

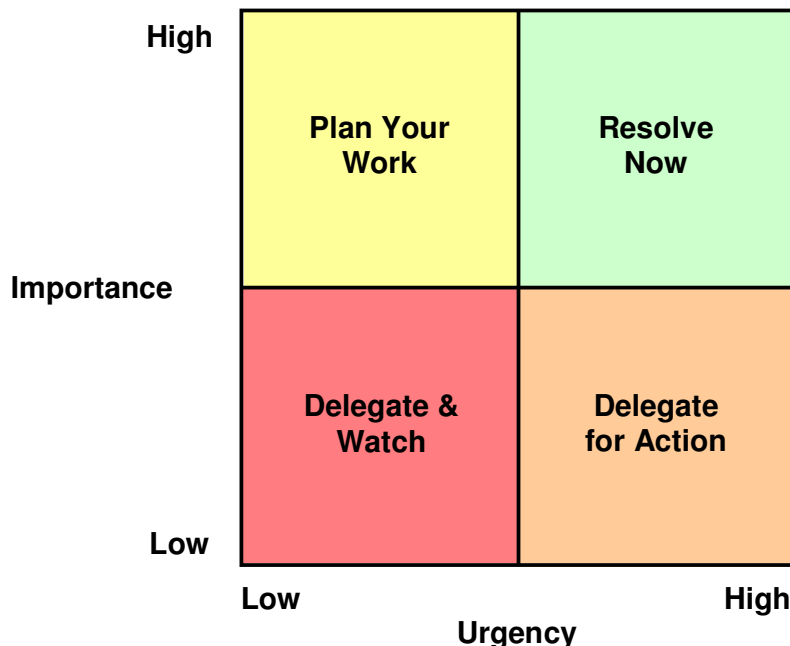
Personal Time Management

Project managers have numerous pressures on their time, need to balance work with other aspects of their lives and achieve a high rate of productivity. This White Paper takes a pragmatic look at some of the options that can help achieve the maximum output from your valuable working time.

The Urgent / Important Matrix.

The first step in achieving high levels of productivity is to offload as much unimportant work as possible. *Urgent* is not synonymous with *important*. The differences between the two are:

- Urgent tasks are deadline based. This is usually driven by others. The sooner the task needs completion the more urgent it is.
- The importance of a job drives how much 'time' you want to spend on it. Notice that this is independent of 'urgency' and is what you want to do.



This matrix separates problems into 4 categories:

- **Urgent and important** jobs must be worked on now. These are critical and also support your goals so make a decision to complete them.
- **Urgent but not important** jobs tend to be generated by others. Because you don't really want to spend much time on tasks not connected with your goals delegate them to a competent assistant.
- **Important but not urgent** jobs that need to be completed before they become urgent. Ensure you allow adequate time to do them.
- **Not urgent and not important** jobs are probably not your work anyway. Definitely delegate them to a team member. Keep a watching brief just in case the work escalates in importance or urgency.

Make time to be effective

Make time to focus on the important jobs by blocking out time in your diary (calendar). When you have a complex or detailed task to undertake, it can take a while to get into the right frame of mind so allow an adequate block of time; a 2 hour block twice a week is probably more effective than 1 hour a day. Ideally

this focused work period should be at a regular time, tuned to your circadian rhythm (see below) so everyone gets into the habit of letting you work in peace.

Good time management that supports an effective work/life balance and makes you a better leader and more productive you need to divide your day into 3 different ‘Zones’:

- The ‘**Go Zone**’, a couple of hours once a day with no interruptions where you focus on one important task. You focus intently and work hard so this needs to be limited to 2 hours.
- The ‘**Slow Zone**’, the rest of the working day where you multi-task, attend meetings and deal with the business of your job.
- The ‘**No Zone**’, specific times where for an hour or two you focus on a hobby, the family or anything but work. By completely switching off from the problems at work you allow your sub-conscious the freedom to work on difficult issues, so keep a notepad handy to write down any insights that emerge so you can quickly get back into your ‘No Zone’ having saved the ideas for later.

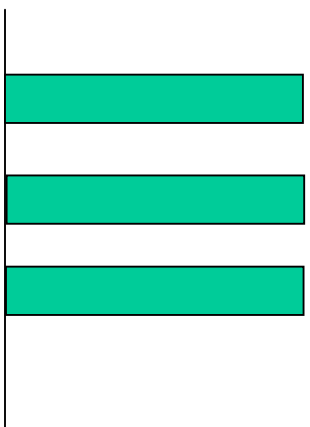
To preserve the ‘Go Zone’ and ‘No Zone’ times, it is important to let the people who work with you know that you should not be interrupted because you will be working on ‘xxx’ which is important to you and possibly the team. This requires discipline and planning, some things to consider include:

- Letting a limited number of key people know how to contact you in an emergency or if something comes up that is urgent, and leaving this particular communications channel open to them.
- Switching off your electronic and phone messaging tools and turning off or setting your status on your instant messaging application to *Offline* or *Do not Disturb*.
- Hanging a *Do Not Disturb* or *Priority Interrupts Only* sign outside of your room.
- Allow adequate time to focus into the work and try to avoid procrastination (see below).

Avoid Multi-tasking

Multi-tasking tries to please everyone and ends up pleasing no-one. The images on the following page are from our scheduling course and need no explanation.....

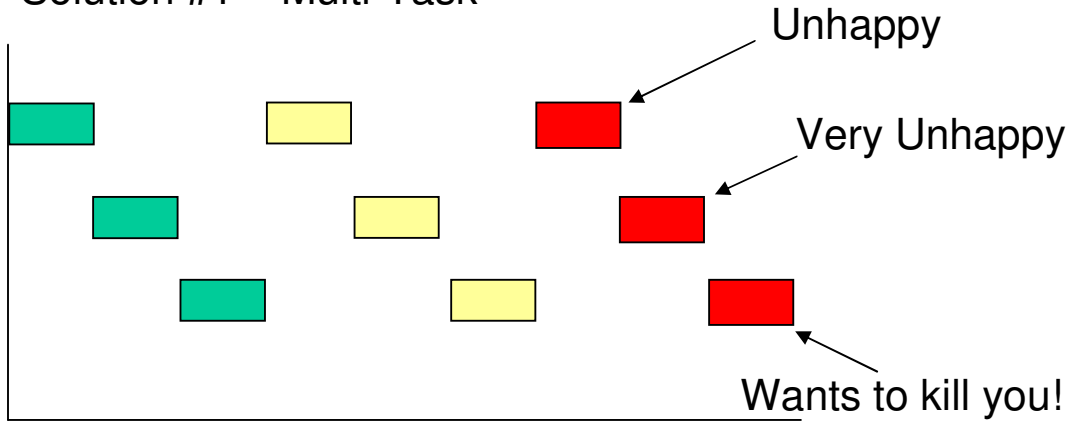
The Problem



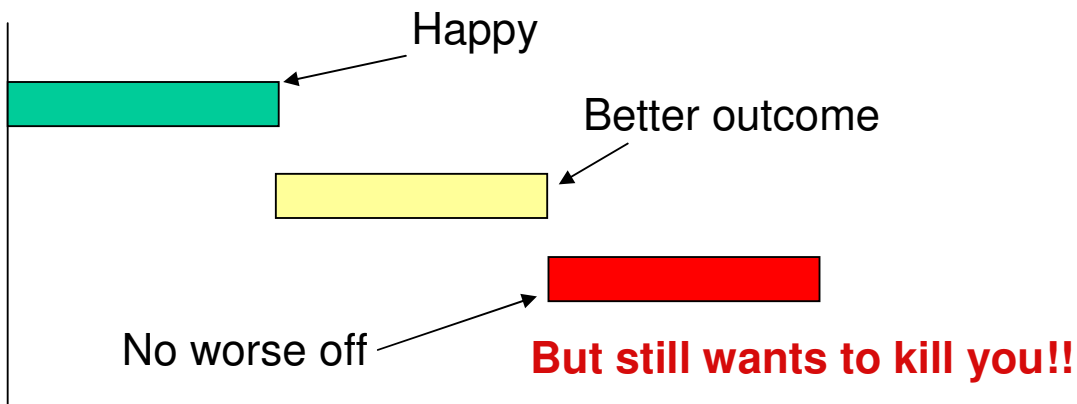
One resource
3 x 1 day tasks
All needed ‘today’



Solution #1 – Multi-Task



Solution #2 – Don't Multi-Task



Note: There is no allowance for the additional inefficiencies caused by ‘job swapping’ in this example! The time taken to refocus each time you swap jobs will add to the overall timeframe to complete the work.

A 1990’s study by Kim Clark and Steven Wheelwright on the impact of multitasking on productivity found the amount of time spent on value-adding tasks decreases with three or more concurrent tasks.

Their findings indicate that the total amount of time ‘on task’ goes up when a person has two tasks to work on. After that, however, Clark and Wheelwright found that time on task decreased. With three tasks the amount of time ‘on task’ decreased to less than when an individual had only one task to work on.

This makes sense; if you only have one task to work on it is almost a certain that you will occasionally be blocked, waiting for someone to return a phone call, answer an e-mail, approve the design, etc. With a second low priority task to work on you can temporarily change tasks and keep being productive. However, Clark and Wheelwright did this research in the early 1990s, communication improvements in the last 20 years may have changed the paradigm reducing the probability and frequency of ‘blockages’.

The main reasons that multitasking is so inefficient is the cost involved in task-switching. There is significant overhead in getting started on one task, switching to another, and then switching back to the first. The more tasks or projects you are involved in, the more likely you are to be interrupted while working on them. The probable optimum solution: one project and one priority task plus a low priority back up job ‘just in case’.

Make effective use of your circadian rhythm

Everybody has an intrinsic pattern of daily rhythms of physiology and behaviour that are driven by their circadian clocks. If you understand when you focus best, set this time aside for important work. Use less productive times for meetings, emails and other distractions. By bunching your distractions together and fitting them into your 'down times' you will be more effective and more efficient.

Work with procrastination

The human psyche seems designed to procrastinate! Some of the key drivers include:

1. **The brain is built to firstly minimize danger, before maximizing rewards.** Any threat to self is minimized, any handy reward is tempting. This alone accounts for a great deal of our procrastination as we avoid tasks that threaten the self, and we discount future rewards in favour of immediate gratification¹. A little more focus on emotional intelligence² can help here. Too often, feelings trump reasons, and we give in to feel good.
2. **Too much uncertainty feels dangerous.** It feels like possible pain so we avoid it. Task uncertainty is a major correlate of procrastination. It feels dangerous; and we want to avoid this feeling so we do. We procrastinate. The uncertainty in our modern world isn't a predator lurking, but our stone-age brain doesn't know this, we simply feel the potential for disaster. We need to strategically reduce uncertainty rather than just run away.
3. **Our conscious processing capacity is small, which makes us terrible at a lot of things, including predicting what might make us happy.** The planning fallacy and our poor ability at affective forecasting create a very difficult situation for accurately setting realistic goals and sticking to them³. We can enhance the skills needed to improve our predictions, but this takes practice and conscious work.
4. **Our capacity to regulate emotions is limited, depletes fast and needs to be used quickly to be effective.** Willpower, that sadly limited resource, is a key issue in our self-regulation. Fortunately, it can also be bolstered, restored and used strategically to serve our intentions and goals.
5. **Our intentions and goals alter the information that the brain pays attention to.** Yes, but there is often a big gap between our intentions and our actions, and this is a defining aspect of procrastination. Understanding the first four of these "quirks of our brain" helps us explain just how our intentions and goals alter our attentional processes, for better or worse. Supplementing goal intentions with implementation intentions can help.

Research suggests you will usually a better outcome by negotiating with yourself and allowing 'rewards' such as reading emails when you have accomplished something rather than trying to apply 'brute force' and just trying to 'do the right thing'. Earn your distractions, recognise these activities as the breaks they are, and use them as rewards.

Confront the unpleasant issues

It's not easy to confront head-on the one thing that you realise is crucial but are uncomfortable putting squarely on the table for resolution. Often the most uncomfortable part of difficult conversations is the anticipation, the sooner you have the conversation the shorter the period of painful anticipation, regardless of outcome. This is a logical reason to get on with it and confront the issue; the 'procrastination drivers' outlined above work in the opposite direction.

¹ This is a form of hyperbolic discounting. Hyperbolic discounting says that humans will choose a lesser reward in the short term versus a greater reward in the long term. The further away the deadline, the easier it is to put it off. Something as simple as staring at the fly on the wall is a more rewarding task than actually accomplishing what we need to do. We are choosing something that makes us happy now (a reward) instead of the greater reward (a job well done) next month. For more on our innate biases see: *The innate effect of Bias* http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1069_Bias.pdf

² For more on Emotional Intelligence see WP1008: [http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1008_Emotional%20 Intellegence.pdf](http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1008_Emotional%20Intellegence.pdf)

³ For more on scheduling visit our planning 'home page' at <http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Planning.html>

Risk management principles also apply. Identifying and dealing with issues or risks sooner is much less costly than waiting⁴. Waiting gives the issue longer to meander down the wrong path; it allows good effort to be wasted, precious time to elapse without a solution, and fixes become progressively more expensive. To make sure you focus on the important issues today try the following:

1. Write down the names of one or two critical topics you are avoiding, that you know need resolution. Don't try to identify or solve every open issue right now; just identify the top one or two.
2. Think about why you are avoiding these topics. Write down the key reasons so you see them. Seeing the reasons in writing might help you overcome them.
3. Imagine the likely result of doing nothing. Can you state or even guess an impact?
4. If the impact of doing nothing is likely to be worse than your reasons for procrastination, schedule a conversation. It could be a formal meeting with a deck, a short phone call, or an in-person conversation over coffee. Often a one-to-one conversation is the best place to start.
5. Acknowledge at the outset of your meeting that this conversation is difficult for you, and why. This should take some of the tension out of the conversation, and may actually help you to collaborate in finding an answer⁵. It will keep a human element at the forefront, and help the other party realize that you care enough to do something that's uncomfortable for you. Also, be willing to acknowledge that you may not know the full answer, but that it is important to recognize the issue and work toward an answer together.

Despite some discomfort, taking the steps needed to deal with the issue will make you a better project leader.

Use tools effectively

It's easy to hide in issue logs, risk assessments, action item lists and all the latest tools and processes. None of these are of any use on their own. The value of the tools and systems comes when they are used collaboratively to communicate with and motivate your team.

Meetings are probably the most misused time consuming tools in modern management. Some meetings are essential and some are even useful but only if the meetings are managed effectively⁶. For the rest, don't call the meeting if you have control and either don't attend or delegate attendance to someone else if the meeting is called by someone else.

Delegate

Delegation is one of the most important management skills. A simple delegation rule is the SMARTER acronym. Delegated tasks must be:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Agreed
- Realistic
- Timebound
- Ethical
- Recorded

Good delegation saves you time, develops your people, grooms a successor, and motivates. Poor delegation will de-motivate your team, confuse the other person and fail to achieve the task or purpose itself.

⁴ Effective decision making is a key requirement. To understand the different types of decision you may have to make see WP1053: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1053_Decision_Making.pdf

⁵ For more on win-win negotiating see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1032_Win-Win_Negotiating.pdf

⁶ For more on running effective meetings see: www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1075_Meetings.pdf