

#reloRant

A Lively Conversation with Steven M. John, SCRP, SGMS-T, President and CEO

A Brief History of Time

(with apologies to Stephen Hawking)

People are obsessed with time. We “save time,” we “lose track of time,” sometimes we have “all the time in the world.” Time is given various qualities; “time is money” and “time waits for no one.” We are advised to “use our time wisely.”

Stephen Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, counseled, “The key is not in spending time, but in investing it.” And it is how we invest time at work that will be our focus today. What follows are a few tidbits I have learned over the course of my career in how to be most efficient and make the best use of my time (these work at home too).

Prioritize the approval process

Managers spend some part of their time on routine administrivia. Time sheets, vacation requests, expense reports, purchases, capital requests, etc. All require management approval before they can move to the next step. If part of your job is to approve stuff, do it as a priority. Why? Because if not, you are holding up the show! If a process cannot continue without your approval, then delaying such approval can affect the efficiency of those who work for you. Be respectful of their time and keep the process moving. Do not commit the ultimate sin of having to be reminded that something is awaiting your approval, as this results in even more wasted time by your team.

Important, not urgent

President Dwight D. Eisenhower once said: “I have two kinds of problems: the urgent and the important. The urgent are not important, and the important are never urgent.” Most of us prioritize the urgent issues of the day; the ringing phone, email, the latest request from your boss. These items are easy to prioritize because they demand our attention, virtually screaming at us to be worked. Unfortunately, most such items are other peoples’ priorities and rarely contribute to the furtherance of our individual goals. The market analysis of a new territory, not urgent. Teaching your second in command how to prepare the monthly reports, not urgent. Creating a new revenue analysis by salesperson, not urgent. Let’s face it, we could spend the entire day, every day responding to “urgent” requests from others and at the end of the year, wonder why none of our goals were accomplished. Tasks that are important, but not urgent, must be scheduled. Calendar tools such as Outlook, Google, etc. are invaluable in helping one to address important, not urgent items.

Put an hour on your calendar each day for such items. Making it a calendar item, with a reminder, now turns it into an “urgent” item that calls out for attention. Blocking out an hour ensures that you will not have something else scheduled at that time. Be honest with yourself, and don’t just ignore the reminder when it pops up on your screen. Time invested in important, not urgent tasks will be critical to reaching your goals.

Your email in-box is not your “to-do” list

Many people sit down at their desk in the morning and the very first thing they do is start working email. Now, I don’t know about you, but it would be odd for my most important task of the day to be magically sitting in my email in-box. While I might spend five minutes in the morning scanning my inbox for anything urgent (approvals for example, see above), email should be prioritized against your entire list of to-dos and worked accordingly. While reaching “in-box zero” is gratifying, email generally represents someone else’s priority and will rarely help you accomplish your most important goals.

Total project time does not equal the sum of the tasks

We all have projects that need to be completed. In many cases, these are important, but not urgent issues. So why do they always take so long? Most projects are comprised of multiple sub-tasks, often spread across multiple team members. Some tasks can be accomplished simultaneously, but many will be dependent upon the completion of another task, requiring completion in sequence. If one were to add up the time required to complete all tasks, it may equal a day or a week. Then why does it take months to get some projects completed? It is these dependent tasks that slow down a project. If there are four tasks to be accomplished in sequence to finish a project and each task takes an hour, we should be able to complete the entire project before lunch. Unfortunately, it does not work that way. Susie may have the first task and starts it right away, finishing by 9am. Bob has the second task, but is in meetings all morning, runs an errand at lunch and then dives into email when he gets back. It’s 3:30 by the time he’s at “in-box zero,” so opts to start his project task tomorrow. You can see where this leads. Our four-hour project can easily stretch into a week or more of elapsed time if team members do not prioritize their project tasks. When managing a project comprised of multiple tasks and team members, you must also manage the elapsed time between sequential tasks. Get commitments from team members regarding stop and start times so that you can limit the amount of elapsed time between tasks.

Multi-tasking

I’ve had people tell me (usually in interviews) they are good at “multi-tasking.” I’m never sure what they really mean. Outside of walking and chewing gum, the human brain has little capacity to do two things at once. There is a reason for the phrase, “undivided attention.” If you do try to do two things at once, what you are really doing is constantly shifting your attention between two tasks. Let’s say you are working on the budget spreadsheet while listening to the monthly sales call. You listen a little, then focus on the spreadsheet, then listen a little more. You will likely miss half of what is said, you will not work your spreadsheet efficiently and will probably miss budget items you would have thought of if you had given it your undivided attention. Focus will make you more effective.

“To do two things at once is to do neither.”

- Publius Syrus, ancient writer

Fortunately, in the 21st century, we can multi-task with the help of a computer. My PC can do multiple things at once, I cannot. That said, we can multi-task by starting a computer task, and while it is running, go do something else. This is akin to running the laundry and the dishwasher at the same time, while watching TV. Through the miracle of automation, you are accomplishing three things at once, while your brain is really only doing one thing, watching TV.

Cage the squirrels

We can accomplish things much more efficiently by focusing our attention on a task and working through to completion. However, our world is full of distractions. Email and phone are prime culprits. Keep your phone in silent mode and you should permanently turn off the beep that accompanies new email. To protect against wandering thoughts, keep a notepad handy. If something important pops up in your brain, write it down and move on. The more times you start and stop a task due to distractions, the less efficient you will be.

Be conscious of how you spend your time. Whenever possible, be the boss of your time and you will accomplish much.

“Don’t say you don’t have enough time. You have exactly the same number of hours per day that were given to Helen Keller, Pasteur, Michelangelo, Mother Teresa, Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas Jefferson, and Albert Einstein.”

- H. Jackson Brown, author

Thanks for listening!

Steven M. John