

Don't fall victim to being a 'thief of time'

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Key time management pops up regularly in this column, but tends to concentrate on the logical separating out of 'urgent' and 'important' tasks - two quite different criteria.

Take one example. When you're about to leave for a two-week holiday, make a list of the 10 tasks you expect to have to address most urgently upon your return. In the event, you will quite likely find that by the time you're back at your desk, that list will look quite different: many of the items having either acquired another timescale and consequently downgraded — or been cancelled for various reasons.

Also firmly on the agenda is the tempting habit of procrastination, a practice rightly identified as the "thief of time". Let us take two tasks of equal urgency that are competing for your attention. One might be negotiating a difficult contract while the other might be organising the firm's annual dinner.

Logically you should negotiate the contract first. But you'll probably go for the second one first, as an excuse to avoid the difficult negotiation. However, by the time you've finished, there may be another urgent task on your desk, presenting a further excuse for putting off that contract discussion — which may complicate things further.

More serious, of course, is the habit of delaying the moment when you get down to work at all — often the sign of the person who likes to talk rather than act.

Not long ago, I held a seminar for a firm that imported travel goods, that had been taken over. One of the financial managers was transferred to a new job administering the company's pension fund — a fairly undemanding task, which she was able to perform from home.

As I already knew her socially, I called in to visit after a couple of months, and was immediately struck by how much more clean and tidy everything was looking around the house.

"So you can afford regular cleaners now, right?" I asked.

She didn't answer, but gave me a meaningful look. And of course I realised what it was. Suddenly all those household chores represented the perfect excuse for delaying the start of her official work.

As one friend to another, I felt entitled to ask her whether she was really the right person to be working unsupervised at home. Working away from the office in a home environment requires strict self-discipline, which my friend seemed not to have.

Instead of allocating a specific space in which to work, she merely placed her computer on the kitchen table, and with one ear listening to music, tried to complete her day's work. In the event, it just didn't work because she failed to properly demarcate her home life from her business responsibilities.

Although it sounded like good work-life balance, it was almost certainly bad time management.

Do urgent jobs first

- Postponing urgent or important jobs is irrational time management
- Putting back an unwelcome task may complicate the situation
- Homeworkers find excuses for delaying the start of the working day