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The Profession of IT

Managing Time

Professionals overwhelmed with information glut can find hope from new insights about time management.

TIME MANAGEMENT IS a persistently hot issue for many computing professionals. Almost every day we hear (or have) laments about information overload, about a relentlessly increasing rate of input from Internet and other sources, and about feelings of overwhelm, data drowning, inadequacy, and even victimization. The consequences from poor time management can be significant: loss of trust, loss of reputation, negative assessments about our competence and sincerity, and inability to get the jobs and projects we want. Books and seminars on time management continue to be popular. Software tools to help keep track of calendars and to-do lists sell well.

The same issues plague us as decision makers. We wanted larger networks and more sensors for better situational awareness—and now those networks overwhelm us. We still complain about the quality of our decisions.

In my own research on this subject I have turned up new insights that are very helpful especially if viewed as a coherent framework. I discuss these insights here. There are opportunities here for all computing professionals to become more productive and for some to design new software tools.

From Time Management to Commitment Management

It is very important to frame the question properly. Although we often complain about not having enough time, lack of time is the symptom, not the problem. The problem is commitment management. Time is one of the resources needed to manage commitments. Other resources, such as money, space, and personnel, may be needed as well. From now on, let us talk about commitment management.

In managing commitments we need to know only four things. I'll call them *practices* because you can learn them as skills and get tools to help you do them better (see the figure here).

1. How to track commitments to their completions;
2. How to chose what commitments to make or decline;
3. How to organize the conversations that lead to completions of commitments; and
4. How to manage mood and capacity.

These four practices go together. If we pay attention to only one, we will see some headway but not a lasting solution to our problem.

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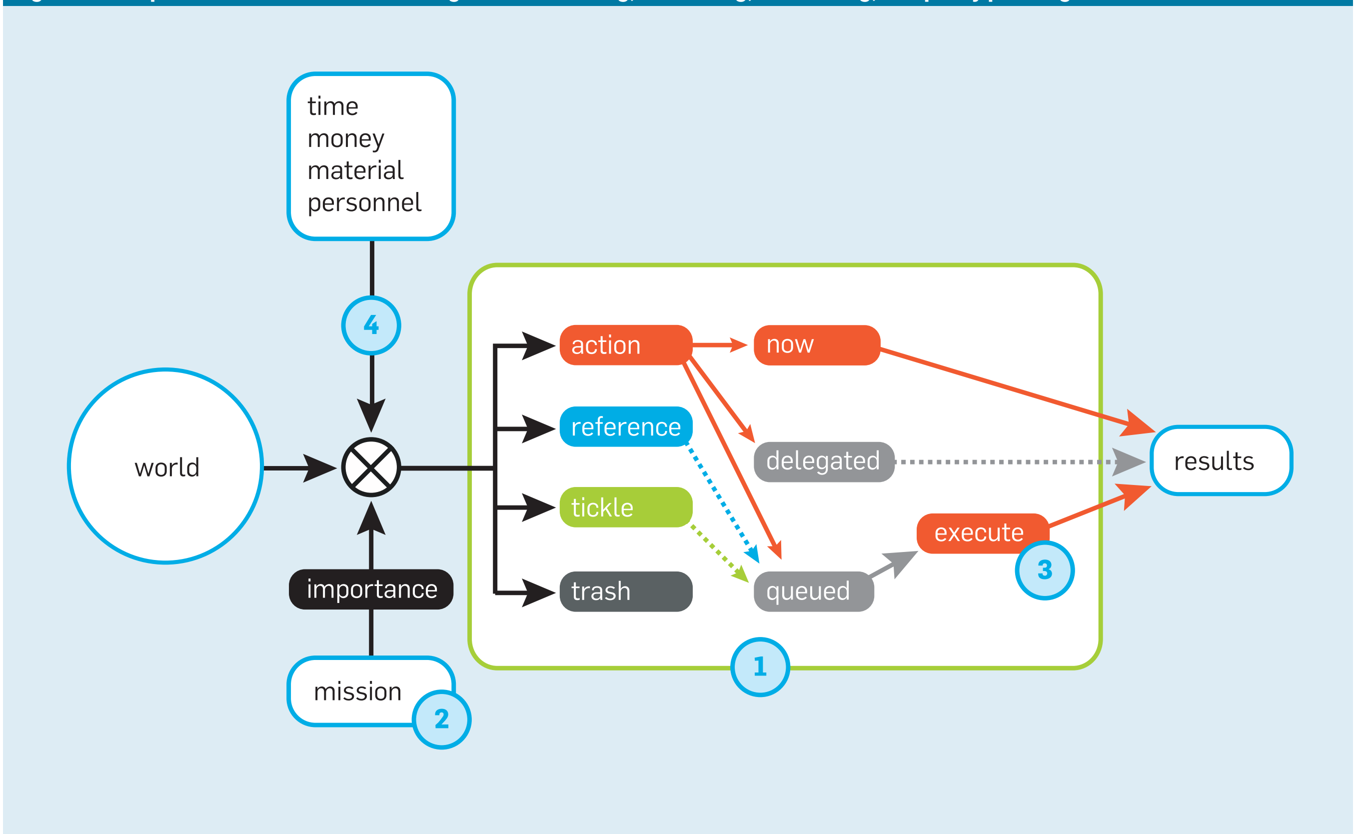
Tracking Commitments to Completion

Much of the literature on time management focuses on the first practice. That practice directly addresses one of the biggest breakdowns with commitment management—missed or forgotten commitments. When the world gets demanding, we can find ourselves in a state of constant worry about whether we forgot commitments or their due dates and whether we have the capacity to get everything done.

David Allen has written a hugely popular book about how to organize our records so that nothing is lost and we can eliminate from our minds all concerns about whether every commitment is being taken care of.[1] He has defined an operating system for managing commitments. His system can be implemented with a few simple rules and folders. The folders and structure of flows among them are remarkably similar to the job-scheduling part of a computer operating system. After you set up your system and practice its rules for a short time, you soon become skilled at commitment tracking. That so many people have found his book really helpful illustrates that the record-keeping part of commitment tracking is a huge struggle for many.

Allen's story begins with "stuff" arriving before you. Stuff is anything that demands your attention and possible future action. Think of stuff as incoming requests. A request can be anything from the really simple (such as "read me" or "take note") to the complex (such as "write an analytic report" or

Figure 1. Four practices of commitment management: 1-tracking, 2-selecting, 3-executing, 4-capacity planning.



"implement a software tool"). Allen says to sort the incoming items into trash (ignore and delete), possibly useful (save in tickler file), reference (save in reference file), and actionable. You do actionable items immediately if they require two minutes or less (for example, a quick answer to an email message); otherwise you enqueue them in your to-do list and calendar, or you delegate them. You review your queues periodically to see if your delegations have completed and the orderings of lists reflects your current priorities. Once an item is in this system, you do not have to think about it and your mind is clear to focus on the tasks needing completion.

This story is incomplete in three ways. (1) It does not address the possibility of controlling the flow of stuff. (2) It does not make explicit that much of the stuff originates with you and your teams as you design actions to fulfill your own commitments. And (3), it does not deal with limitations on your capacity and the mood of overwhelm when you are beyond capacity. These three aspects take us to the next three practices.

Trump the Urgent With the Important

Stephen Covey has discussed at length the notion of controlling what commitments you enter or decline.[2] The central question is: what exactly do you commit to? Covey maintains that the answers come from having a clear sense of mission. Just as organizations have mission statements, individuals should have personal mission statements. We can ignore requests that do not serve our mission, and we can (politely) ask the people making them to leave us alone. Covey counsels each of us to write down a mission statement, including our ongoing personal and professional commitments. Then we arrange our calendars to make sure that we allocate time sufficient for each major commitment.

Covey argues that good mission statements help people distinguish important requests from urgent requests. Many people find themselves overwhelmed with urgent but unimportant requests that consume all their time. This is a double whammy—they are frustrated at being unable to find time for the important things and exasperated over the sheer number of urgent, time-wasting requests. The irony is that many urgent requests are the result of previously neglected important tasks. For example, if you make sure you give excellent service to your customers, you will not spend a lot of time answering complaints.

Covey tells an engaging story about a time-management seminar leader who did a demonstration involving placing rocks, then gravel, sand, and water into a large glass jar. After his students struggled with getting all these items successfully into the jar, he asked, "What is the point about time management?" He got many answers including there is always more room to fit more things in your schedule if they are small or liquid enough, and you may therefore have more capacity to get things done than you think. He said, "No. The point is that if you don't put the big rocks in at the beginning, you can't get them in at all."

The moral for commitment management is: let your mission statement inform you about what tasks are most important, then set aside sufficient time in your schedule to do them.

Mastering Conversations for Context, Possibility, Action

The third practice begins with the realization that all commitments are made in conversations.[3] The practice is to become an observer and facilitator of those conversations. There are three basic kinds of conversations.

- *Context*. Define the purpose, meaning, and value of actions.
- *Possibility*. Invent possibilities for future action (in the context).
- *Action*. Elicit the commitments that will realize specific possibilities and see them through to completion.

It would be a misunderstanding of Allen's model (practice 1) to interpret his "actionable" items only in the third sense. Professionals who do not create context will find it difficult to get anyone to work with them. Although the action itself is performed in the third conversation, the other two are needed before people are willing to engage in a conversation for action. Sometimes you need to schedule time for context and possibility conversations, but more often you can insert them as needed as prefaces to your requests and offers (which open conversations for action).

A conversation for action takes place between a customer and performer; the customer makes a request (or accepts an offer) that the performer commits to fulfilling. The transaction between them can be visualized as a closed loop with four segments: request, negotiate, perform, accept.[5] Performers often make requests of others to get components for their own deliveries; thus a single request can evoke coordination in a larger network of people (for details on conversations for action and their skilled management, see [3–5]).

Commitment management presents a big software challenge.

To manage commitments means to manage the conversations leading to the fulfillment of those commitments. Have you or someone made the appropriate requests or offers? Who is responsible for performing each action? Who is responsible for accepting and declaring satisfaction with the result? Do you trust promises made to you by others along the way?

Managing Capacity and Mood

The final aspect of the picture is your ability to manage your capacity and mood. You have the capacity for a commitment if you have the time and other resources needed to fulfill the commitment. If you do not have the resources, you will need to initiate conversations to get them—and you must manage those conversations as well. Generally, if you have accepted too many commitments relative to your capacity, you will feel overwhelmed, victimized, and sometimes panicked—poor moods for productivity. When you do not have the capacity, you can find yourself in a death spiral of an increasing backlog of broken promises, negative assessments about your performance, lack of willingness to trust you, and a personal sense of powerlessness. Over time, these bad moods increase stress and anxiety in your body and lead to chronic diseases. Not a pretty picture.

With a simple exercise, you can assess whether you have the capacity for your commitments and take corrective steps when they are beyond your capacity.[3,4] On a three-column spreadsheet, make one row for each commitment. Put a description of the commitment in the first column, the number of weekly hours you need to do it well in the second column, and the number of weekly hours you actually spend in the third. Make sure to include all your "big rock" commitments including time for family, sleep, and exercise. Many people who feel chronically overwhelmed discover from the exercise that their column-two total exceeds 168, the number of hours in a week. Even if the column-two total fits, they discover that their column-three total exceeds 100 hours per week for professional commitments. In contrast, people who feel productive and satisfied usually do not spend more than 60–80 hours per week on professional commitments.

You need to reduce your load if you are over capacity. First, look at your mission statement and recall what is most important to you. Make sure that the time you allocate for your "big rock" commitments is sufficient to do them right. All other commitments need to be modified or eliminated. Modified means you negotiate new terms with the person(s) who expects the results. Eliminated means you cancel the commitment. In both those cases you need to work with the customers of your commitments to reset their expectations and take care of any consequences resulting from your scale-back or cancellation.

Conclusion

Commitment management presents a big software challenge. There are software tools that help with some of the four practices separately. For example, *OmniFocus* (omnigroup.com), *Things* (culturedcode.com), and *Taskwarrior* (taskwarrior.org) conform to Allen's workflows in practice 1. *Orchestrator* (orchmail.com) tracks conversations for action through their stages in practice 3; *ActionWorks* (actiontech.com) goes further, mapping and managing entire business processes. Can someone design a coherent system that supports all four together?

If you learn the four commitment-management practices, you will be able to execute all your commitments productively and in a mood of fulfillment and satisfaction. All your customers will be satisfied and you will enjoy a strong, trustworthy reputation. C

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