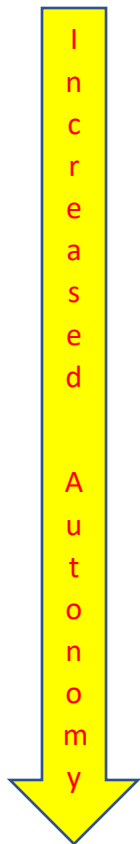


Time Management and Projects

I thought that today I would move away from the technical topics for a moment and look at one that everyone must deal with – time management, because it has been a hot topic lately. Time management covers a lot of things but basically it boils down to three areas for most people: getting enough sleep, having time for personal and family enjoyment, and fulfilling whatever tasks are required to earn a living – aka work. Poor use of time in any of these three areas will have tremendous impacts on the others. I will not claim to be a psychologist to make people fulfilled, or a somnologist, but I believe I am qualified to speak to techniques to managing time spent at work.

Work Time Utilization

Utilization of time at work is the rest of our discussion, and the allocation of time to work breaks down into three categories.



- Organized labor: This is the simplest type of work to think about – a person or group works at assigned task(s) for a set period, then stops at a pre-determined time. The work is then resumed later if it is not completed, or new tasks are assigned. When the set amount of time to perform activity stops, work stops regardless of the amount of progress completed. These types of jobs are usually paid by the hour. The same types of work are usually repeated over and over, sometimes with small variations.
- Task or Project based labor: A person or group works on the assigned task or project until it is completed. When it is complete, then all work stops unless there is another task or project to be done. Each separate task or project may require different expertise, and may be of different scope, and will often require different teams to be assembled to complete. These types of jobs may be paid by the hour but are more often paid via salary with bonuses for success, or via 'piecework' where payment is upon completion of the project.
- Self-directed labor: the person or group must create opportunities to come up with tasks or projects which they can be paid for. The scope of work is negotiated on a case-by-case basis. Payment may take a variety of forms as negotiated. The exact amount of time each project takes is negotiated, and/or 'takes what it takes' because each project is different enough not to have an obvious precedent.

Consequences of Self Management of Time.

With increased autonomy comes increasing responsibility for the person involved to manage their own time, and good time management at work impacts sleep and home life, as well as determining income. Workers whose labor is organized may have very little scope to directly increase their income

by organizing their time well but can often gain promotion and increased income by successful management of their work time. Those who are engaged in task or project-based labor see more direct benefits to better time management. Rapid completion of their assigned work tasks may translate directly into increased time for other activities ex. “Our team completed the blueprints for the new green bean packing machines two weeks ahead of schedule so we can take a break, and maybe help out the other teams” and nearly always translates into bonuses and promotions if such are available. Successful management of time in self directed labor always converts directly into more time for other activities, either in the form of more income, or more leisure.

Example

The same actual actions can be organized labor, task or project based, or self-directed. Take the simple example of trimming grass, cleaning up yard debris and maintaining ornamental beds. The crew doing this at a public park are all organized labor. They work at these tasks from a certain time in the morning to a certain time in the evening. They are not expected to ‘finish’ maintaining the park at any particular time – they simply work their way from one area to another on a regular schedule. Even the ‘owner’ or ‘manager’ of the crews doing the work is still an organized laborer even if they are salaried and do not actually conduct the work themselves because it is so formally organized.

By contrast the team cutting yards for hire in a residential neighborhood is engaged in task or project-based labor. The lawn servicing company they work for has contracts to cut a certain number of yards. When the crew completes the work assigned for them, they can go home, and are paid just as much as another crew which may take considerably longer to complete the work at an equal number of homes. Alternately they can take on more routes and houses to earn more money. Each and every person on that crew is engaged in task or project-based labor.

An owner operator with a pickup truck, a trailer, the right equipment, and some helpers is engaged in self directed labor. She can do as much work as she can get by advertising for it, by talking to friends and neighbors, by developing contacts with commercial real estate managers, etc. One week perhaps she manages to land a contract to do the communal flower beds in a large subdivision in addition to the lawns on her ‘regular’ routes. Perhaps next week there is an opportunity to bid on cleanup and resodding after a major plumbing problem left a yard a mudhole. The week after that a neighbor of one of her regulars ask if they trim trees, and they get a contract to trim trees.

Each team in these examples is engaged in the same actual activities for most of their working hours, but with tremendous differences in autonomy, and with very different expectations of time management. Time management is most important for high autonomy workers.

Managing workload

For those who have high autonomy for their time, there are two extremes to time and project management which should be avoided.

- One project at a time. At the extreme, a project is obtained, then executed and completed, payment is received. Then and only then is any effort put into soliciting new projects. This may be acceptable for projects which take long times to complete (multi year projects) but is too uncertain and leaves excessive time not working between projects to be acceptable for most. If you have been tasked with building the next 3 gorges dam, or a skyscraper topping the

Burj Khalifa tower this is probably appropriate – you and your team will not have the time or capability to consider other projects until this one is complete. Most projects are not of this nature.



Don't commit to a second project like this until the first one is done

- Take every project possible. At an extreme, this means taking things which cannot reasonably be accomplished by the team you can assemble, or which aren't a good use of resources "of course my 3D animation folks can install your gutters! When can we start?" – "Only working 70 hours a week on our current projects. I'll bet we can squeeze in this electrical installation project on Sunday afternoons for the next 8 weeks – lets submit a bid!" This can lead to delivery penalties, legal disputes and the like which can destroy an organization.



Don't Dory your way through your work!

Falling into either trap creates unpleasant financial and psychological results. There is no way to get the balance right, and as a result erring on the side of overloading with projects is always preferable to not taking on enough. The worst-case result of taking on excess projects results in having to take on additional help to complete the projects or requiring additional time to complete them all. Be honest about your expected workload with potential customers. Let them decide to what degree they would like to deal with the potential uncertainty in your completion dates or times. Any project of sufficient complexity has a lot of uncertainty. Projects and managers who want extreme certainty in timing need to be willing to pay a premium price to have vendors, subcontractors, etc. waiting on them. The result of not taking on enough projects is hunger and eviction. Predictions are hard, especially about the future. Projects which were expected to have a certain duration or scope may get smaller. Projects may be cancelled or delayed. Projects may be expected but then not completed. The scope of work may change, and you may no longer be able to accomplish it.

Conclusions

For anything but the simplest of working environments and tasks, time management and project management is an ongoing ever-changing task. Maintaining the right balance between earning, living life and rest requires constant calibration and management to achieve. There will always be some uncertainty and loss of 'ideal' balance from time to time, but good results can be achieved.