

Time Management in Context

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Abstract: What is Time ?

Time is an important and scarce resource of which we never have enough. Unlike other resources, it cannot be substituted with anything else. Still, we do not seem to fully understand its nature. Even our numerous definitions of time are intangible.

Sensation of Time in Human History

Our sensation of time has changed enormously through our history. We keep trying to squeeze more and more tasks into a constant amount of time – in pursuit of more happiness.

Time Management Techniques

Lack of knowledge of this area causes a tremendous amount of struggle. While we are expected to be highly industrious at all times, many of us do not have sufficient level of knowledge of the basic time management technics. Let us briefly summarize these.

Deadlines

Deadline is a magic word in our lives. Deadlines drive our whole existence. What is a deadline? What are the typical types of deadlines?

Common fallacies

Not only we do not have decent definitions for time, not only do we lack knowledge in the field, there are also common fallacies that exacerbate our struggle for time.

Proposals

Do less. Do it better. Know the traps and avoid them.

Keywords: Time Management, Deadline, Fallacy

1 Introduction

1.1 The ideal applicant for any job

From a bunch of job advertisement I created a generic job profile that describes the applicant who can fill any job. The profile:

- high- energy, dynamic
- passionate,
- flexible,
- positive disposition,
- multitasking,

- tight deadlines,
- experienced,
- inspiring,
- broad-minded,
- creative,
- capable of hard work, resilient,
- technically skilled,
- team player,
- covert (not PC, but smart HR managers know how to relate to this):
 younger than 35.

1.2 Problem

Among middle-aged (and onward) employees burnout syndrome is frequent. This syndrome deprives people of many of their traits that are demanded by employers. (Glouberman, 2003)

Required attributes, must haves	Burnout syndrome
Dynamic, loadable, tight deadlines, high-energy	Exhausted
Resilient, positive disposition	Distressed
Problem solver, Can-do, Success person, Multitasking	Inability to cope, dysfunctional
Motivated	Disillusioned, bored
Team player	Antisocial, lonely

Table 1
 Generally expected attitudes vs. Burn out

Permanent overload and stress result in burnout. (Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter, 2001)

A major cause of stress: "I cannot meet the deadline!"

Typical cause for missing deadlines is bad time management.

In my experience, while workload seems to be ever increasing, many people - especially young employees - lack adequate skills in time management. This deficiency causes a lot of unnecessary stress and loss of efficiency. They continue their inefficient fight to meet exorbitant amount of deadlines until they gradually burn out. In this battle they waste a lot of their abundant energy and finally they may become liabilities for their employers. It is also important to understand the

covert nature of the problem: we generally start to be interested in time management only after we have burned out – this means we are regretfully, too late.

This is why I think it is imperative to deal with time management issues as major factors of burnout. In this article I will not focus on the “how”-s since many books describe them in detail. I find the “why”-s and “what not”-s more interesting and far less examined. This is why I will rather dwell now on these fields of questions predominantly.

2 The definition of Time

Passage of time is a major source of our fears. Time is a major source of our stress at work and also at home. The resource we never seem to have enough. This is the dimension that limits our being above anything else. The reason we do not travel to far planets is not distance but the fact that it takes too much time. Time cannot be substituted with any other resource. ‘Time is Money’ – people say. Still, time cannot be purchased for money.

Let us have an initial look at how we define time.

„**Time** is a measure in which events can be ordered from the past through the present into the future and also the measure of durations of events and the intervals between them. Time is often referred to as the **fourth dimension**, along with the three spatial dimensions.” (Wikipedia)

“A nonspatial continuum in which events occur in apparently irreversible succession from the past through the present to the future. The Free Dictionary” (The Free Dictionary)

“The measured or measurable period during which an action, process, or condition exists or continues” (Webster Dictionary)

„The part of existence that is measured in minutes, days, years, etc., or this process considered as a whole. Time is :

- the system of recording hours used in different parts of the world (e.g. GMT),
- an amount of time that you have available to do something,
- a particular period of time for which something has been happening, or that is needed for something,
- a particular point in the day, as expressed in hours and minutes or shown on a clock, or a particular point in time...” (Cambridge English Dictionary)

In comparison, I also show you definitions for other dimensions:

Distance: „the amount of space between two places or things „, (Merriam-Webster)

Temperature: a measurement that indicates how hot or cold something is : a measurement in degrees showing the heat of something (such as air or water). (Wikipedia)

The above examples show how difficult it is for us to relate to time compared to other dimensions. I think this is a precursor of our problems with time. We can rather describe than define time.

3 Man and Time

3.1 Time and Human History

Men's time concept has gone through fundamental changes over history. Let us browse through these historic ages.

3.1.1. Prehistoric age

Our prehistoric ancestors lived in hunter-gatherer societies. They did not produce food at all. They only collected what naturally grew or bred in their way. They lived by the day. Whatever they managed to acquire was likely to be consumed instantly. They could not store up food due to numerous reasons like scarcity, or perishability. They lived in a quick feedback world: they experienced the result of every action within a very short time span. The amount of work to be done in a day: just enough for the survival of that very day.

For them time meant a single day. Their timetable was very basic:

- rise when the sun rises,
- lie down when it sets,
- find something to eat in between and above all,
- not get eaten in the meantime.

Goal: survival. Survival is happiness.

Time schedule: airy.

3.1.2. The Dawn of Agriculture

The invention of agricultural production brought about enormous changes in human life. People discovered how to produce food. When you breed animals you do not have to eat them immediately. You can use them as live food stores. In addition animal husbandry produces a lot of useful side products too – like milk or wool.

When you grow grain, you can harvest it and store it for later use. Domesticated breeds also produce more food than their wild counterparts.

With the appearance of food storage, days became busier. Doing extra work became worthwhile. In order to be able to manage the busier daily agenda you needed more accurate measurement of time. The first clocks were invented for measuring the passage of time within the day: sundial, hourglass. The action-feedback cycle became longer. It was not enough anymore to measure time within a single day. Therefore, calendars were also developed for the measurement of longer periods of time.

The new goal: not to starve. Happiness is being well fed.

Time schedule: tight.

3.1.3. Industrial Age

Machines were invented. The power of beasts of burden and that of humans were substituted with new sources of energy: steam, oil, electricity, nuclear power.

Productivity multiplied. People became even busier so they needed even more time measurement devices. Spring driven mechanical clock became widespread. Later on electric clock was introduced. Then atomic clock was invented - a clock that misses a second only in a couple of million years. We became time freaks. By now we do not have a single moment in our life when we have no clock in our eyesight.

Goal: produce more than yesterday. Economy has to grow endlessly. Produce more than you need. Rush! You are late.

Concept: dehumanization (loss of identity, loss of community).

Consumption is happiness.

Time schedule: over tensed

3.1.4. Post-industrial society

This is a futuristic scenario. Consumption of goods is not everything. Let machines produce and people create. What we need is not more production but a sustainable one. Prevalence of quality over quantity.

New concept: rehumanization. (Rediehs 2014)

Goal: Sustainable happiness.(Boehm, Lyubomirsky 2009)

Time schedule: sustainable, balanced.

Time illusions

If our natural time perception was accurate, we did not need clocks. However, our minds trick us by distorting our perception of time (West). Just a few examples.

3.1.5. Children vs adults

Adults tend to underestimate the length of certain period of time while children overestimate it. This is because we learn to perceive time empirically: an adult compares any time period with the length of his age and so does a child.

3.1.6. Vierordt's law

The root cause of many defaults. Long periods of time are often underestimated while short ones are overestimated. The time demand of simple tasks is frequently overestimated whereas complex tasks are underestimated.

3.1.7. Kappa effect

In case of a sequence of consecutive stimuli, we tend to overestimate the time length between two stimuli if they are distant, while underestimate it provided they are close.

3.1.8. Emotional state effect

Our emotions also impact our otherwise fragile time perception. Time flies when we are happy but seems to freeze when we have a hard time. The time perception of a dentist is likely to differ from that of his patient in the chair.

4 Deadlines

Origins.

Deadline is another word that has a meaningful etymology. The word originally referred to demarcation line in prisons. No one was allowed to approach or cross this line. If anyone did, the guards had to shoot immediately.

The original message of this word can also mislead us:

- modern deadlines are not constant. They can be changed for a better outcome.
- we often miss deadlines with minor or no consequences,
- we use many different types of deadlines instead of the single do-not-cross-me type.

4.1 Different types of deadlines

When trying to accomplish anything, we generally have to face:

- Time constraints (do we have enough time?)

- Sequencing constraints (what should I do first, second, etc.)
- Resource constraints (do we have enough money, machines, workers, space, materials, etc.)

Success depends on the tasks executed in face of all constraints. More specifically: we wish to reach one very specific goal within the boundaries of all constraints. We tend to consider only one outcome as success, any other result will probably mean failure – the chance of full success therefore, mathematically tiny.

This difficult task in these not less difficult circumstances has led to the sophistication of deadlines. Some industries like construction industry have to cope with a complex network of different deadlines in difficult circumstances (e.g. the construction of huge railways, highways - lots of deadlines, long lead time, complicated network of interdependencies among tasks). These industries always use various deadline types besides the standard one. Serious projects are always backed by project time schedules that contain very complex structures of deadlines.

Let us quickly revise these through simple examples.

4.1.1. Default: Finish no later than

This is the classical and most common type. Its behaviour is the same as prison deadlines: an activity must be carried out not later or earlier than a specified time. Example: you want to watch a movie in the cinema. The movie commences at 8 p.m. You can arrive any time earlier than 8.00.

4.1.2. Finish no earlier than

Ageing Hungarian Tokaj dessert wine takes at least 3 years. Longer periods are also fine, but any period shorter than 3 years results in semi-finished wine with heavily reduced quality and value.

4.1.3. On time (must finish on)

If you travel by bus, you have to get off when the vehicle is exactly at the right bus stop. Acting later or earlier equally give bad results.

4.1.4. Rush Deadlines (ASAP)

In case of leakage in a nuclear plant this type of deadline is advisable for up keeping maintenance.

4.1.5. As late as possible

Software development projects generally postpone the costly phase of the work until the client has committed. Actual programming work does not take place until contract is signed and the first invoice (generally for the specification of requirements) is issued.

4.1.6. Must start on

Harvest must start exactly when the crops are ripe. Any delay and any earlier start lead to serious losses or extra cost.

4.1.7. Start no earlier than

In road construction, earthworks need at least 3 months of consolidation. Placing asphalt on an unconsolidated base will cause grand deficiencies.

4.1.8. Start no later than

Piano accordion valves are mounted to the corpus by molten beeswax. Wax solidifies in 10 minutes, so the technician has 10 minutes only to work on the valves and then he has to remelt the wax.

4.1.9. Standby deadlines

Preheating steel plates is optional in outdoor welding. Depending on the steel quality, dimensions and weather circumstances you may experience reduction in the quality of your welding stitches. If this happens you must insert a preheating phase in the welding process in order to improve welding quality to normal level.

4.1.10. Phased Deadlines

This type is predominantly used in case of lengthy activities as a risk management tool. The longer time a task takes the riskier it tends to be. By splitting up a time consuming task into smaller parts, you can increase your insight during its execution and thus allow yourself an opportunity to manage properly.

4.1.11. Milestones: not attached to activities, not flexible – generally externally determined

Milestones are special deadlines. They are typically externally determined, therefore rarely flexible. Their time span is generally zero – whereas other deadlines are mostly attached to some activity that has a time span.

The beginning of the heating season in Hungary is 15 September. A project that targets the reconstruction of heating systems for housing estates must be operational before that date. The date cannot be postponed, obviously. This is a typical milestone.

5 Time Management

The very first thing: Time management does not exist. None can manage time. However, everyone can manage his/her own schedule. Viewing it from this angle may change our vision of time.

There are many good books on time management. My observation is that they have a lot in common:

- they focus on the technics of time management (prefer the “how”-s to the “why”-s),
- they use similar techniques.

With due respect to the great authors of these books, let me make a faint attempt to summarize the very essence of time management technics I learned from works I had been fortunate enough to read.

5.1 Sequencing tasks:

- make a list of your tasks,
- order them into the sequence of precedence,
- eliminate the bottom 20%,
- execute the rest in the sequence you have set above,
- update regularly.

5.1.1. The ABC sequencing method

Categorize you tasks as follows:

- Category A: crucial
- Category B: must be done
- Category C: unimportant

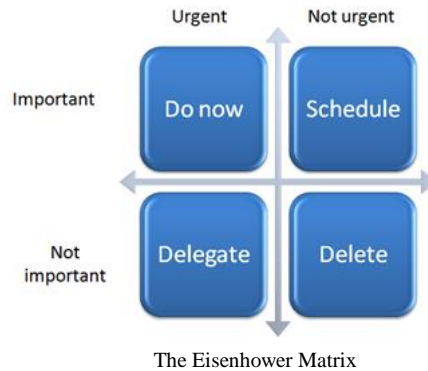
Once you have categorized all, you only have to focus on A-s, do B-s when you have some free time and omit C-s.

5.1.2. The Eisenhower sequencing method

This method was devised by general Eisenhower He was a pragmatic, hands-on man. He realized that people like to pressurize their bosses by telling them some task is very urgent. He realized that the most important things are rarely urgent. He classified his tasks into a 2x2 matrix. The two dimensions of the matrix:

- urgency,
- importance.

Figure 1



5.2 Eliminating tasks

Pareto rule: 20% of our efforts is responsible for 80% of our achievements.
Conclusion: focus on the imperative few and forget the rest.

5.3 Balanced time schedule

Would you like to maintain a time schedule that helps you not only in the short run but also leads you somewhere in the long run? This is what you need to do:

- take the list of your activities that you have prepared and categorize them into one of the following categories: meeting, paperwork, communication, think tanking, interruptions, etc.
- add up the time demand of each category,
- get surprised by the numbers,
- set a goal for a better distribution,
- reach your goal,
- here you have a balanced timetable.

6 Common fallacies

6.1 Ignoring time management

When I left school I was not equipped with time management skills and I paid a heavy price for it. I can see young professionals suffering from the same ailment too often. Many of them did not learn about the concept of Time Management. Others learned it but neglect it. The result is failures and loss of efficiency.

6.2 Erroneous sequencing

Sequencing all tasks into the order of importance is easier said than done. What makes a task more important and others less ?

Every task's importance can be measured on multiple concurring scales. The importance of a task is likely be different for

- the company,
- you,
- your boss,
- your colleague,
- moral obligation (this category is rarely emphasized).

Finding the proper ranking requires a lot of experience (in other words: "earlier mistakes"). The chosen sequencing criteria are often oversimplified or fundamentally improper. This leads to a bad sequence which is likely to cause harm. For a proper sequence you need to understand the context (the "why"-s).

A piece of advice: it might be a good idea to give high priority to those activities that are important for your boss.

6.3 Bad communication

The moment when you miss a deadline is not when its due date passes but a lot earlier. Sometimes you are late at the beginning, sometimes it goes astray at some point during its execution. You have to bear in mind: deadlines are ideally not a l'art-pour-l'art game. Properly managed deadlines keep your organization operational and this is the major motive behind them - which should drive you actions too.

People frequently miss serious deadlines without any preliminary warning cause scores of unnecessary stress for the rest of the organization. The reason why they keep silent is sometimes lack of skills, sometimes ignorance, sometimes fear of consequences.

For those who fear: there is only one thing worse than revealing problems and it is being caught in the red. It not only makes people twice as irritated but you may also destroy trust. Losing trustworthiness is like losing a hundred dollar banknote: you are unlikely to ever find it again.

Develop a sense to foresee the likely miss of upcoming deadlines of yours and notify everybody concerned well before the deadline – so they have time to prepare.

6.4 Rigidity

Nothing is more dynamic than time so time schedules should also be dynamic. Do not hesitate to reorganize your timetable when circumstances demand it. That means that you have to keep a finger on the pulse of the circumstances. Awareness is key.

You initial task sequence can be perfect today but a kamikaze tomorrow. So it may need revision.

When you are about to miss a deadline, preliminary notification of colleagues is a must but far from enough. You also have to increase your efforts (do overtime), and give the problem area proper focus (set aside other activities).

6.5 Distractions

Open plan office became popular in the XX. century. The official reasoning behind it is better communication. My experience is that the real reason was to exert more control over employees.

There are jobs that should never be mixed in the same room. It is a pain for an analyst to hear the sales guy phoning all day long. The intended improved communication backfires: it produces a never-ending noise that destroys productivity.

Cell phones: real beasts. They can ring any time and when they do you immediately suspend whatever you do in order to answer them.

Emails: whenever you receive an email a small pop-up message is likely to let you know. Many people interrupt his/her current task to read it right away, and reply.

You better find a way to minimize these distractions if you want to be efficient.

6.6 Meetings

Many company cultures love meetings too much. The more people attend, the more important the participants are and the longer the meeting lasts the more productive it is considered.

In fact:

- too many participants (above 5-10, depending on the topic) kill any meeting,
- too long meetings exceed people's attention span (60 minutes) and generally are fruitless,
- too many meetings distract people from their other tasks and unnecessarily exhaust them.

Some companies use meetings as governing devices. Here is how:

- employ people flexitime (no overtime pay)
- organize them a mandatory meeting for every 8:00 a.m. and 19:00.

6.7 Unbalanced schedule

Even a seemingly good timetable may lead you in the bad direction on the long run if it is unbalanced. This is the controversy between long term and short term goals. If you do not categorize your time into categories that are important for you then your timetable will probably be spontaneously unbalanced. In unbalanced schedules time consuming humdrum work tend to be overweight while value added activities and your personal development will lose.

6.8 Lack of foresight

I have seen many people who never started any task before it was too late. This lack of proactivity generates untold amount of stress when the deadline is suddenly closing in on us.

6.9 Excessive self-confidence

For decades psychologists saw the roots of all problems in too little self-esteem. People attended lots of courses to increase their self-esteem. Decades later researches prove that the self-esteem of the population has significantly grown. As a result problems caused by too low self-esteem have been replaced by problems driven by too much of self-esteem.

Exaggerated self-assurance causes many people overestimate their capacities and at the same time underestimate the difficulties they are supposed to overcome. Result: defaults.

6.10 Busy bees

Some people confuse business with busy-ness.

How you can recognize people suffering from this disease:

- They always seem extremely busy, therefore they do not have time for anything.
- They are always running.
- They have at least two mobile phones that are constantly ringing.
- They attend two meetings simultaneously, meanwhile they are constantly on the phone.
- They rarely show up at meetings to which they are invited as key participants.
- When they show up, they are late.

- They do not listen to anybody at the meeting. Once they show up, they quickly express their opinions and rush out before anyone could say “John Robinson”.
- At the first glance they seem very-very productive. Real heroes.
- Their time schedule is random, very badly organised if at all.
- Practically, they live in the office 24/7. This includes all banking holidays too. They are likely to be in a private life crisis.

My experience is that these colleagues are rarely top performers – despite all the fuss. On the contrary, they are prone to miss all deadlines, they cannot properly cooperate with anyone and their performance is shallow.

Often, these colleagues try to hide incompetence: they are always too “busy” with simple tasks to think about serious, non-piecemeal issues. Looking busy is looking precious.

If they are glorified, for this misleading appearance, then this behaviour model easily become company culture and soon enough you will see many new disciples acting the same way.

If the above description fits

- you: stop and think,
- your colleague: be careful,
- your boss: you are in trouble,
- your company culture: it is unlikely to change.

6.11 Semi-finished tasks, poor quality

One of Murphy’s laws: some never have time to do a thing properly but somehow always find time to do it twice. Many tasks –especially big, complex ones – are never fully finished. Unfortunately, a 99% finished parachute jump is considered a failure.

6.12 Human games

People love playing games with one another on the cost of the other party (Berne 1996). Shifting the blame for defaults or coercing are old time favourites. Some of them are related to time management.

Some people intentionally forward you a task in the most inconvenient times like

- Christmas Eve,
- at the beginning of your holiday,
- at the beginning of their holiday,
- last day of the year, month, week
- at night.

Some people learned that they can coerce quick positive decisions if they sit on a task until the last moment and then they come to you and say: “We are in the last moment. If you do not sign this off now, the company will lose 100 000 billion dollars”.

My advice is that you should minimize the games you agree to take part in. Every human game needs at least two people. If you stay away from it, the other player will not be able to play with you.

6.13 Victim

There are situations in life when even the best time management cannot save us from trouble. There can be over tensed time schedules, unrealistic expectations, badly managed organizations with constant firefighting. If you are trapped in this for a long time and even the best time management attitude does not help you out - you become a victim. Do not be a victim.

This problem is typical in mature industries where competition is fierce and sales margins are too low, therefore, exploitation of employees is unescapable.

Another typical place to experience this atmosphere is at mismanaged companies.

Conclusions

Be an essentialist (Greg McKeown: Essentialism) : be selective about what you choose to spend time on. Do less, do only what matters.

Do it better.

Know and avoid fallacies.

Whoever you are, your life is a treasure box which is full of time diamonds at the moment of your birth. You have to pay a diamond for every single day of your life until your treasury runs empty. A good day costs one diamond, a bad one often costs more. Think about time and you also have thought about your life.

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