Scheduling the impossible

Thousands of pages have been written on schedule management that include theories, books and reports and hundreds of training courses and workshops that are conducted on the subject every year. And yet people generally avoid implementing even a small portion of this technique into their working and personal lives although it has been proven to increase productivity. We estimate that the majority of corporate professionals struggle with the theory of schedule management and find scheduling tools abhorrent. Why is that? And what can be done to overcome it?

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What is schedule management?

Schedule management is an approach that helps us effectively utilize our time by getting organized to meet deadlines and to streamline collaboration. In the context of projects, this is even more important as it also helps balance other key aspects of project management such as scope, cost, and resources in order to achieve desired results. An incorrect perception exists whereby scheduling is considered synonymous with project management. According to the Project Management Institute (PMI), scheduling (or project time management) includes the processes required to manage a timely completion of the project. It is considered to be the engine to drive a project forward while balancing competing demands from other project management areas.

By getting organized we become more productive and get a sense of order in our professional (and personal) lives. It also limits procrastination and gives us S.M.A.R.T. goals to achieve that are tied to an overall objective i.e. Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timely.

So why do people avoid scheduling...?

We all know that going to the dentist is necessary, yet we procrastinate as if it were a laborious endeavor with no visible benefit until a medical emergency arises. Instead of being proactive we remain reactive as we don't want to feel restricted and likely don't want to change either. This is a simple analogy that identifies the root cause of this disaffection.

Schedule management is never associated with fun–it's always associated with getting more out of us rather than giving us something–higher productivity, scheduling, prioritizing, planning, etc. Because we don't get anything immediate out of schedule management, we associate it with an invisible jail cell that always feels restrictive. Our brain tells us that by the time we finish planning, prioritizing and scheduling, the day is over and the work is still to be done. This resistance is based on our psychological need to be free and our need to have a sense of accomplishment at the end of the day.

Another reason for which people avoid schedule management is that everyone has a way of managing their activities that has been ingrained for a very long time. Schedule management provides an alternate way of managing our work/life that requires a lot of effort on our part to adapt to. Naturally people don't like change and would avoid making any effort for something that has no visible benefit for them.

And a final perception held by corporate professionals is that whether they are efficient or not with their time is irrelevant. These individuals have to stay at work for the prescribed time set by their employer and by being efficient and effective, they will finish the work early leading to more work being assigned. So, people get into bad habits because schedule management doesn't really matter. They meet the deadlines but stretch the work to meet those deadlines. Everyone stays at work between such and such hours and that's it, effective or not. In reality, schedule management can free us to have more fun, more money, greater success in relationships and more "kick the can" type of days.

What's the solution?

In order for people to effectively use scheduling as a way to reduce wastage of time, focus should be put on the broader categories highlighted below:

Understand scheduling

Anyone interested in schedule management needs to first understand what scheduling is and how it helps in the effective utilization of time. They should understand the different concepts like forward, backward scheduling and how

this determines the critical path. They also need to understand how these techniques can be practically used in the corporate world. The benefits can only be visualized when individuals have a firm grasp on the concepts and see the real-world application of schedule management.

Identify what suits you best

People can manage schedules in different ways using different tools. It is incumbent on them to identify the best way they feel comfortable in managing a schedule and the kind of situation they are confronted with. Someone might be comfortable with a detailed and complex Gantt chart* with relationships and dependencies. Others might think of using simple charts on MS Excel or MS PowerPoint that easily satisfy their requirements. Always remember, there is no single perfect way for managing schedules.

Consider your industry

Every industry has a different focus when it comes to managing projects. The focus of the manufacturing industry is effective management of resources whereas the Oil & Gas industry focuses on risk profiles. In order for us to effectively manage our schedules we need to understand the industry we belong to and which tools/techniques are best suited to address those needs.

Use floating windows

An interesting way to make scheduling easier for bigger projects/activities is to break it up into smaller manageable chunks and only schedule those activities that fall within the floating window. So if you decide on a four-week floating window, then you only plan in detail for the upcoming four weeks and leave the rest of the activities as they are. This planning is repeated every two weeks in order to have an ongoing floating window throughout the life of the project.

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Floating window

Activity	January	February	March				April	May
			W1	W2	W3	W4		
Activity 1	███████							
Activity 2			████████████████████					
Activity 2.1			████					
Activity 2.2				████				
Activity 2.3					████			
Activity 2.4						████		
Activity 3								████

In conclusion...

As consultants, time is extremely valuable and our ability to manage and schedule our time effectively is a critical factor in determining our success. We start our careers as consultants driven to optimize our utilization. As managers and leaders, we are focused on optimizing our project financials and staffing plans. Our tendency to use our scheduling abilities makes it difficult for us to complete and meet project objectives on time. This could lead to ineffective use of budget and utilization of resources. To be successful, we should strive to extend our natural scheduling abilities by applying more focused scheduling techniques. Extending our natural abilities with techniques that help us balance competing constraints within a project result in more effective use of budget and resource utilization.

Using the principles mentioned above we can streamline our schedule management processes and advertently affect the way we manage projects. ●

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* A Gantt chart is a type of bar chart, adapted by Karol Adamiecki in 1896 and independently by Henry Gantt in the 1910s, that illustrates a project schedule. Gantt charts illustrate the start and finish dates of the terminal elements and summary elements of a project.