace is one in which it is increasingly difficult to be creative. Giving yourself more time to think creatively, both alone and within a team, may be one of the most important things effective time management can do for you. Go back to your analysis of your time, or better still your time log if you did one (if not you should) and see how these activities show up. Are they getting



the time they need and deserve or are they squeezed out by other pressures and the things that are more obviously urgent? I suggested earlier using the breakdown of your time and tasks as a guide for a more ideal breakdown. Make sure that you set your sights on creating sufficient thinking time – perhaps above all – and that the action you take to achieve this is not offset by unnecessary crises. Without something approaching the ideal in this area, all your objectives may be in jeopardy.

## **Be prepared to say ‘no’**

This is very much a first principle, and it needs some resolve to carry it through, so it is as well to have it in mind throughout your reading of the remainder of this book. Everyone has to accept that they cannot do everything. This must be taken literally because there may be an almost infinite amount to do in any job that has some kind of inherent innovative or creative nature to it. Many people could just go on listing more and more things to do, not all equally important but deserving of a place on their ‘To do’ list nevertheless. Even if your job is not like this, you certainly have to accept that you are not going to do everything when you want. Both in terms of quantity and priority you are going to have to say ‘no’ to some things. It is worth considering here not so much what you leave out but whom you say ‘no’ to. For instance, you may have to turn down:

- **Colleagues.** What is involved here can vary and if there is a network of favours, with everyone helping everyone else, you do not want to let it get out of hand either way. Turn down too much and you end up losing time because people are reluctant to help you. Do everything unquestioningly and you may be seen as a soft touch and will end up doing more than your share. So balance and timing are the

keynotes here; you do not have to do everything that crops up in this way instantly.

- Subordinates. Here they cannot tell you to do things, and while they need support, this must not get out of hand.
- Your own boss. Working with a boss who does not have enough to do, or who expects everything to be done instantly just because he or she is the boss, can play havoc with the best intentions of time management. You may need to regard it as your mission to educate your boss and need to conduct a campaign of persuasion and negotiation to keep any unreasonable load down.

With all of these you need to resolve to think before you agree, and to turn down some potential involvements even though they might be attractive to you. But this is not all; the most difficult person to say ‘no’ to may well be yourself. There are always many reasons for saying ‘yes’ to things: you do not wish to offend others, you want to do whatever it is, you do not think about the way a new thing impinges on the current workload etc. We all have our weak points in this regard and must beware of our own tendencies where they lead us away from priorities. Resolve to be firm with others. Saying ‘no’ is a fundamental time saver. It was well put by Charles Spurgeon: ‘Learn to say no; it will be more use to you than to be able to read Latin.’

## **To be, or not to be (perfect)**

Most people in a job they care about want to do things well (if you were not in that category you would probably not have picked up this book). But I digress – and am in danger of wasting your time! Some people take this further and are perfectionists. Now there is a place for this, and I would certainly not advocate that anyone adopts a shoddy approach

to their work. There is, however, a dichotomy here, one well summed up in a quotation from Robert Heimleur, who said (perhaps despairingly): ‘They didn’t want it good, they wanted it on Wednesday.’ The fact is it takes time to achieve perfection, and in any case, perfection may not always be strictly necessary. Things may need to be undertaken carefully, thoroughly, comprehensively, but we may not need to spend time getting every tiny detail perfect. This comes hard to those who are naturally perfectionists, and it is a trait that many have at least about some things, but it is necessary to strike a balance. The key balance to be struck is between quality – the standard to which things are done – and cost and time. It is one that needs to be consciously struck.

There is always a trade-off here, and it is not always the easiest thing to achieve. Often a real compromise has to be made. Cost is often key in this. It would be easy to achieve the quality of output you want in many things, but only if cost were no object. And in most jobs, budget considerations rank high. It is useful to get into the way of thinking about things in these terms, and doing so realistically so that you consider what is necessary as well as (or instead of?) what is simply desirable or ideal. In doing this there is one key factor that needs to be built in: a significant (and sometimes the largest) cost is your time.

For some, this is easy to cost. People like accountants or consultants will charge for their time by the day or hour and this makes them sensitive to just what costs are involved. In an organisation it is not just a question of dividing your salary to produce an hourly cost; you have to allow the many other costs of your being there. Factors will include everything from your office and office supplies to the cost of support – your secretary, for example, if you have one – and, of course, the cost of other benefits you receive in addition to salary.

It is worth your making this kind of calculation; the resultant figure may surprise you and it is a useful benchmark when considering many things in managing your time, whether you

should make a journey, hold or attend a meeting and so on. Let me repeat, make sure by all means that what must be done to perfection is done in a way that achieves just that. Otherwise make sure you always keep in mind the balance to be struck between quality, cost and time. If you do not over-engineer quality seeking a standard that is not in some instances necessary or desirable, then you will surely save time.

## **Work smarter not longer**

The answer to productivity in your job is not to work longer and longer hours. This may seem like a contradiction in terms. Surely if you put in more hours you will achieve more as a result? Yes, of course the direct answer to that is that you will. The point, however, is that there are limits. We all have the 24-hour day in common (unless there are creatures bending their tentacles to time management problems in Alpha Centauri). This is unchangeable and the amount of time we have to work with is finite.

It seems to be one of life's rules that jobs that are interesting do not allow a strictly nine-to-five attitude; in part, this is probably why they are interesting, so I am not advocating this. After all, you get out what you put in and working hard must make a difference. But it is here that another balance must be struck for most people: that between work and home and outside interests and commitments. If you overdo the work, the other things – and they are all important – suffer. What is more, damage, if damage is done, is insidious. You may not be aware of a difficulty until it is too late and begins to cause some real problems.

The answer is to seek to strike a balance; indeed, you may want to lay down some rules for yourself about this, specifying maximum hours to work, travel or spend on specific things. In addition, for those readers who are managers, remember that

the work capacity of the team you control is very much greater than yours, so it always makes sense to take a team view of things rather than just opting to do more yourself. Finally, excessively long hours worked can be misunderstood and make it appear to others that you are inefficient, which is presumably the reverse of how you want to appear. Long hours will be necessary on some occasions, to complete a particular project, say, but in excess are likely to produce declining standards and run risks that make working smarter a much more attractive option. It is something to ponder (though not late into the night!) in order to make sure that you create a working pattern that is well balanced in this way.

## **Reward yourself**

The final idea in this chapter can motivate you towards better time management and to ensure you continue to think about it as you work. It has already been said that time management is not easy, that it demands a concerted effort, so you need to motivate yourself and give yourself some real reasons to make it work. You need something more than just getting to the bottom of your in-tray. In any case, even the most effective person may never do this and, while what you achieve and how that is received is reward enough in some ways, what is wanted is something that is linked more specifically to your own success in managing your time.

It thus makes sense to set yourself specific time management goals and to link them to what that will do for you; to give yourself personal satisfaction so that you are very aware that succeeding in what you intend in time terms will make something else possible. Such rewards may be seemingly small and personal (they do not have to make much sense to anyone else), but nevertheless an example may make the point.

Take my work on this book. Having conceived and agreed the project, and this necessitates some time, the work falls into

a number of stages: research and planning what the book will contain, structuring it (deciding the sections and sequence of points within each), actually writing it and final editing before the manuscript is sent to the publishers. Having discovered portable computers, I like to have some written work to do when I travel, and an overseas trip tends to contain quite a number of hours that can then be put to good use – on the flight and during otherwise wasted moments. Now the research and planning stage is difficult to do on the move as I need too many papers and too much space, so if I can complete that and have such a task at the writing stage as I start a trip then this gives me a manageable project to take with me. So, completing the initial work in time to fit in with a trip in this way becomes a private goal and the reward is that I have the right sort of task to accompany me on my travels. This may seem inconsequential but the point about it is that it is significant to me, and that is what matters.

If you can think in this kind of way and give yourself some sort of reward – better still a number of them – then your attention will remain focused on what time management can do for you. A major outcome of good time management is the ability to fit in projects that might otherwise be delayed, curtailed or omitted. Make such a pet project your reward, work out what is necessary in other areas to achieve it and you are just that much more likely to achieve what you want.

Everything reviewed so far will help you create a better basis for becoming more efficient at time management. In particular it will help you to adopt the right attitudes in terms of the overall approach to your work, and in terms of specific areas of activity. Like so much that we approach with good intentions, thinking that an attitude makes sense is still a little way from implementing the principles and techniques it dictates. In real life, good intentions have a habit of deserting you at particular moments in favour of expediency – or panic! It may be easier to adopt a trigger to memory rather than a more all-embracing intention. Saying that you will say ‘no’ to more requests may be

difficult to apply consistently. However, some people find that resolving to count from 1 to 10 before accepting unwelcome and avoidable requests without due consideration does work. Rather than being rushed into a 'yes', they are able to give a considered response, perhaps one that has the intention of avoiding the involvement. Of course, nothing like this is infallible. However, if such a ploy reduces this kind of acceptance in any sort of worthwhile way, then it is useful, and other areas may be susceptible to similar thinking. All this will be made more effective if you and your work are essentially organised. In the next chapter we turn to the various ways of putting some order into the mess of reality.