

Balancing importance and urgency

In the fourth part of the series, Jane Lelean tackles the issue of how to divide up your time effectively

Evolution of time management systems

Having read many books and listened to many tapes addressing time management, I have noticed that there have been several generations of thought on this topic.

First generation

The first generation recommends notes and checklists as a way of helping you to recognise what has to be done today and then later on in the week. This time management tool, while it has its place, focuses on the short term.

Second generation

This tranche of advice encourages us to look ahead, scheduling events in the future. Again, while this is a very



important tool, there is little discrimination between the events that are being planned.

Third generation

The third generation reflects a contemporary way of thinking. This approach to time management encourages us to clarify our long-term goals and our values, and then prioritise our tasks on the basis of what is of greatest importance. Using this philosophy we set short-, medium- and long-term goals. While this methodology to time management and planning is incredibly useful, it can squeeze out any spontaneity from our diary. This is one of the reasons why 'in time' people find diaries so difficult to use.

Fourth generation

The fourth generation, developed by Steven Covey in his books *Seven habits of highly*

successful people and *First things first*, suggests that if we focus on relationships and results, rather than time and tasks, we can achieve greater balance.

Time management matrix

In his books, Covey recommends that we categorise our activities and how we spend our time into 'urgent versus not urgent' and 'important versus not important' (Table 1). What he has found is that there are common characteristics to each of the quadrants.

When we are spending time doing urgent, important work, we are working in quadrant 1. We are dealing with pressing problems like dental emergencies, patients who just turn up and want to be seen, deadline-driven projects such as filling in grant applications, and crises such as staff sickness or medical emergencies.

When we are in quadrant 2, we are spending our time on important things that are not urgent. These types of activities include constructive staff meetings, where you develop strategies and contingency plans that ensure your day runs smoothly. You build relationships by spending time talking to suppliers and funders, and working in this quadrant allows you to recognise new opportunities to develop your business and plan their implementation.

When in quadrant 3, you are dealing with urgent but unimportant activities – phone calls, interruptions while you are in surgery that can wait, and meetings that generally don't have agendas.

Finally, quadrant 4 activities are not urgent and not important, and are characterised by trivia – junk mail, spam emails and time-wasting activities that are often pleasant.

Covey has also identified the common outcomes of spending time doing activities from each of the quadrants (Table 2). What he recognised is that people who spend their time in quadrant 1 doing urgent and important activities are constantly crisis-managing, 'firefighting' and not getting on top of things, so they are stressed and burn out.

Those who spend time in quadrant 2 have vision and perspective; they know where their business and life are headed. They tend to be disciplined, in control, with few crises, and, in turn, the related activities have those characteristics.

Quadrant 3 activities tend to be of short-term focus – managing crises that are not really that important. People who spend time in this quadrant tend to change their mind to fit with the popular opinion, often see goals as worthless, feel out of control and victims of circumstance.

Dr Jane Lelean is an accredited coach with the International Coaching Federation and is a member of the Association for Coaching. Jane has gained over 20 years' experience of running a business and being involved in patient care as a dentist and business owner. Having trained as a coach for the last few years, Jane has now sold her dental practice to dedicate herself full-time to providing coaching, NLP and training to business owners and individuals who have a desire to make their careers, life and relationships healthier and wealthier. Jane can be contacted by phone on +44 (0) 1296 770462 or by email at jane@healthandwealthy.co.uk.

People who spend time in quadrant 3 often have shallow, broken relationships and change their friends frequently to be in with whomever they perceive to be most popular.

People who spend their time in quadrant 4, doing non-urgent and unimportant activities, are generally dependent on others, irresponsible and frequently fired from their jobs.

The value of quadrant 2

Covey encourages us to organise our time and activities so that we spend time in quadrant 2, dealing with the important and non-urgent things on our 'to do' lists.

For example, spend time with your staff in meetings and performing staff reviews, because building relationships helps us to understand what motivates other people.

Also in this quadrant is working out your personal values and the values of the business, and incorporating them into your branding and marketing so that everyone, patients and staff alike, know what your practice represents.

Planning and developing practice handbooks and protocols also belong in quadrant 2.

By spending time in quadrant 2, in the long-term you are able to 'see off at the pass' those crises like persistent sickness, lateness and inconsistency in service. You will have developed systems that prevent these problems and nip them in the bud if they do occur, so you no longer spend time in quadrant 1.

Exercise, good nutrition and meditation also belong in quadrant 2, so we are healthy and vital and able to enjoy our work without resorting to alcohol to make it through to Friday.

In which quadrant do you reside?

Consider your last couple of weeks – which quadrant are you spending most of your time in and what is the consequence of that?

If you were able to spend your buffer time doing

quadrant 2 activities, what difference would it make to you and your business? What can you do now to enable you to spend more time in quadrant 2?

In the next part of the series, which will be published in the September issue of *Irish Dentist*, I will turn our attention to how we can align

our thoughts, and then ourselves, to what is important to us as individuals and incorporate these aspects into our lives. 

Table 1: Categorised activities according to quadrants

	Urgent	Not urgent
Important	<i>Quadrant 1</i> Crises Pressing problems Deadline-driven projects	<i>Quadrant 2</i> Prevention 'Production capability' activities Relationship building Recognising new opportunities Planning Recreation
Not important	<i>Quadrant 3</i> Interruptions Some calls, post and email Some reports Some meetings Proximate, pressing matters Popular activities	<i>Quadrant 4</i> Trivia Busy work Some mail and phone calls Time wasters Proximate, pressing matters Pleasant activities

Table 2: Common outcomes of spending time doing the activities from each quadrant

	Urgent	Not urgent
Important	<i>Quadrant 1</i> Stress Burnout Crisis management 'Firefighting'	<i>Quadrant 2</i> Vision Perspective Discipline Control Few crises
Not important	<i>Quadrant 3</i> Short-term focus Crisis management Reputation – chameleon-like character See goals and plans as worthless Feel victimised and out of control Shallow and broken relationships	<i>Quadrant 4</i> Total irresponsibility Fired from jobs Dependent on others or institutions