

Time Management

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Introduction: How often is that one gets a feeling of being stretched to one's limits? Lying tired on one's bed, many of my friends at IIT would wonder where their whole day zipped past, leaving them one day closer to deadlines, but with no progress made.



"Placements", once said a friend of mine at IIT, "are inevitable". What he was referring to was the fact that at the end of our stay, we will all have to decide, and prove ourselves worthy of, the turn our lives will take for at least the coming few years. Implied in this statement, is the sense of urgency we all feel, sometimes sub-consciously, when we know a life shaping decision is imminent.

This is not necessarily how things need to be. Although deadlines will continue to stay, it is possible to manage your activities in such a way that you achieve all the important things which are physically possible, and at the same time have ample breathing space to savor the satisfaction of a life in perfect control.

The Basics: On the most basic level, managing your time is all about *self-discipline*. Time cannot

be "made"; it can only be reallocated. If you feel you are not able to get sufficient time for a few important things, then you will need to take the time out of some things which are not so important.



This brings us to another basic aspect of time management – *importance*. What is *important*? On the surface, this seems like a stupid question. "Of course, I know what's important!" is what most of us must be thinking. The intricacies start creeping in when we need to decide the importance of things on a relative scale. Suppose your friend is ill and needs to be taken to the hospital. Also suppose that the next day you have an important exam. What will you do? To what extent will you help your friend?

Everyone will agree that the answer to this question will depend on a lot of things. But the point that I'm trying to make is that even after giving all the situational details, there is still no "best answer". The best answer will still vary from person to person, and there is nothing wrong with this. Different people have different priorities, and the first step to successful management of time is to know yourself, and understand *what is important to you*.

Do this exercise: Imagine that after a long happy life, eventually your body dies and you pass on to the next world. Imagine that many of your friends and family have come to attend your funeral.

Look inside of yourself, and ask yourself, what you would want them to speak of you. Would you want only your close friends and family to be there, and miss you as an irreplaceable part of their lives? Or would you want your children to say how you were always there for them? Some would prefer their colleagues to remember them for their contributions to their work.

The outcomes of this exercise will differ from person to person, revealing what they truly want to accomplish in their lives. This long-term goal should be very carefully self-analyzed, for this forms the basis of all time management.

Techniques: Once we know what are the important things we need to accomplish, it becomes possible to classify our goals into long-term, medium-term and short-term. Short-term goals are like our day-to-day or “on the spot” schedules: things which we do right away. Medium term goals can be a month to a year-long, and long-term goals are the typically more than year-long projects. Short-term and medium-term goals are often aided by what I call the *deadline-effect*. Most of us would agree that our motivation and efficiency to work towards any task boost up as the deadline comes closer, and are at their peak just before the deadline. So one might feel that in order to utilize time most efficiently, we should put off our tasks till the last moment. But the problem with this approach is that long-term goals seldom have any hard deadline enforced by the environment. For example, it is understandable (though not at all recommended) to delay studying for a quiz because we know that we will study as the date comes closer. On the other hand, for a long-term goal such as “health”, if we keep procrastinating

going to the gym, we will never get any serious exercise.

At any given point of time, the set of tasks that we have can be dissected into a set of four: Based on the ‘importance’ and ‘urgency’ of the task, which are two independent characteristics, we can classify a task into one of four categories, as given in the table above. Now, if at any given moment, we had many tasks, belonging to the four classes, then it is easy to see that first of all, before anything else, we will finish off with the first category, and we will never start worrying about the 4th category till everything else is done. The real heart of time management lies in understanding the relative priority of category 2 and 3.

What most of us would do is go for category 3 before category 2, simply because there is more time left to complete the task in category 2. But this is *wrong*! Given the choice between things which are important and things which are urgent, ***we should do the things which are important, before the tasks which are urgent***, because, as Randy Pausch puts it, “they [the tasks in category 3] are not important – it just says so there in the table!”

In fact, to drive home this point, we can imagine two hypothetical brothers – Jim and Paul. Jim, the younger one, believes that he works best under a deadline, and is always running around doing things at the last moment. Paul, on the other hand, has a fixed set of priorities in life, and is in fact rather adamant about his long-term goals. As a result, Jim does many more things than Paul, but none to his satisfaction, as the last moment seldom offers him the chance to pursue perfection, whereas Paul is the best at what he does, and very rarely has to panic for important deadlines. Even a vacation for Jim is a nail-biter till the point he catches the plane, whereas for Paul, knowing that he is going to take a break at the end of the



year *no matter what*, is a source of motivation throughout the year. The difference in the attitudes of Jim and Paul gets serious as we begin taking the long-term health and psychological effects of such approaches to daily life. Who do you think would be a happier and satisfied person as they get old?

To make the discussion less intuition-based and more logical, observe once again that one can never *make* more time, so to say. Time can only be *managed*, and by managing time, we mean **saying 'NO'** to certain things so that we can do the things that are important to us. So in order to "manage our time properly", we need to be constantly aware and conscious of our priorities. We must make it a habit not to do something which is urgent just because it is urgent. Unless we are firm about it, our lives would be driven not by what we want to achieve, but by what I call as "*the tyranny of the urgent*."

Tips: Given this general guideline in managing your time, there are a few tips which will hold universally for everyone.

- ✓ Make daily schedules on paper. Having a schedule helps as a concrete base for the things you need to get done before the end of the day. Without a schedule, you have a floating set of tasks. Having said that, never be afraid to make amendments to your schedule. Once made, a schedule is a guide line, not a rule.
- ✓ Take care of your health. Think of your body as the greatest tool you will ever have. Maintain and groom it well, keeping in mind the challenges you have decided to take on in this life.
- ✓ Talk to people; make lots of friends, and a few *really good* friends.

A LESSON FROM AN ESKIMO

Gontran de Ponceins

We had been thirty days on the trail, I and the Eskimo family I traveled with. What with the wind, the cold it was fifty below and the Eskimo mentality, it was the toughest trip I had ever experienced. I felt as if fate were working maliciously to delay us. One day the blizzard would keep us squatting in an igloo. Another, some queer fancy would take my native companions and, though the day was good, they would stop to build a new igloo instead of pushing ahead. Several times I had asked the old man of the family: '*How many more days is it to King William Land?*' He had never answered directly. Eskimos do not like questions. They think them rude. Only a white man would ask a thing like that. Besides, Eskimos don't like to commit themselves. '*What will the weather be tomorrow?*' you ask. The Eskimo knows well enough, but he will answer politely: *mauna* (I don't know) and pretend to be busy with the dogs, as if to say, '*Why should I answer?*' If my answer is right, I shall be no better for it; if wrong, I shall look a fool! All the morning, all the afternoon we pushed across the frozen sea, stopping only to untangle the dogs traces or to light a pipe. We sighted land. Perhaps we would reach it. Then when hope was in sight the wind rose, the land was obscured by whirling snow, lost in what, for me, was the gray despair of nothingness.

We stopped again. Slowly, without haste, with that perfect urbanity in which the Eskimo accepts life and fate, Ohudlerk, the old man, talked with his wife and his little girl. At home in France, a peasant in a rainstorm would stop with the same coolness to inspect his plow. Hardly able to bear my distress, I again asked the old man my questions. '*When do you think, now, that we shall get to King William Land?*' Whether this time his patience was at an end, or

whether he was really concerned, I shall never know. He turned back to his wife and they had some silent understanding together. Then he came to me and looked up. He spoke in that light, almost careless way the natives have when they are prudent and afraid at the same time: *'Don't the dogs go as well as you would like?'*

There was silence. The dogs had turned their heads as they do when they pull up, and were looking at me. The woman and the child pretended to be busy but I knew that I was the focus on their attention too. In the instant everything seemed to come to a standstill. Eskimos give you that feeling in their tense moments. They have a way of giving weight to silence. Would they leave it at that? No, it had gone too far. Finally the old man, as if he could not rid himself of his doubts, said: *'Isn't that sled a good sled? Aren't you glad that the snow over the sea is lasting through our journey?'* He kept looking at me with deeply troubled eyes. The stone age with its simplicity, the Orient with its wisdom were looking at me, trying to understand or, rather, trying to make themselves understood.

Then suddenly I saw what the old eyes were saying. *'Why hurry?'* they said. *'And where is it that you are always wanting to be going? Why concern yourself with the future when the present is so magnificent?'* The old man, that day, taught me a lesson, which I have not forgotten. In my feverish thinking of tomorrow, I had failed to appreciate today. In the old man's presence, I remembered what someone had said to me: *To think of the past is to regret it; to think of the future is to fear it. But the present! Is not that the only understandable reality?*

The world is what your mind makes of it. To me the Arctic had been heartbreaking; to the Eskimos it had been a great empire of which they were the kings. To me the snow had been loathsome; to them it was a blessing and a sacred gift. From the thousand facets of life we are free to choose between sorrow and hope. We

rush along the highways of life, ignoring the landscape. Who was it who said, *Luxury consists in having time to spare time to stop and think?* The Eskimos stop when they please,

though tomorrow holds for them, as for us, the eternal possibility of starvation and death. So death when it comes finds them still happy in the present, and they go without regret. I have learned, since Ohudlerk spoke to me with his eyes, what poverty of soul I had suffered in the Arctic. I have learned to make each day as rich as if there were to be no tomorrow. Nothing the future may do to me can change what I now possess. In Vancouver, when the long trek was over, I caught myself rushing to the hotel as if there were no time to lose. Suddenly, I stopped in the middle of the traffic.

Horns sounded from all directions but I didn't hear them. It was as if Ohudlerk stood in the street before me, watching me with those wise, ancient, questioning and troubled eyes, asking me if the dogs were not good dogs and was not the snow indeed a gift from heaven. And I found myself laughing. What fools we are! I thought. I still do.

Sum & Substance: No matter the latitude or longitude of where we live, today's world is revolving at such a pace that both our days and nights appear to be getting shorter and shorter. Before we can pause to enjoy the romance of a full moon, the sun is up again and off we go chasing the next set of appointments and to-do lists. It is easy to dash by life so fast that we fail to enjoy our todays. People with Everyday Greatness may live in a rush, rush world, but they determine the weather of their minds and survive the storms of life by learning to live in and enjoy the present.

