

Stephen Covey: The Time Management Matrix

Stephen Covey is one of the most successful self-help authors of all time. In this article we review his time management model, and consider some of his ideas about how it ought to be used.



The evolution of time management

In his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Covey asserts that, as a field of management study, time management has gone through four stages: [1]

1. Identifying **tasks** and recognising **demands** on our time.
2. Using calendars and appointment books to **schedule** and **plan** for the future.
3. **Planning ahead** and **prioritising** activities; applying **personal values** to the process of prioritisation.
4. Focusing on activities that are not **urgent** but are **important**.

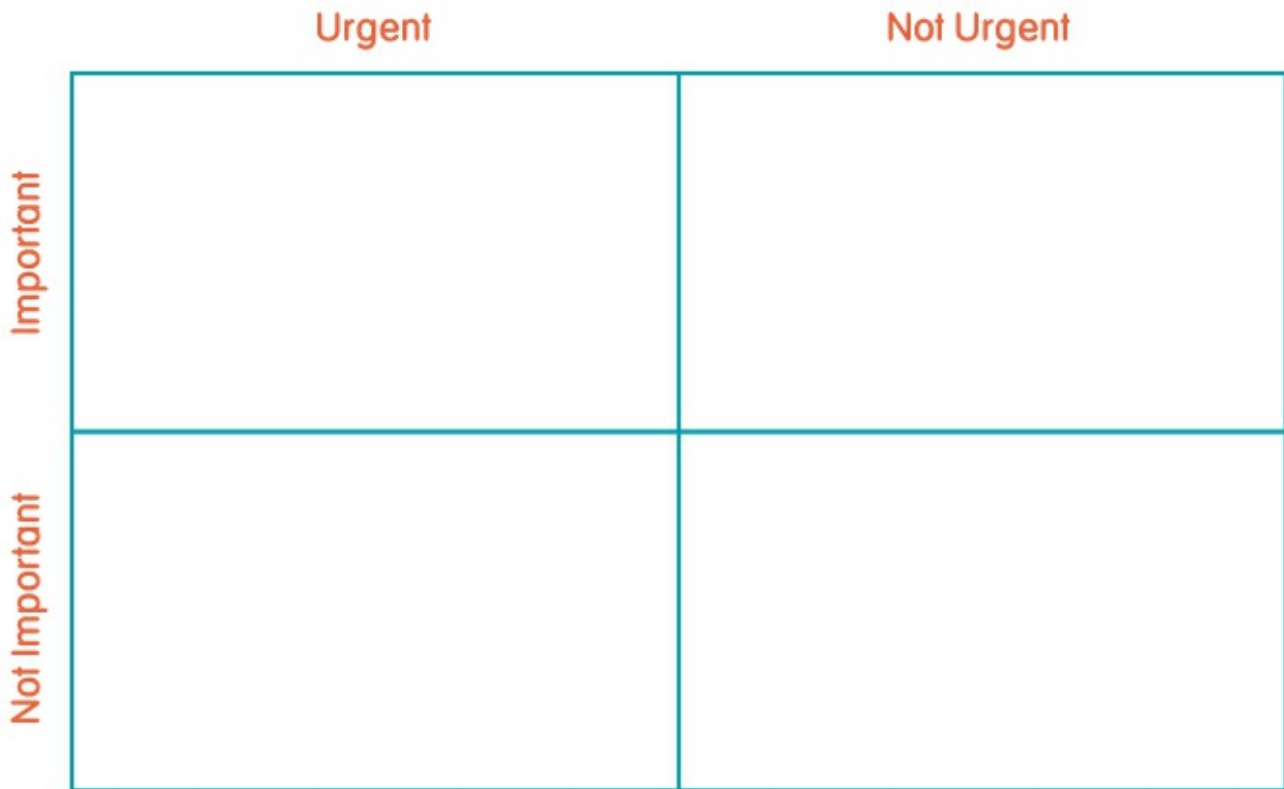
People who adhere to the fourth generation of time management focus on **effectiveness** and **results**, rather than **efficiency** and **methods**. They realise and prioritise the importance of **relationships**, allocating time specifically for nurturing and developing them with the important people in their lives - both professional and personal.

Fulfilling all of your roles

Everyone has different roles and needs within their lives, such as family, work, community, recreation and time for themselves. Covey's time management model is based on the idea that we should manage time around what is **important**, not what is

urgent, and that this should be carried out and planned across the different roles.

All activities can be distinguished using two categories: importance and urgency. Covey uses a **four-box matrix** to visualise this. Urgency is represented on the horizontal axis, with activities placed in either the 'urgent' or 'not urgent' box. Importance is represented on the vertical axis in the same way:



Covey recommends listing all of your ongoing activities and responsibilities - essentially a to-do list - for your work and personal life. Once you have a complete list, place each item in the appropriate box. Any high urgency/high importance projects (or **crises**) should be addressed as priorities. Non-urgent and unimportant activities should be minimised wherever possible. Examine this quadrant for things which can be delegated or ditched all together as **unnecessary**.

A completed example of the matrix is shown below for illustration, focusing on work-related activities. Properly used, it should also include personal activities.

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	Technology project deadline Client meetings Submitting tender	Arrange sales team meeting Research online training courses
Not Important	Sales admin Email line manager	Editing the sales report for the fourth time Meeting colleague for coffee

Using the completed matrix

Covey recommends you place more attention on **highly important** but **non-urgent** issues across all roles. These are things that are often neglected, and cause the most harm when they are. Things like career planning and health fall into this category. Looking at the whole picture in this way, you have the perspective to balance work and other life priorities.

Taking it further

Covey also suggests taking the time to write a personal mission statement, based on **personal, family** and **professional** values, and creating a planner for long-term goals. Franklin Covey sell a specific planner for this purpose, but you can design your own, keeping in mind that it should do all of the following:

- Define all your roles, both professional and personal.
- Select the two or three most important goals every week and tie short-term goals to longer-term ones.
- Focus on activities that will achieve the greatest results.
- Be portable, so that it can be carried or accessed wherever you are.

To provide a **coherent overview**, helping you to focus on a **healthy work-life balance**, the planner should incorporate your personal mission statement and values. Remember that it is your servant, not your master, and must be **flexible** enough to be adapted when necessary. Covey believes that, in addition to improving your time management and work-life balance, this process will also benefit **personal** and **professional relationships**.

Conclusion

Time management is not just about **getting more done**, it's about **getting the right things done**. Taking the time to identify your priorities, recognise which are truly important and allocate your time accordingly could have a revolutionary effect on your productivity, effectiveness and happiness.

Why not try the time management matrix exercise yourself? A blank template is available to download from Supplementary Resources.

[1] Stephen R Covey, *Seven Habits of Highly Successful People* (Simon & Schuster, 1999), p 149.

Image Credit: Flickr [r. g-s](#) (accessed 25 September 2014).