

# watch the clock

Never enough hours in the day? **Gary Bowerman** offers tips to keep events running to schedule

At the start of every week, a certain precious commodity seems plentiful – stretching ahead into the distance. But by Friday afternoon, it's easy to wonder how time passed so quickly. Where did it go? And can extra time be made up next week?

The value placed on time is immeasurable. "Time is free, but it's priceless. You can't own it, but you can use it. You can't keep it, but you can spend it. Once you've lost it, you can never get it back," wrote Harvey Mackay, author of several bestselling business books. Benjamin Franklin, one of the founding fathers of the US, was a little more succinct: "Remember that time is money," he said.

Whichever way time is analysed or counted, the common consensus is that in a schedule-driven world like event management – with the extra dimension of travel sometimes to factor in and multiple projects to juggle on a daily basis across different time zones – there never seems to be quite enough of it. So what are some of the key approaches for converting "time poverty" into "time self-sufficiency"?

## BREAK DOWN TASKS TO BITE-SIZE PIECES

"Effective time management is a core business skill and absolutely critical in our industry where we are dealing with mostly high-end clients, large numbers of participants and fairly complex programme logistics in a wide range of locations," says Cam McLean, director of Taiwan-based In Motion Asia, which specialises in combining outdoor adventure with corporate events.

Working with, rather than against, deadlines is a challenging objective. Deadlines are pieces

“**THE MORE PEOPLE IN A TEAM, THE EASIER IT IS TO ALLOCATE EVENTS AND SHARE THE WORKLOAD**”  
*Louise Fuster, Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre*



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## VENUE VIEW

Interview with Louise Fuster, Event Planner at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre (MCEC)

**When working on client events, how do you mitigate the inevitable time drags?**

We work with customers in different time zones – whether it's an hour difference in another Australian state or clients overseas in completely different time zones.

Sometimes, this is tricky when we need items actioned immediately, but we can work through this by organising a meeting over Skype to chat face to face. We also encourage our customers to send us information as it becomes available. If they are waiting for floor plan approval at their end, we'll give guidance on other elements they can provide us with to keep the ball rolling.

**How does the size of an event team affect time management?**

We have 18 event planners so we can share our broad range of events across the whole team. We hold allocation meetings twice a week, and this ensures effective time management of the events each individual planner is managing.

**What techniques do you use to get everyone working on the same timeline?**

Our team works with a range of departments within MCEC and external companies. We produce a daily operating sheet (DOPS) for each event. This is generated using a comprehensive client checklist that covers key components such as OH & S requirements, public liability, contractor details and the move-in/move-out schedule, and is distributed to departments 10 days prior to the event start date. We hold weekly operation meetings to discuss the events taking place over that 10-day time frame, so everyone involved can raise any concerns or share ideas.

**How do modern technologies help effective time management?**

For team members on the floor facilitating the event, modern technologies are a great help. Being able to check emails and updated event sheets on a tablet or smartphone enables event planners to make changes to the DOPS and share immediately with all departments. It also allows constant communication with our customers. These devices provide immediacy, too; if a client wants to see how a particular setup will look during their initial site visit, we can bring up an image and show them then and there.

**What do you find are the most frequent daily "time distractions"?**

Although a necessity, meetings are the most frequent distraction. I work through these by looking at my diary and allocating time frames – for example, blocking out the morning or afternoon, to ensure a certain amount of hours are set aside to complete my tasks.



in a puzzle and the more pieces that are put in place the closer event managers get to completing the challenge. "Implementing shadow deadlines with anywhere from a day to a week's lead time acts as a safety net. It's important to break each deadline down into individual tasks and tick them off one by one," says McLean.

Setting up a working logistics document for the team that lists the activities, responsibilities, items required and specific deadlines helps ensure everyone knows what they need to be doing, where and – most importantly – when. Proactive communication also facilitates more effective time usage. "We sit down as a team in advance of each programme and carefully go over the working logistics, asking questions until all our staff are clear and confident," says McLean.

Onsite time planning is another tool of the trade. "We complete a dry-run of the programme onsite so our team can physically see where each item is taking place. During the programme, we sit down as a team every evening and go over the next day's itinerary in detail," continues McLean. "However much planning is involved, there are always time factors outside our control, which can impact the smooth running of an event, such as a flight or coach being late. For this reason, it's important to have clear staff communication lines, with mobile phones and two-way radios accessible at all times to deal with such issues as quickly and quietly as possible."

Balancing stress and redress is a central facet of modern working life, and time management means taking a break to enjoy both work and environment. "We're big fans of exercise, and most of our staff have outdoor passions including running, cycling, swimming or hitting the gym," says McLean. "It's important to exercise regularly because it has big benefits in terms of productivity and responsiveness back in the office."

### SET TIME FOR KEY FUNCTIONS

"Work should be fun – life is too short for it to be otherwise," is a motif of Auckland-based Elevate Corporate Team Events. So, how can this philosophy be upheld without getting dragged down by inevitable time distractions? "We block off segments of time to concentrate on certain functions – whether that be answering emails, organising events or doing maintenance," says the company's managing director Chris Gullely. "Of course, customer inquiries and questions can easily interrupt all



“ULTIMATELY, IF YOU ARE VERY ORGANISED DEADLINES LOSE THEIR DANGER”  
Cam McLean, In Motion Asia

this, so it's also critical not to overestimate how much will be achieved each day. By having less on the list, more is achieved."

Managing lead times is a key conundrum for event managers. "These can vary, anything from six months to 12 hours – with the average around the four-week range," says Gullely. "If the event is one that we can handle totally internally, then it is quite easy to pull

together at the last moment – maybe just some overtime and re-jigging of resources. If it relies on third-party suppliers, then the complexities of last-minute event planning can prove difficult."

Critical to productive time management is utilising effective teamwork, especially during busy peak periods. The complexity and scalability of an event can be a critical issue

- ✔ Implement a strategic approach to managing the daily and weekly workloads of you and your team.
- ✔ Optimise smart technologies to speed up communication within teams and with clients and suppliers.
- ✔ Use meetings to speed up event planning processes, not slow them down.
- ✘ Be afraid to delegate and share tasks with colleagues at time-critical periods.
- ✘ Treat time as a limitless commodity early in the week... it will soon disappear.
- ✘ Get delayed by checking emails when other tasks are more important.

for getting the team working on the same timeline. "Events such as Build My Ride – a charity team-building event involving team challenges and building brand-new bikes to give to kids in need – which requires sourcing deserving children and then ordering the correct sized bikes for those particular children, obviously takes more time than an event like an Amazing Race which can be handled internally and, due to the efficiencies we have built in to the event, is easily scalable," concludes Gullely. ■

## TIME TRAINING

**How do project management consultants view time productivity?**

"We have two main categories of clients wishing to undertake time management training," says William Tan, Director of PMO Asia, a project management training, coaching and consultation firm with offices in Penang, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Bangkok and Ho Chi Minh City. "The first group is from the corporate training department of a company, for whom the main objective is to improve the attendees' productivity and capability

to deliver quality work more effectively. The second group is individuals who will attend a 'public class' on their own to learn valuable time management concepts and skills, and to achieve more in their career and life."

PMO Asia's "Time Management: Do More in Less Time" course, which is based on project management methodology, is structured in three parts: time management concepts and their importance; setting life goals and translating those into yearly and weekly plans; and time distractions: how to overcome?

Time management planning should be forward-focused, says Tan. "It is very important to plan and set time management goals in phases, and training provides guidance and tools to do this effectively."

And what are the top three time distractions for training clients? "Emails, drop-in calls or visitors, and poor planning. Smartphones in particular are a major time distraction contributor, as they allow users to access email and social media instantaneously," warns Tan.