

Improving Performance and Effective Time Management

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Time has long been viewed as important as evidenced by Chronus. In Greek mythology, Chronus or Khronos was the God of Time who emerged self-formed at the beginning of creation.

Today, there is a multiplicity of concepts in respect of time. There is Confucianism, fatalism, reincarnation, the work ethic, Weltschmerz and so on. Similarly, concepts of time and space are strikingly different. As regards time, in the Western Hemisphere, people are mostly monochronic. Time is scarce. People prefer to do one thing at a time and concentrate on it. In the East, for many time is polychronic. In the West time is linear; whereas in Eastern cultures, time is cyclic - when God made time he made plenty of it.

Great care has to be taken in respect of time orientation for failure to do so can produce culture clashes. Time orientation is the degree to which:

- People feel they can control their time
- The importance society places on relationships versus keeping schedules
- Attitudes towards timekeeping and punctuality
- Comfort level with short-range versus longer-range planning
- The appropriateness of assigning set times for social functions or business meetings to start and finish. Whilst, In some countries this can be complicated and compounded by other cultural values, such as investing in relationships and the need for harmony and hierarchy

Yet, irrespective of which culture one is from and how time is viewed, the importance of effective

time management cannot be underestimated. Today, however, the focus must cease to be on what may be called the 'box-ticking' approach. One needs to drill deeper to manage time more effectively.

Firstly, however, this is the backcloth against which effective time management must be viewed. In the UK in what was called the Middle Ages, William Caxton invented the printing press. At the time, some people believed that the outpouring of printed material might prove too much for the human mind to absorb. Today, similar views are being expressed because of the speed of modern life. In developed countries in 12 hours the average person is bombarded with around 100,000 words a day. Although people may not actually read that number of words that is what is reaching their ears and eyes through e-mails, texting, reading and other media. It is the equivalent of 34 gigabytes of information each day - enough to overload the typical laptop within a week. This is a doubling of the amount of information which they were receiving 30 years ago. Hence, there are those who believe that people should be sent on quicker reading courses to help them cope. A more effective alternative is to send people on shorter writing courses.

One outcome of this data deluge is one's attention is being chopped into shorter intervals. With some people e-mailing, texting and talking simultaneously, continual partial attention has become commonplace, yet recent research suggests multi-tasking usually makes one less efficient because the brain is inept at memorising bits of information.

At the same time, much of what people are exposed to is superficial. In turn, this raises the question, what is the impact on one's brain - does the e-mail bombardment adversely affect thinking at a deeper level? Is this volume of communication at the expense of intelligent thought?

Currently, the jury is out on will the web change how people think? For example,

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neuroscientist, Joshua Greene of Harvard argues that "The Internet hasn't changed the way we think, it has provided us with unprecedented access to information, but it hasn't changed what we do with it". Similarly, cognitive psychologist, Steven Pinker of Harvard is also sceptical. On the other hand, Howard Rheingold, a communications scholar believes the Internet fosters "shallowness, credulity, distraction", whilst Evgeny Morogov, an expert on the Internet and politics argues "Our lives are increasingly lived in the present, completely detached even from the most recent of the past. Our ability to look back and engage with the past is one unfortunate victim."

As a result of the ubiquity of information people are less likely to pursue new lines of thought before turning to the Internet. In turn, there is less sustained thought.

So, thought should be given to only keeping in one's head what really needs to be there. The focus should be only on absorbing the information that impacts on one's goals, and it is essential to have an action plan to achieve this. Information overload can stifle decision making. One's short-term memory cannot deal with more than five to nine things at the same time. With all the things competing for one's attention, it is no wonder things get forgotten. Shifting from one task to another complicates matters by knocking out what one had in one's short-term memory. So one needs to get things out of one's brain as fast as possible and only keep in your head what really needs to be there. This is particularly important following long haul flights where there is a possibility of jet lag causing fatigue.

Clearing one's short term memory can be achieved in a variety of ways, many of which are very simple but effective. For example, one can carry small cards in one's left hand jacket pocket. For things which are important and require action, make a note on a card and then transfer it to one's right hand pocket. At the end of the day check the cards in one's right hand pocket to ensure that all the must-do things have been done.

So organisational systems are required that help to focus on what is important when needed. To help, systems should be streamlined. Some sagacious advice is offered by Douglas Merrill, former CEO at Google. By way of example, he

suggests combining reading financial statements for a period and following that with back-to-back meetings on related financial matters. The aim is to avoid having to download all the details about a specific problem from your mind and reload a different set of data. Also, try to clear one's mind between tasks - go for a walk, practice yoga and so on.

As regards last year's financial crisis why did so many leaders, intelligent people, make so many decisions which later were seen to be so obviously wrong? In the case of the bankers, many would answer 'greed'. Was it really so simple? Was a more important failure, cognitive? Today, there is a growing understanding of how the brain works. However, now, one view is that to make good decisions one must think twice. This, however, is something the mind would rather not do.

Nor are our brains good at making decisions. Too often choices are based on fear of losing, rather than hope of gaining something. In a recent study of 1,000 executives, half said that they relied on intuition to make decisions. Fine, but intuition only works well in 'stable environments' where conditions remain largely unchanged, where feedback is clear and where cause-and-effect relationships are linear. Hence, according to cutting edge psychologists such as Nobel Prizewinner, Daniel Kahneman, there are two systems of decision making. The first is experiential - fast and automatic. This would be seen as commendable to many experts on time management. There is, however, a downside, namely it is difficult to control. The second is analytical which is slow, serial and takes effort. So one should recognise the limits of intention and seek to train one's gut to produce more reliable responses. Having been alerted to this possibility of the need to think twice, the decision as to what to do is the readers. But, don't procrastinate. In this world you one can only cross a wide river in one leap, so there are circumstances where one has to take one's courage in both hands and make decisions.

At the same time what has also changed is the nature of information. One used to study faces. Today, one stares at computer screens. One used to watch expressions, physical gestures and listened to nuances in the voice. Research shows that over a quarter of recipients of e-mails misunderstand the communication, even where those interacting are

close colleagues. Research at three US business schools found that colleagues were more likely to be dishonest with each other when using e-mail because of the lack of face-to-face interaction. Studies have also shown that business teams cooperate less if they had not talked face-to-face.

Additionally, with e-mail a discussion between a few people can quickly fill the participants' in-boxes with a niagra of messages. Similarly, collaborating on a document via e-mail can be problematical, as different versions start to circulate which must then be reconciled. One way to deal with this is when one opens one's e-mail, do it standing next to the shredder.

Many would like sharper minds, better memories and longer attention spans. Some seeking this use games consoles such as Nintendo DS which has brain-training exercises. Others use pharmaceutical stimulants, dubbed Viagra for the brain. Whilst, they all involve the risk of nasty side effects, nevertheless, this appears to be the most effective. People are entirely focused on the task and at the same time relaxed.

Alternatively, there is neuro-feedback which seeks to enable one to change brainwaves to patterns linked with better performance. A session might start with a test - may be numbers that have to be added or subtracted according to a few simple rules that get harder. Participants get increasingly flustered and start making mistakes. The point of the exercise, though, is not to get better at it, but to see how players react to stress and more importantly, how they recover from it. For this, heart rate variability (HRV) is measured.

One's brains are not the only reason for us being disorganised. People are held back by the way in which society has structured things. For example, many lives are organised around outdated societal structures and beliefs that are totally wrong for current needs. For example, in many countries, children's school lives are based on an antiquated schedule. Youngsters have a long summer vacation. From an educational standpoint, this conflicts with best educational practice. So why do it? Answer - this is what has been done since the nineteenth century when the children had to work in the fields at harvest time. For years now this has been unnecessary for tractors have largely replaced people. Similarly, why do people work in many cases in offices on a working day which starts at 0900 hours and finishes at 1700 hours? That is a legacy of manufacturing based economies. Today, in a knowledge society with computers a lot of work can be done from one's home. So why waste time commuting? Or if one must go to an office, why not use flexi-time instead of the standard hours of, say, 9am to 5pm? By doing this, time is saved by driving at times when there is less traffic on the roads.

But a word of warning, managers and leaders do not learn from doing a thing right. They learn from doing a thing wrong. The more efficient they are at doing the wrong thing, the wronger they become. Hence, it is much better to do the right thing wronger than the wrong thing righter. If you do the wrong thing and correct it, you get better. Think about it.

So only keep in your head what really needs to be there. Having clearly defined goals and an action plan to achieve them is essential