

# CHAPTERS 1-2

## PERFECT TIME-BASED PRODUCTIVITY

*A UNIQUE WAY TO PROTECT YOUR PEACE OF MIND AS TIME DEMANDS INCREASE*

FRANCIS WADE



## Perfect Time-Based Productivity

A unique way to protect your peace of mind as time demands increase.  
Francis Wade

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Copyeditor: Ellen Fishbein

Cover art: Stockfresh.com

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First edition: November 2014

Published in the United States by 2Time Labs Press

ISBN-13: 978-1505408096

ISBN-10: 1505408091

This book is available for bulk purchases, at a special discount.

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**To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often.**

**Winston Churchill**

## **Dedication**

The professional athlete doesn't get distracted by top ten tips on blogs or bits of advice floating around in tweets or pics. Instead, he relies on a nuanced analysis of his strengths and weaknesses in order to improve his performance. He knows that with new understanding, improvements become easier. As a productive professional, you are no different. This book is for you.

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## Frequently Asked Questions: Start Here

This book is about bringing peace of mind to your life. But first, you need to be at peace with this book. Let's take a look at some of the questions you might be asking.

### Why do I need this?

Not everyone needs the principles in this book. However, if you wish you had more time to

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on [Amazon.com](http://amazon.com) and <http://perfect.mytimedesign.com>

complete your commitments, you'll benefit from the steps I lay out in the chapters that follow.

You're about to find the gaps in your current habits. You'll be able to compare what you're doing now with the best-in-class practices uncovered in the latest research. Plus, in the workplace of the future, it's safe to expect increased demands on your time and even higher expectations. I will show you how to expand your capacity to meet these challenges and prepare yourself for a continued information explosion being driven by ever-changing technology.

### **Where do these ideas come from? Can I trust you?**

While I have been working on these ideas for the better part of a decade, you'll be able to separate my opinions from the findings of experts who have gathered empirical evidence from studies involving thousands of participants. While you read, spend time in the Lab Notes at the end to see how I arrived at key conclusions. You may even want to read articles, posts and studies from the references as you make up your own mind based on the evidence.

### **Can I benefit if I'm a novice (or an expert)?**

The reason everyone can follow the steps I'm about to share is that I will start with an assumption: you already know a lot about "time management," and your knowledge is embedded in the methods you employ today. Perfect Time-Based Productivity will uncover this knowledge, giving you a unique, in-depth understanding of the "system" you use right now. You'll measure your skills against world-class standards and develop a new improved approach that works to meet your needs, regardless of your current performance. Plus, near the end of the book, you will have the unique opportunity to compare your skills with participants from my live programs, providing you with a fact-based reality check

### **Do I have to be a professional?**

Not necessarily. This book is written for the knowledge worker who wants to use a "professional approach," which I define as the use of research and science as a starting point, rather than individual stories, examples or anecdotes. Many of these findings are recent, so you'll be exposed to the latest thinking from hundreds of studies. So, before you make any changes, I will show you the foundational reasoning behind them, giving you some confidence based on your knowledge of the facts.

### **Is this time management?**

You may already know or suspect that time itself cannot be managed. The solution isn't "self-management," either, because managing yourself is an activity that's inherent in all forms of management. Instead, it's about managing tasks, commitments and priorities through the lens of a new construct we'll study: a "time demand." Using this idea will remove the frustration of trying to do the impossible – manage time – and the feeling of failure many have experienced.

### **How is this book different from other books?**

This is one of the few books in the genre to rely heavily on recent academic research in multiple fields. Prepare to be informed by the collective wisdom of brain scientists, psychologists, industrial engineers, management theorists and adult learning experts. I also include a wide variety of stories that illustrate their findings. This diverse body of work has never been brought together into

a single tapestry of knowledge, making the message of this book unique.

Prepare, therefore, to challenge the conventional wisdom. The end result will not be a new list of rules to follow, but a fresh appreciation of your available options and their consequences.

### **How can this book promise perfection?**

It offers a breakthrough definition: being "perfect" does not mean following a particular set of habits, practices, rituals and routines flawlessly. Instead, it means playing the game of continuous improvement. You will learn to relentlessly change and tweak your habits to fit the increasing volume of demands you need to process and complete each day. This kind of perfection is tough, because most knowledge workers face changing circumstances: doing the work of more than one person, handling modern technology and dealing with more information than ever before. Perfection, in keeping with the Winston Churchill quote in the opening pages, is a dynamic balancing act requiring permanent vigilance. I'll show you that some professionals are already there.

### **Is this complicated, and does it take a long time?**

It's not complicated, but it does take some time. By the end of this book, you'll have learned a lot, and you will also have created a simple plan of improvement. This will help you take small steps to whatever destination you desire, helped along by your very own support system. While your improvement starts immediately, don't expect overnight success. The methods you currently use to manage your commitments were developed over several years in fits and starts. Unraveling and replacing what you already do is not a matter of magic – it's about applied knowledge (which saves time) and perseverance (which keeps you going). If you put in the effort as you read these pages, your reward will follow.

### **What can I use this for?**

You can start by tackling immediate time-management problems or removing unwanted symptoms of time stress: both require skillful, self-diagnostic methods. On the other hand, you may want to accomplish a new target, goal or vision as you stretch your current capacity beyond today's limits. However, if you are someone who is just curious about the very latest thinking, you'll learn a lot about that, and also about yourself.

In all cases, you will discover there are physical, psychological and philosophical limits to accomplishing your daily goals while, at the same time, maintaining peace of mind. Unfortunately, the field of time management has experienced a growing trend of "I-do-it-this-way-and-so-should-you" thinking that oversimplifies the challenge of being productive. This book reverses that trend.

### **Where can I get the forms?**

Download them here: <http://goo.gl/Ohe9ju>

## Introduction

This is a book about you, but only if you happen to be someone who wants to get better at what you do.

You want to make the most of each hour of every day: get better at what we call "time management."

You're not alone – I'm a member of this group, and so are many others. Do you have big dreams of all the things you could do if only you had more time and capacity to fulfill your commitments? Your aspirations call you to further accomplishments, but you find yourself constrained. Perhaps you're frustrated by what you want to do but somehow can't achieve. It appears as if time won't allow you to reach your productive potential.

I imagine that if you've picked up this book, you have stopped wishing for more than 24 hours in a day. You have found yourself ready to make the most of the time you do have. Simple enough to say. Quite another thing to do.

It's just not that easy. Most people who pick up a book like this have gotten to the limit of how much they can use their own ideas to improve on their own. Perhaps you have too, and you're actively looking for other solutions.

The only problem is that the solutions available... well, to be frank, they suck. Conventional wisdom steers us all towards three stock answers: buy a new gadget, search out tips and tricks, or just copy someone else's blend of habits, practices, rituals and routines. Sadly, these don't work as well now as they did in the past.

Modern devices are small miracles, but even the guy who lines up outside the Apple Store for three days to get the new iPhone struggles. The connection between individual productivity and the size, speed or cost of the fanciest smartphone, tablet, watch or laptop is dubious at best.

Even though a lot of the tips and tricks on the Internet and in books are interesting, they easily become a distraction from our goal – making the best of each day while being at our productive best. We know that Michael Jordan didn't become a basketball great by Googling listicles on random websites. Perhaps you also suspect that people don't become efficient, accomplished professionals that way either. (A "listicle" is an article built around a list (of what are often lightweight tips), e.g. "The Top Ten Ways to Become a Great Basketball Player").

But what about copying or mimicking the behaviors of someone we respect? Is there a blogger, guru or trainer somewhere who has figured out the ultimate pattern of habits, rituals and solutions?

Maybe you don't quite buy into any of these solutions, even though you aren't sure exactly why they don't work. All you may know for sure is that more stuff comes at you each day with a rising expectation to stay on top of it all, chewing up more of your available time and demanding ever greater portions of your attention. New technology has become, in part, a delivery mechanism for *more*.

Some call it "progress."

However, as working professionals, our productivity hasn't budged (even though we can now answer our email from any point on the planet, at any hour of the day). The truth is, we're stuck at pre-fancy-new-technology levels.

To make things worse, we don't know why. Neither did I back in 2006.

### Constant Spring, Kingston, Jamaica. 2006.

*Another waste of my time.* I shook my head and lifted my fingers from the keyboard.

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on [Amazon.com](http://amazon.com) and <http://perfect.mytimedesign.com>



Once again, I found myself blogging about the hours I had just blown at an inefficient local company or government agency. My mind searched for an answer: *What could I have done differently?*

It was a detour, I knew. A few minutes before, I had opened up my blog with a clear intent: to add another entry about bureaucracy in Jamaica.

But now, I had stopped typing as my head whirled with more questions. Should I have arrived earlier? Was leaving and coming back a better strategy? How could I have been more prepared? Did they make me late, or did I make myself late? Me? Or them? Or just "life in the tropics"?

I hated wasting my time, silently complaining: *There are too many damned days like this.* I moved my mouse to save the post and reviewed the last 20 posts. This blog, which was supposed to be all about my transition, now had eight entries on productivity and time management. *This stuff is way off topic.*

But I wasn't sure if I should be surprised. Born in the US to Jamaican parents, my life had involved moving back and forth between both countries: 18 years in Jamaica were followed by 21 years in the US.

Now, I had recently moved to Jamaica, where a chaotic business environment brought one surprise after the next. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Competitive Index I was moving from a country ranked third to one ranked 86th out of 144 countries in terms of its productivity. *I should expect some things to be different with an 83 point difference in ranking,* I reasoned.

But obviously, I had a problem. Even though I had taught productivity and time management programs in the USA and other countries previously, I had stopped several years ago when I got bored. The topic had gotten stale. Or, more accurately, I had gotten stale and moved on to other interests, believing that I couldn't become more productive. If I was already using the best techniques, I decided, what more could there be to learn?

What shocked me was the impact this new, hectic, unreliable environment had on me personally. I found myself running late. Forgetting to do stuff. Dealing with organizations that weren't reliable. Trusting people who were, apparently, incompetent. Watching the wonderful laidback environment that tourists love so much turn into an awful laidback environment where I couldn't get anything done.

At first I laughed at and refused to engage in the local practice of calling ahead to "confirm" a meeting. After a few mishaps, I realized its practical value as a method to remind the other person they had a meeting in the first place. This tactic was about making sure you weren't going to be the only one at the meeting. I had never had to do that in any part of the USA.

Humbled (and a bit humiliated), I didn't know what to do to cope with my failures. After all, I used to be the expert in the front of the classroom, not the novice without a clue. *Someone, somewhere must have solved this problem already,* I reasoned, so I opened a new browser window after carefully saving a half-written post.

Googling away, I searched for terms like "developing country time management," "extreme time management" and even "war zone time management." Hadn't someone figured out how to be productive in an unpredictable environment?

Maybe now, in 2014, such a book exists. But back then – nothing. Nada. Zilch. Just the same tired prescriptions I had given to others as a productivity workshop instructor:

"Follow these exact productivity practices. They work for me, and they'll work for you."

"You need the discipline to use these habits – find it, somehow."

"There can be no deviation from this method – if you do, you have no right to expect success."

Now, I felt a pang of guilt. My own mother had taken my productivity program years before and afterwards admitted: "I don't need this stuff. It's too much for me, son, I'm retired."

Later on, I'd tell people, "When your own mother tells you that your baby is ugly, it's probably time to listen!" In that moment, however, I had changed the subject, because everything I knew to say to rebut her objection sounded stupid. "Maybe that's why I am no longer leading these programs," I muttered.

Closing the window, I went back to writing my post on time wasting bureaucrats, but now, my anger had dissipated. They wouldn't be fired, so why write about them?

I leaned back in my chair, staring at the ceiling.

Two things were once again swirling in my mind. And then, a third.

First, I saw a rubric. I had used one during a short stint in a white-collar sweatshop. The State of California had contracted with a company in Florida to score its ninth-grade standardized tests. Located a few miles from where I lived in Miramar, I figured I had nothing to lose, so I applied and got accepted, probably because I held the required Master's Degree.

It turned out to be little more than a drudge, sitting in an air-conditioned office with a few hundred other graders, working on a computer, marking the English papers of fourteen-year-olds. Four hours in the morning, lunch, then four more hours in the afternoon.

"It's what management consultants do when business is slow," I joked to myself.

But during my single hour of training, I heard a word used over and over again that I had never heard before: "rubric." Or, maybe I had come across it and forgotten. When I got home, I had to look it up.

Today, Wikipedia tells me that a scoring rubric is a "standard of performance." My team of graders used a predetermined scale developed by experts to determine the level of skill a student demonstrated on a standard, handwritten test. Our managers hammered home the mantra: "Just follow the rubric!" They were serious, I discovered. Apparently, the software we used tracked our use of the rubric, and those who didn't follow it were soon asked to leave.

Second, I remembered a workshop a friend of mine had invited me to deliver earlier that year. He used something like a rubric, called a "competency matrix." The ones he put together for his training looked like ladders ranging from low to high levels of performance.

Thirdly, I realized that the vast majority of Jamaicans had never attended a time management class of any kind. Not that this is a special case – it's true for most of working adults around the world. But in Jamaica, it led to a deep gap between their skills and those of North Americans.

As these three thoughts bounced around, I said to myself, "I need a ladder – one that touches the ground. The real ground."

It would be a blend of rubric and competency matrix, for time management skills. At the bottom would be weak skills, and at the top, world-class skills.

Now, I leaned forward, staring at my imaginary ladder. I could see someone moving from one level of skill to the next, seeing the next step clearly and directly.

I knew from triathlon swim training that it was essential to focus on one skill at a time. Terry Laughlin, the Total Immersion swim instructor, made that clear in his books and videos, which I loved.

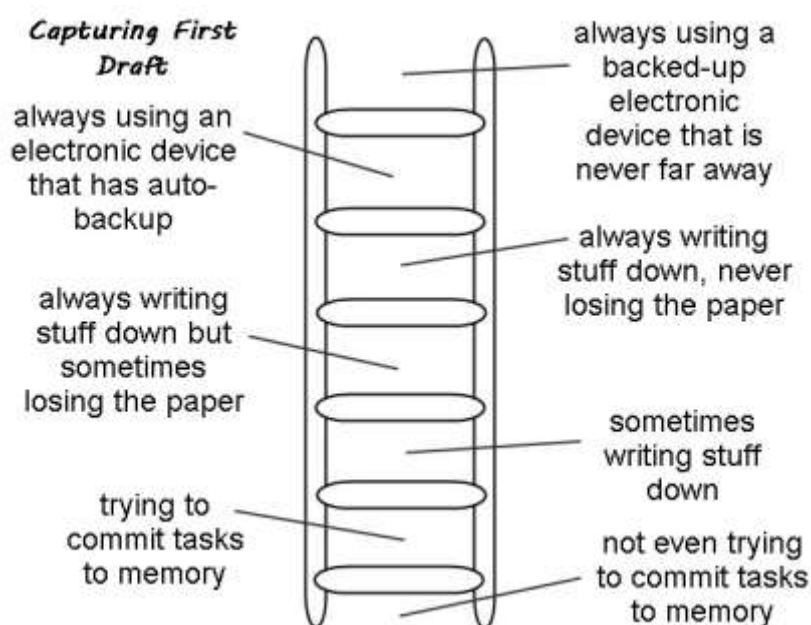
But then, a doubt entered: "How does that help me?" I paused and imagined that I could find space on this ladder that I needed to climb – a way to get better.

With that vague answer in mind, I clicked to close my bureaucrat rant and opened a new post. Out came my first ladder, on the topic of "Capturing," right in the middle of my blog on moving back to Jamaica, where it didn't belong. ("Capturing," as I described it then, is our way of "writing down new tasks.")

I started by writing out the worst behaviors and the best, at the bottom and top. Then, I filled in the gaps, coming up with four steps in all. As I described each level, I had to be honest: "I'm not as good as I think I am." But that didn't stop me. I was determined to reach someplace new.

The diagram below is a re-creation of the original, which is long lost.

Figure I-1



When I completed the diagram, I sat back. This looked different to me. I had never seen a ladder of productivity skills like this one. I could also see my skills placed me somewhere in the middle – nowhere near the top.

It wasn't hard to understand why: some of my productivity problems in Jamaica existed because I had never bothered to perfect the skill of Capturing at the highest level. When I didn't Capture reliably, in the next moment, I left myself open to nasty surprises.

Fortunately, there were people I had worked with who had reached the top rung, but I had never seen the need to follow their example. Now, I could see why I needed to.

I flipped open a couple of productivity books and websites, thinking that I'd only succeeded in reinventing the wheel, but I only confirmed my first impression: I hadn't seen anything like this before. In fact, the pages I opened all focused on defining a single set of behaviors.

For example, one author had perfected the art of "Capturing" with a digital voice-recorder rather than paper and pen, which he would play back each evening before going to bed. Like others, he seemed satisfied to tell readers that only a single rung of practices existed: the one he happened to be describing. He barely mentioned the possibility of other rungs, or even future, improved practices that might be invented to extend the ladder of "Capturing."

"Finally, something new that I can use to get better," I said to myself. "Just because I can't easily find other ladders doesn't mean I shouldn't use it."

It was a start.

Eventually, over the next few months, posts on productivity started taking over my blog, and I had to start a new one. "After all," I reasoned, "I'm just fooling around. Once I run out of ideas, I'll stop. Or maybe others might come along and use them. Just a few months at most, and then that will be it." I was wrong. In 2014, I haven't stopped.

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Maybe you're like me. You realize you're stuck but don't know why. I didn't know how to get unstuck, even though the symptoms seemed clear enough. In this way, I was like millions of professionals who want to improve their time-based productivity but don't know how.

You may also be facing a similar, perplexing life change that has brought all sorts of new commitments. You probably aren't Jamaica after living in the USA for over two decades. But you may be experiencing some of the symptoms of life changes – information overload, email overwhelm, time stress, a feeling of being out of balance, or a sense of always being in a rush. Perhaps it extends to missed deadlines and commitments that are falling through the cracks.

Why aren't there simple solutions to these problems?

In the chapters to come, I'll show you that simple solutions don't come easily to complex problems.

A Band-Aid is no substitute for open-heart surgery – and it's not the Band-Aid's fault, either. The heart is too complex system for such a simple solution. It takes years of training to understand its structure.

At the same time, the uninformed may see a YouTube video of a surgeon in action and accurately observe that the number of cuts being made with the scalpel to do a basic valve replacement surgery is fewer than 10. Given the fact that it takes more than 10 cuts to eat a 16 oz. Porterhouse steak, they'd mistakenly conclude that open-heart surgery, which requires fewer cuts, is easier.

Leonardo da Vinci once said, "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication."

Bypass surgery is complex, requiring years of training to determine the handful of simple cuts needed to complete the procedure effectively. It's the reason why neither Band-Aids nor your steak eating skills could ever get the job done.

In the chapters to come, I'll introduce you to another complex system: the everyday combination of habits, practices and rituals you use to manage your time. But it's not just about some cool insights. One thing I learned from reading swim coach Terry Laughlin's book is that while you're sitting down to read its pages, you aren't getting better. You start getting better only after you close the book, make your way to the pool with a superb improvement plan and jump in the water to implement it.

By the end of this book, you'll also have in your possession a superb, Leonardoesque plan for improvement: simple, but sophisticated. As Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. said, "I wouldn't give a fig for simplicity on this side of complexity, but I'd give my right arm for simplicity on the other side of complexity."

In Part One, you'll get the background knowledge you need to make this journey safely. The research I'll share might confirm some of your suspicions – you'll learn that time management doesn't exist, because *time cannot be managed*. Instead, you'll learn that all these years you have been managing something called a "time demand" an internal, individual commitment to complete an action in the future.

You'll also discover an astounding fact: you started creating time demands as a pre-teen, just after you discovered the concept of time (at around ages seven, eight and nine). By doing so, you sparked an awesome period of development that changed the course of your life. During the following years, you also began to craft personal methods for managing time demands, laying the foundation for every success you have experienced as an adult. I'll share research that reveals the fact that we can't escape the human need to create time demands and keep them alive: we need them to achieve our goals, aspirations and dreams.

Furthermore, your discovery of time demands will help you understand why gurus, academics and trainers have been so confused, even as you find a way to rise above the contrary advice that's been given by them over the years.

To back up this learning and sort out the knowledge from different disciplines, I'll link you to my Lab Notes, which are included at the end of this book. There, you can delve into the logic I used to arrive at these and other conclusions and sink your teeth into the academic research that backs them up. Where I used intuition in the absence of hard evidence, I'll let you know, so that you see where all of these ideas are coming from before you apply them. A few people may want to visit the source materials listed in the References, which include the sources most relevant to this book. My website's Library also includes references to the cover pages of over one hundred additional papers. See <http://bit.ly/WLy6EY>.

In Part Two, I'll take you through an actual improvement cycle in which you can start making real-time changes. We'll tap into your power to innovate in the area of time-based productivity, which you might have set aside in the last few years. Slowing down the rapid but forgotten process you used as an adolescent, you'll do an in-depth assessment of your current methods. In order to do this assessment, I'll explain what world-class behaviors look like through seven core skills: Capturing, Emptying, Tossing, Acting Now, Storing, Scheduling and Listing.

This is not just an intellectual exercise – you will define new targets and plans right away. At the end of the seventh assessment, I'll show you how to bring these plans together into a single Master Plan that's feasible and inviting, even though it may span several months or years.

While your plan at the end will be simple, it will be based on a sophisticated understanding of how human beings manage time demands, and more importantly, the results of your assessment. Your new self-knowledge will be the primary driver: prepare yourself to discover the complexity of what you do each day and, perhaps, the degree to which your skills were developed unevenly in the past. This, you'll find, is typical: for most of us, it's the product of a teenage mind working on its own without help of guidance. Rube Golberg meets MacGyver.

An accurate self-evaluation will let you take some important shortcuts on your path of improvement. You'll find yourself conserving time and energy as you focus on the handful of improvement activities that make the biggest difference, rather than trying to do too much at once. Your skill at defining a feasible Master Plan is key.

For some, the day you complete the plan will be a good time to lay down this book and take a pause, as Part Three looks at advanced topics that help you implement it. In these chapters, you'll take a deep dive into "the flow state" and the reasons why it's important to be aware of this high state of productivity. Then, I offer four advanced skills: Interrupting, Switching, Reviewing and Warning – that you may also include in your Master Plan. They also represent skills that were developed in your teenage years.

The last three chapters are meant to prepare you for real-world challenges. As professionals, we are bombarded with new productivity ideas, can't find the software and hardware tools we really need and face obstacles to being effective in the workplace. You'll learn how to navigate these issues.

As I mentioned in the FAQ, along our entire journey, we'll have a lot of help from researchers in multiple fields. As professionals, it's important we work with facts rather than anecdotes, balancing science with intriguing stories. Bringing findings from different fields together in one place is the only way to gain the insight we need to create a powerful Master Plan that doesn't ignore a single possible improvement.

To help pull this plan together, you will be completing several forms: the most recent versions are available by download from the following page on my book's website - <http://goo.gl/Ohe9ju>. You will use them to complete your self-evaluation, drawing a profile of the methods you use today.

As important as your Master Plan and current profile are, you should finish this book with much more than a plan on paper. My ultimate goal is to give you a clean start in developing your time-based productivity skills. With it, you can fix problems, alleviate unwanted symptoms, and achieve unforeseen peace of mind. You can also use it to prepare yourself for a future that's likely to

bring more time demands than ever before through new 24-hour-a-day technology that can never, *ever* be turned off.

What I want for you is a new beginning: some solutions to hard problems that give you a way to reboot your improvement efforts with a fresh set of insights and newfound energy. More than a mere method: a new mindset.

It's just what I wanted after running into problems in 2006: a way to begin again.

Francis Wade

2Time Labs

Kingston, Jamaica

2014

## **Part One**

### **Understanding the Concepts**

***Knowledge-worker productivity is the biggest of the 21st century management challenges.***

**Peter Drucker**





## Chapter 1. The Big Picture

(In which you learn about the powerful forces in the world that push us to improve our time-based productivity... and why we can't escape them!)

### Chicago, Illinois, USA.

In 2008, I started to notice a new kind of behavior.

I stood in the middle of the group, watching as six associates from McKinsey & Co. struggled with the new concept I had just shared. Our session on giving great coaching was going well, I thought, as they engaged with the idea and tried to work out a solution to the role-play we had just witnessed. But once again, I saw Brad, who was not much younger than me, glancing at his Blackberry. My brow wrinkled.

It had wrinkled earlier in a room that was overheated against the bitter cold outside. I had mentally prepared myself for the wind and snow, even before getting on a plane from my home in Jamaica, but I hadn't prepared myself for the stuffy, indoor heat of a hotel conference room – I had forgotten what that felt like even after living for almost 15 years in New York and New Jersey.

But it wasn't just the heat. I had already very gently warned him to put his smartphone away. But there he was, lost in a different world – cyberspace, apparently. The topic we were discussing was completely outside his awareness.

This time around, I simply stopped talking. After a few minutes, so did the other participants, and I silently directed their attention to Brad, whose eyes were locked in to his smartphone. After a few heavy moments, he looked up, apparently feeling the weight of the silence around him. "I'm sorry," he offered, shaking his head.

"Tough project?" I asked, with a touch of empathy that I hoped would help bring him back to the program we were in rather than the work he was missing.

"Unbelievably tough," he answered as he put his phone back in his pocket and joined the conversation.

### Kingston, Jamaica, 2009

"I can't put it away," she explained. "I need to check it all through the day."

My confusion must have been apparent as she continued, now speaking to everyone in our time management class of about fifteen people. "About a month ago, I got a call from my manager. His boss in Canada called him to complain that I hadn't responded to email he'd sent about an hour before. He asked 'Doesn't she have a Blackberry?' So now, I don't go anywhere without checking my email."

"But you're in a class," I argued.

"It doesn't matter."

Stunned, I didn't know what to say. She was obviously going to be checking her Blackberry over and over again, missing key elements of the class and not learning nearly as much as she could. I moved on, trying to hide my disappointment. What I didn't know then was that this was only the beginning of the end.

For the first time, I had just lost the full attention of a workshop participant due to smartphone distraction and, although I didn't know it then, I would never have another class in which I could count on receiving 100% of each participant's attention. Sure, there had always been the odd distraction in the past, but this was different. She, like so many others from that point on, was required to be distracted while doing her job. She had no choice. It was a matter of keeping the

job or losing it.

Since then, I have repeated my call for 100% attention in every workshop I have led. I routinely ask people to put away their smartphones, turning off all flashing, beeping, buzzing, blipping – anything that could interrupt their attention. More than 90% of the time, at least one person has refused or complained, spurring a classroom conversation that strikes the heart of the question: what does it take to be productive in today's workplace? It's obvious that things are changing quickly. Are we keeping up with the changes that increased workloads and technology are bringing every day?

I suggest that attending a training session while checking and responding to email is a behavior that answers the question. It's not hard to convince my trainees that a participant who checks email while class is in session is likely to miss something important. I drive the point home with some research that shows how exam performance drops when students use mobile devices while they are studying or attending class.

The real disagreement comes when I ask them to consider: "The way you and the people in your company use mobile devices is ruining your productivity." I ask them the following questions, in part because I am curious to hear what they think about a problem that isn't new to any of them.

- Does multi-tasking really work when it involves splitting your attention?
- Are you saving time by texting while driving? (At the time of writing this book, this practice is still legal in many countries and U.S. States).
- Did smartphone makers intend for us to use these devices to check email while talking with others?
- What happens to your concentration when you leave an intense task to check email for even a moment?

As we answer these questions and I share further research data, a chaotic picture emerges.

Employees are afraid. The recession has heightened this fear by limiting their employment options, making them more willing than ever before to fit in without complaining.

Jobs have become more stressful due to downsizing. As a result, many professionals are doing work that used to be done by more than one person. According to a CareerBuilder survey, 47% of workers have taken on more responsibility because of a layoff. 37% are doing the work of two people, and 30% feel as if they are burned out. This pattern makes unemployment statistics misleading. Even as the number employed has decreased, US productivity has increased as employees work harder, longer hours.

At the same time, many are scared of losing their jobs. They don't know if they can find different employment, and the chances are high that a new position will be just as challenging as the one they have. Others are anxious about missing an important message, and constant checking is how they prevent their manager's boss from coming down on them.

Also, most of us love technology. When our employers ask us to start using a new smartphone, we accept the gift of a new, powerful device willingly – the fresher and shinier, the better. What we don't see clearly are the strings attached. As one HR Manager said to me, "There's an assumption that when you get promoted, you are given a company smartphone in order to be accessible all the time."

She meant that you need to be accessible early in the morning, late at night, on weekends, during holidays, while you're on vacation, and when you take a sick day. She also added that, of course, these rules are unwritten.

In this chapter, we'll delve into all the questions raised by these stories and grapple with their combined implications.

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It's obvious to even the most casual observer that life, especially in the workplace, is changing fast.

Research tells us that there are powerful forces operating in every single workplace around the world. These forces cannot be reversed by you or me – they are much bigger than we are, and our participation in the workplace requires us to be engaged by them despite the impact they have on our productivity.

For example, in the mid 1990s, many employees decided not to learn how to use email, especially in the higher ranks of companies. Today, in 2014, it's hard to imagine that any employee is given this option. "Using email" has become a skill as necessary as "using a telephone" used to be. Email skills, although they're no longer taught in classrooms, are an absolute requirement. The advent of this particular technology represented a force that was bigger than any individual, company or country.

It was inescapable, even though we probably didn't anticipate the scope of it when we received our first email message.

But other forces in the corporate air today are just as strong. While they may be categorized into broad headings such as mobility, information overload, messaging and cloud computing, I'll simply summarize some of the most recent data.

1. You are dealing with more email than ever before. The latest studies show that an average employee receives 130 to 175 messages each day from all sources, personal and private.

2. You are able to access email, plus a number of other messages and alerts, through a device that you increasingly carry 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The growth in mobile device use shows that in 2014, new devices are being adapted faster than ever before. The combination of message volume and mobility makes the professional world we live in unique in terms of time management.

3. In your company and industry, new expectations around your responsiveness to digital messages are fast being solidified. Employees report they feel pressured by their workplaces to be available outside of regular working hours, on vacations, holidays and on sick days. There is a quiet expectation that you will continue to increase your working hours by sacrificing personal hours. The only relief, according to a French study led by J. Bhatti, comes when you retire. Unfortunately, research from the American Journal of Epidemiology showed that "Doing more than 11 hours of work a day raised heart disease risks by 67 percent."

4. Your permanent, always-on availability to answer messages is altering your personal and work relationships.

5. The economic downturn has pressured employees to accept the new normal without much complaint. After all, others will take your job if you don't want it. Furthermore, as economies recover, hiring is expected to increase very slowly as companies look to replace pre-recession jobs with post-recession technology plus expanded human capability. Only half of the employees surveyed in 2006 by HR Solutions agreed that "Enough people are available in my work group to accomplish the necessary workload." Furthermore, a Human Capital Trends survey of HR executives by Deloitte showed that 57% say their organizations are "weak" when it comes to helping leaders and employees manage information, expectations and demanding schedules. This weakness may explain the result of a recent Towers Watson survey, which showed that "inadequate staffing was cited by 53% of workers as the major reason for stress, while only 15% of senior managers thought this was so."

6. You process as much data in a day as your grandparents saw in a month. The recession hasn't helped – 57% of US workers strongly or somewhat agree to the statement "Since the

economic downturn, the amount of information that I have to process at work has significantly increased," according to the October 2010 International Workplace Productivity Survey.

7. In a recent 2,000-person survey by Harris Interactive, 94% of employees admitted that when they get more than 50 emails per day, they are unable to keep up. In the same survey, one in five admitted that they feel as if they are already getting more each day than they can handle.

8. A recent study by a group of Swiss researchers showed that time pressure at work is causing an increase in near-accidents while commuting. Apparently, professionals have trouble turning off thoughts about work once they leave the office, which endangers their well-being, and that of others. Their study, which describes five other problems caused by time pressure, is described in further detail in my Lab Notes.<sup>1</sup>

9. A 2014 study by NPR/Robert Wood Johnson/Harvard School of Public Health showed that the number-one most stressful experience in the past month was "Too many responsibilities overall." It came in just ahead of "Problems with finances." Also, half of those who experienced a great deal of stress reported that the daily activity of "juggling schedules of family members" was the most stressful activity. A 2013 Pew Research Social and Demographic Trends Report found that 56% of working moms and 50% of working dads find it very or somewhat difficult to balance work and family responsibilities. The result of this stress turned up in a recent CareerBuilder Survey, which showed that two-thirds of American workers said they are not aiming for the corner office: 52% are satisfied in their current roles but 34% "don't want to sacrifice work-life balance."

These are some of the reshaped boundaries of the modern workplace. For most of us, it hasn't been about transformation or achievement. It's been a struggle. In the face of what author Judith Kolberg calls "The Age of Endless" most of us have tried to keep our heads above water. We have tried working harder, working longer and working smarter – all of which are strategies that used to work. The fact that they no longer make a difference is disconcerting; we find ourselves in new, uncharted waters, at the intersection of new technology, more information and augmented expectations.

Having no idea what to do next scares us. It leads many of us to turn down promotions, limit the number of children we have, reduce our involvement in communities and churches, cut down the time we spend exercising, and purposely run deficits in our lives, believing that one day we'll catch up and re-balance our lives. Someday.

Unfortunately, we don't have time to catch up. Instead, we suffer from the following symptoms, all of which are related to "not having enough time" even if we don't realize it:

- Email inboxes full of unprocessed email.
- Feelings of guilt about not being able to catch up.
- An inability to stop ourselves from multi-tasking at moments when we know we shouldn't.
- Not getting enough exercise (or prayer).
- Scrambling to find information due to lack of organization.
- Being time-stressed.
- Turning down opportunities.
- Cutting back on necessary sleep.
- Waking up in the middle of the night remembering something we forgot to do.
- Running from one fire to the next.
- Watching as important commitments fall through the cracks.
- Seeing our reputation falter as we miss deadlines.
- Arriving late for appointments.
- Procrastinating.
- Taking time and attention away from loved ones.

We wistfully think to ourselves that these symptoms could be reversed if only we had more

time or could somehow stop the clock. Unfortunately, that kind of wishful thinking doesn't help.

Instead, the circumstances call on us to develop the ability to "hot-swap": to change our way of doing things even as we must continue to do them. Some hot-swaps are easy, like changing a microphone while you are in the middle of a speech. Others are more challenging, like changing your sock while you're running. A few are impossible, like changing the motherboard on your computer while sending an email.

Somewhere between the extremes of "challenging" and "impossible" is the hot-swap that this book argues you must make at critical moments in your career. Today, you are using a combination of habits, practices and rituals that have gotten you to where you are now. But in the future, some of them are going to become completely obsolete, while others will need to be upgraded. While you are reading this book, for example, other people in your life (your boss, client or spouse) may be thinking up new ways to get you to do even more. They will need more from you. Faster. With better quality.

Unfortunately, we haven't been taught how to respond to such relentless demands. We have never really learned how to upgrade our habits, practices and rituals at will. We don't know how to manage (or more precisely, change-manage) our own personal development in the area of time-based productivity.

For most people, the easiest option is to simply find one of many productivity gurus. They offer books, programs and websites detailing their individual examples. After discovering, mostly through trial and error, that a particular habit pattern works for them, they codify it in a set of rigid rules. "Follow me," they say to their seekers. They promise that when you follow their precise behavioral prescriptions, you'll be able to share in their success.

For a small number of people, that works. They are able to replicate the guru's habit pattern and find success. Often, they share some of the guru's attributes (e.g. working style, affinity for technology, culture, age, or industry).

However, most of their followers, ranging from the ardent to the casual, have a hard time. Leaping from their current habits, practices and rituals to the guru's is tough. It's not because the guru is bad or even lazy: copying anyone else's precise blend of habits, practices and rituals when you have been using your own for several years is difficult for anyone. (I've observed that even a guru's small number of closest followers will admit to not quite following every piece of advice... human nature limits our ability to mimic the behavior of others. We're all different – there are no clones).

Instead, most people take bits and pieces from here and there, ignoring what doesn't make sense or is just too hard to learn. Unfortunately, most gurus frown on this deviation: It's a corruption that will lead to failure. "Do it all, or not at all" appears to be the mantra, as their programs subtly (or not so subtly) reinforce the need for followers to do everything as described, with no departure from the defined behaviors.

Those who do allow customization offer almost no actual advice on how to do so, leaving the learner to engage in their own process of trial and error. They must discover what can or cannot be tinkered with on their own.

Given the underlying need we have for custom solutions that fit us as individuals, it's no mistake that time management and productivity training via workshops, books or websites is hit-or-miss. One of the most influential studies of time management we'll examine in later chapters concluded that "Contrary to popular claims, time management training was not found to be effective." Dr. Therese Macan, the researcher who conducted the study, also concluded "the (failed) results call into question the assertions (sic) made by advocates of time management training."

If you add to our confusion the intellectual problem mentioned in the Introduction – that time cannot actually be managed – where do we look for solutions? According to Dr. Brigitte

Claessens, a Dutch researcher, leading expert, and author of *Time in Organizational Research*, this is a real problem: "Of course, time cannot be managed in any sense. The only things people seem to manage [...] are their own activities [...] time management is a matter of managing one's activities, taking account of the time involved in it." In a prior study, she defined time management as "behaviors that aim at achieving an effective use of time while performing certain goal-directed activities."

Furthermore, in a 2004 review of time management literature, she and her co-authors note with as much regret as an academic can muster, "we found no empirical studies published before 1982." In the world of academia, that's a nice way of saying that before 1982, no one took the topic seriously.

Professor Laurie Hellsten continues this rueful tone in her own 2012 time management research summary entitled "What Do We Know About Time Management: A Review of the Literature and a Psychometric Critique of Instruments Assessing Time Management." In the opening paragraph, she writes:

"Lack of time is a common complaint in western society. In response, there has been a proliferation of books, articles and seminars on time management, along with their assertions, prescriptions and anecdotes (Macan, 1994, p. 383)." But what exactly *is* time management? Despite the epidemic of time management training programs... there is currently a lack of agreement about the definition of time management and a dearth of literature summarizing time management across disciplines."

To further complicate the issue, consider Einstein's assertion: "time is an illusion." Physicists disagree about whether time even exists. Obviously, that which doesn't exist (or is an illusion) cannot be managed.

Apart from the Claessens and Hellsten, few psychologists, physicists and philosophers have tackled the questions "Does time management exist?" and "Can time be managed?"

My research in all these areas has taken me to some interesting places - leading me to conclude that whether time exists or not, we can't "manage" it the way we do other things (like money, employees, and our physical environment).

But time, as a resource, passes by relentlessly in the background of our lives whether we attempt to act on it or not. "Good time management" is therefore a result, observation or assessment we make after the fact, not an activity we undertake directly.

In order to accomplish the result, we must manage other things: our actions, habits, priorities, commitments, energy, attention, choices, decisions, health, etc. These all add up to a result, which we judge for ourselves, concluding something about the quality of our time management skills in the past.

But what's happening outside of academia? While the question of time management's existence lies waiting to be answered by researchers, blogs, tweets and Pinterest pictures openly repeat the assertion that time cannot be managed. Participants in my programs now tell me so as well. In the past 12 months, there seems to be a groundswell of wisdom that is unmatched by academic activity.

Much of it has led to the notion that "self-management" is the proper replacement for time management. Self-management, according to Wikipedia, includes goal setting, decision-making, focusing, planning, and scheduling.

However, when we adopt this definition, we see that every kind of management (time, money, health, sports, etc.) includes an element of self-management. Replacing the term "time management" with "self-management" doesn't answer our questions.

Given the reasoning I shared earlier and the evidence of a new popular understanding, for the remainder of this book, we'll adopt Claessens' assertion: time cannot be managed.

However, I'll still use the term "time management" to refer to something I alluded to in the introduction: the management of "time demands." My continued use of the term "time management" is a rhetorical device – a way to keep our conversation going smoothly rather than make a pedantic point.

It's a tricky business for me to add to the "proliferation" and "epidemic" of books and programs Hellsten describes. My only hope is that Perfect Time-Based Productivity illuminates and coordinates the most helpful content to be found across disciplines so that you can, by the end, forge a simple plan based on the latest knowledge. (If you are interested in the question of whether time management exists, check out my "Big Ideas" page at <http://www.2time-sys.com/big-ideas-time-management-exist/>).

In the next chapter, we'll take a close look, through the lens of a number of disciplines, at what you have already been doing as a working professional to be at your productive best. You'll discover that there's a process you have been using each and every day that you may not be aware of: a point of view that will challenge much of the conventional wisdom in this area. I'll show you how to do an evaluation and compare it against best practices as well as data I have collected from past participants of my live programs. This information will help you build a realistic plan of improvement based on your actual needs, informed by scientific research.

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At the end of this chapter, and each one that follows, I'll list a few one-liners that together reflect the contrary wisdom we just discussed. I invite you to save them for yourself and also pass them around in your social networks on Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and others. To access the complete file of all Remember and Share entries, download the file from <http://wp.me/P3hu5l-ax>.

## **Remember and Share**

94% of employees admitted that when they get more than 50 emails per day, they are unable to keep up.

In a single day, you process the amount of data your grandparents did in a month.

Time cannot be managed, but time demands can.

Dr. Brigitte Claessens: "Time cannot be managed in any sense."

Professor Albert Einstein: "Time is an illusion." How can we hope to manage it?

Dr. Laurie Hellsten: "There is currently a lack of agreement about the definition of time management and a dearth of literature summarizing time management across disciplines."

"Good time management" is a result, observation or assessment we make after the fact, not an activity we undertake directly.

## Chapter 2. Who Do You Think You Are?

(In which you learn that you already have a functioning system in place and why it's helpful to build on this fact.)

Think about the best improvement you ever made to the way you manage your time demands. Got an example?

Many people stumble over this question, even though managing and executing activities in time is an activity we ALL do as functioning adults.

The reason we stumble is that we don't know "who we are" as professionals in the realm of time-based productivity. We don't pay much attention to how the job gets done – instead, our concern is primarily on the next result we want to achieve and the steps needed to close the gap. Rarely do we step back from the day-to-day fray to consider the means we are using, even though that should be the mark of a professional approach.

Let's meet two imaginary characters who also stumble: Julie and Michael. We will look at some of the questions they ask themselves and the improvements available to them.

**Julie** is stressed, in part because she is confused. As she sits at her desk, she feels the headache she's been nursing start to grow. "Is it because I have to decide right away?" she wonders.

She needs help fast. Her inbox has 2,500 messages sitting in it, waiting for her to find the time to deal with them, and she has put on 25 pounds as her gym membership languishes. Today, her boss told her: "It's time for you to find a time management course or book, and start getting better. The late delivery on your last project plus your tardiness this morning... well, these are more of the same. Other people are noticing."

But she hardly needs his help to notice. Long before he said anything, she had already decided to do something to address the problem. He's just the latest, but strongest, instigator.

Fortunately, he's a cool guy – he's promised to set aside some funds to help her fix the problem. "Where will I even find the time?" she asks herself, but sets that question aside. Right now, she needs to answer the question: "What approach should I use?"

Should she:

- Pick up a book from Amazon.com to find out what she should be doing to manage her time?
- Take a crash course in best practices?
- Surf around for bloggers and podcasters with tips, tricks and shortcuts?
- Hire a coach?

Up until now, these choices have represented the sum of options available to her.

This book introduces another option: diagnosing her current methods and comparing them against best practices so that improvement opportunities become clear.

**Michael** has always been driven by his curiosity. A personal improvement addict, he's read most of the books available. When he picks up a book like *Perfect Time-Based Productivity*, he tries to figure out what's behind the stuff he's reading, or hearing. "Where does this come from?" is the question that lurks in the background.

He's generally open to new content, looking for even a few nuggets of wisdom he can incorporate into his considerable base of knowledge. He's learned a lot over the years, so he's not looking for a silver bullet. Now, he's happy finding small improvements, but not just any old improvements: he wants potential solutions he can try in his life and implement permanently, even if they take a while to master. The same goes for new technology.

How should he conduct his search? Should he:

- Use Google to find the latest academic research?
- Browse life hacking websites to find cool tips and tricks?
- Read the first few pages of productivity books on Amazon to see if they have anything new to say?



- Look for first-hand accounts from other people who are trying new things via blogs, webinars, YouTube videos and podcasts?
- Read geeky websites that cover new technology so he doesn't miss the latest hardware and software offerings?

Up until now, his choices represent activities that involve a great deal of time and low probability of success.

In this book, he'll be exposed to the latest research in multiple fields that together tell a different story from the one he's used to hearing.

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Both Julie, who needs an immediate solution, and Michael, who happens to be deeply curious, will find a unique way of thinking about time-based productivity in this book. They'll not only gain immediate knowledge about themselves, but they'll also learn how to be prepared for inevitable future changes. They are both about to learn that there never will be a final (or perfect) answer to the question of what professionals should do to boost their time-based productivity.

As you read through their stories, you may ask yourself: are you closer to Julie or Michael? Your personality will affect your approach to reading this book. Both approaches have shortcomings.

Julie's mistake is that she's often looking for quick solutions that don't require a lot of work. If there were a time management pill, she would take it. To get the most from this book, she must understand that it takes time to unravel the homegrown system she has put together over the years. She needs to keep in mind that improvement efforts are an investment that will pay off for the rest of her life.

For his part, Michael can get caught up in theory and cool ideas, sometimes leaving implementation for "later," which never comes. He likes the excitement of chasing and learning, which both give him a rush of dopamine. Unfortunately, better performance isn't fed by a sudden rush of new brain chemicals. It comes from systems made up of habits, practices and rituals.

"How boring!" he might think. But he doesn't know that implementation, in this case, isn't the final, drudge-filled step in a long learning process. Instead, it's more like Action Learning, in which the best knowledge comes from putting ideas into play for the first time.

Now, after this additional explanation of their faults, which is more like you?

As you can see, both of them have one important thing in common: they already have a way of managing their actions in time, their time demands, or their system of productivity. It was developed long before they picked up this book. So do you.

Where did it come from? How did it develop? When did its development take place? How does it compare to that of other professionals?

To find out, let's take our first deep dive and discover the answer to each of these questions, so that you can fill in any important gaps in your personal biography.

(A reminder from this book's Introduction: a time demand is an internal, individual commitment to complete an action in the future.)

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### **When do children first start creating and managing their future commitments?**

Initially, I thought I would find the answer to this question easily. Parents who understand the concept of time demands have no difficulty in giving an estimate: their children start developing future commitments between the ages of about 9 and 13.

However, the academic research isn't clear at all. A surprising number of researchers have

assumed that time management skills are learned in adulthood, or don't even exist until someone receives formal instruction. Given the confusion around the definition of time management, perhaps that's to be expected.

After a search through the world of child psychology, I concluded that:

- A child who has not developed the concept of time cannot manage time demands.
- College freshmen enter college with a system already in place.
- Therefore, children start creating and managing time demands in fits and starts, beginning in their adolescent years.

In the Lab Notes, I outline the journey I took to arrive at these conclusions. As I played detective, I made some deductions to fill in gaps in available research.<sup>ii</sup>

Where do kids learn these skills? To answer that question, we'll have to use a term that's become a favorite among psychologists in recent years: "prospective memory."

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If you have ever wondered why your grandparents have a hard time remembering to do simple things in the future like visit a store or return a call, it's because they are experiencing a loss of prospective memory: the ability to remember to perform actions in the future. (Retrospective memory, by contrast, is our ability to remember facts from the past.)

Although our knowledge about prospective memory has expanded in recent years, there's a lot we don't know about its functions. Recently, a team of Swiss, German and Swedish researchers showed that prospective memory increases until adolescence, where it generally plateaus. At the same time, a number of other researchers have shown that it decreases in the elderly.

Also, the ability to use prospective memory varies widely from one person to another, a fact that was highlighted by Devolder and Lens, who studied 17 and 18 year-old boys. They showed that high GPAs in college are caused by more time spent studying, in part because the students viewed the future differently.

Time demands are a part of prospective memory, so we'll see what psychologists have to say about the way they are created and managed. Most of our prospective memory skills are self-taught. So are the methods we use to manage time demands.

As I hinted above, I've extended the finding that we all have a system a step further: my hunch is that these skills are self-taught by children in their adolescent years. While there's no academic research I can find to prove this notion conclusively, the general absence of organized training in time-based productivity indicates that it must come from another source. Perhaps people learn these skills from:

- An individual who deliberately taught them key skills from a book.
- Someone who role-modeled well-formed habits.
- A personality trait they were born with.
- Luck.
- The combined effect of people around them (i.e. "culture").

Unfortunately, answering this question once and for all is far beyond the scope of this book! All we care about at the moment is that for the most part, children are left to their own devices as they learn to navigate a world filled with an abundance of time demands... or, to put it more accurately, a world *they* fill with time demands. Some succeed in this effort and some don't, but our lack of research in this area (plus the lack of clear definitions) means that we just don't know as much as we should.

If you're left wondering how the sharpest minds in the world might tackle this issue, here are a few hints.

Christine Bartholomew, a law professor at SUNY Buffalo, stated: "To better arm graduating students, law students must treat time as an essential component of practice-readiness. Unfortunately, most law schools ignore their students' time management concerns, despite growing calls for greater "skills" training in legal education."

In a recent Working Knowledge Magazine from Harvard Business School, Professor James Heskett writes, "How do we account for the renewed interest in these (time management) ideas? Is it an indication that our new managers are ill prepared to 'work smart'? (At the Harvard Business School, the philosophy has long been to eschew formal training in time management, instead overloading students purposely to force them to learn for themselves how to prioritize and become better time managers.)"

Astounding.

Does this attitude pervade U.S. education in general? Clearly, we need more answers, especially as pertains to average students who attend average schools with teachers unschooled in these concepts.

Parents often ask me, "What are you doing to help kids like mine?" So far, the only answer I have is, "I encourage professionals like you to be mindful and try to be great role models. Your kids need to see you making continuous upgrades, based on changes you are going through." Their faces often register sharp disapproval but it's better to show kids how to adapt to a changing world, rather than just tell them.

Or perhaps the disapproval stems from the fact that I probably won't extend my research in this direction. Instead, I actively encourage other colleagues in this field to take the lead, perhaps using this book as a guide.

(And yes... for those who are curious... the fact that I don't have kids has something to do with my response!)

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The bottom line remains the same: our skills at managing time demands are developed when we are children, without much guidance, and usually before we exit the teenage years. By the time we pick up a productivity book like this one, we have spent years practicing the habits we taught ourselves, hardening them into routines that don't require much conscious thought.

This important fact is overlooked by learners as well as those who I call time advisers: student support program leaders in colleges, academic researchers, gurus, writers, corporate trainers and business coaches. Is it a safe one to ignore? We'll begin to examine this question in the next chapter.

For now, let's assume the obvious: a habit that you have practiced every day since you were a teenager is hard to break.

Also, the fact that you taught yourself these skills means that you probably did a good job in some areas and a not-so-good job in others. The good news is that in *Perfect Time-Based Productivity*, we'll not only look at what you happen to have in place today, but we'll also compare it to best practices and the data I've collected.

The only reason we can make these comparisons is that our research at 2Time Labs has revealed that a common, structured method underlies the way in which human beings process time demands.

Also, we'll discuss the idea that while we self-create our own systems, they all share a few common design principles. Within this commonality, we can find, reuse and invent best practices.

Given this fact, where should we start looking for solutions?

(For the rest of the book, we'll use the phrase "time management system" to refer to the combination of habits, practices, rituals and routines we have self-assembled to help us manage time

demands. Consider it shorthand for "time demand management system.")

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As I mentioned in the Introduction, it rankled me that no one had written a book for professionals who need custom solutions, like those who moved to a developing country filled with unreliable processes. At the moment, the same is true for the advanced learner of time management skills who also needs a custom solution - they have already gone through all the "Productivity 101" books and websites written for the general public... including those geared for "Dummies" and "Idiots."

My annoyance only grew when I realized there was a repeated, subtle message: "You don't know much, and your current skills just aren't relevant. You don't need a custom system."

Back in 2006, I already knew that I had a system in place. What I needed was help to make it better, not a complete replacement.

Like you, I had spent many years assembling a system that, for the most part, worked for me. It had safely brought me to that particular point in my life and was part of the foundation of every single one of my professional accomplishments. To ignore that fact seemed foolhardy, even though I could tell that in some ways, it wasn't working.

Before moving to Jamaica, I used to promote this line of thinking in the training programs I led: "only an instant, wholesale replacement of the bad things you are doing with all the good things I am telling you is acceptable."

Even now, I wince as I think back to what I used to say as a trainer, especially as I recall my Mom's feedback.

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What does this all mean for you, the working professional? Perhaps some of what we have discussed in this chapter rings true – you already have a systematic method for dealing with time demands, even if you have never recognized it. There might be flaws, but changing even small habits isn't easy, and it certainly doesn't happen overnight.

Earlier in the chapter, I mentioned that you might be like Julie, who knows that her system isn't working in some way, or like Michael, who doesn't have a pressing need but is reading this book out of curiosity.

We started by examining your current choices for improvement. Now, let's look at some of the reasons Julie is looking for answers and Michael is looking for ideas.

## **Julie the Problem Solver**

If you're like Julie, you have some behaviors or symptoms you'd like to change right away. When we built a list of modern symptoms in the first chapter, you may have identified with one or two. You may have a different problem altogether that didn't appear on the list. Here's a more complete list:

- Email Inboxes full of unprocessed email.
- Not enough time with your family.
- Feelings of guilt at not being able to catch up.
- An inability to stop yourself from multi-tasking at moments you know you shouldn't.
- Becoming overweight (not finding time to visit the gym or develop and stick to a proper diet).
- Scrambling to find information due to a lack of organization.
- Being time-stressed.
- Turning down opportunities.

- Cutting back on necessary sleep.
- Waking up in the middle of the night remembering something that you forgot.
- Running from one fire to the next.
- Watching as important commitments fall through the cracks.
- Seeing your reputation falter as you miss deadlines.
- Arriving late for appointments.
- Feeling as if you shouldn't be procrastinating as much.

**Case Study:** Rani - someone with a Julie-like persona

"I don't have an issue with time management; I just get too much email."

Rani happens to be an advertising executive in a leading insurance company who complained bitterly, "I never can get caught up on my email. I need an extra two hours per day." A short conversation revealed she was being buried by messages coming in too quickly for her to process, resulting in her spending weekends, nights and early mornings in her inbox, trying to catch up.

She knew logically that her complaints about getting more time wouldn't help. Taking time away from the rest of her life to answer email wasn't working, and she was continually distracted. For example, texting while sitting in traffic had become part of her strategy.

She had lots of symptoms, but to her, the problem had nothing to do with what she thought of as "time management."

On one level, she's right. Time can't be managed, and what she thinks of as "time management" doesn't exist.

However, she is also stuck with lots of unwanted symptoms and no solutions in sight.

You may be like Rani. You experience symptoms, but you don't think they have anything to do with "time management." Like her, you may have believed that the problem is a simple one that requires an easy solution (less email, more discipline, greater focus, or better gadgets). If so, you may find it challenging to read any further, because the

upcoming chapters will complicate your life. Still, I think it'll be worth it. Here, you will learn the techniques that can get to the root causes of these problems.

At the moment, Rani doesn't see the whole picture: what's missing is the piece that connects her obvious stress and the process she taught herself to manage time demands that arrive in email messages. It's unfortunate, but the process she uses wasn't developed using any design principles or best practices. It's like giving a kid a piece of paper and asking them to convert it into a flying object. The child who crumples the paper into a ball and tosses it into the air accomplishes the objective, but crudely.

However, the youngster who wants to beat the 2012 world-record distance of 226 feet 10 inches would do things a bit differently. They'd study the principles of flight as they apply to paper airplanes.

Rani needs a deeper understanding of her problem that would lead her to far more choices. Armed with a knowledge of time-based productivity, she could make significant changes that could get rid of the unwanted symptoms she's experiencing.

While I can't promise that your problems will go away after you read this book, I can promise a greater understanding that you can use to get yourself unstuck while you discover the root causes of the time-based symptoms you are facing. As such, I won't be the one who solves these problems: you will.

## Michael the Curious

Michael, as I mentioned, is looking for ideas, and if you're like him, you may not have a pressing issue you need to deal with. You probably enjoy learning and improvement. It actually feels good to use your brain, attention and energy to try to make things better. It's a process you enjoy so much that you spend your spare time tinkering with different aspects of your life.

Therefore, you didn't pick up this book to solve any particular problem, but you are open to doing things better, even if you are bit nervous.

Why could you be nervous?

Perhaps it comes from a concern that this book will invalidate your current system or knowledge in some way. A part of you might not want to learn that the months and years you have spent putting together a working combination of habits, practices and rituals is faulty, or worse, needs to be thrown out. You may also be fearful of getting caught up in the excitement of new ideas and end up making too many changes. Sometimes, it's a mistake to fix something that's not broken.

These are valid concerns.

The easy part to address is the notion that you might be convinced to throw everything away – the good news is that in this book, I recommend small changes at a slow pace. I don't want to develop a rash of converts to a new cause. Instead, it's to help you more effectively make improvements in the months and years to come. In this context, it's fine if you take several months or years to make the very first change suggested by what you learn in this book.

Further, the approach I take in this book is about honoring your progress to date. Any changes you make in the future need to harness your innate ability to motivate yourself, craft your own improvement plan and implement it.

There's a term psychologists use that we'll look at later – "self-efficacy" – that has to do with your perceived ability to effectively tackle a change in behavior. This book is about boosting your self-efficacy, because you're building on what you have already accomplished.

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You probably recognize aspects of yourself in Julie, Michael, or both. In this book, I'll be speaking to both of them. The improvement process I'll take you through is the same and can be condensed into the following steps.

Step 1: Understand your current skills in terms of the behaviors you use right now.

Step 2: Set new targets for select behaviors, using world-class standards as the backdrop.

Step 3: Create realistic, conservative plans to close these gaps between current and target performance.

Step 4: Implement external supports to enable these plans to come to fruition in the form of new habits.

If you don't identify with either Julie or Michael, don't worry: it's not a requirement! You can still gain from this book.

## Your Purpose

The best way to get the most out of this book is to first determine the reason you picked it up in the first place. Here are some questions that might help:

- What would it be like to be someone who is continually improving his or her time-based productivity skills?
- What difference would it make to others in your life if you were to take away issues of time-stress and stop things from falling through the cracks?
- What would it feel like to be on top of all the demands on your time?

- Where in your life would greater coordination make a big difference?
- Would you be freed up if you knew that you were always doing your best?
- Are you tired of struggling along each day, barely surviving one crisis after another?

Take a moment and answer the questions that apply to you. I recommend writing down the answers in your diary or notebook.

## How this Book is Different

Reading a traditional book is a linear experience: you get the concepts one at a time, and ideas build on each other like bricks in a wall. Therefore, as an author, I have to assume that you have read earlier concepts when I present new ones. This may create some problems if you skip around from one topic to another. In this way, *Perfect Time-Based Productivity* is like any other non-fiction text.

However, there are some differences between this book and others related to time management:

Difference #1: In the chapters to come, I offer a wide range of new practices. Choosing the ones that are right for you depends on your current starting point combined with the targets you set for yourself. I'll show you how to mix and match different levels of competency so that you end up with a custom-made habit pattern that meets your needs. We'll go through this process together in Part 2.

Difference #2: We know from the study of adult learning (andragogy) that merely offering new habit patterns to learners doesn't work. The reason? You already *have* habits, practices and rituals that you use every day. Also, you know that with even the best-made plans, humans have a difficult time implementing new habit patterns over old ones. We'll spend Part 3 looking at issues of effective implementation in individual lives and corporate communities while examining the unique role that new technology plays

These differences don't invalidate other books or programs you have learned from in the past. Everything you already know has helped you develop your current methods.

My job is to start with what you know and build on it.

If this sounds like a lot of work, you're right. I don't (and can't) promise instant gratification. Yet, this approach makes sense for professionals who must adapt to the blinding speed of technology-driven changes.

Let's move to the next chapter and look at why your system of habits, practices and rituals might no longer serve today's needs and what to do about that.

## Remember and Share

Every functioning adult has his or her own time management system.

We each created our own time-based productivity system in our teens, with little or no formal training or coaching.

Individual time-based productivity systems vary widely in terms of quality.

Our homegrown time-based productivity systems are often uneven and overly complex.

Our habit patterns, once set, are hard to change.

Most people are unaware of their ability to craft a time-based productivity system.

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## Lab Notes for Chapters 1-2

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<sup>i</sup> The paper entitled “The long arm of time pressure at work: Cognitive failure and commuting near accidents” was published in 2012 by Achim Elfering, Simone Grebner & Fanny de Tribolet Hardy. They showed that six mistakes in everyday tasks (known as cognitive errors) are caused by time pressure at work.

Safety goals are subordinated to other task goals, leading to an increase in near-accidents. This study focused on commuting and the fact that completing the commute becomes more important than maintaining safety goals.

- Urgent tasks are completed before other tasks, regardless of importance.
- More errors are made when completing tasks.
- Interruptions increase as pressure increases the need to switch from one task to another, more urgent task.
- There is an increase in multitasking, which reduces task performance.
- Professionals think about work while commuting, which impairs cognitive function and leads to mistakes.

Furthermore, Wallace and Chen (2005) hypothesized that “simply having too much work to do in the time available” would increase the risk of cognitive failure. Their research confirmed this notion. (A cognitive failure is a mistake in everyday tasks that a person is normally capable of completing without error).

<sup>ii</sup> Thinking that academic research should yield more precise answers, I was surprised to discover (after a lengthy search) that this was not the case. Instead, I was forced to look at studies of freshmen in tertiary institutions.

College students are probably the most studied population in time management research. Their ready availability to on-campus researchers and the high-stakes game they play of attending classes, taking exams, completing papers and hitting deadlines make them an ideal group to poll, survey and examine in depth.

However, high-school students are hard to study as a group. It might be that they resist answering abstract questions about their productivity and time choices. For researchers, who face formidable regulation of research performed in public high schools, it's a lot easier to wait until they enter college.

At the same time, children as a group are the subject of numerous studies; however, very few researchers have focused on their ability to manage time, by any definition. I reasoned that, in the face of the paucity of research, it should be easier to start by determining when children first learn the concept of time itself. But even then, the answers are less than concrete.

One of the first studies to address this question was conducted in 1946 by Louise Ames, who showed that children develop a sense of time by the age of 8. Other studies by Leona Foerster Mitchell and Molly Fourez show that children develop different perspectives about time by the fifth grade, and children from disadvantaged backgrounds demonstrate much weaker skills.

Lydia Liu from the Educational Testing Service (known to teenagers as the SAT company) led a study in which middle-school students assessed their time management skills. By that age, they had largely developed two distinct skills: "Meeting Deadlines and Being

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Organized" and "Planning and Using Aids to Manage Time." Similar studies of college students showed that they had developed at least four distinct skills, leading the authors to note, "As the task complexity increases and goals become more diversified, more dimensions of time management become appropriate."

In other words, they learn these two additional skills during the high school years. Another way of framing this finding is to say that students who successfully matriculate in tertiary education discover a way to teach themselves these four skills, while those who don't, fail at doing so. My belief is that they do so without being taught.

In terms of gender differences, Liu's study showed that female students reported higher scores in both factors. When the differences are cultural, Mark Trueman and James Hartley discovered some other interesting changes in the U.K. after they replicated a U.S. study. They showed that the GPAs of UK students four years after original measurement were much less influenced by short-term planning and their attitudes towards time compared to their counterparts in the U.S. (The grades of both groups could be predicted by long-term planning). They did, however, replicate the higher scores achieved by females.

Also, a number of studies track incoming freshman entering college as they demonstrate a wide range of time management behaviors. A study led by Krishna Srestha showed that, on average, freshmen spend more time on class-related activities than students in any other year, implying that their skills continue to improve over the years.

Another, more comprehensive study by Bruce Britton and Abraham Tesser showed that time management skills have a greater effect on college grades than SAT scores.

This is an important discovery, even if it was restricted to students. To what degree are time management skills a predictor of success in other areas, such as corporate careers, entrepreneurship and academia?

These studies show that freshmen are entering college with time management skills; in other words, they are already creating and processing time demands before their college years.

However, it's interesting to note that not all researchers understand time management skills in this way. The abstract from a paper written by Therese Macan and Comila Shahani entitled "College Students' Time Management: Correlations With Academic Performance and Stress" puts it well: "Many college students may find the academic experience very stressful.... One potential coping strategy frequently offered by university counseling services is time management."

Rather than a skill students already possess, Macan and Shahani see time management as a strategy they need to develop, presumably from scratch. The fact that this paper was written in 1989 gives us an idea of how many new ideas have emerged recently.