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Recognising pains, walking gains

In the second and concluding part of our look at time management, **Patrick O'Brien** introduces three techniques guaranteed to help improve your task effectiveness

Time is rather like money. You have the power to acquire it and spend it on things that you desire. You can save it and invest it in ways that can yield dividends and increase its value. You can borrow it, with the potential to decrease its value. You can waste it, frittering it away on things of low, or no, value.

Unlike money, time is perishable. You cannot tuck it away into a rainy-day fund. You cannot store up a couple of hours today for use tomorrow. Perhaps even more importantly, you cannot change the amount you receive; we all get the same 24 hours every day.

Given these constraints, being productive means investing your finite time resource into those areas that will bring you the best returns. It requires a mindful balance of concentration and conservation. It calls for concentration on those areas that produce the greatest value and business impact. At the same time, it demands minimal wastage, and conservation of the resources required to achieve the desired outcomes.

Formulating a time management strategy is a relatively straightforward task:

- * Analyse where the bulk of your energy and time is spent today.
- * Identify areas where you can better spend this time in the future.
- * Choose the more impactful business areas for you to invest your time.
- * Commit to invest your time, concentrating energies into those chosen areas.
- * Focus and maximise your efforts, conserving time spent for the important tasks.

Executing a strategy requires attention to detail. There are three critical areas where techniques can help you get and stay on-task: stop

procrastinating, start prioritising and improve processing.

Stop procrastinating

When I was a child at school, I was taught to swim. I recall vividly the day I was tossed mercilessly into the pool and taught to tread water. Was there a point to it? If so, what? It seemed to me at the time that it would have been far more productive to get us to just swim off to somewhere else – perhaps to the safety of the poolside!

So, think about the work you are doing today. What tasks are you tackling? Do they make you feel like you are treading water, too? As soon as

the task quickly. Soon enough, those tasks will be completed and you'll be on your way to delivering the desired results.

Start prioritising

It is only once you start moving that you can begin to get productive. However, not all tasks are equal; the trick is in knowing which one to tackle next. Productive people make choices about where they spend their time so as to maximise their impact. When they do this, they are prioritising.

Consider how restaurants organise and prioritise their menu to help speed up a customer's decision-making. They

PROCRASTINATION LEADS INEVITABLY TO SLOWER STARTS, RUSHED WORK, LOSS IN QUALITY, MISSED DEADLINES AND DOWNSTREAM STRESSES

you begin to sense that you regularly put things off to another day, that's when you begin to recognise that you are committing the cardinal sin of time management: procrastinating.

According to most polls, procrastination is probably the number-one horror – an all-time timewaster. That said, most people do it a little in their lives, especially when switching tasks or straight after an unexpected interruption. Often we prefer to moan and gripe to others, rather than just picking up again to getting back to the task.

Time spent procrastinating acts against the need for time conservation. It leads inevitably to slower starts, rushed work, loss in quality, missed deadlines and downstream stresses. When combined, these have high potential for adverse impact on other projects and deadlines, too. It is better just to start and get back to

know that their time is limited when they lunch, so they segment their menu into courses, such as starter, main and dessert. This helps a customer to prioritise their choice based on time, taste and cost considerations.

Weak time managers pay little attention to this, spending a minimum of time prioritising, and they often suffer from one of three classic weaknesses. First, they may not have their tasks organised into a structure that allows them to easily see the options. Second, they may be unable to decide what task to pick next. Finally, their decision-making criteria might be weak, which means that they focus on lower-value items that do not head them in the direction of their goals.

Prioritising is a strategic activity. It requires that you are organised, know what you are working on and where you can best spend your time in future. It



***PREVIOUS PIECE**

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concentrates your energies on those tasks that drive business impact, that take you towards your intended goals and that create the greatest business value.

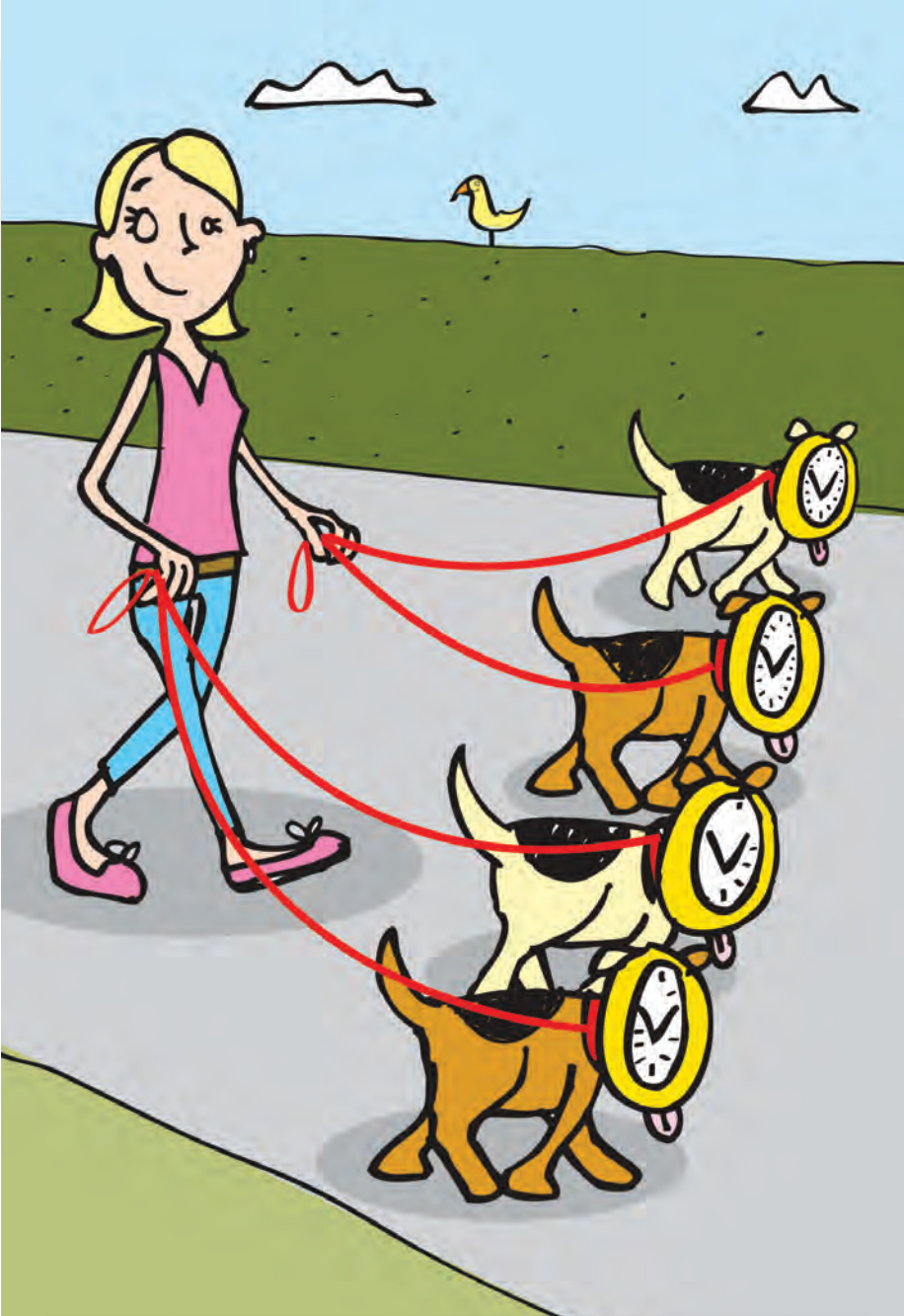
Improve processing

Overcoming procrastination and selecting tasks through prioritising begins the process, allowing you to start to overcome inertia, gain traction and move ahead. As you do this, you are assured that you are focusing on the important tasks that make a business difference.

Albert Einstein once cautioned that insanity is 'doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results'. The service-oriented nature of office work means that, for much of the day, we are likely to be immersed in the routines of our current business processes. During this time, we all have a tendency to operate on auto-pilot, rather than with a knowing consideration of our actions.

Good time management practices require a knowing awareness coupled with active choice, rather than an active unconsciousness and passive decisions. It's important that you see those processing steps that may be leaching your time away, like air leaking out of a punctured tyre. It's also important to look out for others that could yield some big time gains.

Processing does have hidden traps, yes. Yet it allows you to recognise time pains, as well as to realise time gains. Awareness allows time managers to understand how processes consume and liberate time and affords them opportunities to make choices. When working on a task that is within an established routine, be mindful that there might be ways to improve it. Improve processing by looking for



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areas where time is not being conserved. Actively spotting and embracing those areas can often gain you considerable time, saving your company considerable costs, too.

Putting into practice

Dilbert, the product of cartoonist Scott Adams, once insightfully said: 'Decisions are made by the people who have time, not the people who have talent.' So if you have ambition and want to be a decision-maker, then you need to start to get more time.

In reality, most decision-makers probably started out just like we all did, with much less time than they

would like. The difference is that they chose to embrace and start practising good time management techniques. You can now do that, too, if you choose.

In closing, if you really do want to improve your business productivity and personal effectiveness, reduce the stresses that surround you and bring a little balance into your life, then you can. Choose to befriend good time management practices and see how they can work for you. Enjoy!

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