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'Time Management': a review of issues and strategies for academic staff

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'Time Management': a review of issues and strategies for academic staff

Abstract
The title of this paper perpetuates a major misconception, but at least it signals something about the nature of a problem we all seem to face in academic life.
There are many factors in the social and institutional environment which increase the sense of time pressures on us all. Because of their tradition of self-regulation, Academics may have a comparative advantage in managing these pressures if their focus moves from time and things to relationships and results.

'Time Management': a review of issues and strategies for academic staff

Background

The title of this paper perpetuates a major misconception, but at least it signals something about the nature of a problem we all seem to face in academic life.

Time cannot be 'managed' in the same way that other resource can: human, physical, capital, information. Time is a resource that must be used the instant it is received. Time cannot be saved, you cannot get more of it and it cannot be replaced. Wasted time is time gone for ever. Time must be used at the same rate of 60 seconds per minute, 60 minutes per hour, 24 hours a day and so on. Although philosophers and physicists may disagree, for most academics time is a finite resource.

We cannot 'manage' time. What we can do is to learn to manage ourselves and other resources in relation to time. It is my hope that this brief paper can make a contribution to the development of satisfactory approaches to using time to improve the quality of academic life in the very broadest sense. If we accept Craig McInnes' assertion that "self-regulation in daily work practices stands out - regardless of teaching or research orientation - as the most distinctive feature of academic work" (McInnes, 1992, p.10) then the better we are at the skills of self-regulation the better our academic lives may be.

All this said, I will nevertheless revert to the conventional 'time management' label to refer to those related attitudes, skills and abilities which contribute to the development of 'self-regulation'.

An important assumption is, of course, that we are not simply passive observers of the institutional contexts we are in but active participants with the capacity to manage ourselves as well as to influence (if not change) the events around us in our universities. This is, however, a difficult task. Berquist (1993, p.26) argues that we are faced with a highly segmented world, with diversity, unpredictably and 'chaotic' social systems in which it is becoming increasingly difficult to say much that has generally validity. In such a world, developing practical advice on time management is fraught with difficulty.

This paper is an attempt to integrate some ideas in the hope that readers may derive some ideas and strategies to guide them through their academic careers, to assist their colleagues and students, and to participate in the shaping of institutional cultures and practices in ways that address the concerns many of us share. The paper takes the view that issues and
strategies can be structured into three levels of concern: those that operate at the broad social and economic level, institutional issues, and finally personal issues and strategies. The approach that follows draws on work from many disciplines but is integrated around the major issues.

Issues and strategies

1. Social and economic issues and strategies
There are various 'levels' at which one can enter the discussion of the issues that are shaping our perception and use of time. At the broad social and economic level, Schor's book, *The Overworked American, The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*, suggests the following reasons for the squeeze on time perceived by most professional groups in American society. Most, if not all of these reasons appear to be applicable to the Australian academic.

- **Our work is more complex and demanding and therefore requires more time.**
- **We, and our employers, have become more demanding in terms of expectations and achievements.**
- **Employers find it easier to demand more of employees than to employ more staff largely because (a) the high costs of employment (e.g. time required to do this, salary and benefits, taxes, training, accommodation, equipment) and (b) because of the commitment they can expect from a workforce that is in need of higher incomes to support its consumption level.**
- **Many people seem to have a preference for money over free time, especially when they have heavy financial commitments.**
- **More people are now in the workforce, average working hours are up and vacation time is shrinking.**
- **Our perception of time is changing. Many things are now valued for their speed - air travel, computers, delivery schedules, etc. Fast is somehow 'better'.**
- **There are more options and attractions in the market: a greater range of leisure activities (many of which are available only at a monetary cost) and a greater range of books, magazines and professional periodicals.**
- **We tend to convert increases in income to consumption. Consumption takes time in (a) shopping (an end in itself for many) and (b) in enjoying the terms purchased - each of which competes with other items for attention (i.e.) time spent listening to a new CD is time that is not available for walking, theatre, reading, or talking to one's children).**

Schor outlines the following strategies to deal with the situation she describes.

- **Break the work-and-spend-cycle:**
  Every salaried job should be tied to a formal standard schedule of hours. Overtime should be paid back with time; part-time work, should be made more feasible, and productivity should be raised to enable a reduction in working hours (see Fuller, 1985 for a strategy to achieve productivity gains by eliminating complexity and waste). Schor (p. 154) cites studies reporting that reducing hours can lead to productivity gains.

- **Overcome consumerism:**
  This strategy rests on fundamentally changing personal values and attitudes to income and consumption and the priority accorded to particular goals in life. It is a strategy that may take some years to work through, involving as it does the reduction of economic expectations and the elimination of debt.

- **Learn to use 'free' time constructively:**
  The work ethic is very powerful. 'Free' time is often devoted to a second paid job or to unpaid work at home for the profession or for the community. Many people admit to not knowing how to relax and enjoy the 'free' time they have. Leisure skills may need to be developed, particularly among those who have let them atrophy through their commitment to work. In doing this, however, a conscious effort must be made to avoid those forms of leisure which have become commodities and are therefore available only at monetary cost (and which thus feed the work-and-spend cycle).

2. University issues and strategies
There is not an abundance of research on time management in universities but somewhat more in the closely related profession of school teaching and administration were studies of time management and stress have been popular see Tanner, et al, 1991).

McInnes (1192, p.9) summarises some of the findings on the allocation of time to academic work. These point to steadily increasing workloads in 'spare' time and significant changes to the annual pattern of work.
in universities, particularly during the long summer break. Fry (1981) identified significant differences among the average work loads of staff in different disciplines and different academic ranks at the University of Queensland. Harman and Wood (1990) report on changes in academic work post-Dawkins and found, among other things, a sense of confusion and dissatisfaction related to change. There has been relatively more work that has researched student’s use of time and this has been helpful in the development of strategies to assist students (Macan, et al., 1990; Noble, 1994).

Little of this kind of work points us in firm directions about strategies for time management. Some of it contradictory but some of it reveals useful outcomes such as Lewis’ and Dahl’s finding (1976) that academic leaders had a very poor idea of how they were actually spending their time, thus lending weight to the exhortation to keep a time log as a first step in any time management plan.

In this situation, our institutions would be well advised to heed the expressed needs and advice that can be provided to them free-of-charge by the best experts available - their members! On several occasions the University of Adelaide, for example, has been alerted to time management problems but this information has been largely ignored by senior management.

From an internal professional development consultancy in 1990 the University was alerted to widespread concern about apparent dwindling amounts of time available for academic and other forms of professional work and the wide range of different tasks that had to be carried out. (The consultancy has been a major stimulus for the organisation of the conference which this paper supports).

The consultancy revealed the following major needs with respect to time among academics:

- More time to keep up with reading, new information, researching writing
- More time for academic tasks - less administration/teaching (e.g. questionnaires)
- More hours in the day - time to do 3 jobs - research/teaching/administration and keep up to date
- Time/fewer tasks for time available/more people
- Extra time to carry out teaching/research - less administration
- More time/more effective use of time
- Managed time to enable staff to meet prime objectives particularly research
- Time for curriculum development
- Time to maintain professional skills knowledge standards etc. i.e. scholarship
- More time to improve teaching
- Research (time for it)
- Time to complete projects already on hand.

These kinds of needs were so frequently and so strongly expressed* that a major section of the advice given to the University focused on time-related issues. This advice is reproduced here in full because it reflects issues and strategies that have relevance today.

"Workloads and the Matter of Time"

"During the consultancy process it became apparent that many staff members perceive themselves to be under considerable stress in their working lives. They also believe that there is insufficient time to achieve the standards they would wish. Moreover, there was widespread concern about where they would find the time for professional development. The frequency with which this concern was expressed is as significant as it is prevalent across different employment categories.

This report has no 'magic answers'. It is a common problem in modern organisations. But the problem cannot be dismissed and it demands further investigation within the University. Resolution of the problem is critical to the long-term success of the proposals in this Report. There are ways, however, in which it might be approached.

Basic to our definition of professional development is the idea that conditions are created which "optimise the quality of working life". This implies a reasonable balance between a range of factors operating at work: the work itself, resources available, desired outcomes, personal health, and so on. Staff may need assistance to achieve this balance. A mechanism for this to occur is the review-planning process. Planning assists in focusing resources and energy towards desired outcomes, rather than having these dissipated. Planning can further assist in removing blockages to performance outcomes such as unnecessary committees.

*In 1989 very similar needs were expressed during a staff development consultation for (then) South Australian College of Advanced Education.
Some further suggestions are identified, some of which are derived from the advice provided by staff consulted. One way is to reconsider the sensitive matter of the distribution of staff resources in relation to the principal objectives of the University and of areas. The fact that 64% of staff are general staff and that academics complain about lack of support for teaching and research warrants investigation.

The matter of time management could also be examined. This can be done at various levels.

First, individuals may benefit from formal time management courses or from study of any of the numerous manuals available on the subject to improve their personal effectiveness. A difficulty with this material is that it is unsuitable for application in academic environments. Perhaps, in the context of its new responsibilities for institutional research, the ACUE might examine this matter and report on examples of best practice in the use of time in academic environments, as well as the scale and dimensions of the time problem. Support from the Evaluations and Investigations Program should be sought.

Second, those responsible for staff supervision and the work of committees might benefit by reviewing their own practices with their staff, particularly where these practices impinge on the time of others. Strategies might include: delegation and abolishing some local committees or restricting their meeting times to strictly confined limits.

Third, recognizing that sometimes the most under-utilised resource in the University is the student, may be the key to more productive use of time for teaching staff. Excellent programmes of teaching based on principles of self-directed learning and self-assessment are now in wide use in Australia and bear critical examination for their applicability in a wide range of courses. For such development to occur, however, additional short-term resources from internally controlled schemes for example, the Teaching Development Grants Scheme or from funds managed by DEET will be necessary.

This leads naturally to the fourth proposal. This is to foster more flexible schemes of time allocation by arranging work assignments or by seeking external support to release staff members for extended periods of time to develop, for example, new office procedures, research management strategies, or teaching arrangements that will lead to longer-term benefits. Creative use of area funds could be a strategy to achieve this.

It is expected that better planning in the longer term and appropriate training in time management will contribute to resolving the problem.” (The University of Adelaide, 1990)

From a more recent consultancy on quality in teaching and learning time emerged as an important theme that required attention from both a staff and student perspective.

Drucker (1993, p.86) notes the phenomenon of ‘splintering’ in service organisations, including universities and hospitals, which is seriously damaging their effectiveness through the twin effects of a loss of professionals’ time in doing a range of sub-professional and administrative tasks and the costs of meeting professional and academic salaries.

Dealing with the avalanche of paperwork and attending meetings are common complaints in both organisations. The cure, according to Drucker, is simple: take the non-professional work away to allow the professionals to their professional work. He suggests that two questions need to be asked. First, ‘What do we pay for?’ and second ‘What value is this job supposed to add?’ (p.87)

3. Personal time management issues and strategies
Many academics complain that they cannot manage their time effectively. Could it be that their skills of ‘expert performance’ in time management involving personal insight and self-regulation (a critical component of academic life as noted previously) are lacking in some important ways?

Might it be possible that the dominant forms of education we have experienced, and continue to provide for many of our students, have not given us the appropriate skills and attitudes to manage the difficulties we are confronted with? It is also possible that the current wave of teaching and learning innovations in our universities such as peer teaching, problem-based learning, self-assessment may be very relevant changes in educational practice in the present context?

Self-appraisal involves:

- knowledge of the self as a performer, such as knowing that one is a competent tutor or a time waster, etc;
- knowing how to perform the skills required;
- knowing when, why and how to use the self-knowledge and performance skills. This is vital because it distinguishes mechanical performance from the capacity to use knowledge flexibly. Covey (1989, p.41) describes these kinds of understandings and patterns of behaviour as ‘habits’.

Self-management refers to the use of self-appraisal knowledge in the normal course of our work. Self-management involves:

- planning and goal setting and the selection of appropriate strategies to achieve goals;
- regulation of strategies and techniques required to achieve goals;
- evaluation of progress and success.

The time management literature is replete with strategies and techniques that fit into this framework. The trouble is that much of the presentation of these ideas is neither intellectually coherent nor obviously relevant to academic contexts. A good example of this problem is in the popular and practical book by Edwin Bliss titled *Getting Things Done, The ABCs of Time Management* (Macmillan, 1976). Between the covers there is much useful guidance on topics as diverse as alcohol, indecision and the workaholic, but little to bring it all together in a coherent fashion. On the other hand, the more recent *Getting Things Done* by Roger Black (Joseph, 1991) structures strategies and techniques around five major themes: Planning: Directions and Goals; Your Time; Knowing, motivating and improving yourself; Dealing with others; Results. Black’s is a much more coherent book, and is generally recommended.

How can we achieve ‘expert performance’ in time management? The answer is that we need a ‘strategy’. The thesaurus embedded in my word processor, provides these synonyms for strategy: method, plan, procedure, system, scheme and modus operandi. Whatever term one prefers, there are ways of achieving expert performance in time management involving the skills of insight and self-regulation canvassed above.

One of the most helpful presentations on this theme in the recent past is in the book by Stephen Covey, titled *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (Simon and Schuster, 1989). There are two reasons why I believe that the book will be helpful to many academics. The first is that Covey’s approach has an attractive coherence built on principles on human effectiveness such as equity and justice, integrity, honesty, dignity, excellence, service and personal growth. The principles are reflected in the seven habits he describes and explains. These are:

- Be proactive
- Begin with the end in mind
- Put first things first
- Think win/win
- Seek to understand, then be understood
- Synergise
- Self-renewal

The second reason why I believe Covey’s book will appeal to academics is that it recognises and gives prominence to the quality of relationships among people that are at the core of many of the important roles that academics assume: teacher, researcher, mentor, counsellor, coordinator, head and dean.

The habit of ‘putting first things first’ is at the heart of Covey’s presentation on time management. For Covey “the essence of the best thinking about time management can be captured in a single phrase: organise and execute around priorities” (p.149)

Covey distinguishes between four generations of time management thinking. The first generation centred on notes and checklists to recognise the demands placed on our time. The second generation was characterised by calendars and appointment books in an attempt to schedule into the future; the third and current generation of thinking emphasises prioritisation, clarifying values and comparing the worth of activities based on their relationship to those values. It also involves goal setting and daily planning to ensure progress is made towards the goals.

The trouble with the third generation approach, according to Covey, is that efficient scheduling and control of time can be counterproductive to the development of relationships with people and to taking...
advantage of spontaneity in daily encounters. Could it be that these are the very reasons why many academics often find time management principles unworkable? Effective teaching and counselling roles are surely based on the development of high quality relationships with others, particularly with students. Research not only requires large blocks of time for its execution but also benefits from the possibility of spontaneous reaction to developments as they unfold. There is also a strong emphasis on achieving research 'results'.

Covey suggests that a fourth generation approach is emerging which recognises that the challenge is to manage ourselves, not time. Instead of focusing on time and things (note the emphasis on things in the titles of time management books!) the focus is on relationships and results; a focus that is also implicit in the strategies suggested by Schor and listed above on page 3. Effectiveness lies in the balance of the results achieved and the continuing capacity to achieve results, or to use Covey's shorthand 'the P/PC Balance (where) P stands for production of desired results (and) PC stands for production capability . . . " (p.54). Both of these functions depend on the maintenance and enhancement of relationships with others. Thus, for the academic, these suggestions can be interpreted to mean that teaching, research and service are carried out together with a balanced programme of continuing professional development in order to maintain and enhance 'production capability'.

The essence of Covey's self-management approach is captured in the now-familiar time management matrix where activities can be defined by their degree of urgency and importance. Urgent matters require immediate attention. Important matters have to do with results and they are linked to personal goals and values. Quadrant II is the core of effective personal management; quadrants III and IV are the antithesis.

Moving to Quadrant II involves scheduling priorities according to a personal mission statement and creating a balance between production and production capability. It also requires a 'people dimension' that reflects the diversity of roles one may have with respect to partners, children, students and professional colleagues. Covey elaborates on a strategy to do this that is much too detailed to summarise here (Covey, p.158-182).

In another popular book, The Fifth Discipline, Peter Senge uses the comparable concept of 'personal mastery' as a 'discipline' embodying clarifying what is important to us and continually learning to understand current reality. To Senge, learning is truly 'lifelong learning' which "does not mean acquiring more information, but expanding the ability to produce the results we really want in life . . . And learning organisations are not possible unless we have people at every level who practice it" (Senge, p.142)

4. Life plans and careers: a longer-term perspective
It is helpful to distinguish between short and long-term personal strategies for managing time. Certainly, the hour-by-hour, day-by-day and week-by-week
approaches can have significant utility, but I suspect that not enough thought is given to the life-span or to personal career plans. Covey’s notion of ‘production capability’ is very relevant here and deserves our close consideration.

Chickering and Havighurst (1981) proposed that throughout the adult years we are confronted by qualitatively different ‘developmental tasks’ which have important implications for our personal and professional lives. Moreover, it is as equally important to consider our students in a similar life-span perspective and to consider appropriate ways of responding to them both as teachers and in the courses we devised for them.

There has been considerable attention to career stages in the literature, and two works are strongly recommended: Robert Boice The New Faculty Member and Jack Schuster, Dan Wheeler and Associates, Enhancing Faculty Careers.

Baldwin (in Wheeler, 1990) argues that attention to these career stages can help universities develop flexible policies and working arrangements in light of differing needs and circumstances rather than against rigid standards (of the kind now found in the Academic Award). Both individual members of academic staff and the university as a whole stand to benefit if attention is given to differences and to individual needs at different stages. Boice’s study of new academic staff suggests that new staff who are able to quickly achieve comfort and acceptance in teaching (through professional development support, for example) also achieve higher levels of scholarly productivity, greater satisfaction and greater success in their careers (Boice, p.78).

**Summary and conclusion**

There are many factors in the social and institutional environment which increase the sense of time pressures on us all. Because of their tradition of self-regulation, academics may have a comparative advantage in managing these pressures if their focus moves from time and things to relationships and results.

At a personal level, the individual academic needs to consider the balance between the work that is actually done now (‘production’) and the capacity to perform high quality work in the future (‘production capability’). Universities actively encourage and support the attainment of this balance through their research and outside studies/study leave policies.

Because much academic work is related to the needs and interests of other people, especially students, particular attention needs to be given to the quality of relationships in the overall management of self. Moreover, the focus needs to shift from simply the here-and-now to the longer term and to consider the balance between career-related goals and other relevant life goals.

Responsibility for these matters rests with individuals, academic departments, universities and unions. Universities and unions have a special responsibility to ensure opportunities for professional development and to encourage the development of patterns of work that reflect different stages of career development in the life span. Individuals have a responsibility to exercise their obligations to both ‘produce’ results in the variety of roles they assume and to ensure that they take a advantage of the opportunities provided to them for continuing professional growth.

**References**


Bliss, E.C. Getting Things Done; The ABC’s of Time Management. Melbourne, Macmillan.


**Handy Hints, Tips, Pointers and Other Advice**

In the next edition of Overview we hope to include a column with the above title. We picture it as a list of short (20 - 50 words long) items of practical teaching advice. Perhaps you have found something worth sharing. Send your contribution to Richard Caladine at Academic Development Services.


The University of Adelaide (1990) *Professional Development at the University of Adelaide*. 

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**Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Research Group**

The Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Research Group is a multi-disciplinary group which aims to promote action research in teaching and learning. Current members are from the Faculties of Law, Health and Engineering, the Departments of Chemistry, Management and Applied Statistics, and units within the University (Academic Development Services, Educational Media Services, Library, Aboriginal Education Centre, Learning Support Services).

**Key aim for 1997:** The launching of a project to trial different approaches to implementing change in learning and teaching at the University of Wollongong and to evaluate the effectiveness of these approaches.

Members of the group have reached agreement on this project to include:

1. designing approaches to educational change
2. identifying obstacles to such change
3. developing strategies for overcoming these obstacles
4. using a set of evaluation methods to assess the impact of these approaches

In the first meeting of the year, members will decide on a particular project in which they would like to be involved during the year. Examples of educational innovations for projects include group learning, peer assessment and flexible delivery. Members will form cross-faculty groups and together design the project and specify methods of evaluation. Plans will be discussed at group meetings and reports will be given at suitable intervals. Group funds will target the administrative support of this project.

Guest speakers will be invited to present on issues relevant to the projects and to provide guidance and support from their own experience. Short papers on the project will be submitted to the editors of Overview for dissemination of ideas throughout the university community. The aim of these activities is to foster reflective practices. This means encouraging critical and systematic thinking on the teaching and learning process, with a goal of improving teaching practices. Research students will be encouraged to present on their work and discuss relevant issues. Members will also be encouraged to write for publication, seek research funds and present at conferences wherever possible.

Meetings are held on a regular basis to share ideas and experiences across traditional boundaries. The 1997 schedule of meetings will appear in the next edition of Overview.

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