

Time Management

Time management systems have become exceedingly popular in recent years... and with good reason. The ultimate potential benefit of such systems is the ability to optimize how you spend your time in order to extract the best possible results in the shortest period of time. Such systems do come with a price, however, and that price is the time you must spend first learning and then maintaining the system. Generally speaking, the more complex the system, the more costly it is to use. The more time you spend managing your system, the less time you'll spend reaping the rewards of increased productivity.

Since the early 1990s, I've studied time management extensively, both by devouring existing knowledge on the subject and through first-hand trial and error. I've read a shelf full of books on time management, listened to hundreds of hours of time management audio learning, and read dozens of articles on the subject. I've used a variety of time management systems including Franklin-Covey, David Allen's Getting Things Done, and Anthony Robbins' Rapid Planning Method (formerly called OPA for Outcome-Purpose-Action). I've used PC software like Microsoft Outlook, Palm computers, and paper-based planners. If there were such a thing as a Ph.D in time management, I've gone through the curriculum many times over.

Studying time management has been an extremely worthwhile endeavor. While the claims made by people selling products in this field are often exaggerated and overhyped, I did realize some genuine productivity benefits from applying the best ideas. As I wrote in the article "Do It Now," I was able to earn two college degrees in only three semesters, largely by applying a variety of time management techniques, some of them to the extreme. I took the same classes in 1.5 years that other students took over a 4-year period, but I was able to compress them into a much shorter period of time by taking about triple the normal courseload. However, I don't consider this to be an extraordinary achievement. I think someone else who studied time management as much as I did could achieve similar results. The sad truth is that most people are so incredibly bad at managing their time that rock-bottom personal productivity is simply accepted as normal. So anyone who can consistently invest 80% of their time each day in intelligent, productive activities is going to look like an overachiever by comparison. The average college student in particular is probably operating at only 20-30% of their capacity, and I'm referring to their social life in addition to academics. Most people are completely unaware of just how poor they are at time management until some "overachiever" enters their lives and makes them look bad by comparison.

Time management systems

It's tempting to say that excellent time management is a result of having a great time management system. But I have not found this to be the case. I think the general mindset of time management is far more important than any system. And the mindset of time management is simply that you value your time. It's really a self-esteem issue. If you see your life as valuable and meaningful, then you will value your time as well. If you find yourself wasting a lot of time, you probably don't have a strong enough reason to manage your time well. No system you use will make much difference until you address the

underlying issue of self-respect. If your life has no meaningful purpose, then you don't have a compelling enough reason to improve your time management skills. You might get motivated every once in a while, but your motivation to improve just won't last.

Time management systems are seductive. They lure you in with the promise of greater productivity, more free time, faster income generation, and higher self-esteem. And some of those benefits may indeed be realized. However, another possibility is that your system becomes a distraction that prevents you from achieving real gains. You find yourself investing more and more time in meta-activities like getting organized, prioritizing objectives, and learning the latest productivity software. Actually *doing* the tasks that your system is designed to manage becomes almost an afterthought... perhaps even an annoyance. Instead of helping you increase productivity, your system becomes a means to disguise low productivity. This is a common problem for people who haven't yet identified a purpose for their lives. The system provides the illusion of productivity, but when you strip it down to its bare essence, you find it's a house of straw. There's nothing there. When you sum up all the tasks, they amount to nothing but busywork and trivialities. Whether or not they actually get done is of little consequence in the grand scheme of things. In the long run, no one will care anyway. If you find yourself in this situation, you've simply lost sight of the real purpose of time management.

What is time management?

Let's strip away all this complexity and get back to basics for a moment. *What is time management?* The essence of time management is the following:

1. Decide what to do
2. Do it

These appear to be very simple steps at first glance. Even a child can do them. However, when we look at them through the lens of optimization, they become much more complicated. In order to optimize these steps, we must concern ourselves with identifying the "right" or the "best" way to complete each step. We can easily see that some decision-action combinations produce better results than others. So our question becomes, "What is the best action to take right now, and what is the best way to do it?"

Answering this question should be the main purpose behind any time management system. Yes, there are side benefits like getting organized, becoming more clear-headed, and reducing stress. But ultimately these benefits all contribute to the decision-action process. What will you do, and how will you do it?

When I first studied time management, I found that most of the existing literature was focused on step 2. There was a lot of emphasis on how to get things done. This is a fine model for employees whose tasks are given to them, but that's an industrial age model, and it doesn't suit knowledge workers today who have a lot more freedom in choosing their tasks and even their careers. If step 1 is done incorrectly, then it doesn't matter how well you do step 2. If you decide to do the wrong thing, it makes no difference how well you do it.

Deciding what to do

Step 1 is a lot more difficult than step 2, which is probably why I've found so little adequate coverage of it. One of the most popular systems that attempts to tackle step 1 intelligently is the Franklin-Covey system, which concerns itself with the high level subjects of mission, roles, and goals more than the lower level of projects and actions. However, I don't think Franklin-Covey goes nearly high-level enough. Many of the mission statements I've seen produced by this system are nothing but vapid drivel, especially those produced by corporations.

The next level up from roles, goals, and mission is the level of context. Think of this as your current understanding of reality as well as your role within it. If you change your context, then everything else changes as well. For example, if you change your spiritual beliefs, then you may experience changes in your relationships and career as well.

Accuracy is paramount

The most important aspect of context is accuracy. Either your context accurately models reality, or it doesn't. This includes your most sacred spiritual beliefs, and it also includes the possibility that your beliefs may even alter your external reality. If inaccurate beliefs guide your actions, then your actions may very well be pointless. A person whose high-level beliefs are inaccurate simply cannot be productive in any meaningful sense. S/he might as well be digging a hole and then filling it.

I began learning of time management at the level of projects and actions, but I've since been approaching it from a top-down perspective. Now I'm far more concerned with doing the right thing than with doing things right. I spend a considerable amount of time reviewing my beliefs, looking for incongruencies between my beliefs and my experience of reality, and exploring other potential beliefs that may be more accurate. While working on the projects and actions level can yield minor productivity boosts, working on the high level of context and purpose can produce major breakthroughs. This is the process that led me to retire from computer game development and to start working in the field of personal development. When my context changed, everything else changed as well, including my mission, goals, projects, and actions.

I believe the most important thing I can do to manage my time is to strive to understand reality as accurately as possible. Above all, this means I cannot ignore data. Everything I've experienced -- everything I think I know -- must somehow be integrated into my approach to time management. There can be no incongruencies. My beliefs, thoughts, and actions must all be in alignment with reality itself.

Resolving in congruencies

A big time management mistake people make is that they allow incongruencies to exist in their lives without ever consciously resolving them. This is very easy to see when it comes to religion. People claim to hold certain beliefs as sacred, but they fail to act in accordance with those beliefs. They hold back or label themselves as weak. Why? Because part of them feels those beliefs are correct, but another part of them feels they're not. But instead of resolving this conflict, they try to avoid thinking about it. To resolve the incongruency would likely cause serious upheaval in their lives, and they fear what might happen. So instead they go through unhealthy cycles of hiding the truth from themselves and feeling frustrated with their inability to meet a standard which they don't fully agree with but which they feel they must continue to follow.

The upheaval caused by resolving internal in congruencies is real, but that doesn't mean you must fear it. I've gone through some major life changes as a result of pursuing this path, and it's hard every time. But I cannot accept the logic of clinging to a belief system that I know to be inaccurate. Once new data presents itself (or a new understanding of old data), I have to find a way to integrate it. At the very least, I must drop the incongruent beliefs while I search for better ones.

Despite the challenges, I've been extremely pleased with this approach. Problems that I struggled with for years simply evaporated once I adapted my beliefs to fit my own experience instead of blindly accepting what others told me. The world is full of so many false beliefs (especially from mass media), so it becomes a serious challenge to trust ourselves and our own thinking when everyone around us is telling us we're wrong.

For example, one of the first beliefs I found to be inaccurate was that I needed a job. Part of me felt I should get a job -- it seemed like the right thing to do after college -- but another part of me didn't like the idea of having to go to work each day and have a boss tell me what to do. I'd look at a job application and just stare blankly at it. I could barely stomach the idea of working on my resume. The whole idea just felt intuitively wrong to me. And I'm certainly not alone in this feeling, but most people do their best to tune it out. They go to work each day, but they don't really like it. They'd rather not go to work if they could afford to do so. Instead of accepting this incongruency like everyone else seemed to, I chose to resolve it. And this led me to find a way to make a good living without a job. It was not an easy path in the short term, but it's been much easier in the long run, especially when I notice the results people who followed the accepted get-a-job approach have achieved. Very few of them seem happy and fulfilled with their lives. At work they pretend everything is OK, but privately they feel miserable and trapped. And it gets harder each year. Personally I don't think most jobs are very healthy, considering what they do to the human spirit. I'm sure there are exceptions, but those aren't the norm.

Despite lots of people telling me to "get a job" (often with various expletives tacked onto the end of that sentence), I never did get a job after college, and I've been happily jobless ever since. I just accepted that being employed wasn't something I wanted, and I noticed that people who did have jobs didn't seem to want them either, so I ignored their advice and listened to my intuition instead. (I already explained how I do this on Podcast #6: How to Make Money Without a Job.) By unraveling this incongruency in my beliefs and resolving it, I was able to achieve a better result for myself -- abundant income generation, stellar career opportunities, and a fun social life without the confines of employment. Best of all, I'm ridiculously happy with my life.

The ultimate simplification of time management is that time management is *accuracy*. In order to use your time effectively, you must strive to create the most accurate understanding of reality you can. This means giving adequate consideration to all the data that presents itself to you: sense perceptions, facts, logic, intuition, emotions, etc. And the ultimate goal is to bring all of these things into alignment. So what you perceive, feel, think, say, and do are all congruent.

Debugging beliefs

I've made tremendous progress in this area, but I certainly haven't reached the pinnacle of alignment. There are plenty of incongruencies I have yet to resolve. Whenever I experience uncertainty in some area, I look for ways to conduct personal tests. For example, the Million Dollar Experiment is intended to test the power of intention. What role does intention play in achieving results? I don't know the answer to that, but I can't overlook the potential of the intention-manifestation model because it could be very significant, and I've already seen some promising results. I don't yet have a deep enough understanding of how it all works though. The real benefit of such experiments is that they provide me with data I can use to upgrade my mental model of reality. And a better model allows me to make more accurate decisions and thereby use my time more effectively.

It isn't enough just to write down a goal and work to achieve it. It isn't even enough to create a mission statement and live your life in accordance with it. How do you know whether your mission and goals are intelligent to begin with? Haven't you ever set a goal you later realized was stupid or pointless? Will future historians summarize your entire life with the label "misguided?" How do you know you won't look back on your current goals a decade from now and conclude that you were on the wrong path all along? What a waste of time and of life to put so much effort into achieving goals that ultimately won't even matter.

Accuracy is the standard for knowing whether or not your goals are well chosen. If your goals are based on the most accurate model of reality you can muster, then you have nothing to worry about. You've done the best you can, and you can expect no better results. But accuracy isn't remotely easy. This is why many of my goals are directly targeted at increasing the accuracy of my beliefs. I figure that if I don't understand reality well enough to be confident that my goals make sense, then my first priority should be to increase the accuracy of my current mental model of reality. To the degree my model seems accurate, I act within it, but when I find incongruencies, I refine the model itself. Sometimes I find my model so broken that I must discard it completely and rebuild a new one from scratch. The ultimate test of your model of reality is reality itself.

Now while you may not want to dedicate your whole life to the pursuit of accuracy, I think you'll realize substantial improvements in your time management by moving accuracy to the top of your time management philosophy, as opposed to efficiency, effectiveness, or some other standard. Whenever you have to make a tough decision about how to use your time, take a step back and revisit your current understanding of reality. What do you know to be true? And what does that truth dictate is the correct course of action for you? Once you know the correct course of action, then you can strive to get it done effectively and efficiently, and that's where modern time management systems can be of use.

To improve accuracy, eliminate inaccuracies

Although it's very hard to know when your beliefs are accurate, it isn't as difficult to detect inaccuracies, so focus your improvement efforts there for starters. Symptoms of inaccurate beliefs include chronic procrastination, mixed emotions, lying, self-sabotage, setting goals that fizzle, fear of failure, fear of rejection, timidity, depression, anger, frustration, resentment, and wearing excessively baggy pants where the crotch is down to your knees (you do NOT look cool in those; you look like a dolt).

It's usually not that difficult to identify incongruencies in your beliefs. You probably have lots of them, but you may have been taught that it's just normal to feel incongruent. I'd say it's common, but it's not normal. I think it's more normal and natural to be congruent. Having mixed feelings is generally an unpleasant state. When you experience this sensation, take some time to privately journal about your feelings on both sides and explore them as deeply as you can. Most people don't go nearly deep enough. Eventually you will uncover a new truth that you've been unwilling to face. For example, as I previously explained, I had to face the reality that I didn't want to spend my life working for someone else, but I still had to earn money to meet my needs. I admitted that both of these were true (my inner feelings and the external reality), but they were incongruent. And that allowed me to devise a congruent solution that honored both sides without forcing me back into a state of incongruency. I opted to find a way to make a good living without needing a job. It was hard in the short term but much easier in the long run. Inaccurate beliefs don't serve you, so dump them whenever you can.

If you take care of the highest level of time management (accuracy), the other parts have a way of taking care of themselves. My purpose, mission, roles, goals, projects, and actions all filter down from my current understanding of reality. Based on my understanding of reality, my purpose is clear. Based on my purpose, my mission is clear. And so on down the line. Clarity at the top creates clarity at the bottom. There is still plenty of room for choice at the lower levels, but it's like picking options for a new car you purchased. The big decision has already been made, so the details just aren't going to matter all that much. The details will control the flavor and texture of your life but not the essential nature of it.

When it comes to time management, the accuracy of your beliefs about reality will basically dictate your results. It doesn't matter so much what particular system you use. As you strive for greater accuracy and congruency, be patient with yourself. This quest for greater accuracy is ongoing. I'm not sure human beings will ever reach the pinnacle of accuracy -- that would require that we become gods. There are always more inaccuracies to eliminate, more experiments to conduct, more pieces of data to integrate. The important thing is not to settle. Don't settle for conflict in your life when you could achieve congruency. Sometimes it will take a year or more to replace conflict with congruency, such as in the case of divorce or career changes, but that time is going to pass anyway, so you might as well put it to good use.