

Deadlines Tipsheet

In the main article this month, I promised a tipsheet to help you work with deadlines, time management and motivation. What follows is a small sample of exercises and ways of thinking about time that you may find helpful.

1. The ABCDE checklist – prioritisation and delegation

Brian Tracy – who I mentioned in the main article, devised this checklist. He recommends arranging tasks according to the following hierarchy:

- A = must do tasks**
- B = should do tasks**
- C = nice to do tasks**
- D = delegate tasks**
- E = eliminate tasks**

I particularly like options D & E – but alas don't get the opportunity to practice them very often!

2. Buy a bigger diary - a metaphor for finding space to do the things you really want to do.

I used to use an A5 diary – which was continually crammed with entries and notes. I constantly felt stressed by all the tasks I seemed to have crammed into each day. One day I had a brainwave – I'd go out and buy an A4 diary and transfer all the entries into that. The result was astonishing – all of a sudden there was (literally and metaphorically) space between all my tasks. I felt much less stressed and intimidated by my schedule.

Interestingly, around the same time, I stopped wearing a watch. I still get to where I need to be, on time, and prepared. But I no longer endlessly consult my watch. I'm still known as the most punctual man in the world. I have stopped being a slave to time – and it feels good.

3. Technology and the expectation of instant response

The need for the average person to 'know what time it is' largely did not exist until the Industrial Revolution, when it became important to keep track of hours worked. It strikes me that since then we have been wedded to time in increasingly stressful ways.

Technology brings with it an expectation of instant response, coupled with the means to fire messages off rapidly. We all recognise the consequences but use it nonetheless. Using email is a bit like driving a car – when we are in control of the send button, woebetide anyone who doesn't respond. But when the mail pours inwards, like some hapless pedestrian, we wonder when there will be decent sized break in the stream of traffic.

Expectations of normal grammar, and in some cases of basic politeness, also need to be suspended.

I have a friend who works at director level in IT who gets impatient with me when I say hello on the phone, and ask him how he is. He hasn't got time for the niceties any more. How sad.

As a result, I no longer give my mobile phone number to business contacts – it only gets used in case of traffic holdups and unforeseen circumstances. At all other times, it's for family use only. Some people look at me askance when I say I don't use a mobile for business – and then fail to notice any difference in our working relationship. I can manage landline messages and email in a seamless way – by redirecting both to a laptop with an internet dongle* – so I get to deal with things at a time of my choosing.

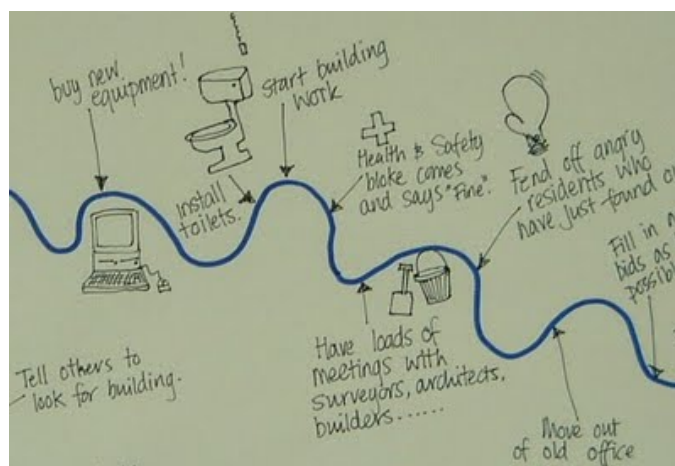
I use a 'Skype' account to do this – it costs very little, makes things much easier to manage on the move, and as bonus, I can video chat with friends and family (and occasionally with clients). I went to Cyprus for a week last year to talk to artists and craftspeople about their open studios scheme – and my english clients didn't know I had been away. That's what I mean by seamless and at a time of my choosing.

By working smart, we can manage the workload and make a little time into the bargain.

When the time comes to manage mail, I do so in chunks – I'm often to be found sitting answering email in my dressing gown (with a nice cup of tea) first thing in the morning. I regard it as a task that I do in preparation for a day's work. Mail coming in later in the day gets dealt with in similar batches – but fully clad, I hasten to add.

4. Timelines

Timelines are a wonderful way to visualise events in chronological order. All you need to create a successful timeline is a large sheet of paper - a flipchart sheet will do - although you can use an unrolled length of lining paper (dirt cheap at B&Q or similar) if you are feeling really ambitious.



Arm yourself with a selection of marker pens, and decide how long your timeline will be - this can be marked on the paper as a straight line or a wiggly path - depending how creative you want to be, and marked off in units of time - usually months - the picture above is a fragment of a large timeline depicting the process of planning and developing a new youth arts centre.

I find it helpful to start the process off using mini post-its. Then you have the opportunity to move things around as you explore which events are dependent on each other. When you have the final arrangement, you can then transfer your commentary onto the line in a more permanent way.

Stick your timeline up on the office/studio wall - that way you can tinker with it - revisiting the diagram as events unfold and your actual path becomes clearer.

This is an ideal tool with which to think through everything that is involved in planning new projects or events - it's highly involving and supports rapid thought processes.

5. Quadrant thinking

This grid based analytical tool is really useful when your plate seems rather full and you need to prioritise stuff before you go bonkers.

The spin off is that you'll also recognise how quickly quality tasks – like looking after and developing yourself – go out the window in times of stress.

| Q1 Important and Urgent | Q2 Important but Not Urgent |
|----------------------------------|--|
| | |
| Crises | Planning Ahead |
| Pressing Problems | Relationship Building |
| Deadlines | Following up new opportunities |
| | Looking after your health, relaxing |
| | |
| Q3 Urgent but Unimportant | Q4 Neither Urgent nor Important |
| | |
| Interruptions | Non-urgent repairs and maintenance |
| Some mail, reports or meetings | Some mail and calls |
| Daily hassle | Junk mail |
| | Things we put on the 'back burner' |

Get a big sheet of paper, draw a grid as above, and then list your tasks (one per sheet) on post it notes. Place the post it notes in the quadrant that you think is most appropriate for the task. If they are all crammed into Quadrant 1, you need to think about how to manage them (perhaps by using the ABCDE method, or with a Timeline).

If you are not getting round to the important things in quadrant 2, you need to actively set some goals for those life enhancing activities.

If you've got loads of stuff in Quadrant 3, you maybe need some help – these are the tasks that eat up your productive time – it may be better to employ someone for a few hours a week than to use all your valuable making time doing them yourself.

Quadrant 4 is self-explanatory – sometimes things that go here can be ditched completely, or prioritised and moved into Quadrant 1 or 2.

I hope you've found this tipsheet useful – remember you can always suggest a subject for these tipsheets by contacting me via the magazine.

Pete Mosley

*Dongle = a device that you plug into your laptop that allows you to connect to the Internet or work wirelessly.

It's worth noting that if you sign up for one of these on a monthly contract, from anywhere between £15-35 per month, you get the laptop for free. Terms and conditions vary wildly – so beware!