

OVERSCHEDULED, AND NOT LOVING IT

No white space on your desk calendar? Weekends booked rock solid too? Maybe it's time to ask yourself a few questions.



By WALTER KIECHEL III April 8, 1991 (Excerpts)

(FORTUNE Magazine) – An early warning from the Bureau of Zeitgeist Seismology: Stand by for a potentially major upheaval. Soon it could get a lot less fashionable to be overscheduled -- to have too much to do, making sure of course that everybody knows it. Blame the change on burnout sparked by years of excess, on constricting economic expectations, and on the slowing down of the baby-boom generation, whose oldest members turn a decidedly middle-aged 45 this year. As Hemingway wrote a friend shortly after his 43rd birthday: "I would be happy to fish and shoot and let somebody else lug the ball for a while." "Ah," you say, "I wouldn't mind a piece of that slower-paced action. But I can't avail myself -- no time." Don't be too sure. Let us examine the causes of managerial overscheduling, its effects, and what you might do to ease the crunch if you were so disposed. Virtually all the experts -- business school professors, consultants, and teachers of time management -- say they have never before seen companies put so much pressure on their white-collar employees to work long and hard. The reasons usually cited: the recession, of course; increased competition, particularly from abroad; new technologies, from laptops to cellular phones to portable faxes, that let the office follow you anywhere; and most of all, restructurings that have eliminated layers of managers but not the work they used to do. Typically, their confreres cheer them on. Andrew J. DuBrin, a professor of management at the Rochester Institute of Technology, summarizes the underlying cultural bias: "It's seen to be heroic for an executive to be overcommitted." In the heavy-duty psychological jargon, too-busy managers may be stress-facilitators, argues consultant Dee Soder, president of New York's Endymion. Challenge pumps them up, improves their performance. Where other people will accomplish 15 things in a day, these wonders will shoot for 20 and actually pull off 17 or 18. If you want a stress-facilitator to do well on a test, counsels Soder, put the toughest questions first. Of course this will freak out their opposites, the stress-debilitators in the class; challenge daunts them, so they need the softballs up front to build confidence.

Unfortunately, healthy reasons for becoming overscheduled often shade into darker or more trivial motives. "These people have a need to feel important," says Arnold. "If everybody is clamoring for your time, that time is a precious commodity, and by scheduling yourself into too many things, you show everybody how important you are." All the more a temptation when there are issues at home that you don't want to confront. Arnold again: "It's easier to play busy executive than deal with a teenage kid who thinks you're a dork." What Overscheduled You may in fact be is a perfectionist, monitoring your subordinates to distraction, so insecure that you can't trust them with the smallest details. Or even worse, you may lack a sense of what's most important and least important for you to do. Managers thus afflicted commonly fall prey to

random-shot busyness, confusing it with the true productivity that is born of focus. "Not me," you protest. "I'm one of those productive overschedulers who simply crams in more than others. What could be wrong with that?" Plenty, it turns out. For starters, as professor DuBrin notes, your frenetic routine may leave you no time to think -- to sit back, ponder the big picture, take the long view. Or to be creative: The wellsprings of imagination usually require a bit of leisure to bubble up. STILL MORE PERNICIOUSLY, your too-busy tendencies may begin to poison your relations with others. Your subordinates can never get in to see you to raise small problems before they become big ones or to benefit from your managerial wisdom. Higher-ups may exploit you, then complain of the results. Dee Soder describes what can happen to stress-facilitators: "The boss asks them to take on more. Soon they're trying to do not 20 things a day, but 25. They manage about 21, but they're late for every meeting. Then their superiors begin to complain that their projects aren't done on time and that the quality is poor."

But how to get off the hamster wheel? Begin by reminding yourself of all the mundane time-management rules that everyone dimly knows but few abide by: Always leave at least a quarter of your time -- and probably more -- unscheduled. (Don't worry, contingencies will come along to occupy you.) Assign tasks A, B, and C priorities, and try to work on the A's every day. Break down big jobs into small chunks. Early in the day try to finish something, a small chunk perhaps, to give yourself momentum. If you take on something new, give up something you were doing. It may help to ask yourself the following questions with some frequency: -- Is this work really necessary? Will anybody actually read the report you're preparing? If not, and you have the requisite clout within the organization, kill it. If you lack the clout, at least raise the possibility with your superiors. -- Should I, in all my loftiness, be doing this? Michael Abelson, a management professor at Texas A&M, argues that there are only six things an executive should never delegate: planning, selecting the team, monitoring their efforts (not "How ya doing?" but "Where are you in the project?"), motivating, evaluating, and rewarding them. -- Might not the task be profitably given to somebody else? Professor DeWald wonders why over busy execs don't more frequently ask subordinates, "Would you like to do this?" Often they're eager to take on jobs you've come to regard as numbingly boring. -- Is this what my superiors think I should be spending my time on? While it may sound a little hokey, Bob Preziosi, who conducts time-management seminars for the likes of American Express, recommends the following exercise: List each of your major priorities on a stick-it note, array the notes in rank order on a sheet of paper, and hand it to your boss. See if she agrees with it. The biggest step in getting over overscheduling, the experts say, is realizing that it's a problem to be attacked. All too commonly, execs figure this out only after they have had the heart attack or the busted marriage or the full-blown mid-life crisis. Set yourself higher goals. The consultants at Priority Management Systems maintain that there are, in fact, six areas you need to make time for: your work, your intellectual life (when was the last time you read a book unrelated to your job?), your physical well-being (ever get to the gym?), your social life, your family, and your spiritual life (whether this means studying the Bible or the Kamasutra). Neglect any long enough, and you'll be an unbalanced person. The real scheduling challenge is to make a place for all of them.