

Missing the Point – Driven. Our “Type A” nation obsessed with time.
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Life consists of a finite amount of time – and there's the rub.

When you're reading this, check the items with which you identify. Figuratively speaking, of course. Don't actually write on your screen which probably isn't protected by a [Winky Dink](#) set. If you suffer even one, let alone most of the following, I get it. We are seriously overbooked but then, if we're to be honest with ourselves, we wouldn't have it any other way. It's who we are, as individuals and as a people whose accomplishments over the past almost 250 years are the stuff of historical legend.

Life is short, some of us lasting longer than others. There are more than 8 billion people on our planet. With very few exceptions, in the next 100 years, all of us will be gone, having been replaced by 8 billion new and different people. It sounds remarkable, but that's the way it is for our species. We are not permanent, enduring features of our ecosphere. Far from it.

To say that “every second counts” is technically true but, more importantly, it's also a state of mind. Time is precious, precisely because it is limited, for each of us on a very personal level. It's true for everyone, but we Americans are particularly obsessed with it, with time that is. We have an extraordinary work ethic. We are a nation on the job, making it happen, whatever “it” happens to be.

The other day, I was up and on the road early on my way to an 8:00 AM meeting an hour and a half away. I just assumed that I'd be all by myself out there, but I wasn't. Traffic was light, but there were cars, so many that I asked myself, *"Where are all these people going?"* Best guess, they were all on their way to or home from work. *"We are,"* I thought to myself, *"if nothing else, an industrious people."*

We're having some work done to our house for which the contractor's team arrives at 7:30 in the morning. Because some of them arrive early, I open our garage doors at 7:00 o'clock. A couple of days ago, I saw one of the carpenters sitting in his car, so I walked over, peered in the window and invited him to come in. Sipping coffee, he smiled and told me, *"I just need a minute to wake up."* I don't know where he lives, but he'd gotten up early, stopped for a cup of coffee on his way and made it to work ahead of schedule. Half hour later, he'd be on the job, working a full day without so much as a break for lunch.

From all accounts, we are [a sleep deprived people](#). Why is that? However essential sleep may be to our health and longevity – and to the quality of the work we do when we're awake – for too many of us, we're too busy to hang out under the sheets. *"Sleep is for weenies,"* as a friend of mine likes to say.

How many of you wake up tired every day?

Men don't shave as frequently as their fathers and grandfathers, in part because shaving takes time. (There's that word again.) It's time we need to be spending doing something else. Getting more sleep, if possible.

We're driven. We go in early, eat lunch at our desks and leave late. We don't take siestas except for the occasional 20 minute power nap when no one is looking.

We decide where to live, not so much because of the quality of schools and life in different neighborhoods, but because of their proximity to where we work. And when we do live farther away, for reasons having to do with the quality of life, it's often at the cost of a commute that sucks the living daylight out of your morning. Most of us live in cities where we have clustered together to save time, on the way to do this and that, only to suffer from time consuming traffic congestion.

"Multi-tasking" is a thing because we don't have enough time to spend doing only one thing a time.

Do you find yourself annoyed by the voice quiz when you call customer service? It's aggravating. Questions the voice asks never have to do with precisely why you're calling. *"All of our representatives are assisting other callers."* ...So, maybe you should hire more of them. Charge me a little more for whatever you're selling and then spend

some of *your* money hiring more customer service people so you can stop wasting *my* time when I call you.

I called Verizon FiOS to talk about upgrading my service. The speed I get coming to the house is what I'm paying for, but the wifi inside my house is much slower. Ironically, they want me to upgrade my wifi speed to save me time when I'm online, time I'll need to wait on hold to talk to them about that upgrade. ...After almost an hour, I hung up, called back and told the automated operator that I was interested in new service. **"Bingo!"** a customer service representative picks up the phone. Now we know why "All of our representatives..." are so busy. Busy recruiting new customers and booking more lucrative upgrades that, not incidentally have a zero incremental cost to Verizon. FYI, we're switching to Comcast for Internet only and YouTube TV.

Good news. I was inspired by this Verizon incident and wrote the entire first, albeit rough draft of this op/ed while I was on hold, my phone lying on my desk next to my computer, playing really bad hold music.

Even when we relax or vacation, we tend to do it with determination.

How much time are you spending thinking and worrying about things you have to do instead of spending time and giving full attention to whatever work you have in front of you? Only to have a good number of those future things never happen?

How much of whatever you're worried about has to do with the time you have to do something about it?

How often a day do you check the time, on your wrist, the clock on the wall or your cell phone? How much of what you're anxious about has to do with time?

As a person and as a country, we tend to underestimate the difficulty of what we commit to doing – and then do whatever it takes to get it done anyway. Welcome to the USA. How do you think we made it to the moon in less than a decade after JFK's speech? What about the speed with which Franklin Roosevelt mobilized the US Economy to join our allies in Europe under threat of Hitler's Germany – eventually making bombers faster than the Germans could shoot them down. Does the Manhattan Project ring a bell? The record pace with which pharmaceutical companies delivered lifesaving COVID vaccines with mRNA technology?

Damn it, when we're in a hurry with a popular purpose, no one takes the American economy. And that economy? It's not a thing of its own. It's you and me and the person in the carrel, office, lab or construction site, whatever, next to you. Unfortunately, all that human energy and creativity doesn't come without a price.

Put another way, do you find yourself thinking, when it's finally over, that you wouldn't have undertaken whatever you did had you known how hard it would be?

Do you make lists of what you have to do on a daily basis? Why would you do that? Because there are too many items on that list for you to remember and to help you manage your time. When was the last time you actually accomplished everything on your list?

The popularity of all things Internet and rise of the Amazon behemoth and other online retailers is due to favorable pricing, of course, but also to the time savings and 24x7 convenience of online shopping.

All these instances and many, many more that we have in common, regardless of our level of education, income and professions, are manifestations of “The Time Problem.” Everything we do takes time and there’s only a finite amount of it. We all know that, of course, and yet we keep taking on more work, particularly if we’re getting paid to do it.

Do you have any spare time? And what would you do with it if you did?

When asked to do something for your family, friends or your employer, how often, if ever, do you say “No”? Is “No” a word in your vocabulary you don’t use often enough? And why is that?

The simple answer is, we are driven. It’s who we are. It’s our nature and the reason we have the leading economy in the world. It’s both how and why our ancestors got here. It’s what we have in common with the people who have walked from central and south America to the banks of the Rio Grande.

We are driven, but are we happy? Are we approaching happiness, whatever that means for each of us, with the same energy as the work and everything else we do? Are we maximizing or even just optimizing our use of the time we have? Is anxiety something external that we can figure out how to overcome? Or is it self-inflicted, the result of our taking on more than we can chew?

-Les Cohen

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