



Making the Most of Your Time: Going Beyond To-Do Lists

By Rajesh Setty

So Many Things to Do, So Little Time . . .

Everyone knows that time is the great equalizer in this world. Everyone has a flat twenty-four hours in a day—nothing more and nothing less. Everyone also knows that successful people get a lot more out of those twenty-four hours than average people.

Time management is hard, and it's a flawed concept. You really can't manage time. It is finite. What we all know and talk about really is how we can manage ourselves better. So, really, if you want to manage your time better, you have no choice but learn to manage yourself better.

Here are 9 things to consider:

1. EXECUTE YOUR CURRENT PROJECTS FLAWLESSLY

You will always be engaged in one or more projects where there are some deliverables (implicit or explicit). You just can't avoid that.

What is the single biggest way to ensure that you are executing on your projects flawlessly? It begins even before the project. Think about this question: "Are your current commitments reasonable and fall in the area of your strengths?" If you are positive of both answers, then the chances are that you will come through with flying colors.

Here are a few things to remember:

Be careful on your commitments: You may not give a serious thought about your pre-existing commitments when you make a new one. Slowly the commitments add up, and you get overwhelmed. You start slipping up on them. You can actually turn this problem around by being extremely careful when making new commitments or promises to people.

Engage in your areas of strengths: It is easy to manage your commitments when you are working in your areas of strengths. While it may be impossible to get into an arrangement where you are ALWAYS working in your areas of strength, you MUST make an attempt. It is an ideal condition. You will never get there, but you sure must try.

Quality is king (or queen): Remember that you won't get extra points for just completing the task—that is what you are paid for. But you will gain respect and recognition if you complete it in a fashion that elicits a “Wow!” from everyone around you

Practice leverage wherever possible: When you feel the desire to “fix things yourself,” take time to look at the resources available around you. Who else could complete this task? Remember, you will only have twenty-four hours in a day. Applying leverage, you can vastly expand what you can get out of those twenty-four hours.

2. STRENGTHEN YOUR PERSONAL BRAND

Whether you believe in it or not, whether you like it or not, whether you care for it or not—you have a personal brand. You just can't avoid it. You may not like what you have as your personal brand, but you can't avoid the fact that you do have one. It is “who you are” to the world.

Everyone has a personal brand, because very simply everyone makes a promise to the world—some explicitly but most implicitly. Your current personal brand can be found out by thinking about the following questions:

- What will ten of your friends say about you when you are not around?
- What will ten of your colleagues say about you when you are not around?
- What will ten of your clients say about you when you are not around?
- What will your boss, colleagues, and employees say about you when you are not around?
- What will someone who does not know you learn about you from sources such as Internet?

Your personal brand or identity in the marketplace has direct correlation with the value that the marketplace places on you. Here is how it always works. First, you work on your personal brand, and then your personal brand works for you.

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Here are a few reasons to build a powerful personal brand:

1. It commands a premium
2. It provides trustworthy shortcuts to people to choose you
3. It opens up new opportunities.

Your personal brand evolves over time, but it is NEVER going to be a short-term exercise. You can't have a one-year, three-year, or a five-year plan for building a personal brand. It is a lifetime commitment of making and fulfilling promises.

3. BUILD LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS

Long-term relationships with powerful people will provide you the ultimate competitive advantage.

Remember,

- It is not what you know, but who you know.
- It is not just who you know, but how you know who you know.
- It is just not who you know; it is who knows and cares about you.

So what is the easiest way to get into long-term relationships? You must be someone that powerful people want to build long-term relationships with.

At the start of your career, you may not have enough power yourself to attract those kinds of people. However, that should not prevent you from trying. Most powerful people started off the way you started out. They got where they are through commitment and discipline.

Here are a few things to remember:

Keep growing: If you are drifting through your life, others will hesitate before wanting to connect with you. Just like you, they have only twenty-four hours in a day. They will place a higher value on their time than you do. So, if you want to respect their time, ensure that they get a feeling that the time they spent with you was worth spending.

Create more opportunities as compared to the requests you make: Powerful people always get requests of help from other people. If you are one of those people, you MAY BE ignored just because of the sheer number of requests they have to handle. Alternatively, you can create low-cost opportunities for them. Create opportunities that are extremely low-cost for them (not for you), so that they are motivated to embrace them. When you offer genuine low-cost opportunities, and make few requests in return, you'll have a better chance of becoming engaged with them.

Forget about short-term results: With relationships, what you get out of a relationship will not always be tangible. However, what you get out will far-exceed other tangible benefits. The caveat is that all this happens over a LONG period of time. This principle has stood the test of time—“You give first and then you get.”

Relationship building is not an automatic process: Remember, nobody wants to be a record in your CRM software. They are human beings and you can only touch them through genuinely caring for what they care most about. Unfortunately you can't trick smart people into believing that you are “investing” in a relationship with them. So quit trying and start investing.

Be a piece in many puzzles: Everybody is solving one or more puzzles at any part of their lives. The problem is they have too little time to gather all the puzzle pieces and complete the puzzle within a reasonable amount of time. If you want to truly add value to others in a very short time, try and become a piece of their puzzle and help them complete the puzzle in a time shorter than what it would have taken them to complete it without YOU.

4. INCREASE YOUR CAPACITY TO DELIVER

Whatever be your pursuit, your investments in yourself should make it easier for you to pursue your passions and to make a difference to the world next year.

Ten years ago you had a certain capacity, probably derived from things like:

- Your expertise and skill sets at that point in time
- The power of your network at that point
- The trust the marketplace places on you at that point in time
- The demand in the marketplace for what you bring to the table

I'm sure that whatever your skills were then, you wouldn't be able to win in the marketplace today. You have achieved success today by increasing your capabilities and remaining relevant to today's marketplace. However, you also know you can't succeed tomorrow with the capacity you have today.

What are some ways you can ensure that you are increasing your capacity to deliver? Here are a few:

Work with a great coach or mentor: Great teams with great coaches win. Any other combination is risky. Great coaches want to work with people where the odds of success with their mentees are in their favor.

Fine-tune your accountability structure: You make a promise to yourself, but slip on it. You make another promise and again slip on it. After some time, you will think that this behavior represents "who you are." You soon resign yourself to the fact that you have to just live with it.

Rather than suffer on this path, you can work on getting your accountability structure right. Here is an example: what if you take a promise and treat it as if you have made that promise to the CEO of your company? Treat it as if your life depends on it. Treat it as if you will suffer your biggest loss if you don't live up to that promise. Do anything that will make you live up to your promise to yourself.

Look at your own accountability structure. I am sure you are smart and fine tune those accountability structures for your benefit.

Invest in the right tools: I have included this step because it is an easy one to understand and to handle. Tools make a big difference, but good tools need investment and the returns will come later. Never skimp on investing a reasonable amount of money to acquire the right tool--if they will help you become more effective in what you do.

5. MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO THE WORLD

When I talk about making a difference in the world, most people in the audience say that they are not “big enough” to make a dent (positively) in the universe. I beg to differ.

“The Starfish Story” by Loren Eiseley

Once upon a time, there was a wise man who used to go to the ocean to do his writing. He had a habit of walking on the beach before he began his work. One day, as he was walking along the shore, he looked down the beach and saw a human figure moving like a dancer. He smiled to himself at the thought of someone who would dance to the day, and so, he walked faster to catch up.

As he got closer, he noticed that the figure was that of a young man, and that what he was doing was not dancing at all. The young man was reaching down to the shore, picking up small objects, and throwing them into the ocean.

He came closer still and called out “Good morning! May I ask what it is that you are doing?” The young man paused, looked up, and replied “Throwing starfish into the ocean.” “I must ask, then, why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?” asked the somewhat startled wise man. To this, the young man replied, “The sun is up and the tide is going out. If I don’t throw them in, they’ll die.”

Upon hearing this, the wise man commented, “But, young man, do you not realize that there are miles and miles of beach and there are starfish all along every mile? You can’t possibly make a difference!” At this, the young man bent down, picked up yet another starfish, and threw it into the ocean. As it met the water, he said, “It made a difference for that one.”

When we have opportunities to make a small difference, we might not take advantage for a variety of reasons. Some of them are:

- You think the other person may not need help.
- You think if it was really required, somebody would have already done it.
- You think the job is so small that anybody can do it.
- Yes, you think it won't make a big enough difference.
- You think nobody will care whether you do it or not.
- You are busy with your own problems, and you don't have time to look at anything else.

Next time, when you find yourself in that situation, think about the starfish story and make it a point to make a difference, however small it is. Everything counts in this world!

6. INCREASE OTHERS' CAPACITY TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The world will be a better place if more people decide to make a difference. Most people can. They just don't know that.

Well, there is a solution. We can change and act now. Some of us have to decide to walk the extra mile and give a few people around us a helping hand and lift them to the next level. Don't wait until you reach some distant goal in your life. Start contributing back to the world now. No matter where you are in life, it's not too early to start lifting others.

We all know that it does not take a lot of effort or resources to begin making small differences in the world. As you increase your capacity, you will be able to increase your capacity to make a difference.

Evangelize the need to make difference: Advertisements are most effective when someone sees them multiple times. Some people need to hear this message over and over again before they get up and actually make something meaningful happen. When I say evangelize, I don't mean it literally. There are many ways to evangelize, and the best one in this case would be to lead by action. You can start participating in a variety of things that can make a difference in the world. Every now and then, you can try to get participation from people around you to do the same.

Teach people to become better: When you acquire skills and come across resources that will make you better, just think for a moment about your network. Who else can benefit from those skills or who else can benefit by having access to those resources? Share what you learn freely with others. Help them increase their capacity to make a difference.

Help people identify their strengths: Many times we are blind to things that are close to us. Our strengths are one area where we may be blind to. Other people can see our strengths but we can't. When we work from our areas of strength, we achieve success almost effortlessly. When there is no effort, how can you notice it? When you notice some strengths in others that they might not have noticed, take time to make them aware of those strengths.

Connect people that are opportunities for each other: Imagine that you connected two people that were "true" opportunities for each other. That would be a "gift" to both those people at almost no cost to you. That is "leverage" in action. Please remember that it is hard to build "exclusive" relationships so there is no point in holding back. If you tap into your network today and see how many opportunities you can create RIGHT NOW by connecting people to each other you will be (pleasantly) surprised.

Yes, relationships are powerful, but that power does not come by holding on to them.

7. SPEND TIME WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY

They say that we are most blind to things that are very close to us. Family and friends typically come into this category. People talk about spending “quality” time with their family when the family needs their “time” period. Talking about spending “quality time” is just a glorified excuse to not feel guilty for not spending enough time.

I agree that this phrase is easier to say than to do. Everyone is so busy and people really have not enough time for personal things. What are some things that you can do? There is no one right answer to this, but here are a few things that you can look into:

Manage your “always-connected” devices carefully: Imagine you were addicted to smoking. Could you imagine smoking during a wedding or in front of your parents? You wouldn’t. But, you would not mind using your “always-connected” devices in the middle of a meeting. For me, both are equally bad addictions. The former one has a health risk associated with it and the latter one has a relationship risk associated with it. Remember that these connection devices are tools. You have to control them. If you get carried away, these tools will start controlling your life.

Get up early in the morning: Yes, it sounds that simple. Remember that if you wake up one hour earlier in the morning before the other members of your family wake up, you can get a lot of things taken care of. Nobody will call you at that time and ONE HOUR is a long time to get a lot of things done. Do this consistently and you will almost get 4 extra days in a month. With some discipline, you can do wonders with those four extra days.

8. INCREASE YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS TO MULTIPLE NETWORKS

Earlier, I talked about spending time in building long-term relationships. One-to-one relationships require a big investment of your time. This is important, but in order to get the maximum benefits, it has to be complemented with your efforts in becoming a valued member in multiple networks.

Here are a few things to note about networks:

The power of a network is directly proportional to their exclusivity: When I talk about belonging to networks, many people think about making an investment to belong to a club. Yes, that is one kind of a network, but remember that the power of a network is typically directly proportional to the exclusivity associated with the network. If the network is exclusive and you got in there VERY easily, congratulate yourself. You have worked hard, and your effort has paid off. For most of us, we must first BECOME someone that “exclusive clubs” will want to recruit as a member.

Most exclusive networks are egalitarian in nature: It will be hard to get into these networks, but once you get in, you will get the same status as other members. Of course, people who need to be valued more will be valued more. The point here is access. Once you are in, you have “full access” to what any other member—whoever they are.

Participation in a network requires a time commitment: If you want to effectively participate in a network, you have to be willing and ready to make the necessary time commitments. This can be as simple as attending the meetings regularly to participating in committees that are in-charge of a certain task within the network.

Here are some ways that you can become a valuable member of multiple networks:

Master the art of leveraging multiple networks: This one will seem obvious and you can take advantage of it only if you belong to multiple networks. Sometimes a challenge that seems “rocket science” for people in one network will be a “piece of cake” for people in the other network. By simply leveraging the power of the right network, you can ensure that you bring a lot of value at a very low cost to each of the network you belong to.

Make others successful: Your first goal in belonging to a network has to be to make sure that you will do everything reasonable to help others become successful. I am not saying that your personal agenda should disappear, but it should always take a backseat when compared to the needs of other valuable members in the network.

Share across networks: While belonging to multiple networks is hard work, if you have something interesting to share and contribute, you will get higher leverage. Let’s say you come across a really cool web service that is unknown to the masses, you can quickly disseminate that information across multiple networks by sending a few emails.

9. LEARNING AND LEARNING TO UN-LEARN

“Everyone spoke of an information overload, but what there was in fact was a non-information overload.”
Richard Saul Wurman, *What-If, Could-Be* (1976)

The world will continue to generate information at a breathtaking speed. You can make changes to yourself on how exactly and how fast you can consume the necessary information for your benefit.

Mindmapping: Mindmapping is a creative technique to visually represent information. As a technique, it can be applied to a number of activities—some as simple as taking notes during a course to as complex as brainstorming on the next big idea for the company. I have been using this technique for more than a decade (first on paper and now using software from Mindjet called MindManager) for variety of things. It has not only saved me time, it has also helped me capture information in a manner that I can easily retrieve and use it later.

Music for Learning: Research has proven that certain forms of Baroque music help in accelerating your learning. I have used music for more than a decade to assist me in learning.

Audio Books and Book Summaries: If commuting takes away a chunk of your time, audio book summaries will help a lot. I have used audio CDs, MP3 players and book-talk radio stations to help me make the most out of my long commutes.

Partnering with other readers with similar interests: No matter how you try, it is hard for you to win alone. You need help. People around you need help too. So why struggle alone? Connect with readers with similar interests and start leveraging each others' works for mutual benefit.

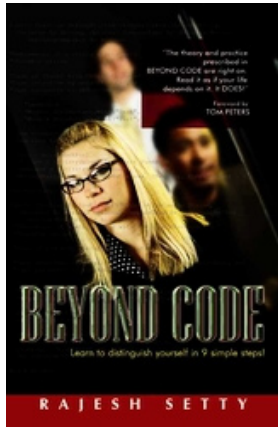
Using the web effectively: The web is one place where you can get a lot of help, but you can also get lost for all the wrong reasons. If you decide to invest “X” hours on the web, you have to have at least a broad plan as to how you are going to spend those “X” hours for your short-term and long-term benefit.

At work, systems are upgraded and new practices are put in place and you just dance to the new steps. It is in your personal life, especially with old habits that it is hard to let go of things.

While you are investing your time and energy to learn new things, you also have to consciously un-learn things that are no longer relevant. At work, this is automatically taken care of—old software programs are removed, systems are upgraded and new practices are put in place and you just dance to the new steps. It is in your personal life, especially with old habits that it is hard to let go of things.

Un-learning anything is hard and I don't want to sound like I have a magic trick to make it happen easily. For me, what has worked is my relationship with my three mentors. As I discuss issues and situations, I get to see their thinking in action. Many of my practices get re-shaped as I learn new ways of looking at the world and new ways of accomplishing things.

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Rajesh Setty is a serial entrepreneur and investor based in Silicon Valley. Raj is the author of seven books with his first book published at the age of thirteen. Raj's latest book *Beyond Code* (foreword by Tom Peters) was published in late 2005. Raj's latest venture [iPolipo](#) aims at helping people schedule meetings with less than two emails exchanged—saving time (and money). Raj maintains a popular blog called [Life Beyond Code](#) where he has posted more than 850 articles. See Raj's previous ChangeThis manifesto on [25 Ways to Distinguish Yourself](#).

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