

# The Juggling Act

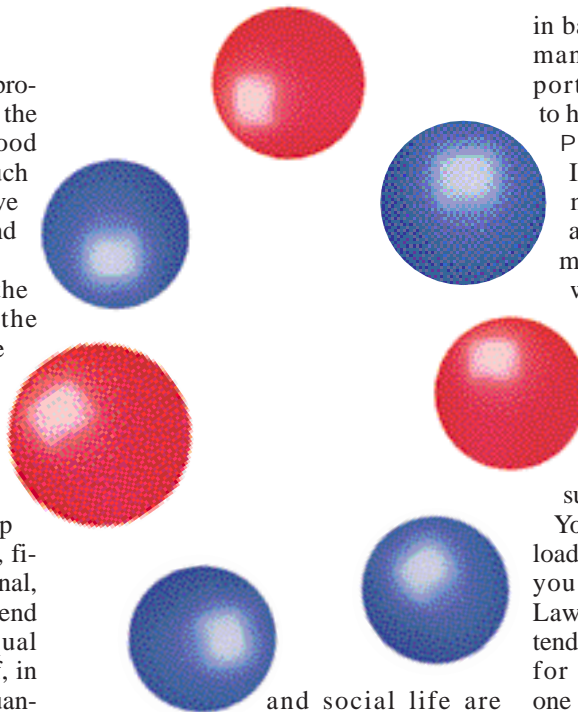
By Donald Wetmore

We all have too much to do. As a professional speaker, I hear that all the time from my audiences. It says good things about you if you have too much to do: Obviously, a lot of people have entrusted many things to your care and have confidence in you.

Every priority claims itself as the most urgent and crucial thing in the world, screaming for your immediate attention. The problem is, we can only do one thing at a time. So, here are a few ideas to help you manage multiple priorities.

Keep your primary focus on personal balance. Our lives are made up of several vital areas: health, family, financial, intellectual, social, professional, and spiritual. We don't necessarily spend time every day in every area or equal amounts of time in each area. But if, in the long run, we spend a sufficient quantity and quality of time in each, our lives will be balanced.

If we neglect any one area—never mind two or three—we eventually sabotage our success. Much like a table, if one leg is shorter than the others, it makes the entire table wobble. If we don't take time for health, our family life



and social life are hurt. If our finances are out of balance, we aren't able to focus adequately on our professional goals. And so forth.

In the medical profession, it's said that you can't be sick and make other people well. In time management, then, we have to keep ourselves healthy first,

in balance first, or it won't matter how many priorities we have or how important they are. We won't be able to handle them properly.

Plan to plan, and make a list.

I set aside at least 30 minutes each night for daily planning, a time to have a board of directors meeting at the most important corporation in the world: Me, Inc. I make a list of tasks for the next day that includes not only all of the things I have to do, but also—more important—the things I want to do. Putting it all down in writing is vital. If you want to manage it, you have to measure it.

Your completed list will probably overload the next day. That's good. It allows you to take advantage of Parkinson's Law, which says, in part, that a project tends to take as long as the time allocated for it. If you give yourself only one thing to do, it will take all day to do it. If you give yourself three things to do, you will get them all done. If you give yourself 12 things to do, you may not get all 12 done, but you may accomplish nine. Having a lot to do—being a bit overloaded—creates a healthy sense of pressure that gets us through our lists.

Review each item on your planning

## Time's a-Wastin'

- ❑ Eighty percent of U.S. employees don't want to go to work on Monday mornings. By Friday, the rate drops to only 60 percent.
- ❑ The average person uses 13 different methods to control and manage his or her time.
- ❑ On an average day in America there are 17 million meetings.
- ❑ Nine out of 10 people daydream in meetings.
- ❑ Sixty percent of meeting attendees take notes to appear as if they're listening.
- ❑ By taking one hour per day for independent study (seven hours per week, 365 hours per year), you can learn at the rate of a full-time student. In three to five years, the average person can become an expert in the topic of his or

her choice, by spending only one hour per day.

- ❑ Ninety-five percent of self-improvement books, audiotapes, and videotapes purchased are not used.
- ❑ In the past 20 years, working time has increased by 15 percent; leisure time has decreased by 33 percent.
- ❑ A person who works at a cluttered desk spends, on average, 90 minutes per day looking for things or being distracted by things.
- ❑ The average worker sends and receives 190 messages per day.
- ❑ Twenty-five percent of sick days are taken for illness; 75 percent are taken for other reasons.
- ❑ Taking five minutes per day, five days per week to improve your job will create 1,200 little improvements over a

five-year period.

- ❑ Eighty percent of crisis management events are preventable.
- ❑ Seventy percent of professionals use a to-do list on a regular basis to keep track of their have-to's. Only 5 percent use a list to administer their want-to's.
- ❑ It almost always takes twice as long to complete a task as originally thought.
- ❑ One hour of planning saves 10 hours of doing.
- ❑ In 1999, the average person received more information on a daily basis than the average person received in a lifetime in 1900.
- ❑ Half of what is known today was not known 10 years ago. The amount of knowledge in the world has doubled in the past 10 years and is said to be doubling every 18 months.

list and ask, "Is this the best use of my time?" There's a lot of difference between *I do it* and *It gets done*. Which is more important? That it gets done.

Sure, it's great to accomplish things ourselves, but we have only 168 hours a week. If we take away 56 hours per week for sleep, that leaves only 112 hours! So, each night during my daily planning exercise, I review each item on my list and ask myself whether it's the best use of my time. If it is, I plan to work on it. If it isn't, I try to find a way to delegate it so that it still gets done.

Prioritize your list. Typically, our to-do lists contain crucial and not-so-crucial items. The not-so-crucial items often are quicker and more fun than the crucial ones. What happens to many of us is that without prioritizing our lists, we tend to do the not-so-crucial things first, substituting quantity for quality.

Identify the most important crucial item on your list—the one you would want to tackle if you could work on only one item tomorrow—and label it 1. Next, identify the second item you would work on, if time permits, and label it 2. Continue prioritizing your entire list in that fashion and, tomorrow, start work with number 1.

Eliminate "The Hole." Most people lose about three hours a day—15 hours a week—in a black hole that sucks away more than a third of the time we have to be productive at work.

The Hole? Needless interruptions.

An interruption is nothing more than an unanticipated event. They come to us in two ways: in person or via such electronic devices as telephone, fax, email, pagers, and so forth.

Like most anything in life, interruptions can be good or bad. A lot of what we do daily is address the good interruptions, those we deem important. Some examples: A customer calls to place an order, your boss stops by to tell you that you're getting a raise, a co-worker shows you how to complete a project in less time. Those are all

### More resources

- If you found these ideas helpful, Wetmore has prepared another article, "The Time Management Myth." It's free; if you would like a copy, email your request for "Myth" to [ctsem@msn.com](mailto:ctsem@msn.com).
- To receive free *Timely Time Management Tips* on a regular basis, sign up at [www.topica.com/lists/time-management](http://www.topica.com/lists/time-management) and select **Subscribe**.

interruptions, but they lead to enhanced results. They are good—so very good. Indeed, a lot of what we get paid for is to handle good interruptions. Those aren't our concern here.

What diminishes productivity are the bad interruptions, those that have little or no value to us. Such as when a colleague drops by to complain about the price of hay in Den-

mark (assuming that you're not in that business) or a PR rep calls to make sure you received the information.

On average, we experience one interruption every eight minutes, or six to seven per hour. In an eight-hour day, that totals 50 to 60 interruptions. The average interruption takes approximately five minutes. If you're receiving 50 interruptions in a day and each takes 5 minutes, that's 250 minutes—just over four hours or about 50 percent of the average workday.

Let's say we were to track and rate the interruptions:

- A=crucial
- B=important
- C=of little value
- D=of no value.

We'd find that only about 20 percent are of the A and B variety and 80 percent C and D. If you have 250 minutes of interruptions in a day and 80 percent are the C and D kind, 200 minutes or a little more than three hours a day are being consumed by interruptions that aren't worthy of your time.

Following these tips will help you manage multiple priorities more effectively and increase your daily results. And that's a good thing.

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