

IT'S THE LAW: Tetris Time Management

In this edition of IT'S THE LAW we tackle something a bit different. Time Management. How to get more done, better, in less time.

A new normal

All of us rapidly adapted to new ways of working in 2020. We are likely to be working from our kitchens, bedrooms, sheds or sofas for the bulk of 2021. Even once things are 'back to normal' that will be a 'new normal'. Working from home is going to be a much bigger part of everyday life.

Studies show that, for those still in work, the goal of a work/life balance was thrown out the window by lockdown. Boundaries between home and work were already blurred with 24/7 email access in our pockets via our phones. Those boundaries were all but demolished last year. The time we took back from the daily commute was more than given over to work.

Balance

However, for the same reasons that achieving a work/life balance and a home/office separation was important BC (Before Covid), the current trend of working morning, noon and night, weekday and weekend is not sustainable. Almost all of us could benefit from finding a more efficient way of working. Allowing us to get what we need to do finished quicker - so that we can switch off from work at a reasonable hour each day.

In this edition of IT'S THE LAW, we look at one possible way to achieve that goal – Tetris Time Management (TTM). Everyone is different. What we say below may not work for the kind of work you do. And you may find you just don't like it. But, in our experience, most people who give it a go and either adopt it wholesale or adapt it for their particular circumstances find that it helps them become more productive. Importantly, part of its philosophy is to enable you to switch off from work when you are not 'at' work.

Action management rather than time management

Time Management is, in fact, a misnomer. Putting to one side Albert Einstein's theory of special relatively, time is a constant. It's a precious and limited resource. Most people have remarkably little control over how their time is divided up. What TTM is all about is organising your actions and fitting them into your available time slots. It's not time management, its action management.

The five problems to be solved

TTM aims to solve the following five problems:

Start/ Stop/ Start: A job that should take you an hour to complete if you tackle it one go will take far longer than that if you start it, stop it half way through and then pick it up again later.



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Cluttered heads: Our subconscious mind contains a list of all the things we have to do. But it doesn't do well at differentiating between things we have to do now and things we don't need to think about until later. Subconsciously, the mind just has a jumbled list of things that need to be done. Items on that list will keep popping into your consciousness almost at random. You'll be more productive if you just think about one thing at a time.

Control (lack of): For most of us, we have limited control of what we do when. Others dictate when we have meetings, when the 'phone rings, when we have to drop the kids off at school or attend a parents' evening. We might be able to exert some influence over that some of the time – but not always and not a lot. We need to accept that and stop trying to control the uncontrollable.

We are terrible estimators: There is something about the human psyche that means we're almost always over optimistic about how long an action task will take to complete. To be fair, sometimes we are too pessimistic. But, what is certain, is that we are almost never accurate.

We are ruled by our inbox: In days gone by the usual method of business communication was the good old letter. Most people received only one post delivery a day. We are now constantly receiving emails and calls wherever we are. The temptation is to deal with the last thing that came in. And to break off from dealing with that as soon as the next thing comes in – whether or not you have actually finished the first.

TTM tries to address each of these issues. Its aims are:-

- to get your 'to do list' out of your head, so you can stop worrying about it;
- to fit your action tasks into the time slots available, so your 'you hours' are used most efficiently;
- to give you the confidence to organise your action tasks, so you have the confidence not to be blown off course when the next email arises.

STEP 1: Filling the bucket (and keeping it topped up)

Most people know they have 101 things to do. At some point. They may be things that they have to do that day (return a 'phone call) or things that don't really need to be done for some time (buy sun cream for the summer holiday). They may be things that you absolutely have to do (pay the TV licence fee) or things that you might do but maybe you won't (write a novel). These are all floating around in your subconscious all of the time and

they will pop into your conscious thoughts at the most inconvenient times (either 3am or when you are just about to present to the board). It's impossible to ever switch off.

Your mind will be stressing about these action tasks in two ways. Firstly, the fear you'll forget something. Secondly, the fear that you'll not have enough time to do everything.

Step 1 is about dealing with the first of those two stresses. And it is pretty simple: *write it down*.

Metaphorically speaking, you are filling your 'bucket of actions'. And it's going to be a big bucket. Get everything down. Work stuff, home stuff. Big stuff, small stuff. Immediate stuff, longterm stuff. Definite stuff, maybe stuff.

Don't edit yourself. Don't say to yourself "I'll definitely remember to do that so I don't need to put it in the bucket" or "I probably ought to do that but it's not that important so it doesn't need to be on the list".

Don't spend time on the detail. At this stage the only important thing is that the list is complete. Don't worry about when you will do an action, how you will do it or how long it will take - just make sure it's written down.

The first time you do this it will almost certainly take quite a bit of time. 2 hours isn't unusual. And, it's not a one time only kind of thing. After you have filled the bucket for the first time you will need to keep topping it up – making sure that, as new actions get allocated to you, you add them straight into the bucket. The trick is to convince yourself (including your subconscious) that the list is complete and always complete. It's only then that your mind will have the freedom to stop worrying.

Different people have different physical ways of keeping this list. Some do it virtually. Notebooks are popular. Our favourite is a stack of post its. You need to be able to carry it with you all of the time – so you can add to it wherever you are.

The TTM trick is to keep the process simple. You are then far more likely to stick with it.

STEP 2: Kicking things into the long grass

Step 1 will have left you with rather large bucket of actions. Next, we need to start organising those. And the first part of that process is taking a hard look at the

action tasks and *working out which of them, realistically, you don't need to worry about any time soon*. Writing a novel or planning for your silver anniversary in three years' time. We are not forgetting them. There will be some good and important stuff on this list and we aren't losing any of it.

It's just that we won't be doing it just yet. Without these actions and thoughts written down somewhere, your subconscious will be worrying that they will be lost when the time comes for them to be actioned.

From time to time you should review the list to see if anything should be moved up for more immediate action or whether something should be crossed off altogether. If in doubt, leave it on. But if something is no longer relevant (say, because you have changed jobs) then get the red pen out.

The TTM trick is to be honest with yourself.

STEP 3: Every second doesn't count

Steps 1 and 2 will have left you with quite a large bucketful of actions that are 'current'. The instinct will be to start actioning these straightaway or at least trying to decide when to action them. Don't.

Step 3 is to *identify, in relation to each action task, how much of your time it will take to complete*. But it's important to accept that, in reality, you will probably be quite bad at this step. And, even if you get better at it, you are likely to remain pretty bad at it. Don't beat yourself up about this. You're only human and humans just aren't that good at accurately estimating precisely how long an action will take to conclude.

So, rather than investing any great effort into working out precisely how long something will take, just group each of your action tasks in your bucket into one of four piles:

- less than fifteen minutes;
- less than an hour;
- less than 3 hours;
- more than 3 hours.

Where an action task can be broken down into a series of separate, shorter, actions then do that. But don't try to do that artificially. One of the five problems to be solved is the additional 'you hours' a task takes to complete if you have to start/ stop/ start it. If you are writing a report, it may be that different sections can be written independently of each other – so, as long as you write each individual section in one sitting, you are not adding to the total time

that will need to be taken.

So, the TTM trick at step 3, is to be broad brush about it – don't waste your time trying to estimate down to the last minute. You'll almost certainly be wrong.

STEP 4: Your diary

Steps 1, 2 and 3 essentially leave you with 5 lists – one of which can be ignored for the time being – so you are left with 4. All of your current actions are on one of those 4 lists. We'll come back to those. *You now need to turn to your diary*.

You could spend hours each Sunday slotting all of the actions into neat plans. The problem with that is 'events dear boy, events' (as Harold Macmillan once said). Your Sunday afternoon will almost certainly be time better spent watching your daughter play football or nipping down to the pub for a swift half.

The TTM trick is to acknowledge that we have limited control of what goes into our diary, and when, and that what your diary looks like on a Sunday evening will rarely reflect what actually happened to your week by the time we get to Friday.

That doesn't mean not to try to have any influence: To the extent you are able, try to arrange as many of your meetings as possible on the same day or days. Meetings are not bad per se, but they are often disruptive. You could try to spread that disruption evenly over the week. And if you do it will probably feel better. But, actually, if you add it up objectively that means more 'you hours' of disruption.

If you are able, try to arrange blocks of quiet time to work through at least some of your action tasks. At this stage don't worry about what action tasks – just know that there will be plenty of action tasks to choose from when the time comes. These blocks of time should be booked out in your diary as if they were meetings. During these times you will not be taking calls. You won't even be looking at emails coming in. If you can switch off email notifications and turn your 'phone to silent then do. We tend to put our out of office on for these periods – as you would if you were out of the office for a long meeting. Realistically you can't have too many of these or you will develop a reputation for being inaccessible – which is rarely a good look in any organisation. The ideal is to block regular slots (e.g. up until noon on Mondays, Wednesday's and Friday's) If you are successful in blocking out time as referred to above, it is important that you leave time at the end to return any calls that you receive during the blocked out

time. One of the downsides of TTM is that you will not necessarily be instantly available as much as you were before. It is important to over compensate for that by making sure that, otherwise, you are super responsive.

STEP 5: “Enough of talking. It is time now to do” (Tony Blair on the steps of 10 Downing Street 1997)

You now have your diary organised and your 4 current lists. The temptation may be to start by looking at your list and selecting what is most urgent or what is most important. But, if that were the right answer, this wouldn't be called Tetris Time Management.

What you are looking for is the actions that will best fit into your available timeslot. If you are starting work at 9am and you have a 10am Teams Meeting then take an action from your 'less than an hour' list and get cracking. If you finish before 9.45am, congratulate yourself and immediately look to your 'less than 15 minutes' list and get something ticked off that. Throughout the day, whenever there is time that you control (i.e. when your diary does not dictate that you are in a meeting or on a call), see which list just fits into the slot and take an action off of that list.

How you choose which action task to take from the relevant list will depend on a variety of factors. And, frankly, it's not something you should be spending too much time agonising over. Within reason, the most important thing is just to get on with things. But deciding 'what next' factors include:

- **What's most urgent:** Fairly obviously, this is one of the biggest determinants of what to do next.
- **How much energy:** Different tasks require different levels of energy to do them well. If you have just finished a 5 hour budget meeting and have a half our slot before home time, it may not be the best time to call a new contact who you need to impress.
- **What do you want to do least:** Everyone has their least favourite aspects of the job. Prioritise getting them done as soon as possible. The task is often not as bad as you fear. And, even if it is, its going to be bad enough doing it – you don't need to add to that by worrying about it for a week. Tackle such tasks as soon as possible so you can put them behind you.

STEP 6: that was the week that was

A critical part of TTM is the weekly review. To get the most out of TTM you do need to invest time in a regular review. If done properly this shouldn't take more than hour.

- **Bucket filling:** All going well, any tasks that headed your way during the previous week should already be

in your bucket. But, just in case, spend some time making sure you haven't forgotten anything. One of the benefits of TTM is convincing yourself that your lists are complete – so you don't waste any thought time worrying that you have forgotten something.

- **The 4 + 1:** Make sure your lists are up to date. Is there anything you actioned last week that you've forgotten to cross off? Of the new action points, have they all been allocated to one of the four lists?
- **Continuous improvement:** Think about the week before. What went well? If you had to do it all again would you do it differently? Have you spotted any trends in your meetings? Is there anything that is regularly taking longer than expected? Is there anything that always finishes before time?

TTM won't work for everybody. But we have seen it work for many. The trick is to give it a go. If it works great and let us know. If not, nothing ventured nothing gained.

The tiny print

This is one of a series of leaflets published by Devonshires' Real Estate & Projects Department aimed at our property owning and developing clients. No action should be taken on the matters covered by this leaflet without taking specific legal advice.

Find out more

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