

## **How to stop fighting against time**

Oliver Burkeman for ITV business development away day

Confronting your limited time and the consequences of your limited time is an invitation to experience an existential crisis - but an energizing and empowering one

## **How time feels today**

- overwhelm: the feeling that we *must* do more than we *can* do
- not merely overwhelm: despite so much activity, the sense of not focusing on what matters most
- “when-I-finally” mind: the feeling that soon, when certain things are in place, important things can be addressed, and real life can begin - but not yet. We are Arnold Bennett’s “companions in distress... that innumerable band of souls who are haunted, more or less painfully, by the feeling that the years slip by, and slip by, and slip by, and they have not yet got their lives into proper working order”

## **The big question**

- What would change in your feelings about time, your way of being in time, your choices and your priorities, if you knew for certain there would always be too much to do, and there would never be a moment in future when you felt “ready” and on top of everything?

## **How we usually respond to the feeling of struggling with time**

- Fighting to become more efficient
- Fighting to delegate as much as possible
- Fighting to find the productivity technique that changes everything

...but what happens? We get busier and more stressed: All else being equal, becoming more efficient, or making an organization more efficient, just leads to an increase in the number of inputs being processed - including lower-quality, less important inputs.

## **You'll never make time for everything that matters by trying to fit more in**

- Life is shockingly finite: four thousand weeks, on average
- Our control over our limited time is shockingly finite, too: we can't know the future
- Yet the *inputs* - demands, obligations, opportunities, possibilities, emails - are effectively infinite
- This is a basic mismatch, between human finitude and the infinity of things we *might* legitimately spend our time on, that we'll never overcome

## **Why do we pursue these counterproductive strategies for winning the battle with time?**

- Because the alternative is even more painful: it means accepting the truth that being human means making tough choices about time, missing out on most opportunities, abandoning many cherished ambitions, failing in certain roles, in order to make time for anything meaningful at all.

## **But what happens when you deeply internalise the truth of your finitude?**

- You're free at last: to stop pursuing an impossible quest and pour your time, energy and attention into a few things that truly count

## **Four lessons in finitude**

1. Prioritisation isn't a matter of trying to avoid neglecting anything important, but of wisely figuring out what to neglect
2. Beware the lure of middling priorities, those attractive enough to lure you into spending time on them, but not important enough to take any of your limited time
3. Pay yourself first with time. Stop clearing the decks: the decks will never be clear. Focus on learning to tolerate the anxiety of *not* doing many other important things while you focus on one or two.
4. Be brave and bold. Confronting our finitude is a reminder not to put off what matters to a time when we finally feel secure and in charge, "on top of everything" - because we never will.

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