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Preface

In 1985 while I was in the library I happened to come across a thesis written by J. Winnubst, called: *Het Westerse Tijdssyndroom (The Western Time Syndrome)* in which he links the time factor with personal character traits. Using this thesis as my guide, I created a questionnaire, wrote an article which was followed by several lectures, created a new model for time management, gave training sessions and countless seminars both in the Netherlands and abroad, which all resulted in this book. That fleeting moment in the library turned out to have long lasting and very useful consequences, without me actually realising it at the time. That's what happens with time.

Most of my thoughts and ideas about management come about during the courses I give and in the discussions and exercises with the course members. Theory, books and research have always served as a background support framework. Thanks to my students' experiences – their success, their despair, but most of all their sense of humour – I have been involved in time management for more than fifteen years without losing any of my enjoyment and interest.

The book's success resulted in a demand for a ninth edition plus another revision and review. The text has been revised somewhat but the structure and the underlying philosophy remain the same, so that there are no essential changes. Many people who use this book as a basis for 'Time management' courses have asked for an attachment with tips to be included.

I should like to thank my 'expert' colleague Cees Harmsen for his ideas and for the discussions we had about this book. I also want to thank the staff at Thema for their commitment to this book over the years.

Ron Witjas
Den Haag, 2005

1

Introduction

*Time, oh time
All those millions of years
Today's gone by, tomorrow's on the way
An so it goes on...*

*But one day time will pass
So that time will have gone for good
I will take the days I have left
And just keep them for myself ...*

This is the nicest poem I have ever received after one of my seminars on 'Time management'. Better than all the thank-you's and the compliments, more welcome than a bouquet or even a bottle of wine. The student who wrote this (I am so sorry but I can't remember the name), gave it to me after two afternoons of trying to find answers to his questions about time management. He had such a resigned look, as though he knew that neither my seminar nor anything he might try could possibly solve his problems. He was simply too nice and too polite to say 'no' – to me, to time management, and also to his bosses – and there you have his big problem. His poem really illustrates his despair: when it's all over I can take time off, but until then time just drags along and takes me with it. What on earth can I do about it?

This poem says that for some people, time management is not an easy subject. Coping with time or even more difficult: coping with your job and your own behaviour inside the stifling framework of a limited amount of time, is hard, and for some it is a tough battle. But you can fight that battle and learn to handle time, your job and your personal life in such a way that you can create a balance and that feeling of constant conflict will disappear. But you need so much input: an insight into how time works; a perception of how you manage time and an understanding of your own situation and what is disturbing or upsetting the balance.

Can time management help? Yes indeed, because time management is the culmination of all the insights and principles that help you to create a healthy balance between work and relaxation. This book covers much of this.

But bear this in mind: you have to be realistic about what time management can offer, and be aware that creating and maintaining the ideal balance is no quick fix. For example, tips look so easy and promise instant results that in many cases simply don't exist.

Before we start on the principles, I really must tell you that although the basic principles of time management are relatively simple to explain, actually adapting them to life's complications is rather more difficult.

In my opinion, the essentials of time management consist of three elements. First of all: choose. Then comes organise and influence.

The book talks about these three elements and will offer you insights and solid pointers that will help you to get going. How can it be so hard to make these adjustments?

Based on discussions with students over the past five years, I have identified four factors that make it difficult to put time management into practice:

- Increasing work pressure
- The bigger role of technology
- The wealth of options
- And: not (really) knowing what you want and who you want to be.

I will simply say this about work pressure: this is still escalating and is boosted by the other three factors. A good example of the influence of technology on time management is e-mail. In less than two years the fax has become hopelessly outdated, with e-mail becoming an indispensable part of our work and way of communication. The speed and immediacy of e-mail puts us under huge pressure whether we admit or not. We all know about those PCs that beep when an e-mail arrives. And we all know that colleague who simply has to look at that mail, even when they are in the middle of a meeting.

Mail has that same compulsive effect as the telephone: you have to respond because it's always 'urgent' (it's ringing *now*), even though you can't really know beforehand whether or not it's important.

It's our curiosity and good manners that often allow the telephone to distract us from whatever we are doing when it rings. We set ourselves up to be disturbed. We do exactly the same thing with e-mail, but with one difference: with the telephone we just speak to one person at a time but with e-mail we can reach any number of people with one mail!

We are afraid to leave anyone out in this plethora of information. While your telephone message reached just one person, you can now intrude on an endless number.

E-mail has a destructive effect of the first essential of time management: you have (almost) no choice, you get the mail. How many people do you know who delete mails without

reading them? Or even better: set up their PC so that they block e-mails from certain people altogether? Not many, I bet. E-mail is the biggest time waster of all: it's so horribly efficient that it makes us believe that this makes it effective. And therein lies the trap hidden in all this technology we have or will soon have in the near future.

Technology is directly linked to the third factor that makes time management more difficult: the seemingly unlimited opportunities that surround our financial and economic fields. We are still living in a time of abundance. We can do almost anything and we also want (almost) everything. Looking at my childrens' timetables, I can see that Thursday afternoons are the best: then none of my three daughters has 'something going on' and they will be home. That's the only afternoon when they have time for a cup of tea, a game or just to do something together. The rest of the week is taken up with drama, hockey, netball, piano lessons and tennis. In this sense they are following in their parents' footsteps. There is always work, or a client on the phone or that chance to finish something off. Having so many ways to expend our time and energy is great, but this freedom of choice is also a curse, because with this wealth of opportunities our behaviour is governed by the fear of falling short. We are always 'responsive' with our choice of options but how do we know when enough is enough? This presents a real challenge to the first essential of time management – choose. It's as though by choosing to keep going, you forget that you can also stand still. We have forgotten that you can also say 'no' to all those options and go back to the essence of who you are and what you want to do.

It's hard to put the brakes on those three fronts, Work, Technology and Options. We can only combat them by gaining insight into the fourth front: our goals with regard to what we want and who we want to be.

I really feel that time management is becoming ever more interconnected with questions about our own ambitions and performance motives

Ultimately, time management is much more than simply techniques and 'tricks' and more than just managing all the work. The problem is that there are so many options that we – if we don't watch out – just can't respond at all anymore. And if we can't respond, maybe it's time to ask different questions. Questions about what we want to do, who we want to be, and when will enough be enough. So that we can enjoy some freedom before it's too late.

The perceptions and ideas in this book are mainly intended to help you with the first and most important essential of time management: choose. If you can't or won't choose then you have a real problem. But if you can reorganise your options and sort out your environment according to those options, then you will regain the most precious thing in your life: time.

This introduction and structure clearly shows the difference between the old and the new time management. Old time management concentrated mainly on management, outlines and planning. All its principles and 'truths' are still valid. But these days they

are simply not enough to enable you to balance your energy and time to the best effect. This is why the new time management concentrates mainly on your choices and asks you what you want and who you want to be.

The first part of the book deals with the principles from the old time management.

The second part will help you make a start with the new time management. Both sections are valuable in themselves, and also complement each other.

2

A perfect working day

I once had to cancel a 'Time management' seminar because of illness. Luckily I was able to give enough notice so that the participants didn't turn up for nothing. Two months later, I was able to give the seminar. One of the participants came up to me and said: 'That last seminar was really brilliant!' I wasn't sure if he was joking, but he went on: 'You know, when it was cancelled. That was great! I didn't tell anyone in the office that it had been cancelled, and you just wouldn't believe how much I got done in those two days! Nobody knew I was there and I got so much done that normally I wouldn't have had the time for. Fantastic! I don't know what these two days will be like but it will be hard to top those last two – they were perfect days.'

What would be your 'perfect' day? The sort of day when you come home tired but satisfied and think: that was a good day; I enjoyed my work and got so much done. I hope that you have a day like that at least once a week, and you don't have too many days when you come home drained and exhausted without being able to say what you actually achieved. At the start of a 'Time management' seminar, I always ask the participants what would be their perfect working day. Over the years, I have collected their answers and came to a clear conclusion. There are three statements that come back time and again when people are talking about their perfect working day:

1. *'When I have achieved my planning for that day, done what I planned to do and hadn't been disturbed too often while I was working.'*

The central theme in this statement is having control over the working day and the feeling that you are in control and not be lurching from one thing to another with the day's events.

2. *'When I had actually finished something.'*

The most unsatisfying feeling about a working day comes about when you have been working like mad all day but when you get home, you haven't a clue what you have actually achieved. It's as though you have been swamped by all the events of the day, and you know because of everything that is thrown at you, that you haven't been able to finish anything. That feeling that you have achieved something, that feeling of satisfaction when something is done, that's what makes a perfect working day.

3. *'When I have solved a particular problem, or have clarified a tricky or unexpected issue.'* Most people want to show their best qualities and work hard in their functions. This third and often mentioned statement has to do with challenge. The opportunity to show your qualities is a very important source of satisfaction during the working day. The more difficult or unexpected the problem solved, the more perfect the day.

Being able to organise your own work, finishing exercises and showing your qualities, that's what makes a perfect working day for many people. But how can you make it happen, how can you make every day a perfect working day? And why are so few days perfect? Just as everyone can tell you what would make a perfect working day, they can also tell you how difficult it is to achieve.

Maybe you will recognise the following statement from your own experiences: 'If I really want to think, or finish something off, then I work from home.'

We construct expensive buildings where people can work, but that work goes much better when there are no people there. In one of the companies where I gave a time management seminar, one manager told me: 'I started coming to work earlier and earlier so that I could work in peace or at least manage to finish off at least some things in a day. When I started there I was just a department employee and it really did suit me. Before anyone else turned up for work I had already finished off the jobs for the day so that I could take my time dealing with everything else that happened. I also didn't need to stress about unexpected business or just plain interruptions, because I had already finished most of that day's work. Over the years I would come into work even earlier; 6 o'clock in the morning wasn't unusual. But I was still quite happy – until I became the department manager. Because I was the boss and I came in so early, my staff thought that they should arrive earlier too and within no time at all they were all coming in at 7am. My quiet time had gone and I felt forced to come in earlier still. But of course there was a limit, and now I had to stay in the office later. Those golden days when I could do my work on my own, were gone forever.'

This manager then went on to research the principles of time management in order to regain that feeling of satisfaction. Why is there so much more demand for time management? Are we busier than we used to be? Do we have to perform better? Or is it just more difficult to concentrate on our work and finish anything off? And does time management help?

3

The demand for time management

If you have been browsing through this book in the book shop or you have actually bought it, then you must be interested in time management or the techniques for making better use of your time. Or how to do everything faster and better so that you have time to do other things. If you have received this book as a gift, then maybe someone is trying to tell you that you could manage your time better.

Let's agree on one thing: time cannot be managed, time just goes by; you can't stop it or slow it down. You can't save time for later use either: you must use every moment of time before it's gone. What you can try to manage however is your own behaviour. You can also alter the way you perceive time and experience time. Is time your friend? Or your enemy? Or an annoying neighbour who you'd rather not see, but who keeps popping his head over the fence?

Something's going on with time. We want more, we must do more and time is an important factor in that game. The manager of a large company asked me rather hesitantly: 'I now have half the staff who worked here last year and next year I am expected to start up four times as many projects. Do you think time management could help?'

We are expected to do more work, and in many companies this work has to be carried out by a smaller number of employees. The pressure of time in the workplace is clearly increasing, because the pressure to succeed is rising so dramatically. While companies focus on their 'core business' the superfluous tasks are being outsourced. Many permanent positions are now being filled by freelancers who are employed to carry out specific projects, so that there is little room and time left over for extra exercises, which then frequently have to be done by those actually employed by the company. Their time is more 'flexible' than that of a freelancer who is taken on for a project with a time limit.

Phasing out certain functions can sometimes have a negative effect: 'We always used to have a doorman but he was suddenly let go because it would save so much money. We should have known better! Because there was no one to open the door any more, every visitor rang the bell, and who had to answer the door? Whoever was nearest of course – he couldn't get on with his work because of the endless interruptions,

but then some genius solved that problem! They brought in a piece of wood from home and jammed it in the door during the day so that it stayed open all the time. So, now visitors could just walk in, but then they would wander around the building not knowing where to go, and they were constantly asking for directions! Eventually, we employed a doorman again, but one hired via an employment agency. We had a new one every month, so we were still always busy showing them the ropes ...' 'Outsourcing and downsizing' might save money but certainly doesn't save time for those who have to carry on working.

People's private lives are also so different from how they were say fifteen years ago. On the one hand part time work is much more flexible and should mean that we have more time for other things. On the other hand, there are so many more ways to occupy your free time that there will never be enough time to do it all. I myself get such a sense of peace when my family has 'nothing to do' for a whole weekend. What a sense of freedom that brings, being able to read for as long as you want. Or wander along the beach for an hour and have a drink at a beach cafe without that feeling that you are always just on the way to doing something else. That feeling of having unlimited time, oh what a luxury ...

We come up against a shortage of time because we want to do yet more in the time that we have. You only have to look around to see that the pace of life is gathering speed all the time. Changes and improvements happen faster. We live in a world where everything seems to depend on everything else and one event follows another with blinding speed. Every day we are literally drowning in a sea of information while we only really need a few drops from the tap. As individuals we are bombarded with more information every day than the people living in the Middle Ages received in a whole lifetime!

At the same time we feel pressured to react to the information at an ever increasing pace. A good example is the advent of e-mail. Just ten years ago, nobody worked with e-mail. Now there isn't a single office where the employees don't use e-mail every day. Is this always a good thing?

A lawyer friend of mine told me: 'Not so long ago I used to receive everything by post and I could take a day to think about things or say that the post had been delayed.' Now the clients' letters and questions come via e-mail, so you can't claim that you haven't received it yet, plus you get a phone call straight away wanting a direct answer. Just e-mail me back, they say! You can't just set something aside for a little while; everything has to be done now, no delays! Because of e-mail there's no more room to breathe.'

Because technology offers us speed, then of course speed is what we want! It doesn't take long before we simply can't imagine life without these applications. Before there were word processors and copiers, a typist could spend three days producing a perfect report. You used to have some sheets of carbon paper so that you could make a few copies of a report, destined for three or four people. Now you have one secretary (if such a person still exists