

*Managing by the Book . . . **

Time Management: Oxymoron or Trainable Skill? **

Jean M. Holcomb ***

Law library managers daily face challenges to allocate scarce resources, including time, to meet institutional objectives. To lead a truly productive organization, librarians must develop strategies and skills to balance the demands placed on their time as managers with the need to allocate time as a resource of their institution.

¶1 Law library managers daily face challenges to allocate scarce resources to meet institutional objectives. Those who oversee libraries understand that tensions exist between competing demands for such fundamental operational components as collections, technology, space, personnel, and funding. As managers we constantly ask ourselves if we are making the best use of the resources available.

¶2 But how many managers consciously consider the use of time as one of the resources that must be properly allocated? Measuring productivity and accounting for the passage of time capture the attention of managers in the industrial arena and other corporate settings. Time management, or more specifically clock management is a key function of managers in the sports world. When the focus moves away from widgets produced per hour or shots on goal, however, managers in service-orientated organizations like libraries may not as readily see a direct connection between management of time and institutional or personal well-being.

¶3 Fascination with the relationship between time and productivity measurements isn't just a twenty-first-century phenomenon. Well before the popularization of such maxims as "time and tide wait for no man" and "a stitch in time saves nine," the inherent tensions between time and productivity shaped sensibilities about the world of work. Before the concept of time management can be seen as something other than another oxymoron like jumbo shrimp, the clichés about the nature of the struggle between an individual and the march of time must be examined.

* *Editor's Note:* "Managing by the Book" is a new *Law Library Journal* column commencing with the Winter 2005 issue, Vol. 97, No. 1. In each column author Jean Holcomb highlights a book outside the field of librarianship that has a message about management topics that will resonate with law librarians. The author introduced the column in 2003–04 in the newsletter of the State, Court and County Law Libraries Special Interest Section of the American Association of Law Libraries. Copies of prior articles are available on the section's Web site (<http://www.aallnet.org/sis/scell/membership/newsletter.htm>).

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¶4 To lead a truly productive organization, librarians must develop strategies and skills to balance the demands placed on their time as managers with the need to allocate time as a resource of their institution.

¶5 Authors Heike Bruch and Sumantra Ghoshal describe just such a process for making effective use of time as a resource in *A Bias for Action: How Effective Managers Harness Their Willpower, Achieve Results, and Stop Wasting Time*.¹ Without promising a five-minute solution for overcoming time-based challenges to productivity, the book does set out easy-to-follow principles. While an admission to wasting time might require more self-examination than most librarians would initially feel comfortable making, the authors' systematic approach to identifying ways to become more efficient rests on a philosophical design that bears closer examination.

¶6 For Bruch and Ghoshal, the road to productivity is paved with willpower. In itself, the term willpower often calls to mind negative images. What parent, grandparent, or former babysitter doesn't remember the terrible twos? The actions of willful characters color literature, the movies, and other expressions of our popular culture. To the authors, however, willfulness doesn't carry negative connotations, it means acting purposefully to get important work done.²

¶7 The organizing principles of *A Bias for Action* center around two different spheres of action. The early chapters focus on the efforts individuals take to harness their own willpower to achieve results. The final chapters focus on an organization's responsibility to develop purposeful leaders and on a leader's responsibility to encourage others within his or her organization to act purposefully to shape organizational culture.

¶8 Throughout the book, case studies based on actions taken by managers of European corporations illustrate the key principles. An appendix describes how Bruch, a professor of leadership at the Swiss University of St. Gallen, and Ghoshal, a professor of strategy and international management at the London Business School who passed away in 2004, conducted the research that led to the creation of their theories.³ The book concludes with twenty pages of footnotes, an index, and an authors' note.⁴

¶9 To set the stage for their theories, Bruch and Ghoshal define purposeful action as "determined, persistent, and relentless action-taking to achieve a purpose, against all odds."⁵ They do not minimize the difficulty of acting purposefully. From their perspective, people who exhibit purposeful action possess two critical traits: energy and focus.⁶ Energy requires the investment of personal involvement

1. HEIKE BRUCH & SUMANTRA GHOSHAL, *A BIAS FOR ACTION: HOW EFFECTIVE MANAGERS HARNESS THEIR WILLPOWER, ACHIEVE RESULTS, AND STOP WASTING TIME* (2004).

2. *Id.* at 8.

3. *Id.* at 179–82.

4. *Id.* at 211–12.

5. *Id.* at 9.

6. *Id.* at 10.

and vigorous effort. Giving lip service without giving your heart won't qualify as an energetic action under their criteria. Focused behavior requires the discipline to avoid distraction, overcome barriers, and resist the urge to be sidetracked when plans do not proceed as expected.

¶10 Because of these stringent criteria, the authors maintain that only 10% of managers act purposefully.⁷ They draw clear lines to distinguish action from unfocused busyness. The underlying thesis of *A Bias for Action* is that every manager, regardless of the inclination to be a procrastinator, over-busy, or detached, possesses the capability to engage his or her willpower.

¶11 For willful management to flourish, leaders must ensure that their organizations provide space for autonomous action. Employees must be encouraged to develop a sense of personal ownership and must be provided with the training needed to make effective decisions. An internal network must be in place that ensures that professional, social, and emotional support underlies the freedom to act. Finally, leaders must create an operating culture that recognizes and celebrates the exercise of responsible willpower.⁸

¶12 If the method proposed by *A Bias for Action* sounds intimidating, the authors make no apologies. The level of emotional commitment required isn't for the faint of heart. To build and sustain the level of energy necessary for taking purposeful action, individuals must identify a clear, ambitious goal that they're confident about achieving. After identifying such a goal, emotions related to the tasks that must be achieved will also need to be actively managed. While putting self-doubt and second-guessing aside won't be easy, the authors do provide directives to help protect against the "noise" of everyday demands. At the same time, they do recognize the importance of guarding against personal stubbornness, blindness to consequences, and burnout.⁹

¶13 Bruch and Ghoshal's research experience suggests that managers can train themselves to visualize the purposeful action-taking process by imagining what would happen if they chose not to pursue their goal.¹⁰ They suggest a series of questions to help with this learning curve. Decision makers should ask themselves how they will feel once they have met their goal. They should envision what others will say about their accomplishment. To help with balancing the negative and positive aspects of their goal, an outline of the steps needed to reach the goal should be created that identifies potential setbacks and their solutions. An assessment of the energy needed to reach the goal completes the process.

¶14 Viewing purposeful action's components in this fashion demystifies the process. Taken as a whole, the *Bias for Action* mandate may make it sound like the authors recommend that a constant state of adrenaline rush will be required

7. *Id.* at 11.

8. *Id.* at 16.

9. *Id.* at 23.

10. *Id.* at 73.

to reach goals personally and for the organization. Common sense suggests that working on the adrenaline-fueled edge of a flight-or-flight mentality would be unsustainable in the long term. Broken into steps, the practical nature of their recommendations appears.

¶15 The keys for achieving balance between goal setting and a sustainable energy level rest both within the individual and within the organization. Be explicit about what you are doing. Choose priorities carefully. Phase projects. Budget time to refocus. Manage negative behaviors. Inject humor into your outlook.

¶16 Consider concluding strategies at the outset of a project. Recognize that goals may need to be modified. Be prepared to disengage when the goal has been reached. As a part of the process of acknowledging that potential setbacks exist, determine stopping rules in advance.

¶17 Why is such a training regimen worth the effort? Because it is the antidote to nonaction. The authors believe that most managers can't admit that a fragmented day is actually the laziest day. Bruch and Ghoshal see a fragmented day as a lazy day because it requires the least mental energy and discipline while expending the highest level of nervous energy. They suggest that, at root, a belief that they are already overwhelmed paralyzes many leaders and stops them from taking purposeful action.

¶18 To fight against the pull of nonaction, managers must overcome three traps. The trap of *overwhelming demands* results when managers become so caught up with expectations that they are unable to identify and prioritize tasks that keep them busy from tasks that make a true difference in moving the agenda of their organization forward. The trap of *unbearable constraints* arises when managers feel so hemmed in by rules, regulations, or budget restrictions that their belief in the possibility and power of autonomous action dies. The final trap feeding nonaction rests on managers' *tunnel vision*. A failure to recognize and explore options restricts freedom to act purposefully.¹¹

¶19 To combat nonaction, managers must clear the most difficult barrier—the conviction of their own indispensability. The authors' research suggests that purposeful action takers handle workplace demands very differently than those prone to nonaction. Purposeful action takers manage demands on their time and energy by:

- developing an explicit personal agenda that requires them to make decisions about what they want to achieve in their job;
- practicing slow management, a strategy for taking the time needed to differentiate between demands on their time that involve mandatory action taking and those that do not require their action;
- structuring contact time by setting parameters on their availability; and

11. *Id.* at 90.

- shaping demands and managing expectations with an understanding that they cannot meet everyone's expectations.¹²

¶20 Within this philosophical approach to achieving productivity as an individual and to leading a productive institution, the authors provide some specific directives. To inspire others, a purposeful leader must encourage others to transform their ideas into action. Risks must be openly acknowledged. Ambivalence about making a commitment to act must be confronted. All within the organization must be offered choices about paths of action and must be alerted to responsibilities that flow from active decision making. Everyone must be supported with the balancing power of stopping or reassessing during the execution of a given responsibility. Finally, a way must be found to make challenge emotionally captivating.¹³

¶21 At heart, *A Bias for Action* delivers one key message. While time and tide may not wait for anyone, each of us can make conscious decisions that shape the impact of the interaction between time and productivity on ourselves and our libraries. With their emphasis on self-awareness, the authors provide a big-picture philosophical approach to time management.

¶22 Beyond giving the strategies suggested in *A Bias for Action* a try, what else can law librarians do about time management?

¶23 Even very small changes can make a long-term impact on a process as all-encompassing as time management. The willpower Bruch and Ghoshal extol as the supporting device for their theories can be employed in a variety of common-sense ways not mentioned in their text.

¶24 For example, stop to reflect on how you spend your time during an average day. For even one day, audit your own activities. With a new awareness of the risks inherent in frenzied activeness, track how much of your time you spend doing work not directed to a concrete goal you've set. Examine how often you're interrupted while performing a task. Consider what part of each day you spend scanning e-mail that's not directed to you personally. Survey the number of items you completed on your "to do" list in relation to their critical priority to the institution's mission.

¶25 Ask yourself some tough questions. Did you facilitate or attend a meeting today that started late, strayed from the agenda, or failed to reach a conclusion? Will it be necessary to take work home, come in early, or stay late today? Have you laughed yet today? Have you shared a chuckle with a colleague? Have you been rewarded today? Did you offer a word of positive support to someone on the staff?

¶26 Identify the time of day when you're most productive. Learn to recognize the time of day that works best for you to open your mind to big-picture perspectives. Be ruthless in carving out some quiet time for reflective thinking. Know when your energy level drops and plan tasks accordingly.

12. *Id.* at 92.

13. *Id.* at 176–77.

¶27 Think in similar fashion about the biorhythms of your library. Do seasonal events dictate workloads? Are there times of the year when workflow and project patterns decelerate, offering opportunities for strategic visioning? Would creating templates for repetitive actions facilitate delegation or autonomy?

¶28 Engaging in such a review process holds out the promise of identifying strategies for improving productivity and preserving personal and institutional resources.

¶29 Ultimately, for behaviors to change, rewards must be identified and granted. The discomfort that accompanies change must be acknowledged. Law librarians who follow the strategies identified for taking purposeful action will realize tangible and intangible benefits. Personal and organization goals will be reached. In addition to gaining a sense of control and purpose while proving that “time management” isn’t an oxymoron, these managers will also find time for that jumbo shrimp dinner guilt-free.