

Making the most of your time

Jane Lelean explores free days, focus days and buffer days, enabling you to be more efficient and profitable in the surgery and still have time for the things you love to do



In this article I am going to show you how to allocate your week to generate an optimum number of 'free days', 'focus days' and 'buffer days', which will enable you to be more effective and profitable in the surgery, get all your admin and strategy planning done, and have time and energy to do the things you love to do with the people you love.

As Jim Rohn once said: 'Time is more valuable than money. You can get more money, but you cannot get more time'.

Free, focus and buffer days

I work as a coach with clients from many industries, including dental practices – most of who are business owner managers. The vast majority of the business owners are experiencing very similar situations to those that I encountered in my practice before I started working with a business coach. My clients are really busy doing the work that generates the fees; they feel that their businesses are controlling them rather than being in charge and setting the direction for their business; and they seldom have the time energy or inclination to do the things they used to enjoy. Consequently, they are often unhealthy, unfulfilled and have unsatisfactory relationships with their family and friends,

and often resent the business.

Things really changed for me when my coach, Chris Barrow, introduced me to the Entrepreneurial Time System developed by Dan Sullivan. This system changed the way I worked and gave me my life back and my clients experience similarly remarkable changes. Dan Sullivan advocates that you divide your time into three types:

- Free days
- Focus days
- Buffer days.

Free days

Free days are full 24-hour periods in which you do not undertake any business-related activity. No planning, no calls, no emails, no treatment planning, no checking radiographs and no writing referrals. Nothing. Free days are sacred and are not to be violated. This is time off for you to recharge, re-energise and have fun; it is recreation time.

Focus days

A focus day is a 24-hour period in which you spend your time on the activities that create results for your business. These are the days that you generate the fees by providing treatment.

On a focus day, you are the provider working 'in your business' rather than 'on your business'. These are the days when you do all your clinical

dentistry and fee-earning activities.

Buffer days

Buffer days are the days in which you work 'on your business', dealing with all the things that would otherwise distract you from patient care. Choose a buffer day to write your treatment plans, hold your staff meetings and staff reviews, have your coaching sessions and training days, and do the strategy work to grow your business. On buffer days, meet with your marketing agency and web designer to promote the practice, write your welcome packs, role play, and practise sales conversations and dealing with objections with your staff. Spend buffer days catching up, dealing with problems or learning new skills.

The ideal ratio

There is an ideal and most effective ratio for free, focus and buffer days that a business owner should be working towards, and that is:

- Free days – three days a week
- Focus days – three days a week
- Buffer days – one day a week.

In my personal experience, and that of many of my colleagues and clients, when you work to this structure you will get the balance back into your life, and you will work more effectively and profitably.

Just do it!

The most effective way to make this system work is to follow Nike's advice and 'just do it'.

Block out the appropriate time in your diaries. So many of my clients spend a long time telling me all the reasons why this cannot possibly work – they are short of fees and can't possibly take time out and still cover the monthly overheads.

I know this from experience; I gave Chris all the same objections only to discover that when I did it, I experienced all the benefits Chris said I would, only not as soon as I could have done if I had just organised my diary sooner!

If the way your diary is running now is leaving you with insufficient time to do the things you need to do, or the vitality to want to do them, something has to change.

Implementation

This system works by planning your year in advance and to do this you need:

- A year planner from your stationer or download one free of charge from my website at www.healthyandwealthy.co.uk
- Some adhesive dot labels of three colours
- At least three hours of quiet time.

Firstly, choose a coloured label for each day, perhaps:

- Free days – red

Table 1: System matrix

Weeks holiday	Weeks working	Free days	Focus days	Buffer days
6	46	180	138	46
7	45	184	135	45
8	44	188	132	44
9	43	192	129	43
10	42	196	126	42
11	41	200	123	41
12	40	204	120	40

- Focus days – green
- Buffer days – blue.

Then use the matrix in Table 1 to calculate the number of dots you need for each type of day, depending on the number of weeks of holiday you wish to take during the year.

Start with the holiday and free days and place one dot per day, then allocate the focus and buffer days, until every day has a coloured dot.

Once you have the days allocated they can be transferred into your appointment book and diary.

When allocating your days as free, focus or buffer, it is vital that you use a system that can be changed, such as adhesive dots, coloured pencils or map pins. It is important that this system has the flexibility to allow you to take advantage of opportunities as they arise. For example, if you are asked to speak at a conference on a day that falls on a free day, you say 'yes' to the engagement and swap the red dot from that day with a blue one from elsewhere, thus preserving the free time you have and allowing you to take advantage of the opportunity.

Work smart, not long

Some of you will be saying: 'But you haven't explained how this makes me more profitable'. My personal experience, and that of all the clients I have introduced to this system, is that when we reduced working 'in the business' to three days a week, we became more profitable as a by-product of working more

efficiently. By prioritising how we spend those three focus days, we are now working smarter, not longer. By now you should have an understanding as to why it is not appropriate for you to be working clinically five days a week and then using weekends to run the business.

By following this simple strategy, you will get your life into balance and improve your profitability. If you would like any further advice or assistance with time management or other areas of your practice, please contact me.

In part three of the series, which will be published in the next issue of *Irish Dentist*, I will explain how to organise your appointment book to increase your effectiveness and profitability. 

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