

Life is too short for time management. Our productivity hacking leads to a dead end.

Reading time 9 minutes

Brilliant time management is considered the turbo for management careers. In his book '4000 Weeks', the award-winning journalist Oliver Burkeman comes to the conclusion that the attempt to get more things done in less time, i.e. to keep increasing one's productivity, is bound to fail and leads to constant inner dissatisfaction. Because we cannot save up time: behind every completed task there is a constantly growing mountain of tasks to be done.

I was gripped by the book. After all, I have been confronted with the most diverse time management systems in my career, tried out many things and ultimately drowned in minutiae. I have lived the productivity mania in detailed spreadsheets and have not found the promised time paradise. Didn't appear in any meetings decades ago without my Time/System ring binder, leather version of course. Later I even attended seminars by David Allen, the grandmaster of 'Getting Things Done'.

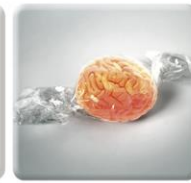


'4000 Weeks' is a philosophical book that approaches the concept of time and the infinite possibilities of filling it from different angles. I am only giving a few appetisers here.

The average human lifespan is, as Burkeman puts it, "absurdly, frighteningly and insultingly short". 4000 weeks, or 80 years even. "Yet the modern discipline called time management is a depressingly small-minded affair, focused on getting through as many tasks as possible, developing the perfect morning routine, or cooking all the meals for the week in one go on Sundays..."

Burkeman criticises the productivity gurus for obscuring our view of the wonders of the world in compulsive rituals, when the real meaning of life could be to experience more of the wonders. The problem with trying to master time is that you end up being mastered by time. One will never be able to muster enough efficiency, self-discipline and effort to force the feeling of having everything under control, meeting all the obligations and not having to worry about the future.

We have to stand up to the fear of missing something, because we realise that it is basically almost certain that we will miss something - and almost everything!



We live in an efficiency trap. Even the winners of our performance-obsessed culture, those who make it to the elite universities and then rake in the highest salaries, experience that their reward is the constant compulsion to work with crushing intensity - to maintain status.



Can't we solve the problem by paying more attention to importance? The problem with trying to find time for everything that seems important is that you definitely can't do it. There is an overabundance of things that seem important to us. Housewives have not benefited from labour-saving appliances entering the home. There was a parallel rise in expectations of the housewife. Shirts now had to be clean all the time, i.e. changed daily, instead of roughly clean to last a working week.

You begin to realise that when there is too much to do - and there always will be - the only way to spiritual freedom is to say goodbye to the all-denying illusion that you can do it all and focus instead on a few really important things.

Tinder is an efficient platform for finding people you want to date, but constantly reminds you that there are other, potentially more attractive people you could be dating instead.

Only gradually had the former time optimiser Burkeman grasped what one needs instead in such situations, namely a kind of anti-skill: not the counterproductive strategy of making oneself more efficient, but the willingness to resist this urge - to learn to deal with the fear of not having everything under control without automatically reacting to it by trying to accommodate more.

When one recognises the finiteness of life, one can develop the "joy of missing out" as a conscious contrast to the "fear of missing out".

Thus, dealing with our limited time is not about how to manage everything - that will never succeed - but about how we can most wisely decide what not to do and how we can remain calm when we do not.

The crucial question is therefore not how to distinguish between important and unimportant activities, but what to do when far too many things are perceived as at least somewhat important. Fortunately, a handful of bright minds have addressed this very dilemma, and their advice focuses on three main principles.

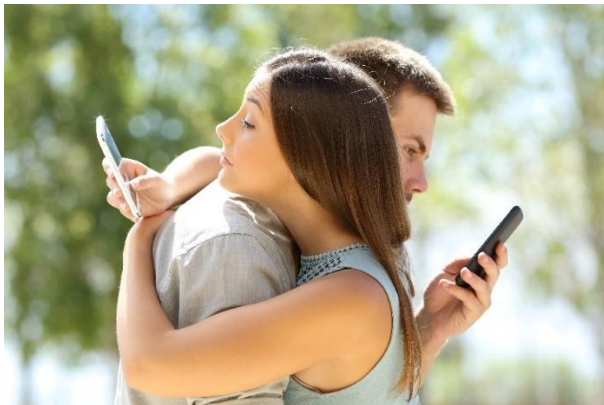
1. If you want to spend part of your 4000 weeks doing what is most important to you, then you have to start with yourself at some point.
2. The second principle is to limit the number of parallel projects.
3. The third principle is to resist the lure of middle priorities. You have to learn to say no to things you want to do, knowing that you only have one life.



A central problem is that we can imagine our future in all kinds of ways and therefore find it difficult to make concrete decisions in the here and now. We dream of being grandiose as parents, as partners, managers and athletes all at the same time. In reality, that might not work out so well. But we keep on dreaming, because human beings always prefer indecision to committing to a single path.

So the idea of a future, pregnant with a myriad of possibilities, is more fertile than the future itself. And that is why we find hope more appealing than possession, the dream more appealing than reality.

Since every real decision about one's life involves the loss of countless alternative life possibilities, there is no reason to hesitate or refuse to make commitments in the anxious hope that one might somehow avoid such losses. The loss is a fact. The train has left the station.



Partnership is also about "committing"- the ubiquitous modern fear that one might commit to a life partner who does not match one's ideals or is not worthy of one's outstanding personality.

But the popular opinion is wrong. One should definitely commit oneself. A fulfilled life presupposes that one commits oneself. Looking for too many things in one person is hardly less absurd than dreaming of a partner who is both 5 feet and 6 feet tall.

Ultimately, Burkeman touches again and again on the fact that our brains are not adapted to today's times and that we should therefore not rely on our instinctive reactions but make conscious efforts to better arrange ourselves with our scarce time on the planet.

Giving good advice is not the focus of 4000 Weeks. However, at the end of the book there are five questions to help you assess yourself, and ten tips summarise the key messages well.

Do I no longer use time management myself? Not for a long time in the sense of efficiency systems. But of course I follow David Allen's central tip: A mind like water. You should write down everything that needs to be done, because otherwise everything would always require constant contemplation. And I track deadlines/milestones. Many things actually remain undone and disappear again, with the old lists. Diligent, but not neurotic. When examining importance, I try to keep it with Burkeman. And pay attention to the joy of the deliberately not done.

Burkeman's ultimate advice for a successful life seems simple: always do the next and most necessary thing in every situation. As the next and most necessary thing, I recommend this book, just the right brain food for the meaningful days ahead.

Speaking of contemplative: Shortly before Christmas, there will be another fitting BrainCandy: "These are the science-based tools for more happiness".



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Book recommendation

By Ralph Ohnemus, Uwe H. Lebok, Florian Klaus:

Context marketing

The key to consumer behaviour to [order](#)



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