

Urgent versus Important

Planning, Prioritising and Productivity

Patrick Forsyth



PATRICK FORSYTH

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AND PRODUCTIVITY

Urgent versus Important: Planning, Prioritising and Productivity

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The advertisement features a black header with the CMO Inspired Conference logo on the left, which consists of a green speech bubble containing the letters 'CMO'. To the right of the logo, the text 'INSPIRED CONFERENCE' is written in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. Below this, in smaller white capital letters, is the date and location: '25 OCTOBER | DE VERE BEAUMONT ESTATE | OLD WINDSOR UK'. The main body of the advertisement is a collage of three images: the top image shows a large, white, classical-style building with many windows, surrounded by green trees and a fountain in the foreground; the bottom-left image shows a woman in a black dress speaking into a microphone on a stage; the bottom-right image shows a man in a light blue shirt presenting to a large audience seated in a conference hall. At the bottom of the advertisement, a black banner contains the text 'Join Over 100 Chief Marketing Officers & Digital Innovators' in a green, sans-serif font.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick Forsyth is a consultant, trainer and writer. He has worked with organisations large and small and in many different parts of the world. He is the author of many successful books on management, business and careers and prides himself on having a clear how-to style.

One reviewer (“Professional Marketing”) commented: *Patrick has a lucid and elegant style of writing which allows him to present information in a way that is organised, focused and easy to apply.*

In this series he is also the author of several titles including “Your boss: sorted!” and “How to get a pay rise”. His writing extends beyond business. He has had published humorous books (e.g. *Empty when half full*) and light-hearted travel writing: *First class at last!*, about a journey through South East Asia, and *Smile because it happened* about Thailand. His novel, *Long Overdue*, was published recently.

He can be contacted via www.patrickforsyth.com

1 INTRODUCTION: TIME IS A RESOURCE

The day is of infinite length for him who knows how to use and appreciate it.

– Goethe

The modern workplace is unrelenting and deadlines, pressure (and, if you let it get to you, stress too) together with a daily avalanche of e-mails are the order of the day – so if you are busy and even if you struggle to cope on occasion, or at least to get everything done that you want, then you are normal.

Yet you are doubtless judged by what you do, by the results you achieve. To survive and prosper you have to be productive, efficient and effective. Time management is about working actively to create efficiency and effectiveness in a way that makes achieving your targeted results more likely. Success does not just happen. You make it happen. So too with your work pattern, you create it and do so for good or ill.

It does not surprise me therefore that time management is a perennial issue (I have written on many subjects relating to work and management and my book *Successful Time Management* [Kogan Page] has outsold every other topic). Good, effective time management matters. It is a core skill, a career skill that we all need both to make us able to perform in a current job and to enhance our career prospects. It is a real differentiating factor, one where getting to grips with it can see you consistently achieving what you want in both job and career in a way that gives you an edge on other people, perhaps of equal ability, but who lack this aspect of self-organisation and discipline. It is not in any sense an option. It is not that being an effective time manager would be somehow “nice” or maybe “useful”, it is simply essential to making your work and career successful.

The overall principles are straightforward. It has been said that you should: *Do what's important, and ignore what isn't* and that *Urgent things are only important things that were not addressed when they originated*. Essentially such sentiments suggest a firm focus on priorities. True enough, but oversimplifying does not make tackling the details easy. Doing so needs application and commitment to put some of the principles of good time management into practice. Though longer term, as things become engrained as habit, it becomes easier. But it is possible. It is not rocket science; indeed much of it is largely common sense. But it is a matter of getting the details right; for while there is no magic formula, there are many details. This book focusses on one key factor, one that has a disproportionate impact on

overall time management, and sets out techniques and tips to make you more productive. It is designed to be practical, and it is designed to make implementation manageable.

Reviewing the process involved is the first step to improving what you do with your time. You *can* make a difference, and you will like the difference you make. If you work smarter (rather than just longer and harder), then you will achieve more and find what you do less stressful and more satisfying.

Of course, you must read this book and that takes a while (though by definition a good book about any aspect of time management is surely a short one, as this series demands it is). Consider your reading of this an investment, take a little time now and you can save a significant amount of time every day thereafter (this is a sound principle of time management generally). What will you do with any extra time?

Overall principles

Whatever job you do, if you are in a management or executive role, then you will utilise a number of resources: people, money, materials – all are important. In any particular job one resource may predominate. But there is one resource we all have in common: time. And time is a hard taskmaster. Everyone experiences problems occasionally getting everything done that needs to be done, and doing everything necessary in the time available. For some, such problems seem perpetually to exist to one degree or another; others will admit to having moments when things seem to conspire to prevent work going as planned, and a few admit to living in a state of permanent chaos. Always the danger is that, amidst the overall juggling necessary, the attention given to priorities suffers.

So everyone can potentially benefit from reviewing how to manage their time effectively. In any organisation many of the things that actually characterise its very nature make proper time management difficult: hierarchical structures, people, deadlines, paperwork, computers, meetings, pressures and interactions, both internally around the organisation and externally; all these and more can compound the problems.

So, this book aims to help solve key problems of time management for all those working in executive or managerial positions within organisations, whether commercial or otherwise, and who are charged with getting things done and achieving results. If you are in this category, even if you have already made strenuous attempts to organise the way you work, then you may pick up ideas that will help you achieve more. If you see yourself as having too much to do, if you have too little time in which to do it, if coping with the urgent means you never get to all the important things on your list, and you would like to be more organised

and do not quite know how to go about becoming so, then this book is directed at you; especially if your desk is piled with untidy heaps of paper, you are constantly subject to interruptions, your deadlines are impossible and you despair of ever being able to get your head above water.

Time management is not an option. It is something that everyone who wants to work effectively must consider, whether formally or informally. In fact, probably virtually everyone practises time management to some degree; the only question is how well they do it and how it affects what they do. Yet time management is not easy – as you may have noticed! Nor, even for those who work at it, is it something that anyone gets one hundred per cent right. If you think that is a rather ominous start to a book on this subject, there is worse to come. The classic author G.K. Chesterton wrote: ‘The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried’. So too with time management: just because it is difficult, the temptation can be to despair of ever making a real difference, and to give up on it, letting things take their course and muddling through somehow. To varying degrees this temptation is often very strong.

Making it work

But, and it is a positive but, you *can* make a difference and such a difference can not only be worthwhile, it can have a radical effect on both job and career. Make no mistake: the effects of getting to grips with this area can be considerable and varied. It can:

- Affect your efficiency, effectiveness and productivity. This alone makes your attitude to time management very important, for it affects your work day-by-day, hour-by-hour, all the time.
- Mitigate the pressure that goes with any job
- Create greater positive visibility. Time management is something that will influence how you are perceived by others within the organisation. Good time management is an overriding factor that can act to differentiate people of otherwise equal talent and ability, making it more likely that some will succeed better in career terms than others.

Thus, although it may take some time, getting to grips with your own personal system of time management is immensely important.

All aspects of time management must be seen as synonymous with self-management; it demands discipline, but discipline reinforced by habit. In other words, the good news is that it gets easier as you work at it. Good habits help ensure that a well-organised approach is brought consistently to bear on the way you plan and execute your work. On the other

hand, bad habits – as many of us are aware - are difficult to shift. And the changing of habits is something that may well be a necessary subsequence of any review of how you work.

Achieving good productivity is based on two key factors: how you plan your time and how you implement the detail of what you do. The first of these creates an important foundation upon which you can then build and work. The second consists of a multitude of operational factors, practices, methods and tricks, all of which can individually and positively affect the way in which you work. Such factors may be absurdly simple, for example, visibly checking your watch from time to time will tend to make visitors less likely to overstay their welcome, especially if such checks are accompanied by the appropriate look of concern. Or they may demand more complexity, for example, a well set-up filing system can save time: ensuring that you can locate documents quickly and accurately.

Furthermore, there is a cumulative effect at work here. This means that the more you adopt or adapt the tricks of the trade, as it were, that work for you, the more time efficient you become. This is a process that most of us can continue to add to and work on throughout our career. So, unless you are a paragon of time efficient virtue, a review of whether you are working in the best possible way is nearly always worthwhile. Indeed, it can pay dividends to keep a regular eye on this throughout your working life. This too can become a habit.

The productivity gain

Because of the way time management works, influenced as it is by many things, what works in any particular kind of job or for any particular individual will vary. Thus the base principles reviewed here will need personalising, tailoring to the circumstances in which you work, and what your individual priorities may be.

Time may be relative (thank you Mr Einstein), but it is a resource as valuable as any other. Yet it is so easy to squander. Why is it that the thought and effort given to the appropriate use of other resources, money for instance, is so much less for time? The sheer difficulty of some aspects of time management and the power of habit explain some of this, but there is, I think, another reason.

Long ago the late Peter Cook appeared in a comedy sketch about the possibility of a nuclear war, during which it was said that the early warning radar would give four minutes warning of any enemy missiles aimed our way. ‘*What can you do in four minutes?*’ asked one character incredulously. ‘*Some people*’, came the reply, ‘*can run a mile in four minutes!*’ Though sadly inadequate for the task of escaping from annihilation, four minutes is still,

well, four minutes, and it is an important principle of time management that even small periods of time can readily add up to a worthwhile amount.

Consider four minutes saved – though not by running that mile perhaps. It is easy to think of it as not really useful. However, if the four minutes is saved by increasing efficiency on one task which is executed regularly then, for something done every day, that adds up to more than 14 hours over a year! That is very nearly as much as two working days, and should give anyone pause for thought. What could you do – extra – with two additional working days? It is undeniably a useful amount of time and most people have probably got a dozen jobs on their list that could be got out of the way if such an additional two days were really available. This thought comes from imagining what speeding up just one small regular task or perhaps avoiding wasting time, to the tune of just four minutes, can do for you. Another significant reason why time management may be neglected is that individual small savings of time may seem unimportant. We tend to wonder what five minutes here or there matters, when what is really needed is a clear hour or day without interruptions to focus on priorities. Yet clearly such short moments add up.

If this fact is recognised, and time and activities planned accordingly, then it is possible to free up considerable amounts of time. What is more, this can often be done at minimal cost. This is worth noting, as many potential improvements to efficiency do have a cost. If you want new equipment, more in your budget, or additional staff, then in many organisations this needs considerable justification and may still be turned down. But your time is yours to utilise. It is an area where you can make a real difference to performance armed with little more than the intention to do so.

Nothing, as has been said, is more important than focussing adequate time on the essentials and that is our focus here. With the scene set, let's look more closely at just why and how priorities are so important.

2 PARETO'S LAW

The secret of success is consistency of purpose.

– Benjamin Disraeli

Let's start here by stating an absolute fundamental: there is one fact upon acceptance of which much, if not all, of 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, some things progressed in parallel and moments when you pause in one task and deal with something else before returning to the original task, 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) ultimately produces 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. Long term one of the things that really separates the time efficient from others is their ability to decide on their priorities promptly, easily, accurately and consistently. That is not something anyone gets one hundred per cent correct, and is perhaps something that only comes with experience, but it is worth working towards. Given competence in whatever the task is, when you deal with priorities well, you become efficient and productive.

Pareto's Law

Before you can work effectively in deciding priorities, you have to come to grips with their importance. This sounds obvious no doubt, a priority is, well, a priority, 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 who a hundred years ago noticed how the wealth of the society around him was shared out, is now commonly 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 areas of life. For example, you may find as you drive that 80% of traffic holdups occur on 20% of the

roads. Certainly this ratio exists in business activities, sometimes with a precision that is considerable. 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, for instance:

- 20 per cent of time spent in meetings 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 outputs are 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. Looking at your job description, at your work pattern and making yourself think through and decide just what it is about what you do that has the greatest effect will clarify. 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, just how important they are. Certainly you are unlikely to find a direct relationship between every item on such a list of key issues, if you compile it, and the things you spend the most time on. Why is this, what distracts you from priorities?

Priority bypasses

There is one key cause of a lack of focus on priorities which should be addressed up front: yourself. There is an area of habit and of some natural human characteristics that need fighting (the right word, I think) for there are things here that we tend to return to again and again with time being frittered away on every occasion. Three predominate:

1. *Do not put off the things you find difficult*

The time wasted here can occur in two ways. First, decision-making is delayed, then implementation is delayed and both let time leak away. Let us take a dramatic example to put something clearly difficult in mind. Imagine you manage a group of people, one of whom is performing badly. Action must be taken, and there are only ever three options here:

- Put up with it (which is not to be recommended)
- Develop or persuade the person to perform more effectively
- Dismiss the poor performer (or otherwise move them out).

The reasons for the poor performance may need checking, which can be difficult, so the temptation is to put it off – and time goes by. Or you decide that development of some sort is necessary and, if it is something you have to do, this is delayed – and time goes by. Or perhaps you decide it is a hopeless case and dismissal is the only solution. But no one really enjoys firing someone. It is difficult so you put it off, perhaps to try and think of the best way of doing it (there is no painless way). And throughout the entire process the thought keeps coming to mind that ‘maybe it will get better’. This kind of thinking can be all too common and you can probably equate it with many difficult tasks you have had to tackle.

Now it seems to be a sad fact of life that difficult things do not get easier if they are left for a while. Worse, in many cases what starts out as a bit difficult rapidly becomes very difficult if left and often breeds additional problems along the way. Think again of the aforementioned scenario. What are the costs of continuing poor performance if things are allowed to run? And what is the nature of them? In other words, how else will things become affected? For example, if the poor performer was a salesperson the cost can be measured in the revenue of lost sales but, depending on the nature of the poor performance, may also be counted in terms of lost customer goodwill which might be even more costly in the long term.

So do not put off the things, whatever they may be, large or small, that you find difficult. Of course, the thought, consideration, checking, or whatever needs to be done, must be done and in many contexts should not be skimped, but once you are able to make the decision or take the action, or both, then there is merit in doing so. Watch out for any tendency you have in this respect, controlling it can save considerable time and aggravation.

2. *Do not put off the things you do not like*

There is a difference between what you find difficult and what you simply do not like. The likely effect of delay and avoidance of tasks is here very similar to that referred to above, and I will not repeat a similar example here, but the motivation is different, though none the less powerful.

There may be numerous of reasons for disliking doing something: it involves something else you do not like (and that for the best of motives, perhaps doing something necessitates a visit to a regional office, something that will take up a whole day and

involves an awkward journey) or, more often, the dislike is minor – it is just a chore. This is perhaps the chief reason why administration is so often in arrears. It is boring and there are other things to do and ... you know the feeling.

The only real help here is self-discipline and a conscious effort in planning what you do to make sure that such things do not get left out and that this, in turn, does not lead to worse problems. Some flagging system to highlight things on your list may act as a psychological prompt. Experiment here to see if it makes a difference.

If all this seems minor and you disbelieve the impact of this area, it is likely that any time log exercise you undertake will confirm the danger. Again it seems simple, but the correct approach can save a worthwhile amount of time.

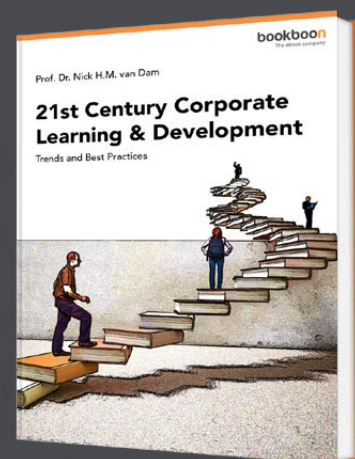
3. *Beware of your favourite tasks*

This is potentially even more time wasting than putting off things that you do not like or find difficult, and often the most difficult to accept. But many people spend a disproportionate amount of time on the things they like doing best and, perhaps also, do best. This is perfectly natural and there are various reasons for it. An important one is that any concentration on what you like is what seems to produce the most

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job satisfaction. This is fine if that satisfaction comes simply from doing whatever it is and the thing itself is necessary, but the danger is that you may be prone to over engineering, doing more than is necessary, putting in more time and sometimes producing a standard of quality or excellence that is just not necessary.

But there can be more sinister reasons for this practice, for example, it may be because you:

- Are using one task to provide an excuse to delay or avoid others (the difficult things, perhaps), telling yourself, with seeming reason, that you are too busy to get to them
- Are concerned about delegating (a subject to which we return) and worry that a task is not a candidate for this, so you go on doing it yourself and go on over engineering
- Find the work conditions of one thing too tempting, such as a low priority job that involves visiting an attractive city new to you, for instance; this is something that is compounded by the opposite being true of the priority task
- Find some aspect of possible over engineering fun; as an example, this happens to some people who have a fascination with computers, and they spend hours devising, say, a graphic representation of some figures when something simpler would meet the case just as well
- Do not know how to go about something else and use the familiar as an excuse for delay or inappropriate delegation.

All these and more can cause problems in this way. It is frankly all too easy to do, we are all prone to it, probably we all do it to some extent and thus all have to be constantly on our guard against it. Usually it continues because it is easy not to be consciously aware that it is happening. The answer is to really look, and look honestly, as you review your tasks and your regular work plan for examples of this happening. Better still look for examples of where it might happen and make sure that it does not. Of all the points in this book, I would rate this as in the top few best potential time savers for many people. Do not be blind to it – it is so easy to say, *'But I don't do that'*. Be honest. Check it out and see how much time you save. And, who knows, maybe some of the extra things you can then fit in will become tomorrow's favourite tasks.

Self-generated interruptions can be surprisingly time consuming and are often a significant factor in a typical work pattern; it is easy to be blind to them. *Note:* Many influences may distract us from focusing attention on priorities, time management is a matter of detail (many beyond the brief here).

Just this self-focused review may prompt you to make some changes to your work practice and 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 this basis 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:

- Urgent and important
- Urgent but not important
- Important but not urgent
- 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 are to be actioned fast you must then either do, or delegate, at once; things that will wait should not just be put on one side, but 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 which tasks are 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 that to make the decision. This is a prime area where resolve is more important than technique, where there are no magic formulae and 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, you may feel that, despite the reality of the Pareto effect, there is a problem with the varied bits and pieces with which you must deal that are clearly not priorities. Surely they need to be dealt with too.

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 may mount up. If this is realistically 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 it 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 act disproportionately to clear paper from your desk and systems and allow you to concentrate on greater priorities. (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 email, 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 rest of the kinds of thing you know tend to get left out and mount up.

Ideally there should be no bits and pieces. If you operate truly effectively then this sort of thing will not get left out. Pigs might fly. If you are realistic then, like me, you will find such an occasional blitz 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 again making you more able to deal with the key things without nagging distractions.

Right, with a clear overview about priorities in mind it is useful to have a clear idea of how you spend your time now, but the first part of that is to know precisely what your objectives are and it is this that is investigated in the next chapter.

3 LET OBJECTIVES LEAD THE WAY

If you don't know where you are going then any road will do.

– Peter Drucker

Perhaps the quotation above is the oldest business maxim in the world, originally I think attributed to Peter Drucker. Objectives, clear objectives, are important and in context here they act directionally to aim us at the right priorities. After all, logically priorities are those things that play the greatest part in aiming you towards achieving your aims and objectives.

Setting clear objectives

You do need clear objectives, and they must not be vague or general hopes.

A much quoted acronym spells out the principles involved: objectives should be SMART, that is: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timed. An example will help make this clear. A perennial area of management skill, one on which I regularly conduct training, is that body of skills necessary in making formal presentations. Incidentally, any weakness in this area will waste time, tending to result in longer, and perhaps more agonising, preparation. Good presentation skills save time. But I digress.

It is all too easy to define the objectives for a workshop on this topic as being simply to ensure participants '*make better presentations*', a statement that is unlikely to be sufficiently precise to be really useful. Applying the SMART formula might produce a statement such as:

Objectives for presentation skills training:

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

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

- *Realistic*: picking up the last point, if the time, say, is inadequate then the objectives may not be realistic. These people can potentially be improved we might say, but not in one short session.
- *Timed*: in training terms this will reflect the timing of the course; it may be scheduled to take place in one month's time, so the objectives cannot be realised before then. Also the duration: is a one, two or any other number of days programme going to do the job?

Much of what needs to be done to manage time effectively is concerned with tackling conflicts and making decisions about what comes first, and none of this is possible if there is no underlying clarity about objectives to act as a reference.

This is not the place for a longer treatise on objective setting, suffice it to say that clarity here is important to everything in corporate life. An organisation functions best with clear corporate objectives, the management structure works best when individuals are clear about what it is they are expected to achieve. Consider your own position:

- Are there any areas that are not clear in this respect?
- Do objectives make for problems or conflict regarding the way you go about the job?

If you answered 'yes' to the first question, then you probably did the same for the second. *Note*: you will never be a good time manager unless you have clear objectives as part of your overall job description (which itself must be clear). If you do not have such clarity then this is something which you *must* seek to resolve.

At this point we can take stock with some of the key issues now on the table. If you have an idea of where times goes now (a topic addressed in the next chapter) and how you really approach things, if you have a (written) plan – relating clearly to your job objectives – then you can get to work with some hopes of correctly identifying priorities and being reasonably productive.

Objective guidance

Clearly one measure in deciding priorities is how things relate to objectives. Some things are directly linked and therefore important. An objective that specifies reducing costs, say, may

flag a project that sets up a new procedure that does just that as a priority. Other things may achieve importance in other ways – a topical issue, say – and together such considerations help list priority tasks (though they may well need to be ranked too, of course).

Dangers occur when things crop up unexpectedly; crisis management and so called firefighting are all too familiar to many. So it is relevant to mention dealing with such situations in this context.

There is something one might call the ‘*if only . . .*’ school of ineffective time management. Too often people find themselves in a crisis to which the resolution would be all too easy if we could wind the clocks back. ‘*If only we had done so and so earlier*’ we say as we contemplate a messy and time-consuming process of unscrambling. So the first lesson here is that thinking ahead as you plan your activity is itself a kind of prudent priority. In all honesty, though the unexpected can happen sometimes, crisis management is all too common, and coping well with crises that are, for whatever reason, upon us, saves time; certainly if the alternative is panic.

So, in the words printed on *The Hitchhikers’ Guide to the Galaxy*: don’t panic. It’s a good rule.

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

So, the rules are:

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

What you are doing here is essentially to recognise a new priority and fit dealing with it into the hierarchy of priorities already recognised and in train. Then action can proceed on a considered basis to systematically sort out the problem, at least as best as possible – you cannot wind the clock back. Finally, attention can turn not only to the lessons to be learned (so as not to repeat similar disasters), but also to anything positive that might come from the whole incident. Not least, a considered approach may prevent damage being done in other areas as time is allocated to the emergency with other adjustments being made in parallel.

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

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

Some people find that to ‘see’ the pattern of future work and tasks in their mind’s eye is difficult. One invaluable aid to this is the planning or wall chart. This enables you to create a picture of activities, and the time spans are very much clearer as you scan such a chart than when flicking through the pages of a diary. Charts come in all shapes and sizes; some are for the current year and are, effectively, large diaries, others are ruled for specific tasks and others still are designed for you to create the detail. The large ones come with a variety of stickers to help highlight what is important; others are magnetic and can provide a permanently updatable guide to your schedule. As an example, if a priority action is producing a new brochure by a certain date then seeing the various stages (from copywriting to design and printing) highlighted on such a chart make achieving what is required on time more likely.

Whatever you do to document things, however, the key is to get into the habit of thinking ahead – keeping current objectives in mind and adjusting them and the priorities they dictate in the light of change and events. While at the same time not disrupting the current day’s workload. Anticipating problems and spotting opportunities can make a real difference to the way you work in the short term.

Having highlighted the mix of activities that go on at any one time, priorities and otherwise, we turn next to how you work with your current work pattern and practice. Being accurately knowledgeable about the detail of how you work now is a prerequisite of being able to focus on priorities.

4 ANALYSING THE MESS OF REALITY

Whatever your individual job, whether you are manager or executive, and regardless of the type of organisation for which you work and the functional area in which you are involved, you doubtless have many different things to do; too many perhaps.

Your work mix

Your various tasks are different in nature and complexity, and involve different timescales. They range across a thousand and one things, from drafting an email or report to planning the relocation of the entire organisation to new offices or the launching of a new product. What is more, you probably have a good many things on the go at once and overlapping, perhaps conflicting, priorities. Often work feels just like juggling, and your ‘reach’ – how much you can keep on the go at once – is an important aspect of your effectiveness. If you exceed your reach then, like the juggler, the danger is that you do not simply drop one club but several.

It helps the consideration of managing all of this effectively to categorise the many elements. There are doubtless many ways of doing this, but just four categories seem to bring some order to the picture:

1. *Planning*: this is the prerequisite to all action. Many tasks are involved: research, investigation, analysis and testing amongst others. This area may also involve consultation and ultimately the communication of plans and is, of course, the key to decision making
2. *Implementation*: simply stated, doing things – of all sorts – whether intangible, of which the key one is making decisions, or tangible. Specific tasks divide importantly into two sorts, first individual tasks. These are free standing. They may be major or minor, for example, a writing task may entail composing a 2-line e-mail or a 20-page report. Second, progressing tasks where a series of closely linked actions and contribute cumulatively to achieving an overall end result. Something like moving offices, referred to above, would involve such action and such things may be more clearly visualised rather than described – indeed flowcharts provide a useful and time efficient way of working on them. Tasks in both categories may well need to be linked to planning activity on whatever scale

3. *Monitoring and control*: checking may well be necessary to ensure things are being done in the best possible way and bringing the desired results. Checking may be simple, editing the draft of a report or running it through the spelling checker for example. Or it may be complex, as are many financial control systems
4. *Communicating and dealing with people*: this clearly overlaps with the other three categories of activity, but is inherent to the work of almost everyone. Few, if any, people work in isolation from others, and for most the people issues, whether it is briefing them or reporting to them, meetings and other forms of communication with them, are an essential part of their work and take up a major part of their time.

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

It may be a cliché, but it must never be forgotten that activity must never be confused with achievement. With this picture in mind you can look specifically at your current working practice.

Assessing your current working practice

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

To make other than superficial changes, you need to know something about your own working practices and pressures, and where time goes at present. In a complex job many activities are involved and not all are priorities.

Where time goes now

There are two ways to consider and assess this. The first is to estimate it, guesstimate if necessary. To do this you need to list your main activities, these will be different for every person. Mine include writing, writing and... but also planning content, research, editing what I have written, checking proofs and more (and I do other things besides writing!). For others it might include a wide range of things from preparing and making presentations and writing reports to meetings or spending time with staff (and that last would produce many headings too: from appraisal to consultation). Then the easiest way to see how activities relate to time is in percentage terms using a pie chart.

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

In my experience, few, if any, people keep a log without surprising themselves. And the surprises can be either that much more time is spent in some areas than you think, or that certain things take up less time than you think – mainly the former. A key question is to ask whether clear priorities get their fair share of time. Some obvious areas for review



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usually come to mind as a result: you want some things to take up less time and for others to have greater time spent on them.

Again using a simple pie chart, it can be useful as a second stage of this review to list what you would ideally *like* the time breakdown to be. This puts a clear picture in your mind of the gap between the two – the ideal and the actual - and thus shows what you are working towards. Such a picture might even be worth pausing and setting out before you read on.

All this gives you something to aim towards and will tell you progressively – as you take action – whether that action is having a positive effect. If action really does cut back on wasted time, or over-engineering, and if you spend more time on key priorities then you know you are moving in the right direction. This exercise will certainly highlight whether you are spending sufficient time on your priorities or whether other things are leading you to short-change them. With all this in mind, we turn to what is both one of the basics of time management and perhaps its most practically important tenet in terms of being able to spend the time you want on key issues.

Plan the work and work the plan

Certainly any real success in managing your work load needs a plan. This is where your priorities appear, are prioritised and what you work from in terms of applying time and progressively ticking tasks off your to-do list in the way you really want. Such a plan must be in writing (yes, it really isn't enough to think you have it all straight in your mind) and must be reviewed and updated regularly; for most people this means undertaking a daily check.

I repeat: a written plan, highlighting priorities, and a regular check and update.

Doing this will create what is sometimes referred to as a rolling plan, not only is it updated regularly, it provides a snapshot of your workload ahead at any particular moment. As such it should show accurately and completely your work plan for the immediate future, priorities and all, and also give an idea of what lies beyond. As you look ahead there will be some things that are clear far ahead, for example when an annual budget must be prepared and submitted (likely a clear priority); other areas will be less clear and, of course, a certain amount cannot be anticipated at all in advance.

At its simplest such a plan is just a list of things to do. It may include:

- A daily plan
- A weekly plan

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

The exact configuration will depend on the time-span across which you work. What is important is that it works for you, and deals with the reality of your work; for example, I would probably never back up my computer at all unless I got a prompt to do so from my system. Such a system must be clear, with different kinds of activity showing up for what they are and linking clearly to whatever diary and appointment system you use. How such a list is arranged and how you can use it to improve your work and effectiveness are important, but the fact of the system and the thinking that its regular review prompts are also important in their own right. It is the basic factor in creating a time management discipline, and it provides much of the information from which you must make choices – what you do first (priorities), what you delegate, delay or ignore, in what order you tackle things and so on. Even priorities need an order of priority! Good time management does not remove the need to make decisions of this sort, but it should make them easier and quicker to make and it should enable you to make decisions which really do help in a positive way, so that you get more done and done in the best way in terms of achieving your aims.

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

Dealing with the uncontrollable

What about what you cannot list, you may ask? Priorities can arise at short notice and some things are inherently unpredictable. You must react as some things occur. A final point here is therefore crucial. Some people, perhaps most, have a measure of their day that is *reactive* and a proportion of their available time is always going to go in this way. Such activity is not automatically unimportant, and the reverse may well be true. For example, a manager on the sales or marketing side of a commercial company may have enquiries and queries coming from customers which are very important and must be dealt with promptly, but will nevertheless make fitting in everything else that much more difficult. Sometimes the reaction to this is to believe that, because of this reactive element, it is not possible to plan or to plan effectively. Bad decision. The reverse is true. If your days do consist, even in

part, of this sort of random activity, it is even more important work out your priorities and to plan, because there is inherently less time available to do the other things that the job involves and that time has to be planned even more thoroughly to maximise its effectiveness.

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

What kind of system?

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

I will recommend no one system; I do not in fact use such a branded system myself. This is not to say that I disapprove of them. More than one highly organised person I know uses one and swears by it; but I also know people who are the very opposite of organised and yet whose desks are adorned with the binders and card indices of their chosen system, so they certainly offer no kind of panacea. Many are restrictive, that is they can only be used in a particular way and that may well not suit you or the way you think and work. There is thus a real danger that if you use a system and some element of it does not work for you, then your use of the whole system falters; it could thus be a route to being disorganised.

A better way is perhaps to work out what you need first, considering:

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

Then, when you have thought through what you need and worked that way for a while (a process which will almost certainly have you making a few changes in the light of how things actually work), you can check out the systems and see whether any of them formalise what you want to do and, as they can be expensive, make the investment in a chosen one worthwhile. Otherwise many people organise themselves perfectly well with no more than

a diary, a notebook or a file. To end with something of a recommendation, I would suggest a *loose-leaf* diary system is a good basis for many (I use a desk-sized Filofax). This combines a neat system with the flexibility to include exactly what you need, and that is what is most important. After all, it must reflect your plan and it is your time that you want to organise. Another option of course these days is to go electronic, so any form may be on screen rather than paper; but the same thinking applies to selecting and tailoring what is best. Computer systems may be particularly effective with a group of people working to co-ordinate their activities.

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

Priorities should stand out throughout such a planning process, so let's return more specifically to them in the final chapter.

5 PRIORITIES: FIRST THINGS FIRST

All time management begins with planning.

– Tom Greening

Priorities come in all shapes and sizes as it were. The first criteria that comes to mind as we assess and rank priorities is perhaps linked to such things as projects. If you are involved in, say, a new product launch then there will be an important and probably unchangeable deadline. Your bit – devising and writing promotional announcement material say – is certainly a priority and must be fitted in with due reference to the deadlines involved; both yours and those of other people involved.

Selecting priorities

A priority is something that either should have major time and resources linked to it or which must be done first or promptly; or both. What constitutes a priority will vary person by person. You need to work out what are the best criteria for you and use those as you make the necessary choices. I have picked a few examples that should have wide relevance. Identifying something as a priority may involve:

- *Money*: which things will make or save most money
- *Productivity*: what will get more of something done
- *People*: what must be done promptly because of other people: something ranging from simply getting something done before a key player goes on holiday to shareholder demands
- *Political*: this is another aspect of the people point, for example perhaps you need to do something to make a point to your boss or involve someone whose collaboration you need more widely
- *Fit*: priority status may be necessary to get two, or more, projects to fit together
- *Timing*: the workplace is replete with deadlines and often these must be made to relate sensibly to each other.

There are other criteria in identifying priorities too and some may be largely personal. For example, in writing, especially longer text, I will sometimes aim to have a final draft ready at the time I make a long haul flight; allowing several hours of uninterrupted final editing (and

utilising time that would be otherwise wasted). There are also important criteria reflecting *processes* involved in the work mix and I here highlight three of them:

- *Planning tasks*: this, everything from an annual business plan to a detailed operational budget, is an example of longer term activity and is often subject to interference from things that you give priority to on a time basis because they are simply urgent. The danger is that they are left too late, then done in a rush and suffer accordingly. So such things must be given the priority status they deserve
- *Thinking*: some things need thinking through, and we might include things that need thinking through with others involved in the process; that need consultation. Thinking takes time and again the problems and solution are the same – some topics do not have an instant plan, solution or anything else, you need to give them some time and make sure that time is available at the right moment
- *Creativity*: this is something that suffers more than anything else. Most organisations do not run simply by keeping going in the same old way and protecting the status quo. They need to change, both as a reaction to external change (say in the market) and simple to find new ways of doing things for a range of reasons from saving money to stealing a march on competitors. This can need consultation, collaboration and research and involves planning and thinking. No wonder it can be a problem. No wonder finding time for it sometimes needs to be made a major priority. This is vital – a loss of creativity is one of the first things to suffer from you not being on top of the volume of work.

However you make the decision to categorise something as a priority or rank a priority at the top of your list, and doing so may involve a number of factors, it must be as the result of a *considered* decision.

Keeping on top of your priorities

Even having identified and ranked priorities alongside or within a complete ‘to do’ list, there is more to this than just recording a list. Tasks must be noted in the right kind of way and the way you review the list can usefully follow a pattern. One such, a useful one, 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 to action, as accurately as possible, and...

- 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 (and rank) priorities; this is key, and, as we are seeing, is one of the most important aspects of time management for anyone. Effectively your 'to do' list has two categories: priorities and other, less important or urgent items, producing one complete to-do list that must, of course, be managed together.

This specifically adds duration to the fact of tasks to be done, and allows a more realistic link to be made with day to day activity. Scan the plan, in the way that's been mentioned, 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 day when the mail arrives. But what matters is regularity in a way that 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. One little thing I find useful is the ubiquitous yellow sticky paper pads (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 managing your priorities and of time management generally. 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. As a final thought here, a 'to do' list can become long... and thus unmanageable. It can help therefore to run several 'to do' lists, with each listing a certain category of things. What those are clearly will reflect individual jobs.

Communication and priorities

It may not be sufficient for you to be clear about your priorities. Other people may be involved too. Some of this links back to job descriptions and objectives. Unless you are the boss you will have one and they are doubtless involved in this area. If you do not both have a common understanding, this can quickly lead to problems. So in job appraisal meetings

(and elsewhere if necessary), if you think this is the case – ask. Make sure that there is a common view of such things.

Alternatively you may have staff reporting to you, in which case the responsibility for ensuring that there is such common understanding of priorities is yours. You do not want to be chasing to make sure some key priority is being met and find your queries answered by a comment such as: *I didn't realise that it was that important.*

The principle here can perhaps be best illustrated by an example; consider issuing instructions. There is an old saying that there is never time to do anything properly, but there must always be time to do it again. Nothing is more likely to end up meaning something has to be re-done than not making it clear to people what they had to do in the first place. It is a truism that communication is not easy (the mistake is to assume it is), but the responsibility for getting it right is with the communicator – and that, if you are issuing instructions, is you. Similarly, if people do not really understand and fail to query it, perhaps because they are worried you will blame them, then that is your fault also because you should make it clear that in such circumstances it is the way they should proceed.

So instructions should be clear and people should be told:

- What needs to be done (and give them sufficient details)
- Why it needs to be done (knowing the objectives and priority ranking may make the task clearer and will improve the motivation)
- How it should be done (methodology etc.)
- When it should be completed (and anything else about the timing).

Before leaving the point, ask if it is clear – get some feedback. Any short cut of this sequence must be based on genuine knowledge or familiarity, not simply assumption that all will be well. Good clear instructions save time, written guidelines do the same and for some jobs they are useful. This last is especially true of awkward or difficult jobs which are performed regularly but not often. Moral: all instructions, in whatever form, must be clear. Indeed all interaction between people must where priorities are involved, be conducted in a way that ensures that both parties see the same degree of urgency and, or, importance. Care is necessary here.

A further element here, certainly if you have staff reporting to you is delegation. Many of those reading this may be managers, so this makes a good example of dealing with priorities in such a context.

Don't do it – delegate

If a task simply has to be done – it's a priority, but you cannot get to it, then the best way to give yourself more time is to delegate the doing of it to someone else. This is eminently desirable and yet, for some, curiously difficult. What are the pros and cons?

- *The advantages:* consider these by asking yourself what sort of manager you want to work for yourself. You could probably list a great many qualities: someone who is fair, who listens, who is decisive, good at their job and so on – but I would bet you put someone who delegates high on the list. The opposite is a boss who hangs on to everything, does not involve you, is probably secretive and generally not the sort of person you would want to work for at all. So if you delegate effectively, there are major advantages in other ways: motivation and the chance to tackle new things and priorities for one, as well as the time you will save.
- *The difficulties:* delegating is a risk. Something may go wrong and what is more, as the manager, you may be blamed. So, despite the fact that going about it the right way will minimise the risk, there is temptation to hang on to things. This makes for problems in two ways. You have too much to do, and particularly too much at the more routine end, keeping you from giving the attention you know they deserve to things that are clear priorities. And staff do not like it, so motivation – and productivity on the things they are doing – will also be adversely affected.

But there is another important and significant reason why delegation sometimes does not happen. This is fear. Not that the other person will *not* be able to cope, but that they *will cope too well*, that they will improve the method, that they will do things more quickly, more thoroughly and better in some way than you. If you are honest you may admit this is a real fear too; certainly it is a common one. Though it is also precisely how innovation can occur. It is not a reason that should put you off delegating – the potential rewards are too great. The amount you can do if you delegate successfully is way beyond the improvement in productivity you can hope to achieve in any other way. So it is a vital area. But what about something delegated that does go better? So much to the good, this is one of the key ways that progress is made in organisations as new people, new ways, and new thinking are brought to bear on tasks. Without it organisations would become stultified and unable to cope with change. And besides, as a manager you should be the reason they are able to make this happen. It is your selection, development, counselling and management that creates and maintains a strong and effective team; and this is something for which you deserve credit.

Making delegation successful needs a considered and systematic approach to the process. What does successful delegation achieve? There are five key results, it:

- Creates, for those to whom matters are delegated, opportunity for development and accelerated experience; the range of what they can cope with expands and this can come to include priority tasks that, without delegation are being short changed in terms of time
- Builds morale (precisely because of the opportunity above) through the motivational effect of greater job satisfaction, and achievement long and short term in the job (and ultimately beyond it)
- Has broader motivational effects around a team, as well as on the individual.

In addition, there are advantages to those who do the delegating: principally that as a result of the time freed up they can:

- Concentrate time and effort on those aspects of their job which are key to the achievement of objectives - priorities
- Bring a more considered, or creative, approach to bear, uncluttered by matters which may distract or prevent a broad brush or longer term perspective.

You can probably think of specific advantages springing from these kinds of general effects in your own job. Yet it can be curiously difficult to delegate, and there are some managers

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who find it impossible. Ask yourself the question: what kind of person do you wish to report to? Most will answer: one who delegates – and so, no doubt, will those who work for you. If the time gains to be made from delegation seem inadequate to make you do it, or do it as much as you should, maybe this will produce additional pause for thought. Despite the several and considerable advantages delegation can bring, it is not without its risks. It is this element of risk that can make it difficult to accomplish, but several factors can help:

1. *Minimising the risks:* There is always the possibility that delegation will not work. After all, it passes on ‘the right to be wrong’ as it were, by putting someone else in the driving seat. So if a misjudgement is made about the choice of what is to be delegated, to whom it is to be delegated or how the process will be carried out, things may end up with mistakes being made, and time being wasted as a result. The net intention from all this must be to minimise the inherent risks, first by selecting tasks that are suitable for delegation. In most jobs there will be certain things that should sensibly be omitted. These include:

- Matters key to overall results generation or control
- Staff discipline matters
- Certain contentious issues (e.g. staff grievances)
- Confidential matters (though be sure they need to be confidential, protecting unnecessary secrets can be very time wasting and often fruitless).

Then, in picking the best person to whom to delegate, you should ask questions such as:

- Have they undertaken similar tasks in the past?
- Do they have the necessary knowledge, experience and capability?
- Is it too much to cope with at once?
- Is prior training (however informal) necessary?
- Do they want to do more? (Or should they?)
- Will they be acceptable to others involved and will it be accepted also as a fair opportunity amongst peers?

Thereafter, perhaps the greatest guarantee of success is clear communication, and that means more widely than just with the person involved. Others may have to know what is going on and have to trust in the person’s ability to do something. Messages may need to be passed up and down and across the line to ensure total clarity. Make sure there is nothing left out regarding authority, responsibility and that, above all, the individual concerned knows why the job is necessary and why they are doing it. And as the result of any briefing, be confident that they are able to do it satisfactorily.

Any explanation needs to make clear whether what is being done is a one-off exercise, perhaps in an emergency situation, or ultimately a permanent addition to the existing set of responsibilities. Remember delegation is more than simple work allocation and, as such, can have implications for such matters as job descriptions, salary and employment conditions.

Assuming that delegation is well chosen and communicated, the next step is to keep in touch, at least initially, with how things are going.

2. *Monitoring progress:* Once something has been passed over, keeping in touch can easily be forgotten, and when done can present certain problems. It must be done, in a word, carefully. If it is not, then it will smack of interference and may doom the whole process. The simplest way to monitor in an acceptable way is to build in any necessary checks at the time of the original briefing and handover. From the beginning, ask for interim reports at logical points. Do not simply arrive unannounced at someone's desk and ask to see the file (they may be at an awkward stage). Let them bring things to you, at prearranged moments. If they have been well briefed, know what is expected and to what standards, then they can deliver in a way that either duplicates past practice, or brings something new to the activity. Either may be appropriate in the short term, though, as nothing lasts for ever, new thinking is usually to be encouraged once the person has a real handle on the basics.

It may be necessary to let things proceed, to bite your tongue and resist taking the whole matter back during this stage as you see things proceeding in a way that may well differ, if only a little, from the way in which you would have done the job. The ultimate results make all this worthwhile, and not just in time terms but in terms of growth and development within the workplace.

So far so good. If all goes well surely there is nothing more to be done? Wrong. The process must be evaluated.

3. *Evaluating how delegation has worked:* Once sufficient time has gone by and you can assess how things have gone, a number of questions should be asked. These can usefully include:

- Has the task been completed satisfactorily?
- Did it take an acceptable amount of time?
- Does it indicate the person concerned could do more?
- Are there other tasks that could be delegated along the same route?
- What has been the effect on others? (E.g. are others wanting more responsibility?)

- Is there any documentation change necessary as a result?
- Has any new or revised methodology been created and are there implications arising from this? (e.g. a change to standing instructions);
- Overall what has the effect been on productivity?

This last brings us to a key aspect of evaluation: what has the effect been on you? In other words: What have you done with the time saved? (This might make new work possible, or facilitate a greater focus on key priorities or long-term issues).

There is little to be gained by delegating if you only end up submerged in more detail and having little or nothing of real substance to show for the change.

Similarly, should the process not be a success, questions should be asked about what went wrong and they too need to address both sides, asking not just what did someone do wrong or misunderstand, but also raising such questions as how thoroughly you in fact briefed that person. It is important to learn from the experience; testing what you delegate, to whom and seeking the best way of handling the process is well worthwhile. If you develop good habits in this area it can pay dividends over time.

At the end of the day the effect on others is as important as the effect on you. People carry out with the greatest enthusiasm and care those things for which they have responsibility. In delegating you pass on the opportunity for additional responsibility (strictly speaking responsibility can only be taken, you cannot force it on people) and you must also pass on with it the authority to act. As has been said, delegation fosters a good working relationship around a team of people. Not least it produces challenge and, although there are risks, people will normally strive hard to make it work and the failure rate will thus be low. Certainly the effect on productivity can be marked. But – there is always a but with anything of this sort – it is a process that needs care, determination and perhaps even sacrifice. Delegation is not just a way of getting rid of the things you regard as chores, amongst the matters most likely to benefit from delegation are almost certainly things you enjoy doing.

The potential rewards cannot be overrated, and the need to make delegation work is therefore strong. Theodore Roosevelt once said: *‘The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and the self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it’*. Sound advice, and for the manager wanting to be a good time manager it is crucial. The two things go together. You cannot be as good at time management if you are a poor delegator. Get both right and you have a major part of the overall management process working for you.

This is an area to think on:

- Do you delegate?
- Do you delegate the right things and do it sufficiently often?
- How well does it work?

While the principles reviewed here are important and it is something to be tackled on the right basis, an intention and commitment to making it work are perhaps most important. It may be worth more time to check it out. If you think there is more that you could delegate, review just what and just how you can action the process to get the very most from it in terms of your time and all the other advantages that can flow from it. Perhaps you should consider attending a course on delegating (or better still, send your assistant!).

Overall here I want to stress the people aspects involved. Priorities are not identified and tackled alone. For most, working in an organisation means working with other people and that has a variety of implications for the way priorities are dealt with. The two heads are better than one principle is sound. Some collaborations, certainly clear communication and maybe some delegation too – all can act to see a whole team responding to their collective task and focussing on priorities as they do so.

AFTERWORD: A WELL-ORGANISED FUTURE AWAITS

*Next week there can't be any crisis.
My schedule is already full.*

– Henry Kissinger

Identifying and focussing on priorities and, overall, making time management work for you is important to everyone. At worst, the alternative is a life of permanent muddle, pressure and frustration – not to mention the fact of actually achieving less than you would want or believe possible. So there are considerable advantages to getting to grips with the process. To recap: principally, effective management of your time and a focus on your priorities will allow you to:

- Achieve greater productivity, efficiency and effectiveness
- Give more focus to your efforts and bring any particular way of working that may be necessary, for example creativity, more certainly to bear
- Be more likely to achieve your various objectives
- Be more likely to be able to develop the job long term
- Get more satisfaction and enjoyment from what you do
- Find that home and family and job responsibilities fit better together.

These overall statements incorporate many details from fewer missed deadlines to more time for key projects and better relationships with the people working with, or for, you in the organisation. Further, because time management affects results and efficiency so directly, it can have a direct bearing on your career progress; remember - good time managers tend to be more successful than their less well-organised peers.

So, there certainly seem to be more than sufficient reasons to make it work for you. Success comes not from one panacea, but from a wealth of details. Some ideas that help seem very obvious and when you take them up they quickly fit in, become habits and work well without great effort. Other aspects of the process are, as we have seen, inevitably harder. The matter of priorities is both amongst the harder and yet also is a core issue; success with this does a great deal for you. At the end of the day, given the inherent difficulty and what I have referred to as the mess of reality, is time management really something to bother about or is it just another management panacea, actually only taking up time that could be better spent simply getting on and doing the job?

I believe firmly that it is not just worthwhile, but essential. I hope this book has demonstrated that the time it takes to become better organised, certainly in the matter of prioritising, need not be prohibitive, indeed that, as good habits develop, the techniques, tricks and, most important, the attitudes adopted clearly pay dividends.

It was said early on that time management means self-management, and certainly what is said here reinforces that point. What makes it all work is not simply having an understanding of the principles and enough ideas, but the discipline and ultimately the habit to make it stick as an overall way of working.

The results stemming from it have been stated. Even so, is the net effect worthwhile? I believe the answer is certainly yes. You probably spend a major part of your life on your work (proportionately more if you are not too well organised) so it must be important to you. This is one business technique that not only affects the organisation through your job and the results it generates, but also affects you very directly – your job satisfaction, state of mind and general well-being are all subject to the way you run things in this respect. Becoming a better time manager may take a commitment, and needs working at but, as the saying has it, *‘there is no such thing as a free lunch’*. Most things that are worthwhile do need some investment of time and effort. This is no exception; it is no exaggeration to say that good time management can change your life promptly, for the better and do so in a variety of different ways and, when you work at it, very possibly can do so for the remainder of your career. Sorting yourself out in this way is itself clearly a priority.

Eternity is a terrible thought. I mean, where is it going to end?

– Tom Stoppard