First things first

The secret of success is consistency of purpose.

Benjamin Disraeli

It may be a little late to be stating absolute fundamentals, but there is one fact upon which an individual's approach to time management must be based. This is simply that none of us can do more than one thing at a time. No one – ever. It is no use quibbling. Yes, of course there may be some overlap, but that is not the same thing at all. Like the 24-hour day, we are all stuck with this fact, and the fact is that what we do (and do not do, or spend less time on) is ultimately a crucial measure of success.

Time management is certainly about using methods that will increase the amount of real effective time available to you, but it is also about ordering the work within that time to produce a focus on the right things. As such, it is about priorities as much as it is about anything else. This chapter addresses a number of issues under this heading, and aims to give you some helpful ideas. Long term, however, one of the things that really separates the time-efficient from others is their ability to decide on their priorities easily and accurately. That is not something anyone gets 100 per cent correct, and is perhaps something that only comes with experience, but it is worth working towards.

Pareto's law

Before you can work effectively in deciding priorities, you have to come to grips with their importance. This sounds self-explanatory no doubt, and of course you may say some things are obviously more important than others. But it is very easy to underestimate just how much this concept influences what you need to do, indeed just how much it influences your inherent effectiveness. Pareto's law, named after the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto, is now universally known as the 80/20 rule. It links cause and effect in a ratio and, although this is not represented absolutely accurately in real life, an approximate 80/20 ratio is found in many business activities, sometimes with considerable precision. This means that, for instance, 20 per cent of a company's customers are likely to produce 80 per cent of its revenue; 20 per cent of factory errors are likely to cause 80 per cent of quality rejects.

And it applies specifically in terms of the issues reviewed here also: 20 per cent of meeting time results in about 80 per cent of decisions made; 20 per cent of items to read that pass across your desk produce 80 per cent of the information you need in your work.

And, most important of all, 20 per cent of your work time probably contributes around 80 per cent of what is necessary to success in your job. So, it is enormously important to reflect this in the way you operate so that attention is focused on those key issues that have this dramatic effect.

You may not be able to readily identify exactly which of your tasks have this effect. Some things will be clear, others you may need to think about. Have a look at your job description, at your time log too and make yourself think through and decide just what it is about what you do that has the greatest effect. It may not always be obvious for all sorts of reasons. You may take some key things for granted. For instance, forgetting, once they have become a routine, how important they are. Certainly,

you are unlikely to find a direct relationship between such a list of key issues and the things your time log shows you spending the most time upon.

Just this simple review may prompt you to make some changes to your work pattern. Clear objectives and a clear job specification, together with a clear idea of which tasks influence what results and which are key in 80/20 terms, are the only rational bases for deciding priorities. Give yourself these bases and you will be better equipped to work effectively both in terms of time spent on key issues, and in terms of reducing or eliminating corresponding minor matters. But it is curiously difficult at one level to decide certain priorities. If we ask why, it brings us to the vexed question of the urgent versus the important. The urgent and the important are different in nature yet both generate pressure to deal with them 'before anything else'. It may help to think here of four categories:

1. urgent and important;
2. urgent but not important;
3. important but not urgent;
4. neither urgent nor important (but still necessary).

Overall, the key is to think first and make considered decisions before letting particular circumstances push you into doing anything, or trying to do everything, first. Things that need actioning fast you must then either do, or delegate, at once; things that can wait should not just be put to one side, but should be planned or scheduled so that they get the time they deserve and then, in turn, get completed as appropriate.

This may seem difficult. It is difficult. But the difficulty is, at least in part, psychological. We do know what is most in need of action, certainly with hindsight, yet somehow the pressures of circumstances combine to give some things an 'unfair' advantage and we allow this to influence the decision. This is a prime area where resolve is more important than technique,

and where there are no magic formulae. Making the right judgements in a considered way must become a habit if you are to remain organised in the face of such pressures. That said, there are other ways of focusing attention and time on priorities and we look next at some examples. First, what useful approach can you take to the varied bits and pieces you have to deal with?

Make the miscellaneous a priority

Let me rephrase that heading: make the miscellaneous a priority occasionally. Nothing is perfect and it is inevitable that as you plan and sort and spend most time on priorities, some of the small miscellaneous tasks mount up. If this is what happens – and for many people it is – then it is no good ignoring it and pretending that it does not occur. Rather you need to recognise the situation and decide on a way of dealing with it.

The best way is simply to programme an occasional blitz on the bits and pieces. Not because the individual things to do in this category are vital, but because clearing any backlog of this sort will clear paper from your desk and systems. (Remember 80 per cent of the paper that crosses your desk is less important than the rest.) So, just occasionally clear a few minutes, or an hour if that is what it takes, and go through any outstanding bits and pieces. Write that name in your address book, answer that memo, phone back those people who you wish to keep in touch with but who have not qualified recently as priorities to contact, fill in that analysis form from accounts and all the other things you know tend to get left out and mount up.

Ideally, there should be no bits and pieces. If you operate truly effectively then these sorts of things will not be left out. Pigs might fly. If you are realistic then, like me, you will find this useful. Be sure it does not happen too often, but when it

does, you can take some satisfaction from the fact that a session to 'blitz the bits' clears the decks and puts you back on top of things, making you more able to deal with the key tasks without nagging distractions.

Schedule – backwards

Some tasks are straightforward. They consist essentially of one thing and all that matters is deciding when to complete them and getting them done. But many tasks are made up of a number of stages that may be different things you do yourself or with other people. In addition, some stages may be conducted in different locations and the whole process may take days, weeks or months. All of which makes it important to schedule such multi-stage things in the right way if all priority tasks are to be completed on time. What can happen is that you take on a project and begin by believing it is straightforward. Consider an example: you are to produce some sort of newsletter. Let us say it is in four stages:

1. deciding the content;
2. writing it;
3. designing it;
4. printing it.

You complete stage one and stage two, but at this point find it has taken somewhat longer than you thought. You hasten into stage three but halfway through it becomes clear that the complete job will not be finished on time. At that point, it may be possible to speed things up, but other priorities could suffer, or the only way to hit the deadline may then be to use additional help, spend additional money or both. What needs to be done is to approach scheduling from the far end of the cycle:

- ■ Start with the deadline.
- ■ Estimate the time of each stage.
- ■ Make sure that the total job fits into the total time available.
- ■ Allow sufficient time for contingencies. Things cannot always be expected to go exactly according to plan.
- ■ Look at the thing in isolation, see how it will fit in with or affect other current projects and responsibilities.

It may be that you need to adjust the way stages work to fit with other matters that are in progress. For example, perhaps a certain stage can be delegated so that this is ready for you to pick up and take it through to the end. A number of options may be possible early on, whereas once you are part way through, the options decline in number and the likelihood of other things being affected increases. All that is necessary here is that sufficient planning time precedes the project, and that in thinking it through, you see the overall picture rather than judging whatever it is as a whole and oversimplifying it by just saying 'No problem'.

Be honest about deadlines

You must have heard the cry: 'If I had wanted it tomorrow I would have asked for it tomorrow.' The biggest problem about deadlines is their urgency – so many things seem to be wanted yesterday (sometimes because of someone's bad planning) that if you are not careful you spend your life running to keep up. As the Red Queen told Alice: '… here you see it takes all the running you can do to stay in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run twice as fast as that.'

Deadlines must therefore be realistic, which was the burden of the point made in the previous section. Give yourself sufficient time, build in some contingency plans, and then you can deal with the thing properly and still be able to hit the deadline

on time. Fine – or is it? There is another common complication to deadlines: people are dishonest about them. In some ways this is understandable – there may be a great deal hanging on a deadline being hit, and not only in terms of results but also of reputations. So, what happens is that if something must be done by the end of the month, so it is requested for the 25th 'to be on the safe side'. But this practice, and the people who do it, become known around an office and so the recipient of the deadline decides that a week later is fine. If several people are involved then the misjudgements can get worse as things are passed on and, overall, the chances of missing the date increase. It is ironic, but what starts out as a genuine attempt to ensure a deadline is met, ends up actually making it less likely that it will be.

The moral is clear. In any group with which you are associated, try to make sure the situation about deadlines is clear and open, and that everyone approaches the situation similarly. If something needs completing on the 10th of the month, say so. If some contingency is sensible, again say so: 'This has to be with the client on the 10th, let's aim to have it ready two days ahead of this to give time for a last check and make sure there is no chance of our failing to keep our promise to them.' This not only makes it more certain that the deadline involved will be hit, in part because people like this approach and commit to it more certainly, but also prevents other things being at risk because time is being spent chasing a deadline that is not, in fact, the real one. There is sufficient pressure in most offices without compounding the problem artificially.

While many, many things have to be completed by a deadline (including writing this book), there are some where exactly how they are done affects how long they take. With these, a review of methodology can pay dividends in saving time; with others such a review may allow the decision that they do not need actioning at all. And there may be more of these than you think. However, consider first those things that must be done

but might be done differently from the way they are under-
taken today.

Review task methodology

Another useful way to ensure you have adequate time for
priority tasks is to review how exactly they, and other tasks too
for that matter, are undertaken. Clearly, how you do something
– the methodology – affects how long it takes. Because of this,
there is sense in reviewing working methods on particular tasks
and perhaps in doing so regularly. I am not suggesting that you
stop all other work and spend time only on an examination of
how things are done, but that you set yourself the job of
reviewing a series of things over a period of time to search for
worthwhile improvements.

Consider the example of my writing work again. The first
book I wrote I drafted in longhand, my secretary typed it on a
typewriter, and a long process of editing and retyping began.
Since then I have typed my own material and the process has
both changed and simplified. I still have to decide what to write
(I would not want the publisher believing it was too easy!) but
the whole process takes much less time and even though I have
had to learn to type – not perfectly – the overall time saving is
worthwhile and, of course, there are other advantages. For
example, I can type on the move, on a journey for instance, and
this saves still more time. Obviously, the changes that might be
made to any task will depend on the nature of it, but all sorts of
things can be worthwhile, for example:

■ Systematising a task that was previously more random or
circuitous.
■ Changing actual methods (as with my example above).
■ Working with someone else (for example, again in my
work, I do a little copywriting and brochure design, and
always check the copy with one of my associates; another

view focuses the process much more certainly and quickly than just thinking long and hard about it alone).
◼ Lower standards. One method may achieve perfection, another – faster – one may achieve a lesser, but perfectly acceptable, result and sometimes save money.
◼ Sub-contract. In other words pay an external supplier to do something that they can do quicker, and sometimes cheaper and better, than you.

Again, such a list could go on and you may be able to think of routes to action that suit your particular job and work best for you. However, the principle of checking to see if there is a better way of doing something is sound. This needs active review and an open mind. Anything you can think of to prompt the process may be worth considering. Maybe if you select certain tasks and swap them with a colleague this will bring a fresh mind to bear and prompt new thinking about methodology; you do something for them and they for you. However it happens, make it happen, for there is never only one right way of doing anything forever, and improved methodology can be a great time saver.

Eliminate the unnecessary

Most people will deny, if asked, that they spend time doing things that are unnecessary; after all it seems absurd. But it does happen. And it happens for all sorts of reasons. Consider a few examples:

◼ **Habit.** You have always attended a monthly meeting, read a regularly circulated report, checked certain information, filed certain items and kept in touch with certain people. And it is easy for things to run on, repeating automatically without thought and for such things to take up time unnecessarily.

- ▪ **Insurance.** You do things for protective reasons. In case something goes wrong, in case someone asks why, in case… what? Sometimes the reason is not clear, there is just a feeling that it is safer to do something than not. Filing and documenting things are examples of this.
- ▪ **Avoidance.** The real reason for something to be done has long disappeared, but continuing to do it means you have no time – and excuse – to take on or try out something new and perhaps risky. Be honest, have you really never put off doing something new?
- ▪ **Expectation.** You do things not because of their real worth, but because it is, or you feel it is, expected of you. In a team environment you do not want to let others down, though you will let things down more by ignoring priorities.
- ▪ **Appearances.** You do things because they are 'good things' to be involved with, perhaps politically, and every organisation has some politics. Your position and people's perception of you around the organisation are important, but you must not overdo this kind of involvement, not least because it can become self-defeating, being seen as the ego trip of someone who has nothing better to do.

All of these and more may occur and, make no mistake, there are no doubt valid reasons under each heading – you really do need to attend some meetings simply to demonstrate commitment and this is a tangible and priority result. But… but, this is an area you need to be quite tough about. Are there any things you are doing that you can stop doing without affecting the results significantly? For most people an honest appraisal shows the answer to be 'yes', so review it immediately if you have not done so for a while, and regularly afterwards to ensure that unnecessary tasks are not creeping in again.

How is this done? Very simply (it is something consultants like me spend a lot of time doing with their clients), you ask why? Why is something being done? And if the answer is because that is the way it is, that is the system, or, worst of all,

that is the way it has always been done, then ask again. If you cannot really find a better reason then the task may well be a candidate for elimination. Failing that, maybe you can do it less often, in less detail or otherwise adjust the approach to save time and allow attention to the priorities. This is another area that can start from the time log; it is not just what you are doing that matters, but the time it takes. If you are ruthless about this kind of questioning and honest about the answers then time may be saved in this way.

Danger – keep your distance

One particular kind of task may very sensibly be categorised as unnecessary, at least to you. Black holes, collapsed stars so massive and with such powerful gravity that they pull in everything and even light cannot escape from them, make the old expression about going down the plug hole seem pretty small beer. In most offices, there are corporate equivalents of this phenomenon, 'black hole jobs' that suck in all the time you can think of and more. Watch out for them and beware – just like real black holes, if you get too near there is no going back and an involvement means all your other plans have to be put on hold. What kind of jobs warrant this description? They include projects that:

■ involve a number of different, and complex, tasks;
■ may be contentious;
■ are impossible to complete and please everyone;
■ may be ruinous of reputations;
■ take up a quite disproportionate amount of time.

They encompass a range of things from organising the company's twentieth-anniversary celebrations to moving the company to new offices. Such things have to be done (you may have such things in your job description, in which case it is a different matter), but they often call for 'volunteers'. This can

mean the Managing Director suggests it, in public, in a way that makes refusal risky: 'It is only a suggestion, of course, but do bear in mind who's making it.' At this point, others heave sighs of relief and resolve not to get involved even in a tiny support role.

You will know, if you have any wits at all, the kind of tasks in your office that have these characteristics and should, if you value your ability to keep on top of your other tasks, plan to be well away whenever there is a danger of you getting lumbered with one. Do not say you have not been warned.

Be confident of your priorities

The best time managers organise successfully to concentrate time and energy on their priorities and one reason they do so seems to be an ability to make prompt and firm decisions about what should be priorities. Others use up hours of valuable time not only deciding what should come first, but reviewing the decision again and again to double-check it. Of course, circumstances change and some ongoing review may be necessary but it does not help, as the saying has it, to keep digging up the plant to look at the roots to check if it is growing well. Similarly, the constant reassurance some people seem to seek in their decisions may just waste time and is also, in my view, a certain route to stress.

The decision process starts with review and analysis. Remembering that you can only do one thing at a time, you must be clear what the key factors on your list are and which are in fact most important, and constitute the real priorities. Having considered all sides of this thoroughly, you need to make a decision. There is no reason at that point to doubt that it is other than a good one.

And, in any case, no amount of further review will change the fact that you can do only one thing at a time, and however illogical, it is this that a long list of 'Things to do' sometimes

prompts us to look to change. It does not matter whether the first thing to be done is followed on the list by 10 more or 100 more, something has to come first.

So, make the decision, stick to it, and get on with the task. The quicker you do that the sooner you will be able to move on down the list. Much is written about stress in the workplace (though not by me). Stress is a reaction to circumstances rather than the circumstances themselves. You should be able to say that you:

■ know your priorities;
■ have made work planning decisions sensibly, based on reasonable and thorough consideration of all the facts;
■ are sure there is no more, for the moment, you can do to make things easier;
■ know that as you proceed with the task you are going to do it effectively and that the methodology you will use makes sense.

This should then allow you to be comfortable about the process, and to reject any tendency to stress. Trying to work at something while worried that there may be greater priorities, knowing that a variety of other things are queuing up for attention but are as yet unsorted, and having any doubts about the way you are doing things, is a sure recipe for stress. Keep calm by keeping organised and you will be better placed to maintain and increase your effectiveness.

Getting your priorities clear is not an area to be underestimated. Work at it. Look at your time log, analyse what you do and you may find with some initial horror that there are quite a number of things that you do that can be left undone (forever or for a moment) without causing any problem. You can then turn to looking creatively at how to use the time saved.