

THE RACE AGAINST TIME

Some ideas on how to organise yourself so you do what needs to be done, on time.



“Every second of every day you’re faced with a decision that can change your life”-- that’s a rough translation of the tagline of the cult classic German film, *Run Lola Run*. The film’s protagonist Lola has 20 minutes to deliver some cash to save her boyfriend’s life. While working against a ticking clock may get your adrenaline going, what’s more important is using every minute of the day productively.

First ask yourself some questions

Are you feeling burnt out, stressed out, run-down and tired? Out of balance? Out of control? Have too much to do? With not enough time for the

family or for yourself? Are you unable to get it all done? Do interruptions throw you off your track? Do you procrastinate on important tasks? Are you now less satisfied with what you are doing than a few years ago? Do you feel as if you have too many priorities? Do you often feel unprepared and under excessive pressure?

If your replies are in the affirmative, then as a first step, focus on managing your time better. Time management is a concept that is gaining more and more importance given the information overload that we all face. We have e-mails to answer, calls to make, targets to achieve, and the all-important deadline to meet. Time cannot be controlled but we can certainly learn to

manage it better. Most achievers are masters at managing their time and therefore effective people.

Time management theories have come and gone. Several have failed simply because of the sheer amount of time it takes to implement them. But it’s only if you are able to use time management skills well, that you will be able to function effectively, even under intense pressure.

Usually time management strategies recommend setting definite goals. Most experts advise writing down goals. Some others maintain that one needs to go further and analyse goals or targets into action plans or task lists. However, everyone agrees that time deadlines must

have priority and to observe it you need an “action plan”, not just an Excel sheet or a reminder on your mobile phone. Some authors, with an eye to the clock, strongly advocate making time management a weekly, instead of a daily routine.

The four generations of time management

Best-selling author Stephen R. Covey has examined the dozens of time management theories and approaches that are on offer. From that he has culled four generations of time management:

■ **The First Generation** - Reminders. Followers of this approach limit their time management efforts to keeping lists and notes. These lists are reminders of the order in which tasks are to be completed. Those not completed by the end of the day are transferred in the evening to the next day’s list.

■ **The Second Generation** - Planning and Preparation. Time managers who fall into this category typically go beyond lists and use tools like calendars and appointment books. They note where meetings are held and register deadlines, either on electronic devices or on

paper. As compared to the first generation, the second believes in looking farther into the future.

■ **The Third Generation** - Planning, Prioritising and

Controlling. Third-generation time managers are different from the first two generations in that they prioritise their activities on a daily basis. They tend to use detailed

forms of daily planning on a computer or a paper-based organizer. This approach implies devoting time to considering importance and urgency.

■ **The Fourth Generation**

- Efficient and Proactive: Covey’s book *First Things First*, refers to his own approach as *Fourth Generation Time Management*. He believes in, one, distinguishing the urgent from the important and, two, stressing the important. To illustrate his advice, he develops the idea of a space of tasks divided into quadrants

of importance and urgency (see chart). The fourth generation departs from its predecessors by devoting enough time to the second quadrant, the important-but-not-urgent tasks.

Further time management tools

There is also the problem of resistance to a task. It is on this problem that the author of *The One Minute Manager*, Ken Blanchard, bears down. Whether we want to do a task or not is a key variable in the accomplishment of a task. So Blanchard adopts and modifies Covey’s quadrants

MAKING MEETINGS MATTER

The key is focus: set an achievable agenda and then focus on accomplishing that agenda

Ask Simon Mahoney, Education Manager, British Council, UK what his working day is like. And you are sure to get a reply like, “Official meeting manager.” He’s not joking; most workdays for him just seem to melt into one meeting after another. Doesn’t Simon’s situation sound familiar to many of us? Despite the enormous time folks in business suits spend in meetings, not everyone is clear on how to make meeting productive and action-oriented. While it’s important to participate in meetings, it’s also important to remember that these encounters need to be productive.

Inefficient meetings do little to enhance a company’s progress and also leave employees without a sense of accomplishment that is so needed for the “feel good” factor in the work environment. Some things take place because they have been scheduled to take place and not because it’s important that they happen. A simple way to assess just effective meetings are for you is to evolve a system that will account for the results of the meetings against the progress of your department or ongoing project. What’s important to remember is that if conducted properly, meetings can and will ensure that you function more efficiently.

Today progressive organizations are more participative and democratic and therefore “discussions and meetings” are part and parcel of our offices and work groups. But when meetings are not productive, it only means precious time has been frittered away. And time always translates into money. Employees could have used the same time to complete pending tasks and paperwork

The obvious solution for unproductive meetings is simple – don’t hold them. You need to ask yourself whether the purpose of the meeting can

be fulfilled in some other way. This is especially applicable in cases where executives have to be flown down from other cities and branches. You must pose the question whether e-mails, memos and informal phone chats might suffice. Sometimes it’s important to meet face to face and sometimes it is not.

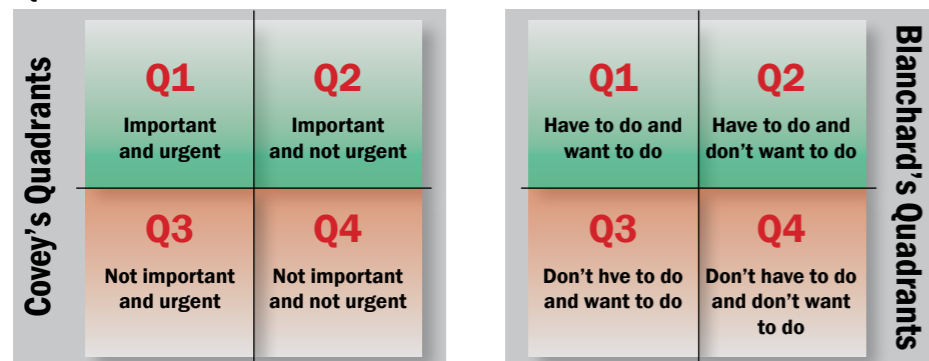
When face to face is desirable consider holding your meeting standing up. This is regularly done by daily newspaper editorial personnel as a way of cutting down on meeting times. Most people (apart from British football fans) do not like to stand up for more than 30 minutes. So 60 minute seated meetings can become half-hour ones if held standing up, and 30 minute seated ones will typically be trimmed to 15 minutes. Of course, long meetings (negotiations etc...) will still need to be conducted sitting down.

Clearly define your objectives of the meeting. Learn to steer conversations back to the focus of the meeting. Restrict the agenda of the meeting to topics that require an entire group’s thinking and action. One effective way of dealing with off-the topic discussions are to “park them” somewhere. This could be done by noting down ideas for later discussion and possible action. Focus is the keyword here. And at the end of the meeting, ensure next steps are defined and accountable.

Another approach to meetings could be perhaps to declare a meeting free day once a week. A further possibility is to assign certain hours of a working day for meetings and keep certain hours strictly free of meetings. Mornings when people are freshest and are able to tackle the toughest problems are probably better left meeting-free.

Despite all this, remember that scheduling a 15-minute meeting can sometimes be a lot more effective than four e-mails, three missed phone calls and a paper report! So the next time you’re asked about why you bother to hold meetings, think of all the time and money-wasting activities that could be minimised or eliminated with a meeting, provided it is kept focused. ■

THE QUADRANTS OF TASK SPACE



Source: Stephen Covey: *First Things First* Ken Blanchard: *The On-Time, On-Target Manager*

CASE STUDY MANAGEMENT

by distinguishing tasks that we need to do or not, and tasks that we want to do or not (see chart). People will typically frontload the tasks that they want to do. Blanchard insists on focusing on the have-to-do dimension while side-lining the want-to-do category. Successful managers will focus on the two have-to-do quadrants, and especially the have-to-do but don't-want-to-do quadrant.

Mark Forster, the UK's leading time management expert, proposes a useful technique which reinforces Blanchard's confrontation of resistance. It consists of a quick list of resistant tasks and something called Colley's Rule. Colley was a 19th century mathematician who devised a useful decision-making rule that allows one to make a choice that has a reasonable chance of being a very good one and a weak chance of being a very bad one. The rule states: search until you find an object that satisfies all your criteria; do not choose it; choose the next one that you encounter that is better than the first. Forster applies the rule to the resistant task list in the following manner: take a task on your list; don't do that one; find the next task on the list that is more resistant and perform that one, instead. In this manner you are guaranteed of performing highly resistant tasks while not having to spend excessive time in trying to figure out which exactly is the most resistant one.

Tim Ferris, author of the best-selling *The Four-Hour Work Week*, brings two further well-known rules to bear on the problem of time management. The first is Pareto's 80/20 rule-- Pareto being one of the founders

of sociology-- which is used in many areas of management. In its most general formulation the rule states that 80% of the results are generated by just 20% of the effort. You may know the rule under the guise positing that 20% of the customers produce 80% of the profits, or 20% of the products create 80% of inventory-carrying costs. Applied to time management, the rule becomes: 20% of your tasks produce 80% of your results. You now need to spend a little time on determining what those golden 20% are, and making sure that they are not the ones shoved aside. You can also ask yourself how many of the 80% of the tasks that remain are really worth the trouble. Many of them might now be shunted into Covey's not-important quadrants.

A further problem is posed by a Parkinson's Law which states that work will take as much time as is available for its completion. Here you need, first, to decide how much time the task is worth, and, second, use a timer to monitor that allotted time. For those with antiquarian leanings and a taste for the passing of time, sand glasses are now available in many different chronological scales (T. & K. Young offer them in increments from 30 seconds to four hours). Managers with more modern tastes, like Mark Forster, prefer mechanical timers. These have coloured (typically red) disks that reduce in size as time elapses. A very small disk quickly tells you that you have very little time left to perform the task. These are also available on CDs for installation for display on your computer screen.

If all this sounds like Latin to

A Productivity Credo

Here are some of one company's time management tools

Bernard Sandoval, CEO of the advertising agency, Sandia, found much inspiration in Tim Ferriss's book, *The 4-Hour Work Week*. Out of it, he drew up a 16 point task productivity checklist for his employees. From those sixteen, we have selected six which we think very useful:

Let certain tasks "batch" and complete the work all at once:

Rather than respond immediately as certain tasks flow in, batch them for subsequent processing. Types of such tasks are work orders, invoicing and especially e-mail and voice mail. Determine which of your tasks lend themselves well to such batch processing.

Select a time each day to check your e-mail and voice mail

Studies show that the average worker checks e-mail 30 times a day. The processing of checking and responding to the batch of e-mails should occur only 3-4 times a day. Size the batch so that its processing does not last much longer than thirty minutes.

Prioritise

Now that e-mail and voice mail have been brought under control, you have more continuous time to devote to the most important tasks. Prioritize your tasks. Avoid the traps of: everything is important (i.e. you don't prioritize) and of nothing else is important (i.e. you are blinded by only one task). At the end of the day, draw up the prioritized tasks for the next morning.

Do not e-mail first thing in the morning or last thing at night:

The former prevents you from sticking to your prioritized tasks for the morning. The latter can extend your day unduly and prevent you from winding the day down in a controlled manner.

Stay focused and on-task:

Write yourself a note and post it somewhere on your desk or wall. The note should read: What are you doing now? Is it on task? If the answer is no, then return to the scheduled, prioritized task.

Do not disturb and do not be disturbed:

When working on the scheduled task, batch any questions you have for colleagues. Do not disturb your work flow or your co-workers by seeking immediate answers to those questions as they arise. Batch them for that e-mail, call or meeting.

Source: <http://www.fourhourworkweek.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/sandia-4hww-corporate-guide-being-more-productive-2.pdf>.

you, then hurry up before it's too late and think *tempus fugit* and *carpe diem*. ■

**NEXT ISSUE:
DUMMY TEXT**