



The New Time Management: Simply Focus on the Fundamentals, and Toss Away the Tips By Francis Wade

The New Time Management

At first, getting a Blackberry as a surprise for Christmas sounds like fun. After all, it has wonderful, amazing capabilities, with most of the functions of a PDA and a phone combined into a small, 5 ounce package.

However, would Hank Aaron have accepted the gift of a newfangled, “high-tech” bat from a cousin and used it in his next game? Would Michael Jordan have worn sneakers bought by his aunt in the next playoffs? Does Tiger Woods use the fanciest club that gets sent to him for free in the mail in his next Master’s tournament?

In each case, probably not.

The average professional, however, acts differently from the experts. They look for, purchase and employ the latest gadgets they can afford, and eagerly adopt the tips that they think will give them a quick advantage. The result of their actions is unfortunate—in too many cases they actually destroy their personal productivity, and end up discarding the gadget and the tip to return to their old practices.

If one of the goals of a professional is to be as productive as possible, you would think that they would take the kind of care that Aaron, Jordan and Tiger take when selecting the tools of their trade—the ones that are integral to achieving all of their most important results.

Professionals don’t demonstrate this kind of care, but it’s not their fault.

While the expert sportsmen are gifted, they have something that we working professionals don’t have—a firm grasp of the fundamentals of their sport. Not only do they know them, but they each spend years mastering these basics through diligent practice. The ones who we acknowledge

as masters start practicing when they are young, and never stop as long as they are committed to competing. Even so-called child prodigies like Mozart base their success on hard work on the fundamentals; it is said that Mozart practiced so much that his hands were visibly deformed by his early twenties.

Pity the mediocre sportsman or musician who can't bother with the fundamentals, and instead spends his or her time shopping for the latest bat, club or instrument that uses the latest materials, design or manufacturing process that the mind can conceive. The hope, of course, is that some of the expert's magic will rub off without having to do the mundane work needed to attain true mastery.

Pity them also for chasing after the latest tips or shortcuts found in books, on the internet, or from those who are more skilled. The tips become a new gospel until everyone is trying the tip—whether it be boxers trying to “rope-a-dope,” tenors being temperamental, or martial artists travelling to Asia to learn the true secrets of their art.

All this, instead of practicing the fundamentals.

Time management systems are essentially quite simple, and they are easy to understand and to learn once the fundamentals are appreciated.

Unfortunately, the working professional suffers from ailments that should draw more than mere pity. For not only does he or she not practice the fundamentals, but they have never been taught what they are, or even that they exist to be learned.

The results are plain to see: millions of PDA's, Blackberries and copies of Microsoft Outlook are sold each year to well-intentioned knowledge workers who don't know the fundamentals. They might come to understand the 40 features contained in the new Palm Treo, but their ignorance of the fundamentals leaves them in a struggle to incorporate the new technology into their daily lives.

The gadget ends up in the desk drawer to gather dust until the next, shiny must-have comes along. Likewise, the well-intentioned list of 100 tips ends up being forgotten as the user gets overwhelmed trying to fit them into his or her life. Without a basic understanding of how time management systems work, the tips remind me of trying to become a great quarterback using the advice of every coach, player, fan and commentator that has even a passing knowledge of the game. It's just stressful and impossible.

What I have discovered is good news—time management systems are essentially quite simple, and they are easy to understand and to learn once the fundamentals are appreciated. In my research, when I compared professionals across different cultures, industries, ages and genders, I realized that the problem we all face is exactly the same, and that every solution that has provided relief has, perhaps unwittingly, covered all the fundamentals.

THE SAME PROBLEM

As working professionals across the world, we all want the same things when it comes to time management. We want to feel a certain peace of mind that comes from knowing that our affairs are in order and that we've not forgotten something that might jump up later to give us a nasty surprise.

We also want to get as much as we can out of life, and to maximize the time we have to be alive. We share the belief that this time is limited, and we want to spend it in ways that are in line with our values and commitments.

And we all face the same problem of having only 24 hours in the day.

We also want to avoid the exact same things:

- Unnecessary stress that comes from forgetting to do the things we wanted to do.
- Breaking promises made to ourselves and people we care for without good reason.
- Being out of balance with respect to the time we spend working, with family, enjoying our friends, being entertained, relaxing, etc.
- A sense of regret when we realize that we are spinning our wheels and have accomplished little in the past day, week or month.

But we are also missing the same essential knowledge—an understanding of the fundamentals. If we knew them, we would know how to repair our time management systems when they break down. When Tiger's game falls apart, he's lucky—he knows what to do. He returns to the fundamentals and starts to rebuild.

If we were so lucky, we would have the following fundamentals taught to us in the 5th grade. It's late, but not too late to learn them, and to begin our long overdue practice sessions.

THE FUNDAMENTALS

The basic time management system consists of 2 kinds of components: time demands and a variety of practices.

Time demands are merely the different things that we decide we must do. Simple examples include a decision to call a colleague, visit our parents, pay a bill, attend a meeting or prepare a document. Time demands are created by us, the professionals, who have commitments to “get stuff done.” We create them by the tens and hundreds each day, sometimes by merely visiting a website, looking in a closet or glancing at ourselves as we walk by a mirror and decide to change our appearance in some way.

Time demands are like raw chunks of dough that have just been made by a baker.

A friend of mine, who owns a bakery here in Kingston, tells me that dough undergoes a process that is transformational. He uses practices that include dividing, rounding, resting, moulding, proofing, baking, slicing, cutting and packaging. These are the fundamental, and universal, practices that bakers throughout the world must use to transform dough into bread.

To violate these fundamentals is to ruin the bread, according to him.

In time management, there are 7 core fundamentals that all professionals must employ to transform time demands into action: Capturing, Emptying, Tossing, Storing, Acting Now, Scheduling and Listing.

To violate these fundamentals is to end up with feelings of stress, overflowing email inboxes, broken promises, late arrivals, forgotten commitments, poor reputations, upset colleagues, a missing sense of accomplishment and more. What exactly does each of these fundamentals comprise, and why are they so important?

What follows is a description of the 7 fundamental practices to professional time management.

PRACTICE 1. CAPTURING

A “capture point” is the “port of entry” of a time demand into a professional’s time management system. When he or she is “capturing,” a time demand is being stored temporarily for later use.

For example, an email Inbox is a capture point that contains email messages, all of which are time demands. A professional’s memory is a possible capture point, as in a mental note that one makes for oneself. A piece of paper with a list of items to do later is yet another. A voicemail system and a digital voice recorder also count as capture points.

Key Principles

- The mind is the worst capture point to use, and should be employed to store information as infrequently as possible. Instead, the mind should be kept free to process thoughts, and external devices or tools should be used to store information instead.
- A capture point should be kept nearby at all times, just in case it’s needed
- Capture points should be limited in number.
- Time demands should be stored in capture points for a short a time as possible.
- In the case of an email Inbox, messages should be allowed to enter upon demand, rather than automatically.

At expert levels, professionals have taught themselves to practice the Key Principles religiously, thereby preventing any incoming time demand from ever “falling through the cracks” of their system.

PRACTICE 2. EMPTYING

Because capture points are temporary storage devices, they naturally need to be accompanied by the practice of Emptying. At some time after Capturing has occurred and time demands have accumulated, a professional sits down and empties each capture point, removing all items and preparing it for future use.

Key Principle

- Empty capture points as often as possible, and make immediate decisions about their disposal on an individual basis.

Expert professionals empty rigorously, and never allow messages to accumulate in their email inboxes, as items on paper, or let their voicemail ever get to the point where they are overfull.

PRACTICE 3. TOSSING

When a capture point is being emptied, one option is to get rid of a time demand by deleting it, crossing it out or throwing it away.

Most messages that are emptied from an email Inbox are probably deleted. They are “Tossed” because in the process of Emptying, the user has decided not to ever act on the time demand.

A good idea that came up in conversation loses its lustre several hours later and needs to be crossed out. A voicemail is immediately deleted after it’s listened to because there is no further action required.

Key Principle

→ Toss time demands aggressively deleting items once and for all instead of allowing them to sit in the time management system weighing things down.

An expert at Tossing is always looking for reasons to delete or get rid of time demands that are no longer active. They keep their system light, knowing that the only time demands that are “alive” have their full commitment.

PRACTICE 4. STORING

When a key piece of information comes into a time management system, it must be safely put away for later retrieval. It might be a phone number, address, meeting minutes, credit card number—anything that must be saved.

Key Principles

- Never use personal memory.
- Store only the minimum information, and store it in a place that is fully backed up in case of an emergency.
- Use as little physical space as possible.
- Use a portable storage device, but use only one.

Experts use technological tools that match their specific needs, and have 24 hour, 7 day a week backups available in case of emergencies

PRACTICE 5. ACTING NOW

When professionals are emptying, they realize that they can take at most 2 to 5 minutes to complete an item. They act immediately to complete the time demand, rather than transferring it to another place in the system.

Key Principles

- Choose a time limit between 2-5 minutes and use it as a rule.
- If Acting Now exceeds the time limit, stop and make a decision whether to continue or to plan it for a different time.

Expertise in Acting Now is demonstrated by completing the action within the time limit, and avoiding time overruns.

PRACTICE 6. SCHEDULING

Time demands are placed in a calendar of events that include solo as well as group activities. A professional's schedule prevents him from over-committing himself.

Key Principle

- Schedule in slack time to account for interruptions and for time estimates that are overly aggressive.
- Look for recurring events to schedule each week, e.g., the regular Monday morning meeting.
- Before committing to due dates or meetings, check the schedule.

The Scheduling expert rarely runs out of time, because they are precisely allocating their time to activities in their calendar. They stop what they are doing and decide what to work on next based on what is in their schedule.

PRACTICE 7. LISTING

While Scheduling is a critically useful practice, it can easily become overwhelming if too many items are placed in a calendar. After all, who wants to fill their calendar with a single line item of 2 minutes for each purchase to be made at the grocery store? Instead, a shopping list is much more useful.

Lists are created and managed when it is impractical to use the schedule to keep track of minute details.

Key Principle

- Listing is carefully balanced with Scheduling, according to the needs of a professional.
- Lists are basically groups of items that share the same characteristic.
- Lists must contribute to peace of mind, rather than subtract from it.
When they get to be too long, and start to hide their contents from the user, they probably need to be scheduled in the calendar.

A professional skilled at Listing maintains just enough lists, none of which are overly long, to help provide his or her peace of mind that no key information is being forgotten.

PERSONAL TIME MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

Each complete time management system that exists describes activities that correspond to these 7 fundamental practices. Those systems that are sold commercially describe fine tuned practices in each of these areas, bundling them together in a single approach with its own language, nuances and details.

But these systems must cover ALL the fundamentals in order to work. Like the baker of bread, they must follow the same process even while producing their own variety, taste and texture.

However, a baker who insists that everyone must buy his bread, and his bread alone, creates a problem for his customers. He turns them off even further when he is unwilling to teach them how to bake their own bread at home. His unwillingness may come from the fact that he bakes with his instincts, and has no idea how to teach others his process, but the result is the same—his customers want something that he does not deliver.

I happen to believe that the creators of commercial time management systems just don't know the fundamentals clearly enough to teach others. Their focus has been on finding ways to teach people one system, not in helping them to create their own.

The result is that the users of different systems are either raving fans, or failed adopters.

The fans are the lucky ones whose habits easily fit into the new system they are learning. The failures are those who get fired up for a few days, and after a week are forced to go back to their old habits.

My observation is that the vast majority of professionals take a bit from here and a bit from there to craft their own unique set of habits. Unfortunately, they do so without understanding the fundamentals, and the results in some cases are disastrous.

Their system of habits doesn't work, but they don't know why. It allows stress, missed appointments and forgotten commitments to occur too frequently, but they don't know where to start to fix their systems.

FIXING AND UPGRADING TIME MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

Luckily for them, the 7 fundamental practices are perfect for the job of fixing, upgrading or adapting personal time management systems.

When a professional athlete's game deteriorates, which happens to all of them at some point in time, they go back to the fundamentals. So must a working professional.

A friend of mine was recently promoted in her company, and discovered that the system that she been using to manage her productivity is just no longer sufficient. Her new responsibilities bring with them a dramatic increase in time demands, which have left her with sleepless nights as she struggles to get things done. The same thing happens to professionals everywhere who undergo major transitions: a new baby is born, a project is started or a hobby is taken up for the first time.

The creators of commercial time management systems have focused on finding ways to teach people one system, not in helping them to create their own.

Often, stress immediately rises as time demands start falling through the cracks. It never used to happen before, but the change has caused their system's weaknesses to be revealed.

The best course of action in these circumstances is to use the 7 fundamentals as a set of diagnostic tools to discover which practices need to be upgraded, fixed or changed.

To illustrate, let's look at a single example that all knowledge-workers share—the state of their email Inbox.

THE UNPRODUCTIVE, OVERFLOWING EMAIL INBOX

When email was a quaint new convenience, it was fun to get a new message. Many users of AOL can recall the sonorous voice of the programme announcing “You’ve Got Mail!” and the feeling of pride that came with it. A teenager or grade-schooler who gets his or her first email account has the same feeling in the first few days (as fleeting as it might be!)

As working adults, however, we are quite glad that that voice has disappeared because, in 2008, it would drive us insane.

Now, tens and even hundreds of legitimate emails per day are the norm for some people, not including those that should be routed away as Spam. In the meantime, the habits that we developed in the mid '90s or grade-school for handling email are simply insufficient.

The overflowing email Inbox is one of today’s signals to the working professional that they are being unproductive, and that the state of their Inbox might be adding to the stress that they feel everyday. Why so?

Hidden in the Inbox are overdue time demands, requests that have become urgent, meetings that have not been scheduled in the calendar, and agendas that have not been revised.

If this is the case, the cure is not as easy as picking up a book or reading a blog on “How to Create an Empty Inbox Forever.”

Instead, the cure comes from a professional applying the 7 fundamental practices to the way she handles her Inbox. The overflowing Inbox is a sign that one of the 7 practices is not up to the level required.

It might be that she is Capturing incorrectly, and randomly, by allowing messages to flow into her Inbox automatically. Or, she might not be Emptying her Inbox often enough. Or she might not be Tossing at all. Or not Acting Now, etc.

The fact is, the cure to the complex professional disease of an overflowing Inbox is not as simple as slavishly following someone else's habit pattern. Instead, it requires personal time spent in personal diagnosis, experimentation, practice, measurement, and improvement. Only then can a solution be crafted that fits into the professional's lifestyle, circumstances and temperament.

There is simply no substitute to the time that must be spent to get the 7 practices honed into a working system, and I imagine that Hank, Michael and Tiger would nod their heads in agreement. They might also agree that one's skills change over time, and that constant re-examination is the price one pays for being a professional.

TIPS, NEWFANGLED TOOLS AND OTHER DISTRACTIONS

In today's world, there is an increasing pull to abandon the fundamentals for new tips and gadgets that seem to be more exciting.

A new article with 100 new time management tips comes out every day. New PDA's are released every week. Software for handling email, calendars and to-do's is upgraded and launched every few months.

They may provide real excitement, but the question a professional should ask themselves when they open that gift on Christmas morning is “what does this mean for my fundamentals?”

Will I use this new innovation to help improve my Capturing, Emptying, Tossing, etc.? How exactly will I do that? Will the technology help me to upgrade one of the 7 practices in a way that I can sustain it?

Recently, I discovered a programme—Mozy.com—that backs up all the files from my hard-drive whenever I am not active at the keyboard. It fits nicely into my current practices.

I have also been researching new PDA's. I currently use the original Palm Tungsten T, and while there have been shinier new models with more features, I have yet to upgrade for one simple reason. According to my research, and my current understanding of my own time management system, an upgrade would do nothing to improve any of the ways I use the 7 fundamental practices.

Professionals need to be very careful about the way they change their own habit patterns, and to do so simply to accommodate a new technology is a frequent mistake.

In a recent training session in a large management consulting firm, I was working with a group of five associates huddled around a flip-chart. Many of them were armed with Blackberries.

As we were talking in a huddle, I noticed an associate reach into his pocket and pull out his unit. As we watched, he scrolled to read his email, and started replying to it with both thumbs flashing, oblivious to the effect he was having on the activity.

I softly called his name, and he snapped to attention, as if he were just awaking. He apologized profusely, and turned off his device with a red face.

Apart from questions of social etiquette, what he did not realize is that by jumping to a new time demand while in the middle of another, he was being unproductive.

The new technology had merely reinforced his bad habits, and made him even more inefficient. He was only faster, not better.

It's a warning to professionals that bears repeating—be careful of new technology and new insights, as exciting as they may be.

In today's world, there is an increasing pull to abandon the fundamentals for new tips and gadgets that seem to be more exciting.

WHAT NEXT?

It can be guaranteed that more innovations are on their way, and as new tips and technologies are thought up, the commercial and peer pressure to use them will only increase.

To be effective, however, a professional must focus himself on the simple fundamentals. Like a Zen master, he must quietly marshal his energies towards perfecting his system, paying attention to the 7 practices, all while looking for ways to improve them on a daily basis.

Only then will he see the results I mentioned that we all want—peace of mind, productivity and a life-long feeling of fulfilment.

All one needs do to is take ownership of their time management system for the first time. 📖

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