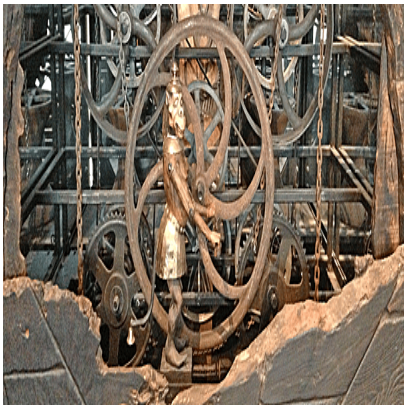


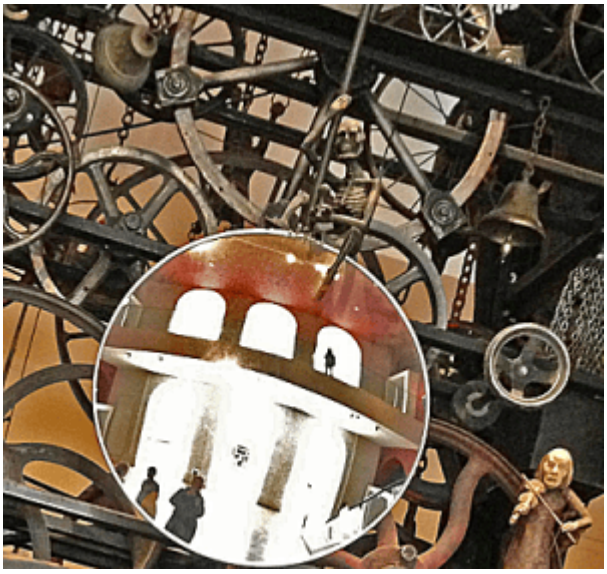
Buying time

Description

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I stumbled across wikiHowâ??s advice to students who need to buy extra time to complete an assignment. You upload a corrupted MS Word file to the online assignment submission system. Eventually someone will get round to asking you to submit it again, by which time you might just have it finished.

Thereâ??s an art to eking out as much time as you can. It happens in politics too. Countless news commentators are asking, â??Is Assad just buying time with his pledge to turn over chemical weapons?â?• Time is something to bargain with. Itâ??s a token in a strategic game to get what you want. Itâ??s a way of tipping the balance in your favour.



Balance is a key metaphor amongst those who offer time management advice. According to *Time Management for Dummies,* â??The point about better time management is that youâ??re able to do the things that are important to you and create **balance** in *all* areas of your life, not just at work. Many people who are overworked, with too much work to do in those 24 hours, spend too much time doing just that â?? work.â?•

The problem with the balance metaphor is that, like the scales of justice, at least half the load is guilt, and you feel even worse for getting the balance wrong.

But the commercial metaphor of *buying time* is useful. In his management self-help book, *Leading Quietly*, Joseph Badaracco endorses the strategy of dealing skilfully with delay. We instinctively think that decisive management involves getting things done quickly, dealing with problems as soon as they arise, in particular where other people are involved. Badaracco agues to the contrary.

Quiet time

> When faced with a challenge, *effective* leaders rarely rush forward with â??The Answer.â?• Instead, they do something quite at odds with the conventional view of leadership. Instead of charging the hill, they often look for ways to beg, borrow, and steal a little time.
>
> This tactic can make the difference between success and failure. Time lets turbulent waters settle and clarify. It lets people discuss their situations with others and think things through on their own. Time gives people a chance to assess their real obligations, and gives sound instincts a chance to emerge. It lets them observe and learn, understand some of the subtle ways in which individuals and events interact, and look for patterns and opportunities in the flow of events (53).

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How do you buy time? You can ask for it. You can set a time beyond the original deadline and tell people what your plan is for getting the task done. You can introduce a plan for consultation, and explain how the extra time will produce a better result. (Itâ??s well known that passengers waiting on board a delayed train are happier when the train manager or driver announces the causes of the delay and provides an estimate for when things will get moving again.)

Buying time is different to â??kicking it into the long grass,â?• or just stalling, which is an obstructive tactic, as if in hope that the problem will go away, or waiting for the responsibility to be deflected elsewhere. Effective time bargaining is presumably a subtle, sociable, and responsible tactic.

References

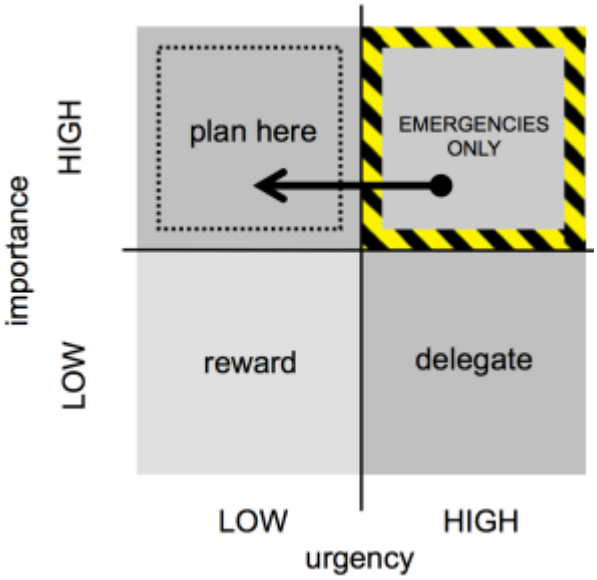
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- Zerubavel, Eviatar. 1999. *The Clockwork Muse*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. (recommended by Michelle Bastian)

Notes

- The other prominent metaphor of time management relates to target practice and surveying, ie setting your sights on goals: set goals that are specific rather than vague, make sure you are able to recognise when you achieve them, get others to agree to them, make sure the goals are achievable, and set time limits on their achievement. Goals should be **SMART** â?? **S**pecific, **M** easurable, **A**greed, **R**ealistic, and **T**ime bound.

- I find advice about time management the most useful and philosophically satisfying when it takes account of the **heterogeneous** nature of time. Time has a different character as deadlines approach. It scrunches up as it reaches the buffers. For some of us time goes at a quicker rate when sifting through emails than waiting for a bus. Thanks to smartphones you can use the former to speed up the latter.
- Time also functions differently for different tasks, different people and at different times â?? stages in life, times of the year, the month, the week, and the day. Russell Foster is a biologist specialising in the way time is monitored, regulated, recorded and defined in organisms (chronobiology). In his book *Rhythms of Life* he examines the way organisms adjust themselves to the cycles of the days and seasons, and even define time. He asserts that: â??Animals ***produce future*** most dramatically by anticipating seasonal processes, and regulate their annual breeding, migration and hibernation to chime with themâ?• (133). We human beings are heirs to that biological tuning-in process. Our effectiveness for different tasks varies throughout the 24 hour cycle. Body and mind fail us during the small hours of the morning. Thatâ??s when we are least rational and the most likely to be fearful and accident prone. Thatâ??s when weâ??ll fire off stupid emails, start undoing and re-doing what weâ??ve already accomplished, or lie awake fretting about all the things we need to do.
- Also see Soft fascination, The past is a construct of the mind, and Delayed gratification
- Hereâ??s some more time management advice.
    - It takes time and effort to plan. So invest precious planning time where itâ??s going to be most helpful, ie on large scale tasks that are important but not urgent. Completing a report or assignment might be very important, but if itâ??s not due for a few weeks then itâ??s not urgent. So put your planning effort into that task. How long will it take, when will I do it, how do I organise other tasks around it, how do I pace out the task, where can I borrow extra time from if it takes longer than I expect?
    - Tasks that are urgent but not so important (meeting a self-imposed blogging schedule), or not urgent and not important (sorting my digital photo collection into albums), tend to take care of themselves. You can even delegate these tasks to other people, do then when you are less alert, or think of them as rewards. Tasks that are very important and very urgent such as completing a job for a client or compensating for a mishap in the office require crisis management. Itâ??s all stops out to get it done. But people who always seem to operate in that mode are in a perpetual state of stress. One of the challenges of time management is to migrate tasks from the emergency quadrant to the planning quadrant.

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Some publications on the philosophy of time

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Category

1. Research related

Tags

1. stress
2. time management

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