

You asked, Tony Crabbe answered

1. How to find more productive time in business?

There will never be any more time, it's a finite resource. It's a question of how usefully we use the limited time we have. To help you use your time more 'productively' the question you should never ask yourself is 'how much have I done today?' What you should ask instead is 'how much impact have I had today?' Our impact only comes from our ability to bring real focus on the important, big things; rather than allowing our attention to be scattered by hundreds of micro-tasks, messages and distractions. The simplest way to do this isn't clever; it's just to put the most important things first! From a psychological point of view, the order we do things matters, because our brain gets tired. I always warn people to beware of 'when': lots of people tell themselves 'I'll do that big thing when I've cleared my inbox' by the time we have an empty inbox, our thinking power is too depleted to be bothered with a big thinking activity, so we tend to fill our time with seemingly useful, less intellectually demanding activity. Do the big stuff first, not when you have time.

2. What are your thoughts on people working from home?

The research shows flexible working has a positive effect on motivation, productivity and life balance. So it has to be considered a good thing. There is some research to suggest that working from home all the time is challenging: people can feel disconnected and invisible. What I think matters is three things. Firstly, we get much better at deliberately choosing environments to suit the intellectual task we want to do: the quiet of home is probably far better than a noisy open-plan office for deep thinking and analysis, for example. All the research shows our behaviour and thought patterns are more influenced by our environment than we ever appreciate. Secondly, make sure any move to flexible working has a strategic intent. I find the best flexible working projects aim to deliver business results as well as happier staff (and cheaper real estate). Ask yourself, how can a more flexible workforce drive your strategy. When staff understand the strategic reasons for doing it, they are more likely to embrace it; when it's just HR driven, staff will often still feel the need to be 'present' in the office. Finally, when you move to flexible working, it can often highlight any weaknesses in your business processes. For example, if your business is not good at setting clear objectives or outcomes for your people, it can be hard. Flexible working requires a more adult manager / employee relationship. The manager trusts the employee more, giving them a lot more freedom. Having said that, the consequences, positive and negative, for performance should be much more evident.

3. I'm so busy caring for our horses, and teaching clients - we are a new social enterprise, making riding affordable for poorer families. How do I find time for marketing, teaching, horse care, and keeping on top of my paperwork, but also make a profit?

For me, this question is all about a sense of mastery over your time. When we feel the masters of our time, we still don't get everything we want to done, but we persistently have the ability to focus on what matters. In this case I would say it starts with some brutal prioritization. Write down all the important things you feel will make a difference to your enterprise. Then, even though they are all worthwhile, just choose one. In the following weeks, focus for a small amount of time, each day, on that one area. Soon you will feel some momentum; you will also see the benefits from what you've been doing. Only at that point should you start thinking of anything else to do. Start small; build a good habit; see the success; and build out from there. Good luck!

4. What advice would you give to new start-up business owners?

Don't try and do everything, and don't try and serve all customers. As a new business, resources will be tight. Get completely clear of the product or service you will offer; and those you will not. Fight against slowly adding more things to your portfolio: they can strangle your ability to focus, and so you will have less impact on the market. Also, be brutally focused on which clients you want to serve. The essence of corporate strategy is focus; and through getting really focused, we are more likely to stand out from the crowd and differentiate ourselves.

5. Some people don't want to be 'inspired', they just want to 'do their job' and plod along. Is that a bad thing and should management try to change their attitude? What's the most effective way to do that?

Every person has the right to choose how engaged they will be. However, this shouldn't let management off the hook. Research shows that only 20% of employees are really engaged at work; it also shows that only 20% of employees use

their core skills regularly. Most management teams get 'inspiration' backwards: they think it is their job to inspire their team. In reality, it is the management's job to create conditions for people to motivate themselves. What does this mean in practice? Motivational initiatives such as reward schemes, team building events and upbeat presentations, can often have limited effect. It's not what you say but what you hear that matters. Rather than throwing staff at your staff in the hope it will motivate them; why not try to understand them instead. Talk to them; ask them how you could motivate them better. Motivation and inspiration are just other words for engagement: so engage with your people. Listen, don't talk!

6. Do you think we work long hours in the UK, just for the sake of being seen at work?

I think one of the reasons is for the sake of being seen at work; but it's broader than that. Research shows that even in our private lives, we try and demonstrate how busy we are. One study of Christmas cards found that people are increasingly competing to demonstrate how much they are doing. Our busyness demonstrates to the world how vital and important we are (or so we think). I don't think it's a coincidence that the most productive country in Europe - Germany - works some of the shortest hours; with Spain and Greece, at the other end of the productivity spectrum, working the longest hours.

7. How do you make people who are busy realise they are not and have just filled up their time with 'stuff'?

I seldom find someone who isn't busy; but I also find that most people have just filled their time with stuff. I find it's hard to persuade people to stop doing things; they feel fearful about the consequences, or undermined if you suggest the 'stuff' wasn't important. Instead, I try and get people really excited and committed to what will make a difference; what will impact on the business or their lives. Once people are really focused on the big stuff; once they have built up some good habits which help them to focus on that; the other 'stuff' starts to get the attention it deserves.

8. Should more UK businesses in general be much more disruptive in how they operate to succeed?

The Nomura Institute - a highly regarded economic research body - claim we are now in the fourth era of economic activity. First we had agricultural, then industrial, then the information age. They claim we are now in the Creative Era. They argue this is the case for a couple of reasons: information is ubiquitous, it's everywhere and so it is becoming a commodity rather than a thing of value. Also, as everyone is so busy, the biggest scarcity today isn't quantity, quality, or even time; it's attention. All our customers are so thoroughly bombarded with demands and messages that we are going to have to work hard to capture their attention. The only way we will do this is through innovation. As soon as you launch any new product its road to obsolescence has started. We need to constantly prioritise time for rethinking our products, services and business processes; and find ways or people to challenge our thinking. On a more general point, I travel a lot in my work, and I would see the single biggest strength of UK plc is creativity and innovation. We can't compete on price and we can't compete on scale. I don't think we can even compete on speed. But, around the world, the UK has a well-deserved reputation for creativity. We can't kill our only source of international advantage by allowing ourselves to become too busy to think.

9. How best can a small business owner delegate without losing control of their business?

Delegation involves trust, and takes time to train someone up to allow you to delegate. For me, the question is simple: if you want control, then you also have to accept that your business will not grow. That is a valid business choice. However, if you want growth, you have to find a way to delegate. Shift your focus away from your individual expertise and activity, and onto the company's performance. Experiment with giving people genuine responsibility. Put measures and checks in place, to ensure successful delivery. If it works, build on this. If it goes wrong, don't stop delegating, just work out what went wrong and delegate differently next time. Remember, the stuff you are not delegating is stopping you from focusing on other, important things.

10. How does Tony manage his time?

Great question. I work in massive chunks of time. I completely immerse myself in things, only stopping to check things like email and voicemail a couple of times a day. I don't have a to-do list, because I don't need a to-do list to remind me of the big things I need to focus on. I do, however, use Microsoft OneNote to capture random ideas, tasks and worries. I do this to get them out of my head so I can focus better. Towards the end of each day I look at my bucket list and deal with what's there (mostly I delete stuff). I also have three big values that I use whenever I prioritise. These are creation, energy and relationships. I make sure, when I prioritise, that I am devoting enough attention to

creating things (e.g. writing), to deepening and building relationships (that's inside and outside work); and finally that I am doing enough that energizes me (that's both stuff that excites and scares me; physical exercise; and great time with my family).

11. How can you learn to refocus towards your vision and feel motivated after going through a traumatic / challenging experience which affects the way you now feel about the world?

At times in our lives, our visions can seem a little dry. They can be useful goals but do little to inspire us. If this is the case, it might be worth de-focusing on your vision and think in terms of your values and strengths instead. Start by becoming really clear on your core values. Many people fail to use their values to be the sources of direction and inspiration they can be because they don't do the work to figure out what is most important to them. A list of 12 values is useless. Identify the one, two or three values that, more than any others mean something to you. One of the silver linings to a traumatic event is it can often bring what's important to us into sharp clarity. Use that clarity. Don't try to motivate yourself in general. Be specific. Identify ways to do substantive work towards your values, or using your greatest strengths. If you can bring more focus into your values and your strengths; motivation will follow, as will success.

12. How do I handle multiple requests at the same time that all seem to have the same high priority status?

Make a choice. I used to work in the financial markets on the L.I.F.F.E. trading floor. On the floor there were 'locals' who wore red jackets and traded their own money. What always interested me was the people who were most successful, made more choices. They didn't try and work out the right choice; they just made a choice. If it turned out wrong, they'd quickly choose to get out of that position. If it worked, they'd choose to stay in their position. I see too many people not making enough choices, which means they try and do both things, or miss opportunities by procrastinating over what to do. Choose. You won't always be right, but it is better than not choosing.

13. How can you influence others that impose impossible timescales?

In project management there is a model called the triple constraints model. This means that when we shorten the deadline on a project, it will have a direct effect either on the scope (quantity or quality) of the project or the resources needed. One way to deal with impossible requests isn't to be awkward, just explain the implications of that request and give the person a choice: would they prefer you to reduce the scope of the work (do it to a lower than usual quality or scale) or would they like to give you more resources. Often people giving impossible deadline don't realise the full implications of their request. You want to get them into a reasonable, but frank discussion. Also, as a minor additional point, when we use the word 'because' in our attempts to influence, we are much more likely to be influential - it seems it's almost a magic word!

14. I used a wipe board to plan and to list my 'do' actions. The act of physically putting them on show and then being able to action and review was motivational not only for me but for others. Is this something that you would recommend?

Yes, providing they are at the right level. If the actions are too small and trivial, it undermines motivation. But if the list highlights and focuses attention on the big stuff, and it's reviewed regularly, it is a really useful practice.

15. If I have a difficult piece of thinking to do, should I do in 4 x 2 hour slots over 4 days or one day of 8 hours?

I'm a big believer in the Zeigarnik Effect. It basically means the brain works with open and closed files. One of the ways I increase my own effectiveness if I have a big piece of thinking to do tomorrow is I start working on the topic today. Even if all I do is mind map the topic for 15-30 minutes. What this does is it creates an open file in the brain. Overnight, the subconscious will work on the topic and I'll be more imaginative the following day. On that basis, I would suggest 4x2 hour slots. This would work even better if those slots are at the time when you are at your brightest - for most of us that's first thing in the morning.

16. From setting a habit perspective, which one would be better: would you decide on the big tasks you want to prioritise for the day early THAT day, or the evening before?

Quite frankly, it depends how battered your brain is! Prioritization is actually quite a demanding task for our prefrontal cortex. We will often be better at making tough choices when we are fresh in the morning. What I find is that, when people make lists at the end of the day they are more of the 'I mustn't forget to...' kind of lists rather than

tough, strategic choices. Those kinds of lists are valuable, as long as they don't drive our activity when we start the next day...and drive us back into reactive mode. I suggest looking at those check lists after lunch...when you are a bit brain dead so ticking off to-dos is mindlessly rewarding!

17. What about prioritisation of tasks which I have used before for identifying key tasks to separate the wood from the trees?

Separating the wood from the trees is critical. One of the consequences of time pressure is that our field of vision, our perspective narrows. So we only take into account the stuff that's immediately in front of us. Whatever technique you use, proper prioritisation starts with sitting back and thinking broadly about the situation and asking what is most important. It doesn't start from a random list of tasks, where we put numbers next to each item. There was a very successful general in the US army who, when asked how she prioritised said: I list all the things I think are important, then I put them in order, then I delete everything below number 3 on the list! That's maybe a bit extreme, but I think it describes the difference between priorities and lists of stuff. When faced with a list of stuff, don't waste your time going through the whole list, numbering or colour coding them. Simply choose the first three to do, and do them.

18. If people are used to you emailing back quickly, how do you start to change this expectation? Can you just stop or do you need to do it gradually?

If we want to change our focus, we should explain why to people. Our views on other peoples' actions are heavily driven by the interpretations we make. For example, if you saw an old lady falling over; would you help her? What if she was filthy, covered in vomit and smelt of urine? Our feelings about this situation change depending on our interpretations. I had a client who was becoming irritated at my slow email response. This was the case until I explained that I wanted to focus on thinking, and how I only checked email irregularly so I could focus. His irritation changed to inspiration! So yes, you might do it slowly, but far more important than that, explain the reasons. Everyone suffers from busyness; if you have an approach that makes you more effective, it might impress people.

19. What are your views on using automated software to help with tasks?

I'm not sure I can be specific here. All I would say is that, if there is a tool that helps free you up from repetitive tasks, then use it. Just make sure you use the time you have freed up for important stuff; and don't wait until you have that tool until you start to shift your focus onto the important.

20. Are midday power naps a good idea to rest our brains?

There a lot of research that shows the power of sleep. It has been shown to increase athletic performance in swimming and basketball; it has been show to refresh our ability to focus etc. One study found, for example, that if people were posed with a complex problem, and then 8 hours later asked to try and solve it. Those that had slept in the intervening time were much more likely to find the solution. Sleep not only boosts our ability to concentrate, it also improves our creativity.

21. How much time should I spend working on average? At the moment I do 12hrs plus.

It's difficult to be exact. We're all different. However I have to wonder about the consequences of working 12 hours each day. This is likely to reduce your ability to prioritise...so you will be more likely to do stuff than strategically focus. It will reduce your ability to think, problem solve and innovate. It will decrease your productive output. It will also reduce your energy, as you make compromises out of work, so you are likely to become a little more tired, a little greyer and a little less inspiring. Our brains are not machines; we have to give them time to recover. If you really feel you MUST do that amount of work, at the very least build strategic breaks into your day. Think of your day as being like pulses of extreme activity followed by periods of recovery. That's far healthier for your brain. If we flatline our activity, always on, always running, no pause, we develop something called an allostatic load; which is bad for our health, our happiness and our longevity as well as our effectiveness.