

Getting (and staying) organised

Despair is the price one pays for setting oneself an impossible aim.

Graham Greene

Organisation and time management go together. Being well organised creates the right time environment. Poor organisation is insidious; everything takes just a little bit more time than it should and this adds up day by day, inevitably reducing effectiveness. This is true of even minor faults or omissions which, duplicated across a number of activities, can together have a significant effect and dilute efficiency. At worst, a lack of organisation causes real, even debilitating, problems. The poorly organised person:

- cannot locate papers and information easily;
- allows muddle to enter their diary, sometimes to the point of double-booking;
- is inclined to ‘task hop’, moving between tasks in an attempt to meet many and conflicting deadlines, completing things erratically;
- is late and ill-prepared for meetings;
- allows paperwork to proliferate;

- has no clear priorities;
- works in a mess;
- communicates poorly and keeps inadequate records.

As a result, they end up duplicating effort, wasting time, missing deadlines, and delivering inadequate or insufficient results, even after having apparently put in the time and effort required. Worse still in some ways, such poor performance is both visible to, and affects, others. Colleagues whose work overlaps with such a person are inconvenienced, the perpetrator collects a reputation for unreliability and not only is work affected but so are things such as personal promotion prospects.

Now all this is, I am sure, not painting a picture of you (the hopelessly disorganised will surely not pick up a book like this). But most of us will see a small part of ourselves in this kind of picture. You need little imagination to see how even some of the above can have the wrong kind of impact; and maybe, in some instances, memory confirms this view better than imagination!

It is all very well to stress the disadvantages of being disorganised, but how do you get, and stay, organised? The key, touched on in the last chapter, is having a plan. So we will return to that, looking not only at creating the plan but also at working the plan. Beyond this there are numerous different factors that contribute positively to a state of organisation: next we look at an unashamed mixture of them. Some are simple ideas, though they can have a significant influence nevertheless. Others are more fundamental. All perhaps need some thought to fit them to your existing methods of working, but many can also readily become habits so that you stop wasting time thinking about their implementation. First, back to planning.

Work the plan

There is more to this than just recording a list of ‘Things to do’. Tasks must be noted in the right kind of way and the way you review the list can usefully follow a pattern. One such is the so-called LEAD system, with the letters of the word ‘lead’ standing for:

- List the activities. This must be done comprehensively, though in note form as you do not want the list to become unmanageable.
- Estimate how long each item will take, as accurately as possible.
- Allow time for contingency as things always have a potential for taking longer than your best estimate; also allow time for regular tasks, the ongoing things that go on as a routine day by day.
- Decide priorities. This is a key, and one of the most important aspects of time management for anyone.

Scan the plan, reviewing it overall probably once a day. (When I am in my office I like to do this at the end of each day, updating in the light of what has gone on during the day, followed by a quick review at the start of the next day when the mail arrives. But what matters is what you find suits you.)

This process should become a routine. What other action may be necessary will depend on the pattern of your day and work. Something cropping up during the day may be either thought about and added to the list at the time or simply put on one side to be incorporated into the plan at the next review. I find the ubiquitous yellow sticky paper pads useful (like 3M’s Post-it notes) – whatever did we do before these existed? These can be used to make a brief note of something, appended to your planning sheet and then incorporated in permanent form later.

This review and recording cycle is the heartland of time management. Proprietary systems set it out in particular ways, sectioning things and arranging them under headings; and if this helps that is fine, but many find their own simpler system works perfectly well. A sheet ruled into a number of spaces or the use of a second colour, or both, can make what may well be a full list easier to follow. If items are reliably listed and the list conscientiously reviewed then you will keep on top of things and certainly nothing should be forgotten.

Batch your tasks

The trouble with so many jobs (most?) is that the list of things to do is itself apt to get unmanageable – unless the tasks are batched. An overriding principle of good time management is to batch your tasks. Here again the proprietary systems all have their own methodology, but what works best for you is the only measure. I am inclined to believe that what is more important than the precise configuration of the system here is the number of categories; three or four are ideal simply because that is manageable. It does not matter too much what you call them:

- PRIORITY;
- IMPORTANT;
- ACTION NOW;
- OBTAIN MORE INFORMATION;
- READING.

These are some of the options (and there are those who manage perfectly well with A, B and C). You will also need FILE and may consider other action categories such as TELEPHONE, WRITE, DISCUSS (perhaps divided into categories such as e-mails or reports), and similar ones that are particular to your

business and role in it, such as PROPOSALS, QUOTATIONS or the names of products, departments or systems. Some of the implementation of this necessarily comes under the section on paperwork. The important thing at this stage is to work out how many and what titles of batches suit you, and that this and the way you arrange your desk are not in conflict. A manageable number of batches of this sort can, if you wish, link physically to filing trays on your desk or some distinguishing mark on files themselves. (Incidentally, beware of colour-coding office-wide systems – a significant proportion of people are colour blind.) One grouping, which can logically be commented on at this point, is events, most often appointments, which routine use of a diary can automatically batch together.

Use your diary effectively

A good clear diary system is a must. Many formal systems combine the conventional diary with their sophisticated version of the ‘Things to do’ list. One thing that certainly works well, and which a loose-leaf system allows, is to have at one opening of a binder a convenient complete picture of your day, showing both appointments and things to do.

Confusion is caused in many offices over what constitutes the master diary. A desk diary often lives on the secretary’s desk, another in the executive’s pocket and sometimes there is more duplication such as with a wall planner or computer system. This needs to be clear, and where appropriate, necessitates regular updates between the executive and the secretary who must clearly both communicate and have an understanding about who does what. Small things have an effect on efficiency. The diary should:

- Show full details, certainly full enough to be clear. An entry that reads ‘R B Lunch’ tells you little – where it is, at what time it is, can you be contacted while you are out, how long

will it last, and, not least, are you even going to remember in three weeks' time to whom R B refers? Worse, I know of a case where all it said in someone's diary was 'Oxford', across two days. He was away, presumably staying at a hotel, and had only told his family to contact him via his office. When one of his children was involved in a car accident, it took two days before the message reached him. His diary was a copybook example of clarity thereafter.

- Show how long is set aside for things (this will help decide what else can be fitted in).
- Be completed in pencil so that alterations can be made without creating an illegible mess.

A planner element within a diary is very useful. Certainly I could not operate without one, and anyone who operates in a way that necessitates taking an overview of a period and seeing how things relate one to another is likely to find it invaluable. Perhaps the most important and useful difference between just an appointments diary and a time management system is if it is used to schedule all (or most) of the working time rather than just appointments. The two additions are: tasks, actually setting aside time to work on a specific project, and thinking time, so that planning and creative work is not carried out, as so often happens, only in gaps that are left between appointments and meetings. If this is done – leaving some space for the unexpected and any reactive part of the work, and linked to the concept of the rolling plan, you will stay much more organised and better able to judge how things are progressing, whether deadlines will be met and tasks completed.

Two final points. The diary is a vital tool, to be guarded and treated with respect. It is also, therefore, a good place to keep other key information, telephone numbers and other data you need at your fingertips, provided you do not overburden it so that it becomes too thick and unmanageable.

The computer, and a variety of electronic personal organisers, are taking over some of these activities. Often this works

well. Being able to set a meeting with six colleagues, some in different cities, at the touch of a button on a networked system may well save time. But for many people a personal diary or planner, usable anywhere there is a pencil, will always be a part of what helps them work effectively. Certainly, the thinking that needs to be applied to diary organisation is the same however the information involved may be recorded.

Schedule appointments with care

Appointments, transactions with other people, take up a major amount of many executives' time. Exactly when you programme them makes a real difference to your productivity. Allow sufficient time; one appointment running into another always causes problems. And always schedule a period of time, in other words, a finishing time as well as a start time. It is impossible to do this with 100 per cent accuracy, but it helps. Think about:

- The potential for interruptions (an early meeting, before the office switchboard opens, may take less time because there are fewer interruptions).
- The location (where it is geographically makes a difference). A meeting room may be better than your office, especially if you need to move what you are working on just before it starts.
- Timing that makes it inevitable that it continues into lunch or a drink at the end of the day.
- Timing that restricts your ability to schedule other appointments, in the way that something mid-morning could mean there is not sufficient time to fit in another meeting before it, or after it and before lunch.

And take especial care with gatherings that involve more than one person. You have to be accommodating here, but do not

always consider others' convenience before your own – it is you who will suffer. Always record appointments clearly in the diary.

While considering when to schedule appointments, it may be worth a slight digression to make a point about the most fundamental level of scheduling: that affected by your personal time clock. There is a serious, and useful, point to be made here. I am a morning person and try to allow for this in how I operate. Accommodating your nature in this respect is one of many areas where you will never achieve perfection, but that is no reason to ignore it; get things mostly right and you will be more productive and waste less time.

Clear your desk

There are those who are in no danger of boosting the sales of furniture polish; their desks are totally covered with piles of paper and the wooden surfaces never see the light of day. These are the same people who, if asked about it, always reply, 'But I know where everything is.' They mean it too and some of them are right. But, and it is a big but, this kind of disorder rarely goes with good time management. It pays to be neat. It pays you and it may also pay the organisation for which you work. This is worth another slight digression. If you are employed by a large organisation, you are not indispensable. Sorry, but it is true. What is more, it is incumbent in your responsibilities that you protect the continuity of operations and this includes thinking about what happens if you are, for any reason, not there. Even a short absence by someone on sick leave, say, can cause havoc. It takes others a while to locate things you were working on and, because of the difficulty, matters can be disrupted or delayed. Worse perhaps from your point of view, when you return and other people have been rifling through your system, you are not going to be able to find anything.

So resolve to keep your desk tidy. This means having a clear, and clearly labelled, system, one that is likely to be more specific than an 'In' and 'Out' tray and is reasonably intelligible to others. Having said all that, I recognise that there is a need in many people to have things visible, a belief that out of sight is out of mind and that this may lead to things being forgotten. This can be accommodated in part by your diary and planning system, which can link to and identify where things are – in files or whatever – but still the need is there. Frankly, I share it; there are certain kinds of thing I want visibly to hand and I am not as confident of having my fingers on everything unless that is so. One solution to this is to have a tray (or something bigger if necessary) that contains current project files. I have this to one side of my desk, and the top item in it is a list of those files that are there – because it is a changing population – which helps me check quickly if I am up to date with things. The list, which is in a transparent plastic folder, also records the status of projects and I find this very useful. Thus I believe it is possible to accommodate both views realistically; having key things to hand but keeping your desk clear. For most ordinary mortals it is a constant battle to keep things tidy, a battle that ebbs and flows, but one worth keeping a continuous eye on.

Avoid 'cherry picking'

Your approach to time management needs to be systematic. Some of the techniques that have been discussed here demand habit and a consistent approach. Some people are good at this, they make the plan, they list the priorities, they have a good diary and time system and are careful about their decisions and work practice in terms of how they affect the way they use time. But they then make one significant mistake that negates all this effort: they cherry pick. That is, they keep picking out jobs, possibly for one of the reasons that was reviewed earlier,

such as because they like them. Whatever the reason, they keep rethinking their priorities and deciding that something else must be done first. They can spend so much time doing this that the plan never settles and time is not spent primarily actioning it. Of course, a time plan is not static. It does need regular fine-tuning, but this must not become an excuse for not sticking to it. If your plan is reviewed regularly, and if the decisions made about it are good ones, then you can stick to it and will make more progress through the work list by doing so. Have confidence in your plan and resist being sidetracked by anything and it will work better for you.

Use abstracts

No one needs reminding of the amount of reading there is to do in most jobs. For some it is very important to keep up to date with the technical area their job involves, for others management processes themselves are worth regular study. In both cases, the first task is to decide which, from the very many references published, should command your attention. This first selection exercise can be time-consuming in itself before you actually study anything individually.

But here help is at hand. In most fields it is possible to subscribe to what are called abstract services. These are not expensive and from them you receive a regular list of what has been published on a given subject. Such a list does not just list the title of articles or papers (and books), but who wrote them, sometimes details of the author and, most important, a synopsis of the content. It is this latter point that lets you select with reasonable accuracy those items you judge you want to look at in more detail. You can then either turn up the source and read the item in full (scanning it first, no doubt) or, in some cases, the service will provide – for a small fee – a copy of a particular article without your having to purchase the full magazine or journal in which it appears.

If the thought of this facility appeals to you then you may want to check locally what services are available. Typically, they will come from libraries, colleges, trade associations and professional bodies (management institutes may be able to help you), business schools and the like. Many can now be delivered by e-mail. If you find something that offers a service that appears to suit you then it is perhaps worth taking out a subscription for a short period and see whether it does save you time. If it does, and if it also helps you find information you might otherwise miss, it can then be economic to continue, in which case you have another continuing time saver on your side.

The internet

The internet provides a source of almost infinite information, one that can be accessed quickly and, once mastered, easily. To take a very simple example, where once you might have obtained background information about a company by sending off for its annual report, now you can view its website, see the report verbatim and dig deeper for more specific or updated information. And this can be done at minimal cost without leaving your workstation.

Beware, however, surfing the internet is a major source of distraction. One thing leads all too easily to another and it can be tempting to spend a minute or two more ‘just in case you can access something better or more specific’, and then a minute or two more again. Be warned, some real discipline may be necessary here – for yourself and perhaps on behalf of others whom you manage. *Note:* another new word has entered the language: cyberloafing. Not only is a vast amount of time wasted by people surfing the internet in ways that have nothing to do with work, some of it is so inappropriate that it has become grounds for dismissal. Avoid it; and resist too the social

pressure involved in circulating jokes and other material by e-mail.

Highlight key facts

Amongst the mass of paperwork you have to read, file, keep or pass on, there are some things contained in it that stand out. When you go back to a specific document you will likely have a keyword, heading or section in mind and finding this can lead you straight to the key facts without combing through all the detail. But you need to be able to find the prompt element fast.

Highlighting things on paper is easy with a fluorescent highlighting pen. It is a small point perhaps, but one or more of these in your desk drawer is a great little time saver. They work well and any section, heading or word in a document marked with one really stands out; you cannot flick through a stack of papers and miss a page with a mark. They lead you to essentials, and I for one would not be without them. Like the yellow sticky sheets popularised by 3M, they are now a part of office life we cannot imagine not being there. If for some reason these are not in your desk drawer, get some soon and give them a try. I predict you will quickly be hooked and become a regular user – they are not expensive and they may save a few moments every day.

Insist on quality

Quality has always mattered, and always will, but is currently enjoying something of a special emphasis with Quality Management having been elevated into a major issue, often under the name Total Quality Management. This is no bad thing as anything that emphasises so important an aspect of corporate performance is all to the good.

Look at this for a moment on a more local scale. Consider your office, your department. Does it do a good job? Now you may well answer, 'Of course', but how do you really know? Ask: are there sufficient performance standards? Are you aiming specifically at achieving particular levels in all activities? And so on.

For example, in the area of customer service, a bank may specify that no more than three customers should be in a single queue, that each should receive a greeting as they are attended to and that the customer's name should be used at the end of the transaction as they depart. Small points perhaps, but it is the summation of such points that add up to the standard of customer service that they intend to provide. Such standards are designed not simply to specify what should happen, but to make it more certain that the standards are achieved in practice. If you think banks are a poor example, I agree!

You may have noticed (from your own time log?) how much time is sometimes spent sorting out things that have gone wrong. And this need not mean very wrong, but just falling short of the ideal by a small margin. Consider the bank example again. If customers are kept waiting just a little too long some of them will comment on the fact, the cashier will apologise and perhaps explain, and the transaction will then proceed, usually without further problem. But it will take a little longer than it would otherwise, and with many hundreds of people seen each day at the counter this matters, not least to other customers whose wait is increased.

This is a simple example, but similar things will apply in your office. If you and your team get things right, and know what is necessary to get it right, then things will take less time, first because tasks will be performed efficiently, second because there will be less time wasted in any disruption caused by performance to a lesser standard.

Quality is a great friend of good time management. You should think about the standards of work with which you are

involved, and clarify this area if necessary. Further, if there are moves within your organisation to embrace the likes of Total Quality Management, this will be worth supporting. There are set-up costs and time needs to be invested also, but the equation is likely to work. Such initiatives will save time. 'Do it right and the time it takes will be less', is a good general principle and can be applied to many areas of work. Quality saves time.

Action or investment

Few people are bad time managers because they are idle. Certainly most of those with an interest in time management are busy people, but they are not getting everything done, or everything done thoroughly and on time. And the thing that gets neglected most is investment time; this is time taken now to ensure improvements or results in future – the planning and analysis and other such activities necessary to make progress in any area.

Categorising on your plan which category of time you are scheduling will help create a balance (it has already been mentioned that diary and 'To do' lists should schedule tasks – some evolve a code to differentiate between different sorts of task in this way). Thus the plan will show whether time is to be taken up with people (appointments, meetings etc) or tasks (and whether they are action or investment-orientated). It will also allow for the unexpected. And this will be seen at a glance, maybe in the double opening of a loose-leaf book, so that fine-tuning can take place if necessary. After all, time planning should be a guide and assist the way you work, not a strait-jacket that restricts you.

If you have a good feel for how much of your job should be spent in action time and how much in investment time, then you will be better able to maintain the balance you need, using the techniques of time management to create the working

pattern you want. Time management is, and should be regarded as, a personal tool, something that you use to help you and not a standard approach that you must adopt in order to be efficient.

A good personal assistant (or secretary)

There is an old story told about a secretary to a much-travelling and very senior executive. Asked by someone one day if he could see him, she replied that she was sorry but he was in Singapore. 'Abroad again', he replied, 'He's always overseas. Tell me, who does all his work while he's away?' She looked him straight in the eye and answered without hesitation: 'The same person who does it when he's here.' Some personal assistants or secretaries perhaps have such authority, but while they are a panacea no more than the time management system sold on the basis that it will reorganise your life effortlessly is, he or she can help. For those who have them, good PAs can be not only the recipient of some of your delegation, they can also act as a regular prompt to good time management and take a genuinely active role in organising you, or your whole department. The emphasis here is on 'good', so the first job is to find the right one for you; and then, as we will see, work with him or her to create the end result you want.

The characteristics of the ideal PA are many and varied. As well as typing, and sometimes shorthand, skills, he or she must be familiar with an increasing array of office technology. But what of time management? Whether a person has a natural or acquired organisational ability is difficult to assess at an interview, as is whether he or she really cares about such things. If you can do so, however, and only appoint a candidate who has characteristics of this sort, then you will have a real asset on board in your battle to win the time war. Ask any questions

you can think of that will give you information in this area, particularly about past experience in managing the diary and appointments of previous employers. This is also something to check when taking up references; this is always worth doing in almost any recruitment situation. At this level, a phone call – with the permission of the candidate – to a last employer is probably the quickest check. It will be likely to give the best information anyway as people are reluctant to take the time or make the commitment to put references in writing.

There are two other important characteristics in a PA that you should seek. First, the ability to work your way. This is important as there may be existing procedures and systems, as well as management style, that you need your PA to fit in with; on the other hand, always be ready to learn from him or her. There is no monopoly on good ideas, and in this area you should be on the look out for ideas from any source, the only criterion being that the ideas are useful. A good PA will also have sufficient ‘weight’ or clout, that is, he or she must be able to stand up for you with colleagues and others, to say ‘no’ on your behalf and to make requests on your behalf – and make it stick. Achieve this and your attempts to control your time will have a permanent ally, one who will work with you to achieve what you want and who will, at best and with experience, take an active role in the process.

Commonly today, PAs must be shared. This need not negate anything said here, though it might make being the senior partner a valuable position, one that allows you to influence the way things work. It will also compound the need for care in communication with a PA, to which we turn next.

Communicate with your personal assistant (or secretary)

It is no use having a good PA, one who is sympathetic to time management, and then not communicating with him or her. This is a classic example of something for which there is ‘never

time' but which, if you do find the time for it, will help you save much more time than this communication takes. Many executives start the day with a meeting with their PA, perhaps when the mail arrives in the morning. You must decide what suits you best and also work out a way of keeping in touch and up to date with your PA if you spend much time out of the office, though modern communications make this easier than once was the case.

Your PA must know how you work and what you have on the go at any particular time. And he or she should, if possible, share your view of priorities, knowing what you are prepared to be interrupted for, which things and people rate most time and attention, and what must be actioned first. You need to review and organise the diary together, and over time it helps if you explain what you are doing and why in order to pass on some of the detail beyond the letters and reports. Once a PA has some experience, more may well be possible. He or she can take the initiative on things, accompany you to certain meetings and ultimately run whole areas of your office life in a way that improves your utilisation of time dramatically. Find areas of real responsibility, let him or her look after them and make the decisions affecting them and it can pay dividends.

You must make it work. It is no good coming back to the office after a trip and complaining that things have not been completed or that you now have a string of time-wasting meetings in your diary, if your lack of communication has caused this situation. So, communicate clearly and regularly, and remember that this includes listening.

As a footnote to this point it should perhaps be mentioned that working with a PA necessitates that all the managerial techniques are brought to bear appropriately. This will include development, motivation and many more. A good relationship does not just happen, it demands some time up front – but the results can be very worthwhile.

Use a 'document parking' system

This point might equally have been listed under paperwork, but it is so useful a device that it deserves to come in here. Perhaps the best explanation begins with the problem it solves. You may have many things on the go at any one time, and in physical terms, they may consist of a single sheet of paper or a batch of correspondence. Many of them do not need action, or cannot be actioned immediately. This is what so often constitutes the ever-present overloaded Pending Tray. The net result is that you spend a great deal of time either shuffling through the heap to locate things, or checking things in there to see what you might, in time, do about them. The nature of some of the material makes the problem worse. Say one item can only be actioned when certain monthly performance figures are published at the end of the month, then to keep checking it may well be both time-consuming and useless as no action can be taken anyway. Further, constant reviewing can achieve little in advance of knowledge of the figures.

If you suffer this sort of situation you need a parking place for such things, somewhere safe yet guaranteed to trigger prompt action at the appropriate moment. You need what is called a Prompt File (sometimes also called a Bring-Forward or, less elegantly, a Bring-Up File). This means you take an item and decide when you will be able to progress it. This may be at a specific time (when the monthly figures arrive) or it may not (just six weeks on, or longer, at the start of the next financial year). Then you simply mark it with the date on which you next want to see it and file it, with other similar items, in date order. Then forget it. Waste no more time even thinking about it. You do not have to, because every day your PA will check the file and bring anything marked with that day's date in to you with the morning mail. At which point you can either act or, occasionally, give it another date and move it forward.

A couple of provisos: first, you may want to limit the total quantity of items (or list them alphabetically) as something will happen occasionally that means you need to take action earlier than you thought, and you will need to retrieve an item from the file and action it ahead of the date you originally set. Second, you may want to link it to a diary note, especially if you have no PA. This is such a simple common-sense idea and everyone I know who runs one swears by it. If you do not already use this system, it takes very little time to set up. Why not give it a try?

Make use of checklists

How many times a week do you have to pause and think about how exactly to complete some routine task? Or you do it wrong or incompletely in respect of some detail? Even if you only have a few tasks to complete, checklists will save time, and save it both by preventing those pauses for thought and, more importantly, removing the necessity to do something again. Consider an example. Many companies have a form that is completed when a sales enquiry is received. Completing such a form does not only create a record and act as a prompt to further action, it can also act as a checklist, for instance reminding you to:

- check the enquirer's job title as well as name;
- ask how they heard of the company or product;
- refer to an account number;
- check that you obtain any additional information such as credit details and as many more items as circumstances demand.

Many such routine tasks are not always predictable; conversation with the customer may take all sorts of routes and it is easy

to forget those questions that might be considered optional, or at least of lesser importance. So a checklist helps. This can be either a form (like a customer enquiry form) designed to act as a checklist as its completion proceeds, or a point of reference, literally just a note of what should be done. Some of these you may want to create for yourself and your department, others take the form of company 'standing instructions' and, despite often being categorised as 'yet another memo', may be well worth keeping. Many exist only on computer screens.

You may like to make a mental note to look in particular at things that provide assistance outside your own area of expertise. For instance, if you are a dunce with figures, do not throw out that checklist concerning the procedure to reclaim expenses. It might just help you keep track of how much money you've spent so that you can reclaim it, or at least avoid the wrath of an accountant whose system is being ignored – and save you some time.

Remember: this kind of documentation is clearly not only useful to record information, but the items listed also act as a prompt to remind you of necessary action. A plethora of such forms can be purchased as standard items or designed internally to do just what you want.

Directing the techniques at particular result areas

All the techniques mentioned in this chapter, and more no doubt, can help you become generally more time-efficient; effects can be targeted also. Everything you do in time management terms is designed to affect efficiency, effectiveness and productivity; to enable you to do more and to do everything better than would otherwise be the case, so as to achieve the results your job demands. But there are advantages to be gained en route to these ends, and these are useful in their

own right. Bearing them in mind can help you adopt some of the methodology necessary to an organised way of working and make the whole process easier. Such advantages include:

- Having a clear plan, knowing and having an overview of what must be done – the first step to successfully completing the tasks on your list. Such clarity will make adequate preparation more likely and this can reflect directly on achievement.
- Having a clear link between things to do and overall objectives is a sound recipe to keeping on track.
- Being better organised (eg, not wasting time looking for things).
- Your memory coping better with what you actually need to remember (the systems take care of some of this for you, and it is not necessary to keep everything in your head).
- Being better able to identify and concentrate on the essentials.
- Wasting less energy on irrelevancies.
- Making better decisions about how things should be done (and better business decisions generally).
- Better coordination of tasks (progressing certain things in parallel saves time).
- Having a greater ability to cope with or remove distractions and interruptions.
- Cultivating the habit of greater self-discipline about time matters, which makes consistency of action progressively easier.
- A greater ability to cope with the unexpected and emergency elements of any job.

Any of these are useful, but some may be more useful to you than others, at least at a particular moment or stage. It may be useful to look for the particular advantage you want, wasting less energy on irrelevancies or, more specifically, attending fewer meetings, for example. Or you may wish to adopt

methods that will have precisely the impact you want. This is not to say that all those listed above do not have a good general effect on productivity. They do. But they produce additional, and more personal advantage also. You will achieve more and get greater satisfaction from the results you achieve. In addition, you may have more time to develop what you do and how you do it, and motivate yourself and any staff you may have, all of which can potentially improve things still further. And it may remove some of the things that create the feeling that a job is ‘hard work’ (different from ‘working hard’). In my experience, the latter is nearly always a prerequisite of success. You do not want tasks to constantly put you in mind of trying to nail jam to the wall when a little organisation will ensure they go smoothly.

This list of advantages makes both a suitable summary to this section and preliminary to all that follows. If you bear these and other advantages in mind they can help you implement specific changes with clear ends in mind.

Intermission... take a break

Another thing: time management is about... er, productivity... and er... effectiveness. So... it... that is...

Sorry, I had to take a break for a moment there. I went to get a cup of tea (another cup of tea, if I am honest; very nice too). This took maybe three or four minutes and I do not believe it extended the time taken to put the comments on this topic together. Indeed, the way they are presented was largely decided in some of that three or four minutes. After working on any intensive task for a while most people find their concentration flags; certainly mine does in writing. An occasional break is not a contradiction of the productivity you seek, it actually helps it. You return to your desk and your head is clearer; you feel refreshed and revived by stretching your limbs and can get back to the task in hand with renewed fervour.

This is particularly true of seemingly intractable tasks. Sometimes you can sit and puzzle about things for a long time and seem to get nowhere. After a break, as you start again, it suddenly seems clear – or at least clearer – and again time is saved as a result. Sometimes a break may be as simple as standing up and stretching, or making a cup of tea (for me no job goes well without a regular supply of tea). Or it may be that you can benefit from something that takes a bit longer – you go to lunch even though you originally planned to do that an hour later, or you go for a walk. At one time I shared an office with someone who did this – the office was opposite a park and he had a particular circuit that took about 10 minutes and was useful thinking time, perhaps being applied to something else apart from the job. This made a break, yet was still productive. Alternatively, all you may need is simply to switch tasks for a moment, rather than stop work, in order to ring the changes.

In any event, a break is often much more productive than struggling on with a job when concentration is not adequate. Again, it is something to utilise consciously and a pattern of such activity can become a useful habit if not taken to extremes.

Something to think about perhaps. Remember Doug Kling's saying: 'Learn to pause... or nothing worthwhile will catch up with you.' Take a few minutes. It will test the idea. Me? I am going to have a bite of lunch before I even think about writing more; it will be more productive in the long run.