

# Time Is on My Side, Yes, It Is

By David Parmenter

I was promised, by my religious education teacher, when I reached fifty I would be working a four-day week. The Americans had just landed on the moon, with less computer capacity than your smartwatch. My teacher was certain that the technological advances would be used so ably and willingly by us that it was inconceivable that we would not have an extra day of recreation. Has this happened?

Certainly not. Many of us today have frustrating long commutes, are constantly sleep deprived, are addicted to responding to Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram as well as binging on a box set or two. To make matters worse now, once in the office, we are subjected to far too many meetings, scheduled across the day that go nowhere quickly. Everyday pressures of modern life leads us toward the belief that we cannot cope as there is not enough time in the day.

When I was in my thirties, the king of time management was Stephen Covey. He wrote the book "*First things first*", and developed an international training programme that hundreds of thousands of people attended, around the world, including myself.

What I have discovered, is that with the passing of Stephen Covey, a whole generation of people have not been exposed to time management principles, which has led to an epidemic of time-poor practices. I discovered this when I wrote an article for 'Accountants in Business' on time management. It created far more feedback than all my other articles put together. My webinar on the topic had over 250 registrations and these were the responses to the polls.

## Results from a recent study

### On average how much time is spent on emails?

50% were spending over 2 hours a day (123 popn)

### Over a week how much time is spent in meetings?

Nearly 50% over 10 hours (113 popn)

### To what extent do you work from home? (110 popn)

60% working at least one day a fortnight

Just over 20% two or more days a week

I would like to make it clear that I am not a paradigm of time management, far from it. However, through exposure to talented managers, meetings with consultants and reading many works by the great management thinkers I have collected a potpourri of solutions that will revolutionise readers' time management to varying degrees.

# 1 The Good News- You Have More Time Than You Think

On YouTube, Laura Vanderkam, a time management expert, pointed out that we have more time than we think — 168 hours each week. Let's say we have joined the growing new-age "sleep movement" and sleep 49–56 hours a week and we work between 40–55 hours a week. That leaves 64–72 hours a week spare.

|   |     |     |
|---|-----|-----|
| There are 168 hours in a week             | 168 | 168 |
| If we sleep 8 hours a day / 7 hours a day | -56 | -49 |
| If work 40 hours a week/ 55 hours a week  | -40 | -55 |
| Left with a lot of hours                  | 72  | 64  |

This explains how my younger sister visits her horse before and after teaching at a school, runs a household and plays in a semi-professional orchestra, leaving her enough time to go swimming in the sea in the summer months, catching up with friends while listening to Irish music and seeing foreign films with her younger son.

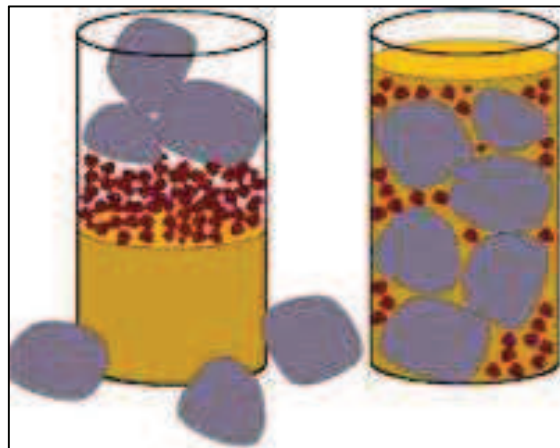
We have all have had those times of peak performance where we managed a workload we considered was the impossible. I want to explain how this happened and remind you, by applying these tools, that you can do it again.

## 2 First Things First

The father of time management could be Stephen Covey. In his book "*First thing's first*", he observed that great leaders appear less stressed and seemed to have more time on their hands. He drew a four-quadrant time management diagram, see below, illustrating that far too often we are firefighting in the "urgent and not important" quadrant. We should, instead, allow such fires to burn themselves out, redirecting our time to the "non-urgent and important" quadrant.

He was adamant that the key was "not to prioritise what's on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities."

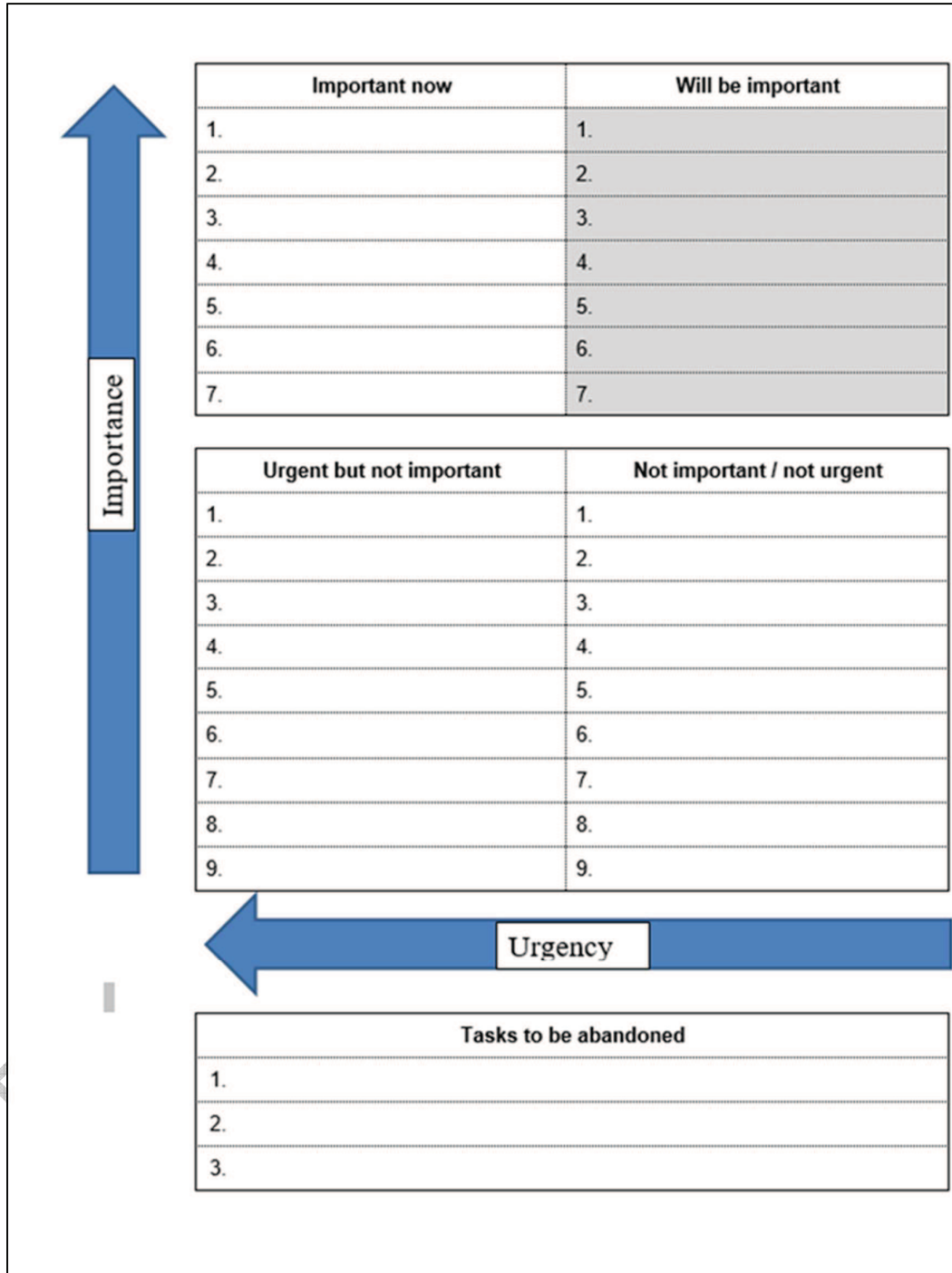
A philosophy professor is lecturing to his students. He brings out an empty jar and small rocks. Filling the jar with the rocks, he asks if it is full. "Yes", they reply. Then he lifts a container of small pebbles and pours them in. "Is it full?". "Yes", they reply. Then he lifts a container of sand and pours it in round the rocks and pebbles. "Is it full?". "Yes definitely", they reply. Then he pours in a cup of coffee in to the container and it fills up all the spare space.



He explained, "Rocks are the important things in your life — you must give them priority each day otherwise you can't fit them in. Small pebbles — are the next important things. The sand (your emails, routine meetings, daily chores) — are the least important activities and should be made to fit around the more important tasks".

"So why the coffee?" a student asks. "To remind you that you should always make time, every day, for a coffee with either a work colleague, a client or a friend." The professor replied.

The rocks are, of course, the important but not urgent tasks that Covey was pointing us to.



### 3 Why You Should Eat a Frog Every Morning

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Mark Twain once said that if you eat a live frog first thing in the morning, you know that the rest of your day will be better because the worst is behind you. After all, you've already eaten a frog, what's the worst that could happen?

Far too often we dread a task (Mark Twain's frog), perceiving that it is either nearly impossible or we simply hate doing it. It creates a dark mood that impacts our ability to focus and complete other tasks.



I learnt on a self-development course to ask myself, when I wake up in the morning, what I don't want to do that day. The subconscious will answer you back honestly. Your task, when you arrive at work, is to do that very thing that is unpalatable to you. Make that call, organise that appointment, give that reprimand or write that report you have been avoiding. Two things will happen: the feared task will not be so hard to complete, and you will feel much lighter as this great weight is lifted off you. Try it – I hope you find it as useful as I have.

### 4 Importance of Abandonment at Home and at Work

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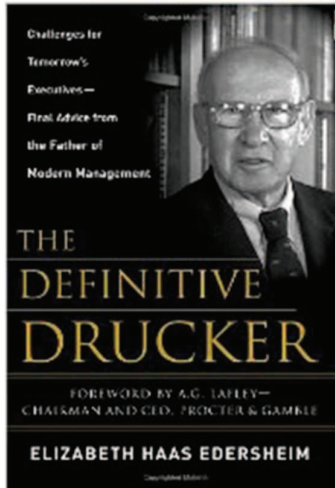
From the time we were at kindergarten we have had a fear of admitting we were wrong. In our personal lives we have held on to dumb purchases in the hope that one day it will be a good idea. Our houses are cluttered with the past, not giving enough space for our potentially glorious future to unfold.

If I was to go into a reader's garage what would I find? Maybe an exercise machine that started off life in great excitement as we envisaged a leaner version of oneself. After a couple of weeks in the lounge, it started its inexorable journey to the garage. There to rest under the dust cover for a day in the future when we would use it again, so we could say "I told you so".

At home the best approach is to have a periodic clear-out. What you cannot sell, give away or send to the recyclers. You will be amazed what you can sell. One friend sold their son's Lego collection for €3,000 and the buyer thought he had a bargain.

In the world of commerce this trait of "Groundhog Day" is equally damaging. Dr Jeffrey Liker points out that "Most business process are 90% waste and 10% value-added work." There is thus much that we can abandon. In Toyota, staff are expected to look, every day, for that abandonment, that simplification that can make a process more efficient and reliable.

We will hold on to systems, keep going with projects, keep writing that report that nobody reads because to remove it would mean a loss of face. Let's get over it.



Management guru, Peter Drucker, who I consider to be the Leonardo de Vinci of management, frequently used the word 'abandonment'. I think it is one of the top 10 gifts Drucker gave us all. In his final book, where Drucker asked Elizabeth Edersheim to interview him and summarize his life work, one whole chapter is dedicated to this very topic. He said, "Don't tell me what you're doing, tell me what you've stopped doing." He frequently said that abandonment is the key to innovation. He left some rather telling statements.

*"If leaders are unable to abandon yesterday, they simply will not be able to create tomorrow".*

*"Without systematic and purposeful abandonment, an organisation will be overtaken by events. It will squander its best resources on things it should never have been doing or should no longer do. As a result, it will lack the resources needed to exploit the opportunities that arise".*

In many teams, processes are followed, year-in and year-out, because "it's the way things have always been done." When staff question, "Why do we do this?" the manager will often answer, "There must be a reason; so please do it."

An organisation that embraced Peter Drucker's abandonment, earmarked the first Monday of every month for "abandonment meetings at every management level." Each session targets a different area so that over the course of a year everything is given the once-over. This process would work well in all teams except we should meet once a week to discuss at least two abandonments.

The act of abandonment gives a tremendous sense of relief to the team members for it stops the past from haunting the future. It takes courage and conviction from the manager. Knowing when to abandon and having the courage to do so are important leadership attributes.

I have included, in the electronic media attached to this white paper, a book review of Elizabeth Haas Edersheim's "*The Definitive Drucker*"<sup>ii</sup>. Browse the book for more on abandonment and other great advice. I consider this book one of the top ten management books I have read. I hope, like me, you too will become a follower of the great Peter Drucker.

FOR REVIEW ONLY



## 5 Have Two, Two-Hour Blocks of Time Every Day

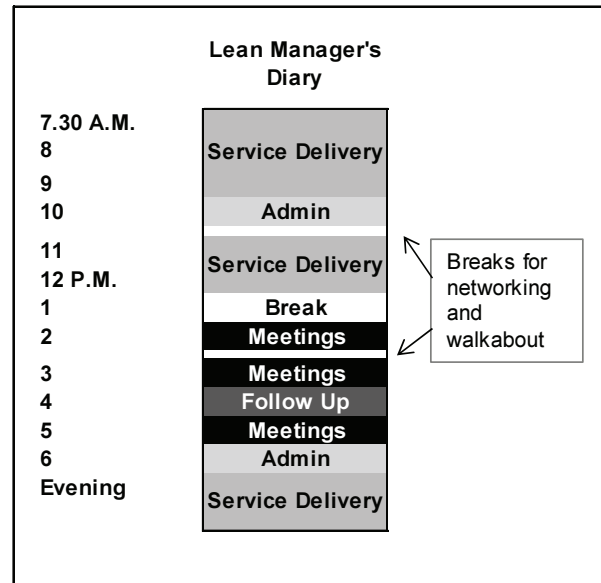
My father, changed his career in his thirties, moving from a clerk of the court to train as a lawyer. He had a full working day, four children under seven and a requirement to take seven exams which had to be passed each year. Failing one exam meant a resit of all seven. As he only had the opportunity to study in the evenings and at weekends, my father had to undergo a rigorous study timetable which he then introduced to me when I began to study

study for my university entrance exams. He took me aside and told me how he managed to study effectively. He said the sweet spot for being productive was to work in a series of 1.5-hour / 2-hour blocks of time, free of interruption where you can concentrate on a key task, a Stephen Covey "rock". Ensuring that you have a 10 to 20-minute break between.

I have applied this technique during my exams and my working life and have found it to be most beneficial.

Looking at the typical working day it would make sense to start the day off with two of these blocks; hence moving meetings to the afternoon. More of this later.

If you have projects, reports to write and research to read then do not expect any major progress unless you achieve this benchmark every day.



## 6 Balancing Customers' Needs with Your Effective Time Management

Frequently, we have meetings organised by other team members that completely ruin any chance of being effective. The classic would be flying in to a city for one meeting only to return the same week. Simply senseless. But the customer has to come first you cry. Yes, BUT, I bet they were never given options. If it hinges on a key player being there you can often bet, they will not turn up in any case.

When I am organising my schedule that can involve flying 8,000 miles, I am forced to be focussed. I always make a phone call first to the potential client, to find out the window at their end. I then offer a series of dates. If we cannot get everybody available on one of the dates, and it is often the very busy key person, then I will organise one to one contact with them. This contact could take the form of phone calls, skype sessions, a series of Go to Meetings with them as an alternative so that their attendance to the workshop(s) is not critical.

Letting the client name a date is naive at best. A good friend of mine has his agenda run by his efficient, and not so efficient, sales staff. My suggestion was that he shows a league table of the sales staff who have organised the most efficient meetings (multiple meetings in a day rather than multiple visits in a week). This would no doubt improve performance.

## 7 15 Second Rule for Short Term "To Do" Actions

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I am a member of a dining club and I need to pay fees at each dinner I attend. It is a task I always leave to later, until I get chased up and am embarrassed into action. Murray, a successful businessman, told me about the 15 second rule. He said that the consciousness holds short term "to do" actions for about 15 seconds. When you realise you must do something you have 15 seconds to take some action or resign yourself to having to think about it again, some other time.

I researched this suggestion and found that the prefrontal cortex holds a thought for 15 seconds, these thoughts are like "the brain's Post-it notes", and they fall off if you do not action them.

I am now an avid follower of the five second rule (sounds much better than the 15 second rule). When working on a Rock task I am normally focused enough to avoid these thoughts. However, when working on general issues, if a thought crosses my mind, I now ask, "Do I want to complete this easy task or think about it again?" Invariably I do it.

## 8 Adopt the Golden Rules for Handling Emails

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Emails are seldom one of Covey's rocks. They are the Covey sand and they absorb far too much time. I have gathered several rules that will guide to more efficient handling of emails.

**Never open emails before 10.30am.** In the good old days, we would handle mail at 10:30 a.m. when the mail finally arrived from the mailroom. Hence, we started the day scoring a goal — undertaking a service delivery activity. Now, the first thing we do is open the email inbox and suddenly one hour has evaporated. Some of us even get interrupted every time a new email arrives. As a therapy, for one week, I suggest you do not opening your emails until 10.30 am and then only looking at emails at one or two more intervals during the day. If something is very important you will get a phone call. You will note the difference in your effectiveness.

**Never send emails late at night or at the weekends** There is nothing wrong in having an idea late at night or on the weekend and putting it into an email. The key is to schedule the "send" anytime between 8.00 to 9 am on the next business day. If you would not ring that staff person at 11pm then do not send it. If you do ring them out of office hours, then you need therapy.

**The five-sentence rule.** Treat all email responses like text messages and limit them to something you can count easily: five sentences. With only five sentences, the writer is forced to ensure that all terms, conditions, and papers are attached to the email. This has the added benefit of ensuring the saving of possibly important documents in the document management system.

**Have an attention - grabbing header.** Make the header the main message of the email e.g., Freeing up more time- reengineering of \_\_\_\_\_. Never recycle the header you received in previous correspondence. Make the header more meaningful. If you cannot think of a good email header, maybe you should not send the email.

**Actively terminate email exchanges.** Manage your email exchanges. If you needed feedback in order to get to closure, often a phone call is better. Ping - pong emails on the same topic are screaming out for "Let's speak tomorrow!" Think about your desired outcome and promote a course of action to avoid the table tennis. If necessary use the sentence "No more emails on this one, thank you."

**Only send your email to those people who you are prepared to phone.** Promote yourself by your endeavours, not by your use of broadcast emails, reply all, or copy correspondence. Avoid sending broadcast emails unless you are prepared to call up each person to advise them that there is a key document that they need to read.

**If you would not put your words in a letter, do not put them in an email.** Far too often the content of emails, while amusing, is not appropriate. Be careful about being the bearer of silly jokes. Today many people seem to want to be remembered by their joke telling. Now, don't get me wrong, I love a joke, but when you are sent a couple a week by the same person, you do wonder what they do all day. Remember, perception rules everything. You do not want to be perceived as a person whose prime focus is to entertain and be seen as another David Brent (The Office). You want to be thought of in more positive terms.

**Beware of sending a rebuff email.** For complex responses, complaints, rebuffs, etc. draft the email and file in the draft section, of your email application, overnight as you may well have second thoughts. It is a good idea to discuss these emails with your mentor. Many a career has been dented by a poorly thought through email written in anger.

**Monkey-on-the-back emails.** Many people are using the email system to pass their workload on to others. In many cases people contact known experts and ask for their help without having done any research themselves. In other words, they are passing the monkey on their back to the expert. My friend, an internationally recognized expert, advised me that the best way is to politely thank the sender for the email and then say, "Please call when convenient to discuss." Based on his experience, this gets rid of 95 percent of the requests.

**Target One in Four emails to be delete without opening.** Assuming you have the "view screen" option ticked you can see the content of each email without opening them. If in doubt delete. (Only when you are regularly deleting emails that you need to get resent to you are you deleting too much.)