

iFLOW

Time Management You've Got Time For



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"I've got too much to do, and not enough time to do it in."

More and more of us are in this position, more and more of the time. Pressure is mounting to deliver better results, more quickly, and at lower cost. Organisations and marketplaces are changing faster than ever. New communication technology is giving other people unprecedented access to our time and attention.

This can all have tremendous negative impact – overly stressed teams have lower morale, higher conflict, absence and attrition. Ironically, they can actually become *less* capable of delivering what's needed.

Many authors over the years have offered their systems for "managing time" more effectively – and this literature contains much that is helpful. But the problem is far from solved.

We think it's time for a new approach – a more effective way of improving effectiveness, a more time efficient way of managing time. We think an approach is needed which generates solutions that are better tailored to the individual, and can be implemented more quickly and easily. In short, time management you've got time for.

Best Fit

One approach to optimising personal productivity is to purchase a System, such as "Time Manager International" or "Priority Manager." These all-encompassing planning systems of course include many beneficial features – but after initial enthusiasm, they so often end up gathering dust. Why is this?

One reason is that they don't work with people's natural routines and rhythms - it tells them what they ought to do rather than working with what they naturally do well.

Another reason is that conventional time management systems are "off-the-peg" systems, with fixed (and expensive!) diary structures, stationery and/or computer software. But as we coach more and more individuals, the clearer and clearer it becomes that different people, in different roles, need different systems to handle their personal workload effectively. So we don't pretend that "one size fits all." Instead, we take a "best fit" approach. We want people to have ways of working that really suit their working styles and the particular set of challenges they face.

For example, an area manager visiting several sites per day will get great benefit from listing their actions according to location, as recommended by David Allen. On the other hand, that system might provide no benefit at all to a graphic designer who spends all their time at their workstation. The best fit for them might be a timeline on the wall, visualising their projects, workload and deadlines.

Least Change

Another reason why off-the-peg systems end up gathering dust is that they have a very high "activation energy" – they take a great deal of time to set up. But of course, lack of time is precisely the problem here!

So we advocate a “Least Change” approach. We believe in helping people find *just what they need* to move their productivity up a level. This can often be quite a small change - 80% of the benefit may well come from 20% of investment.

There are two aspects to this: what’s best to change, and what change to make.

What’s Best to Change?

When it comes to pin-pointing what to change, we recommend some sort of map, to help identify the individual strengths and weaknesses. Our map is called “Universal Workflow” – it gives an overview of the different dimensions of personal effectiveness, helping the individual decide where they could best apply their effort.

For example, one person might be good at prioritizing, but constantly overwhelmed by demands from others. Meanwhile, their colleague is really good at saying no, but never acts until things reach crisis point. Both may be stressed and underperforming, but for quite different reasons.

There’s another very valuable source of information on this: what the individual feels motivated to change. We often find that if we help people focus here, they make particularly rapid progress.

iFLOW in action: five more hours a week

iFLOW finds those key tiny actions which can make all the difference. Michelle runs a PR agency and training company. After her iFLOW coaching session, she chose two actions in particular - to tidy her desk and only check email once every hour. She gained an extra 5 hours that week.

What Change to Make?

Having established what to change, one needs to find what the change should be. We suggest three sources:

- **What’s already working.** Everyone already gets things done *to some degree*, and has *some* systems in place, however informal. Often people have very well developed systems, which have been very effective until an increase in workload overwhelms them. Rather than discarding these systems, we suggest keeping the best elements and building on them. After all, we can be sure that these systems and structures suit the individual well.
- **Pre-Existing Tools.** Once the individual’s needs are clear, it makes tremendous sense to look at ways of working which have been tried and tested by others. Those who say “yes” too easily are likely to benefit from William Ury’s “Positive No”, while a crisis-manager would probably benefit more from Stephen Covey’s Importance vs. Urgency matrix.
- **Custom Tools.** Surprisingly often, people have unique needs in their particular roles, with their particular ways of working and their particular priorities for progress. In this case, the most time-effective way forward is often to create a tool especially for the situation.

Tools for An Ever-Changing World

As well as drawing on the best of the pre-existing tools, we also find that today’s environments demand more effective tools. We find that our clients’ consistently need tools to...

... set objectives which remain relevant, despite changing circumstances

... avoid prevarication and resistance, when being pulled in different directions

... maintain good morale, even though there’s always too much to do

Optimum Performance - FLOW

In this field, there's a danger of getting so involved with systems that one forgets what they are for – delivering optimal results, in minimal time and with minimal stress. Having good systems and being well-organised are just two of the conditions that lead to high levels of performance.

So we suggest stepping back from the nitty-gritty, and finding the particular conditions that each individual needs, in order to perform at their best. For example, some people respond really well to challenging meetings and tight deadlines, whereas others need to reflect quietly over a period. They may generate results just as effectively, but should plan their activities quite differently!

Working at our best can be very enjoyable and satisfying. We're persuaded by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who writes about "Flow" states. These are the states of mind in which we are most effective, most engaged – and at our happiest. While we can't always be in these optimal states at work, we can certainly move in that direction.

iFLOW in action: changed workspace = more head space

It's amazing how we react unconsciously to our work environments. Ursula is an administrator, who had been asked to cover for her manager during a crucial trade-show period. iFLOW enabled her to realize that she already had the skills to manage the trade-show well – as long as she could keep on top of the flow of her other work. Her next step was to re-arrange her workspace, putting her filing system within reach of her chair. That meant she no longer had to sift through a pile marked "for filing" – instead, she could file everything immediately – and then find everything immediately too. A simple change made a huge difference to her work – and her manager!

Learning Format

A critical dimension to stimulating learning is the format of learning events. For the senior-most individuals, 100% personal coaching delivers optimal value-for-time. With groups of learners, optimal value for time and money comes from a combination of group training and personal coaching. This provides a smörgåsbord of ideas and techniques, followed by direct and personal help for the individual in their particular situation.

Conclusion

In summary, we advocate a "Best Fit, Least Change" approach to personal effectiveness. We suggest giving people *just* what they need to make better use of their time. "Best Fit" means suiting the individual well, "Least Change" means they actually have time to implement it.. Going beyond tools, we recommend that people discover whatever helps them to achieve highly effective "flow" states, and act on those discoveries.

Our iFLOW model gives you a way to rapidly realign your work systems with your personal style, creating a way of working that really works – for you. At last, time management you've got time for.

*"I rate this programme 10/10. It's helped me be more efficient, get things done on time and prioritize better. I'm now fresher and more relaxed, happier and more available to my team members."
Isabelle Felix, International Logistics Team Manager, UK Retail Chain*

*early bird booking before 26 March 2012