

Managing time

The executive who doesn't know how he spends his time almost certainly doesn't spend it well

It is rare to find a manager in business, industry or government who is not busy. (The only thing rarer is finding one who will admit to it.) For one reason or another, we have all come to believe that a good manager is a noticeably busy one. An executive who is caught reading the newspaper in his office (even if it is the business supplement) is likely to be seen as (or feel) guilty even if he is efficient in his job.

No matter what our individual perceptions are on the use of executive time, it is clear that some managers are able to accomplish more than their colleagues. The popular saying is that if you want to get something done you must ask someone who already has a lot to do. Busy people know how to use time. But do managers? Not always, if we believe recent studies of how managers use—or misuse—their time.

Studying managers

One of the earliest studies of managerial management of time was by the Swedish professor Sune Carlson. In 1951 Carlson spent four weeks examining the work of the managing directors of nine Swedish firms. He asked the executives to keep a log of all of their meetings and activities and their secretaries to take notes on the number and time duration of all phone calls.

Studying his results Carlson was struck by the fact that the managers were rarely alone. When they were, it was usually too short a time for deep thought. Carlson concluded that his executives were too ruled by their appointment books. They were not autonomous managers; their work—and use of time—was determined by other people, with a consequent loss of efficiency. Carlson said that before his study he had thought of a managing director as being like the conductor of an orchestra; afterwards he began to think of him as a puppet with other people pulling the strings.

The next major study was done in 1952 by the British sociologist Tom Burns. Using the Carlson diary method for observing 76 managers in six different companies, Burns' five-week study suggested that there was a close relationship between changes in the external environment, or the firm's programs for expansion, and the amount of time top management spent in discussions. In general, the faster the change the more time the managers spent talking together.

Burns also noted a significant amount of lateral communication, particularly among firms most involved in change and between those in the lower ranks of management, thus challenging the traditional view of management as a working hierarchy.

Further light was thrown on how managers spend their time by the British researchers Home and Lupton in 1966. Looking at 36 managers in 10 companies employing from 170 to 140,000 people, they confirmed the earlier findings of Carlson and Burns that there appeared to be no major differences in the behaviour of managers in companies of widely different size and technology.

The researchers concluded: "Managers talk most of the time, and mostly face-to-face. They seem not to be overwhelmed with paper work or formal meetings. They swap information, advice and instructions, mostly through informal face-to-face contacts in their offices. Middle managers do not seem to require remarkable powers to analyze, weigh alternatives and decide. Rather,

to facilitate.

Further studies on the manager's use of time were carried out in Britain by Rosemary Stewart and in Canada by Henry Mintzberg. Using respectively the diary method and direct observation of executives at work, they addressed themselves to two key questions. The first was whether the manager was doing the right thing; the second, whether he was doing it efficiently.

Keeping track of time

Rosemary Stewart discovered that most managers, when asked, were not really certain how they spent their time. She therefore requested them to keep a diary in which they would record any work-day activity that took five minutes or more.

The results led her to classify managers into five different categories:

- Those who travelled a great deal and made contacts mostly with customers and officials from other companies or public institutions (The Emissaries).
- Those who spent relatively more time reading, writing and dictating reports

and memoranda (The Writers).

- Those who spent their time with colleagues at the same organizational level and undertook diverse activities and functions (The Discussers).

- Those who made shorter, fleeting contacts than managers in other groups and were called upon to cope with more crises and problems needing more immediate attention and solutions (The Trouble-shooters).

- Those who spent most time in group discussions and committee meetings and whose contact was almost invariably internal and tending to deal with questions largely related to personnel (The Committee-men).

Henry Mintzberg's work in measuring managerial behaviour, though radically different from that of Rosemary Stewart, produced similar results. He selected five senior managers in different organizations and observed them for one week. He noted that 659 pieces of mail reached their desks; 231 pieces were sent out; and 368 distinct verbal contacts were made. Analysis revealed ten managerial roles. (See below.)

Interpersonal	Description	Identifiable activities
Figurehead	Symbolic head; obliged to perform a number of routine legal or social duties.	Ceremony, status requests, solicitations.
Leader	Responsible for the motivation and activation of subordinates; also for staffing, training and associated duties.	Virtually all managerial activities involving subordinates.
Liaison	Maintains self-developed network of outside contacts and informers who provide favors and information.	Acknowledgements of mail; external board work; other outside activities.
Informational	Description	Identifiable activities
Monitor	Seeks and receives a wide variety of special information to develop a thorough knowledge of the organization; emerges as the nerve center of internal and external information.	Handles all mail and contacts concerned primarily with receiving information.
Disseminator	Transmits information received from outsiders or from other subordinates to members of the organization; some information factual, some involving interpretation.	Forwarding mail into the organization for informational purposes, verbal contacts involving information flow to subordinates.
Spokesman	Transmits information to outsiders on the organization's plans, policies, actions, results etc.; an expert on the organization's industry.	Board meetings; handling mail and contacts involving the transmission of information to outsiders.
Decisional	Description	Identifiable activities
Entrepreneur	Searches organization and its environment for opportunities and initiates "improvement projects" to bring about changes; supervises design of certain projects.	Strategy and review sessions involving initiation or improvement of projects.
Disturbance handler	Responsible for corrective action when the organization faces important unexpected disturbances.	Strategy and review involving disturbances and
Resource allocator	Responsible for the allocation of organizational resources of all kinds - in effect the making or approval of all significant decisions.	Scheduling; requests for authorization; any activity involving budgeting and the programming of subordinates' work.
Negotiator	Responsible for representing the organization at major negotiations.	Negotiation.

All of the studies described thus far have been done in the West. I felt it might be instructive to apply some of the same research techniques to Asian managers to discover how culture-bound—or culture-free—are managerial methods of handling time.

My research was done among 733 practising managers in 19 distinct jobs in Hongkong, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Japan, Thailand and Indonesia. The national samples ranged in size from 59 to 136.

By analysing information obtained from each manager through a detailed questionnaire, I obtained profiles of managerial jobs against which individuals may compare themselves, and which at the same time indicate the ways in which managers in different countries perceive their work.

Overall, I found that managerial time is broken up in terms of the following activities:

Talking to other people	32.80%
Involvement in paperwork	39.77%
Reading	11.81%
Traveling	7.34%
Other activities	7.91%

The most prominent talkers were general managers (39.81%) and marketing managers (39.46%). Those most involved in paperwork were finance managers (53.82%) and civil servants (46.11%). These perceptions represent behaviour demands which managers see as inherent in their jobs if they are to do them properly.

In terms of the allocation of time, we have seen the most managerial activity tends to polarise around the phenomena of talking to people and handling paperwork. Based on the reported data averages, the national groupings of managers indicated job pressures thus:

Time spent talking to people: Philippines, 41.56%; Singapore 39.62%; Japan 36.64%; Hongkong 36.62%.

Involvement in paperwork: Thailand, 48.22%; Indonesia, 45.62%; Hongkong, 41.71%; Malaysia, 39.64%.

Time spent talking to others can mean a preoccupation with a wide variety of people—subordinates, the boss, colleagues, others in the organization, customers, suppliers, etc. It is interesting to note, therefore, that among those national groupings claiming pressure to talk to people, managers from the Philippines, Singapore and Hongkong stressed that most talking was to subordinates.

By and large those managers who said much of their time was spent talking to people also claimed high pressure in two other dimensions of work—the need to establish relationships and uncertainty attached to their work.

The science of defining and predicting what managers may do is too much in its infancy to regard this research as more than a pointer for future effort. It may be true that there are significant variations cross-culturally in the ways in which managers approach what are otherwise similar tasks. The implications of this for multinational companies are obvious.

Every manager should periodically audit time spent. The question of the appropriate use of time can only be answered in individual cases by an examination of this record against the declared objectives and inodus operandi of an organization with as much knowledge as possible about the cultural setting of the job.

—Excerpted from Terry Casey, "Use of Time" in *Asian Business and Industry*, November, 1977.