

EFFECTIVE TIME MANAGEMENT

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Do you love life? Then do not squander time, for that's the stuff life is made of.

Benjamin Franklin

Abstract

This paper presents the importance of time management, focusing on individuals. In subsequent parts of the paper, some of the most common obstacles of time management and ways of overcoming them are characterized. In the final part of the paper the emphasis is put on procrastination. Summing up, some of the author's reflections are presented in this paper.

Keywords: *time management, procrastination*

1. Introduction

Time is a precious resource we cannot buy or store; it is irreversible and irreplaceable. Therefore, it should be valued by both individuals and organizations. However, we too often waste it by filling it with some unimportant activities instead of using it to accomplish our priorities. We also too often procrastinate in our tasks, not doing what we are supposed to. The result of this is that the quality of our work suffers. The aim of this paper is to present the most common obstacles to effective personal time management as well as some ways of overcoming them, paying special attention to procrastination.

2. The importance of effective time management

Every day each of us has the same amount of time. It's what we do with it that makes a difference – our use of time affects our achievement and comfort level. Therefore, it's good to have a clear vision of what we want, of our priorities, keeping in prospective that it also influences other people in both private (family, acquaintances) and organizational (co-workers, clients) circles.

“Time management is the consistent and goals-oriented application in practice of proved work techniques in such a way to ensure both self-

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management and management of the environment without intrusion, as well as the reasonable and optimal use of time we gain” (Czaja, 2011, p. 256)

Effective time management can be understood as spending time wisely on activities that move us closer to our goals as well as the process of assessing and planning how to use our time to accomplish them. Conscious and effective leveraging of time means using it to pursue our most important goals. The very first step in effective time management is to clarify our priorities. At the same time, time management is also about discipline in performing successive tasks and control over whether we waste our time or not and whether we implement our plan. (Raffoni, 2007, 5-14).

Effective use of time is a skill which can be learned. It requires concentrating on the right issues and acting in an effective manner. Hence, making the right choices is more important than simply doing a task efficiently. (Lakein, 1989, p. 11). For this purpose, it is good to have a vision of what you want to achieve as it adds meaning to life, motivates, guides actions and allows you to overcome discouragement where there are obstacles and problems.

All of us have a certain amount of time, but we often forget that our time is limited. Therefore, we should learn to use it wisely – not to waste it and not allow others to waste our time. However, if you do not know where your time is disappearing, it will be difficult to make any changes in order to save (or rather better use) this time. According to Lakeina (1989: 12), there is no such thing as a lack of time. We all have enough time to do what we really want to do. If we think that we are too busy, think about the fact that there are people who are able to do a lot more than we do in their “free” time – they don’t have any more time than others, but they are able to manage it better.

Effective employees are able to maintain a balance between work and personal life (“work-life balance”). This is a crucial skill – especially when you are working long hours. It is not easy and requires continuous effort. Balancing responsibilities properly provides:

- energy – the more energized you are, the more productive you can be. If you are burnt out you do things more slowly,
- accuracy – when you are rested, refreshed and energized, you think more clearly and make better choices quicker. You do not waste time redoing your work and correcting mistakes,
- innovation – very often the best ideas come when you step away from your work and look at the problem from a distance. A change in environment or activities often stimulates innovation enabling you to solve problems more easily,
- patience – a satisfying life outside the work makes it easier to tolerate frustrations at work. When you work long hours, you are too quick to lose perspective and make big problems from little ones,

- motivation – maintaining a work-life balance enhances the quality of your life which gives you a feeling of fulfillment and a sense of purpose in life. (Morgenstern, 2004a, pp. 21-22).

As Bieniok writes (2010, p. 21): “Time management is the conscious transformation of hopeless idleness, and useless or excessively rigorous and exhausting labor into well-organized and efficiently planned work ensuring personal success and contentment.”

Good time management is about creating days that are meaningful and rewarding to us and the feeling of satisfaction in each and every one of our tasks. (Morgenstern, 2004b, p. 14)

3. Difficulties in personal time management

When people manage their time poorly, they often jump to the conclusion that they are internally flawed and they are simply incompetent or they may even believe that being out of control is just how life is supposed to be in the modern world. However, both perceptions are inaccurate as it is usually a combination of forces that creates time management problems. There are three categories of obstacles that cause this problem:

- Technical obstacles – we may simply lack particular skills or techniques,
- External obstacles – sometimes environmental factors interfere with our ability to manage our time,
- Psychological obstacles – sometimes internal forces and fears cause a problem with time management; by recognizing certain self-sabotaging habits, we can begin to break free of their control.

So, we should ask ourselves: “Is my problem technical, external or psychological”? If we have trouble with delegating, the problem could be technical if we don’t know how to do it, external if there is no one we can delegate this to, or psychological if we feel guilty asking someone else to do this for us.

If the problem is multifaceted, it’s good to tackle the technical obstacles first and then the external obstacles, once we overcome the problem pragmatically, and psychological resistance usually melts away. (Morgenstern, 2004b, pp. 16-17)

Technological obstacles:

- One of the common causes of not being able to tackle certain things is not enough time being allocated to doing it (forgetting to include them in your schedule) or tackling them at the wrong time of day and not taking into consideration natural life cycles (some people are “night owls” while others are “early birds”). So, if something

is really important to you, then you should set aside time in your schedule at the proper time of day (considering each individual's level of energy and concentration),

- Another obstacle in effective time management is the lack of appropriate time required to perform certain activities – as a rule, people tend to underestimate time needed,
- Lack of vision for the future as priorities can also be a huge impediment to effective time management. Having a vision of your future (your main goals in life, what is important to us and what you want to achieve) allows for the easier eliminating, shortening, or delegating of tasks that do not serve our priorities,
- Many people think that it is necessary to do everything yourself, and that asking for help is a sign of weakness. However, this is a false assumption, because keep in mind that everyone is different and possesses different talents and skills, and some tasks are simply better done by others,
- Another obstacle may simply be the excessive complexity of the task. Even if we go about doing what's important to us, the way we go about the task may be too complicated. In addition, the task may be intimidating, overwhelming in its vastness and difficulty and thus lead to procrastination. Therefore, if we want to succeed, we must simplify the task by dividing the larger project into smaller tasks,
- Another of the obstacles is poor memory and lack of scheduling. We are living in a very fast world, often flooding us with too much information and multiple stimuli. So even with the best intentions, it is hard to remember all of our duties and obligations. Therefore, a good solution is to make (and stick to) a schedule,
- Another impediment is a disorganized working space – chaos in the workplace results in a significant loss of energy and time associated with searching for different things,
- Yet another barrier to effective time management is the lack of planning. The more „busy” we are, the more we should take a step back to look at your priorities and plan exactly what we want to achieve. If you take the time to plan, it'll save in your performance, since it is often possible to find a „short cut” to provide for the obstacles and avoid them or minimize their impact on our goals,
- Another error in effective time management is an unrealistic workload, or in other words, taking on more responsibilities and tasks to be performed than is realistically possible. Sometimes it is related to a technical error through an underestimation of the time needed to perform certain tasks. Sometimes it's the psychological tendency of a person to take on more tasks than he is able to do, while other times it is due to external factors when it's just simply life, „overloading” us with different tasks and roles at the same time. Whatever the reason,

this obstacle can be treated as a technical problem and one should focus on surviving this period – reviewing responsibilities and seeing what you can delegate. You have to be tolerant of each other and, if necessary, the standards of performance for certain tasks can be reduced in order to „stay afloat”. (Morgenstern, 2004b, pp. 18-24).

External obstacles

There are situations in which we are faced with significant time management challenges beyond our control, having a profound impact on our time management ability. By recognizing external realities we can hit the problem and adapt to it, instead of wasting time and energy worrying. Sometimes we simply don't have enough energy to tackle the problem. Constant lack of sleep deprives us of energy as well as the ability to focus on and do difficult analytical tasks. We can also be slowed down by depression or other health problems that we can even be unaware of (e.g. thyroid problem). If we suspect a health problem, we should be proactive- make an appointment to see a doctor and simply take care of ourselves: sleep well and long enough to restore our energy resources, eat well, and move enough – these are basic adjustments. No matter how simplistic and trivial these pieces of advice sound, we should implement them to increase our energy level to enable us to deal with important issues – both personal and organizational. (Morgenstern, 2004b, pp. 18-24)

Psychological obstacles

Within this group, we shall mention procrastination which consists in postponing the task we should work on and doing something else instead. However, we should not equate procrastination with laziness because very often procrastinators, while putting off some tasks, are performing others – often difficult, important and needed but not necessary at the moment.

We can point out the following symptoms of the procrastination problem along with some ways of dealing with it:

- perfectionism – we should understand that our time is at least equally important as the perfect realization of a project. Therefore, we should have a look at our activities distantly, realize our propensity and fight with it,
- overplanning – this symptom can indicate that we feel overloaded; teamwork or simply asking somebody for help can be a remedy for this,
- putting off the work to the last moment – such working style can be productive for individuals. However, if we are working in a team such behavior can frustrate others and decrease the quality of our work; therefore we should stick to the schedule,

- escaping into self-comforting tasks – we can avoid working on more difficult and important tasks because we don't know how to tackle them; in this case, we should ask for help more experienced persons, and think out the skills needed to do this particular job,
- ordinary disinclination to do something – we can try to delegate a task to a willing person. However, if it is impossible, we should name the date of starting the task and stick to the plan; in this case, it is good to appoint a reward for accomplishing the task. (Raffoni, 2007, p. 79).

4. Overcoming obstacles of personal time management

Time awareness

The first step in time management is to develop a consciousness of time by paying attention to it. Time consciousness means that we know how we use our time. Very often we do things in a particular way because we've been taught to do so. We don't know the reason behind it but we are used to do it that way. However, we should remember that there is always room for improvement as new techniques and devices appear enabling us to better manage our time. Therefore, we should allocate some time for trying them out to make a better use of our time, because, according to Parkinson's law, work expands to fill the time available for its completion.

Automation of activities and developing work systems

Every job has certain aspects that are repetitive. No matter how complex or varied the job is there are always things which we regularly do. They may not be exactly the same but similar enough and it is recommended to develop a system and follow it (modifying it as needed) as any automation of tasks saves our time. Otherwise we will be forced to reinvent the way of doing things. This system, however, should be simple. If it is complicated people seek opportunities to avoid it and it is going to be useless. So, by developing a system, we should use the KISS principle – Keep It Simple Stupid! (Cash, 2013, pp. 4-10)

Prioritizing

To manage our time effectively we must set priorities; we have to decide for ourselves what is important to us and we should concentrate on these things. If we know what motivates us the rest is the matter of the right techniques. We must learn how to distinguish between important and unimportant, eliminating the latter and focusing on the former. To start changes we should know what is important to us. There is no one right answer to that question, as what is

important to one person, can be worthless to another. Therefore, we should decide by ourselves, not let others do it for us. (Cash, 2013, pp. 2-3). One of the tools helping to prioritize is called Eisenhower's matrix.

Table 1. Eisenhower's Matrix (Priority Matrix)

Tasks	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	I	II
Unimportant	III	IV

Source: L.J. Seiwert: Zarządzanie czasem. Bądź panem własnego czasu, Agencja Wydawnicza „Placet”, Warszawa 2001, p. 138; S.R. Covey: 7 nawyków skutecznego działania, Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, Poznań 2007, p. 152.

All tasks are evaluated using the criteria of urgency and importance and put in congruent quadrants. Accordingly, tasks in the first quadrant are important and urgent, in the second quadrant – important but not urgent, in the third quadrant – unimportant but urgent and finally in the fourth quadrant they are both unimportant and not urgent. Therefore, the quadrant I tasks should be done at once, which is quite reasonable, but we should have in mind to pay special attention to the tasks from the quadrant II, as they are the most important for our future and tackling with them consequently help us diminish the tasks from the quadrant I and break free from the pressure of the moment, stressful atmosphere adversely affecting both our judgment and health. (Covey, 2007, pp. 150-157)

We can also use the so called 80/20 rule or Pareto rule which says that 80% of results can be attributed to 20% of activity. Therefore, we should concentrate on these activities which create the greatest added value. (Covey, 2007, p. 157)

The ABC technique can also be used to categorize tasks in three groups and rank them according to their importance: A-tasks/goals are perceived as being the most important, B-tasks/goals as of middle importance and C-tasks/goals as quite unimportant and therefore they should be delegated. (Seiwert, 2001, pp. 133,134)

Delegation

According to David Fontana (1993, pp. 85-91), basic ways of improving our use of time are: making sure that we spend time in line with our priorities and main responsibilities, and not performing the tasks which can be done by

others. If only we have such an opportunity, we should delegate tasks which are (using the nomenclature from Eisenhower's matrix) in the third and fourth quadrants of priority matrix (the urgent but unimportant and neither urgent nor important tasks respectively). The effective delegation is about devolving mantle and legitimation to others along with making them responsible for the results.

Delimiting boundaries – being assertive

During work we can encounter many distractions. Therefore, to work effectively we should delimit boundaries and be able to say 'no' to others. We can do it in different ways: to tune out from the chaotic and noisy working environment, to refuse to tackle others' problems (unless we decide to do that), to switch off the phone within intensive work hours, not to use communicators, or yet other ways of rationing access to ourselves. All these tools are to help us to avoid unnecessary work interruptions as well as overloading with tasks. So, we should learn to make better choices concerning using our time, making decisions and refusing. (Lakein, 1989, pp. 84-88)

4.1. Coping with procrastination

First of all we should try to think positively as negative thinking is the main driving force behind procrastination. When thinking negatively we are more likely to be stuck and clueless as we are unconsciously telling ourselves that it is impossible to finish and our mind can be pretty convincing and instead of making an attempt we may withdraw ourselves and dismiss the idea of work altogether. (Fontana, 1993, pp. 14,15)

It is important to understand that procrastination is a habit – it's something that is learned and conditioned within us. According to some authors (Fontana, 1993, pp. 71, 72) the only remedy to the procrastination is to master discipline which is also a learnable skill, and as so requires practice.

Yet, sometimes it is wise to follow the classic advice given to procrastinators: "Just do it!"

5. Conclusions

Time management is a conscious attempt of allocation and control of limited time resources. Its philosophy is to concentrate on setting priorities and then acting appropriately. Nevertheless, we should not confuse effectiveness (doing the right things – according to our goals) with efficiency (doing things right). However, we should remember that effective time management does not mean that we can do more things but that we can more accomplish.

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