

# GET ON TOP OF YOUR DIARY

We're all too busy, but there are ways you can manage your day. Story by **Rebecca Houghton**



I recently conducted a LinkedIn poll, asking: "How busy do you feel compared to 2020?" About 800 people responded, with 80 per cent reporting they were a little or a lot busier. Studies also show we are busier, with email traffic increasing 30 per cent in the past five years, and a constant flow of new work and social platforms to engage with.

Every spare second we have is used playing a game of "whack a mole" as we flick between platforms to keep up with hundreds of alerts. Controlling the pace of work has become an essential skill for anyone.

## **Busy is your brand**

Being busy is an unconscious badge of honour for almost all of us. When someone asks "How's work?" the standard response is to smile, shrug and say "I'm so busy." How busy you are has become a way of defining your value and importance. Ever heard two colleagues comparing (and competing with) stories about how busy they are? Of course you have.

## **Busy is your happy place**

Busy is easier than productive, impactful or strategic. Deeper thinking requires heavy intellectual lifting: it's tiring, so we avoid it (and use busy as our excuse). Busy is also addictive. Every time we respond to an email or a notification, we get a hit of dopamine that gives us a momentary high. Like most addicts, we are conflicted about our relationship with busy. We smile proudly when we say "I'm so busy" yet we hate it at the same time.

## **Don't waste (your) precious time**

We give our time away thoughtlessly and we need to start treating it like the precious commodity it is. Most of us are in the habit of accepting meetings without an agenda. We don't question the necessity of our presence

when we are on a long list of attendees. We habitually schedule 60 minutes for meetings and 30 minutes for calls: it's a system default setting. Break the habit; reset your calendar default from 60 minutes to 30 minutes and calls from 30 minutes to 10 minutes, and ask others to do the same.

## **Time management is not the answer**

Your diary is full and no amount of time-blocking, list-making or colour-coding will change that. Instead of trying to find clever tricks to add more busyness to your day, focus your attention on subtracting it. Can you remove yourself from a meeting? Can that meeting be an email? Do you really need to read everything you are cc'd on? Removing yourself from things in your diary might give you FOMO, but stick with it.

## **Set your priorities**

Management writer Stephen Covey once said: "Schedule your priorities, don't prioritise your schedule." He is right, but most of us don't even know what our priorities are, and that's the reason we are always at the mercy of other people's priorities. The Eisenhower principle (the urgent v important matrix, said to have been used by US president Dwight Eisenhower) is a gold nugget if you use it to plan your day. You will be able to identify the most important things you need to do and you will be able to ruthlessly prioritise any new requests that come in rather than get carried away by them.

Ultimately, the reason our diary controls us rather than the other way around is because we let it. Make a decision about who is the boss and stick with it.

*Rebecca Houghton is founder of BoldHR and author of IMPACT: 10 Ways to Level Up Your Leadership (\$29.95).*