

# Time to think and plan to do the really important things in business

## Managing attention

Managing attention is now a primary skill. Attention has been described as a key determinate of business success. Why is this? Well first and foremost we live in a world of information overload. If you're in any doubt about this you only have to look at the growing number of emails, voice mails, meetings and information you have to wade through to able to be informed, learn or act on something.

There's never enough time to devote to all the things that need attending to. No matter how hard you work, or how cleverly you organise yourself, there are only 168 hours in a week. When you deduct the time for rest and play, even an extreme workaholic is not likely to find much more than a hundred.

Most people work between 35 to 50 hours per week; though an increasing number of business owners and managers are making conscious choices to work less. Allowing time for working in the business, this probably leaves around 10 to 15 hours in a working week for development or planning, making calls, marketing and managing the business. This doesn't seem to be very much, does it? In an effort to cope with these pressures there has been a huge emphasis on focus and goal setting. In the heat of an increasingly goal driven culture every drop of attention is hungrily consumed often by ourselves. So where

### Just how much time can you lose?

- |   |                          |
|---|--------------------------|
| 1. Interruptions from other people                              | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Fatigue, tiredness, low energy                               | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Worry, concern about the business                            | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Meetings that overrun  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. IT interruptions   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. Stress trying to do something that we don't quite understand | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Trying to find something                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. Indecision about a course of action                          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. Sidetracked by emails  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. Diversions  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>Total hours</b>  | <input type="checkbox"/> |

ever you look - inside or outside - your attention is under siege. What seems to be in short supply is attention that you can devote to all the information and activities that require our consideration and focus.

It seems that most of us have problems managing our

time. But we have to. Somehow, we've got to manage how we focus our attention on working on the really

important things. Things that will drive the business forward help us to achieve our goals and turn our business dreams into reality.

The purpose of this strategy is to form some good habits to nurture and protect your attention that will have positive ripple effects on your ability to find the time to think and plan for years to come.

## **Just how much time can be lost to distractions?**

Let's explore the point a little further before we move on to some tactics. Taking a typical week how many hours do you think you can lose from each of the following distractions?

If you haven't already, have a go at the questions set out in the table above.

Even after double counting, people have said that they can lose as much as 12 hours per week around 20% on a 60 hour week! The implications are stunning!

If you could develop a relationship with time what sort of difference would that make to your business? What if you were to concentrate your attention on those things that really count such as nurturing relationships with prospects and more customer facing work, would this not constitute a better use of time - time that would generate greater profit and fulfilment rather than catch up and longer hours?

The exercise though reveals symptoms - rather than the causes - of distraction.

The causes of distraction are overwhelm,

disorganisation dread and isolation. Every time problem has its origins in one or other of these causes. But much of the literature around time-management deals purely with symptoms, and is devoid of root causes and diagnosis?

Simon, an MD of a fruit importing company, remarked on the difficulties of managing the business and the day-to-day, saying;

*"...that even though the month ahead was well planned, sometimes it was as much as you could do to cope with business, dealing with the day to day things as they arose, looking perhaps at some of the future advantages for your customers, but when the environment around you and the things you have to consider you know that you will probably not have enough time to do everything at the same time.*

*At any other time," he said, "This might seem normal but sometimes it seems overwhelming and you couldn't see a solution."*

The root cause of this sort of pressure is the experience of overwhelm – not a shift in workload. To deal with overwhelm, it is important to first shift the focus of your attention, then you can find solutions.

## **The roots of distraction**

In detailing a few simple moves to deal with distraction, your aim should be to define the source of these distractions to try to achieve some awareness of

enduring value rather than some short term motivational fix. If you really want to spend more of our time on things that really require your attention you need to solve the right problems. There are four types of problem, they are briefly outlined below.

The opposite to “focus” is “distraction”. There are three very different types of distraction – familiar to everyone who has ever spent a challenging week in a modern workplace:

- 1 **OVERWHELM:** Under stress, your attention “narrows” and your perspective concentrates. Sometimes, this is advantageous; and this is one of the reasons why people often claim to work well in the run up to a deadline. However, prolonged overwhelm leads to loss of direction, stress, lack of time for others, being reactive, mistakes, indecision, role overload, little time for strategic development, a constant sense of lagging behind and fatigue .... All of which distract your attention.
- 2 **DISORGANISATION:** Your attention is finite: you cannot cope with an indefinite number of things at once. This is why you need systems, support and structure, even though your requirements for order will vary. When adequate support is found wanting it is simple to disappoint customers, and lose track of messages, projects and appointments. You may not even know whether you are overwhelmed or not – you are simply too busy to know!

- 3 **READ: Dread** – or de-motivation – is often the blight of business. Even when you are not overwhelmed, and are well organised, sometimes the will to tackle a task just isn't there. You have to wait until it is urgent to get it done. Or perhaps it takes ages to get going after the weekend or a holiday. Sometimes you are recovering from earlier overwhelm or disorganisation.
- 4 **ISOLATION:** This can be depressing for some. Sometimes battling alone in a twenty-first century economy there is a growing sense of marginalisation. With requests for mission, values and purpose the language and thrust of these are almost incompatible values. Others might be trying to do more and more just to overcome the feeling of isolation Others might be paralyzed and need the environment of others and the office to work in

### Key moves to manage attention<sup>1</sup>

- 1 Doing the Top Three. A great way to get things done effectively.
- 2 Zoning the diary. If your attention is finite, you can only attend to one or two things at a time.
- 3 Planning the time to think. Prevention is better than cure. Yet fewer than 5% of business people practice a structured planning approach.

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<sup>1</sup> Please ask for further details from [andrew@uniquebusinessstrategies.co.uk](mailto:andrew@uniquebusinessstrategies.co.uk)

4 Learning to say No, and how. If we cannot say No, what value does your Yes have?

### Some pre-requisites

Here's a question. Which is worse; having an idea and not doing anything with it or not having any ideas at all?

I hope this provides you with some food for thought. Try the suggestions and I'm sure you will notice a difference.

### With best wishes



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