



## TIME MANAGEMENT SKILLS AND EFFICIENT PLANNING

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*It is more than certain that we all have the same 24 hours in one day.  
It's how we use them that matters.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

“Time”, as know, is a social construct, i.e. – is created by humans and society to measure life and activities. Whereas some events are “natural” and “objective”, such as “day” and “night”, others are “artificial” and “objective”, such as “hours”, whilst other are influenced by psychological and internal factors. For example, how “long” an hour is perceived by a person according to his or her particular emotional state at a given moment?

As a preliminary remark, it is important to note at the outset that “time management”, as understood below, can only refer to the last of the three understandings of time, namely the internal and personal one. A “day”, in its natural sense, cannot be managed by a person; so cannot an hour, as this is only the social construct of humanity and does not exist in the world of real and material things.

What can be “managed” are the activities a single person, and so – in last instance his or her productivity – can proficiently carry out within the specific time-space of the social construct she or he has at disposal.

However, if “time-management” turns into the paradigm of “activity management during a given set of time”, and thus if the focus rests on the third understanding of time (the internal perception), the existence of a multitude of subjective and psychological elements – variable over time – make it difficult to elaborate a general and absolute theory and model for time management. In other words, it seems difficult, if not impossible, to elaborate e good-for-all forecast time management solution model that applies to everyone, in all situations.

If the task to create a time management model valid in any circumstance for anyone seems impossible to reach – than the quest of time management becomes more narrow, but feasible and social utile: increase awareness in people about factors subjective and objective factors that usually lower efficiency in productivity and help them understand to which degree they are exposed to such factors. This first step can usually be carried out by ways of self-assessment instruments, by which persons review their approach to work or study methodology and environment, and are called to analyze the most critical habits. Secondly, time management studies can contribute in the increase of personal productivity by suggesting new approaches and solutions to (smart) work, through planning and organization schemes aimed at rationalizing efforts and concentrate actions, also by way of avoiding distractions and procrastination. In this last sense, of course, a strong will remains the first precondition; without this, no solution will be of any help or pave the way to any miracle.



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### **a. Social and practical relevance of the specific topic addressed**

Time Management and Efficient Planning skills are aimed at (i) managing time effectively so that the right time is allocated to the right activity; (ii) planning your actions according to your own goals. The development of specific skills on time management and efficient planning has now consolidated its importance in the professional and occupational context.

Moreover, the topic has shown its importance in the broader spectrum of social relationships and in personal life. Time management is one of the most important capacities each individual should learn in order to have a happy and successful existence. Self-realization and wellbeing are strongly developed if a person is able to fulfil goals and achieve results, and more generally to build his or her life according to his or her own expectations. Time is an instrument and is also an element that cannot be ignored, since it inevitably affects daily activities. To take control of your own time means, in the end, to take control of your own life.

It appears particularly important to remember how the first studies of time management were originally directed to ensure better performances of leading figures within top-ranking companies. “Managers” were the first natural target group of time management studies and recipients of deliverables. Nonetheless, over time, more and more worker categories have been attracted in those included within the “beneficiaries” of these studies, as a better individual management of productivity at *any* level bears positive outcomes, not only for the single worker or employee, but for the market as well. Workers who can better manage their time are more efficient than those falling behind schedule. This comes without saying. In this sense, an individual efficient and effective time management indirectly bears positive externalities that cannot be ignored by a society based on production (and consumption).

This justifies from the social and practical point of view the extension of time management studies from top managers to lower working classes.

Additionally, and with little surprise, the necessity to organize workload is evidently felt also in college students – empirical studies have shown how the overlapping of diverse academic and non-academic deadlines, together with debit loans and work issues, might ingenerate anxiety and organization issues that have a negative impact in terms of grades. Of course, this becomes particularly sensible where grades – that might be higher with a different individual time management approach that increase efficiency and productivity – become a selection criterion in job interviews of public calls. In other words: an early adoption of a subjective time management methodology might contribute obtaining higher grades, thus a better job in life. In these terms, the practical and social relevance of the subject matters also for college students becomes *icto oculi*.

From the above, it results that learning time management skills produces positive effects in the general wellbeing and happiness of people. It increases the capacity to work efficiently and effectively, as well as the capacity to conquer balance between personal and professional life, because people might be put in a position to accomplish more with less effort. This results in positive effects for the society as a whole.

Like every other soft skill, the ability to manage time can be learned and trained, until it becomes an automatic and consolidated habit. Time management is not an emergency plan, to use only when you are falling behind your work, but a long-term and sustainable lifestyle. For this purpose, and since time management strongly depends on each individual’s personal approach towards work and life, it is very to proceed with a preliminary subjective self-assessment test.



## **b. Need assessment**

Acquiring strong and effective time management skills is of crucial importance in the current society. Today, students and workers at any stage and level are constantly exposed to any kind of distractions (e.g. social media) and experience difficulties in making good choices, because of the wide range of possibilities that suggest “consumers” to do many things in order to be successful.

Time management and efficient planning skills are in high demand across all industries and jobs. Employers and recruiters are expecting strong capacities in the management of the work from their employees or future colleagues. They require the achievement of great results in less time: the ability to use time makes the all the difference in the choice of a good employee or associate, and in the success of your own business. Therefore, the ability to efficiently use your time, avoiding at the same time stress, burnouts and a poor quality of work, is critical.

The key idea is that the ability to plan and to manage time efficiently allows us to work smarter than harder. A poor time management may result in: low work quality, missing deadlines and appointments, poor professional reputation, dealing only with urgencies, inability to learn new things and inability to pursue long-term goals. On the “personal” side, this might lead to work and life imbalance and, consequently, to dissatisfaction and possibly to burnouts.

To some extent, the old paradigm - difficult to abandon – of the 9 to 5 office hours job, is currently under reconsideration in some leading companies, who have understood that profits and proficiency does not necessarily equal with long hours in office. However, a reduction of the working office hour can only be pursued with a smart, effective and efficient time management and planning of the working time – that has to make up for the lesser hours spent in the office. Some experiments are well-known: Microsoft Japan has reduced the working week from five to four working days, without any cut in wages for workers. During this experiment, the company has registered an increase in productivity and revenues. The same has been for some companies in Northern Europe, that have experimented shorter working days of six hours, where other countries, such as Italy, still remain on the 5 working days and 40 hours per week for full time working contracts.

Learning time management skills as a student allows to consolidate effective capacities before accessing to the labor market, other than enhancing academic results that increase their chances of better job-placement. Having the possibility to acquire and learn those skills enable students to develop a consolidated personalized method that can easily be applied in the future.

If Universities are supposed to prepare people for their future professional life, a teaching on time management and efficient planning should be considered compulsory, since those abilities have evident effects on how jobs are and will be performed, as well as they might contribute in attaining an acceptable work-life balance.

To this end, in the following i) key concepts of time management and efficient planning will be explored; ii) concepts to understand time as a resource and time management as a process will be explained; iii) the basic techniques to use time better according individual goals will be presented, as well as to manage time according to personal energy necessities; iv) the most common “time wasters” and strategies to reduce them will be presented; v) techniques to work “smarter, not harder” will be presented, vi) as well as a tool to develop a personalized plan for short, mid and long-term goals



## 2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO SELF-ASSESSMENT BY STUDENTS

As outlined above, the development of an individual (effective) time management plan is not a contingency strategy, but rather requires time, and adjustment. This can only be constructed over the self-assessment of each persons' daily activity. Only after weaknesses and strong points in the management of daily activities are carefully analysed by the persons, the subsequent study of the "interference" factors and their "degree" of interference over productivity can lead to identify the priority action to be taken to increase effectiveness and efficiency. However, to change a model, the previous one must be known.

### The Britton-Tesser TMQ (Time Management Questionnaire):

In order to assess the time management capacities of college students, the "Time management questionnaire" developed by Britton and Tesser in 1991 is being used (see Britton & Tesser, 1991 in references).

Students shall answer question according to their own perception, assigning it a value between *always, frequently, sometimes, infrequently, and never*.

In scoring, 5 points are assigned to the response at the end of the scale that is defined a priori as a "good" practice, while 1 point is assigned to the response at the other end of the scale. Intermediate values are given to the other responses. Higher values on the scale correspond to better time management practices.

The following version contains the questions, with the points assigned to each answer. Students are provided with a clean version of the questionnaire. In order to determine the final score of each students, sum up the points of each given answer.

Short-Range Planning					
1. Do you make a list of the things you have to do each day?	Always 5	Frequently 4	Sometimes 3	Infrequently 2	Never 1
2. Do you plan your day before you start it?	Always 5	Frequently 4	Sometimes 3	Infrequently 2	Never 1
3. Do you make a schedule of the activities you have to do on work days?	Always 5	Frequently 4	Sometimes 3	Infrequently 2	Never 1
4. Do you write a set of goals for yourself for each day?	Always 5	Frequently 4	Sometimes 3	Infrequently 2	Never 1
5. Do you spend time each day planning?	Always 5	Frequently 4	Sometimes 3	Infrequently 2	Never 1
6. Do you have a clear idea of what you want to accomplish during the next week?	Always 5	Frequently 4	Sometimes 3	Infrequently 2	Never 1
7. Do you set and honor priorities?	Always 5	Frequently 4	Sometimes 3	Infrequently 2	Never 1



<b>Time Attitudes</b>					
1. Do you often find yourself doing things which interfere with your schoolwork simply because you hate to say "No" to people?	Always 1	Frequently 2	Sometimes 3	Infrequently 4	Never 5
2. Do you feel you are in charge of your own time, by and large?	Always 5	Frequently 4	Sometimes 3	Infrequently 2	Never 1
3. On an average class day do you spend more time with personal grooming than doing schoolwork?	Always 1	Frequently 2	Sometimes 3	Infrequently 4	Never 5
4. Do you believe that there is room for improvement in the way you manage your time?	Always 5	Frequently 4	Sometimes 3	Infrequently 2	Never 1
5. Do you make constructive use of your time?	Always 5	Frequently 4	Sometimes 3	Infrequently 2	Never 1
6. Do you continue unprofitable routines or activities?	Always 1	Frequently 2	Sometimes 3	Infrequently 4	Never 5
<b>Long-Range Planning</b>					
1. Do you usually keep your desk clear of everything other than what you are currently working on?	Always 5	Frequently 4	Sometimes 3	Infrequently 2	Never 1
2. Do you have a set of goals for the entire quarter?	Always 5	Frequently 4	Sometimes 3	Infrequently 2	Never 1
3. The night before a major assignment is due, are you usually still working on it?	Always 5	Frequently 4	Sometimes 3	Infrequently 2	Never 1
4. When you have several things to do, do you think it is best to do a little bit of work on each one?	Always 1	Frequently 2	Sometimes 3	Infrequently 4	Never 5
5. Do you regularly review your class notes,	Always 5	Frequently 4	Sometimes 3	Infrequently 2	Never 1



even when a test is not imminent?					
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### 3. SYMPTOMS OF POOR TIME MANAGEMENT AND PLANNING

While drafting their self-assessment questionnaire, Britton and Tesser considered all the aspects that could immediately be symptomatic of poor time management and planning.

In the “short range planning” section, students have the possibility to examine typical time management and planning behaviors that have an impact on a short time frame (one day or one week). The prior identification of goals and priorities is the first, fundamental step to be taken in order to achieve an effective control of time. Without a direction, our energies are likely to be wasted in a multitude of actions that we consider necessary at a certain moment, but that lack an overall coherence and are not useful to a certain scope. Moreover, without a plan, it is more probable to fall into an “emergency mode”, in which we are constantly running against urgencies and deadlines.

In the “time attitudes” section, students will be able to identify certain personal patterns, beliefs and behaviors that are detrimental to a good time management and can even obstacle the implementation of a well-settled plan. Among those attitudes there is, for instance, the inability to say “no” to people, that may lead us to take over additional tasks that we do not actually have the time to do. The result is that the new task will steal time to our pre-determined priorities or pre-existing tasks, making it more difficult to do everything or to do it in a proper way.

In the same sections, students are requested to face their personal perception of time use and their own psychological relationship with time management. A self-evaluation of one’s control of time enables students to be honest as concern their actual use of time and is also an indicator of the attitude that one’s assume towards time. For instance, the question “*Do you feel you are in charge of your own time, by and large?*” will make the student aware of the existence of negative feelings associated with bad time management, like frustration, lack of self-esteem, stress.

In the “long-range planning” section, students are requested to examine some habits that may have an impact on time management on the long term. For instance, having a clear desk may improve focus and concentration, and may eliminate certain sources of distraction while performing a specific task. The habit of reviewing class notes regularly reflects the ability to distribute the workload, to avoid procrastination and to respect deadlines without having too much to do in a short time. On the contrary, if the student finds himself/herself too often behind schedule and is used to work on a task until the last moment (*e.g.* the night before the deadline of an assignment), this constitutes a symptom of poor time management.

On the other hand, those situations are less likely to happen if the students is capable to provide himself/herself with an effective long-term plan (*e.g.* for the entire quarter), that will determine a better distribution of tasks according to deadlines and workload.

#### The most common “time-wasters”:

1. Absence of clear daily/weekly/monthly goals and of an action plan:  
When we do not have clear goals, everything on our to-do list seems equally important. This often leads to “analysis paralysis,” where we waste time trying to figure out what to do first. Moreover, lacking an action plan results in working on low-value tasks that don’t move the needle.
2. Absence of a well-established system for monitoring deadlines:  
Tracking deadlines represents only the first step of a well-organized agenda. Writing a deadline on the calendar may not be enough, if there is no *awareness* on deadlines and we still find ourselves working the night before the expiration. Noticing deadlines close to their

expiration is detrimental to time management and quality of work. Therefore, it is necessary to set “pre-warning” signals, based on the importance of the deadline.

3. Multitasking:

Although our society has often worshipped multitasking as an index of productivity, doing more than one thing at a time may be very harmful for time management. Dividing your attention decreases efficiency and increases the chance to make mistakes. Multitasking may also increase stress. If your brain switches from one activity to another, you always need to refocus your attention. Moreover, there is a great risk to start many activities without actually finish them.

4. Distractions and interruptions:

Social media, online magazines, a constant flow of emails, requests from co-workers and office small-talks are only a few examples of the multitude of interruptions that may affect our activities. Although we may not have the complete control of each of these occurrences, there are actually many things that we can do in order to manage and limit distractions.

5. A cluttered desk and workplace:

According to a study held by the Princeton University Neuroscience Institute, a person surrounded by physical clutter in a disorganized environment is less productive, because multiple stimuli compete for our attention. In fact, constant visual reminders of disorganization drain our cognitive resources and reduce our ability to focus.

6. Procrastination:

Procrastination is a dilatory behavior that consists in postponing tasks and activities. It is doing something later than sooner. There are many root causes of procrastination, since the phenomenon is not merely linked to poor time management, but also involves psychological aspects. The latter is an “emotional view” of procrastination, that considers that dilatory behaviors occur when motivation or enthusiasm are lacking, when we are worried about failing or we engage in perfectionist tendencies.

7. The inability to say “no”:

Constantly saying “yes” to people may lead us to take over additional tasks that we do not actually have the time to do. The result is that the new task will steal time (and energy) to our pre-determined priorities or pre-existing tasks, making it more difficult to do everything or to do it in a proper way.

#### 4. ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE TIME MANAGEMENT

Time management refers to the world of the so-called “soft skills” that is defined as a set of character traits, attitudes and behaviors that enhance a person’s interactions and job performance. Those skills should help to build a lifestyle which is sustainable and enables to achieve personal goals. As already mentioned, the ability to manage time can be learned and trained like every other soft skill.

Time management is a process that should be adapted to personal circumstances and needs: there is no fixed recipe for time management, since it depends on which goals we want to achieve, on our personal approach towards time, on the unique way in which our energy works. Therefore, each technique that is illustrated in this chapter can be accustomed and adapted to personal agendas.

In order to acquire effective and durable time management strategies it is important to **understand time as a resource and time management as a process.**

Time is a limited **resource** that expires every day. Unlike money, you can’t earn more time other than the amount you have at disposal. What it is possible to do is to budget time well and use it according to our needs.

Time management does not consist in the sporadic application of some techniques, but is the **process** of planning and controlling time in order to improve efficacy, efficiency and productivity. It consists in learning, assimilating and apply on the long term a set of specific behaviors. Therefore, it can be assimilated to a lifestyle.



Good time management enables you to work smarter – not harder – so that you get more done in less time, even when time is tight and pressures are high.

### **a. Know your energy and find your most productive hours**

Tony Schwartz, author of *The Power of Full Engagement*, recommends that we manage our energy before we manage our time.

Most of the people respond to higher demands at work by increasing their working hours. However, the result is that they become more and more exhausted and they do not see improvements in their productivity. This is not sustainable in the long run, because time is a finite resource. Our energy, on the contrary, is a source that can be regularly renewed. Moreover, energy works in different ways for each person.

Usually, our energy goes up and down during the day. There are many factors that can affect our energy: *e.g.* sleep, food, the thoughts that we have, our emotions, how often we take breaks.

Working for hours without breaks may appear as the best strategy when we are overwhelmed by our workload (and may exceptionally be the only possible alternative from time to time), but it actually results in poor performances and higher stress levels. On the contrary, in order to be sure that our energy has the possibility to renew, we have to recognize our slumps and we have to know when to take breaks. This, combined with well-defined and focused working hours, will result in a great enhancement of our productivity.

*Well-defined working hours, combined with appropriate breaks and energy-rising activities, increase the level of productivity.*

Another important step to adopt an energy-oriented working style is to recognize our own energy patterns. For instance, some people are more productive in the early morning and feel that their energy goes off in the afternoon. On the contrary, some people feel more inspired and productive in the afternoon. Recognizing this pattern will enable us to schedule and prioritize different work activities throughout the day in relation to changing energy levels.

## **EXERCISE 1**

### **PERSONALIZE YOUR AGENDA ACCORDING TO YOUR MOST PRODUCTIVE HOURS**

#### **Introduction**

Finding our most productive hours becomes more relevant in a context where there is more autonomy in the organization of the work and in the time schedule. Classic 9 to 5 jobs are less prone to let people adjust their schedule according to their energy and concentration peaks. However, the modern society is going fast towards more flexible schedules and the recent events are making smart-working the rule instead of the exception in many contexts.

Therefore, it is very useful to find out when you are more productive (When? Where? Alone or together?) and concentrate there all your most difficult tasks.

#### **Exercise**

- 1) Discovering our productive peaks and valley requires self-observation. However, this does not need to be done over a long time-span, since there are exercises enable us to get a general idea of the conditions in which we are more productive. Ask students to engage in the following activities every time they can during the day, for at least three days. Those exercises



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may seem time-consuming at first sight, but a few days of effort will enable to save time in the future.

- 2) At various times throughout the day, try to write a short story of maximum three sentences. Try to choose different context, environments and, of course, times of the day. Just sit down and try to write a story according to what comes on your mind at that moment.

*E.g. Once there was a mouse that was looking for a new home. His last nest had been destroyed by a tractor and now he needed to find a new one before winter. He tried to ask around, until he found a beaver that led him to a beautiful shelter under a chestnut tree.*

Please notice that the quality and the topic of the story are not important: what is important is to examine our attitude towards the activity.

Ask students to answer the following questions:

- How much time did it take to write the story (time of completion)?
  - Are there times when stories just pop up in your mind?
  - Are there times when, at the idea of writing a story, your mind answers “just not right now”?
- 3) Ask students to observe their work/study rhythms for at least a week. Propose the following questions:
    - Do you usually perform most of the tasks during the morning? (yes/no)
    - Do you usually feel tired and sluggish in the morning?
    - In the afternoon, do you have the impression that the day is finally come to an end? Or do you feel refreshed and ready to work?
    - Do you think that your energy pattern during the day is ascendant (from down to up, with a peak in the evening), or descendant (from up to down)?
    - Do you usually enjoy studying/working after dinner?
    - Will you be willing to wake up an hour earlier each day in order to have more free time in the afternoon?

### **Avoid procrastination**

There are many reasons for procrastination. The tendency to postpone tasks that can be done (or have to be done) in the present moment can be fought only discovering its root causes. Subsequently, it is possible to apply strategies that are targeted and personalized.

Reasons for procrastination:

- **Fear of failure and perfectionism:**

This is one of the most recurring causes of procrastination, according to the most recent research. The importance of a task, combined with a low rate of self-esteem or a high rate of perfectionism, may induce people in engaging in dilatory behaviors. In addition, postponing creates the illusion of time: setting aside an activity makes us think that there is still time to perform it. At the same time, filling our time with other activities may develop the false impression we are fruitfully employing our time and resources.

**How to cope with it:**

- Develop a well-settled plan and try to stick to it: Section 5 of this manual chapter will help you to learn effective strategies for efficient planning. Once you have developed a plan, you need to perform it, understanding that some tasks are more important than others and need to be done first and within the deadline.
- “Eat the frog”: once you have identified the important tasks in your plan, try to perform them firstly, at the beginning of the day. Do not start with the simplest tasks, start from the important ones!



- When you know that you have important tasks that you continue to procrastinate, reserve for them a well-defined slot of your daily time. Allotting specific time boxes to certain activities will help you, even if those time boxes are short (e.g. 15, 20 or 30 minutes). In this way, you will not be afraid of having to dedicate many hours to a strenuous activity, but at the same time you will be able to start.

- **You give yourself too much time to perform a task:**

The well-known “Parkinson’s Law” states that

«*The work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion*»

If you schedule too little time to complete a task, you are more likely to feel stressed (especially if you do not finish it on time). However, scheduling too much time may work against you as well, since you will be more prone to procrastination.

**How to cope with it:**

- If you know that you are a tendential procrastinator, and you give yourself three weeks to perform a task, you will probably wait until the last moment. Once the final deadline is fixed, establish mid-term personal deadlines (eventually splitting the task in different segments) in order to distribute the workload well.

- **The task that you need to do is boring:**

There are some activities that are boring, not essential, but also necessary. They make our schedules busy and are always in our mind, yet we tend to postpone them, because they are usually no subject to a deadline.

**How to cope with it:**

- Try the “Power Hour” technique (Exercise 3).

## EXERCISE 2

### DOING AND POSTPONING

#### Introduction

While setting short-term goals, the usual approach is to define which kind of results we want to achieve in one day/week/month. However, an efficient strategy of goal-planning cannot be performed if the definition of the activities is not accompanied by an actual implementation. In this context, it is important to understand our attitude towards the execution of a settled plan.

Often, our perception of an efficient use of time may be undermined by the fact that we **perform non-important tasks** and we **postpone important ones** (on the basis of a pre-determined set of goals).

Postponing creates the illusion of time, or lack thereof: setting aside an activity makes us think that there is still time to perform it, even if the deadline is close. At the same time, filling our time with other activities may develop the false impression we are fruitfully employing our time and resources.

#### Exercise

Ask students to set a weekly plan with the exact indications of the goals and activities they would like to achieve on the week. The plan can be done on Friday or Saturday.

In order to make the exercise more effective, the plan should be thematic: e.g. include only academic activities. This will help students to get the immediate impression on the distinction between planned activities and other activities that are not included in the personal goals.



Week \_\_\_\_\_ (dates)

Activities and Goals (plan)

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Ask students to take a diary (on the form of short notes) at the end of each day, in which they should sign how they have actually spent their time. This does not need to be detailed, but it should give a general idea of activities actually performed during the week.

At the end of the week, ask students to compare their plan with their diary, with the activities they have carried out. Ask students to answer the following questions:

A. Are there any activities or goals that you planned to achieve and you actually have achieved?

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B. Are there any activities goals that you planned to achieve and you did not achieve?

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C. Are there some activities that you have actually done and you may qualify as “non-important” compared to the prior-fixed goals?

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D. Do you think that you engaged in some ‘postponing’ attitude towards your fixed activities and goals?

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### Discussion

Discuss together about the differences between the prior-fixed plan and the actual activities performed during the week.



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# EXERCISE 3

## THE POWER HOUR

### Introduction

In time management, the Power Hour technique is used to clear up our schedules from small, yet necessary tasks that require a short amount of time but are prone to a high degree of procrastination. It is a 60-minute window during which you aim to complete a predetermined set of smaller tasks. Those are the activity that most often make our schedules busy and are always in our mind, yet we tend to postpone, because they are usually no subject to a deadline.

The Power Hour enables us to clear all those tasks in a fixed and predetermined amount of time that is exclusively dedicated to them and will enable us to put a short but consistent effort in eliminating them from our agenda.

### Exercise

- 1) Ask students to identify the tasks that respond can be qualified as “small tasks”, since they are not priorities, but they need to be done anyway. In other words, they are the annoying little tasks that we are constantly ignoring (*e.g.* schedule a dentist appointment; organize the notes of a course; complete your monthly timesheets; send a mail).
- 2) Ask students to identify an hour during the day where you may effectively concentrate all these tasks (most probably, during office hours as these activities may require contacts with students’ offices, secretary staff, etc).
- 3) Ask students to effectively perform the Power Hour.

### Discussion

What was the impact of the Power Hour on the overall weekly organization?

Did the Power Hour have a beneficial impact over the week (both from an organizational and psychological point of view)?

Did some of the students experienced benefits regarding their perceived control of time during the week?

### Manage distractions

*«God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference»*

This is the Serenity Prayer, written by the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and often recited in many self-help groups. This short sentence, which indeed holds a very important secret for a more fulfilling life, reveals a very common tendency of people when dealing with day-to-day problems. This tendency consists on focusing (and complaining) on what is outside our area of control, instead of taking care of things on which we have a great deal of room for maneuver.

Distractions coming from objects (*e.g.* phones, internet) and from people (*e.g.* colleagues) are frequent in the workplace. Whereas some negative factors can easily be controlled (even though not necessarily completely eliminated as a moment of relax is not per se negative), a multitude of interruptions can prejudice if not even nullify a well-constructed time-management plan. Distractions are costly: a temporary shift in attention (*e.g.* stopping your work because an e-mail notification pops up) increases the amount of time necessary to finish the primary task by 25%.

In order to manage distractions, the first step is to observe your working environment and to understand which distractions can be controlled. It is normal that some distractions are outside our



sphere of control (e.g. co-workers or the boss interrupting us for work reasons). However, it is important to recognize the distractions that we can actually limit, such as the use of our phones to check social media accounts.

## EXERCISE 4

### MANAGE YOUR DISTRACTIONS – SAVE YOUR TIME MANAGEMENT PLAN

#### Introduction

In most occasions, in particular where work is performed in groups, the possibility to carry our activities is greatly influenced by the surrounding environment. Colleagues and distractions (such as cell phone, social media, etc.) negatively affect your time management. Whereas some negative factors can easily be controlled (even though not necessarily completely eliminated as a moment of relax is not per se negative), a multitude of interruptions can prejudice if not even nullify a well-constructed time-management plan, obliging you to keep up with work or study at home, thus breaking the work-life balance time management should contribute to preserve.

This exercise will make possible that your well-reasoned time management plan is not negatively affected by outside elements and sources.

#### Exercise

- 1) Ask your students to analyse the environment they usually work in and count i) the number of times they check their phones (to check what time it is; to check social media account, etc.); ii) the number of times they are interrupted by people (even if they are just passing by and greeting);
- 2) Ask your students how many minutes in average in 3 working hours they lose due points i) and ii) above
- 3) Suggest your students they identify “silence working areas” in libraries (or close the doors in offices with “no disturb” signs) for 2 hours in the morning and identify one hour for work in common spaces (or work in the office with open door). For the same time, avoid using cell phones for non-professional purposes.
- 4) Check with your students after two weeks if their perception of external distraction has increased their capacity of time management.

#### Discussion

The “concentration” of “distractions” in one single, “controlled” and pre-defined time-slot (most probably, the working hours where you feel yourself less able to better perform) should allow you to better keep you on track with your time-management schedule without necessarily being unfriendly in a working place – as your door will always be open (just in specific times, your times!).



## 5. ELEMENTS OF EFFICIENT PLANNING

The most effective approaches to planning are those tailored to meet individual needs. Since people lives naturally differ from one another, it is impossible to define a planning strategy or planning tools that fits all individual needs. For this reason, efficient planning teachings should focus on the assimilation of basic mechanisms and techniques, which should enhance one's ability to form a personalized planning.

An effective plan comprises **two time horizons**:

- 1) **Long-term planning** identifies goals that reachable on the long run, such as in six months or in one year.
- 2) **Short term planning** identifies the goals and activities that are to be performed in one day, one week or even one month.

Everyone has immediate and long-term goals. Both those stages are important in order to reach an effective planning. However, in many cases the very short-term goals or tasks supersede long-term goals to the point that individuals may never achieve their lifetime goals. Therefore, it is important to consider those aspects as synergic.

Having a well-defined perspective of long-term goals will enable us to elaborate a short-term planning that will conduct to effective results over time. Short-term planning can improve our daily productivity and make us reliable from the perspective of others, but it also need to be functional to the fulfillment of long-term goals.

In the Chapter '[Set professional and academic goals by means of modern coaching](#)', students learn how to set long-term and short-term goals according to two different settings: HUGGS (Huge, Unbelievably Good Goals) and SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attractive, Realistic and Time Bound). In this Chapter, students will learn to translate and split goals in a series of actions, and to identify priorities that are aligned with the settled goals. They will learn how to distinguish between urgent and important tasks and how to manage deadlines. Moreover, students will be able to develop an action plan that is flexible and takes into account unexpected events.

### a. Setting priorities

The development of an effective planning finds its basis in the ability to set into actions our pre-determined desires and goals. Once we have established our direction, and we have identified our long-term and short-term goals, we need to translate them into a well-defined set of actions. This implies:

- Setting the goals in a hierarchical order on the basis of priority;
- splitting our goals in the actions that are required to achieve them;
- identifying the chronological order of that actions;
- ranking each action according to its importance in achieving that goal.

## EXERCISE 5

### THE ART OF SETTING PRIORITIES AND PUT THEM INTO ACTION

#### Introduction

Most people think time management is about doing as more activities as possible in the shortest amount of time. However, time management is an instrument that allows us to achieve previously established goals according to our desires and duties. In establishing goals (and the executive activities that are necessary to achieve them), we set them in a hierarchical order on the basis of priority.



We should rely to our priority hierarchy while deciding:

- In which tasks to engage first;
- The amount of time to dedicate to each task.

### Exercise

- 1) Ask students to make a list of goals they want to achieve in the upcoming week or month (the time span can be modulated according the course schedule).
- 2) Ask students to examine the list and to give a score to each goal:
  - 1 = Extremely important
  - 2 = Very important
  - 3 = Somewhat important
  - 4 = Less important

Warning: Avoid the **procrastination trap!** This scoring should avoid lists filled with unimportant goals that gives us the impression that we are progressing in something, instead of addressing the elephant in the room.

- 3) Ask students to take into consideration each goal and to split it in a list of activities which are necessary in order to reach that goal. Activities should be as specific as possible. Subsequently, ask student to rank each activity (within a single goal), according to its importance in achieving that goal:
  - a = extremely important
  - b= very important
  - c = somewhat important
  - d = **unimportant** (*this score has been included because an activity that may be considered necessary for the performance of a certain task at a first moment, may result superfluous after an in-depth examination*).
- 4) Ask students to make a new list of goals, with the order that reflects the score given to each goal (1 to 4). At the right side of each goal, the students shall put the list of the activities assigned to each goal, with the order that reflects the ranking given to each activity (a to c). Activities with ranking “d” should be left out.
- 5) Ask students to fill in a weekly (or a monthly) calendar, in which to plan the activities that they would like to perform each day (or each week) according to the fixed set of priorities.
- 6) At the end of the week (or month) ask students to make an assessment of:
  - goals they have reached;
  - activities effectively performed;
  - amount of effort dedicated to the activities performed, compared with the importance ranking given to each activity at the beginning of the exercise.

### Urgent v. important

One of the most famous tools for efficient planning has been developed by Stephen Covey<sup>1</sup>, an American educator, writer and businessman that took its clues from a quote of the former US President Eisenhower:

*"What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important."*

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<sup>1</sup> S.R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*, New York, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1989, p. 145 ff.



From this statement, Covey developed the Urgent Important Matrix, a useful scheme that defines tasks according to their importance and urgency.

**Urgent tasks** are the tasks that we are required to perform immediately, or within a short time framework. We are usually obliged to stop what we are doing to focus on the urgent task instead. Not dealing with urgent tasks usually brings immediate consequences.

**Important tasks** are the tasks that move us towards our bigger goals and projects. Since those tasks are often not associated with a close deadline, it is easier to procrastinate on them: we are more likely to prioritize tasks with a deadline, even if other tasks may have major payoffs in the long term.

The Urgent Important Matrix is structured in four main quadrants:

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	<i>Quadrant 1 - Crises</i>	<i>Quadrant 2 – Preparation and planning</i>
NOT IMPORTANT	<i>Quadrant 3 - Interruptions</i>	<i>Quadrant 4 - Distractions</i>

When our schedule becomes very busy and we are overwhelmed by the workload, we tend to operate mostly in *Quadrant 1 (Crises)*. Therefore, we find ourselves shifting from one activity to another, in the attempt to manage all the sudden emergencies. At the same time, if we spend all day dealing only with urgent tasks, the latter will most probably pile up because we do not have time to plan our work and to work on the real priorities.

However, if we give ourselves time to operate in *Quadrant 2*, we will be able to alleviate the load of *Quadrant 1*.

*Quadrant 2 (Preparation and Planning)* contains all the activities that are actually important in order to achieve our goals. If we deal with them *before* they become urgent, we will gain more control over our daily schedule. Of course, it is not always possible to predict all urgencies and unexpected events: for this reason, it is important to leave enough time in our schedule to deal with unforeseen problems.

*Quadrant 3 (Interruptions)* contains the activities that are not important for the purposes of our goals, but we have to do anyway. In addition, they need to be done immediately. Those activities usually interrupt or take us away from important tasks. It is important to minimize our time in this quadrant by reviewing and prioritizing our tasks.



*Quadrant 4 (Distractions)* are all unimportant and non-urgent tasks that constitute distractions: for instance, excessive time spent in checking emails or social media or pointless web surfing. It is important to understand that, sometimes, it is important to linger in those activities. However, if we spend too much time in this quadrant we will be late on our projects and deadlines: those habits may also lead to negative self-talk and depression!

*The objective of the Urgent Important Matrix is to spend as much time as possible in Quadrant 2, in order to prevent the overflow of Quadrant 1, and to limit the time spent on Quadrants 3 and 4.*

## EXERCISE 6

### THE URGENT IMPORTANT MATRIX

#### Introduction

The Urgent Important Matrix has been developed by Stephen Covey following an inspirational quote of the former US President Eisenhower: "*What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important*". It is an important tool to move us towards our goals, because it enable us to manage our time more effectively.

Using a simple grid, Covey helps us to define our tasks according to two parameters:

1) **Urgent tasks** are the tasks that we are required to perform immediately, or within a short time framework. We are usually obliged to stop what we are doing to focus on the urgent task instead. Not dealing with urgent tasks usually brings immediate consequences.

*E.g.*

2) **Important tasks** are the tasks that move us towards our bigger goals and projects. Since those tasks are often not associated with a close deadline, it is easier to procrastinate on them: we are more likely to prioritize tasks with a deadline, even if other tasks may have major payoffs in the long term.

Starting from this, the urgent Important Matrix consists in four quadrants that classify your daily/weekly/monthly activities on the basis of the aforementioned parameters.

		URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	URGENT	<i>Quadrant 1 - Crises</i>	<i>Quadrant 2 – Preparation and planning</i>
	NOT URGENT	<i>Quadrant 3 - Interruptions</i>	<i>Quadrant 4 - Distractions</i>



*Quadrant 1 (Crises)* – contains all the activities that are urgent and require our immediate attention. They may be unexpected events, emergencies at work or in personal life (like sudden health issues), sudden deadlines, urgent meetings, pressing problems. Those activities are also qualified as important, because we cannot avoid to perform them.

When our schedule becomes very busy and we are overwhelmed by the workload, we tend to operate mostly in *Quadrant 1 (Crises)*. Therefore, we find ourselves shifting from one activity to another, in the attempt to manage all the sudden emergencies. At the same time, if we spend all day dealing only with urgent tasks, the latter will most probably pile up because we do not have time to plan our work and to work on the real priorities.

*Quadrant 2 (Preparation and planning)* – contains all the activities that lead us towards our goals and projects and are not urgent in the present moment. Their positive impact is experienced in the long term. If we make sure to have enough time to deal with these things properly, we will significantly reduce the load of *Quadrant 1* and we will spend our energies on what really matters. If we deal with activities in *Quadrant 2* before they become urgent, we will gain more control over our daily schedule.

*Quadrant 3 (Interruptions)* – contains the activities that are not important for the purposes of our goals, but we have to do anyway. In addition, they need to be done immediately. For instance, in this quadrant there are unimportant meetings, interruptions from co-workers, unnecessary checking our emails or phone calls. Those activities are not “important” under the perspective of our personal goals (although they may be important for others).

Those activities usually interrupt or take us away from important tasks. It is important to minimize our time in this quadrant by reviewing and prioritizing our tasks.

*Quadrant 4 (Distractions)* – If the activities in *Quadrant 3* are distractions with deadlines, the activities in *Quadrant 4* are the frivolous distractions: checking social media, surfing the web without a purpose, watching TV, etc. Sometimes, it is important to linger in those activities when we feel tired and we need a break. However, if we spend too much time in this quadrant we will be late on our projects and deadlines

*The objective of the Urgent Important Matrix is to spend as much time as possible in Quadrant 2, in order to prevent the overflow of Quadrant 1, and to limit the time spent on Quadrants 3 and 4.*



### Exercise

- 1) Ask students to list all the activities that they must and want to perform in one day, one week or one month. It is also possible to use the list developed in Exercise 5, point 3).
- 2) At the beginning of the day/week/month, ask students to fill the four quadrants according to the qualifications given in the introduction.

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT		
NOT IMPORTANT		

- 3) Please keep in mind that it is not always possible to foreseen all the activities that may fall in *Quadrant 1 (Crises)* and in *Quadrant 3 (interruptions)*. Therefore, ask students to regularly update the chart, signing up those activities that come unexpectedly and can be classified into those quadrants.
- 4) During the day/week/month, ask students to try to operate as much as possible in *Quadrant 2 (Preparation and Planning)*. They may prepare a daily/weekly/monthly plan that fits with this objective.

### Discussion

At the end of the day/week/month ask students to answer the following questions:

- 1) If you find *Quadrant 1* filled with a lot of urgent and important activities, are there some activities that you could have foreseen? How those activities could have been scheduled in advance in order to deal with them before they became urgent?
- 2) Did you manage to spend as less time as possible in *Quadrant 3* and *Quadrant 4*?
- 3) On average, do you think that you have spent enough time on *Quadrant 2*?



## **Manage deadlines**

Although many people understand the importance to have clear deadlines and to have them signed in their agenda, most of the time we do not have an effective system to deal with deadlines before they approach.

A correct management of deadlines enables us to deal with tasks before they become emergencies (*Quadrant 1* of the Urgent Important Matrix). Therefore, we will dedicate the proper time to a task and we have more chances to do a good quality work.

# EXERCISE 7

## “SEE” YOUR DEADLINES

### **Introduction**

Time management requires proper identification of priorities and management of deadlines. This presupposes that persons clearly have in mind their deadlines. A good and well-organised agenda for that purpose is key in time management and deadline management. Noticing deadlines close to their expiration is detrimental to time management and quality of work.

### **Exercise**

- 1) Ask students to describe their methodology to entry deadlines and keep track of them
- 2) Ask students to carefully check for upcoming deadlines, so as not to be “surprised” when they come across to near (academic / working or other) deadlines
- 3) Ask students to enter deadlines in agendas (paper or electronic, e.g. their phones)
- 4) Asks students to set “pre-warning” alarms, based on the importance of the deadline (5 days before, 10 days before) etc.
- 5) Ask students the frequency with which their check their agenda, and how many days in advance there are looking into

### **Discussion**

After some major deadlines have expired with the new system of deadline management, inquire with your students whether their awareness of deadlines has increased and, consequently they have met deadlines having had the opportunity to better manage their time with increased quality of the deliverable or the product.



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