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Dogged determination

In the first of two articles on effective time management, **Patrick O'Brien** explains how awareness of how you use your time is key to stopping time take control of you

Many people operate as if there were insufficient time during their day; no time to complete all the tasks on their 'to do' lists, no time to achieve the quality required for the levels of performance expected, and no time to explain the task requirements to others so they might be able to help.

If you feel this applies to you, then perhaps ask yourself two important questions. First: 'Do you feel that you are time challenged?'; and second, if you find you are: 'Have you always been that way?'

To help you reflect, compare the pace of business today with that of five or 10 years ago. Think also about the tools and technologies that you now have to help manage that faster pace.

As you reflect, you'll acknowledge that the business pace has quickened dramatically over the years. You've probably also already taken some steps to keep pace, such as with the use of various devices and apps. However, you'll probably also realise that not all so-called time-saving devices actually save time; many may have a tendency to increase time consumption, if they are not managed well.

One key challenge in a device-driven, technologically deterministic world, is a growing acceptance that not all issues are solvable by technology and speed; brighter and faster may not always necessarily be cleverer.

To better cope with pace requires the development of some specific skills.

Improving awareness

Most people who try to do too much in too little time can be left feeling exhausted, which increases the risk and tendencies for under-performance.

Their 'spend-borrow-spend' cycle may often never be broken because they lack the time, or the wisdom, to realise they are trapped in their own

cyclical patterns. What gets repeated gets reinforced, which exacerbates their time issues.

In 388 BC, Greek poet Aristophanes said: 'Men of sense often learn from their enemies.' So, a good starting point for time-management improvement is with a better understanding of the 'enemies' that challenge. Rather than fight the 'enemy', it is better to embrace time as your friend.

Becoming aware and taking control increases your productivity, which drives results. It also reduces stress levels; operating with a more relaxed state of mind gives you the opportunity

to their customer-oriented business mission, so that the results they achieve also contribute positively to organisational success.

So, it is important to focus on those areas, and keep your attention firmly focused on those areas, to realise excellent business results.

Routines

Whether it is in running a production line, servicing a hotel guest, or preparing a set of accounts, business is built around repetition, and time is typically consumed in its processes. The question is, do those processes repeat the right things? To be most productive,

GOOD TIME MANAGERS UNDERSTAND THEIR PROCESSES, AND CONCENTRATE ON KEEPING THEM RUNNING AS SMOOTHLY AS POSSIBLE

to make better decisions. It also gives you discretionary time, which means you can spend more time in the areas that matter most to driving goal achievement.

But, as economist Milton Friedman once said, there is no such thing as a free lunch. Like all good friendships, you have to work at building up a good relationship with time. There are four key areas where you can start to improve both your awareness of issues, and your control.

Results

Spending time on anything typically realises outputs. The question is, do the outputs generate value? To be most productive, they must help you achieve the business outcomes sought.

Good time managers know they can choose to invest their time in specific ways to achieve desired outcomes. Great time managers align their efforts

repetition must take you towards, rather than away from, your results.

Good time managers understand their processes, and concentrate on keeping them running as smoothly as possible. Great time managers go beyond that, and have the confidence to make creative suggestions as to how their processes can be improved.

So, it is crucial to ensure that your processes run smoothly and perform as effectively as they possibly can.

Resources

All actions typically require some form of input. The question is, are all the right inputs available? To be most productive, they must be ready in the right quantity and quality when required, to minimise having a detrimental effect on the business processes.

Good time managers are organised, and consume the minimum of

resources. Great time managers know how much cost is associated with rework, and keep a keen eye on the quality of their inputs to minimise downstream wastage.

So it is important to know all the inputs required at the outset, and ensure they are available as required, so that consumption needs can be met as efficiently as possible.

That said, a significant part of office- or service-related activity now involves 'knowledge work'. This relies heavily on people processing information, and people-sharing relevant information.

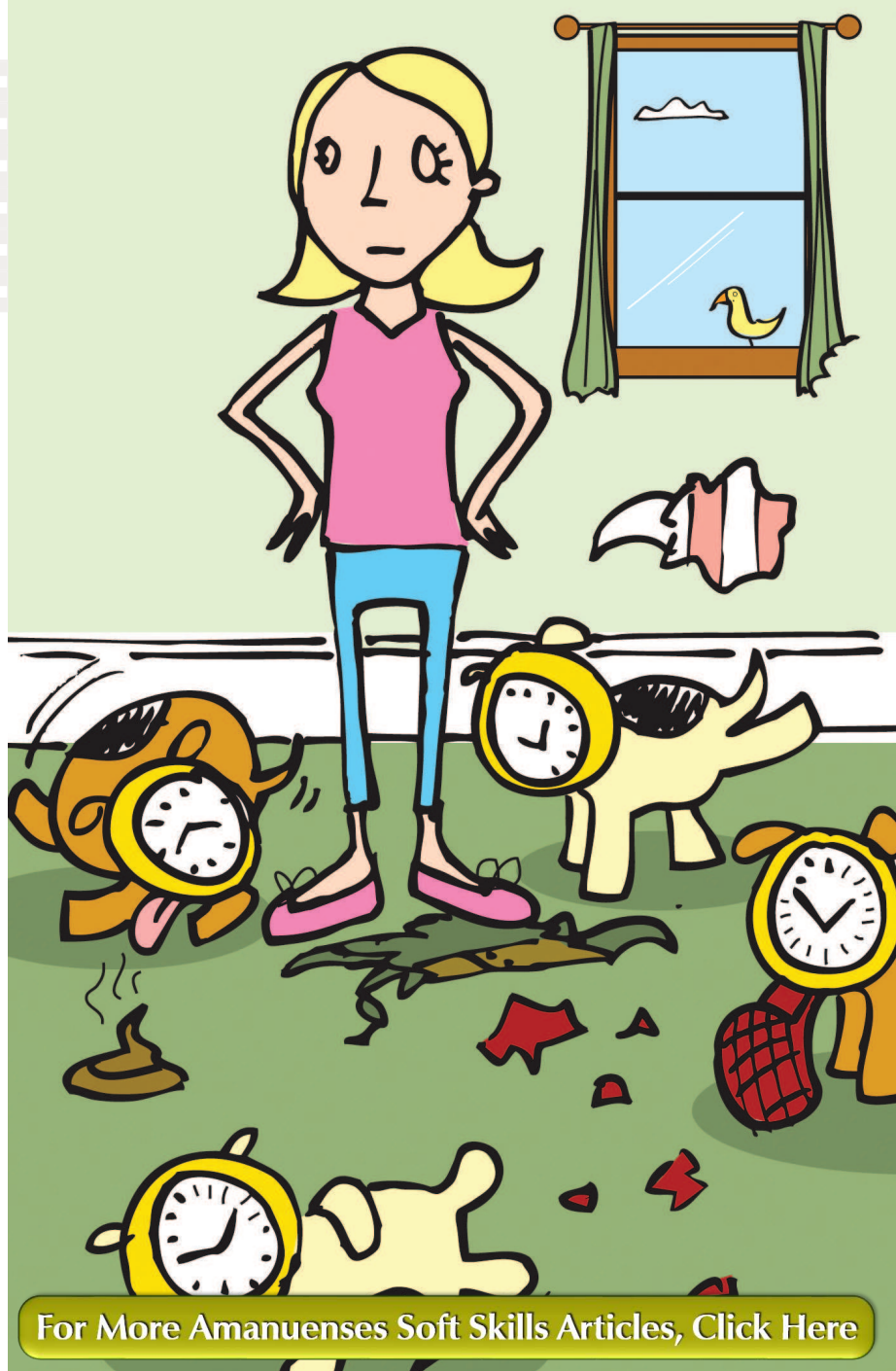
Really great time managers therefore have well-developed communication skills; they know how to get access to, how to use, and how to share relevant information between appropriate parties.

Requirements

Any new task or action is usually preceded by a request. The question is whether those incoming requests are ones that should be performed, and whether you have the capability to perform them. To be most productive, you must work on tasks that are best suited to your skills and responsibilities.

There are three things to keep in mind: you; other people; and the context. First, consider yourself. Be clear on the roles you play, what your responsibilities are, and what you are capable of achieving. In addition, to take on new tasks, you must have a clear view of the demands on your time, and how much discretionary time you have.

Next, consider people other than yourself, especially your close colleagues and team mates. Be clear on the roles they play, what their responsibilities are, and what else they



are capable of achieving. In addition, consider the likely demands they could place on you, as well as the likely areas where they may be able to help you out.

Finally, the context is important, so take time to understand the situation in which new tasks come about; just because a task arises, it doesn't mean to say it needs to be completed. Be clear on what the task is, how it arose, what its priorities are, and the level of discretion you have to influence options. Establish the task deadline and the customer's expectations of how the final product will be packaged for delivery at the outset.

What you can control

Great time managers determine their goals and commit to achieving results. They draw on their communication skills to get access to the right people, and the right information. They concentrate on those aspects that they can control, because they know this leads to the least waste of effort.

Finally, they practise excellent time-management techniques. This is an area that we will examine in the second article in this series.

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