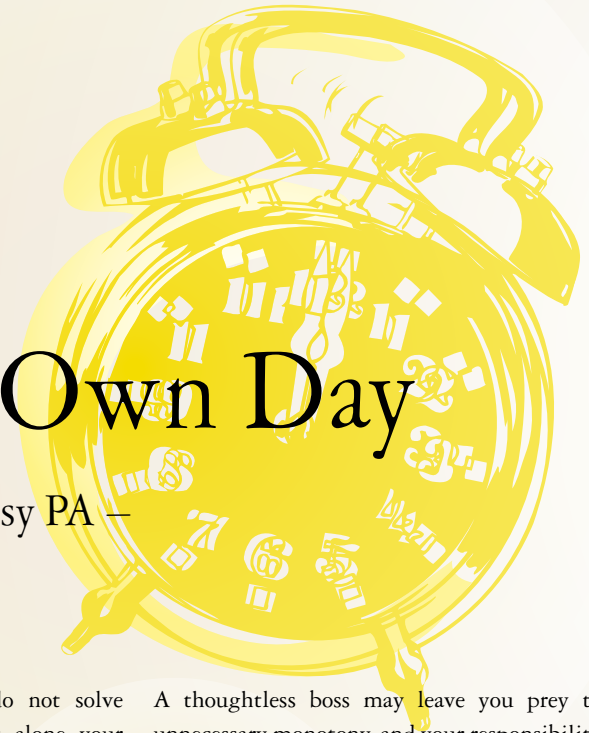


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Managing Your Own Day

Effective Time Management For The Busy PA – A Sure Sign That You're Winning



How well we manage our time is a crucial factor in the control we exert over our own lives. You can interpret a good deal from certain familiar cries on the time theme:

'Not enough hours in the day' – clearly someone who is being managed by their time, and not the other way about.

'Time is money' – a blinkered, mechanical view of time, and not a phrase uttered by top players.

Or even just:

'I haven't got time' – which may sound reasonable enough, but actually means nothing, apart from a suggestion of being time poor, i.e. important and highly-paid.

A better one is:

'The busy person finds time for everything' – as often noticed by some PAs when observing a dynamic and creative boss.

Clearly, time-management is some kind of elbow-game, where you have to show who's boss. If you remain enslaved by time, you will not be free to overview your life and work, or make the big decisions necessary for raising your game.

Clearing Away Baggage

Workplace attitudes to time management can often be traced back to earlier mindsets, based on large, pyramid-shaped organisations resting on massed ranks of workers performing repetitive tasks. These generally discouraged independent thinking and placed a heavy trust on the hierarchical principle.

Such attitudes simply do not fit the

modern workplace, and they do not solve the organisation's problems, let alone your own problems.

Other dubious attitudes stem from the jumbled fashion statements of recent years, such as Michael Douglas growling "Lunch is for wimps" or the neo-puritan workaholic mantra 'Do you realise how late I worked last night?' with its further suggestions of importance of indispensability.

Finally there is the more innocent case of the boss who hopes they are being liberal and progressive by operating, for example, an open-door policy, not realising that this may act as an invitation to every time waster in the building. Thus completely negating its theoretical advantages.

To achieve self-empowerment, you must be ruthless in ditching these obsolete notions, and reading the whole situation afresh, from your own independent angle.

Unnecessary Monotony

The human cogwheel is firmly a throwback to Charlie Chaplin's 'Modern Times' and the tyranny of the production-line, now relegated to the fringes of workplace culture, unjustified by any serious cost/benefit equation.

Monotonous drills have received a unanimous thumbs down from the countless experts who have examined the subject. The conclusion is simply that neither our bodies nor our minds were designed for them. The most obvious result is repetitive strain injury, which is now recognised as a condition requiring active prevention. Less quantifiable is the psychological wear and tear on PAs, who are sometimes made to feel like machines, though its effects on morale have long been noted.

A thoughtless boss may leave you prey to unnecessary monotony, and your responsibility to identify this syndrome and counteract it if you can.

Resisting The Bugle Of Urgency

With some effort, you've managed to set aside a whole day for digging down into an important job, too big and complex to be dealt with in small sections.

After perhaps an hour of hard concentration, you're just starting to get a handle on it, windows are slowly opening in your mind, and you have a moment of quiet satisfaction and anticipation.

Then suddenly your boss says 'We've got this panic on'.

You know that you can't turn away without looking as though you're letting the side down.

It's easy to mistake the urgent for the important, and I strongly recommend the advice of university lecturer John Perry in his Time Management Trainer Toolkit *Every Second Counts* (<http://bit.ly/i12jGy>). He divides every task into one of four categories:

- Urgent and important – action now;
- Urgent but not important – action soon, but don't spend long;
- Important but not urgent – action when you can find the time it needs;
- Neither important nor urgent – attend to it in spare moments, or drop it.

This is a good example of the critical but constructive attitude that you should

bring to your work, as part of your self-empowerment programme.

Another is to distinguish efficiency from effectiveness, or doing the job right, from doing the right job. This is an important piece of pro active work analysis, which is also explored in detail in Perry's book.

Prime Time

Even if you are limited in your time allocations for each task, you ought to enjoy some degree of choice over when to do them. Managing your own day should include an allowance for your preferred working routines, and even – in a small degree – for your whims.

Perhaps you are someone who likes to attack the difficult problems first thing in the morning, when you're fresh and sharp, leaving the less-demanding paperwork for later. Or you may prefer using the morning to warm up by dealing with the lightweight stuff, starting on the serious problem solving when your critical faculties are in full swing. Or there may be times of day in your particular job when people are more or less likely to interrupt, or when the phones ring more or less often.

Ideally, you should also be allowed to recognise the x-factor of the good day and the bad day. There will be certain days when you're not really connecting, and you know you won't achieve anything much. There will be others when you feel wonderfully involved in your work and wild horses won't drag you away from that desk before midnight.

Provided you can apply the necessary self-discipline, you ought to be free to reckon with this irrational human factor – incidentally reminding your boss or client that you are not a robot.

Five Little Experiments

It is instructive to try some experimental research into your current job, to gain some perspective on it. These unconventional little tests (*see* box opposite) may reveal that your job is basically right for you, subject to a few new conditions. Or they may alert you to a great need for a radical change in the whole direction of your career.

Without bucking the system for the sake of it, it ought to be acceptable to try these experiments in the course of your normal working day.

Time management is a major factor in your self-empowerment plan. It is a balance between the mindless hoarding of odd seconds and bold experiments, with the creative use of hours and years.

Clearly the shape and rhythm of your working day makes the most profound impact on your career progress and on your general state of personal adjustment.

Scheduling Your Day

1. CLASSIFY YOUR TASKS

Try to pinpoint every new task into one or other of those four categories identified on Perry's urgency or importance scale, and treat it as recommended.

2. DON'T BE PERMANENTLY AVAILABLE

Don't be too dependable, or you'll be leaned on as good scout (in other words doormat). Plan some slots when you're going to be firmly unavailable.

3. LEAVE YOUR WATCH AT HOME

Take off your watch on a whim for the evening or weekend – or even through a working day. And test how much you really need it, or don't need it.

4. TRY DOING NOTHING

Simply rest and refresh your mind. Enjoy daydreaming, doodling, coasting, or just relishing pure silence, when you can really commune with your intuitions.

5. RATE YOUR WEEK

Evaluate the past seven days for their achievement/enjoyment balance. Work out a scoring system. Then do the same next week. See where you're heading.



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about the author

Carole Spiers' credibility is rooted in 20 years of success as CEO of a leading UK stress management consultancy. As a world authority on corporate stress, BBC Guest Broadcaster and Author, Carole's mission is to empower organisations to achieve sustainable success through a healthy workplace culture. Her stress management expertise is in demand around the world. Carole is a high-energy motivational speaker able to combine inspiration with insight. Her charismatic style has made her into a sought-after keynote speaker working with equal success in the contrasting cultures of the UK and the Middle East, with top corporations. Carole is a vice president of the International Stress Management Association. For more information on the stress management training and nationwide counselling service,

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