

Le Bon Journal

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Time-challenged people complain about not having enough time. But everyone has the same amount of time at any time in the day. So how can some people have more time than others?

Save time or money

At a recent conference, one of the speakers said that the Internet will divide the world into two classes of people.

Those that will spend any amount of time to save money.

Those that will spend any amount of money to save time.

I pondered over this, as it was so well-put. I spend countless hours doing my expenses, making sure the exchange rates I use are reasonable and that I include all tips. I surf the Net relentlessly to get information before making a decision. Do I belong to the first class?

On the other hand, I employ a cleaner so that I wouldn't have to spend the entire weekend cleaning. I would rather consult an expert than to figure it out myself.

It reminds me of a remark my classmate once made of my thriftiness. He said, "Why save money? Just make more money!"

Being on time, being late

My high school band teacher used to say:

"If you're early, you're on time

If you're on time, you're late.

If you're late, then forget you're even here."

My first lesson in punctuality, however, took place during my first visit to Germany. Just as we were sitting down for a big German breakfast of fresh bread, ham, and cheese, my friend Thomas showed up. He insisted that 9 am meant 9 am, and we should depart immediately for the Neuschwanstein - the famous fairy tale castle of Mad King Ludwig.

By being late (i.e. not ready in this case), I was showing a lack of respect for his time. Time is, after all, money.

The German Rail prides itself in being "punctlich." If it is ever late, the staff would apologise with great regret and remorse.

Time challenged people

The politically correct way of referring to people who are short on time is "time-challenged."

Time scarcity is a phenomenon brought about by technology, which was initially aimed to cut down on the amount of time spent on manual production. Fast food restaurants were meant to reduce customer waiting time. Microwaves were supposed to cut down on cooking time.

If that's the intention, why am I stealing time by using my mobile phone when I'm walking to the train station? Why am I multi-tasking by using two telephone sets while microwaving my dinner?

Where has all the time gone?

One day I will have to stop cycling to the supermarket and start ordering my groceries online.

I've stopped using travel agents after mine started charging me commission. So now I spend more time than before, surfing the Internet, comparison shopping, doing sensitivity analysis of the true market value of airplane tickets.

I've stopped queuing at the bank, but now I queue on the telephone to get confidential service.

What has changed? We spend more time searching for information, validating that information, organising and managing that information. Rather than trusting face-to-face experts at our service, we seek them online or over the telephone.

To see my friends, I have to make appointments and use my mobile

phone to ensure we don't waste anytime waiting for each other.

When we do meet, we are conscious of the time set aside for it - the quality time we so worship.

I want to go where time stands still. Where can that be?

Where has all the time gone?

Considering the number of diary entries I've devoted to my time-starved life, I'm surprised that I haven't bothered to figure out why I am constantly trying to catch up or trying to create more time.

My main objective right now is to create more personal time. By this, I mean the freedom to be frivolous, the liberty to "do nothing" and to "do whatever I please." As my wise father so brilliantly put it, "To enjoy life, you must learn to do nothing."

There is too much demand on my time. One day I caught myself sitting still for seven consecutive hours responding to e-mails.

Communication, whether e-mail, post, telephone, or face-to-face, all demands my attention. Even junk mail, the kind of spam that piles up exponentially, as distracting as they are, requires my attention. To check that they are definitely not worth my attention, I have to spend even more time guessing at the relevance of the e-mail from the recipient and subject lines before even opening it.

There's not enough downtime to recover from my trips. Instead, I try to catch up on the backlog that has accumulated while I'm away. Since I'm away every other weekend, I have just one weekend to unpack, unwind, and repack.

I've donated all my time for the good of the world. I am hot-wired to the pulse of the world economy. If I don't check my e-mail while on vacation, I risk getting too stressed out when I return or risk missing out on important opportunities. As I make more and more contacts through work and travel, I have less time to reply to individual e-mails.

Sometimes I just want to shout:
STOP!

Notes from time management

How time flies! Almost four weeks ago I took the one-day time management course, out of desperation. Did I practise what was preached? I'm not so sure. But I did create more time for myself as a result. Here are some notes:

Have a notebook by your bed to write down your thoughts so you won't forget them or think about them when you go to sleep at night.

The idea is to save time by not worrying about what is not worth worrying. But how do you know beforehand?

You can lose stress by not putting it off, meaning - deal with it now to avoid the extra stress.

It's a good discipline to clear your desk at the end of each day.

Optimise your energy levels by making all phone calls at the same time (in the same period).

Turn off "you got mail" - it's another form of distraction.

Schedule your interruptions.

Take time out, allowing "me" time.

Say no.

Don't allow backlog to happen. Catch up on backlog when you're not feeling guilty about taking time from doing something else.

Get everything done and still have time to play

Time management is not about managing time but about managing your attention, writes the author and life coach Mark Forster. Wherever you focus your attention, you will start seeing change.

He suggests that you take your to do list and label each item "must do", "should do", or "could do."

He regards resistance and procrastination as the biggest hurdles of time management. While reading this book, I became aware that I never asked myself why I

didn't do what I knew I had to do at the time I should have done it.

He also suggests doing things in bursts, giving yourself a timed duration - such as five minutes to clean up your desk. Without such restrictions, we are indeed easily led to distraction, sometimes deliberately so.

This little book is full of wisdom and practical advice.

Quality time

In these days of information overload, attention scarcity, and other demands on the already time-challenged individual, quality time is a luxury.

Quality time means putting aside everything and dedicating yourself to maximising the value of that time spent together. It symbolises a deliberate switching off of distractions and tuning into being with the other person.

I believe that such quality time from a parent can make or break a child. A motivated child knows that his parents cared enough to give him time rather than money and everything else that money cannot buy. He will strive to reach his potential and make the best out of life. An unmotivated child will grow up thinking that nobody cares whatever he does because his parents were too busy to pay attention.

How to create more time

Time waits for no one. Did technology create more time for us? No, it just sped things up and raised expectations.

Time stood still for a brief moment while I was on safari in Kenya. That seemed ages ago. I had the luxury of reading and finishing a book each day in the famous Massai Mara.

What was so special about my three-and-a-half week vacation was that I learned to value personal time. Before I went on holiday, I was working one day a week and everybody knew it. I told everyone that I was going away. I did not have access to the Internet. And

Africa seemed too far away for anyone to attempt to get hold of me.

What is so different now? I have a mobile phone and a laptop. I answer my e-mails everyday. Nobody has to know where I am, but I will always check my e-mail and my voice-mail. Since I work full-time, I'm expected to be available. And when I go on holiday, others know that I can be reached anywhere in the world.

It is obvious that to create more time for myself, I have to stop being so available. I need to stop answering my e-mails as soon as they arrive. I need to be less responsive, less proactive, and less eager to please. I need to decrease the rate of input by decreasing the rate of output.

From part-time to over-time

In March, I reduced my work hours from four days a week to one day a week. Suddenly I had time to kill. So I embarked on an ambitious journey to enrich my Web site. I committed myself to writing free articles for an online newsletter. I also offered to help critique Web sites as well as help my friends build their Web sites. I invited friends from afar to visit me while I had all this free time. Soon, I used up all the extra "free" time.

Because of all these commitments, when I started working full-time two weeks ago, I had to steal time from my sleep, my exercises, and even my travel. However, my snail mail, e-mail, and voice-mail continued to arrive at their usual pace. It became a positive feedback - or so-called re-enforcing loop - of playing catch up. This weekend, I slept and slept, dreaming of playing over-time and working no-time.



Anne Ku, editor, wears a watch and carries a mobile phone only when travelling to meet someone. She does not use an alarm clock but prefers to wake up naturally to the sunrise. However, she stills struggles to manage her personal and professional time.

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