

CHAPTER FIVE

Do it now

INTRODUCTION

People's concept of time is a fundamental component of their definition of appropriate business and personal conduct. In this chapter, we look at two significantly different ways of understanding, valuing and allocating time. Although our view of time guides our actions, most people are not aware that there are differing definitions of time that shape the actions around them. They only know that there is their way, and the wrong way. Understanding the different ways in which we view time and especially how the American perspective and how this shapes the way Americans behave in business is critical to building productive, successful relationships with them.

SPEED READ

- What drives the Americans' obsession with time (it's not just money)!
- Why it's important to be on time.
- Factors that contribute to the impression of Americans being rushed and exhausted.

PICTURE THIS

You are a new employee with an American company. Your immediate supervisor tells you your work is excellent and that she is glad you're on the team. The next day Human Resources calls you to their office to counsel you about your record of tardiness. What's happening?

You begin to think something's wrong with your watch. No matter how many times you set it, check it, it seems to be running slow. You know this because the watches of all your colleagues seem to be ten minutes faster than yours. You finally ask and find out they all set them fast to be sure to be on time.

You arrive 20 minutes late to meet a friend for lunch and they've left the restaurant, leaving a message saying they couldn't wait any longer. What's the rush?

THE BIGGER PICTURE

WHAT IS TIME?

If we look at dictionary definitions, we come up with multiple ways of defining this concept. A quick search will lead you to:

Dictionary.com offers: the system of those sequential relations that any event has to any other, as past, present or future; indefinite and continuous duration regarded as that in which events succeed one another.¹

Merriam-Webster: a non-spatial continuum that is measured in terms of events which succeed one another from past through present to future.²

Oxford English dictionary: The continued progress of existence as affecting people and things.³

Time, it would seem, is about events, whether from the past or in the future. In this chapter, we'll look at how people think about events in their lives should be organized.

TIME: SCARCE OR BOUNTIFUL?

Time, is it scarce or bountiful? This question itself, although we are unlikely to raise it, illuminates the two schools of thought about the availability of time.

Scarce or bountiful? Do I have lots of time or am I always rushed? Can I spend a little extra time with a friend, interrupt a project or must I finish a task and meet a deadline? And the answer is: Yes, scarce. Yes, bountiful. Depending on your culture, your understanding of the world, either answer is true.

Overall, the world's cultures divide into two distinct approaches to understanding and using time. One approach, or system, is called monochronic, with an emphasis on tasks and schedules. The other is polychronic, where developing and maintaining relationships outweighs adherence to schedules,

Some key concepts are as follows:

MONOCHRONIC:

- Time is talked about as a tangible thing to be spent, used, saved, lost, wasted.
- Time is linear and can be divided into precise units.
- Adhere to plans.
- People concentrate on doing one thing at a time, sequentially.
- Tasks (doing things) take precedence over engaging with people.
- Interruptions are not welcome (as they interfere with a schedule).
- An outcome of the industrial revolution where the labor force had to be on hand at an appointed hour.

Countries considered to follow this system include the following: the US, Canada, Switzerland, Germany, Canada and Northern European countries.

POLYCHRONIC

- Time is bountiful and ongoing.
- People before task.
- Fluid approach to scheduling with less focus on accounting for every moment.
- Simultaneous occurrence of many things and great involvement with people.⁴
- Interruptions acceptable.

Countries represented include the following: Mexico, Africa and many Asian and Middle Eastern countries including Saudi Arabia, India and the Philippines.

THE DIFFERENCE: SIMPLY STATED

Simply stated, people in one group believe time is infinite, unending, impossible to use up and the other is certain that time is limited, finite and a disappearing resource.

ABSOLUTELY MONOCHRONIC

Americans are probably best known for their focus on time, schedules and deadlines. Stories abound of negotiations adjusted, deals lost, misunderstandings created because American business people stuck to their schedules without regard to other events. The clock is king.

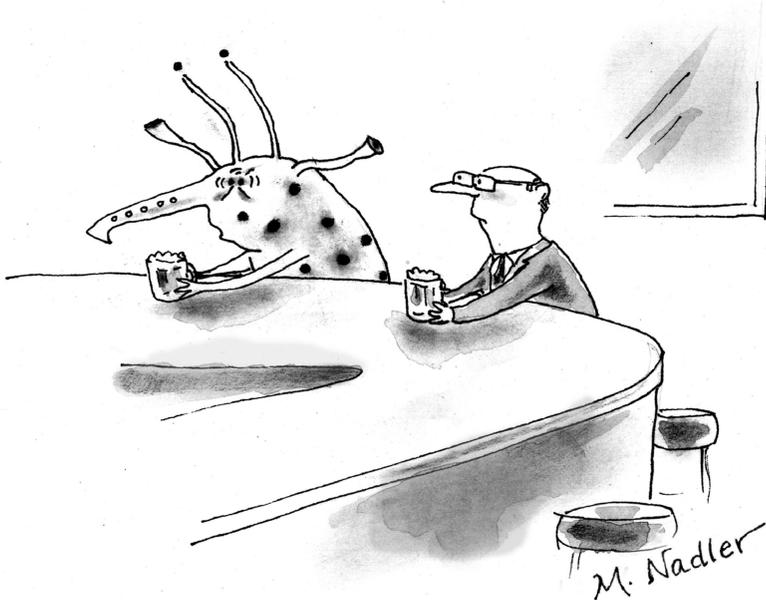
This attitude about time is deeply ingrained, passed down through the generations as it is in all countries, all cultures. The Founding Fathers were mainly immigrants from Northern Europe, and they brought with the influence of the industrial revolution and the schedules of the factories.

The focus on time and task contributes to American's reputation as alternately warm, friendly and then cool, distant and unpleasantly direct. With the emphasis on "getting things done", it appears they're just interested in the business, rather than building a relationship with you and other people involved. Problems arise because it never really occurs to the American that this can be experienced as rude, even insulting. Their concern to wisely manage their time – and yours – expecting that you too are in a hurry.

Absolutely monochronic, convinced that time is a non-renewable resource, they are certain that everyone will understand that

keeping to schedule is critically important. Americans simply believe that creating relationships will happen as you work together. It is understood in the business culture that you can only do one thing at a time. A colleague talks about leaving “place markers” with her friends. That translates to sending brief e-mails, leaving voice mail messages to tell people she’s thinking about them but is too pressed to see them or even have a serious conversation. Then when the deadline is passed, she will re-take her “place” and in a sense re-enter their lives.

Since Americans usually work mainly with Americans, this mindset works. As with the colleague above, no one is insulted when a social engagement is cancelled due to a looming deadline, or when a call is cut short with the announcement “Got to run. Working on a big project. Catch you later”. Time slips away. Use it or lose it!



Think 24/7 is bad? Try 56/12.

LOOKING FORWARD OR LOOKING BACKWARDS?

Another important aspect of people's view of time is whether their focus is on the past, present or future. Is today the best, was yesterday, or will it be tomorrow?

For Americans, the answer is "It's the future". From the founding fathers of history to the most recent arrivals, this is a country where people left their past to come to a strange place, to create something new, something better. Their actions clearly stated their belief in the future.

A hallmark of future oriented cultures such as the US is a widely shared optimism that things can be changed for the better. A favorite American saying is "The best is yet to come". This optimism, in a business sense, is a driver of innovation and experimentation. That outlook can lead to planning, building, creating what comes next. One could say this is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for economic development.

Although today you can read studies that indicate Americans are now less positive that tomorrow will always be better than today, the overall orientation of the culture still remains focused on the present and the future. A recent study shows that those in the beginning of their careers, the "twenty-somethings" create five-year plans.⁵

The focus on time and the future can be a powerful but sometimes problematic driver of US business. In this rush forward, Americans are sometimes accused of not thinking carefully, of proceeding in a way described as "Ready, Fire, Aim" or "Just Do It". From either perspective, understanding the American attitude about time is key to understanding how they work at work.

YOU SAID YOU COULD DO IT

The former vice-president of store planning for a European upscale men's retailer tells a story about her experience of opening a flagship store in New York City. The store had to open by

mid-November in order to take advantage of the key retail season – Christmas. This was to be their first store in the US.

The store was designed to achieve the look of a fine, traditional men’s store, which meant fixtures, flooring and cabinetry in wood. They selected a small firm in Europe to handle the majority of the cabinetry. This firm had the expertise to do the job, experience with the client and could obtain the specific materials they required. They signed a contract.

But one problem appeared – the deadline. The cabinetmakers informed their client, the retailers that they would have to work weekends to meet the contracted deadline. But they didn’t work weekends, so they couldn’t meet the deadline. They were sorry. But the work could be done by early December and that wouldn’t be too much of a delay as the store could simply open a few weeks later.

Telling the story, years after the event, Meg is still incredulous. How could they not understand? A deadline is a deadline. It’s a commitment. Once you agree you move “heaven and earth” to do “whatever it takes”. Work weekends. Work nights. Hire more people. What were they thinking? Miss the Christmas season – don’t be crazy!

In this case, retailer and supplier were able to resolve the issue (they worked those weekends), the contract went ahead and the store opened. At least this time, there was a happy ending.

A DEADLINE IS NOT GOAL: IT’S A PROMISE

A deadline, a due date, is more than a goal – it is a promise, and Americans learn as children that you must keep a promise once it’s made. Your honor is “on the line”. So if you find yourself in a position where you cannot meet a deadline agreed to with an American, tell them!

Don't attempt to hide the fact or delay sharing the bad news. Americans do not respond well to bad news when it's a surprise, especially if it's received too late to correct the problem.

If you announce in advance that a problem has emerged, you can take advantage of another American characteristic: the love of solving problems. Overall, Americans enjoy a challenge, trying to find a way to do something other people think is impossible. If asked to paint the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco purple in two weeks, some people would say "Ridiculous" but others would start lists of what would need to be done and create a project schedule.

MANAGING TIME: THE AMERICAN WAY

A key to working with monochronic (American) people is to understand to their view of time.

PUNCTUALITY

- Be on time. An appointment is more than a promise to show up, it's seen as a contract, a set agreement.
- Being late equates to disrespect, and worse, wasting other people's time.
- It's good to arrive five minutes early and wait.
- If you're going to be late, call even if it's just the delay will just be five minutes.
- Always apologize if late.
- For social occasions, dinner at someone's home, it is acceptable to arrive ten minutes after the appointed time. Being early is not good, nor is being much later.
- If meeting at a restaurant, even for a social event, it's still important to be on time.

MEETINGS

- Expect meetings to start on time.
- Stick to the agenda in a meeting; don't stray from the topics stated (that's wasting time).

THE VARIETY OF BUSINESS HOURS

Normal business hours vary from place to place, business to business. Traditional hours were 9:00 am to 5:00 pm (which became the title of a 1980 movie.) Today, 7:00 to 4:00, 8:00 to 5:00, 9:00 to 6:00, 10:00 to 7:00 all could be called "normal business hours".

But depending on your profession, industry and location, those traditional hours may not apply. Finance people on the West Coast likely start their days at 6:00 am before US markets open in New York, for tech people everywhere, hours are likely to be flexible with late starts and late finishes not unusual. For someone on a global team, based in San Francisco, many days start with a 7:00 am call to connect with a team in India (although the usual start time is 8:30 am). Normal business hours? It depends.

Lunch is usually an hour, beginning as early as 11:30 am (to avoid crowds at popular places, and respecting the needs of those whose day starts at 7:00 am). However, the most common time for lunch is between noon and 12:30, sometimes as late as 1:00 pm and ending an hour later. For companies with in-house food service, hours may vary more, and for many rushed Americans, lunch can be a salad or sandwich eaten at their desk. So much to do, so little time.

WHEN CAN I SEE YOU?

When setting an appointment, Mondays and Fridays are the least desirable days to request, unless you are setting up what you hope will be a long conversation over lunch, in which Friday might be your best choice. On Monday, people are getting a start on the week,

catching up on e-mails that appeared over the weekend and on Friday afternoon, people are closing out their week's activities and thinking about the commute home.

THAT MEETING IS WHEN?

Americans' special focus on time extends to how we write a date and specify the time for an appointment.

Dates: In the US, the format for a date is: Month/Day/Year; for example, November 4, 2020, which can be shortened to 11/4/20. This may be confusing for our global colleagues, for whom 11/4 is more often translated as April 11. To be sure your American counterpart knows when you plan to visit, it's wise to write out the name of the month.

Time: In the US, the day is divided into two- to twelve-hour segments. Morning defined as 12 midnight to 11:59 am and afternoon/evening beginning at noon and ending at 11:59 pm. Many Americans won't know what time the meeting will start if you tell them it's at 14:30 or that dinner is at 20:00.

RETAIL BUSINESS HOURS

Many "brick and mortar" retailers are open seven days a week, although their weekend (Saturday, Sunday) hours may be shorter than on weekdays. Most are closed at least part, if not all, of Thanksgiving Day (the third Thursday in November), Christmas Day and Easter Sunday. However, movies, restaurants and some grocery stores will be open.

One area where there are differences across the country is in the sale of alcoholic beverages. In some states (North Dakota or Utah for example), there may restrictions on what days, times and places they may be sold.

Banks are generally open on Monday through Friday, with limited hours on Saturday, and are closed on all national holidays.

ALWAYS ON THE GO

Although Americans think that they work the longest hour in the world, current data don't support their view. Information from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), whose 35 members include much of the developed world and some developing nations, found the average Mexican spends 2,255 hours at work, the highest in the countries surveyed. The same article notes that Germans works "a meagre" 1,363 hours per year. The US? It ranks in the top third of those surveyed, at #11 with 1,780 at work hours per year.⁶

But looking at the US as a nation only tells part of the story. WalletHub compared the 116 largest cities, considering nine metrics that they call "work factors" (including average workweek, unused vacation time, commute time) to determine the hardest-working cities. At the top are Anchorage and San Francisco, at #1 and #2, respectively. Washington, DC came in at #14 and New York at #73 well behind Seattle, Nashville and Chicago. The least hardworking of the 116: Buffalo, Burlington and Detroit.⁷

No matter where they are and what the data indicate, Americans overall have a sense of working hard, long hours. Many work more than one job. Others volunteer hours to organizations in their communities. Their days and evenings are filled with activities, e-mails and responsibilities.

WE CAN HELP

Recognizing an opportunity resulting from the demanding pace and time limits of American life, entrepreneurs and established businesses have created services to relieve the stress.

- Online all the time: 24/7 Shopping. Whether you need a dress for a business event, a wedding gift for your niece or food for your dog, with just a few clicks the purchase is made and

delivered to your door, in as little as two hours or as “long” as two days.

- Want dinner tonight? Have DoorDash deliver it from your favorite restaurant or unwrap the preset meal, sent from your subscription meal service, so you can cook your favorite farm-to-table dish at home for your family.
- Ran out of time to get gas for your car before picking up your children from soccer practice so you can drive to that morning meeting 50 miles from home? No problem. There’s a service that will refill your tank at your house during the night while you sleep.
- Monthly subscription services deliver clothes selected by a stylist to meet your preferences, foods from around the world, toys for your children and so much more. You need it now? It will come.
- Too complicated to get to the bank? Use your phone to deposit a check, send money to your friend to share of the cost of lunch or obtain a loan.

But sometimes you wonder, do all these services a benefit or do they just allow us to add other tasks to our already busy schedules?

RESPONSE TIME

You need it when? Yesterday? OK, no problem. A joke that’s almost serious. Americans seem to want everything instantly. Information. Deliveries. No longer are we willing to wait a month, two weeks to receive what we order. Tomorrow – ok. Today? Much better. In two hours? The best!

The general rule for replying to phone messages and e-mail – to indicate that you are interested in the person contacting you, and/or their proposal – is no more than 24 hours, maybe 48 if you’re traveling. If you are an American, waiting for an answer, a day or two seems reasonable. After that, unless you’ve been forewarned, the response time seems slow (translation may be the person is

not interested, slow, lazy, not “with it”, not professional). In Europe, a week may be satisfactory. However, for American colleagues working with European teams, you say, “They take their sweet time responding. They don’t seem to understand I need this by COB – and that Close of Business means I need it today”.

But if you cannot reply promptly (in American time), then tell your American colleague and indicate when they can expect a response: three days, a week, two weeks? If you won’t be able to meet a target date, speak up, tell someone. People will let you know if that causes a problem and they will generally help find a solution but unexpected missed deadlines, or worse yet, unending silence, can precipitate a disaster or ruin a business relationship.

IN A HURRY. TOO MUCH TO DO

You’re in a hurry. You learned as a child that it’s important to “Do something. Don’t just sit there”. But today, you’re an adult and you are busy, rushed. There are deadlines at work, endless e-mails at all hours of the day and night. Even your non-work is filled with activities: friends and families need your attention (and time), you volunteer in business and philanthropic organizations, feel compelled to read those new business books and don’t forget those early morning yoga classes. It turns out there are even names of this state of being: the hurry sickness, or being “overly time oriented”.⁸ While this is stressful for you, just hearing your tales of all that you have to do can be exhausting for people, like your colleagues in Europe who don’t have the same time focus.

TIME TO GET AWAY?

Considering this state of “time urgency”, you might think that Americans would be anxious to take vacations and enjoy every minute possible away from the stress of the workplace. Yet, this isn’t always the case.

But first, a reminder of how little vacation time most Americans have. As we said before, it begins with the fact that companies are not required to provide vacation time. Most industrialized countries (European, Japan and Australia) by law give employees four to six weeks of annual paid leave. In fact, the US is the only OECD country that does not mandate time off for employees.⁹ However, recent studies show that the majority of companies do provide some paid vacation, usually depending on tenure within a company ranging beginning with one work week (or five days) after one year and increasing to four weeks (twenty days) after ten years.

For employees who do have paid vacation time off, a startling number do not take advantage of that opportunity. One reason for people's reluctance to take vacation time is related to a sense of increased job insecurity, resulting economic downturns of bursting of the "tech bubble" in 2001 and the Financial Crisis of 2008 which resulted in significant job losses.

But even when Americans take vacation, they often still don't leave work completely. According to Chris Abato, President of Moneta Vista Advisors:

Americans work very hard and we don't view a vacation as a time when you're not working. It just means that you're not working all day long, or taking a business call while sitting at the pool with your kids playing in the pool. We think its noble to work hard and that a person's value is tied to hard work even above accomplishments.

OFFICIAL HOLIDAYS

There are ten federal holidays when the banks, post office and many businesses (except retail and restaurants) are closed. Some are fixed to a specific date, for example January 1st, and

others are a set day within a month, such as Veterans Day, which is the second Monday of November. The ten days are as follows:

- | | |
|--|-----------------------------|
| • New Year's Day | January 1 |
| • Martin Luther King Day | Third Monday of January |
| • Washington's Birthday/Presidents Day | Third Monday of February |
| • Memorial Day | Fourth Monday of May |
| • Independence Day | July 4 |
| • Labor Day | First Monday of September |
| • Columbus Day | Second Monday of October |
| • Veterans Day | Second Monday of November |
| • Thanksgiving | Fourth Thursday of November |
| • Christmas | December 25 |

Famous (last) words

"Americans and clocks go hand in hand (even though it's the Swiss who are the master clock makers). We run our lives around a clock. We don't eat lunch when we're hungry if it's not lunchtime". (C. Abato)

"Lost Time is never found again". (Benjamin Franklin)

"A man who dares to waste one hour of time has not discovered the value of life". (Charles Darwin)

NOTES

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