



Bending time to suit you

We all have an ideal 'time personality' which will enable us to manage our time most effectively. Report by **Dr Jan Francis-Smythe**

Time management is about using our time efficiently. It's about getting more value out of our time whether it be at work or at leisure.

The perceived benefits of developing specific time management behaviours through 'self-help' books or by going on training courses has been around since the early 1970s but what evidence do we have that time management does have beneficial outcomes and how does it actually do this?

If we understand how time management actually works and our own individual ways of dealing with time then we can adopt an approach that suits us best as an individual making the most of all the time management advice available to us.

Behaviours

There have been numerous definitions over the years but one of the most recent is perhaps that of Claessens (2007) who, after reviewing much of the time management literature, suggests time management is the 'behaviours that aim at achieving an effective use of time while performing certain goal-directed activities'. Claessens suggests these behaviours are wide-ranging and fall into three types:

- **Assessment behaviours** – judging what the time is, estimating how long it will take to do something, reflecting on how much time has passed
- **Planning behaviours** - setting goals, planning tasks, prioritising, writing lists
- **Monitoring behaviours** – assessing progress.

These behaviours can best be represented as a cycle – see illustration. Most often we will move through the cycle in a sequential clockwise direction, i.e. judging how

long something will take us (assessment), planning how we will do it (planning) and checking how far we have got with it (monitoring).

For simple tasks one pass through the cycle will be sufficient. However, for complex tasks after monitoring we are likely to re-assess, re-plan and re-monitor and, therefore, there may be a number of passes through the cycle before the task is finally completed.

Techniques

The panel (on page 38) shows how the most popular time management techniques fit into these three types of behaviours – assessment, planning and monitoring. If we want to maximise the benefits of time management then we need to practice some of the techniques in each of the three categories of behaviour and not just focus on techniques from one category.

Time management behaviours have been shown to be related to performance, job satisfaction and stress, albeit in varying and inconsistent degrees. The strongest evidence relates to their positive enhancing effects on job satisfaction and health and the reduction of stress.

How it works

The first research to explore how time management works (Macan, 1994) showed that planning our activities, for example, gives us a sense of control over our time which then in turn leads to us experiencing a reduction in stress and an increase in job satisfaction. In other words this research showed that time management only works because it makes us think we are in control of our time.

More recent research however (Claessens, 2004; 2007) has shown that planning and other time management behaviours can do more than this, they can directly

enhance our performance and job satisfaction and reduce stress because they help us to distribute our effort and energy better i.e. actually be more efficient. So the benefits are brought about in two ways; one way is a direct effect where certain techniques do increase our efficiency and the second way is where practising the technique makes us think we have better control of our time and it is this perception that brings us the positive effects.

Positive outcomes

It is likely that, all other things being equal, certain techniques will simply be better than others at bringing us positive outcomes and indeed different techniques may well improve certain outcomes more than others, but we don't have the research evidence to support this yet. What is also likely is that when it comes to using time management techniques to give us a sense of control over time, different techniques will suit different people and this is likely to be dependent on their own time related preferences.

To work out which techniques to use, we need to look at our individual time personalities. Research (Francis-Smythe & Robertson, 1996) has shown us that we each have our own unique 'time personality' – preferences about how we deal with five different aspects of time:

- **Planning** – do you like to plan your day in advance, maybe write a to-do list or just let it happen?
- **Punctuality** – are you always on time for things or might you have a tendency to be late?
- **Polychronicity** – do you like to have several things on the go at any one time or do you prefer to finish one thing before starting the next?
- **Time awareness** – are you generally aware of what the time is or can you easily 'lose' hours?
- **Impatience** – do you get irritated standing in a long queue or do you make the most of the time by chatting to people or reading a magazine?

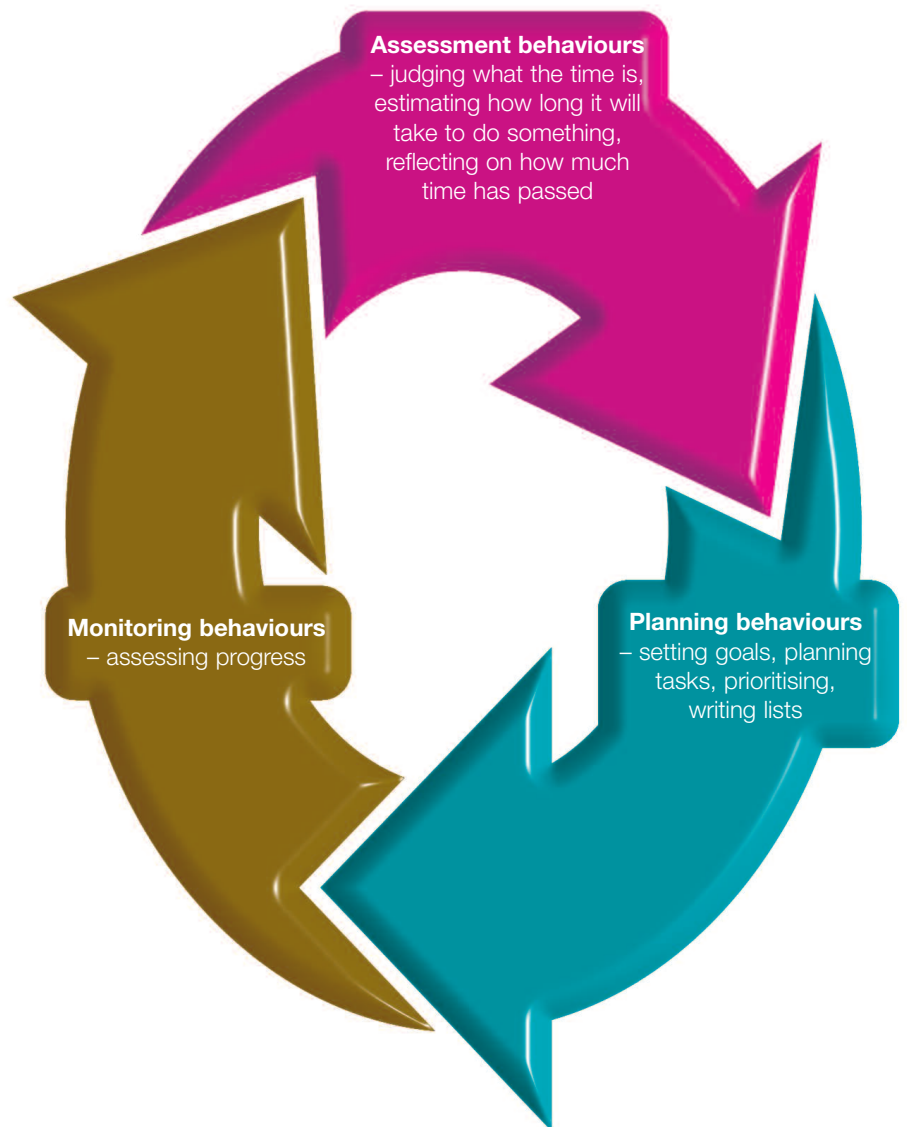
The way you prefer to handle time is likely to determine which time management techniques will suit you best. Remember, we are looking for not only generally effective techniques but also ones which give you personally a sense of control over your time. If it has the opposite effect by making you anxious about time then it is not for you!

So for example, for some people high on 'planning', keeping a detailed diary works brilliantly. They feel in control because they know exactly what is ahead of them. For others who are low on 'planning' this has the opposite effect, making them feel out of control which may lead to anxiety, stress and reduced performance.

In the dynamic and fast paced business environments in which we operate, few of us can live without a diary so the reality is we need to develop coping strategies and compromises that take account of our preferences. In this situation perhaps the 'low planning' person could attempt to schedule all appointments into a busy three or four days a week leaving one or two days totally diary-free?

As another example, time management techniques aimed at avoiding distraction such as 'blocking out

Time management process cycle



diary time to work on one task', closing the door and switching off e-mail and phone are likely to work well for monochronics (people who like to focus on doing one thing at a time) but they are likely to drive a polychronic crazy!

Trying to enforce all polychronics to only answer their e-mails twice a day will never work, they will just find some other distraction. Polychronics need to let this preference work for them.

They can do this by making sure they do always have several tasks or projects on the go at the same time and that they have them to hand readily so they can, for example, do 30 minutes on one and then switch to another. Contrary to time management wisdom this is not necessarily an ineffective way to work. It can be highly efficient as each task is being moved on in small steps often meaning someone else can then be working on the next step in that task. This is especially relevant when working globally and different time zones come into play.

Time preferences

Importantly, we need to recognise how our time preferences might inter-relate in terms of how they

Resources

CMI members have access to further information on time management at www.managers.org.uk/subjectsearch
Instant Manager: Time Management by Polly Bird, published by Hodder Education and CMI is available to order online at www.pressoffers.co.uk/HOD194 or telephone 0870 755 2122, quoting offer code HOD 194. Lines are open Monday to Friday between 9.00am and 5.00pm.

Popular techniques arranged by time management behaviours

Assessment

Phone calling/responding
 E-mail responding
 Open door policy
 Meeting strategy
 Interruptions handling
 Procrastination avoidance
 Delegating technique
 Saying 'no'
 Discard technique
 Avoidance tactics
 Accurate time estimation
 Good enough?/
 Perfectionism
 Important -v- Urgent

Planning

Setting goals
 Breaking tasks into smaller tasks
 Writing lists
 Setting schedules
 Setting internal deadlines
 Prioritising tasks
 Filing e-mails

Monitoring

Checking progress
 Reviewing objectives
 Reviewing schedules
 Communicating upcoming needs
 Checking resources

impact on each other. Imagine a person high on polychronicity but low on planning. If they are to successfully manage multiple projects to suit their polychronic preference then they will need to work on developing their planning behaviours. Alternatively, they may decide to forego the polychronic preference and work on things in a more monochronic way which involves them in less planning. There is a choice to be made but it can only be done effectively by knowing and acknowledging our time preferences.

So, the important message is:

1. Ensure you adopt time management techniques that address each of the three types of behaviour: assessing, planning and monitoring
2. Know your own time personality
3. Practise those time management techniques that will play to and suit your time personality
4. Develop coping strategies/compromises for where you have to use techniques that work against your preferences.



References

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Francis-Smythe, J.A. and Robertson, I.T. (1999) *Time – related individual differences*, Time and Society, Vol.8, pp. 273-292.

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Dr Jan Francis-Smythe is an occupational psychologist (HPC Registered), Chartered Psychologist and Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society. She is the director of the Centre for People at Work (www.worc.ac.uk/cpaw) in the Business School at the University of Worcester. As an active researcher and consultant she has managed and delivered a wide range of applied research and consultancy projects. Her

specialist area of expertise is in 'time' as it relates to both individuals and organisations.

If you would like to take part in on-going research in 'time management for leader-managers' and in return receive a free written personalised report (retails at £125) that provides feedback on your leadership impact, or discuss time management coaching, then please feel free to contact Jan at j.francis-smythe@worc.ac.uk