



Reducing the Risk of Un-Productive Team Members

How Project Managers Can Assess and Improve Individual Time
Management Performance

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Project Managers (PMs) often make a fatal assumption: all team members are alike in their capacity to execute assigned tasks. Operating under this false premise, they risk making costly errors and place their projects and reputations at risk. In the Caribbean, where productivity is historically low, team members may vary more than average. To combat this variance and its attendant risk, project managers can use a number of tools to distinguish between team members of different skill levels to ensure that workload fits individual capacity.

The Historical Context

Caribbean industry, unlike that of most countries, was built largely on models of forced or semi-forced labour. Slavery and indentureship were the primary methods of recruitment and enforcement for hundreds of years. The resulting antagonism that exists in our workplaces between managers and workers has produced employees who are often willing to do as little real work as possible: just enough to stay out of trouble.

The cumulative effect of this mindset is that the regional workplace is full of individuals with low productivity and weak time management skills. Projects that involve tens or hundreds of team members are no exception, even when participants are motivated. The results are often disastrous: missed due dates, high costs, and poor-quality work that doesn't meet the requirements of the project's sponsors or beneficiaries. The project manager's reputation suffers.

Your Role as Project Manager

As a project manager, you have probably seen enough to be more than a little concerned. Your ability to deliver depends on others, and experience has taught you that the number of absolutely reliable professionals is small. You have had your share of unpleasant surprises: someone who is smart, articulate, well educated and experienced appears capable but fails to deliver on time.

You find yourself distrustful, wondering whether the problem lies with the other person or with you. Are you expecting too much? Are you being too harsh? Does that even matter? Where do you start to build a cadre of team members who are utterly reliable?

These difficult questions keep you up at night because you want to be successful in your projects, regardless of who gets placed on your team.

This paper is about reducing the risk of working with a staff of team members whose time management skills are unknown to you. How do you create an environment that allows you to increase the odds of success? What practical steps can you take, and what tools can you use to build that knowledge?

Time Management 2.0

To confront team members' lack of time management skills, let's use the latest research. For this paper, I'll use Time Management 2.0,ⁱ as defined by our research at 2Time Labs.

The latest research shows that:

1. Individuals teach themselves functional but idiosyncratic time management systems in their teens or early twenties. They receive little or no coaching or instruction, instead learning from experience and trial and error. Unfortunately, like many homegrown solutions, these time management systems are uneven in design, resulting in wide ranges of individual capability.
2. At certain points after this initial development, many individuals see the need for improvement or upgrade. However, they do not know how to improve their systems in a systematic way. Some try formal training and attempt to copy someone else's unique method as described in a book or programme. Typically, success is limited.
3. One reason it is so difficult to successfully improve one's system is that learners attempt to implement too many changes at once, underestimating how difficult it is to make lasting changes to one's habits, practices and rituals. They assume that change should come quickly, even when their own experience shows that it doesn't.
4. Even when we know the right habits, humans are bad at setting up an environment that ensures habit change. We think that our willpower is enough, and we fail to set up sustainable support structures.

Having a great team means more than having educated, highly motivated and well-intentioned people. Like most professionals around the world, Caribbean professionals retain outdated ideas about their time management skills and how to improve them. Due to the low overall standard in the region, our professionals are accustomed to getting by with poorly cultivated skills. Project managers must be a step ahead.

In order to reduce the risk, project managers must find a way to reduce the risks they face. They need to assess team members formally and informally and craft ways to help them make concrete improvements.

Assessing Team Members Informally

Informal methods of assessing team members are solo efforts. The project manager evaluates a team member's skill in order to reduce the risk to the project. To do this well, project managers need to understand what determines individual productivity.

The best determinant of a team member's skill in productivity is the process by which he or she handles time demands.

Time Demand: an individual commitment to complete an action in the future. It's a discrete, psychological object that has a number of physical properties. Once time demands are created, we each process them using unique, self-taught methods.

Skillful managers of time demands perform two tasks well:

- a) They complete a high percentage of time demands.
- b) When they are unable to complete a time demand as promised or expected, they know and communicate this fact ahead of time to the project manager or beneficiary.

Unfortunately, most people don't perform these two tasks well, and as a project manager, you need to learn where they lie on the continuum. Here are some of the symptoms of weak time management skills:

- An email inbox in which hundreds or thousands of items are waiting to be read and/or processed further
- Deadlines missed without any advanced warning
- Consistent late arrivals at meetings
- Having neither a written nor electronic calendar (i.e. a mental schedule)
- Having a written calendar only
- Having one calendar that only records appointments with other people
- A to-do list that has grown to be unmanageable
- Building a reputation for not delivering on time or delivering low-quality work
- Time demands that disappear from view or get forgotten because they fall through the cracks in the time management system
- Overwhelmed or imbalanced lives
- Messy desks or offices
- Information that cannot be found when needed
- Multi-tasking that results in partial attention during conversations, meetings, phone calls, driving trips, etc.

Savvy project managers collect this data to get an early idea of how skillful a team member is at managing time demands. If they understand the seven Fundamentals of time management,ⁱⁱ then they can perform a more precise analysis, but their understanding will still be limited by their own biases.

Another informal method emerges from the work of Brigitte Claessens, as outlined in Chapter 6 of her 2004 thesis *Perceived Control of Time: Time Management and Personal Effectiveness at Work*ⁱⁱⁱ. In this chapter, she focuses on the way individual pacing style affects one's results.

Her findings should be familiar to all PMs: the way people tackle critical tasks on a project varies widely, and so do their results. She describes 5 individual "styles", as shown in Figure 1.

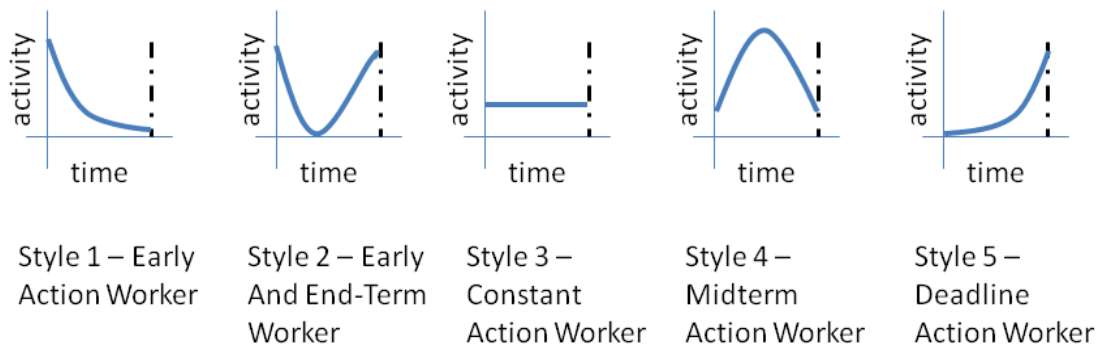


Figure 1

Style 1 - The person who starts everything early and ends slowly.

Style 2 - The person who starts early, does little in the middle, and rushes at the end.

Style 3 - The person who keeps a steady pace from start to finish.

Style 4 - The person who starts slowly, works hard in the middle, and ends slowly.

Style 5 - The person who does little in the beginning and rushes to do everything at the last minute.

As a project manager, you might immediately be able to identify a style you love and a style you absolutely hate.

Claessens gives some guidance to help readers identify which employee belongs in which category. I have put these in the form of six questions:

- Does the person plan activities in detail?
- Does the person focus on priorities?
- Does the person see him/herself as in control over his or her time?
- Does the person see him or herself as effective?
- How does the person assess his or her track record of past performance?
- How does an outside observer assess the person's track record of past performance?

The following 5 styles can be derived from the data she collected. (Table 1).

Table 1

	Style 1	Style 2	Style 3	Style 4	Style 5
Detailed Activity Planning			High		Low
Priority Focus		Low	High	Low	Low
Control over his/her time	High	Low		High	
Sees self as effective		Low	High		
Self-assessed performance	High	Low	High	Low	Low
Other-assessed performance	High		High		Very Low

In summary, the researchers found that Styles 1 and 3 engaged in the most planning activities, and it's no accident that Styles 1 and 3 had high performance scores. Style 5 did the least planning, preferring to take each day as it came. Style 2 received the lowest performance scores.

It's interesting to note that Style 5 did NOT receive the lowest performance rating, as one might expect, indicating that people who have this style can still produce results near the deadline: it just takes a lot of belated, hard work.

Also, Style 3 workers required the least overtime on their projects, while Styles 2 and 5 needed the most – a sign of the effectiveness of their time management skills.

Persons using Styles 1 and 4 felt more in control of their time than those who used Style 2. This probably occurs because by the end of the project, they had already completed the bulk of their work, and last-minute changes could more easily be accommodated.

The frequency distribution of each Style is shown in Figure 2.

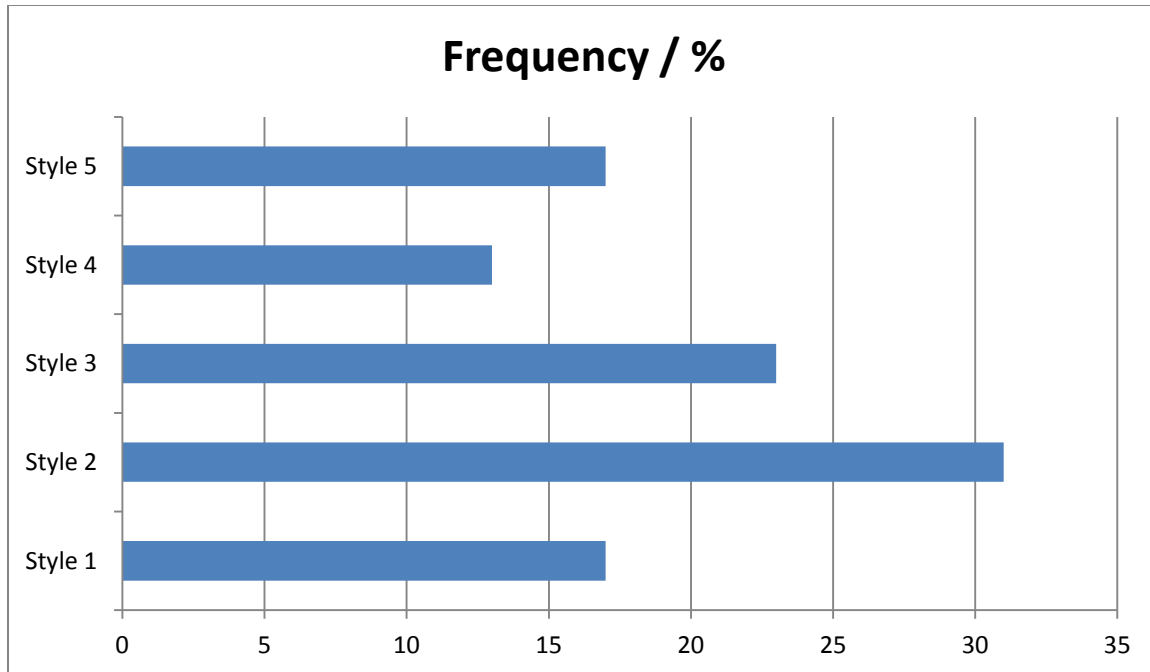


Figure 2: Distribution of professionals among the 5 Styles

Style 2, the least effective, is the most common; an alarming finding.

These are preliminary indicators of time management skill, but project managers can use anecdotal evidence to determine which Style applies to each team member. This data would supplement the intuition that already informs a project manager's ability to delegate tasks.

There are two time frames during which projects receive the greatest visibility: the start and the end. Those who don't manage their time well are unable to keep time demands alive without external reminders, which are typically higher in frequency and intensity at the start and the end of a project.

While the research wasn't performed in the Caribbean, my conjecture is that we, too, have a large number of (ineffective) Style 2s in our professional ranks and project teams. In the next section of this paper, I'll share empirical data that does confirm Claessen's findings among regional professionals who have attended the NewHabits Foundations training^{iv}.

The challenge of these informal methods is that they don't involve individual team members directly. The project manager is the one doing the assessment and adjustment, so these approaches are limited. A better approach, which I call the formal method, involves the team member directly.

Formal Methods of Assessment

Formal methods include individual team members and empower them with information and new skills.

In my book, *Bill's Im-Perfect Time Management Adventure*, the protagonist (who happens to be a project manager) is forced to find a way to improve his team's time management and productivity skills or face unemployment. Ultimately, he is told, they'd all be fired if no real improvement took place.

Fortunately, in the tale, he chooses the route of involvement. He brings in an academic, who helps him teach his team members how to assess their own skills in order to improve them during the life of the project. Fortunately, he discovers that a team focus on improvement can be a powerful motivator, and despite several mishaps, he uses this approach to bring team members together to help them support (and police) each other.

The book describes a real tool that 2Time Labs has been using in corporate seminars for the past five years. We have followed Bill's example, teaching learners how to evaluate their own skills using a competency-based instrument, how to create a plan for gradual improvement, and how to set up successful support systems. The final evaluation looks like a profile of skills. Here's

Practice Tracking Template

	Novice / White Belt	Yellow belt	Orange belt	Green Belt
Capturing	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③
Emptying	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③
Tossing	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③
Acting Now	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③
Storing	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③
Scheduling	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③
Listing	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③
Interrupting	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③
Switching	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③
Warning	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③
Reviewing	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③	① ② ③
Target Dates				
Starting Out ①	Practicing ②	Automatic ③	Today's Date ____ / ____ / ____	

an actual example of a profile in Figure 3 that covers 7 Fundamental Skills: Capturing, Emptying, Tossing, Acting Now, Storing, Scheduling and Listing.

It's a typical profile, showing a wide gap from one skill to the next. In this example, the individual is a White belt overall – one's overall belt is determined by his or her lowest single

Figure 3 - White Belt (low) to Green Belt (high) Skills

belt.

Our data shows that of 281 participants in Trinidad and Jamaica, only 2 participants scored Yellow Belts - all the rest were White. Initially, this was a surprise, but it helps explain the reality project managers see on the ground every day.

Other instruments exist, but they differ in their intent: they don't teach learners how to diagnose their own skills. Instead, they do the work for the learner and simply provide them with a score after they complete a set of questions.

The following companies offer assessments: 2Time Labs^v, save-time.org^{vi} and Time Diagnostics^{vii}

The power of doing such a formal assessment lies not in the knowledge itself, but in how you as a project manager can use it to empower team members and achieve your goals.

Summary

Doing an assessment is just the first step. It's still up to the project manager to create an environment in which improvement can take place.

In the book, Bill finds a way to get his team members engaged in a joint effort to boost productivity. His method is just one way to create a supportive environment for learning and growth, an objective that any project manager can reach with some creativity and planning.

PMs who decide to boost their teams' performance can use modern tools to zero in on behaviours that can be observed, taught and coached. In this sense, they are like the managers of professional sports teams, who don't simply accept a player's limitations – they try to lift the team's performance by developing individual capacity. It's a way to reduce the risks inherent in a team whose members have various skills and abilities. This productivity problem isn't exclusively a Caribbean problem, but our region's project managers would be wise to solve it.

Francis Wade is the President of Framework Consulting and the founder of 2Time Labs. In 2013, he authored Bill's Im-Perfect Time Management Adventure, a fable that describes a project manager's struggle to improve his team's time management skills. Francis is an author, speaker and trainer who lives in Kingston, Jamaica.

ⁱ 2Time Labs website on Time Management Research - <http://2time-sys.com/about>

ⁱⁱ Wade, Francis. (2006) The New Time Management - Focus on the Fundamentals and Toss Away the Tips, available at www.changethis.com

ⁱⁱⁱ Claessens, Brigitte. (2004) Perceived Control of Time: Time Management and Personal Effectiveness at Work.

^{iv} NewHabits Foundations - <http://newhabitsja.info>

^v 2Time Labs' MyTimeDesign 7 Fundamental Assessment - <http://bit.ly/168qmEL>

^{vi} Discover Your Time Management Style - <http://pinkshoepower.com/profiler>

^{vii} It's about time - <http://www.timeintelligence.co.uk/>