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The Time Bandit Solution

Recovering Stolen Time You Never Knew You Had

Edward G. Brown • Greenleaf Book Group © 2015 • 248 pages

Workplace Skills / Become More Productive / Time Management

Take-Aways

- Interruptions waste 40% to 60% of employees' work time.
- This costs US businesses \$588 billion every year.
- The "time bandits" responsible for these interruptions include clients, bosses, colleagues, friends and family members.
- You will always be your own greediest time bandit.
- Many employees believe time bandits control their time.
- You work and live in an "interruption culture."
- Interruptions result in "restarts, momentum loss, do-overs" and "distress manifestations," such as irritability and mental fatigue.
- Learn to make the most of "Time Locking": Designate specific periods when time bandits consciously agree not to interrupt your work.
- Pay employees bonuses based on their productivity gains from time locking.
- Use "Focal Locking" to help you maximize your concentration.

Recommendation

Although author Edward G. Brown grew up in humble circumstances in the East Bronx, he developed a successful career managing Hollywood celebrities – including Hawaiian singer Don Ho – owning restaurants and nightclubs, producing chart-breaking music, and partnering with Roy Rogers, the “King of the Cowboys.” Brown, co-founder of the Cohen Brown Management Group, taught himself how to manage his diverse, often stressful professional activities. He bases his time-management program on his business and life experiences and on the academic fields of management theory, psychology and sociology. While he sometimes bogs down in time-consuming detail, *getAbstract* recommends Brown’s effective time-management program, and his sensible ideas about avoiding interruptions and managing your work schedule. His top-quality presentation makes this vividly illustrated (even glitzy) book an ideal choice for anyone who wants to work more efficiently.

Summary

Time Thieves

Some bandits don’t take money or jewelry; they steal your time. These “time bandits” interrupt your work progress and pilfer chunks of your day. Time bandits include your clients, colleagues, supervisors, friends and family members. But, if you’re like most people, you are your own worst time thief. Though you don’t mean to, you probably also steal time from your colleagues. Don’t feel too bad: Everyone else is a time bandit, too.

“We are our own worst time bandits. Deny even this, and we display the behaviors of addicts who claim they can stop at any time. They are in denial. Are you?”

Time banditry and work interruptions are serious problems. In the turbocharged business world, where many employees must somehow handle their own work plus the jobs of former employees who’ve been downsized or laid off, time has become a precious commodity. Burdened with heavy workloads, many of today’s employees feel like Sisyphus, vainly trying to roll his giant boulder up the hill throughout eternity. They voice a common complaint and lament: “We have too much to do and not enough time to do it!”

Wasted Energy, Effort and Time

Interruptions cause workers to lose 40% to 60% of their “daily, weekly, monthly and yearly time.” According to analyst Jonathan B. Spira, interruptions cost US businesses \$588 billion annually. And time has greater value now than at any other point in history. Despite the severity of the problem, most employees feel as if they can’t do anything about the interrupters who steal their time. Employees think they’re at the mercy of the time bandits. Many workers shrug and say, “Others manage my time; I don’t.” But interruptions are only the initial phase of the time-loss problem. Other complications emerge from the daily onslaught of interruptions:

- **“Restarts”** – Once an interruption occurs, most people go through a “now, where was I?” period as they reapply themselves to their work. Getting back up to speed requires more time and effort.

- **“Momentum loss”** – You develop momentum when you work with concentration. Interruptions undercut your concentration and force you to start again.
- **“Do-overs”** – Interruptions cause you to lose focus, resulting in mistakes. You must fix those mistakes, which demands more of your time.
- **“Distress manifestations”** – No one likes interruptions, which lead to a variety of negative effects, including “mental fatigue, irritability, loss of concentration, reduced efficiency” and “reduced productivity.”

The “Interruption Culture”

Today’s workplace often has an interruption culture. Your colleagues think it’s acceptable to interrupt your work without thought. Interruptions are so common that some workers contract “interruption addiction.” Perversely, some employees welcome interruptions, making themselves their own worst time bandits. Employees often sublimate their interests to those of their bosses and colleagues by trying to accommodate and please everyone. They take on new tasks despite heavy workloads. They answer emails and text messages instantaneously. In their minds, their time does not belong to them; it belongs to everyone else at work.

“Interruption-Driven Distress”

Because these employees are loyal citizens of today’s interruption culture, they suffer interruption-driven distress. Symptoms include feelings of frustration, rejection, demotivation, insecurity, and “mental and physical exhaustion.” Taken together, these symptoms add up to a sense of hopelessness: Eager-to-please employees no longer believe they can do anything to avoid the interruptions of the time bandits who ruin everyone’s productivity.

Solutions

However, all is not lost: you can take productive action to stop interruptions. Try to mediate with the time bandits. Get them to cooperate with you and stop breaking into your day. Win back your time as you improve your abilities to manage relationships.

“We have all been guilty of stealing time from those around us by interrupting them when they are trying to get something done.”

To regain control of your time and become more productive, master two important time-management principles, “Time Locking” and “Focal Locking.”

Time Locking

Designate blocks of concentrated work time that you set aside with a “Time Lock” so no one interrupts you. During these periods, you work unimpeded by interruptions. For your time locks to become a reality, your time bandits must agree never to interrupt you during these designated hours. Display a notice on your office door that says, “Time Locking – please do not disturb.”

“If we don’t control interruptions, we can’t control our time. And if we don’t control our time...we simply don’t control our lives.”

Suggested time-lock rules include instituting at least one hour of uninterrupted work time daily. Get everyone to agree to honor each other’s time-lock periods, including clients and bosses. Make sure everyone in the organization shares a full understanding of the time-lock concept, its purpose and how it works. For instance, employees often cover for colleagues who are in a time lock. Pay your employees bonuses based on the productivity gains they accrue as a result of time locking.

“Time locking will not work without genuinely committed mutual agreements between the interrupters (time bandits) and the interrupted.”

You should be able to arrange time-lock agreements with your colleagues, but you can’t tell clients, “I can’t talk to you right now. I’m in a time lock!” Respectfully propose a time lock to your clients; don’t insist on one. In your proposal, explain that time locking will enable you to deliver superior service. Clearly, such proposals require up-front negotiating with clients.

“Do not, under any circumstances, just go ‘winging it’ with your time bandits. Winging it is for bedtime stories and parlor games.”

Use a pilot program to sell the time-lock concept to your bosses, clients and colleagues. Demonstrate its benefits. Handling things this way will help you reduce and even eliminate the fear of the unknown that accompanies anything new. Prepare yourself for objections, most of which will fall into one of these categories: “no need,” “distrust,” “inconvenience” and “I don’t understand.” Be ready to respond. Whether you negotiate the particulars of your time-lock with your bosses or clients, never wing it with your time-lock proposal. Completely script and practice your proposal. Rehearse repeatedly. Role-play your presentation with family, friends and colleagues. If no one is available, rehearse in front of the mirror.

“Time management...builds self-confidence, self-esteem, job satisfaction...and it engenders gratitude from clients and colleagues.”

Make sure your time-lock proposal includes benefits that others around you – clients, colleagues, bosses – will receive when you lock down your time. For example, tell them, “Time locking for only one hour a day... can increase my personal productivity by as much as 30%.” When you make your time-lock presentation, speak sincerely. Add a smile to your voice. Be polite. Employ appropriate body language. Be a good listener.

“Uninformed decisiveness is dangerous; deliberateness, as long as it isn’t paralyzing, is an underrated virtue.”

A “mutual charter agreement” represents a formal extension and elaboration of the time-lock proposal between you and your managers. As a “strategic contract,” it spells out the terms of your specific time-lock proposal. It explains time locking and quantifies its benefits. Make sure you include such phrasing as, “You, as my employer, and I, as your employee, agree to the following...” Sign the agreement, and have your boss or bosses sign it, too.

Focal Locking

When your colleagues, bosses and clients agree to your time-lock plan, make full, productive use of those periods by using focal locking – “targeted, focused concentration.” You may find it difficult to achieve this level of focus. And, online technology, smartphones and other devices make it more difficult to maintain concentration. To focal lock, use the six techniques of the “mental hygiene process”:

1. **“Transcending the environment”** – To concentrate perfectly, make sure you forget about the external factors that interfere with you and hamper your work pace – background noise, poor (or no) heat or air-conditioning, or other environmental deficiencies. Don’t waste time thinking about such inconveniences. Think about pleasant circumstances or events.
2. **“Constructive acceptance”** – To deal with unavoidable defects, deficiencies or shortcomings, accept them as part of your reality – then move on to what you can control.
3. **“Visualizing the ideal self”** – When distractions enter your mind, think positively about something else. Utilize the popular visualization technique that many athletes adopt. In their mind’s eye, they see themselves triumphing.
4. **“Positive affirmation”** – Psychologist Emile Coué used to say a certain affirmation daily to boost his spirits: “Every day when I wake up, in each and every way, I’m going to feel better and better and better.” Use your own special affirmation to make yourself feel good. Your body will create an adrenaline rush every time you state your affirmation. This is positive Pavlovian conditioning.
5. **“Psychological counterpunching”** – Former boxing heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali was a terrific counterpuncher. When an opponent punched Ali, he would punch right back. This unnerved his opponents. Use a similar mental counterpunching technique to keep your mind clear and focused. When a negative thought enters your mind – for example, “You can’t finish that project; you are getting tired” – quickly counterpunch with a positive affirmation – for example, “Yes, I can.”
6. **“Changing your internal computer chip”** – Ingrained neuronal patterns occur in the brain that translate to habits that result in various behaviors, some good and some bad. When bad behaviors surface during a time-lock period – for example, daydreaming or woolgathering – substitute good behaviors. Author Edward G. Brown used this tactic to keep his head down during his golf swing. His golf pro would place a penny next to the ball and tell Brown to stare at the penny, not the ball, while swinging. Use a similar process to reprogram your brain so it works for and not against you. Replace negative neuronal patterns with positive ones.

“Even over the phone, a smile can be detected and have an effect. It can calm fears, soothe anger, offer sympathy, soften resistance and engender confidence.”

Thanks to time locks, you’ll have more time to think and work. Spend your newfound time wisely. Focus on your most important priorities – your “critical few” tasks instead of your “minor many” tasks. Do the minor jobs many tasks later. Focusing on your few critical tasks increases your productivity and improves your daily work results.

“What, How, Who, How Many and By When”

When your critical tasks are out of the way, save time by grouping similar, repetitive tasks. “Batch processing,” an old-time computer term, helps you develop work momentum. You might be a morning person. Other people are more effective in the afternoon or the evening. Handle your most demanding tasks when you are most ready for them. To stay organized and work efficiently, plan your work using this protocol:

- **“What?”** – Define the job you need to do.
- **“How?”** – Figure out how you will do it.
- **“Who?”** – Determine who else you need on the job?
- **“How many?”** – List and number the different tasks that constitute the job.
- **“By when?”** – Create start and end dates.

“We live in a culture where our time is rarely our own, where quiet time is mistaken for idleness and interruptions no longer carry the taint of rudeness or rupture.”

Plans are useless without action. Write down the steps you must take to achieve your goals. Make your plans as detailed as possible. For example, I will do *A* from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. on Monday, *B* from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. on Monday, and *C* 10 a.m. from to 11 a.m. Monday. Plan the rest of the days of the week with equal detail. Don’t leave any holes in your schedule. Once your plan is complete, share it with your boss, so he or she can ensure you’re focused on the right tasks and goals; share it with work colleagues so they can make themselves available when needed.

Share the Time-Locking Philosophy and Principles

Your colleagues and your organization also can benefit from time locking. Once you master time-lock practices, procedures and processes, teach them to others. Include scripting and role-playing in your time-lock training. After people understand the basics, have them put their time-lock plans to work where it truly counts – in the field. Supervise their real-world activities, track their results and, in the end, debrief them.

About the Author

Edward G. Brown is co-founder of Cohen Brown Management Group, whose clients include Wells Fargo, Bank of America, Citibank, Prudential Life and Merrill Lynch.



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