

# Prioritise *and* maximise

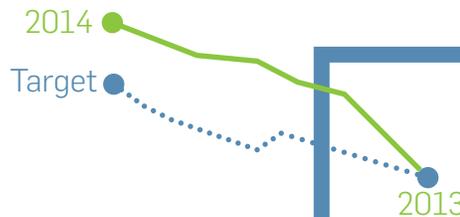
It doesn't matter what your profession is, the one thing we all seem to lack is time.

Even if you're working a 60-hour week, you may be finding it difficult to tame your inbox, let alone think creatively about the next project. **Katherine Graham** ponders the secret to greater productivity.

As a work-from-home mother, I know what it's like trying to squeeze as much as possible into any given day. Sometimes it's laughable how much I set out to achieve. I'm perpetually on a quest to be more productive, to feel the runner's high of knowing I've ticked off all the tasks I had on my to-do list that particular day. Which is why I found this account I read on LinkedIn recently so fascinating.

Harvard economist Sendhil Mullainathan had an 'A-ha!' moment one evening when he dropped his cellphone in the loo. He joined his friends for dinner afterwards and found that he had a surprisingly good time. His friends hadn't become more interesting, nor was the food any better than usual. The simple truth was that he wasn't checking his phone for emails and text messages, meaning he was able to enjoy himself more.

According to Sendhil, who has written a book on scarcity, having too little time (a familiar refrain among businesspeople) is not the problem. Having too little focus is. If you're desperately thirsty, you won't be able to concentrate on anything else. If you're broke, you're unlikely to be able to make



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sound decisions because you'll be so worried about your financial affairs. Similarly, if you have too little time, you suffer from a lack of mental 'bandwidth', as Sendhil puts it.

The brain can only process so much information, so doing too many tasks at the same time is not the way to be more productive. What changes has Sendhil made since his accident? For one, he doesn't have access to emails on his cellphone any more. Before a meeting, he tries not to read emails so he can focus better on the discussion he's about to have.

It reminds me of a book I've been meaning to buy, *Never Check E-mail in the Morning* by Julie Morgenstern. Her advice is similar: choose what your most important task of the day is and tackle it before lunch. Your other work and meetings can occupy your time in the afternoon.

She also suggests scheduling escapes to eat and take a break so you

can recharge your batteries. This is something I can attest to: once, when I had a particularly stressful job, I really looked forward to my mid-shift breaks that allowed me to take a walk and catch my breath. It's amazing how many ideas you have as you stroll back to the office.

The bottom line is that multitasking is a productivity killer. 'Stop starting new things and try to finish what's already on your plate' is the message of Julie's book. Control the 'nibblers', she says – perfectionism, procrastination, interruptions and meetings – and break big jobs into smaller chunks. And don't be afraid to delegate.

My favourite piece of her advice? Shorten your working day; don't lengthen it. Not only will your priorities become clearer but because your time is rarer, you will use it more efficiently, too.