



Making the Most of Time

Time is the most precious asset we possess, because once we have spent it, there isn't any more of it. It takes organization to use time wisely. But isn't it worth the effort if it means getting what we want from life?

□ "Dost thou love life?" wrote Benjamin Franklin. "Then do not squander time, for that is the stuff life is made of." He went on to warn that lost time is never found again.

Though we are all well aware of the truth of those words, few of us translate our knowledge into action. The value of time is "in everybody's mouth but in few people's practice," as Franklin's English contemporary, Lord Chesterfield, wrote.

It has been said that time is what we want most but use worst. The majority of people today would probably agree with that statement. After complaining about how little time there is, they would admit that they could put their time to better use.

People are inclined to be a little afraid of time. They have been brought up to view it as a powerful and rather sinister force of nature. Thomas Carlyle lent it a typically ominous touch when he wrote of "the illimitable, silent, never-resting thing called Time, rolling, rushing on, swift, silent, like an all-embracing tide."

"Time stops for no man," we often say. The message here is fatalistic. Time is relentless and inexorable; it is futile to fight it; it will always prevail over our puny efforts to bring it under control.

But there is another traditional way of perceiving time which indicates that it can indeed be controlled, and that is as a valuable personal possession. Our common figures of speech are sprinkled

with references to time as something that belongs to us — e.g.: "I've got lots of time."

An old Italian philosopher said that time was his estate. When you think of it, it is an estate of considerable magnitude. The average life span in Canada today is roughly 71 years, which adds up to 25,915 days or 621,960 hours. Given that a large proportion of that must be spent on necessities such as sleeping, eating and earning a living, we are nonetheless left with a sizeable sum to call our own.

The parallel with an estate extends only so far, however. If we were to fritter away a financial inheritance, there would always be a possibility of replacing at least some of it. But, if we live to 100, each of us has been allotted an absolutely fixed amount of time, and there is no chance of begging, borrowing or stealing any more.

If we were told there was an unbreakable limit to the amount of money we had to spend — that once it was gone, we would never get another penny — it would naturally make us very careful about how we disposed of it. We would do our best to ensure that the finite amount available to us was directed into getting what we really wanted out of life.

Yet, faced with the same situation with respect to time, most of us cling to our profligate spending habits. Taking deliberate steps to control our spending is somehow seen as unnatural, sapping

life of its charming spontaneity. We shrink from becoming creatures of the clock.

Perhaps this is because we associate the organization of time with business. The techniques for conserving time were originally designed to increase productivity, making people into more efficient managers and employees.

Able time managers get their work done with little strain

So when we think of deliberate measures to put time to more productive use, we also think of being made to work harder. In fact, this is the very reverse of what modern time management techniques are all about.

Far from making for harder work, the systematic allocation of time makes work easier. The world of poor time management consists of screaming deadlines, nagging problems, irritating harassments and unpleasant surprises. Well-organized time managers get their work done with less wear and tear on their emotions and less strain on their health.

Still, many of us seem to feel that organizing our time might prove addictive, turning us into "workaholics" who need a regular fix of 14-hour days. Nothing could be further from the minds of modern time consultants. "Longer hours usually decrease effectiveness and ultimately waste time," one wrote.

Effective time managers are the ones who leave the office just at quitting time with light briefcases. Because they do not have unsettled problems hanging over their heads, they enjoy restful nights and uninterrupted evenings. Instead of stopping them from whiling away the hours, time management has given them more hours to while away.

Its underlying purpose is to spring loose more "disposable" time which may be directed towards meeting one's life objectives. These objectives might include anything from building a cottage to coaching a championship Pee Wee team to seeing the Taj Mahal.

For some, of course, the aim might be to amass a sum of money or working their way to the heights of the executive suite. There is nothing wrong with this as long as their allocation of time is healthily balanced. As Walter Kiechel III recently wrote in *Fortune* magazine: "What the workaholic forgets and the would-be manager of time should always keep in mind is what one might be doing outside the office. Possibilities include walking out in the weather of sunlit days, and storm; watching the seasons change; seeing children grow and maybe even helping the process along; talking in candlelight, perhaps over a meal, with attractive persons, possibly including one's spouse; and being there to solace a troubled friend, or child, or aging parent. If you consistently choose work over these alternatives, then you really do have a problem managing time."

In any case, the principles of time management apply to all of life, not just the relatively small portion of it that is spent in the workplace. Though they are commonly taught to managers and supervisors, the techniques for conserving time work equally well for homemakers, students, self-employed people, retirees, and anybody else who seeks to get the most out of life.

The most profitable lesson the chairman ever learned

What are those techniques? The first step in any personal campaign to gain control of time is the same as the first step in a military campaign — scouting out the position. Consultants suggest that you keep a log of how you spent one whole week (or longer, if the week is atypical), making an entry of what you did every waking hour. This will identify the interruptions, needless activities and other "time leaks" which you can then take steps to avoid.

Once you have a fairly precise idea of how you spend your time, you can move on to what the experts call "prioritizing." This concept comes from

the legendary story of a meeting between the pioneer management consultant Ivy Lee and the chairman of Bethlehem Steel, Charles Schwab, in the 1920s. "Show me a way to get more things done with my time, and I'll pay you anything within reason," Schwab said.

Lee handed the tycoon a blank sheet of paper and told him to take a few minutes that evening to write down the six most important tasks he had to do in order of priority. The next day he was to work on item number one until he had finished it, then pass on to item two, and so on down the list. Schwab was to tear up the list and make a new one at the end of every day.

"Don't be concerned if you only finish one or two," Lee advised. "You'll be working on the most important ones anyway. If you can't finish them by this method, you couldn't have by any other method, either; and without some system, you'd probably not even have decided which was the most important . . . Send me a cheque for what you think it's worth." A few weeks later Schwab mailed him a cheque for \$25,000, with a note saying that it was the most profitable lesson he had ever learned.

The purpose of prioritizing is not so much to determine what is important as to eliminate what is not. On examination, you may find that some of the routines you practise are not worth the time you put into them. Lists of priorities should be checked against a list of long-term objectives. Any task that does not advance toward these goals is of questionable priority.

The question to ask is: Can it be done by someone else?

In the hustle and bustle of the working day, it is difficult to determine which tasks are more important than others. It is therefore advisable to adopt a system which makes you stop and think about each item. Some busy executives use colour-coded file folders to sort out their priorities — red for what must be done immediately, green for what must be done within the day, yellow for what must be done within the week.

If we spend too much time on inconsequential matters because we overestimate how important they are, we also do so because of our own psychology. It is human nature to do the quick and easy tasks before the harder ones. We are quite capable of deluding ourselves about what really matters. Anyone who has ever been a student can recall how much more important it can seem to do the shopping or repair a bicycle than to sit down and write a term paper or study for an exam.

The trouble with doing even legitimate small jobs first is that they tend to multiply, taking time away from work on long-range goals and planning. "Lesser matters will outnumber and submerge more important ones if handled in order of occurrence," Ross A. Webber wrote in his book, *Time and Management*.

In the real world, however, it is not so simple to stick to the big important things of life because the small ones keep interfering. Crises erupt that distract us from working towards the things that really count.

When he was supreme commander of the allied forces in Europe in World War II, Dwight D. Eisenhower developed a formula for dealing with crises while still concentrating on his prime objectives. He insisted that nothing be brought to him unless his aides had decided that it was both urgent *and* important. If it was not urgent, it could wait; if it was not important, it could be delegated to somebody else.

Though ordinary citizens do not have a large military staff at their beck and call, they can apply the same criteria when faced with a seemingly urgent problem. The questions to ask are: "Is this so urgently important that it supersedes the importance of what I am now doing?" And, "Does this require my personal attention, or can it be done just as well by somebody else?"

If a problem does prove to be of surpassing urgency, it automatically leap-frogs to the top of your priority list. This means that you should work on it until it is finished. After that, you can turn your attention back to the item that was formerly first on your list.

But here again the real world intervenes. It is all very well to say that we must systematically go



about disposing of our priorities, but our time is riddled with interruptions. No wonder we can never get the big things done.

The fact is, however, that we need not be interrupted nearly as much as we are. We have a tendency to invite interruptions to avoid having to work on difficult matters. We will even interrupt *ourselves* by dropping a major piece of work half-way through to do a minor one.

People leave themselves open to trivial demands on their time by being too available. A mother, for instance, may never have time to follow studies or satisfying hobbies because she has built up the expectation in her children that she will always be there to do the slightest little thing — which not only thwarts her desires but spoils the children. Managers who follow an “open door” policy may be providing a forum for time-wasting chit-chat; or, worse, for subordinates to come in and dump their problems on the boss. These nuisances can be avoided by simply closing the door.

“Quiet time”: The key to doing the things that really count

We are more likely to be interrupted by telephone calls than by anything else. Having a secretary (or, if you are at home or work by yourself, a telephone answering machine) pick up calls will cut down on the distraction. It will often be found in business that a secretary or subordinate can deal with a caller's problem before it reaches the manager's desk.

A fixed period should be set aside every day for responding to all but urgent calls; the same goes for disposing of essential paperwork and having meetings. A period of “quiet time” during which you can concentrate on priority projects is essential to good time management. Champions of this practice claim that a well-organized person can accomplish three hours' normal work in one “quiet hour.”

Concentration, however, should not be confined to periods of solitude. Many people waste time at

meetings and face-to-face interviews by being too busy in their own minds. In effect, they distract themselves from getting matters settled quickly by failing to focus on the questions before them. It is possible to train yourself to sweep your mind of its preoccupations and give all your attention to the issue of the moment. Top executives deal with the fragmentation of their time due to demands for decisions by cultivating the knack of complete concentration.

Greater control means greater freedom when it comes to time

Various methods have been advanced for organizing routine chores so that they take up a minimum of time. Keeping a clear desk means that you do not eat up minutes searching for information in piles of paper. Good time managers try to make it a rule never to touch a piece of paper more than once. They answer correspondence right away.

All sorts of other ideas have been hatched for conserving time in one's day-to-day life. These include sleeping half an hour less a night, only reading the headlines in newspapers, memorizing all the phone numbers you call regularly, and giving away your television set. Such drastic measures are not for everyone. The richly-bewhiskered George Bernard Shaw once said that he had written several plays in the time he had saved by not shaving. But all men do not want to wear beards; besides, some say they get their best ideas before the shaving mirror.

The tips contained in “how-to” books on organizing time found in public libraries can help to set people on the right track, but they must work out their own schemes to fit their own personalities and circumstances. The exact methods are less important than the recognition that time is their most valuable resource, and that it should be allocated according to a plan which puts first things first. The paradox of time management, as of other facets of life, is that greater control means greater freedom to do the things we want to do. By making the most of our time, we can go a long way towards making the most of our lives.