

Prime time: are you using yours effectively?



By Jane Stevenson

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Take a moment and write down the top three things that you should be doing in your position to bring value to your business. These three things are what you do better than anyone else, things that directly and positively impact the organisation. Now to the right of that list, write down the top three things that you spend time on - and be honest, really honest.



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We recently did this exercise at an Entrepreneurs Conference in Tokyo, and the results were shocking. For most of us, the columns are vastly different. You may find the right-hand column showing emails, meetings and following up with tasks from others. But how much value do these truly bring and are they worth the amount of time you invest in them?

The answer is simple (well, on paper at least), do what you do best, delegate the rest.

It's the inefficient use of time that is partly responsible for working longer hours. Many of us don't work as efficiently as possible, so here are some tips on maximising prime time and working smarter to free-up time.

Business needs

Re-do the exercise I mentioned. Your prime time should be in line with your talents and business needs. If you had to re-plan your life around these, what effect would it have? You need to look at what you need to start, stop, and continue doing, in line with these. And then find the right talent and person to delegate your stop list to.

Avoid distractions

We always face distractions, and technology means there are more of them. Learn to keep these under control, use rules for emails, keep blogs and any non-work related mail in a separate mailbox, close your door and switch off technology to focus on critical tasks that need your full attention. Distractions are merely a choice. Are you choosing wisely?

Control issues

Entrepreneurs who have built a business or a team from the bottom up, often find it hard to let go. But in not doing so, risk not contributing their real value. Learn to step back, consider the big picture and plan the best way forward. Create a dashboard for measurement of critical elements to ensure you keep your finger on the pulse.

Time management

If you're not sure how you're wasting time, keep a detailed, honest diary for a week. Perception is often different from reality, so you might think you're looking at social media sites for a few minutes each day when in fact it's five hours a week.

Once you have identified how you're wasting time, make the necessary changes. It's not always about distractions; your day might be taken up with time-consuming tasks when others are better placed to do them. Delegating more responsibility to others allows you to do more of what you enjoy and find your flow. And if you delegate to the right person, you will help them find their flow too.

To-do list

Lists do help to jog the memory and ensure you don't miss things. But they also create stress if not managed properly. Prioritise your tasks. I tend to keep one rolling list, but I aim to start each day with a structured agenda that has no more than three things to be completed each day.

Whatever the task, ask yourself if it takes your business forward. If the answer is 'not much', ask yourself why you're doing it, is it needed and who should be doing it.

Consider your energy levels

They say people can hear you smile or roll your eyes, and it's true. Make sure you have the right energy for the right task at the right time. The right energy helps to maximise the time needed as opposed to procrastinating and focusing on distractions while trying to do something. Get tedious or difficult items out of the way during your peak energy times. Mine is early morning which leaves easier or more enjoyable tasks for when my energy is lower.

Better habits

Get into better habits:

- Make sure you take regular breaks, walk around the office and get fresh air at least once every hour.
- Say no to non-essential time-sapping requests.
- Successful time management requires self-discipline.
- Set your daily priorities and make sure you focus on the right things.
- Let others know when you're not to be interrupted unless necessary: have calls screened and tell others not to copy you into emails you don't need to read.
- Avoid unnecessary meetings.

Even seemingly small changes can make a big difference when exercising better time management and self-discipline. If it enables you to get just 10% more work done each day, it can make a massive difference to your business, and perhaps reduce time spent working and more time living. It's all about the choices we make.

Of course, life happens when we make other plans but in the words of Anthony Robbins, *"Stay committed to your decisions, but stay flexible in your approach. It's the end you're after."*

ABOUT JANE STEVENSON

Named by CEO publication as SA's most influential government businesswoman in the SME sector in 2012, she's big on vision, strategy and effective communication. Start with a successful business strategy and executive coaching consultancy to leading national brands... add the experience of being a Board and EXCO member of the Nelson Mandela Bay Business Chamber; and stir in some fearless Scottish roots and a dedication to building organisational vision. The result? A motivating, passionate team player.

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