

As We Live and Work

Managing our Time as we Search for Life's Easy Button

by [Barrie Sanford Greiff and Richard J. Levin](#)



Staples had the right idea. If only life had an Easy Button.

That point was driven home when we re-discovered novelist Joan Didion's comment that "time is the school in which we learn". It's clear we all share a common challenge: we are locked in the same finite amount of time to accomplish our goals. Given this universal time constraint, how is it that some people accomplish a great deal, while others bemoan the fact that there is too much on their plate and never have enough time to accomplish what needs to be done?

In search of life's "easy buttons", we spoke with a number of leaders about how they manage their busy schedules.

Jonathan Isaacson, President of the Gem Group, a supplier of promotional products, makes a daily list of "time savers and time sinkers". Peter Brown, a partner at the law firm Nutter McLennan and Fish, says "I find my emotional health and my mind clearer when I can take a half-hour or 45 minutes out of the day to exercise. It works wonders to reduce stress. Also, I think every left-brain person needs a right-brain activity. I play guitar. It's even better than exercise."

Sue Burton, a management consultant and stand-up comedienne, serves many masters simultaneously, juggling endless lists of unrelated projects. “My goal”, she says, “is never to disappoint everyone in the same week. To stay focused and manage my time, I take a Chinese menu approach: I make an Absolutely Must Happen list. I choose one absolute Yes from Column A, one from Column B, etc., and focus on them.”

Kim Gorton, President of Slade Gorton & Company, a leading Boston-based firm involved in the development, marketing and distribution of seafood, manages her time by subscribing to the principles of the book The Corporate Athlete. “I exercise every morning”, she says, “to my mind is crystal clear. I budget time at the end of the day to return e-mails and calls. And I don't beat myself up over competing priorities. I don't get immobilized with guilt.”

Her comments are echoed by Steve Grossman, President of the Grossman Marketing Group, provider of marketing communications materials. He avoids having phone messages pile up by personally returning every phone call by the end of business each day. He also adds a spiritual dimension to his time-saving philosophy by reciting a Biblical passage pertaining to social responsibility. By carving out time to give back to the community, he becomes more

energized and productive at work.

Collectively, this group shares important qualities. They are busy go-to people with lots of responsibilities. They juggle self, work, family and community activities. They acknowledge that no matter how well they plan, there's never enough time to do it all. They vary their activities between work and no work. They prioritize. And they don't procrastinate. As one busy pediatric neurologist explained, “I never put things down; I put them away.”

They have perspective regarding their work and personal lives. They try not to promise more than they can deliver. They know how to say “no” without turning others off. They delegate effectively. They don't feel angry or resentful about the load they put on themselves. On the contrary, they court their busyness and feel invigorated by their commitments, because they like what they do, are good at it, and feel rewarded by their efforts.

In seeking examples of creative time management, we have also discovered that employers have become more committed about adding time-savers as an employee benefit. For example, a number of businesses have contracted with Corporate Fairs, an agency headed by Sherry Michelson that brings upscale, product-driven vendors into business sites to sell their products. The goal is one part time-saver, one-part easy button, and one part productivity-

enhancer because employees don't have to leave their workplaces to shop for gifts. Other businesses have been hiring members of the Employee Services and Management Association, a non-profit organization whose members provide a bevy of time-saving services to workplaces and office parks: concierge services, employee stores, dry cleaning, tickets to sports events and concerts, and arrangements for car

repairs.

Successful leaders and inventive employers have learned the value of managing time. They live by the theme that Yesterday is a cancelled check, Tomorrow is a promissory note, and Today is the only cash you have. Spend it wisely.

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