7 secrets to master timeboxing

Timeboxing is a simple technique, but it has its challenges when implemented in practice. This article lists some typical challenges when timeboxing and how to master them. It's a destillation of many years of experience in applying the technique in practice.

What is timeboxing?

Timeboxing is a very simple technique to manage time and become more productive. The idea is to allocate a certain amount of time to an activity in advance and then complete the activity within that time frame. One example is to plan a meeting agenda and determine up front, how long you want to work on each topic. During the meeting you then set a timer and when time is up, you move on to the next topic. In theory it sounds simple, but in practice it can be hard. Let's look at some typical challenges and how to master them...

1. Hard and soft time boxes

A deadline is negative inspiration. Still, it's better than no inspiration at all.

–Rita Mae Brown

There are two types of time boxes: „hard time boxes" and „soft time boxes". The terms *hard* and *soft* refer to how you handle the end of a time box:

- When a *soft* time box ends, you allow the current point in discussion or the current task at work to finish.

- When a *hard* time box ends, you drop everything, stop doing what you do and take a break or move on to the next point on the agenda.

Both types are useful.

The alarm at the end of a soft time box gives you a hint that you should come to a conclusion, a result or the end of a task. It brings the focus of the group back to the point in questions and reminds everyone, that the time scheduled for this point or task is up. The drawback of a soft ending is the danger of continuing the discussion or work far longer than what is sensible — not seldom multiple times longer than the original time box had been. The soft way works well when first establishing the idea of time boxing with a team, because it allows them to adjust to this new tool without being forced to cut discussions short in a rude way.

A hard time box often leads to agitated utterances like „but we're not finished yet!" or „we need more time!". This reaction is intentional! Teams who don't have much experience with timeboxing have to learn it and get a feel for time. They will run into „time's up" events without having produced any results for the agenda point in discussion or the task at hand. But you will see, that after a few of these events, they will gradually become more efficient within the time box. They will remind each other „oh, we only have x minutes left — let's come to a conclusion now". And they will arrive at results before time is up.

Be clear whether you want to use a soft or hard time box and why.

2. Visual time

Almost nothing need be said when you have eyes.

–Tarjei Vesaas

Make the time box visible! Use a kitchen timer or an iPad app so everyone in the room can see it. Use countdown timers instead of a regular clock to make the time remaining easy to grasp. The best timers use visualizations instead of raw numbers to clearly communicate the time left.

Another big benefit of a visual time indicator is that everyone in the room becomes a time keeper. The moderator is not left alone with reminding people to focus and to come to conclusions. You will see different people from the team pointing towards the timer and reminding the group to return to the topic. The timer gives everyone the authority to cut disucssions short, while without the timer, many people would hesitate to remind their boss about focussing.

Make the time box visible to everyone.

3. Plan in advance

I would like to allocate more time to dating, though. I need to find a girlfriend. That's why I need to carve out just a little more time. I think maybe even another five to ten — how much

time does a woman want a week? Maybe ten hours? That's kind of the minimum? I don't know.
— Ashlee Vance (Elon Musk: Inventing the Future)

Announce the time you give each topic in advance. For a workshop or meeting, plan the time for each topic before it starts. Think about how much time you're willing to give a topic, so that you won't get caught up in distorted priorities: we all know these long and interesting discussions about a topic that noone wants to cut short, yet later everyone realizes that they spent half a day on a rather unimportant topic. Avoid this by setting the time — and with this the time/value ratio — for each topic in advance.

If you don't have an agenda in a spontaneous meeting, take a minute to think about and decide how much time you're willing to give the next topic. Also communicate the planned time box clearly to everyone. People need to know how much time they have.

Plan the time you want to give a topic in advance and announce it.

4. Maximum length

It is not the length of life, but the depth.
— Ralph Waldo Emerson

Is there a maximum length for a time box? Yes. I believe, a time box should not be longer than 45 minutes. This interval fits with our biological rhythm and is also supported by psychology. There is a reason why many schools around the world have kids take breaks after 45min. A longer stint would drain the team's energy in the long run. Go for 45min max and take short breaks of 5–15min in between. If you need more than 45min for a topic, simply break the topic down into two or more time boxes.

Is there a minimum length as well? Of course you can use any time below the 45min mark for topics that don't need as much time: 30min, 20min, 12min, … . But is there a lower limit? No, I don't see one. Sometimes it makes perfect sense to break a task down into small intervals of merely 10 seconds, like „take 10 seconds to write down your first thoughts on topic 1 of 6, then move on to topic 2 and repeat". Get creative with the use of time boxes. It does not always make sense to break down a topic into small time boxes, but sometimes it just makes perfect sense.

Stick to a maximum length of 45 minutes.

5. Breaks

Sometimes I do need to go to karaoke, sometimes I need to relax.
– Jackie Chan

Breaks are important! As I already mentioned, take short breaks every 45min. I would also advice you to take slightly longer breaks (e.g. 15min) every 90min. We often structure workshops by giving

each agenda point 60 minutes: 45min work + 15min break. This also makes planing with full hours very easy.

If possible, move around or get outside every 90min. Don't just sit around and check your emails during breaks. Moving, fresh air and seeing something different (even if it's just the bathroom) keeps the brain fresh and ensures enough energy for a full workshop day.

Make it clear to everyone when the break will end! Do this *before* everyone leaves the room. You don't want to wait another 10min after a 5min break until everyone is back and you can start working again. State the end time of the break, not its duration! Instead of announcing „5min break", phrase it as „break until 11:48". This works, because many people don't look at their watch once the break starts. When they look at their watch after some time, they don't know when the break started. Then one of two things happens: they either fall back to „feeling" when the break is over or they measure the length of the break from the point they first looked at their watch (this is why such breaks often take exactly double the time you've given them). So make it easy for everyone to be back on time and announce the end time, not the duration of a break.

Take breaks and announce the end time of the break.

6. What can be time boxed?

Pizza makes me think that anything is possible.
– Henry Rollins

A time box is not only meant for workshops and meetings. Time boxing is also used sucessfully on a larger scale of days and weeks,

like in a Scrum sprint (1–4 weeks) or [Google's Design Sprint](#) (5 days). Milestones and deadlines in projects or product development are also forms of large time boxes. They all help you make decisions and stay focused on what's most important.

Meetings are seldomly time boxed correctly. Most organizers will tell you the start time of a meeting, but not the end time. If there is an end time, it is often not set on purpose and there is no intention to honor this end time either. But if you really plan a meeting's duration up front, you can dramatically improve its usefulness. You won't spend more time than is worth in a meeting, people will actually look forward to meetings and you will be able to plan appointments after the meeting without having to calculate considerable „buffer" time.

Some argue that there is one even bigger and very effective time box given to us all: life and death. But the bigger the time box, the less it serves to help us focus on the important stuff. Steve Jobs really felt the pressure to focus when his time box shrank dramatically due to his illness ([Steve Job's commencement speech at Stanford](#)). Some people benefit from visualizing this large but nontheless endless timebox in a [life calendar](#). It's certainly interesting to look at life as a huge time box.

I also use time boxes in my daily solo work. The [pomodoro technique](#) is a great way for me to stay productive throughout the day. I work for 25min straight and then take a short 5min break to get up and relax. I can manage to stay focused for 25 minutes without taking calls, going to the bathroom or checking twitter — almost everything can be postponed for 25 minutes. My brain has enough energy to really be productive during these 25min. The days when I use the pomodoro time boxes are the ones I am most productive overall, still feel fresh in the evening and look forward

to tackling the next work day. I even measure the time my work took me in „pomodori".

[Pecha kucha](#) presentations or the famous [TED talks](#) also benefit from timeboxing. They help the presenter to stay focused and they allow an audience to sensibly digest several talks during a single day. If you do presentations, aim to keep them under the 45min mark. Even if it's not a pecha kucha or a TED talk, make it a challenge to turn it into one of these even shorter presentation formats. You'll see that it greatly benefits your final presentation.

Time boxes are universally aplicable. I'm sure there're even more things that can benefit from time boxing out there.

7. Time is up

Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake.
— Napoléon Bonaparte

I already talked about the end of a soft or a hard time box before. Especially with hard time boxes, people will be frustrated and sometimes almost panic about not being able to „finish" the discussion or task. As a facilitator or moderator, you need to stand your ground and make clear that time boxes are not a mere embellishment. People will learn and thank you over time, but it can be tough in the beginning.

A good practice is to give a short warning before time is up. You can either verbally announce a „2min warning" to the team or even

better use a timer that does this for you (I currently use the [TimeBoxing app](#) on an iPad).

When time is up, you have two options: move on to the next topic or start a new time box for the current topic. What you do is solely at your discretion. The important thing to remember is that you don't let yourself get caught up in the moment and what „seems important right now". Rather trust your preparation when you allocated time for each topic depending on its importance. At the very least, take some time when the alarm rings to quickly think about or discuss, whether it will be worth to give this topic another x minutes. Pull your head out of the work and stick it up onto a strategic level for a minute and don't let the work inadvertantly alter your strategic goals.

Moving on to the next topic even when there is no result or conclusion for the current topic can be a tool to become more productive. If a team has been frustrated a few times with not having any results for a point on the agenda, they will quickly adapt and come to results earlier in the time box. Especially if you introduce time boxes as a coach, you should make use of this educational effect.

Use the end of a time box to remember your strategic goals.

Benefits of timeboxing

Timeboxing has many benefits:

- Focus: stay focused and do the important stuff

- Stay fresh: stay innovative and productive, even on the next day

- Breaks: time boxes allow to have regular breaks

- Measurable progress: have clear results

- Predictability: ability to have appointments right after a meeting, because you *know* when it ends

- Everyone is a leader: time boxes are an „excuse" for anyone on the team to cut a fruitless discussion short and get back to the point

- Results: time boxes force results

- Liberating: when you got used to it, limiting time feels liberating instead of limiting

If you apply time boxes in the right way, they're an invaluable tool for productivity and fun. As a coach and facilitator I use this technique all the time! And I hope you also learned some new things about time boxing through this article. Cheers!