

# Balancing the urgent and important: how to be more effective with time management

Have you ever wondered why it is that, with all the advances in technology and communication in the workplace, we seem to get less done than before? And not only that, we seem to be more and more stressed about the things that we haven't got round to doing. We get swept away by a torrent of emails and attachments, knocked off course by interruptions and phone calls, and bogged down in the daily scramble to achieve more with less resources.

Most time management gurus have tried to convince us that we can somehow shoehorn more into our day, so enabling us to take on that other project, attend that urgent meeting, digest that important report.

By contrast, management guru Stephen Covey asks us to look at things in a different way. His key work, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, written 20 years ago, remains a bestseller and was voted the most influential business book of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century by *Chief Executive* magazine in the US. Covey suggests that, instead of focusing on getting more done (being *efficient*), we focus on getting more important things done (being *effective*). And therein lies the key to facing the challenges we all face in the not-for-profit sector of producing champagne results with beer resources, as the saying goes.

## 'Urgent' versus 'important' – what's the difference?

We can characterise any activity we do in our day in terms of its *importance* and *urgency*.

An *important* task simply means one whose completion would significantly contribute to an individual's or organisation's key aims and objectives. An *urgent* task is defined by Covey as one that 'appears to require immediate attention'. *Note the word 'appears'*.

Somebody interrupts you at your desk with a question. The phone rings. A little window pops up on your computer announcing the arrival of yet another email. All of these place an immediate demand on your time, but they may not actually require your attention straight away. They are urgent, but are they *important*..?

Covey presents us with a two-by-two matrix showing all the combinations of urgent and important:

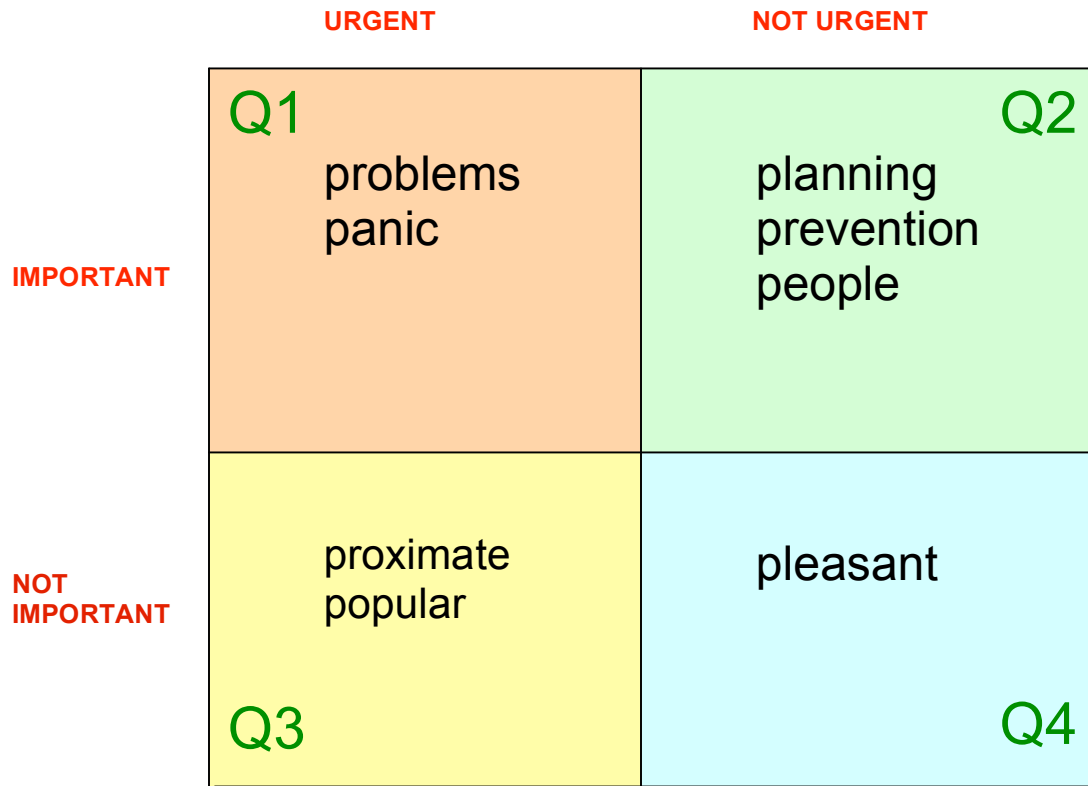


Fig 1. Covey's time management quadrants.

**Quadrant 1:** the tasks outlined in this quadrant are both *important and urgent*, and typically this means *panic* or *problems*! This is the funding application that needs to be submitted today to meet the deadline, sorting out the server that's just crashed or dealing with a complaint from a key partner. All these things *appear* to require immediate attention and *really do* require immediate attention!

**Quadrant 2:** these tasks are *important but not urgent*. Completing these tasks would make a significant contribution to your objectives, but you can easily get away with not doing them today (because they're not urgent). Tomorrow will be fine. Or even next week... So typically these tasks are about *planning* ahead, *preventing* problems before they happen, and building relationships with *people* (ie. customers, colleagues, volunteers, or partners).

**Quadrant 3:** these tasks are *urgent but not important*. To keep the 'p' theme going, Covey characterises them as being *proximate* or *popular*. These are all things that aren't important but which come and get us, even if we're hiding in an office. Phone calls, emails, interruptions, reports landing in your in-tray – anything which tries to grab your attention. And doing them often makes you popular, since people generally want to you to give up your time just when it suits them. Conversely, saying 'no' can be hard and we fear it will make us unpopular.

**Quadrant 4:** these tasks are *neither urgent nor important*. In Quadrant 4 we are idly surfing the web, flicking through magazines, chatting at the water cooler. It's *pleasant* in Quadrant 4... and the chance would be a fine thing!

## **So how does all this help us?**

Are we supposed to be spending all our time planning and making sure we never read any magazines?

Not quite. Covey is a realistic kind of guy. He doubts whether most of us are spending much time at all in Quadrant 4. But this is where those other time management gurus would have us focus, filling every bit of downtime with worthy endeavour. "*Waiting for a train? Then you've got space to digest the strategic plan!*" We need to be realistic about the time we spend in Quadrant 1. The world's a messy place, and the world of not-for-profits is no exception. So with the best will in the world, we can expect to be putting out fires on a fairly regular basis.

The key to personal effectiveness is cutting back on the time we devote to tasks in Quadrant 3 and shifting that time to Quadrant 2 activities. So, rather than saying 'yes' to everything that comes along, challenge yourself to focus on the *importance* of what's being asked. In other words, it's all about '*exercising integrity in the moment of choice*'. That means taking just a second before you choose to start a task to ask yourself, "*is this the most important thing I can be doing right now? Or is it just the next thing?*"

Covey argues that consistently spending even 1% more time in Quadrant 2 will start to have a significant impact on our lives. A bit more time thinking ahead and building relationships should help prevent crises from happening in Quadrant 1, allow us more valuable time in Quadrant 2. And focusing on the important rather than just the urgent tasks can leave us with the lasting satisfaction that today we have made the biggest difference we could in our role. And isn't that why we work in this sector?

## **Need more help?**

Balancing urgent and important tasks is just one aspect of effective time management. =mc can provide you with a whole raft of tools to ensure that you successfully manage your time and workload. Join us for =mc's intensive 2-day programme ***Managing Multiple Priorities***.

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