john carroll

Agile Time Management

for achieving more at work, and in life!

in easy steps

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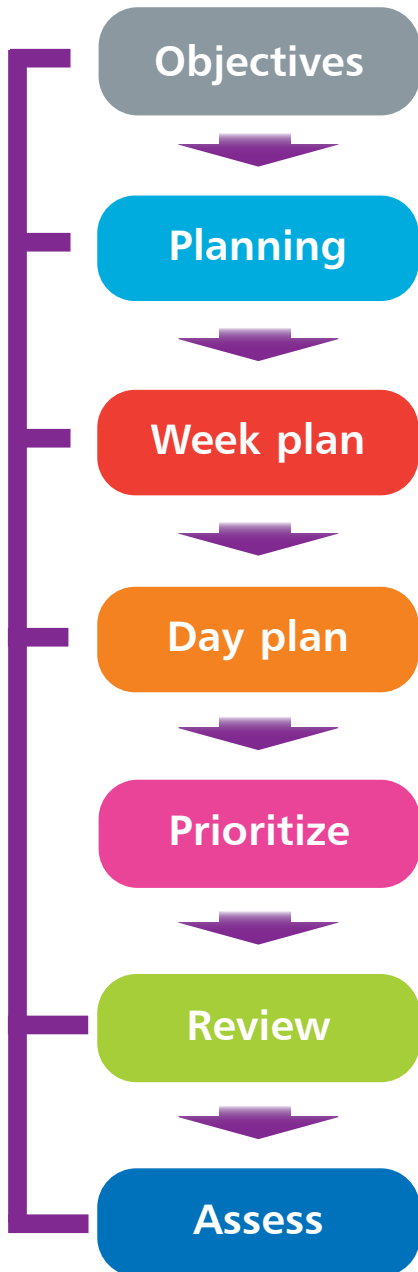
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Agile Time Management
Roadmap for success

Objectives

Planning

Week plan

Day plan

Prioritize

Review

Assess

Life goals
Determine your personal long-term goals, where you want to get to, and what you want to do with your life. From these, develop your strategic objectives for the next five years, including your time-management goals.

Operational plan
Develop a mid-term plan for the year ahead, setting out what you will do this year to move toward your long-term objectives. This should cover any training and development needs as well as time management.

Plan your week
At the start of each week, produce your week plan (to-do list) of activities you need to complete this week. By restricting it to just the activities you will be able to complete, this reduces it to a manageable size.

Plan each day
From your week plan work backlog, select three smaller deliverables (quick wins) of important tasks you can achieve during the day, and estimate how much time you will need to spend on each.

Timebox
Schedule timeboxes for each quick win at times when you will be able to work uninterrupted on them. Then, schedule time for important meetings, phone calls, lunch, and other breaks and activities.

Review the day
At the end of each day, sit down quietly and review how the day worked out compared with the day plan. Record your wins, any time wasted, anything that could be improved upon, and anything you missed.

Assess your progress
At the end of each week, assess your progress against your week plan and review your goals. Review progress on your mid-range plan monthly, and formally once or twice a year.

John Carroll

Agile Time Management

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Contents

1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the benefits of taking an agile approach to time management. It challenges our understanding and use of time, and shows how we can adopt agile practices and methods to improve our experience of life and – ultimately – our true destiny.

Time Management

If we are going to be effective, we need to manage how we spend our time in business, on projects, and in life in general. Many hundreds of books have been published on time management, including one by this author, and they all attempt to address the best-practice approach to the subject. But our knowledge of the subject has been expanded by developments in agile methodology and, more recently, our basic understanding of time itself.

In this book, we will start by looking at the best-proven concepts and methods of effective time management and then enhance them with the benefits of using an agile approach. We can then factor in what we also know about time itself and how best we can use it.

Effective time management

The author has been practicing and teaching time management for over 30 years, and from this experience he created a more effective approach to time management, culminating in the development of an Effective Time Management course, followed by the publication of *Effective Time Management in easy steps* in 2012. This sets out a proven approach to implementing the best practices and most effective methods of time management.

Agile methodology

Over the same time scale. we have seen a significant rise in the popularity of agile methodology. This originally stemmed from the desire to improve the way computer software was developed.

Traditional waterfall software development, so called due to the difficulty of going back upstream, started by defining what the software had to do. This was all documented in a specification of requirements, which had to be agreed to and signed off by all parties before the actual software design could begin.

Software design would then take these agreed requirements and design how the software would actually deliver them. Once again, this had to be signed off by all parties before the actual development of the software could begin.

Then, each further stage of the waterfall development had to be completed before the next stage could begin. After many months or years, the end users (the *often-forgotten* key stakeholders) finally got to see and acceptance-test the software.

8

The problem with this approach was that by the time the software was finally completed and tested, time had passed by and the world had changed, as undoubtably had the needs of the business. Agile development turned the whole process on its head so that we start developing software as soon as possible in order that the customer can see what it can do and start to get some benefits to the business, then we can add or change things to improve the product until it meets the needs of the business. It proved to be a real game-changer and revolutionized the way and the speed with which software is now developed.

These agile projects still had to be managed, and their project management evolved, using Scrum and other agile techniques, into what became known as agile project management. The author also first published *Agile Project Management in easy steps* in 2012 to cover this development.

Agile time management

The author has always been a little uncomfortable with some of the historical perceived wisdoms and approaches to the subject of time management. Having embraced agile development and agile project management, he believes that the time is now right to bring an agile approach to our basic management of time itself.

By adopting an agile approach to time management, we can:

- Change the way we think of spending time and see how best we can use it.
- Put ourselves in control of our lives and deal with the conflicting interests that life throws at us.
- Understand why demands on our time will always exceed the amount of time available.
- Improve our personal productivity and effectiveness.
- Spend more time on the things that really matter to us and achieve a proper work-life balance.
- Stop worrying about the future, get on with the present, and become happier people.

Read on for a journey through this book and see how we can begin to change our lives forever using agile time management.

Agile Project Management in easy steps is a companion publication to this book. Visit **www.ineasysteps. com** for more details.

Understanding Time

In order to understand time and learn to use it wisely, we need to begin by establishing how much time we will actually have. The average life expectancy for someone living in the USA or the UK (the author's home) is around 80 years. It will, of course, vary in other parts of the world, but we can use those 80 years as the basis for some preliminary calculations.

Life stages

We can split those 80 years into three broad life stages:

- Birth, childhood, and education.
- Our working life.
- Retirement, old age, and – finally – our demise.

We can practice time management in all three stages, and to some extent we do. Even as small children we can choose what we really spend our time on, which won't always be what our parents have told us to do. Retirement also gives us a wonderful opportunity to use our time for the things we want to do without having to worry about where the next meal is going to come from (assuming we had the good fortune to provide for it properly during our working life). But in terms of using time for our own future development and success, we only really have the middle stage – our working life – to play with.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (**OECD.org**) defines the working-age population as 15 to 64, and then breaks that down into three further sub-stages:

- **People aged 15 to 24**: Those just entering the labor market following their education.
- **People aged 25 to 54**: Those in their prime working lives.
- **People aged 55 to 64**: Those passing the peak of their career and approaching retirement.

Typically, we will start to think actively about how we will manage our time in one of the two latter stages, which will give us – hopefully – somewhere between 30 and 40 years to work on it.

As there are 52 weeks in every year, that gives us a usable working life of between 1,500 and 2,000 weeks.

Hot tip

There is a lot of excellent information on the OECD website.

Each week

Each week has exactly seven days, and each day we will spend roughly eight hours in bed. On working days, we will spend about the same amount of time at work. So, on work days that leaves us about eight hours for commuting, exercising, relaxing, and spending time with our friends, family, and loved ones.

On non-working days, we will have an additional eight hours to do whatever we like with. That is all the time we have, unless we decide to spend less time sleeping or doing any of the other things that we enjoy. We will see later that to be truly effective we must take time off from work to recharge our batteries.

What we can't do

We will never be in the position of being able to handle every demand that gets thrown at us, or even to pursue every ambition of our own that feels important to us. We have to let go of the fantasy of ever getting it all done and instead focus on doing fewer things, but doing them better. Therefore, the things we do choose to do should be the things that really matter.

Focus on the present

We also need to confine our attention to the only portion of time that matters: this week, if we are looking at weeks; today, if we are looking at days; and this minute, if we are looking at minutes. This topic is expanded upon and explained in detail in Chapter 2, but we can summarize it into these four steps to success:

1 Accept the fact that we have a limited amount of time available to achieve what we want from life.

2 Recognize that we will have to decide what we are going to spend our precious time on.

3 Decide what really matters to us and focus on doing fewer things but doing them better.

4 Focus on the only time that really matters – right now.

Before we explore how we can use that time, we need to take a good look at ourselves, and that is covered in the next topic.

Don't forget

All work and no play will make poor Jack look dull and gray.

11

Understanding Ourselves

This is probably one of the most crucial steps we should take if we are going to make the most of our lives, and we all want to do that, don't we! Think of life as a journey – an exciting journey:

● Sometimes it will take us to places and opportunities that we would never have expected.

● Sometimes it will take us to places and things we would rather not see.

● But perhaps most important of all, we will not always – if ever – be completely in control of it.

You are going on the most exciting journey of your life. Buckle your seat belt and take control of it.

This may sound a bit chaotic, but that is exactly what will happen in life – trust me, I have been there; seen it, done it and have the T-shirt. If we don't have a clear understanding of where we want to get to, it is going to be even worse.

First steps
To begin to understand ourselves, we first need to identify what we want to achieve with our lives: what really matters to us. These are, then, the things we should be choosing to spend our precious time on.

One suggestion (accredited to Warren Buffett) is that we should start by listing our 25 most important things, then prioritize them and then select the top five to concentrate on. The final bit of advice is that we should then positively avoid spending any time on the other 20. That may work for him and it may work for you, but I believe a better approach is to start with something nice and simple like the Rule of Three.

The Rule of Three
The Rule of Three is a simple way of dealing with information overload. It is an effective way to set meaningful limits, as it is very easy to remember things in threes. The great thing about it is that it can be applied to long- and short-term aims, objectives, goals, tasks, and anything else we want to spend our time on. Make a start now by identifying your life goals:

1 Make a list of all the things you really want out of life – what you want to do, what you want to achieve, where you want to live, and what sort of lifestyle you want.

2 Now, go back through your list and rate each one on how important it is to you, using a scale of one to three, where one is the most important and three is the least important.

3 If you have more than three most important ones (and you probably will), go through them and downgrade the least important, and keep repeating this until you just have your top three.

These are the three things that matter the most to you now and that you should be spending your time on achieving.

This whole process is covered in much more detail in Chapter 3 but you can leave these top three goals as your life goals for now. What is important is that you should not now spend time on anything that does not help you toward achieving these goals.

Changing goals

Over time, our goals will need to change or be refined as new ideas occur to us or new opportunities arise. This will largely be as a result of what has actually happened. New opportunities may open up or existing opportunities may change. Once again, there is another simple Rule of Three to assist us in the process of refining our goals:

1 If something else becomes more important, promote it to the top three.

2 Then, relegate the bottom goal of the existing top three and stop spending time on it.

3 If one of the existing top three ceases to be important, relegate it (and stop spending time on it), and then promote the highest of the remaining goals to replace it.

From this point on, we should view our life as a journey toward achieving these three goals. But the whole process of selecting, promoting, and relegating goals requires us to make choices. We will continually be faced with the need to make choices, and that is what we will deal with in the next topic.

Hot tip

These goals will change as you move forward, but always stay focused on your current top three.

13

Hot tip

Be ruthless with this process. Don't keep goals for sentimental reasons!

Making Choices

When it comes to making decisions on the things that really matter to us in our lives, there will be some big decisions that we need to make:

Work or family?

A lot of people feel torn between their work and their family. They want to get on and be successful at their job but it can sometimes means working long hours. This can cause friction with our loved ones and perhaps means we don't spend as much time with them as we should or would like to.

We will need to decide what comes first for us – which goal is more important. We could change our job to one that requires fewer hours but that will probably mean we don't move closer to one of our life goals. Alternatively, we could abandon our family and concentrate on making a huge success of our job. But there will be many other options in between these two extremes that we could explore before making a decision about changing our goals.

Boring or creative job?

We may find ourselves stuck in a boring day job when we feel we have a more creative calling. Maybe that boring day job will take us, eventually, toward one of our major goals in life, but it is dampening our spirits. We may have a creative streak and would love to do something a bit more exciting.

Decision time again! We have to decide what matters most to us. We could quit the boring job and do something more exciting, or we could knuckle down and cope with the drudgery. Once again, there may be many other alternatives between these two extremes that we could explore before changing our life goals. We could talk to our boss about it, we could explore similar jobs at other organizations, and so on.

Town or country?

We might want to live in the countryside while we are working in a city, or we might be working out in the boondocks and missing the bright lights and big city.

Once again, there is the extreme option of changing our job but there are also many in-between options such as remote working, working some days at home and some in the office, or weekend commuting with a little bolt-hole in the countryside or a small

Hot tip

Be honest with your boss – explain why you are asking, and that it is not a bad reflection on them so that they don't feel threatened by your actions.

apartment in town. Or, maybe a goal to relocate once we've achieved a certain interim goal.

There are many other clashes of possible lives and lifestyles that we may have to face, but once again, we can introduce a three-step process to guide the decision-making process:

1 Make a decision about what matters the most to you.

2 Once the decision is made, just do it, and all the anxiety vanishes so that you can get on with your (new) life.

3 If it doesn't work out, go back and pick up the pieces from where you left off.

If you don't do it, you will spend the rest of your life wondering what would have happened "if only". Let me give you a real-life example:

Case study

My wife and I decided we wanted to try running walking holidays in the mountains in Andalucía, Spain. We found an ideal spot in the foothills, but near enough to the coast to be able to go swimming in the sea. We bought an old *finca rústica* (farmhouse) and tidied it up, moved to Spain, and gave it a try.

It didn't work out in the end due to economic factors beyond our control (the UK economy went down the drain and people stopped taking second holidays, which was our target market). But we had two great years doing it, made lots of new friends, and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves.

When the time came, we went back and picked up our previous careers, and neither of us would change what we did if we had our time over. Our holiday idea features in at least two holiday brochures now, so the idea was good, but the timing was wrong. But we have moved on and are also happy with that decision.

More on that case study later, and there is much more detail on making choices in Chapter 4. While we might have ideas, we will never really know what opportunities the future may hold for us, so we will have a look into the future in the next topic.

Don't forget

Make sure you explain why you are leaving.

15

Hot tip

Never burn your bridges – leave on good terms. That way, you should always be able to go back if you need to.

The Future

The future and the past

Let us start with a bold statement: There is little point in worrying about the future, because we don't have any control over whatever it may or may not have in store for us. By the same token, there is no point in fretting about the past. Whatever we did or didn't do, or might or might not have done, we certainly can't go back and change that either. Which leaves us with the one thing that we can control: this moment in time, right here and right now, so remember:

Today is the first day of the rest of your life.

How we got here

Think about it honestly, and ask yourself whether or not you had very much control over how you got to be where you are today. What you have actually achieved can probably be traced back to some jumble of chance occurrences, some good and some bad.

Hopefully, you recognized the opportunities that occurred as good things at the time and took full advantage of them. By the same token, life has also probably already thrown quite a few obstacles into your path, which you are unlikely to have foreseen either, but hopefully you also managed to deal with them.

Where we are today

Our planet, the third planet from the Sun (the Earth as we call it), is around 4.5 billion years old. During the first billion years, the ocean formed and then life developed within it. That life spread and began to affect the atmosphere and surface, leading to the oxidation event around two billion years ago.

We humans emerged around 300,000 years ago, and have now reached a population of around 8 billion. We depend on Earth's biosphere and natural resources for our survival, but we have increasingly impacted on that environment, until today the situation is untenable.

That is a sad statement of reality, and unless we take drastic action now, it will lead to the widespread extinction of most forms of life. We have already seen that we can't change the past – all we have is the future, so let us get back to that.

The journey

Think about the rest of your life as a journey. That journey will take you along a path through the future, and I promise you it will be an exciting one. Let us think about that journey and, once again, you can use three steps to analyze it:

1 As you travel along the path, you will reach points where you have to make a decision. Do you change your objectives or do you stick to the current ones?

2 Once you have made that decision, you continue to move forward through your journey until the next decision has to be made.

3 Make time to enjoy the experience and the journey, for once you get to the end, that's it – your life will be over.

There is a strong background of Taoist philosophy behind those three steps, which this author has analyzed and explored in one of his other published works, *The Way of the Project Manager*, from which I will give you just one quotation:

> *"Just observe the mystery of what unfolds on the journey, there will be darkness, but hopefully, out of this we will begin to know how things happen."*

If we can do this, we will have achieved all that was ever there for us to achieve in the first place.

The future

We will deal with the future in much more detail in Chapter 5, but in the meantime we can now start to think about how we are going to use the future, what we want to achieve, and how we are going to go about achieving it.

That means deciding what we are going to spend our precious time on. But as we should now know, we will never have enough time to do everything.

So, first of all, we have to decide what we are NOT going to spend our precious time on. These are the things we are going to stop doing, and that is dealt with in the next topic.

Hot tip

Just maybe, if we all work together, we can persuade our politicians to do something about saving the planet, rather than worrying about getting re-elected.

Time Wasters

If we are going to spend our time on what matters most to us, then we have to start by first deciding what we are NOT going to do. Every decision to use a portion of our time on something means giving up all the other ways in which we could have used that time. It comes back to taking a stand on what matters most.

Saying no to things we don't want to do is very easy, but what is not so easy is saying no to things we DO want to do. We need to accept that we can only use our time once, so we had better use it on the things that really matter, and these are not always the things we enjoy doing.

The core challenge of managing our time isn't about how to get everything done. As we have already seen, that is never going to happen. But how to decide what not to do and be happy with not doing it? Which brings us to what many people refer to as "the thief of time":

Procrastination

Putting off doing something, or as Wikipedia defines it, *"the act of unnecessarily delaying something despite knowing that there will be negative consequences for doing so"*. Although typically perceived as a negative trait, it can also be an appropriate response to certain demands that could present risky or negative outcomes or require waiting for new information to arrive.

- A negative procrastinator finds themselves paralyzed because they cannot make a decision about what to do.
- A positive procrastinator accepts the fact that they cannot get everything done, so decides which tasks to focus on and which to neglect.
- If you find yourself procrastinating because you're worried you won't do a good enough job on something, relax – you probably won't, so you might as well make a start on it anyway.

> *We don't need to stop procrastinating – we actually need to get better at it.*

So, be a positive procrastinator and feel good about it. But there are many ways we can waste our precious time, so let us have a look at a few of the more common ones.

Other time wasters

Procrastination is by no means the only thief of our time. Here are some other ones identified through the author's research:

- **Poor delegation**: Asking or being asked to do something without a clear explanation of what is needed.
- **Being disorganized**: If we are not organized, we will waste hours trying to find things among heaps of papers and files.
- **Ineffective meetings**: Poor time keeping (people arrive late, causing repetition) and/or a poor chairperson.
- **Upward delegation**: Having delegated a task to someone, they refer it back to you as they don't feel confident that they can do it themselves.
- **Constant interruptions**: Phone calls, drop-in visitors, and other things that call for our instant attention.

But perhaps the biggest time waster of all:

Social media

There is a lot of money made from social media applications (but not by their users). They are free to use, but remember:

> *There is no such thing as a free lunch.*

Surfacing after an hour spent on Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, LinkedIn, or any other social media platforms, we might think we have just wasted an hour, but we'd be wrong because it will have influenced our sense of what matters for some time to come:

- We might be irritated at how wrong some of the people are who express contrary views.
- We will be coming up with ideal ripostes hours later, instead of getting on with the things that matter.
- That one hour might end up wasting half a valuable day of our time.

This is covered in Chapter 6, but let us move on to something positive – how we are going to spend our time – in the next topic.

Planning

Having identified the three most critical things we want to achieve in life and the things we are going to stop doing, we can now focus on planning the things we should do:

1 For each of your three top goals, identify the three most important things you will need to do to achieve success.

2 Then, break each of those down to identify chunks of work that you can accomplish within one week.

3 Then, move on to plan the week ahead using these chunks of work.

Week plan

First thing in the morning on Monday (or whichever day you start work), produce your plan for the week:

1 **Identify three wins**: Things you can achieve in the time available in the week ahead.

2 **Through the week**: Carry out your work each day toward achieving those three wins (see day plan, following).

3 **At the end of the week**: Before you leave work, review how things worked out during the week, and identify three things that went well and three things to improve on.

Day plan

Now, break each day down into three stages:

1 **Plan the day**: Before you start work, select three small wins (things you can achieve that day) from your work backlog (the three wins you plan to achieve in the week), and plan how much time you will spend on each.

2 **Do it**: Carry out the day's work according to that plan.

3 **Review it**: At the end of the day, review how you actually spent your time and record your wins and issues.

Our day's work

Once we realize we won't do everything that needs to be done, we can focus on doing three things that really count. Once we've selected those three "wins" for the day, we need to write them down so that we can focus on what to accomplish. All other demands on our time must now wait until one of those three tasks has been completed or abandoned.

For this to work, those tasks need to be manageable, and so must be broken down into bite-sized chunks that can be achieved in the time available. Be realistic about the amount of time each chunk is going to take, and be prepared to spend that amount of time on it, but at the end of that time, stop and review it.

Timeboxing

A timebox is a previously-decided period of time during which a person or a team works steadily toward completion of a specific goal or task. Rather than allowing work to continue until the goal is reached and evaluating the time taken, the timebox approach consists of stopping work when the time limit is reached and evaluating what has been accomplished.

Timeboxes can be used in varying time scales – from 10 minutes for a quick brainstorm to a full week. But the critical rule of timeboxes is that work should stop at the end of the timebox, and progress be reviewed. If you started to work on a task for 50 minutes, then once 50 minutes is up, stop and review it.

Problems

We will hit snags, so develop a taste for dealing with them. Life is a process of engaging with problem after problem, giving each one the consideration it requires. Problems are not an impediment to a meaningful existence but the very substance of one.

When we get held up waiting for something from someone, put that piece of work on hold and move on to the next piece. But some delays don't allow us that luxury. If we're stuck in a traffic jam or suffering a train or flight delay, there is no point in fretting about it. Accept it and use the time to think about some of the things that matter, and make notes of them.

This is covered in Chapter 7, but remember at the end of each day to review the done list, record wins, and be content.

Don't forget

There will never be enough time for you to do everything that needs doing!

21

Hot tip

Don't waste your time fretting or getting angry – use it constructively.

Effective Time Management in easy steps is a companion publication to this book. Visit www.ineasysteps.com for more details.

Effective Time Management

Before we get into the details of agile time management it is worth taking a look at existing time management practices, as many of them also apply to agile time management. These are the key lessons we can learn, extracted from *Effective Time Management in easy steps*:

Time awareness
Develop your time awareness by recording and analyzing how you spend your time now. This will give you a baseline.

Planning
Develop your planning skills by setting out your long-term, mid-term, and short-term plans for what you want to achieve. Plan your week at the start of each week, to give you an edge in executing your tasks on time. Create a to-do list for all tasks that you need to accomplish during the day.

Quality time
Identify when you are at your most and least productive. We all have a body clock that tells us when to eat, sleep, or work, and it varies from person to person. Work out when you are at your most and least productive, and plan to use your time accordingly.

Prioritization
Start each week and each day by prioritizing the tasks that lie ahead of you. Rate them according to importance and urgency to decide which tasks require your attention and which ones can be delayed or delegated. You can then decide the time you need to spend on each. This also helps you to identify tasks that you don't need to do or want to eliminate from your daily routine.

Get organized
Organize your workspace, communications, writing, reading, telephone use, email management, and filing system.

Stop wasting time
Find out how much time you're spending daily on social media during working hours by recording it for a week. If you want to spend time on social media, do it in your own time!

Avoid multi-tasking
Multi-tasking is a myth. While you're trying to accomplish multiple tasks at once, you're really failing at all of them.

Take regular breaks

Take regular short breaks throughout your working day, as these small breaks help you to stay focused. Just stand up and take five minutes as a break after every hour to refresh your mind and lift your mood.

Exercise and meditation

Exercising for even a few minutes during the day can greatly help in reducing stress and anxiety. Doing this on a regular basis gives you balance and control over your mental capabilities, making it easier to maintain an overall focus on tasks. Equally effective, the use of meditation can lead to a positive outlook on life and help improve your self-esteem.

Review the day

When you have finished your day's work, review it before you pack up and go home. After a long day of work, sit down quietly and reflect on your day. Practicing this daily will help you in evaluating your daily routine and analyzing your time in order to better plan the next day and make better decisions.

That's a summary of top tips for effectively managing your time. We have already seen that a number of them also apply to agile time management. The key thing to note is that being busy isn't the same as being effective. According to research, the highest achievers manage their time exceptionally well by focusing on these two things:

1 Prioritizing their work so that they only deal with the most important tasks.

2 Planning how much time they will spend on each of the selected tasks and sticking to it.

By doing this, they ensure that everything they do will help them to achieve results that matter, and they also manage to get more done in less time. While others may appear to be doing lots of things at the same time while achieving very little, they do less, but finish the tasks that really matter.

This is covered in more detail in Chapter 8, but now, let us take a first look at things from an agile point of view.

Hot tip

This has become increasingly important, as people are working from home more.

Agile Time Management

Taking an agile view

Agile time management requires an important shift in focus from concentrating on activities (the work we do) to the results of that work (the thing that work produces, or its deliverable). We want to start working smarter, not harder, and the way we can do that is by changing our habits.

The other benefit of making things habitual is that we can avoid having to make conscious decisions. A good way we can start to do this is by following these five steps:

1 **Fly high**: Visualize all the tasks that need to be done.

2 **Focus**: Concentrate on just one task at a time.

3 **Flow**: Treat each task as if it is our only task.

4 **Finish**: Get it completed before going to the next one.

5 **Follow up**: Compare the actual with the plan and recycle.

Let us look at these in a bit more detail:

Fly high

Taking a high-level or helicopter view of what we want to accomplish will help us to see the big picture. We need to develop the habit of imagining, as specifically as possible, what we expect to see when each task is finished (the deliverable). This way, we can start to see as many tasks as possible from the early stages of a project. This high-level view is what we will use to identify our mission or plan for the next week.

As we work down from the high level to the detailed level, we can start to divide or break the project down into smaller and smaller tasks.

Focus

As we zoom in to the detailed level, we need to focus on just one task at a time and keep to our priorities. Eliminate what we don't need to do to accomplish the task and focus everything on the only thing that needs to be accomplished: getting the task done.

Hot tip

In agile terms, think of a deliverable as a "win".

Flow

Flow is a state of mind that moves us to do our best work, no matter what that work is. Think how often we lose all track of time while doing something we really enjoy doing. The challenge absorbs us so much that we forget about everything else, even our worries or concerns. We need to develop a routine of treating each task as if it is our only task and follow it without even thinking. Just get on and do it, then each task becomes a quick win and we will get to enjoy it. The process of flow naturally sets the stage for self-improvement.

Finish

Once we start on a task, we need to get it done before we move on to the next one. There will be times when we don't finish tasks, but there are ways to avoid this:

- Timebox it by scheduling a specific time for each task and booking it in a diary or calendar/scheduling application.
- Get to "done" and avoid almost finishing tasks, as that results in a full calendar without any results to show for it.
- Accept what you have done, no matter how good or bad you feel about it – all that matters is that it is done.

Follow up

Compare the actual results with what you planned to do. On the high-level view, you will have developed a list with all your pending tasks. Now, review it. Evaluate the actual results of the completed task and take any action needed to improve your plan. If any task is no longer needed, remove it.

Change the way you manage your time by self-discipline and a commitment to the strategy. Start today to train your self-discipline, and you will accomplish more and more with less and less time. Consistent practice produces mastery, and mastery makes for new habits. This is dealt with in much more detail in Chapter 9.

Agile practices

In this topic, we have started to mention some basic agile practices like "done" and "timebox". We will define these together with other agile practices in the next topic.

Agile Practices

Having now introduced an approach to agile time management in the previous topic, we can start to build on that by having a look at some of the underlying practices behind an agile approach. Let us start with the most fundamental practice:

Done
This is the most basic practice of all. We need to define and get full agreement with everyone involved on what the term "done" really means. This will give them a common understanding of when deliverables really are completed. This is to prevent the build-up of hidden tasks (technical debt) that will cost a lot of time to fix later on in the project or process.

Timebox
We need to set a firm start and end time for a task or collection of tasks. That gives us the time we have available for competing the task or tasks. Once we have set a timebox, we should not allow any changes to it, in order to keep us focused on what's most important and to make sure we don't lose time to perfectionism.

Don't add slack to task estimates
Any safety margins for tasks will always get used (we will cover this in Chapter 2). If contingency is needed, it should be added as one single buffer to the end of a large timebox.

Defer decisions
Only make decisions at the latest possible moment. No decision can also be a decision. The environment may change, making earlier decisions a waste of time.

Reduce cycle time
Iterative cycles should be as short as possible to speed up the learning feedback loop and decrease the time to completion.

Keep the pipeline short and thin
Limit the amount of work in progress and the number of people working in sequence to improve response times and speed up throughput.

Keep the discipline
Prevent expensive rework by doing processes well, right from the start. Fixing problems later is more expensive than following proper rules earlier.

Limit task switching

The human brain is very bad at task switching. It wastes a lot of time, so we need to prevent unnecessary task switching, particularly from one project to another. If we can do that, our tasks will get completed faster and they will be completed better.

Prevent sustained overtime

Overtime working will not ultimately accelerate our progress, so do not try to use it. It will cause lost productivity, poor-quality work, and bad motivation among team members.

Separate urgency from importance

As with basic time management, we must not allow urgent tasks to take precedence over important tasks. The important stuff will still have to get done, but diverting attention to urgent tasks will cost more time in the long run.

Focus on results

By concentrating on the results of a task (the deliverable) rather than the work involved in doing the task, we can achieve more meaningful results and make the most of our work.

Rather than "call a customer", our aim could be to "make a customer happy". This small shift in mindset will help us to connect to our work and make the results more meaningful.

Don't forget

Try to think of a deliverable as a "quick win".

Combining the best practices of effective time management with an agile approach will help us to make the most of the time we have. This is dealt with in more detail in Chapter 10, but think of things this way:

> *You are the author of your own destiny, and you will write your story going forward. It is the ultimate path of personal empowerment.*

Summary

- Each of us will have a finite amount of time available, and we can choose how we will use that time on projects, in business, and in living life in general.
- We need to start out by defining what we want to achieve by setting out our life goals, then view our life as a journey toward achieving these goals.
- We can then take an agile approach to the management of the time we have available to us to put ourselves fully in control of our life and destiny.
- The finite amount of time we will have to achieve that destiny will typically be somewhere between 30 to 40 years or 1,500 to 2,000 weeks.
- We will never have enough time to handle every demand that gets thrown at us, so we need to focus on doing fewer things but doing them better.
- There is no point in fretting about the future as we can't control it, or the past as we can't change it, so we need to focus on what really matters: where we are right here and right now.
- By adopting an agile approach, we can focus on the things that really matter: meaningful results.
- Along our life journey we will be faced with decisions, each of which represents a step toward our goals.
- We don't need to stop procrastinating – we just need to get better at it. Putting off making a decision is sometimes the best decision.
- It is easy to stop doing something we don't like doing. It is much harder to stop doing something we do like doing, so we need to be firm and stop doing things that waste our precious time.
- Finally, if we adopt agile practices – an agreed definition of done; use of timeboxes; making decisions; prioritizing importance over urgency; and focusing on results rather than the work involved in producing them – we will then be in control of our time and our life.

2 Understanding Time

This chapter gives us a basic understanding of the time we have available. It then lays out guidelines for using that time more wisely.

How Much Time?

As we saw in Chapter 1, in order to make the most of our time and have a better understanding of what we can do with it, we need to find a way of estimating how much time we actually have available to us to work with. None of us will ever know in advance exactly how much time we will have, so we are going to have to make some well-informed estimates. The OECD has established some baseline data that we can use.

The OECD
The OECD (**oecd.org**) is an international organization with headquarters in Paris, France. Its stated aim is to build better policies for better lives. Its goal is to shape policies that foster prosperity, equality, opportunity, and well-being for all. To this end, it draws on 60 years of experience and insights to better prepare the world for tomorrow.

It works together with governments, policy makers, and citizens (such as the author) on establishing evidence-based international standards and finding solutions to a range of social, economic, and environmental challenges. From improving economic performance and creating jobs to fostering strong education and fighting international tax evasion, it provides a unique forum and knowledge hub for data and analysis. It currently provides data and statistics for 41 countries.

Life expectancy
At the time of writing, the OECD defines life expectancy at birth in the USA as around 79 years (81 for women, compared with 76 for men). In the UK, it is around 81 years (83 for women, compared with 79 for men). When the author first began his research it was around 80 years for both, so we will continue to use 80 years as a round average for our examples in this book.

Life stages
On page 10 we saw that our lives can be split into three broad stages, comprising birth, childhood, and adolescence, including our full-time education. The second stage is our working life from leaving full-time education, getting our first proper job and onward until the third stage, when we pass normal working age and enter retirement, where we live out our old age until our demise. Let's focus here on our working life.

...cont'd

Working-life stages

Again on page 10 we saw that the OECD defines the average working-age population as those aged from 15 to 64, and the OECD breaks those 50 years down into three working-life stages. When looking at peoples' working lives in smaller sub-stages, some interesting trends in the data over time begin to emerge:

- The percentage of people aged between 15 and 24 in employment has fallen by just over 4% in the last 20 years. People are starting work later in life.
- As we might expect, the majority (78%) of those in the prime of their working lives (aged between 25 and 54) are in full-time employment.
- But the biggest lifestyle change that has been seen is in those aged between 55 and 64, a group that has risen 14% in the last 20 years to 61%.

To generalize for the purpose of this book, it is fair to say we can expect to be fitter for longer, and for any older readers disheartened not to have found this book earlier in life, the good news is that we will have more time, not less, to actively work toward our goals and then to enjoy them.

So much time

Most of us are likely to start thinking actively about how we will manage our time in one of the two latter sub-stages. This will give us (hopefully) somewhere between 30 to 40 years, but years are too large an element of time to use for realistic planning purposes, and months have again proved to not be very accurate for estimation purposes.

Weeks, on the other hand, start to fit into the range where we seem able to estimate time with some degree of accuracy. In the author's research, he has found that people can usually estimate one day's work very accurately and one week's work with a fair degree of accuracy.

If we express our usable working life in weeks (and we know there are 52 weeks in a year), it gives us a working life of between 1,500 and 2,000 weeks, so that is how much time we have.

Data from OECD (2022), "Table B1 - Employment/ population ratios by selected age groups - Total: As a percentage of the population in each age group", in *OECD Employment Outlook 2022: Building Back More Inclusive Labour Markets*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

Time flies, particularly when you take it for granted.

Use of Time

Working on the basis we have around 1,500 to 2,000 weeks available to work with, for planning purposes, we need to drill down to days and then hours. The first step is easy as we know that each week has exactly seven days.

One week

We have seven days, and for each of those days we will spend roughly eight hours in bed. On working days, we will spend roughly the same amount of time working at our desks, on a production line, stacking shelves, or out and about on our rounds doing whatever it is we are employed to do, whether we work for someone else or ourselves. That will leave us roughly another eight hours for commuting, exercising, relaxing, and spending time with our friends and loved ones.

Productive work

Although holidays and vacations vary from country to country, and even from one type of job to another, the author has always found (for planning and scheduling purposes) that assuming one person will deliver 40 productive weeks per year will normally give an accurate plan and schedule.

Non-working days

On non-working days (weekends, holidays, or vacations) we will have an additional eight hours to do whatever we like. One way of making more time for work is to spend less time sleeping or on any of the other things we enjoy doing, but that – unless we have no friends, family, hobbies, or other interests – will (at the risk of upsetting some very high-profile workaholics) make us less rounded people.

Millionaires

Interestingly, two of my early rugby-playing friends became millionaires in their mid-twenties. Two very different people from very different backgrounds, but I can share the secrets of their success:

1 They were totally driven and worked their socks off to the exclusion of virtually everything else.

2 They hated spending money, particularly their own!

3 They recognized a good opportunity when they saw it.

If being rich is all you want from life, you now don't need the rest of this book to tell you how to do it.

Back to reality
Assuming you are a normal person and do want a life outside of work, let us look at that time in a bit more detail.

The first thing to understand, if the penny hasn't already dropped, is that we do not have enough time for everything that we want (or other people want us) to do. So, relax – let's not get mad at ourselves when we fail to achieve something, as we will always fail to achieve some goals.

Eigenzeit
The second is that there is no point in rushing things. When we rush, we make mistakes and probably have to do things over again. Meaningful productivity comes from letting things take the time they will take. The Germans have a word for it – "Eigenzeit", literally "proper time": the time inherent to the process itself. Once we have estimated that time, only use it on that task.

Parkinson's law
The third thing is Parkinson's law: the adage that "work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion". Originally coined by C. N. Parkinson on the growth of bureaucracy in an organization, it is applicable to all forms of work.

Hofstadter's law
The final nail in the coffin is Hofstadter's law – a self-referential adage coined by Douglas Hofstadter: "It always takes longer than you expect, even when you take into account Hofstadter's law."

He used this to describe the widely-experienced difficulty of accurately estimating the time it will take to complete complex tasks. In other words, time estimates for how long anything will take to accomplish always fall short of the actual time required, even when the time allotment is increased to compensate for it.

So, if you are planning to do something when you get some free time, forget it. It will never get done, as you will never have any free time.

Hofstadter's law: "It always takes longer than you expect."

What To Do

Reality check

As we have just seen in the previous topic, we will never ever have enough free time to catch up with things. We need to move on and recognize that we will never be in the position of being able to handle every demand that gets thrown at us, or even to pursue every ambition of our own that we may feel is important at the time. We will be obliged to make some tough choices.

Decision-making

They say we have more information at our disposal today than any of our ancestors had to deal with in a lifetime. To make matters worse, we rarely face a simple "yes" or "no" decision. Decisions are rarely easy, and the tougher they are, the more stress we will feel.

It is also true that the more we do something, the better we get at it, especially as we develop and understand our values and what really matters to us, so do not shy away from making decisions – embrace them! Sometimes we will be right and sometimes we will be wrong. Don't worry about it – that's how we learn through life. Try this process:

1 Don't let stress get the better of you; give yourself some time to make a decision.

2 Weigh up all the pros and cons; think about your goals and values.

3 Consider all the possibilities and then make your decision; document it with your reasons and move on.

In making a decision, we need to put our faith in our gut instinct, which is based on our experiences in the past. If something has a buzz of excitement to it, it probably means we are heading in the right direction. Try to feel excited about life; it is a journey and it should be exciting.

Tough choices

We have to let go of the fantasy of ever getting everything done, and instead focus on doing fewer things. It stands to reason that those fewer things should be the things that really matter to us. But perhaps even more important than choosing the things we will do is choosing the things we will not do.

Hot tip

Sometimes, nerves or even fear is just a sign of us being excited but not yet knowing it.

Trying to make time for the most important activities by first dealing with other urgent demands on our time, in the hope that there will be some left over in the end, is a folly – we will always end up disappointed.

Clearing the decks is another total illusion, as the decks never become clear. More stuff (email, requests, instructions, interruptions, another little task) will continue to arrive while we are trying to do it.

Establishing priorities

We need to establish our real priorities – the things that really matter to us. These should be based on what we want to achieve with our lives. They will change and evolve as we move forward, but at any one time they should be paramount to our decision-making process.

Then, we can make the right decision about each and every item that demands our attention. We can then also make sure we deal with them properly.

What not to do

Given that we are only going to be able to do a fraction of the things that we will be asked to do or may even want to do, the big decision becomes choosing what we will not do. Saying no to something we don't want to do is easy, but saying no to something we do want to do is very difficult. But that is something we have to learn to do if we want to achieve our goals.

Decision time

As we are going to be making decisions about what to do or – more importantly – not do all the time, we need to confine our attention to the only portion of time that really matters: this moment in time, right here and right now.

That means this week if we are looking at weeks, today if we are looking at days, and this minute if we are looking at minutes. And yes, we do need to make decisions about minutes when they really do matter.

Right here, right now

The time to make decisions is right here and right now. We will explore this topic further later on in this chapter.

Doing Less

As we have seen so far in this chapter, we will not be able to do everything we are asked to do or even that we want to do, so we are clearly going to have to do less. If we are going to do less, it then becomes critical that the things we do choose to do are the most important (not necessarily the most urgent) things.

Achieve more by doing less
Popular thinking suggests that to achieve more, we need to do more. The thinking behind this mentality is that more activity should produce more results. After all, more always equals more.

A lot of research has gone into this subject, and the main finding is quite the opposite: that in doing less, we will be able to do the things we choose to do a lot better than if we try to do too much. But when we feel overwhelmed by the endless repetition of tasks that life is throwing at us, the last thing we would think of is to do less. However, that is exactly what we need to do.

Get organized
Look around. Do you see neatness and a lack of clutter, or do you see piles of stuff? Most of us have far too little of the former and far too much of the latter. This usually means that we simply have too many things to try to keep in order. If we cannot get through a day without feeling overwhelmed, it means we are trying to do too much. Being overloaded makes us less effective.

The Pareto principle
It is not just our time that is limited – it is also our energy. The Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto's theory, which is commonly known now as the 80/20 Rule, is simple: identify the 20% of tasks that generate the most value in our lives, and then invest our energy into them. Stop doing the other 80%, and have all that additional time.

When our to-do list becomes too long, we can guarantee that we are not going to reach the end of it. Laura Vanderkam (author of *Off the Clock*) suggests we should focus on just five tasks each day (I prefer just three). If we have 20 things on our to-do list, we won't do them all, so how will we know if the three or five things we did were the most important?

There is no virtue in putting something on a to-do list and then not doing it, as we will just end up feeling bad about it. This is the

worst of all worlds. By overwhelming our brains we ensure that we are accomplishing less than we would if we only gave ourselves a few tasks per day.

Task swapping

Multi-tasking, once considered the height of productivity, is now understood to be the most ineffective way to manage our time. Swapping between tasks makes us less likely to complete any tasks at all. Current thinking is that we are at our most effective when we:

- Pick a few really important tasks to do each day.
- Focus and work on one task at a time.

Doing less is a game-changer because it forces us to focus on what really matters.

Focus more

Bill Gates once said that the single most important attitude to achieve success is focus. Doing too many things at once means we can barely maintain focus on anything, and the result of this is little or no productivity.

The key to success is not really in doing less – it is that by doing less we are able to focus more on what we do. By focusing our mind on just one task at a time, we can complete it fully and well.

David Allen (the author of *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*) tells us that it's about giving things our full attention. If our mind is overloaded with commitments, its capabilities are seriously reduced for creative thinking and decision-making. We need clear space in our heads to engage with what is most meaningful to us in each moment.

Doing less

Rather than trying to do 20 things, by stripping them down to the top three we will be prioritizing the most crucial tasks of the day. Then, by giving them our full and complete attention, we will be able to focus and achieve tangible, commendable results.

Doing less means we are able to concentrate our energy on only worthy endeavors. Thus, we end up accomplishing more and having something to show for our efforts at the end of the day.

Hot tip

This concept is inherent in the agile definition of "done", which we will see later.

Don't forget

Learn more about the Flow Research Collective's work at **https://www. flowresearchcollective. com/**

The Present

How much time do we have?

The Flow Research Collective, an organization specializing in helping professionals tap into their peak performance, has looked at this issue in a lot of depth – it says the problem is huge:

- It says the average knowledge worker is only productive for 2.3 hours per day.
- Every week, they spend half a day duplicating work they did the week before.
- They check their email 36 times every hour.
- They are interrupted 56 times every day.
- They waste 36 hours in unnecessary meetings every month.
- And, most devastating of all, the average knowledge worker is interrupted every 11 minutes (and it takes up to 23 minutes to get back into focus after a disruption).

These are very much in line with the author's own research, but don't become depressed – these are all things we can deal with using effective time management techniques, which we will cover in Chapter 8.

Right before right now

Whereas it is easy to say we need to be entirely focused on what we need to do right now, clearly we can't be 100% focused and productive every waking hour and move seamlessly from one priority to the next. We need to prepare ourselves to be focused.

- Fuel your body and mind. Make sure you are not hungry, and avoid foods and drinks that affect your heart rate, mood and attention span.
- Get plenty of good-quality sleep and rest breaks. You are not going to produce your best when you are exhausted.
- Assess where you'll be working and for how long and put all predictable distractions out of reach or earshot.
- Remember the feeling when you perform well, and practice mindfulness to get back into that state of mind in the lead-up to starting an activity.

Limited time

We have already seen (on the page opposite) that we have limited time available, so we should make the most of that time by not wasting it on anything that doesn't move us forward toward our life goals.

Life goals

The first step is to establish what our life goals are: what we want to achieve and where we want to get to. Identify the things that really matter. Once we have done this, they should become the entire focus of our time. And, conversely, we should not spend time on anything else.

This is covered fully in Chapter 3.

Doing less

We covered doing less but doing it better in the previous topic on pages 36-37, but to summarize it:

- Rather than trying to do 20 things, just identify and schedule the top three most crucial tasks.
- Then, give them your full and complete attention to focus and achieve tangible, commendable results.
- By doing less, you will concentrate your energy on worthy endeavors and have something worthwhile to show for it at the end of the day.

Which brings us neatly back to the present moment – this moment in time:

Right here, right now

Concentrate your mind on using your time here and now:

- The only time you should be concerned with is the current time: this week, this day, or this minute.
- Forget the past – it's gone and you can't change it.
- Forget the future. Whatever you are planning, the future will probably turn out to be different.

But before we explore how we can use that time, we need to take a good look at ourselves, and that is covered in Chapter 3.

Dealing with all these issues is covered in **Effective Time Management in easy steps** – a companion publication. Visit **www.ineasysteps.com** for more details.

Summary

- The OECD defines our average life expectancy as around 80 years, with a working life of 30 to 40 years, so that is the amount of time we have available.
- That works out to around 1,500 to 2,000 weeks in which to achieve the goals that we want to attain most in our lives.
- "Eigenzeit" is the German word for proper time: the time it will take to complete a task properly. We need to plan the right amount of time for every task.
- We then need to protect that time and only use it to complete the task we have assigned it to.
- Beware of Parkinson's law, the adage that work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion.
- Even more so, Hofstadter's law (a self-referential adage), which states tasks always take longer than we expect, even when we take into account Hofstadter's law. So, we must not build slack into our task estimates.
- Given the above, we need to establish our real priorities – the things that really matter to us. These should be based on our life goals – what we want to achieve.
- We therefore need to be clear about what we are going to spend our time on and, more importantly, what we are not going to spend our time on.
- Given that we can't do everything, we need to focus on the things that we can do, but make sure we do them better.
- We can use Pareto's principle (the 80/20 Rule) and identify the 20% of tasks that will generate the most benefit, and concentrate on them, ignoring the other 80%.
- We then need to focus on a small number of tasks (three) that will produce the greatest benefits.
- Then, we need to work on each task in turn, giving it our full and total attention until it is completed.
- Finally, we need to use this week, this hour, and this minute on that task until it is completely finished (done).

3 Understanding Ourselves

This chapter introduces the need to start by understanding ourselves. Then, we can begin to define our goals in life.

The Journey

Beginning to understand ourselves is probably one of the most crucial steps we need to take if we are going to make the most of our lives. And hopefully, as you are reading this book, you do want to do exactly that.

Journey of life

There is at least one Journey of Life game that will help players explore and develop their creativity. In it, the player starts off on an island with nothing and works their way to building a thriving settlement. But that is just a game; here, we are talking about our real-life journey.

Some quotations

There are many famous quotations regarding the journey of life (check them all out at **brainyquote.com**). Here are some of the ones I like, starting with my favorite:

"The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step." Lao Tzu

"If you're going through hell, keep going." Winston Churchill

"Enjoy the journey and try to get better every day. And don't lose the passion and the love for what you do." Nadia Comăneci

"Never give up on your dreams, no matter how painful and difficult your journey is." Lisa Manoban

"Success is a journey, not a destination. The doing is often more important than the outcome." Arthur Ashe

"The journey is never ending. There's always going to be growth, improvement, adversity; you just have to take it all in and do what's right, continue to grow, continue to live in the moment." Antonio Brown

"Struggle teaches you a lot of things, and I am happy that I have witnessed a rollercoaster ride. The journey has improved me as a person and made me more mature." Manoj Bajpayee

And finally

"Sometimes we make the process more complicated than we need to. We will never make a journey of a thousand miles by fretting about how long it will take or how hard it will be. We make the journey by taking each day step by step and then repeating it again and again until we reach our destination." Joseph Wirthlin

Feel the fear

It is no coincidence so many quotes about life refer to it as being a journey, and never an easy one. Walking a thousand miles, climbing a mountain, not knowing what is around the next bend are all common themes designed to reflect the challenges we will face, often at the most unwanted times.

I can't imagine anyone who has achieved anything significant in the realms of exploration would ever have left home if they had focused only on the risks and dangers and negative possibilities.

Perhaps we should finish on one more quote from none less than Nelson Mandela, which sums this up better than I can:

> *"I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear."*

Goals
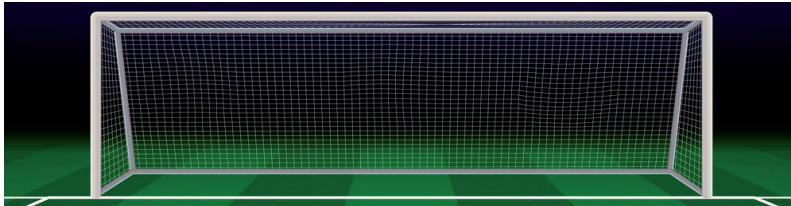
So, what do we really want to achieve with our lives? Here are some of the more obvious goals in their simplest forms. In Chapter 5, we talk about making them realistic:

- To be rich.
- To be famous.
- To be happy.
- To be single/married.
- To have a family/children.
- To work from home.
- To live in a city or the country.

To begin to understand ourselves, we first need to identify what we want to achieve with our lives – what really matters to us. These are, then, the only things we should be spending our precious time on.

Hot tip

Feel the fear, and do it anyway.

First Steps

Why have goals?

To begin to understand ourselves, we first need to identify what we want to achieve with our lives – our goals. These are the things we should be choosing to spend our precious time on. The website GoalBuddy (**goalbuddy.io**) has lots of guidance on goal setting. Here is a summary of GoalBuddy's reasons for setting goals, with some additional comments to put them into perspective:

1 **We become more charismatic**: Something interesting happens when we start to talk about our goals when we are serious about them. We light up and talk with passion and interest. If we have big goals, it affects the way we speak, the way our eyes look, and the energy we radiate. It is contagious – people notice it right away.

Martin Luther King was one of the best speakers of all time. He had big goals that he was passionate about.

2 **Goals can make us live longer and be full of energy**: It is sad but true that people without goals die sooner. Viktor Frankl (the Austrian psychiatrist) was a Holocaust survivor who noticed something scary when he was in the death camp of Auschwitz. When the Nazi guards had to force a prisoner to get out of bed, that prisoner would soon die.

They didn't see a point in doing anything and thus no reason to continue living – they had already decided they were going to die. Goals give us a reason to get out of bed, so we are more enthusiastic and energetic.

3 **Goals help us stay motivated during tough times**: We all go through tough times, and in this state going to work and performing day-to-day tasks is hard. Remember that tough times never last, but tough people do. Having a goal-setting system that can bring us rapidly back on track is essential if we are going to sail through those tough times.

Choose small and easy-to-complete next steps and do them. This will give a sense of control and confidence so that we will be able to deal with the toughest of issues.

4 **Goals provide vision, direction, and meaning in life**: If not, day-to-day life takes over and we are just constantly busy, not making any major progress because we forget about the big picture. A good goal-setting system focuses on the big picture and the daily tasks that are aligned with our long-term vision.

They say we have three choices in life: we can watch things happen, we can make things happen, or we can wonder what the hell happened. When we set and achieve goals, we have the sense that we can direct our life. Stay motivated by remembering the big picture. Goals give us the opportunity to create a new future and to focus on what we want to create.

Think negatively, and negative things will happen. Think positively, and positive things will happen. It's the same with goals – if we constantly focus on our goals, we will find opportunities to achieve them.

5 **Goals unlock the potential of our hearts**: There is a clear correlation between a sense of control and happiness. We are less happy when we feel that our destiny is already written. Conversely, we are happier when we feel that we can control outcomes. When we set and achieve goals, we have the sense that we can direct our lives in the direction we want. We stay motivated by remembering the big picture.

We can create our own future. For people without goals, the future is an extension of the past. Goals give us the opportunity to create a new future and to focus on what we want. Focusing on what we want brings it into our lives. Our mind doesn't know that this potential exists.

When we start to find the meaning of our lives, our heart will lead us there. The goals that are important to us and the projects we want to accomplish are unique. We will start to learn a lot about ourselves. We wake up and start to reconnect with our true self. We achieve greatness only when we tap into our true potential.

Hot tip

This is referred to as the Law of Attraction or manifesting.

...cont'd

6 **Goals provide us with clarity about the direction in which we should go**: This may be the most important reason. Having goals means we know where we want to get to. When we have clarity of intention, the universe conspires with us to make it happen.

There is a wonderful scene in *Alice in Wonderland* where Alice meets the Cheshire Cat at a crossroads. She tells the cat she doesn't know where she's going. The cat assures her that in that case, it doesn't much matter which path she follows as any path will get her there.

7 **Today, the world is full of distractions and we become overwhelmed with options**: The more successful we become, the more options we will have. Feeling overwhelmed is never a good state to be in. Our goals give us a filter to solve the problem. When we know our long-term goals, our day-to-day decisions become extremely easy.

The filter has just one simple question: Is this aligned with my long-term goals? If the answer is "Yes", then do it. If the answer is "No", then don't do it.

8 **Goals help us learn and grow**: When we feel we are winning the game of life, we will want more of it. We must set ourselves challenging goals and decide on the actions we must complete, no matter what. The goals should be very important, and all of our actions for the week should move us one step forward. Even better if the next actions are challenging and we are not quite sure we can complete all of them during the current week.

Then, complete all of them, no matter what, and observe how it makes us feel. We will be uplifted, and nothing boosts our confidence more than achievements. Confidence is one of the most important things we can have in life. If we have confidence, we can accomplish anything. But remember – with every action we either win or we fail and learn, and the emphasis here is on the learning. When we fail, understand why and learn from it.

Hot tip

There is a lot of good logic in this advice, as we shall see later.

Our goals

We must not get into a state of dejection if we can't complete all of the tasks we have set. We should simply learn from it and feed that knowledge into our future planning. The accomplishment of even one goal will encourage us to set another set of goals for next week. That's why the more goals we complete, the more motivated we will be for next week's goals. Setting goals, achieving goals, and even failing goals all help us to learn about ourselves and develop and grow as people.

We will be developing some case studies from here on in the book, but let's get you started now with Warren Buffett's advice and see if you can list 25 things that you really want to do or achieve. Don't worry if you end up with a few more or less for now – just write them all down and work with what you have.

Hot tip

Get a pen and paper or a laptop now and jot down your top 25 goals.

Case study

The following table shows a typical list of goals from a quick brainstorming session, in alphabetical order:

Life Goals		
Achieve things	Be content with life	Be famous
Be environmentally sound	Be happy	Be non-polluting
Be proud of my children	Be recognized for my achievements	Be responsible
Be rich	Be successful	Change the world
Create something notable	Develop myself	Do good
Feel I have arrived	Have good friends	Live in the mountains
Live somewhere nice	Progress	Prosper
Raise a family	Have sporting success	Work from home

Life Goals

As already mentioned in the previous topic, GoalBuddy is an excellent source of information and inspiration. I particularly like these three quotations (and two others I have included later):

"Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans."

"Life is change, growth is optional."

"If you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time."

Why set goals?

We already addressed this question in the previous topic, but some people are already perfectly happy with their life the way it is, so they have no need to set more goals. If you were perfectly happy with your life, you would not bother to set goals – you would just carry on and enjoy it. But as you are reading this book, you do presumably want to change things.

That means that there are things in your life that you feel could be better – things that you would like to change. That is the first step toward defining your life goals. Even if you are relatively happy now, life is moving forward, and things out there are changing. I don't think there has ever been a time in my long life (and I am nearer the end than the beginning of it) when there hasn't been some war, famine, flood, starvation, or other type of catastrophe going on somewhere in the world.

Development

We all of us need to develop and grow in order to move forward in life. That means we have two choices: we either set goals for moving forward consciously or we do it unconsciously. Most people set their goals unconsciously and reactively depending on what happens to them. While not necessarily wrong, it will be an obstacle to them feeling successful and happy. By and large, success comes to the people who do it consciously.

These are the people who have the motivation to take the next step, have a reason to persist in moving forward, and who are purposeful.

Setting goals

Setting goals is not only about the results but also about the experiences and lessons we will learn along the way. Life will carry

Hot tip

We will be looking at making choices in a lot more detail in Chapter 4.

"Happiness is found along the way, not at the end of the road."

on, no matter which plans and goals we set for it. And we will often have to change our plans and goals because of what actually happens.

> *"Happiness is not a goal; it is a by-product."*

Hopefully, you now understand the background and what you should be trying to achieve. If you have worked through the previous topic, you should have started with your list of about 25 things that you really want to do or achieve. Now, you can start to refine that list:

1 Go back through your list and rate each item on how important it is to you, using a scale of one to three, where one is the most important, and so on.

2 Now, reorder your list so that the most important items are at the top and the least important are at the bottom.

3 Where you have more than one item with the same score, decide on their relative importance and resequence them accordingly.

At this stage of the process, you have a list of your top 25 – or thereabouts – goals, in sequence of importance.

4 Now, pick your top three: these are going to be the only goals that you will work on from now on.

These are the things that matter the most to you and that you should now be spending all your time on achieving.

5 Do not spend time on anything else as it is not important enough and could distract you from the things that matter most.

6 View your life from now on as a journey toward achieving these three goals.

You should not now spend your time on anything that does not help you toward achieving these key goals. Your other goals now represent your backlog and can still be reprioritized as and when you review your goals.

Hot tip

We will cover why just the top three goals in the following topic.

Rule of Three

I mentioned earlier that some people suggest picking your top five goals to focus on, but some of us even find that a bit too vague. I am an advocate of the more straightforward Rule of Three, which is a writing principle based on the idea that humans process information through pattern recognition.

Pattern recognition

When it comes to communicating ideas, it is believed that we human beings are programmed to process information through instinctive pattern recognition. To communicate effectively, the pattern needs to be as small as possible, and three is the smallest number required to make a pattern.

And that is why it is so powerful. The Rule of Three allows us to use simple three-element patterns to communicate complex ideas effectively. It works because it is short and easy to remember. That's why we will find examples of it throughout history.

Some of the most powerful orators in history (including Winston Churchill and Barack Obama) fill their speeches with Rule of Three techniques to persuade, to assure, and to rule.

The number three

The number three is pretty pervasive throughout some of our greatest stories, fairy tales, and myths. It's also no coincidence that some of the most famous quotes throughout history are structured in three parts.

The number three has been used so widely throughout some of the most memorable works from our childhoods, it's likely that we are preconditioned to respond favorably to elements grouped in threes.

Some examples

Often-cited examples are:

> *"Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."*
>
> *"Government of the people, by the people, for the people."*
>
> *"Friends, Romans, Countrymen."*
>
> *"Third time lucky."*
>
> *"Veni, vidi, vici."*

> *"Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité."*
>
> *"Swifter, Higher, Stronger."*
>
> *"Blood, sweat, and tears."*
>
> *"Stop, Look, and Listen."*
>
> *"Sex, Lies, and Videotape."*
>
> *"Location, location, location."*
>
> *"Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera."*

Think in terms of the Rule of Three when drafting your goals, and you'll likely end up with a more encouraging outcome. And don't worry if it doesn't quite work the first or second time – remember, there is always third time lucky.

Three goals

The number three works on so many levels. If we try to focus on more than three goals, we start to dilute the amount of time we can devote to each one. Fewer than three goals, and we are in danger of becoming too narrowly focused.

On pages 12-13, I introduced the Rule of Three with a simple set of three rules to help us prioritize and select three goals – or, should I say, our first three goals.

We are not abandoning all our other goals and dreams. They remain in our backlog catalog. It is very likely we will know which goals we want to take on next and we may be impatient to start them, but trust in the process. The important thing is we do not spend time or effort on them now. Rest assured their time will come, and if we really do want to change our mind, we can.

A balanced portfolio

It is a good idea to pick three diverse goals. Focusing solely on three work-related goals might increase our chances of making that promotion but may not go down too well at home.

Unless you are hellbent on achieving something to the exclusion of all else, consider categorizing your goals into some main themes – such as home, work and love or family; health and money – and pick one from each category.

Don't forget

Backlog catalog is an Agile term and we will come to the agile methodology later in the book.

Making Changes

The word "change" is used to define the process of changing something from one state to a different state. It can be applied to objects, individuals, couples, teams, organizations, countries, and even entire societies (think climate change). But in the context of agile time management, we are talking about making changes to our personal goals, aims, and ambitions.

The change process essentially means letting go of a current goal, aim or ambition and encouraging something new to develop. When the change has happened, something will be different. It may be better or it may be worse, but it will be different.

Implications of change

Each of us has our hopes and aspirations. They may be to be happier, have a better job or relationship, have nicer things, or to live in a nicer place. These are the things we define as our goals. However, the aims and aspirations we have now belong to the people we are now. When we change, the people we become might not have the same aspirations or goals. If we want to grow, we must be willing to become somebody who has different thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and experiences. To change the way we are, we have to become different people.

Case study

After a brief and unsuccessful (I didn't hit the big time) period as a professional musician, I became a software engineer, which I enjoyed and was quite good at. After a while, I had the opportunity to design the software as well as build it, which I enjoyed even more. Then, I became a project manager, running a team of developers, which I enjoyed a bit less but the money was much better. However, I was not happy with the change.

I then had the opportunity to become a consultant, advising other people on managing projects rather than managing them myself. This was more to my liking, as there was no people management involved. It turned out I was pretty good at that, so, again, I was very happy.

That success led to my being offered a series of directorships of companies, which was good for my ego and great financially, but not something I enjoyed doing, so I returned to what I enjoyed most: project management consultancy – helping others achieve their potential – and that is what I am still doing today through my writing and occasional consultancy work.

Hot tip

Over this time, my changing top goals were:

● Fame and fortune

● Fulfilling work and location

● Money

● Fulfilling work

● Money and location

● Fulfilling work, location and happiness

Letting go

The most elementary requirement for growth is the willingness to let go of what we believe should happen because when we change, we are no longer the person who thought we knew what we would change into. We have become a different person.

In order to change, we need to be willing to change everything about ourselves, from our self-image and dreams of what we want, all the way through to the things we value most. Otherwise, we will stop growing.

Eliminate barriers

The most important step in allowing the process of growth is to realize that anything might happen and we don't know what it will be. If we try to control it, we are just going to stop it, so let's sit back and enjoy the ride with an open mind.

This does, of course, require trust; not trust in other people, but trust in reality. It will take time for this trust to mature, because when we have fear we tend to stick within our limitations. The more free from fear we become, the more willing we are to let go of those limitations.

Start with a single step

Instead of going for huge, radical change, start with one small step and see how it works out. From this point on, we should view our life as a journey toward achieving our selected goals. But the whole process of selecting, promoting, and relegating goals requires us to make choices and, therefore, make changes.

Changing goals

We discuss the choices we have to make in Chapter 4, but for now, remember the future value of time is far greater than the value of time already spent. It can be emotionally difficult to stop something we have invested a lot of time and effort in, but if it is not producing the results we want, it is time to re-evaluate it and invest our time in something that will achieve better results.

There is a thin line between a folly and a dream. People will be quick to tell us we are wasting our time. Only we can decide. If someone else has done it, if it is humanly possible, if we get pleasure from the pursuit accepting it may never happen, then carry on. Just try not to pick three goals in this category!

Don't forget

"Don't tell me the sky's the limit when there are footprints on the moon."
Paul Brandt

Summary

- Beginning to understand ourselves is probably one of the most crucial steps we can take if we are going to make the most of our lives.

- Think of life as a journey – hopefully a long and happy one, but it will not be straightforward.

- If we think about it positively, it should be an exciting journey, but if we don't have a clear goal, it is likely to be a little chaotic at best.

- Setting goals makes us better people, more charismatic, and better orators when we visualize our view of the future.

- Setting goals will keep us motivated in tough times and provide vision and direction for our life.

- Make a list of all the things you really want out of life – what you want to do, what you want to achieve, where you want to live, and what sort of lifestyle you want.

- Now, reorder that list so that the most important goals are at the top and the least important are at the bottom.

- Take the top three – these are going to be the only goals that you will work on from now on.

- Do not spend time on anything else as it is not important enough and could distract you from the things that matter most.

- View your life from now on as a journey toward achieving these three goals.

- The Rule of Three is a simple way of dealing with information overload. It is an effective way to set meaningful limits, as it is very easy to remember things in threes.

- If something becomes more important than your top goals, promote it into your top goals.

- Then, relegate the bottom goal from your existing top goals and stop spending any time on it.

- If one of your existing top goals ceases to be important, relegate it and promote the highest of your remaining goals.

Don't forget

The journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step.

4 Making Choices

This chapter focuses on the important subject of making choices. It covers how to go about making choices and the importance of always leaving a way back.

Getting Started

We are all making decisions constantly. Most of them are fairly straightforward and don't require a lot of thought – such as where to go for lunch – while others are more serious, like choosing a career or a partner. However, when the situation is more complicated and has a longer-term impact, it's easy to feel unsure or hesitant.

Good decision skills are essential in life, but the good news is there is a lot of advice available. The *New Scientist* magazine offers some excellent advice when it comes to making choices. It says that making good decisions requires us to balance our emotions and rationality. We need to predict the future, accurately perceive the present situation, have insight into the minds of others, and deal with uncertainty.

Decision-making

They say that most of us are ignorant of the mental processes that lie behind making decisions, but what psychologists and neurobiologists are finding out may help us make better choices. These are their decision-making recommendations:

- **Don't fear the consequences**: Almost every decision we make entails imagining how the outcomes will make us feel, but we must not let that stop us.
- **Go with gut instincts**: While it is tempting to think that we need time to systematically weigh up all the pros and cons to make good decisions, sometimes a snap judgment or instinctive choice is just as good, if not better.
- **Consider our emotions**: We might think that emotions are the enemy of decision-making, but in fact they are integral to it, so let them help shape our decisions.
- **Play devil's advocate**: Have a good think about what the negative aspects of the decision might be.
- **Keep your eye on the ball**: Our decisions and judgments have a strange and disconcerting habit of becoming attached to arbitrary or irrelevant facts and figures. Stay focused on the decision.
- **Don't cry over spilt milk**: If something doesn't work out as we hoped or expected, never mind – let it go.

- **Look at it another way**: Consider the potential outcomes and weigh up the benefits, but also consider the likelihood of them occurring before choosing.
- **Beware of social pressure**: As single-minded as we might like to think we are, we are all susceptible to social pressures. Undertake independent research and don't let uninformed influences sway the decision.
- **Limit the options**: More choice is not necessarily better than less. People offered too many different options become less likely to make a decision, so narrow the options down to a sensible smaller number.
- **Have someone else choose**: We think we will be happier being in control of our decisions, yet sometimes, no matter what the outcome of a decision is, the actual process of making it can leave us feeling dissatisfied, so it may be better to relinquish control to someone else.

Simona Botti, Chair of Marketing at London Business School, suggests letting someone else choose the wine at a restaurant, or a machine pick lottery numbers. Her work suggests that people prefer having a doctor make choices about which treatment they should have, or whether to remove life support from a seriously premature baby. "There is a fixation with choice, a belief that it brings happiness," she says. "Sometimes it doesn't."

Strategies

Because indecision can have a negative impact on how we are feeling, it's important to learn effective strategies for making positive decisions in tough situations. While we may not be able to guarantee the outcome of a decision before we make it, at least we can know we put a lot of careful thought into it.

Here are nine considerations for making better decisions:

1. **Don't let stress get the better of us**: It is all too easy to feel stressed out and anxious when faced with tough decisions. We should not rush a decision without thinking it through, or avoid making a decision because the stress is getting to us. We can always take a break and go for a walk or go and talk to some friends.

Hot tip

If you are a self-confessed control freak, try letting go and spending a whole day accepting other peoples' choices in all matters. It is very liberating, and you will quickly learn that not everyone around you is an idiot.

...cont'd

2 **Take the right amount of time**: It's hard to think clearly under pressure, and sometimes our first idea isn't always our best one. It is OK to sit on a problem for a while so that we can think through the options and feel confident about the course of action we ultimately choose.

3 **Weigh up the pros and cons**: When faced with a big decision, write out a list of pros and cons for each course of action and then compare them. Sometimes the cons are not nearly as bad as we imagine them to be, or the pros might make our options more obvious.

4 **Remember our goals and values**: It's important to be true to ourselves and what we value in life. When we factor in the things that are important to us, the best option might become more obvious, and we're more likely to end up with an outcome we are happy with.

5 **Consider all possibilities**: Making a decision can result in many different outcomes, and not all of them may be obvious. When considering each option, list the positives, negatives, and any likely consequences.

6 **Talk it out**: It can be helpful to get another person's perspective on an issue, particularly if they have faced a similar decision in their own life.

7 **Keep a diary**: When we feel like we are on a bit of an emotional roller coaster, it often helps to keep track of our feelings by writing them down.

8 **Plan how to tell others**: If it is possible that others may take a decision negatively, think through how they might conceive it. Consider it from their perspective, and think of a good way to pre-empt and manage the situation.

9 **Rethink the options**: When we're up against a lot of pressure over a decision or there are some new factors to

consider, look over all options again. We might decide that our original decision is still the best one, but keep the option to change course open.

If a decision no longer feels right, repeat these steps to see if there is a better solution.

Decision-making

Taking into consideration all of the advice covered on this topic so far, I have found that the following seven-step approach to making decisions works well for me:

1 **Identify the decision**: This may sound obvious, but it really helps to document what the decision is.

2 **Gather the information**: Do this from our own research, and by asking others who may have made similar decisions or who may be impacted by the decision.

3 **Identify the options**: Again, listing the alternatives helps to clarify them, and if we end up with too many, it will help us to reduce them to a manageable number.

4 **Weigh up the evidence**: What are the likely outcomes? Who will be impacted? How are they likely to react?

5 **Choose from the options**: Do this by weighing up the benefits and risks (a risk-benefit analysis).

6 **Take the necessary action**: Once the decision is made, just do it. Don't hesitate – get to it.

7 **Review the decision**: Assess the original desired outcome and its implications. Does this decision achieve it? Take any necessary refining and follow-on actions.

When it comes to deciding on the things that really matter to us in our lives, there will be some big decisions that we need to make. So, pay heed to the advice above and get started.

Hot tip

Good decisions don't have to be big, complete, and perfect. Each one just needs to be enough to help us take a step in the right direction.

59

Work or Family

A lot of people feel torn between their work and their family. They want to get on and be successful at their job, but it can sometimes means working long hours. This can cause friction with our loved ones and perhaps means we don't spend as much time with them as we should or would like to.

Big decisions

We could change our job to one that requires fewer hours, but that will probably mean we don't move closer to one of our life goals. Alternatively, we could abandon our family and concentrate on making a huge success of our job. But there are many other options in between these two extremes that we can explore before making a decision about changing our goals.

The University of the People website (**www.uopeople.edu**) has a lot of good advice available on this subject. It says that a lot of people have the dream of being successful in their career and also raising a family. While it's a lot to balance two important aspects of life that demand so much time, it is doable, but there are a lot of aspects to consider.

Family vs career

In the past, women were typically the primary caretaker of children. However, as women have defined their position in the workforce and even continue to outnumber men in education, this is no longer the case. Likewise, men were typically seen as the breadwinner and were expected to succeed in their careers to be providers. But the times they are a-changing.

Must we choose?

Having to make a choice between family or career no longer makes sense. With changes in our realities come changing patterns of thought. Rather than feeling guilty for dedicating time to work, we can spend that energy on being fully present with our families. The way to find the balance to do both is to always remain present in the moment. This takes practice, but it is a truly life-changing skill.

Put it off

Not everyone will choose to balance work and family. Some will be driven to be great in one or the other, and there are always options to achieve all outcomes. For instance, someone deciding to progress their career as their priority can put off starting a family.

Hot tip

The Open University (**www.open.ac.uk**) provides a similar function in the UK.

60

Kids generally start school around age five, which means some time will be freed up where they don't have to be in our care. If we decide that moving up in our career means a lot to us for financial stability or expertise or passion, then we may want to consider having children earlier in our career. It will be easier to come back into the workforce at a younger age and catch up.

Strike a balance

Finding the right balance of when to push for a career and when to push for a family is highly subjective. However, two important considerations that come into play are wealth planning and education.

We may have worked already for a few years after leaving school or college, but we can still pursue a master's or doctoral degree by attending online colleges like the University of the People or the Open University. That way, we can potentially start a family while gaining valuable qualifications, and re-enter the workforce with a higher degree, with better earning potential.

Decision time

Use the following steps to help make this kind of decision:

1 **Address the issue**: Speak up and let your superiors at work know about the issue. They will understand what family means to people like you; talk to your family about issues at work (if you don't already) – they will then understand how important your work is.

2 **Prioritize your time**: If something comes up (at work or in your personal life) that isn't serving your goals, learn how to say no to people, politely but firmly. It goes hand in hand with properly managing your time.

3 **Change your work mentality**: Family and work are both important parts of your life. You can take lessons from work back home to your family and family experiences into work – they will understand.

We must be clear on what our goals are and then use the decision-making process set out on page 59 to develop our decision and refine our goals.

Hot tip

The author worked on his MSc with the UK Open University for 9 months while working in Pennsylvania, USA.

Boring or Creative

We can find ourselves stuck in a boring job when we feel we have a more creative calling. Maybe that boring day job will take us, eventually, toward one of our major goals in life, but it is dampening our spirits. We may have a creative streak and would love to do something a bit more exciting.

We are not alone with these dichotomies. Gallup uncovered that out of the world's one billion full-time workers, only 15% feel they are fully engaged at work. That means the other 85% are at best unfulfilled at work and at worst downright unhappy.

Why work is boring

One reason is that we take part in repetitive work tasks and activities every day. It might be a bit more challenging from time to time, but overall it is the same. We grow in our careers as specialists in our particular areas of work because that is what we are told we need to do in order to make a living and be successful.

The job market simply does not give us options to diversify our skills in one job. Even worse, if we stay with the same company for many years, it becomes predictable and boring. The thing is, we are not meant to do the same thing over and over again.

Remember when

As kids we were curious and we would explore and try things, sometimes to our parents' alarm. When we chose our first job we had no experience or useful guidance on what we should be looking for. But once we started getting paid, and maybe promoted and paid a bit more, our fear of change and taking risks rose with it. We had accepted it as the norm and forgotten that it can be exciting to wake up and go to work each day.

Responsibilities

There are two responsible parties here: the company and the individual. From the company perspective, it makes sense to keep specific people in specific roles because that is how we best function in terms of productivity and getting things done. It is simply not beneficial for companies to allow people to explore different areas, or partake in alternative work or passion projects.

From the individual's side, we finish our education; we get a job; we grow in that job; we have stability and security. But are we really happy? Probably not; otherwise, why are so many of us

Hot tip

Not all companies are this bad. The author has worked for a few that understand and encourage their employees' creativity.

disengaged and disconnected? They say that burnout and anxiety are some of the biggest challenges the world of work faces today. Also, that we are more depressed and lonelier as a generation than ever before. So, maybe we should be doing something about it.

If we then consider that we are likely to spend up to 50 years of our standard life span of 80 years at work, it seems amazing that we would want to continue doing something that is not only boring but also slowly destroying our physical and mental health.

Other responsibilities

As well as increasing financial responsibilities, we have family and other external responsibilities that might inhibit us from doing what we really enjoy. We are not talking about cases where it is out of our control, but when we actually do have a choice – and most of us do have that choice. This is where our investment in ourselves comes in, with the chance to explore the unknown, to challenge ourselves, and to create opportunities for ourselves.

Investment

When we choose to invest in that journey for change, it can take anything from three months to two years or more. It depends on various factors such as our current environment, opportunities, where we are, where we want to be, and a gap that might exist. Ultimately, it is about whether we choose to stay where we are and give up control or look at ways we can take charge of our own development and create our own future.

Job security is not what it was for previous generations, yet we still operate as if it is. By taking charge of our own learning and growth, we can manage the risk of being let go. Furthermore, by choosing to invest in ourselves and our futures, we are choosing our health over our job. Our job should not leave us feeling drained, stressed, weak, or sick.

Decision time

You have to decide what matters most to you. You could quit the boring job and do something more exciting, or you could knuckle down and cope with the drudgery. Once again, there may be many other options between these two extremes that you should explore before changing your life goals. You could talk to your boss about it, you could explore similar jobs at other organizations, or you could pursue any other options you have identified – just go for it!

Location

Best country

According to US News & World Report (**usnews.com**), the top 10 best countries in the world to live in currently are:

#1 **Switzerland**: One of the world's wealthiest countries.

#2 **Germany**: One of the largest economies in the world.

#3 **Canada**: The second-largest country in the world.

#4 **United States**: The world's most dominant power.

#5 **Sweden**: One of the largest countries in the EU.

#6 **Japan**: One of the world's most literate and advanced nations.

#7 **Australia**: The world's sixth-largest country.

#8 **United Kingdom of Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales) and Northern Ireland**.

#9 **France**: One of the world's oldest countries, which still has a considerable influence on the world.

#10 **Denmark** (part of Scandinavia with Sweden and Norway).

Best city

The Economist Intelligence Unit publishes Global Liveability Index-based scores for stability, healthcare, culture, environment, education, and infrastructure. Its top 10 for 2022 are:

#1 Vienna, Austria.

#2 Copenhagen, Denmark.

#3 Zurich, Switzerland and Calgary, Canada (joint).

#5 Vancouver, Canada.

#6 Geneva, Switzerland.

#7 Frankfurt, Germany.

#8 Toronto, Canada.

#9 Amsterdam, Netherlands.

#10 Osaka, Japan and Melbourne, Australia (joint).

Beware

All these ratings change with time. The 2022 top ten has six new entries compared to 2021.

In terms of life goals, we might want to consider moving to one of these countries or cities. On the other hand, we may wish to stay closer to where we currently live because of our work, friends, family, or sporting or other interests. But things don't stay the same forever. Keep an open mind on options for the future.

Lifestyle

The world is shrinking. As global communications have improved and low-cost airlines have made far-flung destinations accessible to many, relocation has become more possible for us than for any generation before. With the ability to transfer within international organizations or take skills to where there is a demand, more and more people are upping sticks and moving.

Emigrating would still be considered one of life's most significant events, but there are many other options between emigrating and staying rooted to the town of our birth. Technologies continue to improve; employers continue to liberalize; the gig economy is growing and becoming mainstream. Our dreams have never been so accessible.

Making a choice

The most important point is that we recognize we have to make decisions and choices and then go after them. In summary:

- In Chapter 3 we drew up our life goals, prioritized our top three and queued up the rest.
- This chapter has highlighted some of the choices and given us some techniques for making the required decisions.
- The rest of this book is about the disciplines required to make them happen.

Just in case, we will cover the delicate process of changing our mind and going back in the next topic on pages 66-67.

Case study

The author currently lives in the UK, where the results of Brexit and the instability of the government may well see us drop out of the current top 10 countries. However, he also lives and works in one of the top-rated areas of the region, and has done so for the past 25 years, so has no intention of moving – at least not yet.

Hot tip

Once you've made a decision, don't hesitate or you will spend the rest of your life wondering "what if?".

Going Back

When we make a decision and change a goal, we have to be realistic – it might not work out, so we should always start by assuming we might need to go back. The way to prepare for that is to leave the right way – with dignity and on good terms.

How to leave

Tell your manager first: Write a proper letter of resignation but hand it to your boss in person. Choose a time when your boss won't be stressed – possibly at the end of the day – so that you have time to explain your reasons for leaving. Tell your colleagues after this if you wish, but not before.

Be honest but respectful: If you're leaving for a better salary, say so. If you're leaving because you don't get on with your boss, however, keep schtum! Concentrate on what you've got out of the job and explain the other reasons why the move is right for you.

Be prepared for a counter-offer: If your boss thinks enough of you, they will try to convince you to stay. Make sure they know why you're leaving and decide whether being offered more money would make you stay. If it would, then don't resign – just talk to your boss about your salary.

Don't bad-mouth anyone: Talking negatively about your boss or colleagues will get about, and your new employers might hear of it. Leaving on good terms allows for future recommendations and networking opportunities.

Work diligently through your notice period: Even though you're leaving, you still need to pull your weight until you leave. Make sure you return any company property and all non-personal documents. Clean up your email accounts, getting rid of any personal stuff, but leave any important emails there.

Ensure a smooth handover: Offer to train your replacement, tie up any loose ends, and finish or hand over any projects you were working on.

On your final day, make sure you clear your desk of any personal items and leave it tidy. Get your IT department to clear down your computer and get it ready for its new user. Finally, make sure you thank and say goodbye to all your friends and colleagues, and swap contact details if you want to stay in touch with them in the future. If you didn't get on with someone, just say goodbye.

Hot tip

When he first started his own business, the author got most of his business and new co-workers from previous employers and colleagues.

Stay positive

When things go wrong it's important to stay positive. Everything is temporary, whether it's a work-related issue, family problems, or another form of stress. Few problems last too long, so remind yourself things will get better.

Nobody is perfect – we all make mistakes; it's how we learn! Just make sure you don't repeat them. Don't beat yourself up with self-criticism, but look for ways to improve and become more self-aware. Something good may come of it. Perhaps your relationship has broken up. You might now find someone more suitable. Look for one good thing that can result when things go wrong.

If you are going through a challenging time, make a conscious effort to stop putting yourself down during this period. Instead of engaging in negative self-talk, start by being kind to yourself and compliment yourself on the things you do well.

Concentrate on what's going right in your life. When things go wrong, it's easy to forget the good things and focus on the bad. Acknowledge your achievements, no matter how small. Remind yourself that other things are going right.

Remember that you have some control of the situation – probably not complete control, but you can control your attitude and reaction. Focus on dealing with what is within your control.

Another thing to remember when facing difficulties is that you've handled problems in the past. Remind yourself of problems you've overcome – this will build your confidence for dealing with current issues. Or, think of someone who was in your situation and survived or came out of it thriving. Almost certainly, someone in the history of humankind has dealt with the same problem.

Bite the bullet

But if the worst does come to the worst and the new job, location, or relationship has not worked out and you have no other alternative, you have laid the groundwork for going back.

Get back in touch with your old organization or partner and tell them the truth. You did what you thought was the right thing for the right reasons but it didn't work out. Be humble, tell them why it didn't work out, and ask them if they will consider taking you back.

Case Study

Andalucían dream

My wife and I fell in love with Andalucía, Spain and we decided to buy an old *finca rústica* (rural farmhouse) in the foothills of the Sierras as a holiday home. We spent several holidays there refurbishing the house, getting to know the neighbors, and exploring the surrounding countryside. Gradually, the ideas came and we eventually decided on a complete change. We would run walking holidays in the mountains from there. It was an ideal spot and still near enough to the coast to be able to go swimming in the sea, not to mention a ski resort about three hours' drive away.

We decided to keep our day jobs until we had fully proven the concept and had a financial projection that showed us being able to live off the business with the olives and almonds we grew. We planned our first trial year, and largely filled the bookings with friends and friends of friends. We were all set and would take extended (non-paid) vacations, negotiated with our employers.

The unexpected

Out of the blue I was approached by a previous colleague and offered a contract to be technical director of an IT company operating across the British Channel Islands and Isle of Man. Three years to improve the company and a nice salary to go with it. I made a deal for unpaid leave in my first year so that we could still go ahead with the holiday proof of concept. My wife quit her job so that she could stay in Spain to coordinate everything. I spent the summer alternating two weeks in Jersey and two in Spain. After that, we would put the holiday business on ice for two years to fulfill my contract. It worked out well, and my wife then moved to Jersey, where she was able to pick up her previous career with a new employer, and we spent the following two years there.

Things change

Unfortunately, over that two years the UK economy went down the drain and people stopped taking second holidays, which was our target market. But we had two great years doing it, made lots of new friends, and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. Neither of us would change what we did if we had our time over.

We now smile to see our holiday idea features in several travel brochures, so the original idea was good, but unfortunately the timing proved to be wrong. But we have moved on and are also happy with that decision.

Lessons learned

Here are the lessons we learned from this experience – hopefully you can learn from them:

1 When setting your goals, consider if your lifestyle and location are more important than success in your current job and, if so, be prepared to make the change.

2 Recognize the opportunities that can and will present themselves in any given situation and be prepared to act upon them.

3 Plan how you will do things before you leap and, if necessary, be prepared to carry out a proof-of-concept exercise.

4 Maintain contact with previous employers, colleagues, and friends, as they may well be a source of opportunities for the future.

5 Be prepared to work hard and make sacrifices in the short term (but only the short term) if you feel that the ends really do justify the means.

6 When things don't work out, learn lessons for the future so that you don't make the same mistakes twice, but focus on positive aspects of the experience.

7 Always explain what you are doing and why to employers and colleagues when leaving – you never know if you might need to go back.

8 Remember you are on a journey through life, and take time out to reflect and enjoy the experience.

9 Keep an open mind, be prepared to look and learn, be prepared to give anything a try, and never say "never".

We will be taking a good look into the future in Chapter 5.

Hot tip

Focus on the positives that are going to happen, whether it goes to plan or not. It takes the anxiety and fear of failure away.

But don't forget to consider your gut instinct.

Summary

- Don't fear the consequences: Almost every decision you make entails imagining how the outcomes will make you feel, but you must not let fear and uncertainty stop you.
- Go with your gut instincts: While it is tempting to think that you need time to systematically weigh up all the pros and cons to make good decisions, sometimes a snap judgment or instinctive choice is just as good, if not better.
- Don't cry over spilt milk: If something doesn't work out as you hoped or expected, never mind – let it go.
- When making a decision, identify what the decision is, gather the information, identify alternatives, weigh up the evidence, choose from the alternatives, take the necessary action, and review your decision.
- Use these steps to help you make the decision: Let your superiors at work know about the issue; prioritize your time and learn how to say no; take lessons from work back home to your family, and family experiences into work.
- Think about where you want to live and how important it is to you compared to your work.
- Having to make a choice between family or career no longer makes sense, so rather than feeling guilty for dedicating time to work, spend that energy on being fully present when you are with your family and vice versa at work.
- Once you have made your decision, just do it, and all the anxiety will vanish and you can get on with your life.
- Assume you might need to go back, so prepare for that by leaving the right way – with dignity and on good terms. Then, if for any reason it doesn't work out, you can always go back and pick up the pieces from where you left off.
- Remember you are on a journey through life, so take time out to reflect and enjoy the experience.
- Keep an open mind, be prepared to look and learn, be prepared to give anything a try, and never say "never".

5 The Future

This chapter sets out how we should plan to use our time based on our past experience. It then looks at the future as we continue our journey through life.

Being Realistic

If we are going to stand any chance of being successful, we need to plan for our future. Those plans, if they are going to stand any chance of succeeding, will also need to be realistic.

Realistic plans

Provided our estimation and time management skills are up to scratch, we can produce a realistic plan that will increase our productivity and reduce our stress. However, the more details we put into the plan, the more challenging it will be to maintain it and keep it synchronized with reality.

If we search the internet for realistic planning, we find there are literally hundreds of planning tools (or, more accurately, project management software) available. What they do is help us to assign and schedule tasks and activities, track and report on progress, and even monitor costs. Unfortunately, none of them will help us make a realistic plan.

Having taught and practiced project management for well over 30 years, I can assure you that unless you happen to be a clairvoyant, the only thing that will help you make a realistic plan is starting out with clear, realistic goals.

Realistic goals

Some think that all we need to do is work hard to achieve what we want in life. Others think it's more about who they know or who their parents are. The truth is that those who create goals and have a regular and consistent goal-setting process are much more likely to achieve their life's dreams than those who don't.

Regardless of how hard we work in order to prove ourselves, if we are aiming for the wrong goal, then all that effort will only get us to the wrong place faster. It will be even worse if we have a number of unclear goals. However, a combination of realistic goals and good commitment is a winning formula for success.

By having clear goals, we become aware of precisely what we want to achieve, and we should therefore be able to plan how we are going to do it. We will be able to accurately assess and measure our ability to accomplish those goals and, most importantly, have a plan to guide us and keep us on track.

By adding a commitment to our goals and a determination to achieve them, we will find that we are willing to take continuous

Hot tip

When using automated planning tools, remember GIGO: garbage in, garbage out.

Don't forget

Alice and the Cheshire Cat... if you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there.

...cont'd

and consistent action toward achieving those goals, despite any obstacles we then encounter. And one thing we can be sure of is that there will be difficult times and obstacles to overcome.

Avoid distractions

Having goals and staying committed to them keeps our focus on the things that we have identified as essential to reaching our desired outcomes. Too often, we expend precious time on issues that have nothing to do with what we really want to achieve in our lives. We get distracted by focusing on what others are doing and achieving, and try to do the same.

Having a vision of what we want to achieve in life, together with a realistic plan of how we are going to achieve it, gives us the greatest chance of arriving at the correct destination. Once we have identified realistic goals, we can move on to producing a realistic plan.

Make plans realistic

In my experience, a lot of project managers deal with project planning as a solo act. They don't involve their project team in the exercise, and this means they end up with a seriously-flawed plan.

In case you feel this doesn't apply to you, let me remind you that you do have a team: your employer, colleagues, family, and friends. If you don't involve them in your plan, this could risk the plan's success. Once you have your clearly defined and realistic goals, you can move on to producing realistic plans using these steps:

1   **Break down the work**: Start by defining the main themes at a high level (what needs to be done to achieve a goal), then break down each of those themes into detailed activities. Some can be broken down further. Then, share this with your team to get their feedback and buy-in.

2   **Assign resources to activities**: Which resources (people, time, skills, finance, and any other things) are needed to complete each of the activities properly? It may be only you, but it will sometimes also involve other people. When you have done that, you need to identify any risks related to resources and skills, which might in turn lead you to change your earlier resource decisions.

...cont'd

3 **Define the relationship of activities**: This step forms the heart of project planning as it determines the dependencies between each activity. It will also identify schedule risks and any potential conflicts over resources.

There are four types of relationships between activities:

Start to Start: This relationship is used when one activity cannot start unless the other activity also starts. Used where two activities must proceed in parallel.

Finish to Start: This relationship is used when one activity cannot start until another has finished. This is the most common relationship, where one activity is dependent on the results (output) of a predecessor.

Finish to Finish: This type of relationship is used when one activity cannot finish unless the other activity also finishes. Similar to Start to Start, but in this case, the two activities must finish together: it is fairly rare.

Start to Finish: This type of relationship is used when one activity cannot finish unless the other activity starts. This would be where an activity includes a handover of some deliverable to another activity.

4 **Estimate resources and duration of each activity**: The next step in planning is to estimate the resources required to complete each activity, and how long it will actually take to complete it (the duration). There are multiple techniques for estimating activity resources and durations; the most common are:

Three-point estimation: The most popular method, this calculates the average (or the weighted average) of the most optimistic, most pessimistic, and most likely estimates.

Parametric estimation: This uses a statistical relationship between historical data and other variables.

Bottom-up estimation: This starts at the most granular level of detail and then adds it all up.

Hot tip

If an activity has no dependencies, you should question whether or not it is required.

Beware

Duration is not the same as the estimated time for an activity. It is the elapsed time it will actually take to finish.

5 **Estimate activity cost**: This is similar to estimating resources and duration for each activity, but in this case, the cost is calculated where costs are significant and can form a part of the decision-making process.

Just like estimating resources and duration, parametric, bottom-up, or three-point estimation can be used to calculate the likely cost of each activity.

6 **Generate a project plan**: After completing each activity resource and duration estimate, you can now draw up a plan – automatically if you are using project management software, or by hand if not.

There are several ways of drawing up and representing a project plan: work breakdown structure diagram, Gantt chart, or a network diagram. The most popular is a Gantt chart as this shows the duration and dependencies of tasks on a scale of time.

The following image is an extract of a simple Gantt chart (in Microsoft Project) illustrating the scheduling of a series of tasks, with their durations and resources:
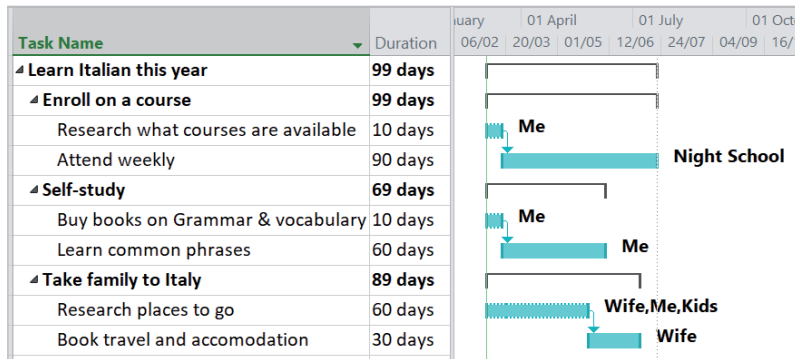
Once you have drawn up a plan, you should review it with your team to identify any issues or inconsistencies. The plan then needs to be updated and, if necessary, revised as each activity is completed. It should be regarded as a living document, but it is important to keep a copy of your original plan so that you can compare it to the actual results at the end and see where you can improve your future estimating and planning skills.

Hot tip

Effective Project Management in easy steps, a companion to this book, will show you how to create these diagrams. Visit www.ineasysteps.com for more information.

Time

Our planet, the third planet from the Sun (the Earth, as we call it), is around 4.5 billion years old. During the first billion years the ocean formed and then life developed within it. That life spread and began to affect the atmosphere and surface, leading to the oxidation event around two billion years ago. We humans emerged around 300,000 years ago, and have now reached a population of around 8 billion.

Dating back to around 3,600 BC, the Megalithic Temples of Malta are considered to be the oldest free-standing structures on Earth, so we can assume that we have been relatively intelligent for just over 5,500 years. Seen from that perspective, the average human life span of around 80 years is quite short.

Time management

How we manage our time is important if we ever want to achieve anything. But time management seems to be a depressingly narrow affair, focused on how to complete as much work as possible in as short a time as possible.

By trying to micro-manage our time, we have become obsessed with ever-growing to-do lists. A recent survey by a team of Dutch academics raised the amusing possibility that surveys such as theirs may totally understate the problem, as the busiest people were probably too busy to take part in their survey.

Another factor is the growth of the gig economy, which supposedly gives us freedom to spend our time as we choose but leaves many people feeling trapped in it and having to work ever-longer hours to earn enough money. Others have taken on casual work as a side hustle to help pay their bills. Working long hours reduces our efficiency.

Attention span

Once upon a time, people read books and papers without distractions. Now, a significant amount of reading is done on devices such as laptops, smartphones, games consoles or even watches. All of these devices are driven by the commercial need to distract you by serving up notifications in ever-ingenious ways to grab your attention. People are becoming addicted to this. According to **www.review.org** in 2022, 47% of Americans believed they were addicted, while 70% admitted to reaching for their phone within five minutes of receiving a notification.

Beware

According to www.
review.org, Americans
check their phones on
average a staggering
344 times per day.

One might cynically assume our problem isn't being too busy, but not being busy enough. We have so little to do that we are bored with everything, including the people we are with. It would seem we need to check what our phones are telling us to try to alleviate our boredom!

We know the reality is that we are not bored, but we do consent to these notifications, and we are drawn to them like moths to a flame. The consequence is we have even less time available to us, and our focus is shattered.

As the old saying goes, "Time and tide wait for no man".

Time flies

We now have to turn to an alarming phenomena that will be familiar to anyone above the age of 30. Time seems to speed up as you get older, steadily accelerating until – to judge from reports of people in their 70s and 80s – it flashes past in the blink of an eye.

The American anthropologist Edward T. Hall once declared that time is like an unstoppable conveyor belt. It brings us new tasks as fast as we can dispatch the old ones. And, if we seek to become more productive in order to catch up, it just seems to cause the belt to speed up further. The more we struggle to master time, the further it escapes from our control.

John Maynard Keynes made an infamous prediction in 1930 that within a century, thanks to the growth of wealth and the advance of technology, nobody would have to work for more than 15 hours a week. The challenge would be how to fill all that leisure time without going crazy. How wrong he turned out to be!

Future Pacing

The past is the past and there is no point feeling guilty for time not well spent.

The future, however, must be contemplated. In the 1970s Richard Bandler and John Grinder developed Neuro-Linguistic Programming as a way of training the way we think. With it came the technique of Future Pacing – imagining the outcome you want, rolling forward in time and imagining how it feels to all your senses, then imagining the journey you had been on to get there. This is now commonly called manifesting or the Law of Attraction. Do not confuse it with daydreaming. It is a serious tool you can use to help your planning.

Today

As we have discussed, we humans live on the planet we call Earth, and we have been around for about 300,000 years. But we haven't been looking after the planet very well since the Industrial Revolution. We regard ourselves as the most intelligent life form on the planet (although whales and dolphins might disagree with us), and we are responsible for this mess. More about that later, but where we are at this moment in time is...

Right here, right now

The future starts today, and now, this minute, is where our attention must be focused. We can't do anything about the past – it is gone forever – but what we do today is critical. Here is a summary of the key points we have identified on this topic so far:

- Plan the day before you start work and identify three achievable wins you will work on.
- Be aware that demands on your time will always exceed the amount of time you have available. Learn how to say no to others, your devices and – more importantly – to yourself.
- Avoid all time wasters, especially social media.
- Only spend time on activities that move you toward your achievable wins.
- Do fewer things but do them better.
- You will have to make decisions throughout the day, so make those decisions and move on.
- Take regular breaks throughout the day, get some exercise, or practice meditation.
- At the end of the day, review how you actually spent your time and record your wins.
- Enjoy the journey.

Our planet

As well as achieving our life goals, we might also slip in something to help save our planet. Pandemics paralyze us, the climate is getting hotter and hotter, and, despite the efforts of a few environmentally-aware people, we continue to make things worse. Climate change, deforestation, and endless wars are destroying our planet. That is a sad statement of reality, and

Don't forget

"Life is only available in the present moment."
Thich Nhat Hanh

Don't forget

Taking breaks will improve the quality of your work, so you will produce better results.

unless we take drastic action now, it will lead eventually to the widespread extinction of most forms of life.

If you do want to help to save the planet, here are some simple things Friends of the Earth suggests you can do about it:

1 **Save water**: Don't wash dishes right away – let them pile up, then load everything into a dishwasher. It can be more water-efficient than washing up by hand.

2 **Help bees**: Don't mow the lawn – by leaving even a small part of your garden to grow wild, it will help pollinating insects like bees thrive.

3 **Stop plastic waste**: Do this by avoiding plastic packaging, which ends up in landfill or as yet more plastic pollution in our rivers and oceans.

4 **Eat fewer meat and dairy products**: They are responsible for around 15% of climate-changing gases – more than all forms of transport.

5 **Get a veg box**: Ordering an organic veg box helps keep pollinators safe from chemicals. It also brings less plastic waste into your home, and can help cut down on separate car journeys, reducing your carbon emissions.

6 **Plant trees**: You don't actually have to plant them; Ecosia does – it's a search engine that plants trees with the money it makes every time you click on an ad in your search results, so you are helping to reforest the Earth.

7 **Clean the air**: Get a cheap ride by finding a driver going to the same place as you. Car sharing will help to reduce air pollution.

8 **Support clean energy**: Switch to renewable energy – there's no disruption to your supply, and it's cheaper than you think.

Ecosia (**ecosia.org**) is a search engine company based in Berlin, Germany and used by over 20 million people worldwide.

The Future

There is no point in worrying about the future, because we can't control what it may have in store for us. If you have thought about the past, you should have concluded that you got where you are today without exerting much control over it. Building on the Future Pacing theme, let's also consider the following quote from David Biello (a contributing editor at Scientific American):

> *"Neuroscientists have now identified regions of the brain involved in envisioning future events. The human mind taps into the same parts of the brain while imagining the future as it does when recollecting the past. This means that the brain can predict the course of future events by imagining them taking place much like similar past ones."*

Our time

As we have seen, the first thing we have to decide is what we are going to spend our precious time on. We should have done that now by identifying our life goals. We should also have recognized that we will never have enough time to do everything, so we should have also decided what we are not going to waste our time on. Now, we can start to think about the rest of our lives as a journey into that future.

The journey

This journey will take you along a path through the future, and I can promise you it will be an exciting one (I am approaching the end of mine, so I know it's true). The great thing is that you have already begun your journey – you have taken the first step, and you now know what your goals are.

But you have already gone beyond that, as you have now opened your mind to the endless possibilities that lie before you. You have also understood that some things that will happen will be good and some things that happen will be bad, and you are prepared for either eventuality.

You should also have recognized that trying too hard will be counter-productive. Likewise, you should have understood that doing fewer things but doing them better will achieve greater benefits. You are already well into the journey.

Don't forget

While we can't control the future, we can certainly imagine it and envisage how it might pan out. Start to think about the future with that in mind.

Moving forward

You should now be planning how you will spend your time each week and each day. You have your goals in bright lights, and you have identified your three wins for the day. But the future has a funny way of throwing obstacles into your path: obstacles that will require you to spend time on them and that could possibly mean you have to change your goals. Each time that happens, you have to make a decision:

- Will you change your goals in order to accommodate this new threat or opportunity?
- Or, do you stick to the current ones and ignore this potential opportunity or threat?

You now have all the decision-making guidelines to help you make that decision quickly so as not to waste time. Then, once you have made that decision, you continue to move forward through the day and your journey until the next decision has to be made.

At the end of each working day, you should review how you actually spent your time, record your wins, and take note of anything that happened that you could deal with better in future. And likewise at the end of each week. Spend a little of your time during these reflections on enjoying the experience of the journey, for once you get to the end, that's it – your life will be over.

The way

Two quotations from one of the author's other published works, *The Way of the Project Manager*, which is based on the thoughts of the ancient Chinese wise man Lao Tzu in his text *Tao Te Ching*.

> *"Just observe the mystery of what unfolds on the journey, there will be darkness, but hopefully, out of this darkness we will begin to know how things happen."*
>
> *"Fill your bowl to the brim and it will spill, amass a store of gold and jade and nothing can guard it, care about other people's approval and you will be their prisoner, retire when the work is done for this is the way to serenity."*

If you can do this, you will have achieved all that was ever there for you to achieve in the first place.

Don't forget

Delaying a decision can also be a decision if you do it intentionally.

81

Change of goals from fame and fortune to family, location, and stability.

Case Study

Rather than giving theoretical examples of decisions, I thought it might be helpful to list some real key decisions on goals that I had to make through my life:

First goal

At the age of 16 (in the 1950s), my first goal was to be a rock musician. I pursued this (to the detriment of my education and intense annoyance of my parents) for five years, achieving some modest success – I did get to play support to some famous bands and stars, but never managed to hit the big time. By the time I was 21, I also had a wife and new child and felt the need to settle down and find a "proper job".

Bad news

I had, from time to time, supplemented my music income and had, among other things, some experience of working in the grocery business, which I seemed to be quite good at, so I applied for a position as a trainee supermarket manager at a major grocery chain in the UK, and after two days of interviews and tests I received some bad news. Despite my having passed all their tests with flying colors, they were not going to offer me a job, because my IQ was too high. They explained that, in their experience, this meant I would not be good at managing people.

Response

Once I had recovered from the disappointment, I sought advice on what sort of work would be good for someone with a high IQ who was good at science subjects but not at managing people. The answer came back as developing computer software (then, as now, an ideal role for a computer nerd). I took a crash computer programming course (which I did well at) and found a job as a trainee computer programmer.

The bad news (for someone then living in London) was it was up north in a fairly grim city. But the job took precedence over location, so I accepted the job and set myself the goal of succeeding at it in two years and relocating back down south.

Change of goals from location to job success.

Apologies to those from up north in the UK but it was grim in those days (coal-powered cotton mills).

Just do it

We moved, and I knuckled down and worked hard at my job, doing a lot of overtime (which paid well), but it meant I didn't get so much time with my family. I also joined Mensa, the high-IQ society, and the British Computer Society, which both looked like

good wins on my CV, and after 18 months I had been promoted twice and was ready to move back to my desired location.

Sounds good

I soon found what sounded to be an excellent opportunity with a large car insurance business based south of London. The role was as an analyst/programmer, which meant designing the software as well as developing it (a good progression), so I took the job and we moved back south.

A mistake

After my first week there, I realized they had been economical with the truth; all I was doing was fixing other people's bugs and being supervised as if I were still at school. Everyone there hated the place, so I started applying for other jobs, declaring why in my applications, and soon had the offer of a position further to the south west, which I accepted, and we moved there.

Change of job now most important life goal.

Good move

This time, the job and location were right, and the family loved it as well. The company was a car tire distributor, a subsidiary of large rubber company (whose mainframe computer they used). My role was designing and developing software to help them understand and develop their business. It went very well, and after two years I had found and fixed several issues that were costing them money. This brought me to the attention of their head office, and I was offered what sounded like a good promotion.

Bad move

I accepted the job at their headquarters, which was at an even better location, but the job did not turn out so well. It was a managerial position and (it seems the grocery people were right) I did not enjoy people management. So, it was time to move on again.

One of the more experienced people with whom I had shared an office on my visits to the head office had recently left and moved to a computer consultancy company, as had some of their other skilled people. He told me they had lots of work for people like me, so I went for it.

Change to a non-managerial role now most important life goal.

Great move

It was great – I had a string of assignments from London to the south west, and eventually a nine-month assignment in Wales.

...cont'd

As it was too far to drive, I shared a flat with a colleague while my wife and son moved back to London to be closer to our families. Unfortunately, when the contract came to an end, so did the consultancy company and my marriage (totally my fault).

Another good move

I found a job with a stationery manufacturing company based south of London. They had a large mainframe computer and had also developed a computer bureau division to sell off spare time on the computer. I was assigned to the bureau division, and loved project managing a small team developing software. It looked like my ideal slot and, once again, I was quite successful, running a team but with no people-management responsibility.

An opportunity

The computer bureau was doing well and becoming bigger than the company's own business, so the company decided to get rid of it. The staff were offered the option of staying with the main company or being made redundant, with quite a nice redundancy payment. I, together with most of the other bureau staff, decided to offer to buy out the bureau business with our redundancy money and move it to a new computer and location, which the company accepted, and we did.

All our existing clients were happy, as they now had our undivided attention, and we got off to a good start. I was made development manager and was still able to do most of the software design, while I recruited, developed, and trained some project managers. We used a contract agency for our software developers, as they only employed skilled staff and could deliver the goods. Success led to my being promoted to technical director of the company, and we had a couple of very good years.

Time marches on

Meanwhile, technology was moving on and mini-computers started to appear. We all recognized that they were a threat to our bureau business, so I proposed that we should expand into that area and ran a proof-of-concept development for a mini-computer-based system for a national range of wine shops. It was a complete success, but the chairman/managing director, who had 51% of the shares of the company, was against it and didn't want to make the move, so it was time for me to move again.

Change of location away from family turned out to be a real disaster.

Main goal now business success and money.

Main goal now to find a more suitable employer.

Nice move

I had enjoyed two great holidays on the island of Jersey, and when their government was advertising for a software manager, it was a perfect fit. It ran a central computer but also wanted to develop mini-computer systems for the larger departments. It was ideal for me, but after five years my boss, who was only a year older than me, showed no intention of moving, so I moved again.

Change back to managerial role despite previous experience for job and money.

Some boring bits

I then spent four years working for a US computer company, two years running a software development business owned by a large consultancy (who I didn't get on with), then another two-year spell in Jersey (while also commuting to Spain) as technical director and then managing director of a computer services company. Next came two years working as a computer consultant, in Spain and Gibraltar, which was good fun. Then, back again for five years in Jersey for one of the big five firms of accountants to get their computer systems year 2000-compliant and bring them up-to-date with distributed computing. I got that job done and moved back to the south west of England.

More technical job; good to start with but then problems. This period is covered in more detail in Chapter 4.

Back to the present

Here, I set up a company doing what I enjoyed most: project management consultancy. I had clients in Jersey and also developed some local work when I was approached by a former colleague, who was now working for an Irish software company, to train their project managers in Cork, Ireland, and New Jersey, USA. I did that, and then spent the next four years working as a freelance consultant for them all over Europe and the USA.

Back to my ideal role, working for myself in a perfect location.

Bad mistake

I then took on a three-year project, which turned into a nightmare project from hell. I did my best, but it was always going to end in chaos. By then, I was past retirement age, so I decided to become semi-retired and do what I enjoy: writing books like this and providing project management consultancy to local businesses.

One final mistake!

I should have listened to my own advice: *"A two-year project will take three years, a three-year project will never finish."* John Carroll, Effective Project Management in easy steps.

Summary

Over the years, a lot of things went wrong, including two failed marriages (all my fault). A lot of good things also happened: I've got two brilliant children and four wonderful grandchildren. I think I've done enough and am now enjoying the rest of my life.
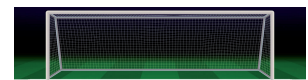
Summary

- The future begins right here and right now, so we need to focus on the present: this week, this day, this minute.
- Learn from the past and understand how much time we have available and how we got to where we are today.
- When planning, we need to produce plans that have realistic goals to have any chance of success.
- Start planning by defining what we need to do to achieve a goal, then break it down into the activities we will need to carry out to achieve it.
- Define the relationships (dependencies) between activities, and estimate the work effort and duration of each, then draw up a realistic plan.
- Planning tools (project management software) help us to schedule activities, track progress, monitor costs, and report on progress.
- Share plans with all stakeholders – family, friends, colleagues, and employers – to get their buy-in and feedback.
- Plan each week at the start of the week and each day at the start of the day, and review each day and each week at the end of it to learn from it.
- Be aware that demands on our time will always exceed the amount of time we have available, so learn how to say no to others and, more importantly, to yourself.
- Avoid being distracted by time wasters, especially social media, and only spend time on activities that move us toward our wins. Do fewer things but do them better.
- Recognize that we are on a journey and that good things and bad things will happen; be ready and react to them.
- As we move forward, we will be faced with continual decisions – should we change our goals or persevere? Make decisions without hesitation and move on.
- Make time to enjoy the journey.

Don't forget

Turn off all notifications on all devices. They are designed to stop you doing what you want to do and make you do what they want you to do, and they are extremely good at it.

6 Time Wasters

We now take a look at the things that steal our precious time. By understanding why we do them, we can eliminate them.

What Not To Do

We looked at deciding what we are going to do in Chapter 2, at defining our goals in Chapter 3, at decision-making in Chapter 4, and at the future in Chapter 5, so hopefully, you now know what you are going to do: the things that matter the most to you. These are the things that you must now start doing.

But every decision you make to use a portion of your time on one thing means giving up all the other ways in which you could have used that time. You have to be prepared to take a stand on what matters the most to you. Accept the fact that you are never going to get everything done, then decide what you are not going to do and be happy with not doing it.

Steve Jobs

We can learn a lot from the founder of Apple, Steve Jobs. He says he learned to admire simplicity working on the night shift at Atari as a college dropout. Their games came with no manual and had to be uncomplicated enough that a "stoned freshman" could figure them out. He then went on to get the inspiration for his first computer when visiting Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center and saw their plans for a computer that had a graphical user interface and a mouse. He went away and designed both so that they were more intuitive and simpler to use. This also allowed him to produce both more cheaply.

Apple fired him in 1985 after a massive disagreement with the CEO and board. Then, 11 years later, Apple had to ask him to return and rebuild the company, which he did. On his return, he made this famous quote:

> *"Deciding what not to do is as important as deciding what to do."*

He went on to reduce Apple's product line (it was then producing a random array of computers and peripherals, including a dozen different versions of the Mac) by 70%. Sadly, Steve died of cancer in 2011, but he has left us with many excellent ideas. Learning from those ideas, we can formulate some guidelines in choosing what not to do:

Don't forget

Establishing your goals is the first step in planning your future.

- Clarity is key to accomplishing anything in life: We need to have clear, distinguishable goals.
- Simplification is key: We need to be able to draw a direct line between us and our goal.
- Sometimes we have to experiment a little to figure out which paths not to take, but knowing when to stop is important.

- Our time is our most valuable commodity. We can't afford to be unsure, hoping to stumble upon an answer. We need to be clear, methodical, and have a purpose.
- Eliminate anything that makes us unhappy.
- Then, eliminate things that create short-term happiness; we don't need those either.
- At the end of each day, think about everything we did and ask ourselves how much had a positive impact on our dream.

Another great quote from Steve Jobs:

> *"The people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do."*

One of his friends said he acted as if the normal rules didn't apply to him, and the passion, intensity, and extreme emotionalism he brought to everyday life were things he also poured into the products he made. His petulance and impatience were part and parcel of his perfectionism.

So, we can all take inspiration from Steve Jobs. What we now need to do is identify the things that we are not going to do.

The easy bit
We have already seen that saying no to things we don't want to do is pretty easy. We just have to make sure we are polite and explain the reasons why we are saying no to the person we are turning down.

The hard bit
But it is not so easy saying no to things that we do want to do. What we have to do is be tough on ourselves. We can only use our time once, so it has to be used only on the things that really matter to us.

There is no place for "nice-to-haves" in this decision-making process. The one thing we don't want to do is waste our precious time. Eliminate anything that isn't essential to our goals.

Time Wasters

The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines time wasters as:

- Someone who causes another person to waste time doing something that does not achieve any good result.
- An activity that takes a lot of time and does not achieve anything important.

Those definitions seem to sum it up pretty well. Many sources list their top time wasters, and social media and procrastination usually feature high up in those lists. We deal with those topics more fully later in this chapter (procrastination on pages 94-95 and social media on pages 96-97).

The other major time wasters most frequently mentioned are:

Interruptions
The impact of any interruption when we are working or concentrating on a problem will always be greater than the actual interruption itself: people with a quick question, telephone calls from clients, emails from all and sundry, physical post, etc. In addition to the actual interruption, we are likely to spend even more time getting back to where we were before it happened.

Multi-tasking
Trying to do two things at once or task switching will always reduce efficiency and effectiveness.

Working without a plan
It is very tempting to work without a plan as we can't fail if we have nothing to hold ourselves accountable to. Don't make excuses and don't wait until something is certain before committing to it. Set a plan you believe in and share it so that you can't backtrack.

Doing other people's work
When we allow other people such as subordinates, colleagues, boss, family, or friends to take advantage of us, we end up spending our time on their priorities rather than our own goals.

Being disorganized
If we are not organized, we will be forever searching for things when we need them. A disorganized desk is a sure sign of a disorganized mind.

Hot tip

Peer pressure: You are much more likely to see something through if you tell someone you are going to do it.

Unnecessary meetings

Unnecessary or poorly-run meetings can be a huge waste of time, particularly meetings with no clear objective or where attendees are allowed to wander in when it suits them, often resulting in things having to be repeated, all of which wastes our time.

Equipment issues

Having the wrong tools for the job or out-of-date software or hardware can seriously impact our effectiveness.

Waiting time

Time spent waiting for a plane or train, time spent in traffic jams, or time waiting for something necessary for our work is wasted time and lost forever.

Perfectionism

Not everything has to be perfect; it only has to be adequate for the requirement (fit for purpose). Not knowing when to stop can waste a huge amount of time.

The good news is that we can and should be able to do something about every one of these time wasters. We will be looking at them all in more detail later in the book, but just recognizing them and realizing we can do something about them is the first step toward dealing with them.

There are only 24 hours in a day, so we need to make the most of what time we have, and stop wasting it. If we can clearly identify where we are wasting our time on things that don't matter, then we can actually do something about it. Try these simple steps:

1 Start to record what you are actually spending your time on through the day.

2 Review it at the end of the day and identify how much time you lost on non-essential things.

3 Commit yourself to reducing the time you are spending on anything other than your goals.

Once we have decided what we are not going to do, we need to learn how to say no. We deal with that in the next topic.

Hot tip

Understanding what you spend your time on is the first step in dealing with your time-wasting activities.

Saying No

Saying no can sometimes be really hard, especially as most of us don't like to upset people or to let them down – a friend or colleague asks us for a favor as they are having a problem; a family member badly needs us to do something for them; or, possibly the worst of all, our boss or someone very senior in the organization asks us to do something – usually urgently.

Let us look at some of the typical situations where we really should say no:

We feel uncomfortable
Perhaps someone is trying to take advantage of our good nature or otherwise put upon us, and it makes us feel uncomfortable. It's almost certain to mean we should say no. Stop, take a few deep breaths, listen to our intuition, and say no.

We feel obliged
Particularly in a work situation, it can be very difficult to say no to our boss or someone senior in the business who asks us to do something for them or delegates some task to us. But that doesn't mean our time and energy are less important or valuable than theirs. One tactic is to ask which of our other tasks we are permitted to stop doing in order to fit it in.

We're overloaded
When we are already overloaded with work, we must say no to any more tasks or projects. New work must wait until we have some free time and energy or be sufficiently important to replace an existing activity. Also, remember that saying no to ourselves is just as important as saying no to others.

Our personal boundaries
We will have our own personal boundaries: things we are not prepared to do (our conscience). If someone asks us to do something that crosses our boundaries, it is important to stop the process in its tracks and say no. Our moral boundaries are worth standing up for.

We want to please
Pleasing other people is a natural incentive for performing tasks, but it shouldn't be the only reason we work hard. If pleasing someone else comes at the cost of our own happiness and well-being, it just isn't worth it.

Beware

Don't allow someone to make their poor planning your problem!

Now, let us look at some of the reasons why it is so important to be able to say no:

- We know we have to do less but do it better. That way, we can deliver more; by focusing on only one thing at a time, we can produce much higher-quality work.
- Being assertive and saying no can benefit our performance and career; it gives us the freedom to pursue projects that are in alignment with our goals.
- It's also important for our mental well-being; we will suffer if we take on more that we can cope with, so we need to say no to tasks we know we can't handle.

10 ways to say no

You should, by now, have grasped the concept of why saying no is so important. However, actually forming the words can be a bit tricky. Here are some phrases that can be used as substitutes for a simple "no" next time you find yourself in this situation:

- Sadly, I have something else critical going on.
- I have already made another commitment.
- I'll have to think about that and get back to you later.
- I wish I were able to but I'm afraid I can't.
- I don't have the capacity to deal with that now.
- I'm honored you asked me, but I simply can't.
- Thanks for thinking of me. However, I'm not able to.
- I'm sorry – I will not be able to fit it in.
- Unfortunately, I already have other plans – maybe next time.
- No, thank you, but it sounds lovely.

We need to accept that we can only use our time once, so we had better use it on things that really matter. These will not always be things we enjoy doing or things we are asked to do, but we must still learn to say no, politely but firmly – no to anyone who asks us to do something less important than our goals and, most of all, no to ourselves for the same reason.

Hot tip

Accountability Works (**https:// accountabilityworks. com/**) has a short, fun quiz to determine your procrastination style. Try it now – it is free and enlightening.

Procrastination

Procrastination is the act of delaying an important activity, usually by focusing on a less urgent, more enjoyable, or easier activity. It is different from laziness, which is simply an unwillingness to act.

Ali Schiller and Marissa Boisvert of Accountability Works coach professionals on accomplishing their goals without sacrificing their health. They say that there are four main types of procrastinators: the performer, the self-deprecator, the overbooker, and the novelty seeker.

The performer

These types typically say things like "I work well under pressure", but what they are really doing is forcing themselves to focus by shrinking the time they have to tackle a task. For some, the real reason is perfectionism. But if you're tight on time, there's no way the task can be done to unreasonably high standards. For others, the issue is simply falling back into old patterns and beliefs: "Nothing would ever get done if it wasn't for the last minute." Whatever the reasons, putting pressure on ourselves is not sustainable.

If this is your type, your biggest challenge is getting started and the solution is simple: set a start date and not an end date. By focusing on when you're going to begin a task instead of when you hope to end it, you'll take pressure off of yourself.

The self-deprecator

Typically says: "I feel so lazy right now." This procrastinator is actually the opposite of lazy, so when they don't do something, they are extra hard on themselves. They tend to blame inaction on laziness or stubbornness rather than admit they are just plain exhausted. What they really need is to be more compassionate with themselves.

If this is your type, your biggest challenge is taking a break. We know you are going to say you don't have time to rest, but the solution is to recharge your batteries. Try taking a walk to give yourself space and to begin to rebuild your energy.

The overbooker

Typically says: "I'm so busy." This procrastinator is an expert at filling up their calendar and is often overwhelmed. "I'm so busy" is probably the excuse we hear most often. In fact, some of the

busiest people actually get the most done. When being so busy is used as an excuse for not doing something, it's usually an indication of avoidance. Rather than facing a challenge head on or admitting they don't want to do something, it's easier to place the blame on having other, more important things to do.

If this is your type, you're creating chaos for yourself by doing other things to avoid the task you know you need to do now. Force yourself to spend half an hour on it. You may find it can work out easier than you thought.

The novelty seeker

Typically says: "I just had a great idea." Accountability Works refers to this as Shiny Object Syndrome. They may be great at making decisions and taking action, but they're constantly coming up with new projects to take on then getting bored with them a week later. They're intrigued by the latest trend and will be quick to pick it up but not follow through with it. They don't take consistent action in one direction long enough to see results. Interestingly, many successful entrepreneurs fall into this category.

If this is your type, your biggest challenge is getting things to completion. Your solution is to write down any new ideas or projects on a sticky note or a white board, but don't pursue them until you finish what you are currently working on, then pick up the next great idea.

The way forward

Procrastination can restrict our potential and undermine our career. But we should also be aware that highly-driven, accomplished people also procrastinate. Procrastination is a habit, and if we understand how it shows up for us, we can replace it with a better one. Figuring out which group we're in can help us break out of our procrastination patterns and maybe even get something finished early for once.

Positive procrastination

Finally, we need to recognize that procrastination can also be considered a wise response to demands that could present risky or negative outcomes, or when waiting for new information. Positive procrastinators accept the fact that they cannot get everything done, so they decide which activities to focus on and which activities to park.

We don't need to stop procrastinating; we need to get better at it.

Social Media

People use social media applications for a wide variety of reasons: to form new friends around the world with common interests; to network career opportunities; and as a platform where they can share their thoughts, interests, feelings, insights or emotions with friends, family, colleagues and even complete strangers. But there is also a dark side to social media, so what is it?

Curse or boon

There are thousands of content creators and millions of content viewers in the world. They mostly use social media as a way to enjoy themselves and take a break from their exhausting and busy lives. Social media is undoubtedly a boon for them and human civilization because it has brought the whole world together in one virtual place, where individuals can share their views and opinions. Such healthy interactions are proven to be beneficial for us as they help our development and enhance our social skills.

However, some individuals use social media as a way to unleash their stress and frustration by indulging in negative activities like insulting, manipulating, and spreading hate against people or a group in order to fulfill their agenda or to satisfy their ego. When it is misused in this way, social media can be seen as a real curse. Spreading hatred and propaganda against another person, group, or community is a form of violence. Propagating hate speech and fake news can distort individuals' thoughts and opinions on matters in a negative direction. This can lead to the development of inappropriate or destructive behavior in people, to the complete detriment of our society.

The real cost

When we put time aside to review our social media platforms, all but the most disciplined among us will be distracted. Artificial intelligence knows what makes us click – literally – and it will be doing all it can to serve up enticing distractions to take us down rabbit holes we never planned to go down (and spend our money).

When we resurface, possibly having forgotten the original reason for picking up the device in the first place, the allotted time – and often much more – has passed and it is not uncommon to experience a sense of guilt at having wasted time. But that's not the end of it – as we briefly covered on page 19, it can sometimes be just the thin end of the wedge.

Hot tip

The negative side to this social media herd mentality is antilocution, which is the first step on Gordon Allport's scale of prejudice and discrimination. Look it up if you want to see where it leads.

Steve Jobs

> *"There's never gonna be anyone who accomplishes their lifelong goal and then looks back and wished they've spent more time on Facebook or wished they spent more time texting. Think about it."*

A lot of money is made from time-wasting applications, but none of it by the end users. The people making the money are the social media companies and the influencers.

Social media companies

The primary way social media companies like Meta (formerly Facebook) and Twitter make money is through selling advertising. The concept of selling advertising while offering a free service is not new; television, newspapers, and media companies were doing this long before social media companies existed. Meta has around three billion monthly active users worldwide and estimated the average revenue per user was around $32 in 2020.

Influencers

Influencers are people with the ability to influence potential buyers of a product or service by promoting or recommending items on social media. This is now a big business. In 2022, the top influencer was Manchester United's Portuguese star Cristiano Ronaldo, who had 480 million followers on Instagram and averaged more than $3.5m per post, according to Nielsen Sports.

According to one influencer, you can make money on Instagram with just 1,000 followers if you post twice a week. But no one is going to pay you anything to post stuff only your friends will look at. For many influencers, this has become their full-time job, giving them the freedom and independence to work for themselves and earn a comfortable income.

However, building up a social media profile and following to that level takes skill, dedication, and effort. If you do succeed in making it big, they say that Instagrammers with over 75,000 followers could be taking home well over $100,000 a year, which is not bad money for doing something they often already do for fun all the time anyway.

So, the ultimate question you have to ask yourself is: do you really want to make other people rich while wasting your precious time, or would you rather use that time to fulfill your own goals?

Don't forget

There is no such thing as a free lunch.
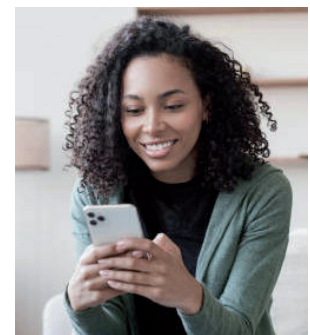
Summary

- Every decision you make to use a portion of your time on one thing means giving up all the other ways in which you could have used that time.
- Deciding what not to do is as important as deciding what to do (Steve Jobs).
- Saying no to things you don't want to do is easy; saying no to things you do want to do is a lot harder.
- You can only use your time once, so it has to be used on the things that really matter to you.
- Time wasters are activities and people that take a lot of time and do not achieve anything important.
- Record what you are spending your time on through the day; review it at the end of the day and commit to reducing time you are spending on anything other than your goals.
- Saying no can be hard, but you must learn to do it politely but firmly so that you can focus on your goals.
- Procrastination is the act of delaying an important activity, usually by focusing on less urgent, more enjoyable, and easier activities.
- If you do procrastinate, figure out why you do it, then take the appropriate countermeasures to help you break the habit and get something finished early for once.
- Positive procrastinators accept the fact that they cannot get everything done, so decide which activities to focus on and which activities to park.
- Social media is undoubtedly a boon for many people but it can also be a curse as the number-one time waster.
- The real cost of using social media is not just the hours you wasted, but the amount of time it will take you to get over what you have been reading and refocus on your goals.
- There is a lot of money made from social media, but not by the end users. The people making the money are the social media companies and the influencers.

7 Planning

In this chapter, we will examine the key elements of planning. Then, we'll look at production of week plans and day plans, some of the problems that might occur, and the importance of reviewing each day and week.

What To Do

We have now identified our major goals – the things we want to achieve in life, and where we want to get to. We have also identified time wasters that we are going to stop doing. We can now focus on the things we will do, and that starts with drawing up a plan for how we are going to do it.

The benefits of planning

Creating a plan may seem like an inconvenience when we want our journey to begin now. But getting there will be much easier when we have a plan for how we are going to get there, whether it's about earning a promotion, starting a new job, or starting a new business. Here are four real benefits of planning:

- **Improved productivity**: Planning stops you wasting energy on unnecessary tasks. Many people say: *"One minute spent in planning can save you up to 10 minutes in execution."*
- **Increased focus**: Planning helps you focus on the task at hand; you will know what you need to do today and why. This will help you stay in control.
- **Greater self-confidence**: If your goals have always been just out of reach, it could be because you've never created a plan for reaching them. Once you have a plan, you'll be amazed by how much you're able to accomplish.
- **Greater self-awareness**: When you create a plan, you will begin to understand yourself. It will help you identify your priorities, and you will learn about your personal strengths and weaknesses and how to overcome them if necessary.

Creating a plan

How do we go about creating a plan? Here are three simple steps to take to create a framework for a plan:

1 **Write down your goals**: These are the things you want to achieve. You should be able to check this one off now.

2 **Develop your plan**: Divide each of your goals into smaller, identifiable chunks (we will be doing that next).

3 **Review your plan daily**: We will also be developing this topic later in this chapter.

Beware

Not planning will result in wasted time, effort, and resources, as well as poor decision-making, lack of direction, and mistakes.

Hot tip

Research shows that just writing down your goals will increase your chances of achieving them by more than 40%.

Now, let us look at the second step in a bit more detail – creating a plan by dividing a goal into chunks, or decomposing it.

Breaking it down

Big goals can seem overwhelming at first. We are reaching for the stars, and it may not be very clear how we are going to get there. A lot of people tend to fall at this first hurdle.

But we know where we want to get to, and we have written it down, so break that goal down into smaller chunks. If our goal is to have a successful new business in a year's time, we can think where we need to be in six months, or maybe three months.

Then, write down those small, incremental steps with the dates that we need to complete them by. It should not now look like such a large mountain to climb, as we're taking small, manageable steps. We continue to break down our plan toward being able to produce a plan for the week ahead and, finally, for the day ahead (which we will be covering in the next two topics).

Case study

In planning for our walking holidays, we began by drawing up the things we would need to have ready: holiday brochure, marketing strategy, suitable vehicle, accommodation upgraded, negotiation with local bars/restaurants, cashflow forecast produced, etc.

Rule of Three

This seems a good time to go back to the Rule of Three, so let's re-state those as three steps:

1 Having identified your three most critical goals, take each in turn and identify the three most important steps you will need to take to achieve it.

2 Then, break each of those three steps down into three smaller steps of – say – three to six months.

3 Carry on breaking steps down until you have chunks of work (stories or wins in agile terminology) that you feel you can accomplish within one week.

You are now ready to plan next week, which we will cover next.

Hot tip

The micro-planning process is based on biomimicry (learning from and mimicking natural strategies to solve human design problems).

Week Plan

We should now have our plan broken down into manageable chunks of work. This alleviates the stress we feel when confronted with something seemingly insurmountable. When we are working under stress, it can significantly decrease our ability to focus clearly and function optimally, and especially when it comes to making decisions based on ill-defined goals rather than on our usual habits.

Micro-planning

Micro-planning allows us to relieve this stress as we don't have to think years ahead, where we have little control over what is going to happen in our lives. There are six steps to follow and you should, by now, have already completed the first three or four:

1. Identify your compelling purpose: your life goals, which was covered in the previous topic.

2. Produce a plan for the next year that aligns with your goals, based on the best information you have available to you at the time, and reflects on lessons learned from previous years.

3. At the beginning of each quarter, reassess what you're working on and how it's working out (more lessons learned). Did any themes emerge, and will you need to make any changes to your plan for the next quarter?

4. Each month, take your goals for the quarter and assess where you stand with them. For each active goal (the ones you need to work on), break it down into deliverables (the things that you have to do this month).

5. Now, at the start of each week, produce your week plan – essentially, a to-do list of the deliverables (wins) that you need to complete this week. By restricting it to just the activities you can complete, this reduces it to a manageable size and it won't be overwhelming.

6. The final step is to produce your day plan – we will be dealing with that in the next topic.

Create your week plan

First thing on Monday (or whichever day of the week you start work on), produce your week plan. The structure of the week plan should be very familiar by now:

1 **Identify your three wins**: Identify the things you can achieve in the time available in the week ahead.

2 **Carry out your work**: Do this each day toward achieving those three wins (see Day Plan on pages 104-105).

3 **At the end of the week**: Before you pack up and go home, carry out a review of how things worked out during the week (we cover this in Week Review on pages 112-113).

Once you realize you can't do everything that needs doing, you're free to focus on doing three things that really count. Once you've selected those three wins for the week, write them down so that you can focus on what you want to accomplish this week.

Time management

All other new demands on your time must now wait until one of those three deliverables has been completed or abandoned. For this to work, those deliverables need to be manageable, so must be broken down into bite-sized chunks that can be achieved in the time available.

Realistic plans

Be realistic about the amount of time each thing is going to take, and be prepared to spend that amount of time on it. By doing work that counts, you will derive satisfaction from doing the work itself. In agile terminology, this is a timebox (which we will cover on page 108).

Problems

Things will go wrong and you will hit problems, as we saw back in Chapter 1, so you need to develop a taste for dealing with these problems, giving each one the consideration it requires. But don't worry about them – they are not an impediment to a meaningful existence, but the very substance of one. We will cover a process for dealing with problems in more detail on page 109.

Beware

Humans suffer from optimism bias. They will naturally underestimate how long something will take and ignore the possible impact of interruptions. Strive to minimize all external impacts on your schedule, but be wise and factor in some breaks to deal with the unexpected.

Day Plan

Regardless of how we set out our long-term goals, it's what we do each day, the things we prioritize, and the tasks we complete that build over time into success or failure. A few restful or fun days each month can help us to clear our heads and refocus our minds, but if we spend too much time away from our goals we will get lost. They say the best defense is offense and, in this case, the best defense against unproductive days is a good daily planning ritual. It should only take you about 15 minutes once you get into it, so make regular planning a daily habit.

Some mornings we may wake up feeling motivated and want to seize the day and tackle some of our big ambitions. But those days are likely to be the exception. We still need to get things done when the alarm wakes us and we wish we could go back to sleep again, or we find ourselves wishing it was 5pm on Friday. That's why having a daily planning ritual is so important.

How to start

Get into work early, while it's still nice and quiet. Grab a cup of coffee and sit down to plan your day in a relaxed way, giving it your full attention. If your work environment is too hectic to allow this, then consider doing your day plan at home before you leave for work, or maybe stop off somewhere peaceful for a coffee on your way to work and plan your day there.

Having already selected three wins that you plan to achieve this week in your week plan, we can take the simplicity of the Rule of Three to identify the steps required in a day plan:

1 From your work backlog (the three wins you plan to achieve this week), select three smaller deliverables (things you can achieve during the day) and estimate how much time you will need to spend on each.

2 Then, carry out the day's work in line with your day plan, controlling how much time you spend on each of the deliverables (small wins).

3 At the end of the day, review how things went and how you actually spent your time compared with your plan, and record your wins and any issues.

Focus

Once you have accepted that you won't be able do everything that you get asked to or wish to do, you're free to focus on doing the things that really count. Once you've selected your three wins for the day, write them down, with the amount of time that you have dedicated to each, so that you can focus on what you want to accomplish. This is a great way to set your intention for the day and keep your focus where it belongs: on the specific actions that will move you closer to your goals. Remember – a plan is no good if you never look at it.

What not to do

All other new demands on your time must now wait until one of those three wins has been completed or abandoned. Once again, it stands to reason that those tasks need to be manageable and so must be broken down into bite-sized chunks that can be achieved in the time available.

Timeboxes

Be realistic about the amount of time each thing is going to take, and be prepared to spend that amount of time on it. By doing work that counts, you will derive satisfaction from doing the work itself. The most effective way of controlling your time is by using timeboxes (explained on page 108), so once you have spent the amount of time you estimated on the work, you stop working on it, review it, and move on to the next task.

Problems

During the day, you will undoubtedly hit problems, but don't worry about it; develop a taste for fixing problems. We have a topic on problem solving on page 109.

Task completion

As you complete each deliverable (small win) from your plan, take a moment to recognize the milestone. This is an opportunity to celebrate your progress and re-evaluate how things are going against your plan and whether you need to make any changes to it. Refocusing on your goal will remind you why you started in the first place and give you a much-needed boost of energy.

Review your day

At the end of the day, review your done list, record your wins, and go home content with your day.

Estimation

Time estimation refers to the calculation of the number of hours needed to complete a task or a series of tasks. The deeper our understanding of what the work actually entails, the more accurate our time estimates should be. If we have done something similar in the past, our estimates should be fairly accurate.

Time estimation

One of the key project management skills is estimating time – the time it will take to perform a small task or something much larger. Over the years, studies have reported that inadequate time estimation was one of the major causes of failure in around 25% of failed projects.

Poor time estimation doesn't necessarily result in complete project failure, but it will always result in schedule delays and/or increased costs. The relationship between time, cost, and functionality is referred to as the Iron Triangle, as any change in one will always impact on one or both of the others.

Generally speaking, the larger the task, the more difficult it is to estimate it with any degree of accuracy; the smaller it is, the more accurate the estimate should be. When it comes to estimating the time required for a task taking less than a day, and one to be performed by the person making the estimate, the estimate should therefore be fairly accurate.

Once again, we can use a three-step approach to estimating the time required to complete a task:

1 First, estimate how much time it will take you to complete the task, assuming you are able to work on it uninterrupted from start to finish: this is the work effort.

2 Now, estimate how many interruptions of any type (calls of nature, needing a break, phone calls, visitors, fetching a coffee, and so on) are likely to occur while you are carrying out the task, and how much of your time they are likely to take.

3 Add the two together and it gives you the total amount of elapsed time the task should actually take to complete: this is the duration.

Hot tip

The Iron Triangle states that any change in time, cost, or functionality will change one or both of the other two.

Work effort

The more familiar you are with a task, the more easily you will be able to estimate the work effort. Conversely, the less familiar you are, the more difficult it will be. In this instance, the widely-accepted best practice is to produce three estimates (you could call them guesses): the best (most optimistic), the worst (most pessimistic), and the most likely. Then, add them together and divide by three and use the result as your estimate.

What can go wrong?

Having produced the work-effort estimate, we need to consider any risks. Sometimes, delays happen due to other people or factors out of your direct control: being summoned by your boss, a power outage, a fire outbreak, or a family crisis. Unless you are working in a very volatile situation, these will not be things you can cater for in estimating, but you should consider any more minor risks that could impact on your ability to complete the task in hand. It shouldn't change your time estimate, but if it does occur, you will have thought about it and should then know how to react to it – "forewarned is forearmed".

Duration

Once you have calculated the duration (the realistic amount of time the task is actually going to take), you should be prepared to commit to scheduling that amount of your time to the task, to the exclusion of all else.

There are many task management tools available on the market and, as the old saying goes, "You pays your money and you takes your choice". A paper day planner (a "day to a page" pocket or desk diary) is just as good, and it doesn't beep at you or ping when you have new mail. Whatever works for you will be fine.

The key control is your own self-control; once you have started working on a task, keep working on it until:

- You have completed the task (a win).
- You have run out of the time you allocated to the task.
- You have hit a problem and can't continue.

When any of those events occur, stop, record the win, expiry of time, or problem, and move on to your next scheduled task.

Hot tip

Many people skew the calculation toward the most likely by taking the optimistic and pessimistic estimates plus four times the most likely estimate and dividing by six. If the job is a well-trodden path, you might want to skew it toward the more optimistic end and, conversely, if confidence is low, skew it toward the most pessimistic.

Timeboxes

A timebox is a previously-agreed period of time during which a person or a team works steadily toward completion of a specific goal or task. Some people tend to confuse timeboxing with time blocking (from which the name was derived), as both involve allocating fixed time periods to activities. The difference is that in time blocking, while you schedule a block of time, you don't limit the actual amount of time you spend on it. On the other hand, with timeboxing you allocate strict periods of time to limit the amount of time you can spend on an activity that might otherwise take up too much time.

Timebox rules

A timebox always has specific deadlines and goals associated with it. It may also involve deliverables, a budget, and milestones. At the day-planning level, timeboxes can be used at varying timescales. Brainstorming could be as little as five minutes; planning the day maybe 15 minutes; or you could use the Pomodoro Technique, which organizes personal work in 25-minute timeboxes or longer.

Work must begin at the start of the timebox and, critically, must stop at the end of the timebox. You must stop when the time you have allocated to a task is up, even when you're bursting with energy and feel as though you could get so much more done. If you started to work on a task for 50 minutes, then once 50 minutes are up, stop.

At the end of the timebox, you stop and then assess your progress. Record whether you were able to fully meet your goal or only complete it partially, and – in the latter case – why.

Timeboxing

The process of timeboxing can, again, be illustrated with a simple three-step process:

1 Allocate a fixed time period when you will work on a planned activity.

2 Work on the activity during that fixed time period and stop working on it once the time is up.

3 When the time is up, evaluate your results and assess whether you've reached your planned goal.

Hot tip

We will explain the Pomodoro Technique in detail in Chapter 10.

Problems

Problem solving

Wikipedia defines problem solving as the process of achieving a goal by overcoming obstacles. One thing that you can be sure of is that you will hit problems, so develop a taste for dealing with them. Life itself is a process of engaging with problem after problem and, as we keep saying, problems are not an impediment to a meaningful existence but the very substance of one.

Many businesses have found profitable markets by recognizing a problem and creating a solution to it: the more widespread and inconvenient the problem, the greater the opportunity to develop a scalable solution. So, don't be put off by a problem – it may be an ideal opportunity for you in disguise.

Techniques

There are many specialized problem-solving techniques, courses, and books available on the market but, again, the Rule of Three can provide a simple approach:

1 Define the problem, if necessary breaking it down (decomposing it) into any sub-issues until you can fully understand it.

2 Draw up a plan, setting out the necessary steps you will need to take to tackle it and schedule these into your day and/or week plan.

3 Carry out your plan and review the results.

Delays

Typically, delays are one of the simpler problems you will face, and they don't usually require planning unless they are a major problem, in which case see above. But if you get held up waiting for something from someone else, just put that piece of work on hold and move on to the next most important piece of work.

Some delays don't allow you that luxury. If you are stuck in a traffic jam, or suffering a train or flight delay, there is no point in fretting about it. Accept it and use the time to think about some of the things that matter to you and note them down. Make a habit of always taking a notepad and/or a book to read (electronic or hard copy) on journeys.

Hot tip

You never know when you might be delayed, so always have a notepad or book with you.

Day Review

Plan your day in the morning and review your progress in the evening. In the same way that day planning is critical to keep us focused on our goals, an end-of-day review is likewise essential to keep us on track. Sit quietly and review what you did, whether it went well or not, and how you could improve. If you leave a review until the following morning, the chances are you will have forgotten half of the things that you did, or at best it will take a lot longer to recall them.

Review

At the end of each working day, sit down quietly and review your day using the following steps:

1 Look at your day plan and note on it everything that you did or didn't do, recording any wins.

2 Make a note of anything additional you did but didn't have to do, and so lost time doing it.

3 Make a note of any breaks you took, any interruptions, and any repercussions from them.

4 Assess what you did that was successful and what you did that wasn't.

5 Identify anything that you did that could be changed, and how you would change it to free up time.

6 Identify anything you missed out on because of your choice of actions.

7 Finally, track your energy level during the day – the times when you were firing on all cylinders or feeling exhausted; this can help you to optimize your workflow.

You can use this practice to make adjustments to the way you work and your goals. It will also give you a tremendous sense of control, which may well help to decrease the amount of time it takes to get tasks done in future. Then, put your notes away for tomorrow morning and go home content.

Time

We all have the same number of hours every day, yet some people are so busy, these hours simply aren't enough. In this highly competitive and pressure-filled world, the number of responsibilities is exhausting.

But this doesn't mean that you can't achieve a good work-life balance. Achieving a good work-life balance requires a simple action: boosting your productivity in a way that allows you to maximize tasks without feeling overwhelmed.

Productivity

Reviewing your day is the first key step toward improving your productivity. Once you have the issues in front of you, continue with the next step when you plan tomorrow.

When doing this, don't forget about Parkinson's law. Give all your projects a set time window to be completed, and you will see that instead of all day, some tasks can be completed in 25 or 50 minutes. Basically, it will all depend on what you prioritize, the deadline you set for the tasks, and the strict control of your time.

Prioritization

Prioritizing your tasks will take a large proportion of the time you will spend on planning but, with practice, you will do it faster and faster every day. Just aim to organize the list on the basis of task importance. The most important tasks should always go at the top, while the least important should go at the bottom of your task list.

Stoicism

If you do a little research on day reviews, you will come across references to stoics and stoicism. Stoicism was a philosophy of personal ethics based on a system of logic and its views on the natural world, which flourished in Greece and Rome until around the third century. These days, we use the term "stoical" to refer to a person who can endure pain or hardship without showing their feelings or complaining.

In time management terms, we regard a stoic as someone who not only accepts what cannot be changed and will endure problems without complaint, but who will also work ethically to improve what can be improved and make the most of things.

Don't forget

Parkinson's law: Work expands to fill the time available for its completion.

111

Week Review

At the start of the week you will have drawn up your week plan, and during the course of the week you will have been carrying out and reviewing your day plans. Now, at the end of the week, it is time to review how the whole week actually worked out compared with the week plan. Not at the micro-level, which you will have done in your day reviews, but more the big picture of where you are on the main road to achieving your goals.

Essentially, the week review gives you the opportunity to direct your life with intention. It should be a dedicated time to think about the past week and reflect on what went well and what didn't so that you can improve your planning for the future. It gives you a chance to check if you are still aligned with your goals and ensure that the work you're doing on a daily basis is really helping you toward reaching them.

It will also give you the chance to re-evaluate your goals in case anything has arisen that might make you want to change them. Some people suggest you should spend a couple of hours on a week review, but that is unrealistic. In my experience, if you have done your day reviews properly, you should be able to complete your week review in 25 minutes or less.

Week plan
The place to start is clearly the week plan you produced at the start of the week.

1 Get out your week plan and check what your three big wins for the week were.

2 Assess if you achieved them fully, partially, or not at all.

3 For the wins you didn't achieve, decide what you need to do about them: reschedule them again for completion next week or possibly further in the future.

Day reviews
Next, look back at your day reviews.

1 Look at each and remind yourself what your three small wins for the day were; make a note of the small wins that you did achieve and give yourself a pat on the back.

Don't forget

A popular quote often attributed to Albert Einstein is that the definition of stupidity is to do the same thing over again and expect a different result. The fundamental purpose of the review is to change what you are doing for the better.

2 For the wins you didn't achieve, consider if you are still happy with what you decided to do about them.

3 Make notes of anything you will need to consider when making your plan for next week.

Life goals

Now, it's time to mentally take a step back and have a look at the big picture: your life goals. Things to consider include identifying:

- How you feel about your performance this week: are things going the way you expected or do you need to reconsider?

- Whether, in retrospect, any of the activities that you did were not the right ones.

- Any new ideas that may have come to you and if you want to consider including them in the future.

- The reasons that you were not able to complete any unfinished tasks and what you will need to do about them.

- Any external factors that stopped you making progress and what should you do about them.

- Are your weekly goals still fully aligned with your longer-term goals? If not, what should you do about them?

- Any tasks you have been putting off and if you need to prioritize them higher so that they get done next week.

And finally

Just three more steps:

1 Make sure you have noted down all the things you need to consider when planning next week.

2 Give yourself a hug for all the things that went well and all the actions you will take to fix the things that didn't.

3 Pack up, go home, and enjoy your weekend – you have earned it.

Summary

- Start to create your plan by writing down your key goals – the things you want to achieve.
- Then, take each goal in turn and identify the three most important steps you will need to take to achieve it.
- Then, break each of those three steps down into three smaller steps of – say – three to six months.
- Carry on breaking the work down until you have got chunks of work (stories or wins in agile terminology) that you feel you can accomplish within one week.
- At the start of each working week, sit down and produce your week plan, setting out what you are going to achieve in the week ahead.
- At the start of each working day, sit down and produce your day plan, identifying three small wins you are going to achieve during the day.
- Estimate the amount of time it will require for each of the deliverables you need to complete, based on the work effort required to do it together with the duration (how long it will actually take to complete).
- Use timeboxes to allocate the necessary duration time for each of the tasks you will need to carry out to achieve the three small wins.
- Start working on each win at the allotted time and stop working on it when the timebox ends, regardless of where you have got to.
- Anticipate problems as they will happen and take the necessary steps to deal with them, including being prepared for delays.
- At the end of each day, carry out a day review, noting how things went against the plan and any actions needed.
- At the end of each week, carry out a week review by looking at your progress against your key goals.
- Go home and enjoy your weekend – you deserve it.

Don't
forget

Habit #2 in Dr. Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* says we must *begin with the end in mind*. The weekly review is an opportunity to check you *still have the end in mind*.

8 Effective Time Management

This chapter summarizes some of the key concepts from Effective Time Management in easy steps. Developing our time awareness and planning skills, together with the other lifestyle suggestions, will also help us in our agile time management.

Time Awareness

Before we get into the fine details of agile time management, it is worth taking a look at some of the existing best time management practices, as many of these also apply to agile time management. These are the key lessons we can learn, summarized from *Effective Time Management in easy steps*:

Where time goes

John Adair, one of the foremost authorities on leadership, said: "Look in the mirror and you will see your biggest time waster." He identified our biggest time wasters as:

- **Procrastination**: often referred to as the thief of time.
- **Poor delegation**: delegation has to be effective to work.
- **Being disorganized**: lost under heaps of paperwork.
- **Ineffective meetings**: poor control or unnecessary meetings.
- **Lack of direction**: having no clear objectives or goals.
- **Growing backlog**: of work and an ever-growing to-do list.

Working hours

Most of us deal with the problems above by working longer hours, taking work home, skipping lunch, and so on. If you are working more than 40 hours a week, then you are not working smart.

How we work

Based on studies, we can identify a picture of the average manager or knowledge worker. They work long hours, taking work home, dealing with hundreds of different things in a single day. Their work is typically fragmented into brief periods of two- to nine-minute chunks, and not done in any particular sequence. They make no attempt to assess the priority or urgency of anything, and issues are dealt with reactively as they occur.

They are continually interrupted by telephone calls and visitors, and their other work has to take place interspersed with these intrusions. They tend to be poor planners and are unlikely to have clear periods of time that they can devote to this key activity. They are also poor estimators, overestimating the time they spend on production and underestimating the time they spend in meetings. In summary, they have little control over how they spend their time and seem to be totally event-driven and reactive.

Conclusions

There are a number of conclusions that we can draw from the foregoing analysis, so let's set out the steps that we need to take to address them:

1 Start by acknowledging that we do not know how we spend our time, and any assumptions we might have are probably wrong.

2 In order to start from a factual baseline, we need to observe how we really spend our time in detail and record it for two weeks.

3 Having recorded our time in detail, we should then summarize it at the end of each week and analyze how we actually spent it.

4 We then need to compare it to how we thought we spent our time and how we should be spending it, in line with our job description or priorities.

5 Then, we can identify the specific actions we will take to improve how we spend it in future.

Keeping a time log

Develop your time awareness by recording and analyzing how you spend your time now – this will give you a baseline. You can use an electronic device, a desk diary, or just a sheet of paper. Split your day into 15-minute segments (anything smaller will be difficult to cope with, and anything larger will be too inaccurate).

1 As you work through the day, record each task or activity as you start it and end it (using codes to make it easier).

2 Review your time log at the end of each day, filling in anything that you missed.

3 Summarize it at the end of each week, and after the second week you will have your baseline.

The 1:10 planning-to-execution ratio sounds excessive but includes the cost of wasted waiting time and rework that often arises in unplanned or badly planned projects.

Peter Drucker was a renowned management consultant who made a significant impact on the thinking of North American organizations from the 60s onward with theories such as Management by Objectives and most widely known to most for his acronym SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-related) to define objectives.

Planning

Planning is one of – if not the most critical of – the business skills. They say that an hour spent planning a task will save 10 hours or more of work carrying it out. Therefore, time spent planning is time well spent. Broadly speaking, there are three types of plans, and to be effective you need to develop them in the following sequence:

Long-term plans

These are your long-term strategic goals or objectives. They should answer the questions about what you want to do with your life and where you want to be in five years' time.

Life can be compared to a journey, and the long-term plan is a roadmap for that journey with some directions and milestones. Then, you can check from time to time if you are still heading in the right direction, or even if your goals have changed.

Mid-term plans

These mid-term or operational plans should cover your current review period. Typically, they will be for one year, but they could be shorter if you are working in a rapidly changing environment. These should be the things that feature in your current job plan, if you have one, as that is exactly what a job plan is for.

Peter Drucker once said that you should ask yourself if you know what you are being paid to do. What are the two or three things that, if you perform them well, will make a real difference? Your mid-term operational plan should answer this question.

Your objectives should map onto your job responsibilities. These are the things you are being paid to do. There should also be an indication of the percentage of your time that you should be spending on each responsibility.

Starting with your long-term objectives, ask yourself what you need to achieve to move toward them. This should give you your key goals or objectives for the year. What should be different in a year's time? In order to do this, you will need to stand back and look at the broader picture. For each objective, ask yourself what you will have to do to achieve it and list these steps; each is effectively a sub-objective.

Using the results of your time log and analysis from the previous topic, identify things that you want to spend less time on.

Ask yourself if you can you stop doing them, delegate them to someone else, or change the way that you do them.

Once you are satisfied that you have a suitable mid-term plan, share it with your boss. In a good organization and with a good boss, they would probably have asked you to do this anyway.

These operational plans need to be reviewed about once a quarter, either with your manager or by yourself. Ask what you have achieved, and what you have failed to achieve and why. Then, ask yourself if the plan needs to be revised in any way in the light of this or if you need to change some of the things you are doing.

Once you have established your mid-term operational plan, you can move on to short-term planning.

Short-term plans
Our short-term or tactical plans set out how we intend to use the time that is immediately available to us. This week and today are natural, understandable, and very plannable units of time. *Effective Time Management in easy steps* concentrates on the importance of day plans.

Day plan
Develop your day plan using the following steps:

1 Schedule in any meetings, including the time for any preparation, getting to the meeting, getting back, and writing up any notes or actions following the meeting.

2 Schedule in one or more blocks of time for dealing with your important tasks.

3 Schedule in one or more blocks of time for reading and responding to emails and other correspondence.

4 Schedule in a lunch break and at least one morning and afternoon break.

At this stage, you may or may not have any free time left in the day. If you have, then keep it free – don't be tempted to schedule every minute, as you will be able to use it if it really is available.

Hot tip

If you don't have a boss, share your plan with a friend, family member, or colleague.

Beware

Avoid back-to-back meetings where possible. They will eat up your time and result in an ever-increasing to-do list.

Quality Time

John Adair again stated very succinctly that "The quality of time matters more than the quantity of time". It therefore stands to reason that we should make the best use of our quality time, but what exactly is our quality time?

Energy and alertness

Our energy levels and alertness are not constants. They tend to rise and fall cyclically during the course of the day. Sometimes, we feel active and raring to go, and at other times we could easily nod off to sleep. Have you ever found yourself doing this at a meeting or seminar after lunch? They don't call that time period the "graveyard slot" for nothing!

When to use it

It clearly makes sense for us to use the times when we are most mentally active – our high-quality time – for important tasks that can benefit from it rather than waste it on low-importance activities. Conversely, we should try to schedule low-importance activities for the times when we are not at our most alert.

When is it?

When is our high-quality time? The answer is it varies from person to person, but you should be able to work out when it is for you by keeping a record for a few days of how you are feeling at set times over the course of the day, from when you wake up in the morning to when you go to sleep at night.

For a large number of people, it will be in the morning, while for some people, it will be the evening, and for a minority, noon or the afternoon. Whenever it is, identify it, then you can plan to use it most effectively.

Scheduling

You can make the most of your quality time if you schedule important tasks that require concentration, creativity, and hard work during the four or five hours when you are at your best. Conversely, you should schedule interesting, social-type (less important) activities such as meetings for when you are at your least alert, as it will give you some extra stimulus.

Obviously, you can't always determine when something must happen, particularly if it's not something that you are arranging. But you can often have an input to the decision.

...cont'd

Your quality time
In order to identify when your quality time is so that you can take advantage of it, use the following steps:

1 Keep a daily record for one working week, recording how you feel when you first wake up and then every three hours until you go to bed at night.

2 Plot each day's results onto the same chart to form a composite view, as in the illustration below.
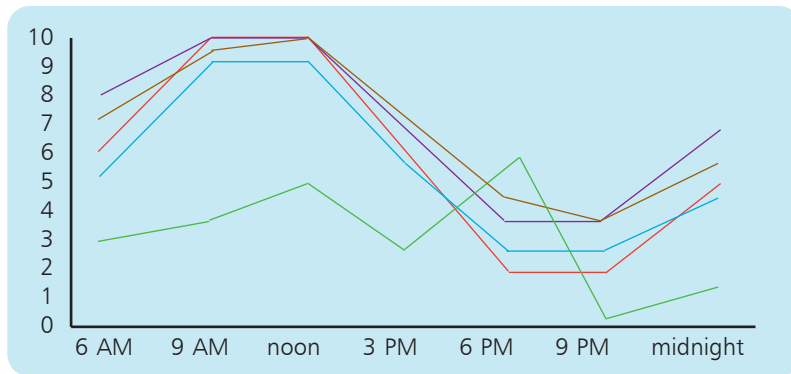
3 Remove any outliers (extreme results) such as the green day 3 in the illustration above.

4 The composite view should give a good indication of your daily time profile.

In the illustration above, the quality time is between 9am and 12 noon, with the early morning 6am to 9am being the next best time (while energy and alertness are increasing). Conversely, the afternoon should be used for less important activities.

Creative moments
During this quality time period, you are at your most creative and will sometimes come up with solutions to problems that you hadn't even been working on. This is a result of your subconscious mind continuing to work on something after you have stopped consciously working on it – this is referred to as creative thinking.

Hot tip

There is more on creative thinking in **Effective Time Management in easy steps**.

Prioritization

An action list (or to-do list) is a record of all the tasks that you have identified you need to do. In its simplest form, it will just be a list of tasks. Typically, you will tend to work through the action list in one of three ways:

- **Starting at the top and working your way down**: but the problem with this is that you are usually adding tasks to the bottom faster than you are crossing them off the top.
- **Dealing with tasks that are the most urgent first**: but the problem with this is that all tasks end up becoming urgent if you put off doing them.
- **Dealing with quick or easy tasks first**: this means you can cross some off, but that risks urgent tasks being late.

Creating an action list

There has to be a better way, and there is. By making the action list a bit more sophisticated, you can prioritize the most important tasks – the ones that really matter:

1 List all the tasks that you have to do on your action list.

2 Note alongside each task when they are due to be completed or when you want to have done them by.

3 Based on this, decide how urgent each task is.

4 Then, decide how important each task is.

Urgent or important?

These last two things are not the same. You can easily find that you spend a lot of time dealing with urgent but not necessarily important tasks, rather than tackling important tasks that are central to your role and will help you achieve your objectives.

The grid at the top of the page opposite illustrates tasks graded into four categories based on their urgency and importance.

A tasks are both urgent and important. These must be given the top priority, but the danger is that you won't allocate (or be able to give) enough time to them.

Urgent or Important

Beware
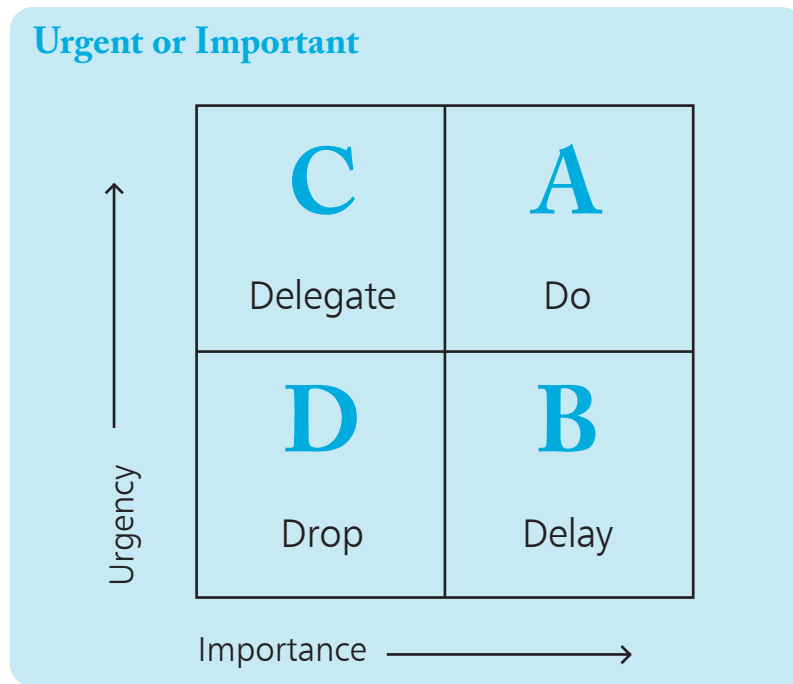
People are habit-forming. If they learn you jump every time something is urgent, it will become their default way of getting their stuff done – at the expense of yours!

B tasks are important but not (yet) urgent. They should be your second priority but only after the A tasks are complete.

C tasks are urgent but not important. Don't even look at them until the A and B tasks are complete.

D tasks (often simple or easy tasks that are therefore attractive to do) should not be done at all.

On this basis, A tasks will always get done, B tasks will usually get done, C tasks might not get done (unless or until they become A tasks), and D tasks will never get done unless or until they become important to the business.

1 Schedule **A** tasks into your day plan/diary.

2 If you have some spare time left after you've done them, then do some **B** tasks.

3 Consider delegating **C** tasks and dropping **D** tasks altogether.

Hot tip

If you face onto another desk, ask for a partition or bookshelf to obstruct your view.

Get Organized

Most knowledge workers and managers spend a large part of their working day at a desk in some sort of office. You might have the luxury of an individual office or share a large one, or it may be in your own home. Wherever it is, it makes sense to organize your work area for maximum effectiveness.

Your desk

Your desk should be positioned so that you have to turn away from it in order to face and speak to any visitor. This will make people more conscious of the fact that they are interrupting you. It will also prevent you from talking to them across your desk, which is a barrier to good communication.

Keep your desktop clear. Only have out the things you need for the task you are currently working on. Everything else should be filed away. Clear your desk completely every day before you leave the office.

The things that you use a lot should be positioned as close to you as possible (preferably so that you can reach any of them without getting up from your desk). Anything that you use less often can be stored further away.

Filing system

Invest a little time in organizing your filing system in a way that supports the way you work. This should apply to hard copy filing and electronic filing systems. With a good filing system, you should never have to search for things.

Communications

We all spend a considerable amount of our time communicating in one way or another: telephone, email, meetings, presentations, and face to face. But effective communication is more than just talking to people – it is a two-way process. People will put their own interpretation on things, and that is what they will remember – if they remember anything at all!

Research has shown that people remember around 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see, and 50% of what they see and hear, so if we have to communicate something important, it's not enough just to send out a quick email. Better to go and see people, then tell them and show them what you want to communicate.

People will remember things even better if they have spoken them as well as having heard them, so if you also ask them to tell you what they have understood, you will also help them to remember it. That said, if something is important, it should always be backed up in writing.

Writing

Writing is just one form of communication, and to be effective your writing needs to achieve its purpose. The first thing to establish is why you are writing it. Is it a proposal, a report to a team, a report to management, an instruction manual, or a letter to keep someone in the picture? Then, be clear about the audience – who it is for.

Then, write it by listing the points you wish to make and sequencing them in a logical order. Then, flesh out each point and add an introduction and a summary. Finally, check it for spelling, punctuation, and plain language (any jargon or acronyms should be explained).

Reading

Before you start reading anything, be clear why you're reading it, then decide how much time you will give the exercise. If it's lengthy, start by just reading the headings and introduction or summary and table of contents. These should tell you what the book or document covers and who it is intended for. Then, you can decide if you need to read any more.

If you do decide you need to know more, then skim read – don't read every word. The first and last paragraphs in each section will usually give a summary – the first and last sentences in any long paragraph, likewise. Skim through, picking out any key words or concepts and looking at any diagrams and graphs. Only read all the details if they are important to you.

Telephone

However much time you spend on the phone, you can make that time more effective. Plan calls before you make them by listing key things you need to say and preparing a brief message in case your call is picked up by someone else or by voicemail. Put your own phone onto voicemail when you are busy. Finally, be discrete with what you say in public on your mobile phone, and do put it on voicemail when you are in a meeting or in company.

KISS: Keep It Short and Simple.

125

Stop Wasting Time

As part of developing your time awareness, you need to identify time-wasting activities that you get involved in and eliminate them. Do you need to go to every meeting you are invited to? Do you need to stay for the whole meeting if there is only one topic that involves you? Before you schedule any activity, ask yourself if you really need to do it. Before you say yes to any request, consider whether it is something you really should be doing.

Learn to say no
You can say no, and you can do it without being unpleasant or upsetting other people. Make a commitment to yourself that you will say no so that you don't over-commit yourself.

Social media
Find out how much time you're spending daily on social media by recording it for a week. If you must spend time on social media, then do it in your own time, not at work.

Effective meetings
If you must have a meeting, then at least ensure it makes the best use of everyone's time. This applies to your own meetings and any others that you attend. Don't stay for the whole meeting if you don't need to.

Moonlighting
John Adair coined the phrase "moonlighting" to describe a process of using the times when you find yourself awake at night with your mind active. He suggests you keep a notepad and pen by the side of your bed and jot down anything that keeps you awake during the night. The act of writing it down should clear your mind and help you get back to sleep. And, as an added bonus, you will have your note to remind you of the thought in the morning.

The Pareto principle
Often referred to as the 80/20 Rule, the Pareto principle states that, in anything, the few (20%) are vital and the many (80%) are trivial. Many businesses have made dramatic improvements in their profitability by focusing on the most effective areas of their business and eliminating, ignoring, automating, or delegating the rest.

The value of the Pareto principle is that it reminds us to focus on the 20% of everything that matters – the things that are important to our goals or to the business. Of the things we do

during our normal day, only 20% really matter. But that 20% of our effort produces 80% of our results, as long as we identify and focus on the things that really do matter.

Waiting time

This is the time we spend sitting about waiting for a bus, train, plane, or a person. Waiting in airports always seems to be the most frustrating, as you have to hang on in there in case there is an announcement about your flight.

If you have your action list with you, you can often fit a number of short tasks easily into what would otherwise be idle waiting time. Write a short letter, plan your next day, or prepare some notes on an issue or problem. All these types of activities can use time that would otherwise be totally wasted.

Travel time

When the plane, train, or bus finally departs, you are now in a seat for sometimes a long period of time. The good news is that you are not in your office, so you can't be disturbed. This is an ideal time for turning to important tasks that require some thought. If you have a mobile phone, turn it off while you are working – you can always pick up your messages later.

Car travel

Travel by car is the exception here as, if you are driving, you must clearly concentrate on that task. Don't be tempted to have your mobile phone on hands-free – it's not recommended for road-safety purposes. What you *can* do while driving is listen to things. This is probably one very practical use for educational or foreign language media. Again, you may have recorded something that you would like to listen to when you have the time; well, this could be that time.

Screen time

At the time of writing *Effective Time Management in easy steps*, the average American and European spent around seven hours a day in front of a screen being entertained. An ever-growing proportion of the population was becoming obese, and some classed as semi-illiterate. TV and the internet has a lot to answer for! If you want to watch something that you are interested in, that's fine – go ahead and watch it. Then, when the show has finished, turn the thing off and do something more useful with your time.

Hot tip

If anything, the average screen time has increased since then.

Multi-tasking

The word "multi-task" first appeared in a paper describing the capabilities of the IBM System/360 back in 1965. It has subsequently been applied to we humans, with multi-tasking now defined as working on two or more tasks at the same time, such as speaking on the phone while driving a car.

Why it's bad

The author and educational consultant Kendra Cherry says that multi-tasking may seem like a great way to get a lot done at once, but research has shown that our brains are not nearly as good at handling multiple tasks as we like to think they are. Some research even suggests that multi-tasking can hamper our productivity by reducing comprehension, attention, and overall performance.

While it might seem like we are accomplishing multiple things at the same time, what we are actually doing is quickly shifting our attention and focus from one thing to the next. Switching from one task to another can make it difficult to tune out distractions and cause mental blocks that can slow you down.

Productivity

Multi-tasking can have a serious impact on our productivity. Few, if any of us, have brains capable of performing multiple tasks at the same time. We are not multi-tasking – all we are really doing is switching our attention quickly from one task to another task and back again.

Distraction

Multi-taskers tend to feel more distracted than people who focus on one task at a time. This makes sense when you consider that, by habit, multi-taskers constantly refocus on a new task, effectively distracting themselves from their original task every time.

Some research also suggests that people who multi-task may have trouble focusing their attention even when they're not working on multiple tasks at once, although this research is not conclusive.

Task-switch costs

Contrary to what multi-taskers believe, we tend to work slower and less efficiently when we multi-task. Multi-tasking leads to what are referred to as "task-switch costs": a slower working pace or other negative effect that comes from switching between tasks.

Don't forget

Research has shown that this leads to more accidents.

We encounter task-switch costs because of the increased mental demand that's associated with jumping from one thing to another.

It is also believed that changing our focus keeps us from relying on automatic behaviors to complete tasks quickly. When we're focused on a single task that we've done before, we can work on autopilot, which frees up mental resources. Switching back and forth bypasses this process, so we tend to work more slowly.

Mistakes

Multi-tasking may lower our performance and make us more prone to making mistakes. Research has shown that students who multi-task in class tend to have lower grades and, if they continue multi-tasking at home, they often take longer to finish their homework. It also found that adults experience lower performance while multi-tasking and again cited the fact that they were likely to make mistakes if multi-tasking while driving.

Cognitive ability

Doing several different things at once can impair our cognitive ability, even for people who multi-task frequently. In fact, research suggests that people tend to overestimate their ability to multi-task, and the people who engage in this habit most frequently often lack the skills needed to be effective at it.

Chronic multi-taskers tend to be more impulsive than their peers and are more likely to downplay the possible risks associated with tackling multiple things at once. They also seem to show lower levels of executive control and are often distracted easily.

This behavior could have a serious impact on activities such as goal setting, identifying the information we need to achieve the goal, and disregarding irrelevant distractions.

Breaking the habit

Try to deal with one task at a time, using 25-minute timeboxes. Make a quick assessment of the tasks you are trying to do, then determine which one you need to focus on first. Organize your tasks into batches. If you're having trouble resisting the urge to check your email or engage in another distracting task, schedule set times in your day to tackle it. Limit distractions by finding a quieter place to work, switching your phone off, and turning off notifications and alarms.

Breaks

This topic explores the importance of taking a break, and looks at what may happen if you don't. It will also cover some of the different ways to take a break.

Why you should take a break

It has conclusively been found that taking a short break from time to time throughout your working day will help you to stay focused and improve your work. Similarly, taking longer breaks like weekends, holidays, and vacations will also be beneficial. When you take a break, you are not shirking responsibility – you're taking care of yourself in order to help you feel refreshed and ready to deliver your best work. Taking a break gives your brain and body a chance to reset, restore, and cope with the stresses of daily life.

Stress

Our bodies are designed to respond to short bursts of stress, but when that stress is prolonged or our stress response is triggered repeatedly and regularly (as can happen in a stressful job or relationship), the situation can turn into one of chronic stress, with real health problems.

Chronic stress can lead to conditions ranging from headaches and stomach upsets to high blood pressure, which brings an increased risk of heart disease and stroke. Research has shown that when our overall level of stress accumulates to a certain level, stress can snowball, because we're constantly in a state of anxiety. At this point, even positive events can feel overwhelming if they take energy to enjoy. Extended periods of stress can take a toll on your physical and mental well-being.

Signs of stress

Each of us responds to stress in our own ways, so the signs of being overwhelmed are also highly individual. However, there are some general warning signs that apply in most cases. If you're experiencing one or more of the following, start planning some downtime. This might mean a real vacation or even just a weekend staycation to recharge your batteries.

Key signs you need a break include: headaches; poor performance at or cynicism about work; difficulty concentrating; getting sick more frequently; sleep disturbances; lack of energy or motivation; increased frustration; using drugs or alcohol to cope with stress; or withdrawing from friends, family, or co-workers.

If you don't feel energized, motivated, creative, and fully engaged at work and in your relationships, the chances are you would benefit from a break. It is important to manage stress before it feels overwhelming. Short breaks, weekends, holidays, and vacations will keep you functioning at your best.

But please note that some of these signs may be symptoms of a mental health condition such as depression or anxiety. Talk to a doctor or mental health professional if the symptoms persist even after you take a break.

Take a break

When you need to take a break, there are several different options for getting one:

- Stand up, take a few deep breaths, stretch, and move your body for a minute or two.
- Change your environment: Going to another area will serve to help your brain rest and switch gears.
- Go for a short walk: The exercise will help you to clear your mind and leave you feeling much better. Even better if you can connect with nature by walking somewhere green and pleasant.
- Have lunch or a healthy snack, but not at your desk – recharge the mind and body at the same time.
- Take a power nap (if it won't get you fired): Short power naps have amazing health, productivity, and relaxation benefits.
- Get creative: If work requires you to use your logical left brain, deliberately choose a break activity that will activate your creative right brain, like drawing or even doodling.
- Drink some tea or coffee, but not too much.

Take a vacation

Take a vacation: a real break is more important than many people realize. The key is to prioritize rest and fun. Don't overdo the tourist activities or cram in too much or you'll feel you need to escape from your vacation. Staycations are becoming increasingly popular – relax at home or at a local hotel with no stress of travel; turn off the phone; ignore email; and enjoy your rest and play.

Beware

Don't try to do too much if you want to return refreshed.

Exercise

If you are too busy to take exercise, then you are too busy. Exercise generates energy and improves your health. It also balances out some of the pressures of work.

Why exercise?

For many, the word "exercise" conjures up a ghastly image of a row of people sweating away on exercise machines in a gym. But in practice, while the gym suits some people, there are plenty of other options available to anyone that wants to keep fit and healthy, or lose a bit of weight. Not to mention the fact that gyms are big business and not cheap.

Physical exercise and aerobic exercise (such as running, cycling, swimming, or brisk walking) in particular is the best type of exercise. It will help you stay healthy, release tension, burn off a few calories, and generally make you feel happier. There is no need for a full workout as, with a bit of ingenuity, 30 minutes' exercise every day will be enough to make you feel energized and content. The key is that whatever exercise you do, make sure it's fun or you won't keep it up!

Exercise every day

Build in some exercise every single day. It could be walking, running, or cycling or, equally well, gardening or cleaning the house. They are all exercise. Take the dog or the children for a walk in the park. Take a ball or a frisbee and have a bit of fun in the fresh air. It's all good exercise.

Some other ideas include:

- Don't take the elevator – walk up the stairs.
- Get off the bus one or two stops early and enjoy a walk.
- Don't slump at your desk at lunch time – take a walk before you eat your lunch.
- When you go shopping, park further away from the entrance.

Once you get started you will be able to find more and more opportunities for exercise, and you will start to feel good about it.

Benefits of walking

Most of us spend far too much time sitting: at our desks, while driving, watching the television, and so on. Get up and walk. You

don't need any special clothes (although sensible shoes help), and it doesn't cost any money. It doesn't require any expensive gym membership and you don't have to be trained how to do it – you already know how, so get up and go!

Walking (like cycling and swimming) is a low-impact form of aerobic exercise. It does not put as much stress on your joints as jogging or running. But it is a cardiovascular activity, so walking is good for your heart and lungs, as well as improving muscle tone and reducing body fat. Regular walking can reduce the risk of disease, relieve stress, help you sleep, and improve your mood. Walking can easily be incorporated into your daily routine. It will make you fitter, could save you money in transport costs, is good for the environment, and will make you feel happier.

Start in the morning

Exercising first thing in the morning is a great way to wake yourself up and energize yourself for the day ahead. Walking, jogging, a bike ride, or swimming, for 20 or 30 minutes, will leave you feeling great. Walk the kids to school. Or, what about walking or cycling to work in the morning? It's much better than sitting in a traffic jam or being on a crowded bus or train with people coughing their germs all over you.

Gentle start

If you feel you need a slightly more gentle way of starting to take more exercise, then things like yoga, Pilates, or stretching may be options to get you started. They are all beneficial in their own right and will help to get you back into a regular exercise routine. They should all raise your pulse rate and make you feel slightly out of breath.

Yoga is a discipline that aims to improve the health of your body and mind. A yoga teacher will direct you through a series of positions that will exercise your body and leave you feeling relaxed. Pilates is similar and will improve your muscle tone and your posture by a series of low-impact repetitions. Again, it will support your body and mind working together. Stretching is something that doesn't require a teacher, as there are plenty of books on the subject and it can easily be done at home.

No matter which form of exercise you choose, make sure you do a little bit every day, enjoy it, and keep it going for best results.

Hot tip

Make sure your exercise is enjoyable. That way, you will keep it up.

Meditation

I can already hear some of you groaning at the thought of meditation. It's for mystics and weirdos, not me! But wait, because meditation is not as weird as it sounds, and it can have some impressive results from a little practice. Recent studies have found that up to 500 million people around the world practice meditation regularly and over 14% of US adults have tried meditation. The top three reasons given for it are: to reduce stress and anxiety (84%), to improve concentration and memory (53%), and to improve performance (52%).

What is it?

Meditation is a process where practitioners induce an inner form of deeper consciousness through controlled breathing and focusing attention on one specific point. Meditation has been practiced since antiquity – sometimes as a component of a religious tradition – but it can be practiced on its own, without any trappings.

The good thing about meditation is that any philosophical or religious beliefs are not important. It doesn't matter if you have them or not as meditation is purely about consciousness, and it can be practiced by anyone.

Benefits of meditation

Studies have found that people who meditate are happier and healthier than those who don't. People who meditate sleep better and may even need less time sleeping thanks to the recuperative results of meditation. Meditation is also credited with providing its practitioners with improved mental and emotional health. It can rid our minds of subconscious feelings of anxiety, anger, depression, fear, and sadness. It is said to produce a perfect mental and physical balance. People who meditate are said to have more stable relationships and be satisfied and content with their lives.

Meditation has been used in clinical settings as a method of stress and pain reduction. There have been many cases where meditation has been seen to reduce and even reverse illness. There are even claims that meditation can extended the practitioner's life span.

Don't have time

A lot of people quite like the idea of meditation, but feel they don't have enough time. What we have been saying throughout this book is that you can invest time as well as spend it. Meditation is something you should consider investing your time

in as it will improve your effectiveness. If you feel you don't have enough time, try watching less television, or try going to bed 30 minutes earlier and getting up 30 minutes earlier. Meditation clears the mind and makes the rest of the day more productive. Nothing can beat the feeling of inner peace it brings, and meditation can give you inspiration. If you have peace of mind, your work will be more enjoyable and more productive.

Simple meditation

Meditation is not only very good for the body and mind, but it is also very easy. Don't eat before meditating and don't meditate lying down, as you are quite likely to fall asleep if you do. You don't need to sit in the lotus posture – a straight-backed chair is fine. You can meditate at any time, but it is probably best in the early morning as it sets you up for the rest of the day.

1 Sit quietly for 10 or 20 minutes, relaxed, breathing slowly, with your eyes closed, and be still.

2 Focus your mind on your center (solar plexus) and concentrate on one single thing – your breathing.

3 Don't worry if your mind begins to wander – let it go where it wants to begin with.

4 As you develop, you can bring your mind back to your center or whichever other single thought you chose to meditate on.

5 When you have finished, open your eyes slowly and bring your concentration back to your surroundings.

6 Stand up slowly, stretch, and feel at peace with the world and your surroundings.

That's all there is to it. Afterward, you will feel more alert and less tense. It is particularly good if you are suffering from stress.

Learn to live your life one day at a time. You can't change the past, so let it go and make tomorrow better by living well today.

Hot tip

Mindfulness is growing in popularity, but it is just another name for meditation.

Summary

- To be effective, you need to start off by determining exactly how you spend your time, as any assumptions you have are probably wrong.
- To produce a factual baseline, you will need to observe how you spend your time in detail, and record it for two weeks.
- Planning is one of – if not the most critical of – the business skills, and you will need to develop long-, medium-, and short-range plans to be effective.
- Our energy levels go up and down during the day, so you need to know when you are at your most and least creative to be able to schedule activities effectively.
- Rather than dealing with urgent tasks as a priority, you should deal with the most important tasks first, and only when you have completed them turn to the urgent ones.
- To be effective, you need to organize your office, desk, and filing systems.
- Then, you should look at your communication skills (reading, writing, and face to face) to make them effective.
- You can make use of a huge amount of otherwise wasted time in situations where you get delayed by being prepared for it.
- Contrary to what some people believe, multi-tasking is not an effective way of working. You will save time and become more effective if you avoid it.
- If we are to be effective, our bodies need us to take breaks from work. Get up and stretch every so often, take a break to get a coffee, or go out to get lunch.
- We all need to take regular exercise to stay fit and healthy and work well. It doesn't have to be high-intensity exercise – it can just be walking – but we do need it to be regular, and it makes sense to get into a routine.
- Simple meditation (or mindfulness) is an excellent way of relaxing and de-stressing our minds and bodies.

9 Agile Time Management

We now bring all we have established so far into the agile environment. We use a helicopter view through Fly high, Focus, Flow, Finish, and Follow-up.

Agile View

Having established an understanding of time, and how much we have, in Chapter 2; the importance of establishing achievable goals in Chapters 3 to 5; what not to do in Chapter 6; planning in Chapter 7; and effective time management practices in Chapter 8, we can now start to take an agile view of time management.

What agile brings

The big benefit of agile techniques is that they focus on getting things done more quickly. Agile project teams can deliver products (and the benefits flowing from them) much earlier than traditional project teams. For example, starting development earlier and completing functionality in iterations often allows agile project teams to bring value to the market up to 50% faster. But the benefits of agile methodology do not just apply to projects – they can also be applied to our personal development and time management as well.

Focus on deliverables

We have already touched on several agile practices in the earlier chapters, and one of the most important is the shift in focus from concentrating on activities (the work we do) to the results of that work (the thing that the work produces, or its deliverable). We have also noted that in agile terminology we try to refer to these deliverables as "wins".

Change of mindset

What we now need to do is change our mindsets into the habit of doing things the agile way. The good thing about habits is that they help us avoid making conscious decisions all the time, so good habits will make us more effective in using our time.

But if our habits are not helpful or smart, we tend to repeat them anyway, and they can become a big burden in our life. The way we handle our time management can make or break our accomplishment rate.

Working smarter

We also want to start working smarter rather than harder, and again, once we start doing that we will be changing our habits, and, once more, we will benefit from that. We have already laid some of the groundwork for this in the earlier chapters. The benefit of making things habitual is that we can then avoid having to make conscious decisions.

The old way

Traditional change (or project) management thinking tended to use five stages: **Initiation** (to define the change and get it started); **Planning** (to scope the work and develop the plan); **Execution** (to design and carry out the change); **Acceptance** (to manage quality and deliver a working solution); and **Closure** (to hand over the process and assess the success of the change).

For a large change (project), those five stages typically had formal stage ends and sign-off. It was referred to as the "waterfall method" as there was no option for going back up to a previous stage.

The agile way

The agile approach to change has also crystallized around five stages or – more accurately – steps, usually referred to and best summarized as the Five F Steps:

1 **Fly high**: Helicopter vision to see the big picture, all deliverables (wins) that need to be produced, and all tasks required to produce them.

2 **Focus**: Then, zoom back in and focus your complete attention on just one task at a time.

3 **Flow**: Defines the process for maintaining that focus and treating each task as if it is your only task.

4 **Finish**: Get the task fully completed or put it on hold if it cannot be fully completed in the scheduled time.

5 **Follow-up**: Compare the actual results of the task with your plan and recycle back to the helicopter view.

We will expand each of these five agile processes in the rest of this chapter.

High achievers

Studies of the highest achievers show that they manage their time exceptionally well and concentrate their focus on just two things: prioritizing their work, and how long they spend on each task. They get more done in less time by working smarter.

Don't work harder – work smarter.

Fly High

Helicopter vision

Taking a helicopter view refers to taking a broader perspective: seeing the big picture rather than concentrating on the detail of any situation. Sometimes referred to as "systems thinking", it is a discipline for viewing a problem or an opportunity as part of an overall situation. They say the best way to understand it is to view things with a historical perspective that takes into account events in the past, present, and potential future.

Developing a helicopter view requires some practice as it is a disciplined way of looking at issues and opportunities. Meirc Training and Consulting, which specializes in this area, says that there are three steps that one should practice until a helicopter view becomes second nature:

1 Distance yourself mentally from the current situation; like zooming out when looking through a camera, step back to see the whole thing. You should not be surprised if you see more than one problem or crisis: some problems will be urgent and short-term; others may be critical and long-term.

2 Describe the present situation as though you are looking at it in five or 10 years, then ask yourself what you will do if such and such happens. Various scenarios for the future can then be articulated, and strategies drawn around these scenarios.

3 Use helicopter vision repeatedly throughout the strategy formulation process to ensure that you are still on the right course. Make sure that you zoom in and out from time to time in order to stay on the right path without losing sight of the details.

So much for practicing the process, but what about actually using the process? Here are some suggestions for that from Anne-Maartje Oud and Joe Navarro, published in *Psychology Today*:

Helicopter technique

Maybe you are in a difficult situation mediating a conflict between team members, trying to understand a disgruntled customer or

just involved in a difficult conversation with colleagues, then suddenly there is this moment in the conversation where you get stuck. The facts may not be clear, and each side is saying something different, and you don't know what to do or say. That is the ideal situation to try out the helicopter technique; it's perfect for those occasions.

Like a helicopter, you don't have to go in one direction – you can quickly maneuver, circle out wider to encompass more details, go high for a better overall view, draw near for greater focus, or even fly backward to revisit a topic. It is also a reminder that you have license to be more agile in your approach – you can try different things to get information or to get people to open up.

The helicopter technique is a helpful image in those moments when you feel like you are not making progress, when feelings overwhelm or emotions start to dominate. In those moments when you feel that something different is needed, let that image of the helicopter act as a mental catalyst to get you back on track. Here is how it plays out in practice:

Flight agility
Basically, a helicopter can go anywhere, with precision. You're suddenly in the middle of something you were not expecting, and it is up to you to bring clarity to the situation. Think of that agile helicopter. You can lift off and take a look from above, take yourself out of it for a minute, and circle about while you think about what to do next. Take the time to develop situational awareness so that you can engage better, but always stay in control even if at the moment you are not making headway.

Precise yet delicate steering
Flying a helicopter requires that you be focused while fully engaged. You need both hands and both feet to steer. This metaphor helps us to remember that during a difficult conversation, we need to be subtle and thoughtful, with a focused mind, but we also need to be precise. Make sure you are calm and neutral. Your phone should be off, your desk should be clear, and make sure you take notes if necessary. Be aware of your own body language. Show an engaging posture and make eye contact. Nuance is key to flying helicopters and also for dealing with others – your movements should be smooth like the conversation.

142

Flying high

Flying high gives us an opportunity to have a greater overview. You can look at things like a helicopter from above to assess the situation and see what is happening. Listen and observe by expanding the view as if you are high above. Analyze the topics that are mentioned while also observing non-verbal communications. Ask exploring questions to get an understanding of the problem. As with a helicopter, you want to have a familiarity with the general area as well as where you are headed.

Flying low

Flying low is an analogy for taking the opportunity to scrutinize the matter being discussed with greater precision. When you see or hear something that stands out, go down into the detail. Ask people what they mean by what they just said; ask them to elaborate on it, or why they are getting irate. As with a helicopter, flying low lets you see details that need scrutiny.

Hovering

A helicopter has the ability to stay in one place, almost motionless. Hovering gives you extra time to observe and analyze more deeply. When using this technique, you pause and don't say anything. You listen, watch, and observe, but do not act. Sometimes, we need to hover to get the facts straight. Use silence strategically to get the others to open up.

Flying backward

During the conversation, you might want to take a step back. Explore what has already been said or reported. For example, you ask the person to repeat what was just said. Or, you see something non-verbal you want to address, such as a person rolling their eyes when asked a question. Try asking them what they feel about what you just asked them. As with flying a helicopter, you have the freedom to back up and revisit a topic of interest.

Getting out

As with a helicopter, some offices are too noisy or there are other distractions. So, you land, get out, and take a walk to a different setting with the person you need to talk to. You are in control, and if it requires a private space, you figuratively land and find that right place to conduct your interview. A bad location can be as adverse for an interview as bad weather is for flying.

Hot tip

People tend to favor certain modes and disregard the others. Practice them all, even if you think the situation doesn't really need it. You will be surprised at what you could have missed.

Flying away

You are the pilot in this conversation, and you have a choice. You don't have to have a difficult conversation there and then. You can take a break. You can leave the setting. You might choose to stop the conversation because of rising and intense emotions. You might feel you are not focused enough, or you might want to take the time to think about possible solutions. You can always ask to meet up at a different time and place. You can even grab a cup of coffee for a few minutes. Sometimes, it is better to fly away and continue the interview another day.

Limiting baggage

Sometimes, it is helpful to notice how much emotional baggage the parties involved bring to the conversation. Consider how long the situation or feuding has been going on for. Heavy baggage, like cargo, can keep a helicopter from flying or you from solving problems. Resolve to unload emotional baggage first.

Chart the course

After the conversation, you will still have the responsibility to orchestrate your next steps. Consider what has been said, what else needs to be done, and how you desire to accomplish that. Perhaps it is more interviews or more facts that are needed, or merely the opportunity to take action. As with any flight, you prepare in advance for what is next, and that helicopter image reminds you that planning is key.

Conclusion

Hopefully, you can get by without having to resort to formality, even with difficult conversations. But if you ever do get stuck, remember the image of that helicopter and what it can do, and remind yourself that you will be able to navigate a way through.

We need to develop the habit of imagining, as specifically as possible, what we expect to see when each task is finished (the deliverable). This way, we can start to see as many tasks as possible from the early stages of a project. This high-level view is what we will use to identify our mission or plan for the next week.

Then, as we work down to the detailed level, we can start to divide or break the project down into smaller and smaller tasks and activities. This will be the basis for our daily plans.

Focus

In Chapter 7, we looked at the process of developing our week plans and day plans, starting out from our high-level goals. Then, we defined the project work at a high level (what we will need to do to achieve a goal), then broke it down into more detailed activities (the things we will need to produce in order to achieve it), and we ended up with a number of tasks (deliverables) we needed to complete this week.

We then looked at estimating the resources, work effort, and the duration (elapsed time) we would need to complete each task. This would allow us to allocate each task to a timebox so that we can control the time we will actually spend on it.

Day plan

In Chapter 8, we looked at putting together our day plan, which must include time for all our other activities for the day as well as any task timeboxes. This is the crunch point and time to zoom in to the detailed level. Now, we need to focus on just one thing: the next task.

Task in hand

We should have eliminated anything we don't need to do to accomplish the task, and now we must focus everything on the only thing that needs to be accomplished: getting the task done.

Working environment

If the task is a personal one, you should have arranged your environment in such a way as to prevent interruptions. If it is a team task, you should likewise have the team working in an environment where they will not be disturbed for the duration of the timebox:

● Desk(s) cleared of all files and other data not connected to the task.
● Phones turned off and or set to silent and diverted to take messages.
● Clock visible to monitor the time during the performance of the task.
● Goal and deliverable clearly defined and either written out clearly on paper or displayed on the wall.

- Everything needed for the performance and completion of the task in place.
- Begin working on the task immediately at the start of the timebox.
- Focus on the task to the exclusion of all else. If something critical occurs, make a quick note and go back to the task.
- Work continuously through the timebox, unless you have scheduled any breaks.
- Check the time occasionally, and make yourself and any others aware of the rate of progress.
- Speed up the work if it becomes necessary due to the passage of time, but not at the expense of quality.
- When the timebox ends, stop work on the task immediately and review the timebox.

Task review

Were you able to complete the task or is it incomplete? If the latter, decide if you will allocate another timebox to compete the task and, if so, when, and recycle to the week plan.

Case study

In the production of this book, I carried out all the preliminary research and wrote a draft of the first chapter to establish a proof of concept with the publisher. Once given the go-ahead, I drew up a detailed plan and, based on my estimated workload, set a completion date based on the production of one chapter every one-and-a-half weeks.

Week plan

The week plan was to produce one chapter – a slightly challenging plan, but with the capacity of being able to stay within the overall schedule if anything slipped a little.

Day plan

The plan each day was to produce one or two topics, with two timeboxes (one in the morning and one in the afternoon), depending on how large the work effort I had estimated for each was. At the time of writing, I was on this chapter and on schedule.

Hot tip

Be strict with all the factors you set to ensure you maintain focus, but be realistic. You must find a sustainable pace. Do not burn yourself out or make the journey unpleasant for yourself or others.

Flow

The concept of flow was originally introduced by the psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi in 1975. His theory was that when we are actively engaged in an activity where the skills possessed are balanced to the challenge of the activity, we can approach an optimal state of experience, which he named "flow". Flow can occur during a wide variety of tasks, such as when a person is learning, being creative, or participating in a sport.

Flow in sport, exercise, and performance

A review published in 1990 stated that a broad definition of flow is a person's sense of joy and creativity, and an experience of total involvement in life. Such an experience fosters the development of a conscious state where optimal human functioning flourishes.

In positive psychology, a flow state, also known as "being in the zone", is the mental state in which a person performing some activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity. When in a flow state, people pay no attention to distractions, and time seems to pass without notice.

Hyperfocus

Flow is similar in some respects to hyperfocus, which refers to an intense fixation on an interest or activity for an extended period of time. However, hyperfocus has a more negative connotation and is often found in children and adults with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Examples include spending too much time playing video games, or becoming overly absorbed by one aspect of a task to the detriment of everything else involved in completing the task.

Nine dimensions

For over 20 years, Csíkszentmihályi conducted a number of research projects, and observed that his subjects' most favored moments occurred when their thoughts and actions flowed. He summarized this optimal state into nine descriptive dimensions of the experience, the first three of which are often referred to as the pre-conditions to flow:

- **Challenge-skills balance**: Flow requires an equal balance between the skill level and the challenge. If the challenge is too demanding, we get frustrated. On the other hand, if it is too easy, we get bored.

- **Action-awareness merging**: Our thoughts often wander, but in flow, we are completely absorbed in the task at hand.
- **Clear goals**: It is sometimes unclear what should occupy our attention. However, in a flow experience we have a clear purpose and a good grasp of what to do next.
- **Unambiguous feedback**: Direct and immediate feedback is continuously present. When we are in flow, we know how well we are doing all the time.
- **Concentration on the task at hand**: Because we are absorbed in the activity, we are only aware of what is relevant to the task at hand, and we do not think about anything else.
- **Sense of control**: An absolute sense of personal control exists, as if we are able to do anything we want to do.
- **Loss of self-consciousness**: A lack of awareness of bodily needs as self-consciousness disappears. In a flow state, we are too involved in the activity to care about protecting our ego.
- **Transformation of time**: A distorted sense of time occurs. Time either slows down or flies by when we are completely engaged in the moment.
- **Autotelic experience**: Flow is an intrinsically rewarding activity; the activity becomes autotelic – done for its own sake.

Agile flow

In agile terminology, flow is a state of mind that moves us to do our best work, no matter what that work is. The challenge absorbs us so much that we forget about everything else, even our worries or concerns. We need to develop a routine of treating each task as if it is our only task and follow it without even thinking. Just get on and do it – each task then becomes a quick win, and you will get to enjoy it. The process of flow naturally sets the stage for self-improvement.

Get into the state of flow by sharpening your focus and attention. Trust yourself, your training, and your ability – you will worry less and experience fewer nerves. When you're in a flow state, you shut down negative mind-wandering. You focus on the task at hand and will find it intrinsically rewarding.

Don't forget

Think how often you have lost all track of time while doing something you really enjoy.

147

Finish

Once we start on a task, we need to get it done before we move on to the next one. There will be times when we don't or can't finish tasks, but there are also ways we can avoid that happening.

It's easy to start a task, and it's exciting – we can imagine things and start designing solutions. It's when we have to do the less enjoyable things that it starts to lose its attraction. But if the task isn't finished, none of the effort we have put into it matters, and for most of us, completing tasks is the hard bit.

Completing tasks

Eleanor McKenna (a designer at Google) came up with these 10 tips on not just starting new tasks but, more importantly, on how to finish them:

- **Be selective**: Choose what to focus your energy on and learn to say no.
- **Plan what needs to be done**: Once you've decided on goals to achieve, put a detailed plan in place.
- **Make the time**: In order to finish a task, you'll need to make it a priority over other activities.
- **Commit**: Now, make sure you do it.
- **Set a deadline**: And if you miss that deadline, set another deadline.
- **It doesn't need to be perfect**: There is no such thing as perfect; it just needs to be good enough.
- **Have the end goal in mind**: Imagine what the finished task looks like; this will give you a clear target to aim at.
- **Track your progress**: Every now and again, look at how much you've done already; it will give you a lift.
- **Get help if you're stuck**: Talk to someone and tell them about your problem; they might have a solution.
- **Treat yourself**: The most important part is to give yourself a reward when you've reached the finish line.

And another set of tips from Brian Tracy (a Canadian-American motivational speaker and self-development author):

Don't forget

In agile terminology we try to think of completed tasks as "wins".

- **Manage and organize your tasks on paper**: Break the job down into its constituent parts before you begin.
- **Fully prepare for each task**: When you sit down to work or to begin a task, make sure that you have everything to hand.
- **Take small steps to manage your tasks**: 20% of the work can account for 80% of the value.
- **Salami-slice your tasks**: Take a small slice and complete just that piece.
- **Select a 5-minute task and start there**: And do only that; don't worry about the whole job.
- **Do the task that causes you the most fear or anxiety**: Deal with whatever is causing you distress or fear.
- **Start your day with the most unpleasant task first**: Get it over with and everything else will seem easier in comparison.
- **Think about the negative consequences if you don't finish**: Sometimes, you can motivate yourself into action by thinking about the negative consequences and what will happen to you if you do not get things done as promised.

Most of these tips are things we have covered already in this book, but one or two of them might give you a bit of additional motivation to get tasks completed.

The only exception is the final one. I am not a fan of negative motivation, but if it works for you, use it.

Getting to done

You should have planned your day and allocated a timebox in which to perform each task by scheduling a specific time for it and booking it in your calendar. What you now need to do is complete each task within that timebox so that it is done.

The concept of getting to done is important so as to avoid almost finishing tasks, as they will fill your calendar without any results. Work to complete the task by the end of the timebox, then accept what you have done, no matter how good or bad you feel about it. All that matters is that it is done – you have completed it to the best of your ability.

Don't forget

Brian Tracy refers to getting the worst thing out the way first as "eating that frog".

Hot tip

"Done" is one of the most important of the agile practices and is fully covered in Chapter 10.

Follow-up

As we finish each task, we need to follow it up by evaluating the actual results of the completed task and take any actions needed to improve our plan. Any new tasks need to be inserted, and any task no longer needed can be removed and the plan updated. In reviewing each completed task we are also reviewing our medium- and high-level plan.

Charlie Gilkey, in his book *Start Finishing*, states five reasons why we should review our plans:

Reviewing plans

- **Limit decision fatigue**: A plan is a set of pre-made decisions – it's a product of the most taxing thing we have to do, so reviewing it helps us to improve next time we plan.
- **Reveal assumptions that need to be adjusted**: Plans rest upon assumptions, whether we articulate them or not. The more your plans involve other people, the more they are likely to be off target.
- **Proactively problem-solve**: We may assume that we can finish a task in one day, but then it takes two, and this starts a cascade. Rather than working harder to try to catch up, a better option is to review our plans to see who we need to proactively coordinate and communicate with. People are willing to help out if you give them advance notice, not when you come up with a last-minute panic situation.
- **Keep momentum on big tasks**: Big tasks always contain a lot of smaller tasks. Objectives can span quarters; rarely do we sustain our motivation that long. It can be challenging to stick with a task that you know isn't going to bear fruit for another three to six months.
- **Ultimately save time**: The items listed above help you save time on their own, but the more you review your plans, the better you get at making plans that work. Whereas most people think effectiveness comes from world mastery, the truth is that it comes from self-mastery.

Doing this requires you to know what works for you and what doesn't. Continually comparing your plans against your results sets up a continuous feedback loop that, done right, is the precursor to an upward spiral of success.

Skills You Need has this to say about lifelong learning: "

> *"It's worth taking time to review your activities against your personal development plan on a regular basis, probably every quarter or so. Less often, and you may find that you are not placing a high enough priority on your development activities, and letting progress slip. More often, and you are likely to put the review off, because the last one was so recent."*

Personal development plan

Regular reviews will ensure that you are not tempted to make personal development a lower priority. It is easy to forget about personal development, especially if you have just started a new job or course of study, but a regular review of your development plan keeps the process on track.

- Set aside time for your review; make sure you are in no rush, and also that your environment is suitable.
- Find your original plan with your goals and activities – you need to know what you said you were going to do.
- For each planned activity, be honest and assess how far what you have done was in line with your plan.
- Consider how successful your development has been in getting you to your goals and whether they are still realistic.
- Decide what you need to do next: more similar activities or something different.
- Will you need to take more time, or do you need to find some external support?
- Then, revise your plan and set out your new activities.

It is helpful to document your thinking during the review process. This means you can look back next time and remember why you changed your goals or activities.

Agile follow-up

Change the way you manage your time through self-discipline and a commitment to strategy. Train your self-discipline, and you will accomplish more and more in less and less time. Don't work harder – work smarter. Consistent practice produces mastery, and mastery makes for new habits.

Hot tip

Skills You Need is a website that provides practical, easy-to-understand articles and resources to help individuals develop a wide range of skills for personal and professional growth: **https://www.skillsyouneed.com/**

Summary

- Having established an understanding of time and how much we have; the importance of achievable goals; what not to do; planning; and effective time management, we can now start to take an agile view of time management.
- The big benefit of agile techniques is that they focus on getting things done more quickly. Agile teams can deliver much earlier than traditional teams.
- One of the most important principles is the shift in focus from activities (work) to the results of the work: deliverables – or, in agile terminology, wins.
- The highest achievers concentrate their focus on just two things: prioritizing their work, and how long they spend on each task. They get more done in less time by working smarter.
- Flying high by taking a helicopter view refers to taking a broader perspective; seeing the big picture rather than concentrating on the detail of any situation.
- Focus allows us to eliminate anything we don't need to do to accomplish the task and focus on the only thing that needs to be accomplished: getting the task done.
- Flow is a state of mind that moves us to do our best work, no matter what that work is. The challenge absorbs us so much that we forget about everything else, even our worries or concerns. The process of flow naturally sets the stage for self-improvement.
- Finish means that once we have started a task, we work on it continually in its timebox until we have finished it or the timebox has ended.
- Done is an important agile concept that defines what we need to complete and no more.
- Follow-up is the process of evaluating the actual results of the completed task so that we can take any actions needed to improve our plan. New tasks are inserted, and tasks no longer needed can be removed and the plan updated. We also review our personal plans and our high-level plan.

Don't forget

What remains of an incomplete task at the end of its timebox becomes a new task. You decide if and when it gets scheduled and what its priority is now compared to all other tasks waiting to be done.

10 Agile Practices

In this chapter, we bring in the Agile Practices and apply them to time management, starting with the most fundamental practice of all: the definition of "done". We then build up through the other principles to give a complete framework for agile time management to achieve great results.

Agile Principles

Before we get into the Agile Practices, it is worth stating the Agile Principles and the Agile Manifesto they are based on for any readers not familiar with them. The manifesto and principles were developed to define a common approach to agile software development at a conference in the Snowbird ski resort in Utah in 2001. The following is extracted from *Agile Project Management in easy steps*:

The Agile Manifesto

We are uncovering better ways of developing software by doing it and helping others do it. Through this work we have come to value:

Individuals and interactions over *processes and tools*

Working software over *comprehensive documentation*

Customer collaboration over *contract negotiation*

Responding to change over *following a plan*

That is, while there is value in the items on the right, we value the items on the left more.

What it means

While the manifesto was aimed specifically at agile software development, it can meet a wider context, as described below:

- **Individuals and interactions**: In an agile development, self-organization and motivation are important, as are interactions like collocation and pair programming.
- **Minimum Viable Product**: Working prototypes will be much more useful and welcome than just presenting detailed documents to clients in meetings.
- **Customer collaboration**: Requirements cannot be fully defined at the beginning of the product development cycle. Therefore, continuous customer involvement is very important.
- **Responding to change**: Agile solution development is focused on quick responses to change and continuous development, harnessing change for the customer's competitive advantage.

12 principles

These 12 principles underlie the Agile Manifesto:

1   **Customer satisfaction**: by the early and continuing production of useful deliverables.

2   **Changing requirements**: welcome changing requirements, even late in the development process.

3   **Frequent delivery**: of working prototypes, from every couple of weeks to every couple of months.

4   **Measure of progress**: delivery of working solutions is the principle measurement of progress.

5   **Sustainable development**: so that sponsors, developers, and users can maintain a constant pace indefinitely.

6   **Close cooperation**: business people and developers must work together daily throughout the project.

7   **Motivate individuals**: by giving them the support they need and trusting them to get the job done.

8   **Face-to-face conversation**: the most efficient and effective method of conveying information in a development team.

9   **Technical excellence**: through continuous attention to technical excellence and good design.

10   **Simplicity**: by keeping things simple, the amount of work that has to be done is minimized.

11   **Self-organizing teams**: the best architectures, requirements, and designs emerge from self-organizing teams.

12   **Regular adaptation**: the team reflects on how to become more effective and adjusts its behavior accordingly.

Definition of Done

Having set out the basic definition of agile solution development in the previous topic, we can start to build on that by looking at some underlying agile practices that we can usefully incorporate into an agile approach to time management.

Let us start with one of the most fundamental practices of all – the definition of done. The following is based on the Agile Alliance definitions.

Done
This is the most basic principle of all. We need to define and get full agreement with everyone on what the term "done" really means. This will give the team a common understanding of when tasks really are completed. This is to prevent the build-up of hidden tasks (referred to as technical debt) that could potentially cost a lot of time to fix later on in the project or process.

Early on, the team should agree – and display prominently somewhere in the team room – a list of criteria that must be met before a deliverable or product increment such as a user story is considered done. Failure to meet these criteria at the end of a sprint (development session) normally implies that the work should not be counted toward that sprint's velocity.

Velocity
At the end of each iteration (version of a product), the team adds up effort estimates associated with user stories that were completed during that iteration. This total is called velocity. Knowing velocity, the team can compute (or revise) an estimate of how long the project will take to complete, based on the estimates associated with remaining user stories and assuming that velocity over the remaining iterations will remain approximately the same. This is generally an accurate prediction, even though rarely a precise one.

History of done
Human nature, egos, and optimism bias makes people very poor at objectively defining when something is done. They may just think it means that they have done what they think they need to do, without considering anything else. They need to agree with the person the product is being developed for what they consider done will look like when the product is actually completed, tested, deployed, and properly documented.

Don't forget

Fit for purpose means the outcome does what it was intended to do, no more, no less. If someone simply needs to get from A to B, they don't need a Ferrari.

Expected benefits

The definition of done provides a checklist that usefully guides pre-implementation activities: discussion, estimation, and design. It also limits the cost of rework once a feature has been accepted as done. Having an explicit contract limits the risk of misunderstanding and conflict between the development team and the customer or product owner.

Upon request, the team can point to its explicit definition of done. The team will use the definition of done at the end of a sprint to justify the decision to count work toward velocity or not.

Potential problem

The list needs to define the minimum work generally required to get a product increment to a done state. Individual features or user stories may have specific done criteria in addition to the ones that apply to work in general. If the definition of done is merely a shared understanding, rather than spelled out and displayed on a wall, it may lose much of its effectiveness; part of its value lies in being an explicit contract known to all members of the team.

Agile time management

The application of this practice to agile time management will be essential if working with an agile software development team, but it will also be applicable when working with any form of team. Where the work is being done by a single person, exactly the same considerations should apply so that the person responsible for the work is able to confirm the work really is complete.

In agile time management we should be defining a commonly agreed quality criteria that will apply to any completed work, be it larger tasks (wins) or smaller intermediary tasks (steps to wins). The definition of done should typically include things such as:

- The quality of the delivered item being fit for the purpose for which it is intended.
- The item can be used as people intend to use it for as long as it is expected to be used.

Failure to ensure the quality of finished work can lead to an unseen build-up of hidden tasks such as documentation or management approval. As mentioned earlier, these are referred to in agile terminology as technical debt.

Don't forget

Fit for use means the outcome can be used in the way it is intended to be used. If someone needs to get from A to B in 4.2 seconds, they probably do need a Ferrari!

(Other fast cars are available.)

Timebox

A timebox is a previously-agreed period of time during which a person or a team works steadily toward the completion of a task. Rather than allow work to continue until the goal is reached and then evaluate the time taken, the timebox approach consists of stopping work when the time limit is reached and evaluating what was accomplished during the timebox. Timeboxes are a distinctive feature of the early agile approaches, notably Scrum and Extreme Programming (XP), but they have a much earlier history.

The stages of planning, tracking, recording, processing, and visualizing are fundamental to the technique. In the planning phase, tasks are prioritized by recording them in a "tasks for today" list, enabling users to estimate the effort they will require. As they are completed, they are recorded, adding to a sense of accomplishment and providing raw data for subsequent self-observation and improvement.

The critical rule of timeboxed work is that work should stop at the end of the timebox, and progress be reviewed. Has the goal been met, or partially met if it included multiple tasks?

Timescales

Timeboxes can be used at varying timescales. For agile software development, timescales ranging from one day to several months are commonly used. Often, timeboxes of three months are used for product releases. But, again, timeboxes of one or two weeks would be used for tighter control of delivery of features or wins.

At the other end of the scale in agile time management, five or 10 minutes might be used for a quick brainstorming session. One very popular timebox method in agile time management is based on the Pomodoro Technique.

The Pomodoro Technique

The Pomodoro Technique was developed by Francesco Cirillo in the late 1980s. He used a kitchen timer to break work into intervals – typically 25 minutes in length – separated by short breaks. Each interval is known as a pomodoro, from the Italian word for tomato, after the tomato-shaped kitchen timer Cirillo used.

The technique has six steps:

1 Decide on the task to be done.

2 Set the Pomodoro timer for 25 minutes.

3 Work on the task.

4 End work when the timer rings and take a short break for 10 minutes.

5 If you have finished fewer than three pomodoros, go back to Step 2 and repeat until you go through three pomodoros.

6 After three pomodoros are done, take the fourth pomodoro and then take a long break (20 to 30 minutes); once the long break is finished, return to Step 2.

For the purposes of the technique, a pomodoro is defined as an interval of work time.

Regular breaks are taken to aid assimilation. A 10-minute break separates consecutive pomodoros. Four pomodoros form a set, with a longer 20-30 minute break between sets.

Goal
A goal of the technique is to reduce the effect of internal and external interruptions on focus and flow. A pomodoro is indivisible; when interrupted during a pomodoro, either the other activity must be recorded and postponed (using an inform – negotiate – schedule – callback strategy) or the pomodoro must be abandoned.

After task completion in a pomodoro, while the Pomodoro timer is still ticking, remaining time should be devoted to activities such as:

● Reviewing the work just completed.
● Reviewing the activities from a learning point of view (which learning objective or outcome did you accomplish?).
● Reviewing the list of upcoming tasks for the next planned pomodoro time blocks, and starting to reflect on or update them based on experience to date.

Hot tip

Life is too short. People don't naturally like limiting their time to do something. If you are one of those people, try asking yourself how much of your remaining life you are prepared to spend on that activity. This tends to focus the mind.

Don't Add Slack to Estimates

Estimation is the process of finding a number that is close enough to the right answer. You are not trying to get the exact right answer. All you want is something that is good enough.

- Estimation can save you money – before agreeing to anything, do a quick estimation of how much you should pay.
- Estimation can save you time when the calculation does not have to be exact.
- Estimation can save you from making mistakes (miskeying) with your calculator.
- Estimation helps you focus on what is really going on.

Estimate

In the agile environment, an estimate will usually consist of two steps:

1 First, a quantified evaluation of the work effort necessary to carry out the given task is made.

2 Then, that is converted into the length of time it is likely to take to carry out – its duration.

In a software development environment, the intent is to aggregate many such individual estimates, so as to obtain an indication of the overall work effort, duration, or cost of a software project.

Common pitfalls

Even within the agile community, one finds many distinct schools of thought concerning the theory and practice of estimation. However, a broad consensus has emerged around a few typical mistakes:

- Estimates necessarily embody a component of uncertainty; point estimates are generally considered inadequate insofar as they fail to reflect that uncertainty.
- Estimates are not the same as commitments; for instance, blaming a developer for taking three days for what they estimated they would finish in two is a counter-productive attitude, usually leading to overinflated estimates in future.

● An estimate isn't a final answer – it reflects the information that was on hand at the time of communicating it. It should always be permissible to update an estimate in light of new information, either upward or downward.

In agile time management, estimation is the process of finding an estimate or approximation, which is a value that is usable for the purpose of scheduling and controlling people's workload. Even though the input data may be incomplete, uncertain, or unstable, the value is nonetheless usable because it is derived from the best information we have available.

Examples
We all use estimates in real life to help us in areas such as the following:

● When picking shopping, we can estimate roughly how much our bill will be from the displayed prices.

● In a restaurant, they have prices on the menu and wine list, so we know roughly how much our bill is going to be.

● When comparing pack sizes or two-for-one offers, we can estimate which item is likely to be the best value for money.

● We can quickly guess roughly how many people are in a room or how many boxes are on a shelf just by looking.

Trust yourself
We are not talking exact answers here, but answers that are good enough for our purpose. Even in mathematics we have a symbol for exactly equal (=) and a symbol for approximately equal ($\approx$), so estimation is just the process of finding a number that is close enough to the right answer. Trust yourself to pick something that is good enough for the purpose.

We went through the complete process of producing an estimate in Chapter 7. What we should have ended up with is our best estimate of how much work is involved in a task and how long it is going to take to complete it (its duration).

We also covered Parkinson's and Hofstadter's laws, so the last thing we should do is add any slack to a task estimate. If we need to allow time for the unexpected, it should be added as a separate item as a single buffer to the end of a larger timebox.

Hot tip

One technique is called T-Shirting. For example, if you had 11 tasks to perform, you might assess that 5 of them were small, 2 medium, 3 large, and 1 extra large. You can use an average duration for how long a task of each size would take and multiply it out.

Defer Decisions

We looked at decision-making in Chapter 4, and identified a seven-step approach. That approach to decision-making is also recommended by UMass (University of Massachusetts) Dartmouth, and these are its recommended seven steps:

1 Identify the decision.

2 Gather relevant information.

3 Identify alternatives.

4 Weigh up the evidence.

5 Choose among alternatives.

6 Take action.

7 Review your decision and its consequences.

Decision-making
So, the key step is Step 5: making a choice. Sometimes it may be a simple choice, and sometimes it may be more complicated. It is not unusual for decision makers to find that they are unable to make a choice between the different options that they are offered. In these situations, they typically defer their decision – that is, delay a decision to a later point in time or possibly avoid making a decision altogether.

Agile approach
The agile practice is to defer making decisions until the latest possible moment. The reason for this is that once a decision has been made, time will be spent on the results of that decision and work will be carried out.

The potential problem is that the environment may then change, making that earlier decision wrong. If later that turns out to be the case, anything done will turn out to be a complete waste of time and effort. While originally based on software development experience, this principle also holds true for individual and team work in any environment.

Don't forget

No decision can also be a decision.

Reduce Cycle Time

Cycle time is the amount of time a person or a team spends actually working on producing an item, up until the product is ready for shipment. It is effectively the time it takes to complete one task. This includes time spent producing the item and the wait stages (amount of time the task is left waiting) between active work times.

Calculating cycle time
The mathematical formula behind cycle time is not difficult to understand. Subtract the time the first task was started from the time at the end of the last task.

Cycle time = finish time - start time.

For example, if the first step of producing a report starts at 10am and the completed report is checked and printed by 11:30am, the total cycle time for producing the report is one-and-a-half hours. Cycle time can also be used for specific portions of the total process, having one cycle time for the first draft, a second cycle time for the draft to be reviewed, and a final one for producing the final report.

Reducing cycle time
Getting cycle time down will improve your delivery rate and mean you are delivering a better service. First, you need to establish a goal: what sort of reduction might be possible and what would be a realistic target? Then, identify areas where you can improve, such as:

- Identify and deal with any bottlenecks.
- Eliminate any activities that don't add value to the process.
- Eliminate waste such as defects, waiting time, neglect of human talent, or transportation.
- Reduce setup activities.
- Optimize the sequence of your processes to whatever makes the most sense for your business.

Agile approach
In agile time management we should be looking at any tasks or other work items that are repeated, such as producing progress reports, to see how we can reduce cycle time.

Pipelines

In business, the term "pipeline" is used to describe progress toward a long-term goal that involves a series of discrete stages. This might be a sales pipeline including marketing, negotiation, credit checks, and processing contractual documentation. Or, it could be a research and development pipeline such as a university might use for the purpose of seeking grants.

Software development

In agile terminology, a software delivery pipeline is the process of taking new or changed features from developers and getting them quickly delivered to the customers by getting the feature deployed and into production. Testing within continuous delivery pipelines is designed so that the earliest tests are the quickest and easiest to run, giving developers the fastest feedback.

Successive rounds of testing then lead to increased confidence that the code is a viable candidate for production, and that more expensive tests (in terms of time, effort, or cost) are justified. Manual testing is performed toward the end of the pipeline, leaving computers to do as much automated work as possible before people get involved.

Although it is tempting to arrange the delivery pipeline in phases such as functional tests, then acceptance tests, then load and performance tests, then security tests), this can lead to serious problems progressing too far down the pipeline before they are found. This is, in fact, harking back to the old waterfall model.

Waterfall process

Prior to 2010, most companies used the bureaucratic waterfall process for developing IT projects. The primary measures of project success were the actual cost of the delivered product compared with the budget and meeting the project schedule dates. This often resulted in contrasting views of project success:

- From the IT view, the project was a success if it was on time and to budget. History tells us that this was rarely achieved in the early days, which resulted in ever-inflated budgets and lengthier delivery schedules.

- From the business view, the project took a long time and cost a lot of money but the functionality and usability of the system delivered often left a lot to be desired. The business and the

world had changed during the project, so the delivered system was already two to three years out of date.

Lean concepts

With the advent of the agile approach, lean concepts and methods were introduced, and the lean software delivery approach seemed to work. Organizations started to recognize that this technique was at least equal to – if not much better than – the traditional waterfall approach, and the take-up of agility expanded rapidly.

During this period, many new lean practices and techniques were introduced into agile practices. These included Value Stream Analysis, Lean Management, Kaizen, Visual Process Performance, A3 problem solving, and many more. Gradually, these lean agile practices developed into one concept, keeping the delivery pipeline short and thin.

Keep the pipeline short and thin

The agile approach is, therefore, to keep the pipeline short and thin to limit the amount of work in progress and the number of people working in sequence to improve response times, and speed up throughput.

This builds on the practices covered so far in this chapter:

- Use of timeboxes to concentrate on speed and quality of delivered products.
- Not adding slack to projects to keep them honest, and not allowing work to expand to fill the time available.
- Deferring decisions to the last possible moment to reduce production of wasted work.
- Reducing cycle time to eliminate waste of all types, and any other processing inefficiencies.

By keeping the pipeline short and thin, we can now add faster response times and speed of delivery to this list.

Agile time management

In the world of agile time management, this practice clearly applies to any work being carried out by a team, where it should be capable of identifying ways of improving the team's progress. The concept may also be useful in more complicated solo work.

Hot tip

Don't be distracted by what is coming down the pipeline. That is part of the review process.

Discipline

Discipline refers to the ability to follow rules, regulations, and procedures, and to stay committed to the code of ethics in the workplace. It also refers to your dedication and determination to uphold your part in a project or task and to ensure it's done in an efficient and effective manner.

Work ethics

They say that developing a good work ethic is the key to job satisfaction, maximizing your personal productivity and ultimately evading burnout. A good work ethic means doing your best with your job, whatever it is. Developing a good work ethic is good in itself; it helps your personal productivity, and is generally contagious. Everyone gets something out of a good work ethic.

The eight steps you can take to develop a good work ethic are:

1 **Cultivate self-discipline**: This will allow you to stay on top of your work without taking on too much or too little. Be accountable to yourself above anyone else, as ultimately this first step is the key to success.

2 **Use your time wisely**: Effective time management is easier than you may think – be punctual, try starting earlier, schedule your tasks, focus on important tasks, and be prepared to stay late when necessary. Choosing to put everything into what you do is the cornerstone of a good work ethic.

3 **Eliminate distractions**: Put your smartphone away, limit watercooler chats, don't daydream, set mini-goals you can accomplish throughout the day, and understand how and when you work best.

4 **Focus on consistency**: All work involves a degree of repetition, but as you learn and master new skills and apply them regularly to what you do, you will attain expertise through the repetition.

5 **Start your day right**: The work you do first thing sets the tone and pace for the rest of your work day. Understand your energy cycle, as you may work better at different times of the day.

6   **Take breaks**: Eat and drink when you need to, and get some exercise – a good workout releases endorphins, boosting mood and focus; so does meditation. If you're struggling to incorporate exercise into your work life, prioritize it as one of your goals.

7   **Learn from mistakes**: You won't get it right 100% of the time. Developing and improving your work ethic isn't about being the most productive or best-liked employee in your company – it's about doing the best you can; and because some failure is inevitable, learn how to deal with it.

8   **Make time for yourself**: As well as cultivating good work habits, you need to prevent burnout and discouragement, so: get adequate sleep, look after your general health, put work out of your mind at the end of the day, don't work every day, and manage your stress levels.

Those are the steps we can each take to develop a disciplined approach to our work. Now, let us consider the agile approach.

Agile approach

The discipline we are talking about in agile time management is the discipline of using timeboxes to concentrate on speed and quality, not adding slack to projects to keep them honest, deferring decisions to the last possible moment, reducing cycle time to eliminate waste, and keeping the pipeline short and thin to minimize overheads – in fact, all the agile practices we have covered so far in this chapter.

Keep the discipline

By adding keeping the discipline to the mix, we can prevent the need for expensive rework by doing everything correctly, right from the start. Fixing problems later is always more expensive than doing things right by following the proper procedures early.

This always applies to team work, which is what the practice was originally developed for, but it applies equally well to work carried out by individuals – doing the right things and doing them right, first time and every time.

The target is "Once and done!".

Task Switching

We have already covered some of the issues with task switching and multi-tasking in Chapter 8. To summarize:

Multi-tasking
Multi-tasking may seem like a great way to get a lot done at once, but research has shown that our brains are not nearly as good at handling multiple tasks as we like to think they are. Switching from one task to another can make it difficult to tune out distractions and cause mental blocks that can slow us down.

Productivity
Multi-tasking can have a serious impact on productivity. Few, if any of us, have brains capable of performing multiple tasks at the same time. We are not really multi-tasking; we are just switching our attention quickly from one task to another and back again.

Distraction
Multi-taskers tend to feel more distracted than people who focus on one task at a time. This makes sense when you consider that, by habit, multi-taskers constantly refocus on a new task, effectively distracting themselves from their original task every time.

Speed of work
We tend to work slower and less efficiently when we multi-task. Multi-tasking introduces task-switch costs and a slower working pace. When we're focused on a single task that we've done before, we can work on autopilot, which frees up our mental resources.

Cognitive ability
Doing several different things at once can impair our cognitive ability. People tend to overestimate their ability to multi-task, and those who do frequently lack the skills needed to be effective at it. It also makes us more prone to making mistakes.

Impulsiveness
Chronic multi-taskers tend to be more impulsive and are more likely to downplay the possible risks associated with tackling multiple things at once. They also seem to show lower levels of executive control and are often distracted too easily.

This behavior could have a serious impact on activities such as goal setting – identifying the information we need to achieve the goal, and disregarding irrelevant distractions.

...cont'd

Breaking the habit

Deal with one task at a time, using 25-minute timeboxes. Then, determine which task you need to focus on first. Organize your tasks into batches. If you're having trouble resisting the urge to check your email or do another distracting task, schedule set times in the day to tackle it. Find a quieter place to work, switch your phone off, and turn off notifications and alarms.

Hopefully, the foregoing has made the case against multi-tasking, but it still leaves the fact that we are sometimes forced by outside events to switch tasks. Hence, the agile practice of limiting task switching.

Limit task switching

The human brain is bad at task switching, so what we need to do is prevent unnecessary switching between tasks and projects and also try to prevent interruptions that can sometimes force us to switch tasks. If we can do that, then our tasks get completed faster and better. Try these five steps:

1 **Batch and timebox your schedule to create clearer boundaries**: Task switching doesn't just kill your focus – it eats into the time you have for your most important work.

2 **Build a habit of single-tasking**: In your timeboxes, stay focused on just the one task – you'll be more productive, less stressed, and more creative; also, try to work where you won't be interrupted in your timebox.

3 **Finish each task**: We need to stop thinking about one task to fully transition our attention to another, but it is difficult for people to transition their attention away from an unfinished task, and subsequent performance suffers.

4 **Take regular breaks**: Too long spent in a focused state can actually backfire; we can't be in a state of high energy, high focus all day long.

5 **At the end of each day, shift out of work mode**: If we don't disconnect at the end of the day, we won't be able to give our mind the rest it needs to focus again tomorrow.

Hot tip

We can see from this it is almost impossible to achieve a state of flow (see pages 146-147) when multi-tasking.

169

Overtime

Overtime is the amount of time someone works beyond their normal working hours. Most countries now have overtime laws designed to prevent employers from forcing their employees to work excessively long hours, as was the case in previous centuries.

Health and safety
Employees who work overtime hours may suffer from mental, physical, and social effects. Significant side effects include stress, lack of free time, poor work-life balance, and health risks. Employee performance levels could also be lowered, as long working hours can lead to tiredness, fatigue, and lack of attentiveness. This can, in turn, result in increased workplace injury.

Work culture
There has been much in the media recently about employees being expected to work excessive hours as a new norm, even threats to sack employees who don't. 25% of US employees deal with constant pressure from their boss, and 15% even experience pressure from their colleagues. As a result, they feel guilty for taking time off and instead work long hours so that they're not perceived as unproductive. But there are a number of other reasons we end up working longer hours:

Always in contact
Since home working was introduced, it does bring perks, but it also comes with a few challenges. Not being able to unplug and create boundaries between your personal and work life is one of them. With 24/7 access to a work laptop, email, and chat, it's hard to know when to switch off, making the work day feel like it's never-ending.

Work Martyr Syndrome
Also known as Hero Syndrome or Hero Complex. Some people are willing to sacrifice their personal time for the benefit of their team members. They take pride in always working hard beyond their regular hours and feel validated when their colleagues rely on them for help. This happens because they somehow feel the need to prove themselves.

Heavy workloads
Having too much work on your plate can feel like a huge burden, especially when video meetings are eating into your schedule and causing additional strain on your mental health. Heavy workloads

force you to work overtime just to catch up on your to-do list and meet deadlines. Nearly half of employees don't take time off because their workload won't allow it.

Poor self-management
People who struggle to focus on tasks and manage their time effectively will often work longer hours than they need to.

What can we do?
Leading on from the previous point, learning self-management skills can help improve our time management and work focus and make us more productive, thereby reducing the number of hours we need to work to be effective.

Working hours
There is no ideal number of hours people should be working, but there is such a thing as working too many hours. Research has consistently shown that working over 45 hours a week is bad for the average employee. As the number of hours goes up, so does the risk of health conditions like strokes or heart attacks. The World Health Organization warns against working 55 hours a week or more, as it's a serious health risk.

Productivity
Once you pass 50 hours a week, your productivity takes a dive, so increasing to 60 hours a week certainly won't make you any more productive than someone who works 50 hours or less. Working smarter, not harder, is the answer.

Organizations that have put in place shorter work weeks or days have found that it's been extremely beneficial. They have found it results in increased productivity levels, more satisfied employees, better management of stress, increased focus, less sick leave, and improved work-life balance – in short, happy employees working fewer hours and producing better work.

Disregarding sustained overtime
Any project, contract, or piece of work that has a deadline is prone to this if progress starts slipping behind schedule, in order to catch up, but it has rarely worked. Disregarding sustained overtime was introduced as an agile practice to counteract this, on the basis that doing it will cause lost productivity, poor-quality work, and bad motivation among team members.

Beware

If your circumstances are such that you rely on the income from working sustained overtime, talk to an independent financial advisor, such as the Citizens Advice Bureau in the UK or The Foundation for Financial Planning in the USA before you burn yourself out helping someone else reach their goals.

Urgent vs Important

Many people get confused about the difference between urgent and important. Even long-time managers in large corporations can fail at this hurdle, but it is a core requirement for agile time management. Understanding the difference between urgent and important and making appropriate decisions based on that knowledge will have a big impact on both your personal and professional life.

Urgent

Urgent is defined by the *Cambridge Dictionary* as "very important and needing attention immediately". The task may have an immediate deadline or a deadline that has already passed. These urgent tasks are not always very time-consuming, nor do they always require a lot of effort, which makes it much easier to acquiesce to the request. It is easy to see why some people respond to urgent requests by giving them priority over anything else. But often, they are only urgent because someone has let the task slip in the first place.

Important

Important is defined by the *Cambridge Dictionary* as "necessary or of great value". Important tasks need not have a deadline looming over them; they are important because of the impact that they can have on the business or a person's life. Again, they need not be time-consuming or effort-intensive and may not require you to do them immediately. For instance, planning your next career move is not something that you need to do right away, but it is important for your future success.

In summary, the urgency of a task will be determined by its deadline, whereas the importance of a task is a more introspective exercise you need to decide by the impact it can have on your life. What you consider important will usually be different from what other people consider important. At work, bosses tend to consider the tasks that they delegate to you at short notice to be more urgent and more important than your own work.

Eisenhower Matrix

General Dwight D. Eisenhower (the 34th President of the USA) summarized this decision-making process in his Eisenhower Matrix or Eisenhower Box, which is now the mainstream popular prioritization tool that we first looked in Chapter 8 on pages 122-123.

The Eisenhower Matrix helps us prioritize tasks by placing them into four different boxes based on their urgency and importance. The four boxes are:.

A   **Important and Urgent**: Tasks in this box are both important and urgent and require immediate action. Examples of tasks in this box might include dealing with an unexpected crisis or meeting a deadline for someone taken ill.

B   **Important but Not Urgent**: Tasks in this box are important but not time-sensitive, so they can be scheduled for later. Examples of tasks in this box might include strategic planning, relationship building, or personal development.

C   **Urgent but Not Important**: Tasks in this box are urgent but not important, so they can often be delegated or postponed. Examples of tasks in this box might include responding to routine emails, attending unnecessary meetings, or catching up on overdue administrative tasks.

D   **Not Urgent and Not Important**: Tasks in this box are often distractions that can be eliminated or minimized. Examples of tasks in this box might include checking up on your social media, watching TV, or engaging in other non-constructive activities**.**

On this basis, **A** tasks will always get done, **B** tasks will usually get done, **C** tasks might not get done (unless or until they become **A** tasks), and **D** tasks will never get done.

This requires the ability to say no, not just to our colleagues and ourselves, but sometimes to senior managers. The agile practice is:

Separating urgency from importance
The aim is that we don't allow urgent tasks to impact on our important tasks. The important tasks will still have to get done, but they might now be late if we divert our attention to urgent tasks. It may cost us a considerable amount of time or, even worse, the failure to reach a goal in the long run.

Don't forget

We also covered this in Chapter 8 as it is so fundamental to time management.

Beware

We should be careful not to dismiss all relaxation and downtime as unproductive time wasting. Recharging our batteries is important and sometimes even urgent!

Focus on Results

In this final agile principle, we are looking at focusing on results rather than on the work (tasks) needed to achieve them. In a good organization, we should all be measured on the results we achieve rather than on how hard we work. It matters not a jot how many hours we work – if we achieve nothing, we will be seen as a failure.

Agile Principles

A quick recap on what we have covered so far in this chapter:

- We will never be able to deal with all the things we are asked to do, so we need to choose tasks that really matter.
- These must be important tasks rather than urgent ones so that we know the tasks we need to complete.
- We can improve the way we carry out these tasks using the other agile principles we have covered in this chapter.

We can now take the process one step further by focusing on the results we want to achieve rather than the tasks we need to complete to achieve them.

Focus on results

Effective people are focused on results. They know their goals and have planned how they are going to achieve them through the desired results. Focusing on results is contagious. A good leader's attention to tasks that really matter and a continual focus on the desired results is a model to team members. If the leader is focused on results, the team members will be as well, and the results will be beyond exceptional.

Problems

We know that achieving good results in today's climate can be tough. Things are often changing faster than we can keep up with, and we face challenges like:

- Having too much to do – being overloaded and overwhelmed.
- Reacting to urgent things.
- Not having enough time and being unable to keep up.
- Having to work longer hours to cope with things.

By concentrating on the results of a task rather than the work involved in that task, we can achieve more meaningful results and make the most of our work and life.

Focus

Focusing on results and managing by exception requires less time than trying to micro-manage the work. This will also improve the morale of the team. If we have someone trying to micro-manage us, we will assume they don't trust us or think we are incompetent. Focusing on results helps the team members know how their success will be measured and it will stop them thinking they're being treated like children. Here are some ways to help you find your focus:

1. **Discover the metrics you need for effective oversight**: Historical and up-to-date data, financial reporting, cash flows, bank balance.

2. **Review your metrics as they are updated**: Make sure you are seeing what you expect to see. If you've had a good month, your profitability should be going up.

3. **Take action when things look wrong**: If your productivity is high but your output is down, the reasons need to be investigated.

4. **Let the team know how it's going**: When results are good, tell them how well they're doing. If things are going wrong, share it and ask for their suggestions.

5. **Watch out for spoofing**: Wherever there's self-reported data (like billable hours), be aware that the data entered can be faked to make the employee look good. Check it!

You may have a lot of things to do, but by focusing on results and choosing what to do based on that, you can achieve meaningful results. Rather than a task of "calling a customer", go for a result of "make a customer happy". This little shift helps you connect to your work, thrive against challenges, and makes your results more meaningful. You are the author, and you write your story forward. It's the ultimate path of personal empowerment.

Don't forget

Try to think of these results as quick wins.

Summary

- Agile Practices are based on the 12 Agile Principles and the Agile Manifesto.
- Definition of done is the most basic agile principle of all. It spells out what the term "done" really means so that the team has a common understanding of when tasks really are completed.
- A timebox is a previously-agreed period of time during which a person or a team works steadily toward the completion of a task. Work stops once the time limit is reached, and progress is then evaluated.
- The Pomodoro Technique splits work into 25-minute bits, separated by short breaks, to improve effectiveness.
- Don't add slack to estimates – to prevent Parkinson's and Hofstadter's laws. If we need to allow time for the unexpected, it should be added as a separate item as a single buffer to the end of a larger timebox.
- Defer decisions until the latest possible moment. Once a decision has been made, time will be spent on the results of that decision, and work will be carried out that might be wasted.
- Reduce cycle time for any tasks that are repeated, to make us more effective overall.
- Keep the pipeline short and thin to improve response times and speed up throughput.
- Keep the discipline to prevent the need for expensive rework by doing everything correctly from the start.
- Limit task switching so that tasks get completed faster and better.
- Disregard sustained overtime to accelerate progress and avoid poor-quality work and bad motivation.
- Separate urgency from importance so that we don't allow urgent tasks to impact on our important tasks.
- Focus on results rather than tasks to improve performance and the morale of the team. Go for quick wins.

11 Moving Forward

In this final chapter, we look forward to achieving our life goals, with some (hopefully) helpful guidance.

Don't
forget

Today is the first day of
the rest of your life.

The Rest of Your Life

Back in Chapter 1, I took you through the past, present, and future, and the relationship between them. What we saw was:

- There is no point in fretting about the past. Whatever we did or didn't do, or might or might not have done, we can't go back and change it, so forget about it.
- The present – this moment, right here and right now – is the one thing we have total control over. We can choose exactly what we do and how we do it.
- Regarding the future: we saw there was little point in worrying about it, because we don't have any control over whatever it may or may not have in store for us.

While that statement is still true, you should, by now, have seen that you can, in fact, have some influence on it by what you choose to do today.

Your goals

You should now have identified your top three goals: the things that are most important to you in life. You also know that you will never have enough time to do everything you are asked to do or wish to do, so you must stop spending time on anything other than these three goals, no matter how urgent or interesting the other stuff may be. You know where you want to get to.

Your plans

You should also have developed a long-range plan for what you need to do to achieve those goals. From that, you should have produced your mid-range plan, which will have more detail about what you need to achieve over the next six to 12 months. Finally, you should now have your week plan for this week and your day plan for today, identifying the results you are going to focus on to achieve your quick wins. Now, you know how you plan to achieve those goals.

The journey

You are now on the journey to those goals, through the rest of your life. It is going to take you along a path through the future, and it will be an exciting one. As you travel along the path, you will continually have to make decisions. Do you stick to your plans or do you change your goals based on new information?

You now have an agile approach to guide your decision-making, including deferring decisions until the latest possible moment. But once you have made a decision, move on forward until the next decision has to be made.

Progress tracking
You should also now be tracking your progress through your regular reviews:

- **Day review**: To record your wins, identify what worked and what didn't, and find ways of improving, at the end of every working day.
- **Week review**: To check how you did for the week and identify decisions you need to make regarding your plan for the following week or your life goals.
- **Mid-range review**: To track your progress toward your life goals and identify any big changes. These are the reviews you should involve your boss in (if you have one).

The future
The future is all about what you are going to spend your precious time on. Make time to cherish the other things that bring you pleasure in life: your home, any sports that you play (no matter how well or badly), places where you find peace and tranquility, your relationships with friends and family, your love life, things that you share with other people, and so on. As you get older, life will start to appear more finite, as you will have fewer years left to achieve your goals.

The meaning of life
Douglas Adams wrote in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*: "*The answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything is 42.*" Years of effort have since been wasted by people trying to ascribe some deep, symbolic significance to it, but there is none – it was a just a joke. Take the time to see the funny things in life, and smile – it will do you good!

Be pleased with anything you do altruistically to help other people or help the planet. Be polite to strangers and make time to answer questions when they are put to you. Make time to enjoy the experience of life and the journey, for once you get to the end, that's it – your life will be over.

Stop working at the end of each day and week. You need a break to stay fit and healthy.

Big Decisions

We will be making decisions continuously throughout our day at work and even during our leisure time, but we will also be faced with really big decisions from time to time. We looked at some of these, and some of the ways to go about making them, in Chapter 4, but there are likely to be others, like money or job satisfaction, changing employers, starting our own businesses, taking a sabbatical, and so on.

You should now have a sound approach to making decisions on the big things that really matter to you in your life, based on the effective use of your time and the agile practices you have covered. They say that successful decisions are largely a result of:

- Starting with a good understanding of all the options available to you.
- Then, clarifying the advantages, disadvantages, risks, and benefits of each.
- Selecting what you believe is the best direction to proceed in.
- Then, using all the resources available to you to head in that direction.

Decision-making

It starts with your goals: you should have identified the three things that are most important to you in your life. You should have also produced plans setting out how you will get there and how you will measure your progress. You now have the techniques for making daily decisions and an understanding of how an agile approach can help with them. Let's now look at making big decisions:

1   **Identify the decision**: You need to be totally clear on what the decision is, so write it down on a fresh sheet of paper or, better still, on a clean white board.

2   **Gather information**: Add all the information you need about the options, using anyone else who can help, including friends and family.

3   **Identify alternatives**: List all of them, then reduce them to a manageable number.

KISS: Keep It Short and Simple.

4 **Weigh up the evidence**: Identify the likely outcomes, who will be impacted, and how they are likely to react.

5 **Choose from the alternatives**: Do this by carrying out a risk-benefit analysis and selecting the best option, never forgetting the option of delaying the decision.

6 **Take the necessary action**: Once you've made up your mind, just get on and do it.

7 **Review your decision**: Once you've had a chance to see how it works out, assess the outcome and any implications, and take any necessary follow-on actions.

When it comes to deciding on the things that really matter to you in your life, pay heed to the advice above and get started.

Altruism

Altruism is the principle and moral practice of concern for the welfare of our fellow human beings, fauna (animals), flora (flowers and forests), and the environment of our planet. Most of us have some vestige of concern in us for others, except for a few egotistic or spiteful individuals who exploit their fellow humans and the planet for their own gain or, even worse, out of sheer spite. There is no conflict between being rich and altruistic: look at Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan, J. K. Rowling, and many other well-known philanthropists.

Philanthropy

Defined by the ancient Greeks as a love of what it is to be human, philanthropy covers anything that is done to better humanity, and usually involves some sacrifice as opposed to being done for profit. It can include donating to a charity, volunteering at a local shelter, raising money to donate to a good cause, or anything similar.

Few of us would actually describe ourselves as philanthropists, but there is a positive benefit to helping others and the planet. Look at the news and compare evil leaders who seek to exploit their own people and dominate the world to good leaders who care about others and want to improve our planet and everything on it. Then, ask yourself how you would rather be seen in the future.

Review Progress

We looked at short-term reviewing in Chapter 7 and have mentioned mid-term and long-term reviews in later chapters, so let us summarize the purpose of these reviews and how we can apply agile practices to them.

Daily review

At the end of each day, before you pack up and go home, sit quietly and review what you did over the day. Make brief notes of what went well and what didn't. Record how you felt your energy levels were during the day. Reflect on whether you were able to stick to your plan or not and, if not, what you will try to do about it tomorrow. Then, go home content and stop thinking about work.

Weekly review

At the end of the week, consider the week as a whole. Have a quick look at the day reviews to remind yourself what you did, then consider how the week worked out against your plan. Not at the micro-level (which you did in your day reviews), but the big picture of where you are on the road to achieving your goals. Make sure all the things you are trying to do are worded as wins so that you can tell when they are done. Then, for each deliverable, ask yourself what the current status is, what needs to happen next, and what the next action you need to take is.

Then, put your notes away for next week, go for a quick drink with your colleagues (if that is what you enjoy), or just give yourself a big hug, then go home and enjoy your weekend.

Yearly review

Once or twice a year, you should take a step back and have a look at how you are progressing toward the big picture: your life goals. If you are an employee, you should be reviewing your progress with your manager.

In these more formal reviews, you should submit a written self-assessment progress update. Report on what you have done over the year or half-year, giving details of what you have achieved against your objectives, together with any issues or problems you have had, and what you would like to do or have done about them. You should always be looking for ways to work smarter rather than working harder. Are you able to delegate some of your responsibilities or get rid of them?

Don't forget

If you leave a review until the following morning, you will have forgotten half the things you did.

You should also set out your plan for what you are aiming to achieve over the next review period. It is important to document these reviews because you are unlikely to remember them otherwise. The agile time management processes of Flying high, Focus, Flow, Finish, and Follow-up apply in producing these reviews, together with agile practices such as urgent vs important.

Long-term review

This is a personal review of your five-year plan, and you should review it at least once a year, to check you are following it and moving toward your goals:

- Set aside sufficient time for the review; make sure you are in no rush and that your environment is suitable for reflection.
- Get out your original plan, with goals and activities. For each activity, assess if what you have done was in line with your plan or if you did something different but more effective.
- Have you progressed toward your goals? Have you identified more activities that will need doing? Are your goals and timings still realistic? Decide what you need to do next.

Ask yourself if these goals are really what you want to achieve more than anything else; if they inspire you to take action. If the answer to either is no, then you probably have the wrong goals, and that requires a big decision (see the previous topic on pages 180-181).

Lessons learned

Make a note of the lessons you have learned through the review process. These are some of mine:

- Stay focused on your life goals but be prepared to change them based on what has happened.
- Listen to what other people tell you and be honest if you make a mistake.
- Think about what would look good on a job application.
- Be considerate to other people – you never know when they may be able to help you.
- Seize opportunities with both hands, and if you are not happy with your job, change it.

Hot tip

Think about what really matters to you – what you really want out of life.

Don't forget

If it seems overwhelming, break it down and do it **in easy steps**.

Top 20 Tips

These are the top 20 tips for agile time management. Some are fairly easy to do; others are more difficult. If you are looking for inspiration for your plan, consider these:

1 Identify and document your goals for what you really want to achieve in life.

2 Create a long-term plan for what you want to achieve toward those goals over the next five years.

3 Develop a mid-term plan from your long-term plan by developing your objectives to cover what you want to achieve over the next year.

4 Create a week plan for what you intend to deliver this week, and a day plan for what you are going to spend your time on each day.

5 Focus on the task in hand and exclude everything else until you have completed it.

6 Use timeboxes and the Pomodoro Technique to work on critical tasks and get them done.

7 Remember the Pareto principle and concentrate on the most important 20% of anything.

8 Train yourself to avoid task switching and stop multi-tasking.

9 When confronted by an issue, use a helicopter view to analyze and deal with it from many different dimensions, and don't be afraid to take a break.

10 Defer decisions until the last possible moment, but don't procrastinate – if you need to make a decision, make it and move on. If it turns out to be wrong, just learn from it and use that knowledge next time.

11 If you've got too much work to do, don't work overtime – work smarter by prioritizing, planning, and breaking work down into manageable tasks.

12 Focus on producing the results of a task (the deliverable or quick win), not the work involved in doing it.

13 Don't allow telephones and email to run your life – be prepared to turn them off when you're busy.

14 Deal with interruptions effectively and learn how to say no politely but firmly, and mean what you say.

15 Review what actually happened compared with your plan at the end of each day, making notes for your next day plan.

16 Review your progress at the end of each week and check you are making progress toward your goals.

17 Once a month, review your progress against your mid-term plan and check if you need to re-appraise your goals.

18 Identify any things that cause stress in your life, and work at eliminating them.

19 *"Be nice to people on the way up, as you are quite likely to meet them again on the way back down"* – Anon. It costs nothing to be kind and helpful to people, and you never know what they might be able to do to help you in future.

20 Take care of yourself in terms of your health, diet, exercise, and leisure activities, and start enjoying yourself by scheduling in things you like doing.

So, that's the top 20 tips for agile time management. When you are able to check all those boxes, you are making the most effective use of your time and should be enjoying life.

Don't forget

It is not a race. Take the time to rest and recuperate, and give yourself a pat on the back.

Don't forget

No one is going to deliver your goals for you. Only you will make them happen.

Summary

- This moment – right here and right now – is the one thing you have total control over. You can choose exactly what you do and how you do it.
- You should now have identified your top three goals: the things that are most important to you in life.
- You should also have developed a long-range plan for what you need to do to achieve those goals.
- From that, you should have produced your mid-range plan, which will have more detail of what you need to achieve over the next six to 12 months.
- Finally, you should now have your week plan for this week and your day plan for today, identifying the results you are going to focus on to achieve your quick wins.
- You are now on the journey to those goals. As you travel along the path, you will continually have to make decisions.
- Try to find a space for altruism and philanthropy in your life, as it will make you a better person.
- When it comes to big decisions, start by understanding the options available, then clarify the advantages and disadvantages of each and select the best way to proceed.
- At the end of each day, carry out a review noting how things went against the plan, record your wins, identify what worked and what didn't, and find ways of improving.
- At the end of each week, carry out a review by looking at your progress against your key goals, and identify decisions you need to make regarding your plan for the following week.
- Once a month, track your progress toward your long-term goals and identify any big changes.
- Once or twice a year, review your mid-term plan (with your boss, if you have one), and record what you have achieved and what you plan to do.
- Take time out to relax, unwind, and enjoy the journey.

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