

Chapter 2



WHY TIME MANAGEMENT COURSES DON'T WORK

Do Less – Don't Sign Up For A Time Management Course For The Wrong Reason

Go on to Amazon and put in the search term "time management". How many results did you get returned? The day I did it, I got a staggering 104,247 results returned. This is not to mention the courses, training companies, time management "systems" and all the rest of it, that are abroad in the world. So with this abundance of time management tools available, why do we continue to get busier and even more overloaded? What's happening? I think you'd have to agree there's something not working somewhere.

Whenever I teach a project management course and talk about how to manage multiple projects simultaneously, I always start out in the same way:

"It's a time management problem. Get your training department to organize a time management course and you'll be fine." *Laughter.* (I'm obviously not going to get off that lightly.)

"Have you ever done a time management course?"

"Yes."

"So you don't have a problem – you can leave now." *Laughter again.*

"No, I'm serious. If you've done a course and done what it said, then you wouldn't have a problem . . . would you?"

"Hm, I suppose . . ."

"So it wasn't a very good course?"

"No, it was a great course. I learned good stuff like getting rid of time stealers and planning my day and the two-minute rule (getting something done and out the way if it can be done within a minute or two)."

"So what happened? If the courses were so good, why do you still have a problem with overload?"

"I fell back into my old ways . . ."

"I came back to work and it was okay for a week or two but then it just went back to the way it was before . . ."

"I didn't have time to implement what I learned . . ." (The old ones are best!)

What is interesting about all of these answers is that the people feel that *they* did something wrong. They failed in some way – falling back into their old ways or allowing work to overwhelm them or not finding the time to implement the time management techniques from the course.

In saying these things, these people are doing an injustice to themselves. Because they didn't fail. It wasn't something they did or didn't do. It was something else entirely.

So what happened?

Here's a way that you could think about or model the world. In any period of time – the rest of today or the rest of this week or this month or this year or even your whole life – there are a bunch of things that you will **have to do** – things like your job, the weekly shopping, mow the lawn etc. Think of them as a physical pile of stuff, like a pile of bricks.

Now place on top of that pile another pile of stuff. These are the things which, in the same period of time, you **like to do** and would like to do more of. Your hobbies or socializing or hanging out with your children or loved one, for example.

Next, place on top of that pile another pile of stuff. These are things you **hate to do** but you have to do them anyway. Paying your taxes, queuing at airports, being stuck in traffic and so on.

"It's easier to do trivial things that are urgent than it is to do important things that are not urgent, like thinking. It's also easier to do little things we know we can do, than to start on big things we're not so sure about."

- JOHN CLEESE

Finally, place on top of the pile a fourth pile of stuff. These are the things that you would **really love to do**. These are the things which, if you didn't have to bother with the pesky business of earning a living, you would be doing all the time. These are the things which, if you won the lottery, you would do. Learn to paint or become a rock guitarist or sail around the world or climb the seven tallest peaks on the seven continents or whatever. So there we have it – a great big pile of stuff towering up to the sky:

REALLY LOVE TO DO

- Go to your salsa class
- Learn to paint
- Become a rock guitarist
- Sail around the world
- Start own business

LIKE TO DO

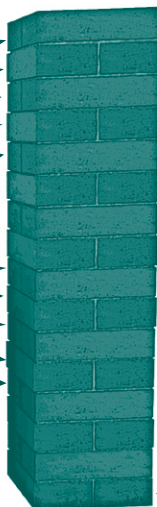
- Take kids to the movies
- Reading novels
- Cooking new dishes
- Hanging with your friends
- Dining out with your partner

HATE TO DO

- Paying taxes
- Queuing
- Getting stuck in traffic

HAVE TO DO

- Weekly grocery shopping
- Go to work
- Mow the lawn



Now imagine a second pile of stuff. These are the things which, in the same period of time – the rest of today or the rest of this week or this month or this year or even your whole life – you **will actually do**. They are the things, drawn from each of the four categories, which will actually get done.

REALLY LOVE TO DO

Go to your salsa class

LIKE TO DO

Take kids to the movies

Hanging with your friends

HATE TO DO

Paying taxes

Queuing

Getting stuck in traffic

HAVE TO DO

Weekly grocery shop

Go to work

Mow the lawn



Do Less – Do Nothing For Two Minutes

Bizarre as it may seem, doing nothing can be difficult. Try the following for example and see how you get on. Visit this link <http://www.donothingfor2minutes.com/>. Now just sit there and relax. Was it a blissful oasis of calm in a busy day? Or were you fidgeting after 30 seconds?

In general, for most people, the first pile of stuff is several, or maybe many times, higher than the second pile. Perhaps it has to do with how ambitious you are, or how driven you are. Perhaps it has to do with how organized or efficient you are. Perhaps it has something to do with your age – you reach a certain point in your life and you start to realize that life isn't infinite after all. You realize that if there are things you want to achieve in your life, you better start thinking of doing them now.

Now, if you go on a time management course or do what a time management book says, what will happen?

Well, it should have the effect of increasing the second pile (unless it's a particularly awful course or book). You will become more efficient. You will be able to get more stuff done.

Take something like the two-minute rule. David Allen mentions it in his very popular time management book, *Getting Things Done*.⁵ We could imagine somebody who bought that book and just implemented that one idea, and would be able to increase the height of the second pile as little things whizzed across his desk and were dealt with.

But Allen's book or any other time management book or course isn't going to solve the basic problem that the first pile will still be many times higher than the second pile.

This is the problem with time management books and courses and systems. *They don't solve the right problem.*

The problem with time management books and courses and systems is that they don't solve *the right problem*.

If you want to become more *efficient* and get more done, then time management will solve that problem. But that's not the problem most people have – or at least, it's not the most pressing problem.

The most pressing problem is that people have far more to do than they have time available to do it.

This then, is the reason why people report things like, "I fell back into my old ways" or "work overwhelmed me" or "I didn't have time".

Of course these things happened – because nothing had changed.

The first pile was still several times higher than the second pile.

The people who implemented what they learned on the time management course got a momentary "spike" or step-up of productivity that gave them the illusion that they had solved the problem.

But the problem remained.

The time management course hadn't solved it because this is not the problem that time management courses solve – even though, perhaps, they imply that they do.

And this is not to rubbish time management books and courses. They have their place and do useful things.

But they don't solve the problem you need to solve.

So if you're planning to spend your time and/or money on a time management book or course, just pause for a moment and ask yourself what problem you're trying to solve. If it's the problem of *efficiency*, i.e. you want to not waste time and get

more done in the available time, then go for it. A time management course will do the business for you.

But if the problem you're trying to solve is too much to do and not enough time to do it, then forget about it. You'll just be wasting your time and money and you'll come away frustrated and feeling let down.

For *that* problem – too much to do and not enough time to do it – you need a different solution.

And before we talk about the solution, we need to talk about the *nature* of the solution.

Compare these two reviews of the book I mentioned earlier, one of the most popular and best-selling time management books of recent times, *Getting Things Done* by David Allen.

First, the bouquet: "This is a life-changing book. I was drowning in paper, felt constantly anxious about things I wasn't getting done, was missing deadlines, finding it hard to keep on top of my various commitments and projects. I thought I was just a disorganized person; this book has changed everything for me. I now have a clear idea of my commitments, an easy-access and reliable filing system, a simple way of capturing all my necessary actions, an empty inbox, and freer weekends." Wow!

Now, the brickbat: "I'll keep it brief because I'm guessing you're short on time – if only David Allen had done that. Instead this book is hundreds of pages of time management advice which, if you could take a year off to learn it, and then spend half your week organizing it as he suggests, it might all come together. David Allen has a knack of over-complicating things so adding complexity to an already busy schedule – no thank you!"

Same book!

So what's happening here? Maybe the bouquet-giver had a problem with efficiency, wanted to find ways to do more in the time he had available and therefore found the methods in the book particularly helpful. And perhaps the reason the brickbat did not find it as useful was because it wasn't actually solving the right problem for him.

More importantly though, what this also shows is that different things work for different people. The reason I mention this is to avoid falling into that trap in this book. Take what you will from the ideas in this book and see the various challenges as items on a menu. You don't have to try everything on the menu – just the ones that you like, that you find work for you.

[If you've got too much to do and not enough time to do it, better time management is *not* the answer – you need a different solution.]

Do Less – Turn Something Down In Your Personal Life

In Chapter 1, I asked you to decline something at work. Now try the same outside of work – at home or in your personal life. Again, you figure out how to do it and only if you're really, really stuck should you go to Chapter 5. As a possible hint, ask yourself whether the technique you used to decline something in the Chapter 1 exercise would also work here in this one. If it would, feel free to use it; otherwise come up with another one. And if you do come up with another one, would that technique also be usable in a work setting? If the answer to that is yes, then notice that you now have two viable techniques.

“Liberty means
responsibility.
That is why
most men
dread it.”

[— GEORGE BERNARD SHAW]