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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.

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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.



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



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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 undoubtedly 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](http://www.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.



There is a lot of excellent information on the [OECD website](http://www.oecd.org).

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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.



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



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

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.

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.

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- 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.



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



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 mean 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



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.

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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.



Make sure you explain why you are leaving.



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.

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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.



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.



You first need to identify what you want to achieve with your life, as these are the things you should be spending your precious time on.

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.

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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.

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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.



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



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



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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.

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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.



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.



In agile terms, think of a deliverable as a “win”.

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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.

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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.



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.



Try to think of a deliverable as a “quick win”.

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.