

## Time Management Some Concepts and Techniques

### Introduction

In general we are better at managing our money than we are at managing our time. We get reminders (bank statements) of where our money has gone, some of us have computer software programmes that help sort out budgets, and a few of us make cost benefit calculations in our heads before we go out and buy something desirable but not essential! Indeed some of us delay or avoid making a purchase because, at the time, we do not have the money.

When it comes to our time, which is just as precious and limited as our money, we pay almost no attention to how it is used. The mental energy that we do commit to the topic tends to be used complaining about where the time has gone. To a certain extent, money can be replaced, but time can never be repaid. Once this session today has gone, there is no way of getting it back so we need to be as sure as we can be that the time spent will be worth the effort.



*Before we start did everyone pick up their 36hour wrist watches?*

One way to do this is to start treating your time as money. For example, someone earning £25,000 per year has a cost per hour of £13.00 (based on a 37 hour week). If you take off time for annual leave, the figure rises to more than £14.50. If I were to assume that the average salary today is £25,000 and there are 15 of you here each spending 7 hours on this module, the cost to the taxpayer is £1552.50.

Over the year, huge amounts of money/time are committed to the jobs you do, and starting to treat our time as a precious asset is a prerequisite for using it effectively.

This session will look at the subject from two different angles. The first will be how you choose to use your time, and the second will look at how to manage the demands that others place upon your time. In both parts we will look at some of the challenges and obstacles placed in your way together with some of the techniques you can use.

It is important to stress that not every technique will work for everyone, but even if you take just one or two and use them, you will find pockets of time in your working week that you can then use more effectively.

Finally, we are all different and some people are more naturally organised and self disciplined than others. The key is to work with your personal style rather than beat yourself up and try to become a different person. Some of these techniques work better with those different styles so just experiment until you find the ones that work for you.

### Your Demands on Your Own Time

Most of us, if we think about managing our time, start by looking at our interruptions, the things that others do to us that get in our way. Therein lays the problem. If we keep thinking that we are ok but everyone else needs to change, we will not only stay inefficient but also we will become increasingly isolated from our colleagues. If you want someone to change their behaviour towards you, you have to make the first move, so let us start with your own demands on yourself.

In no particular order, the common self-inflicted wounds are

- Messy desk
- Lack of clear goals (for the job or for a specific time period – week, day, morning etc)
- No review of how the time is being spent at present
- The carrier bag/briefcase of papers that accompanies you home at night
- Double handling of paper (including electronic paper such as emails)
- Putting yourself at the mercy of the computer
- Lack of a good filing/bring forward system
- No explicit purpose behind phone calls
- Losing control of the diary (if you have one)
- Running or attending meetings with low value and outcomes
- Not understanding when during the day you are at your most effective/energetic/focused.

A few hints are offered for each of these, in the following pages.

### Messy desk

This one is a sensitive one to start with because I know several people who have messy desks and who can put their hand on anything they need within seconds. However they are in the minority. An untidy desk has been found to lose between 2 and 5 hours per week of productive time (depending on the type of job) finding stuff, redoing stuff, preparing material too quickly, or damaging material whilst moving it around looking for other stuff. Everyone has periods where their paper mounts up but five minutes of tidying and sorting will pay dividends. The material on any desk will fall into three broad categories,



*'I'd like to schedule a time management seminar... as soon as I have found my diary!'*

There for a reason,  
There in case, and  
There for want of somewhere else to put or send it!

The first category material should be on the desk when being worked on and in a known and organised storage system when not. (More on filing and bring forward systems later). The second category stuff should be off the desk, full stop. The third category material should either not have come to you or having served its purpose should go somewhere else. That might be the bin, a bookcase, or a work colleague (if it is likely to be of value to them).

Find a moment in the next few days, and start by marking what is on your desk using those three categories. Don't try to fix everything at once, you don't have the time and you probably don't have the willpower at this stage but at least do something about the first category material.

### **Clear Goals**

At the risk of sounding somewhat American, most of us do not set goals, either for our lives or for our jobs. We may have objectives and targets, but these are rarely translated into what that means for our work programme today, or this week, or this month. The key here is to be realistic; bearing in mind the work on goal setting is for your eyes only! Whether you write the goals down or not is up to you but it can help if you start the week, or finish the week before with a few minutes of thinking about what you are trying to achieve over the next few days. If your work tends to come to you then this task will be a fairly modest affair. If your work is largely self-generated it becomes more important to map out your priorities and then act to protect time to achieve these.

One way to reality check the value of a goal is to ask the following questions

- Why do I think it is my goal/objective/priority and not someone else's?
- What would happen if I didn't do it?
- How long might it take (or) how much time does it deserve this week?
- What help do I need to make progress, and are they likely to be available this week?

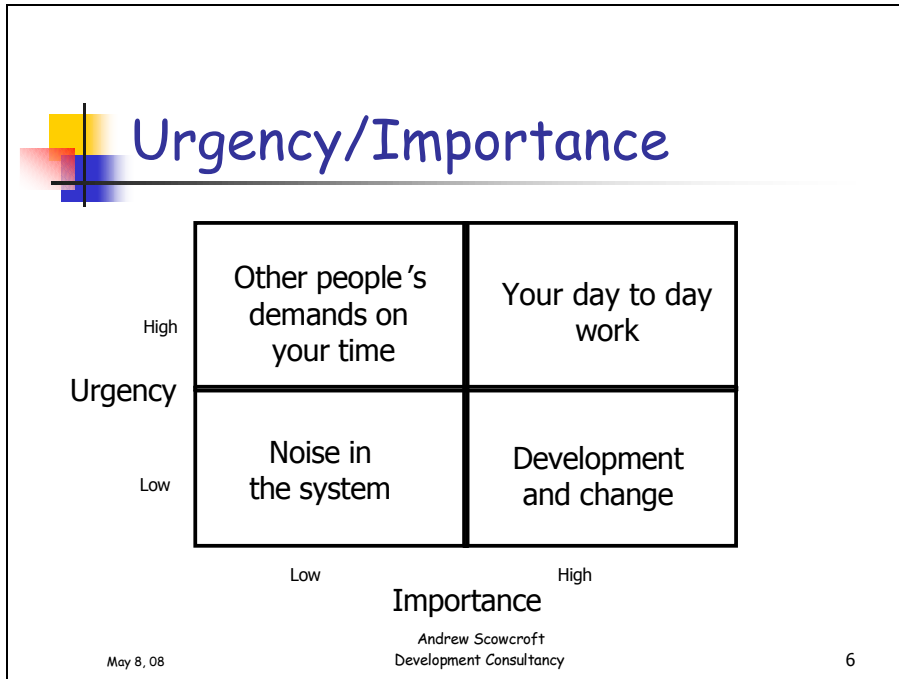
You may think of other more helpful questions, but even if this is an uncomfortable process for you, try to spend a few minutes sorting out your priorities.

### **Using a time log**

Those of a self disciplined and organised personality will take to this one much easier than the spontaneous and creative types but it can be a real eye opener to log your time for a set period and then review what you spend your time doing. There is no one right way to do this. Some people design a simple form divided into periods of the day (normally 15 or 30 minutes) and write in what they were doing during that time, with whom, for what purpose and with what outcome. It needs a bit of stamina but a log taken over a fortnight will normally be sufficient to give you quality data. Please don't keep doing it forever! Once you have the information you will see the following

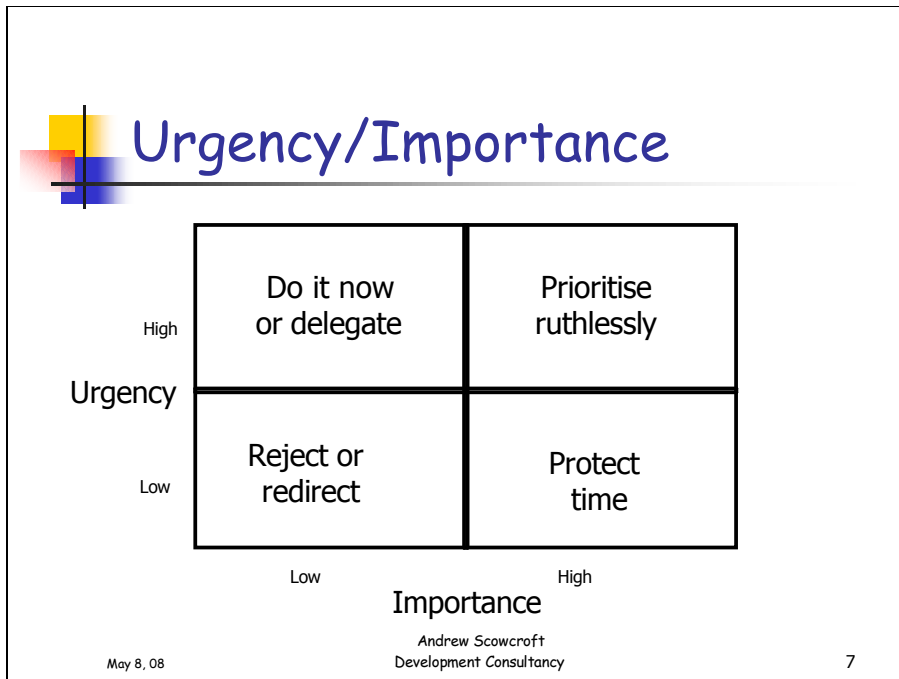
- How much of your time is self determined and how much is taken by others' demands
- The types of people who take most of your time. Many people find the 80/20 principle at work here – 80% of your interruptions are caused by 20% of the people, or 20% of your work tasks take up 80% of your time.
- Where you tend to drift or lose focus (this can help you establish productive times of the day or week (see later)
- Where you keep returning to the same task (which may tell you something about when it might be best to allocate a set time and finish a task). Studies have shown that an interrupted task can take up to 50% longer to complete than if it had been given adequate time at the start.

One method of sorting the time log into a manageable form is to use this grid.



You can see that some activities are more urgent than important, whereas others are more important than urgent. The labels in the boxes are mine and signify the origins of those sorts of items.

Having sorted the items you need to do something with it so here is a suggestion.



### **Carrier Bag/Briefcase**

Many people I know put stuff in a bag or case at the end of each day, take it home and bring it back the following day untouched. Why is that? Is it a status symbol, and expression of importance, a comfort blanket, or merely the result of too much to do during the day? Whatever the cause, the lack of attention overnight certainly doesn't solve the problem and can simply add to the guilt.

The medicine here is strong. If you are not going to work on it at home (and why should you unless it is a personal choice) leave it at work. Use my other techniques to review why it is in the case in the first place but don't just leave stuff in the case.

### **Handling each piece of paper / email just once**

This sounds impossible or impracticable and in reality you will probably handle importance stuff many times as you work on it. What this is saying is that if you pick up a piece of paper, or read an email, do something with it there and then. The action could be a reply, a call, a deleting or throwing away, filing, setting to one side for full attention at a scheduled time, but please do not simply put it on a pile and then have to pick it up several times again just to work out what to do with it. Double and triple handling of paper and emails is a major time waster, and a contributor to the messy desk syndrome.

### **Control the computer!**

Software designers are cruel people who don't understand how their users work! Email systems beep at you when an email arrives, almost demanding that you stop doing what you were doing to look at it. Having been interrupted you read it and then go back to what you were doing, thus adding to the double handling of paper mentioned above. It's the equivalent of your postman or women ringing you at work to say that they have delivered a letter and would you return home to open it, and by the way they will be back later in the day with more letters! Switch the speakers off and read emails in batches at times that suit the rest of your day.

Email housekeeping is a dull but vital part of your time management arsenal. I predict that most of us have an email inbox with dozens of opened emails still in them. That is the equivalent of having opened and read 30 letters and then put them all down in a pile 'until later'. Once read, every email should find a new home and Microsoft Outlook gives you lots of options. You can move them to a tasks list (a sort of electronic to do list), delete them or archive them, forward them to someone else, and then move them to a new folder marked for that person. You can even set up rules so that emails from particular people or about particular subjects can go to specific folders. The gold standard here is that once an email has been read it leaves the inbox. If you don't currently do this, then it will be a slog at the start but once done it becomes natural and so helpful.

### **Filing and Bring Forward Systems**

For most people filing is a necessary evil and I would probably agree with them. A good filing system should be invisible – it just does its job and lets you do yours. A bad or non-existent filing system can seriously compromise your efficiency as you search for lost files, redo work unnecessarily, look unprofessional and raise your stress levels. The exact design of a system depends on the work you do and I cannot give you a one size fits all template. However I do want to raise its importance with you and suggest that, if your current system does not do the job you want it to do, at least get together and make some changes.

Bring forward systems are easier to implement and can transform both your desk and your sense of being in control of your work. As the name suggests it is a system that brings material back to you, at a time that suits both you and the task at hand. Typically a bring forward (B/F) system consists of a number of hanging files, either in your desk drawer or filing cabinet. Some people have 4, one for each week in a month, labelled 1 – 7, 8 – 14, 15 – 22, 23 – 31, whilst others with more precise schedules have one file for each day. Once a piece of paper comes in, it is either dealt with once straightaway or marked with the date you want it back on your desk, and then placed in the appropriate folder. Each day, simply have a quick look in that folder and bring out what you need.

This approach prevents papers sitting on the desk, where they could get lost, hidden or damaged, and avoids the need to put them in a larger filing system where they may take more work to retrieve. Whether you are single-handed or part of a larger team, a b/f system can seriously improve confidence in your paper storage.

### Phone Calls

If you ring someone about a work issue, it is a good idea to introduce the purpose explicitly at the beginning. *'Hi Joe, do you have five minutes? Good, I have two things I need from you, the first is .....*' This looks a little artificial out of context but there are two important ingredients. First you establish that there is enough time in the call to complete the business. All too often you start a conversation only for the other person to have to go and so the call is repeated later and the original time is wasted. Secondly you provide boundaries for the call, both you and the recipient know exactly why the call has been made and both are more likely to commit to achieving that purpose.

### Diary Management

Most of us, if we have a diary, would have to admit that it acts principally as a record and reminder of other people's demands on our time. We may have some of our priorities in there but they are likely to be a very small minority. Because of this we get asked to do things by bosses and colleagues and, if the diary is 'free' we say yes and there goes another slice of the day. Remember the time was never free; it was simply not allocated against a piece of work or person at that time. But what about your work, your priorities, and your needs? For some of you clinics or other patient related appointments will be a major feature of your diary, but if you have work to do outside those set times when are they going to get done? Never, if this 'free' time keeps being offered to everyone else.

The simplest way of getting some balance in your diary is to book meetings with yourself. It's deceptively simple but unless you commit time to get your importance stuff done, and demonstrate that in your diary, it will be too easy to put it in the carrier bag and take it home. Balance is critical here. If you go overboard and fill every available slot with your work you will never be available for the social and work related contact with colleagues, but if you do nothing other demands will inevitably invade and take over. Start by booking an hour a week and protecting it 'to the death', even if you don't know exactly how it will be used. You will find that issues emerge and you can always release the time later if you wish. Just make sure you do have a choice.



*'Sorry, I am moving tomorrow mornings meeting to yesterday afternoon... is that good for you?'*

## Meetings - Yes or No?

I have a respected colleague whose mantra on meetings he is invited to is - 'no agenda – no thanks'. This does not mean he needs a formal agenda every time, what he wants to know is why the meeting is being held, with what intended outcome, and what contribution he is expected to make. The absence of answers will normally lead to him either declining or asking some straight questions before saying yes. The strictures of public sector life can make this somewhat defiant approach difficult to do every time, but the more hawkish you are, the more meetings you can avoid and so use the time for other things. This also applies to meetings you call and organise. If you cannot see a clear purpose and beneficial outcome you are risking a waste of your own time and that of others. There are many other hints and tips on meetings management and these can be made available on request but the process starts with a commitment to only go to meetings that add value.

## When are you most productive?

For some people this will be a somewhat flaky theory, but for others they accept that there is a clear time of the day when they feel more productive, creative, focussed, or just calmer than at other times. Most of us cannot use this to dictate to our employers when we will turn up to work or get busy, but it can help to sort out the best time of day to do those tasks that are not themselves time bound. If you know that late afternoon is when you get a burst of energy and discipline, then you might allocate that time to correspondence, emails, reports, etc. Others find that early morning is thinking time and so they plan to get to their workplace 30 minutes before everyone else, not to push paper around, but just get their head around personnel issues, difficult clients etc. Your time log may give you clues as to when that time is for you, or you may just have always known it. In terms of time management, the trick is to put that knowledge to work and protect those parts of your diary for the tasks that have the greatest payoff for you.

## Other People's Demands

So far this note has covered how you can manage the way your work is done, and how you provide enough structure to feel in control.

However the world around you doesn't always behave as you would like it to, nor does it know that you have a new system for organising your own work. So how do you handle other people's demands on your time? This next section provides some suggestions

The main areas to cover are

- Handling personal interruptions
- Dealing with needy subordinates/colleagues (who want you to solve their problems)
- Getting rid of people (from your work area, not from their job!)
- Delegating
- Returning from absence (holidays, sickness etc)

## Personal Interruptions

It has been found that the average work interruption lasts 9 minutes and the aftermath is another 4 minutes before you really get back into what ever you were doing. That is 13 minutes of down time per interruption. The key to solving this is **courtesy** as the person

coming to see you probably has genuine needs, and values your opinion/contribution. Therefore to be reluctant or difficult is not a sustainable solution. However there are a number of helpful techniques. Again in no particular order they are,

- Saying that now is not a good time but offering a firm promise later that day/week
- Saying how much time you have now and asking whether that will be enough. If they say yes, hold them to that time, if they say no, don't get started, rearrange.
- Spot the regular 'offenders' and be straight with them. Say something like, '*you come to me a lot and I don't want to stop that, but can we agree to make it more planned and structured? The best time for me would be just before/after lunch? Also if my door is closed, it means now is not a good time*'. You need to use your own words here but if you say nothing and suffer in silence the frustration is likely to surface somewhere else and be more destructive as a result.
- As already mentioned, go to emails when you are ready, not when they arrive, unless you are waiting for an urgent email that will help you with the current task.
- If meeting up with someone you previously sent away, go to see him or her as this allows you to leave when you want to.
- Phone calls are intrusive and most of us cannot ignore a ringing phone. If you have the capacity to divert calls and then answer them in a batch when you are ready, do so. If you can use an answering machine, again that's ok but don't make it permanent or you will become remote from your callers. If a meeting is critical then unplug the phone, tell everyone to switch off their mobiles, and put a polite but clear note on the door.

### **Moving People On!**

If you do need to see people in your work area, and you have also picked up some of the tips above, you can go further by making the environment comfortable for you and tolerable for your guests. The idea of a big office with plush sofas looks good on the TV and for some it is a status symbol, but if you offer coffee and a comfy seat to every visitor you will struggle to get them to go when the business is long sorted.

If you have said 5 minutes or 10 minutes or whatever, you are entitled to say when the time is up. Clearly if it is a sensitive issue you can extend the time, but if you never gave a time to start with it is more difficult to impose one retrospectively. Stand up and move towards the door. Most people will get the hint. If they don't, open the door and start to walk though it gesturing that they accompany you.

### **Needy People**

The fatal response to someone who asks you for help with something is to say 'leave it with me'. This guarantees two things. First you now have more work than you had at the start of the conversation, and second the other person is justified in sitting back, doing nothing, and waiting for you. One management writer has described this as like a monkey hopping from one person's back to the other's, with the result that the recipient now has to take on the task of 'feeding the monkey'.

The key is to offer help to them on solving their problem, and once this concept is introduced it is much easier to say '*what do you think, what precisely do you need from me*', etc. in other words the process becomes a partnership not a dumping exercise. Resist, at all costs, the

desire to step in and solve the problem, as this becomes a self-perpetuating cycle where every time that person has an issue they know they can come to you for a fix.

## Delegation

This is a big subject and again more material is available on request. However there are a few basic rules, as follows

- Only delegate what you know others can do – don't set them impossible tasks.
- Don't delegate the things you find unpleasant. Delegation should have a positive intent for both parties
- Be absolutely clear on the task and any constraints. If you are not clear the person will be back for clarification taking up more of your time
- Let them do it their way. If you delegate and then micro manage them, why didn't you simply do it yourself?
- Set up sensible review periods so that if discussions and progress reports are needed they happen in a planned way.
- Don't abandon the person. Be available but not a pushover, given that some people don't need much excuse to push something back up to you, particularly if they themselves are under pressure.

## Returning from Absence

Whilst not all absences can be planned in advance, almost all returns can be. If your job involves a backlog of tasks, emails, papers etc when you return to work, there are preventative measures and treatment measures you can take.

Starting with **prevention**, find someone who will do a quick trawl of your material at intervals, who you trust to spot the urgent and at least take some holding action. Then, even if your absence is sudden, you can still rely on a degree of backup.

For planned absences, out of office replies on email can help to divert or hold back queries, and answering machine messages can do the same for callers. Some colleagues of mine do not encourage messages to be left, preferring instead to strongly suggest that the person rings back a few days after the return to work.

In terms of **treatment**, plan to be overloaded. That sounds simple but I am amazed at how many people return to an instantly full diary or clinic, try to juggle that with the backlog, and then complain that they have no time. This is not a charter for slacking but if you know that there is half a day of really important stuff on the desk the day you get back, then schedule and protect time to deal with it. Closing your eyes and hoping for the best won't work, and it will probably add to the paperwork in the much-travelled carrier bag or briefcase.

## Summary

I mentioned at the start that no one could realistically implement every one of these techniques at the same time. Some will suit different people and their personalities; others will suit different job environments. However the key is to do something, try it out, evaluate it and then either continue with it or try something else. Time management sounds like a simple subject but everyone's context is different, and everyone has more or less tolerance for self-discipline.

- Start by finding out where the time goes (the equivalent of your bank statement but for your time). Then identify major areas of time inefficiencies and pick one to work on over the coming weeks. Don't overcomplicate it. For some it may be a triumph to get 30 minutes a week thinking time or 2 hours a month.
- Others may see their desk as the key 'suspect' and just want to look and feel more in control.
- Someone else may have a problem relationship with a colleague causing massive loss of time.

Pick your own area and systemically work on it for a month then step back and critically reflect on progress. If there has been little, don't beat yourself up, just think why? Is it the wrong method, the wrong time, or does it just need longer to settle in?

Some months ago the media were running a story about how much food the average family throws out per year (£600 worth if you are interested). I thought that was a lot of money, until I thought again about how much time the average employee 'throws out' per year. My guess is that it is more than £600 per person but there is nothing on the news about that! Start treating your time as money and it will come higher up your list of priorities.