Maker's Schedule, Manager's Schedule

July 2009One reason programmers dislike meetings so much is that they're on  
a different type of schedule from other people. Meetings cost them  
more.There are two types of schedule, which I'll call the manager's  
schedule and the maker's schedule. The manager's schedule is for  
bosses. It's embodied in the traditional appointment book, with  
each day cut into one hour intervals. You can block off several  
hours for a single task if you need to, but by default you change  
what you're doing every hour.When you use time that way, it's merely a practical problem to meet  
with someone. Find an open slot in your schedule, book them, and  
you're done.Most powerful people are on the manager's schedule. It's the  
schedule of command. But there's another way of using time that's  
common among people who make things, like programmers and writers.  
They generally prefer to use time in units of half a day at least.  
You can't write or program well in units of an hour. That's barely  
enough time to get started.When you're operating on the maker's schedule, meetings are a  
disaster. A single meeting can blow a whole afternoon, by breaking  
it into two pieces each too small to do anything hard in. Plus you  
have to remember to go to the meeting. That's no problem for someone  
on the manager's schedule. There's always something coming on the  
next hour; the only question is what. But when someone on the  
maker's schedule has a meeting, they have to think about it.For someone on the maker's schedule, having a meeting is like  
throwing an exception. It doesn't merely cause you to switch from  
one task to another; it changes the mode in which you work.I find one meeting can sometimes affect a whole day. A meeting  
commonly blows at least half a day, by breaking up a morning or  
afternoon. But in addition there's sometimes a cascading effect.  
If I know the afternoon is going to be broken up, I'm slightly less  
likely to start something ambitious in the morning. I know this  
may sound oversensitive, but if you're a maker, think of your own  
case. Don't your spirits rise at the thought of having an entire  
day free to work, with no appointments at all? Well, that means  
your spirits are correspondingly depressed when you don't. And  
ambitious projects are by definition close to the limits of your  
capacity. A small decrease in morale is enough to kill them off.Each type of schedule works fine by itself. Problems arise when  
they meet. Since most powerful people operate on the manager's  
schedule, they're in a position to make everyone resonate at their  
frequency if they want to. But the smarter ones restrain themselves,  
if they know that some of the people working for them need long  
chunks of time to work in.Our case is an unusual one. Nearly all investors, including all  
VCs I know, operate on the manager's schedule. But   
Y Combinator  
runs on the maker's schedule. Rtm and Trevor and I do because we  
always have, and Jessica does too, mostly, because she's gotten  
into sync with us.I wouldn't be surprised if there start to be more companies like  
us. I suspect founders may increasingly be able to resist, or at  
least postpone, turning into managers, just as a few decades ago  
they started to be able to resist switching from jeans  
to suits.How do we manage to advise so many startups on the maker's schedule?  
By using the classic device for simulating the manager's schedule  
within the maker's: office hours. Several times a week I set aside  
a chunk of time to meet founders we've funded. These chunks of  
time are at the end of my working day, and I wrote a signup program  
that ensures all the appointments within a given set of office hours  
are clustered at the end. Because they come at the end of my day  
these meetings are never an interruption. (Unless their working  
day ends at the same time as mine, the meeting presumably interrupts  
theirs, but since they made the appointment it must be worth it to  
them.) During busy periods, office hours sometimes get long enough  
that they compress the day, but they never interrupt it.  
When we were working on our own startup, back in the 90s, I evolved  
another trick for partitioning the day. I used to program from  
dinner till about 3 am every day, because at night no one could  
interrupt me. Then I'd sleep till about 11 am, and come in and  
work until dinner on what I called "business stuff." I never thought  
of it in these terms, but in effect I had two workdays each day,  
one on the manager's schedule and one on the maker's.When you're operating on the manager's schedule you can do something  
you'd never want to do on the maker's: you can have speculative  
meetings. You can meet someone just to get to know one another.  
If you have an empty slot in your schedule, why not? Maybe it will  
turn out you can help one another in some way.Business people in Silicon Valley (and the whole world, for that  
matter) have speculative meetings all the time. They're effectively  
free if you're on the manager's schedule. They're so common that  
there's distinctive language for proposing them: saying that you  
want to "grab coffee," for example.Speculative meetings are terribly costly if you're on the maker's  
schedule, though. Which puts us in something of a bind. Everyone  
assumes that, like other investors, we run on the manager's schedule.  
So they introduce us to someone they think we ought to meet, or  
send us an email proposing we grab coffee. At this point we have  
two options, neither of them good: we can meet with them, and lose  
half a day's work; or we can try to avoid meeting them, and probably  
offend them.Till recently we weren't clear in our own minds about the source  
of the problem. We just took it for granted that we had to either  
blow our schedules or offend people. But now that I've realized  
what's going on, perhaps there's a third option: to write something  
explaining the two types of schedule. Maybe eventually, if the  
conflict between the manager's schedule and the maker's schedule  
starts to be more widely understood, it will become less of a  
problem.Those of us on the maker's schedule are willing to compromise. We  
know we have to have some number of meetings. All we ask from those  
on the manager's schedule is that they understand the cost.  
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