

## Every second counts - maximising the value of your time



Whatever your views about cash flow, order books or restructuring, Jim Lawless argues that managing your time efficiently is just as important. He tackles taboo areas including switching off those PDAs and not answering email.

At work, the time we have often seems too short to allow us to address everything that needs our attention. But time is not just spent, it's invested. Every action or inaction we make during the working day brings a return and the value of the return we get depends on how wisely we invest our time. With the current economic uncertainty putting many companies under financial pressure, it is more important than ever, once you have clarity about what it is you want to achieve, that your time is streamlined and focused in order to achieve maximum productivity.

**Competition: We have four copies of Jim Lawless's latest book *Taming Tigers* for our readers. Copies will be won by posting a viewpoint about this article in the 'Add a comment' box.**

A productive way to review the value of your time investment is to keep a detailed record of everything you do at work for a week, including when you did it and how long you spent on it. If someone else manages your diary for you, you may wish to keep a task list for 'at your desk' and 'on the hop' activities, and retrieve the rest of your diary from your appointments calendar at the end of the week. Next, sit down with your task list and appointments calendar and reflect on your investment of time versus what you have achieved. Imagine that you are only paid for the tangible, measurable benefits that you deliver for your organisation and then, using your task list and diary, write a summary of all your work activity from the past week. To start, write down in black all the real activities that directly account for your results. Next, add in what you do that directly accounts for your team's result.

After that, write in red every activity that did not account for results. Activities like coaching others and boosting team morale count towards the result, but only if a follow-up action was agreed - otherwise it's called chatting! Now cross out all the red activities that nobody would miss (the 'agenda-free Monday morning meeting' might be in there, for example, or a three-hour trip each way to attend a meeting that you could have attended by phone). Then cross out all the red activities that could have been delegated to others, leaving you free to achieve more for your team. In doing this you are removing all of the activities that seemed to need doing 'now' but didn't actually reap any real benefits. Finally, review your summary and look at how much time it could have taken you to achieve what you achieved last week. It's very likely that you could have saved yourself many hours to invest more wisely elsewhere.

With this new information, you can plan your schedule much more effectively. If you do have a PA, remember that as the manager of your time, they could be one of the most important members of your team, so make sure you feedback the results of this exercise to them so that they can understand what makes a worthwhile investment and help prioritise your time accordingly.



With that done, the first step towards taking greater control of your time is to reflect critically on the 'time-saving' devices that clutter your daily working life. Online calendars, laptops and PDAs all function to make our schedule more flexible, allowing us to continue to work from anywhere in the world, but often, the insistent beeping and flashing of communications technology is more a distraction than a convenience. If you are on deadline for a vital project and an email pops into your inbox, can you ignore it until the project is completed? And if you look, and it's not urgent, nor related to the task at hand, are you still tempted to respond? Technology will continually interfere with even the most carefully planned of diary investments, unless you take action.

### **Mobile communication overkill**

If you are on deadline, turn your email off and mobile phone off and only turn them back on at an appointed time in your diary for dealing with communication, or at least when you are not at risk of missing the deadline on a vital task. The very nature and ubiquity of portable communications devices leads many to believe they are expected to check them continually, but do you really need to be available 24/7 by email, landline and mobile? Is it possible that you would be more valuable to your organisation if you took time away from the hum of communications to actually get things done? And if you're ever in a meeting where people are tapping on laptops and checking PDAs rather than attending to the subject matter, ask yourself, is this really worth my time?

A second way to control time more effectively is to introduce self-imposed deadlines. Many ongoing activities do not have deadlines and the higher up the management hierarchy you find yourself, the less likely you are to have day-to-day deadlines thrust upon you. So, when a vital activity presents itself without a deadline or schedule, put one in place immediately. Don't wait to see how your time plays out; set a deadline, make time for it in your diary, and, if you need to incentivise yourself, put something at stake against it so that you don't become distracted and invest your time elsewhere. Again, if someone else keeps your appointments calendar, make sure time allocated to complete tasks in your list of 'things to do' is also reflected in your diary so that meetings don't push out vital time for getting work done.

### **Just say 'No'**

Many of us are, through a willingness to 'do the right thing' reluctant to say 'no' to colleagues, whether in taking on tasks or travelling to meetings that brought you no progress. However, when you are clearer (through the use of the diary exercise above) about how your time can be most valuably invested, you should find it easier to say 'no' with conviction when you are asked to make an unwise investment of your time. And, what's more, if you communicate that sense of purpose to the person you say 'no' to, they are more likely to accept that you have a plan in place and adjust their needs to fit in with yours.

Saying 'no' is the third tip, then, and a particularly important time-saving tool when you come face to face with 'time bandits', the staple subject matter of every time management course; those colleagues who appear to have little sense of purpose other than disrupting the people around them. Interaction with distracting people will ruin the best laid time investment plans, so avoid them if you can, and if this isn't possible, try to 'train' them to leave you in peace by asking just that of them - frequently.

Finally, remember that time can easily slip back out of your control, so it is vital that you put time aside for planning on a regular basis. You may find that you need to constantly reassess your priorities as new challenges put new pressures on your time, so allow half an hour a week to sit down in front of your diary and reflect on the past week and the week ahead. If you are committed to investing your time wisely, you will reap excellent returns.

*Jim Lawless is one of the most sought after conference speakers in Europe, CEO of Taming Tigers Learning and author of new book [Taming Tigers](#), out now*