

# The Value of Timeboxing

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In this track, we'll cover:

- The definition of timeboxing
- The main advantages of timeboxing
- Practical guidance for how to implement timeboxing

To paraphrase Francesco Cirillo, founder of the Pomodoro Technique, for those of us trying to be more productive in our daily lives, time is the enemy [1]. When faced with an overwhelming number of projects, deadlines, and ideas, it can often seem impossible to find enough hours in the day to complete everything. Today we will be looking at the timeboxing method of time management and the ways it could help you to become a more productive and creative person.

To those of you who already use to-do lists, this idea might sound familiar. Timeboxing is, simply put, a calendar-based to-do list in which each project you are working on at a given moment is allocated a specific time slot [2]. Rather than spreading a task throughout the day and letting your productivity be interrupted by meetings, social media, dog walking, and tasks – timeboxing involves condensing all the time you'd spend on the task into one "box". This allows you to focus solely on one problem at a time. Unlike techniques such as time blocking, where you're trying to find time for everything on your agenda, timeboxing is designed to constrain the amount of time you can dedicate to a specific task. This prevents you from getting distracted by irrelevant details or competing tasks. Frequent interruptions have been proven to impact our productivity and happiness levels [3], so finding a method that resolves these issues is really meaningful.

Let's look at an example of timeboxing. If you want to spend your afternoon tidying your desk but also have an assignment due in a few days, you can split the time you have between the two tasks based on their priorities: spend three hours on the assignment and the second that allotted time is up, move onto the tidying for thirty minutes. When those thirty minutes are over, move on to the next task, and so on. That way, you'll be less likely to get bogged down by over-researching for your assignment or spending too much time finding the right furniture polish for your desk. Committing an infinite amount of time to something may mean our work expands to fill the space

and projects never truly feel complete. Or they simply feel slow, stagnant, and uninspiring. Plus, we may fall into the trap of boasting about how hard we've worked when in reality, we've just inexplicably dragged out a task and worked inefficiently.

The two main advantages of the timeboxing technique are prioritisation and urgency. Timeboxing allows you to look over all of the tasks in your agenda in context – you know that tidying your desk is important, but you *also* know you've got a deadline coming up that both takes priority and is a more complex task. Therefore, you can put adequate time into the assignment while also getting the little things done. Compare this to the most common form of time management, the to-do list. The contrasts between timeboxing and to-do lists are clear and act as a solid case for the former. Marc Zao-Sanders, a proponent of using timeboxing to increase productivity levels, says of to-do lists [3]:

*First, they overwhelm us with too many choices. Second, we are naturally drawn to simpler tasks which are more easily accomplished. Third, we are rarely drawn to important-but-not-urgent tasks, like setting aside time for learning [4]. Fourth, to-do lists on their own lack the essential context of what time you have available. Fifth, they lack a commitment device, to keep us honest.*

When your list consists of tasks with different levels of priority and complexity, you're more likely to prioritise the difficult tasks and forget about the easy or low-priority tasks. Do that often, and you're just making more problems for yourself further down the line [5].

Furthermore, because each timebox has a set time limit, you'll be more likely to find yourself wanting to get more done in your allotted time. If you have thirty minutes to tidy your desk, for instance, you won't waste twenty of those minutes making sure your pens are arranged by colour. According to Gina Trapani and Adam Pash in their book *Lifemaker: The Guide to Working Smarter, Faster, and Better*:

*Lots of people work better under pressure because the limitation puts their brains into overdrive and forces them to think quickly and creatively about the best way to spend that little time they have. It makes you race to an imaginary finish line and gets you there more efficiently than if you had all the time in the world.*

This has practical applications as well as creative ones. Because each project has a fixed time limit, you're more likely to keep a project as streamlined as possible. As with the desk tidying example earlier, if you know you only have one week to work on a project, you won't want to complicate it with unnecessary add-ons. This is an absolutely vital skill when ensuring that your project is delivered both on time and to scope. In a professional context, this could even save you money. Most work projects involve a trade-off between time, cost, and scope. A smaller scope means less wasted time, and as the adage goes: time is money.

Another advantage of timeboxing compared to other time management techniques is how visual it is. To-do lists can quickly become intimidating and unreadable when there's a lot on our plates. Timeboxes are much more visually appealing, breaking your day into neat chunks that can be intuitively read and understood on the go. It becomes

less about knowing what to do first and more about where to put something in your schedule. In this way, timeboxing is perfect for fans of the video game *Tetris*.

This leads nicely to the main benefit of timeboxing: the sense of control it offers. As mentioned earlier, to-do lists and overstuffed calendars can be overwhelming, and when we're overwhelmed, we can become paralysed. We might begin to procrastinate [6], ignoring our responsibilities rather than dealing with them. Organising your day into timeboxes provides a simple, easily accessible schedule to work from, so you feel much more in control of the work you have left to do. A glance at a timeboxed calendar tells you everything you need to know to get your work done and exactly how long it takes to do it. Not only does timeboxing act as a visual guide to the week ahead, "it gives you a comprehensive record of what you've done"[3] previously. As Marc Zao-Sanders examines, a timeboxing calendar can be a great resource for seeing what you've achieved over the past weeks and months. It displays your biggest victories and the time and dedication you've put into them.

Timeboxing also synchronises well with other time management systems. If the timeboxing system sounds familiar, it might be because of its resemblance to the Pomodoro Method, which we mentioned earlier. The Pomodoro Method is a sort of early version of timeboxing: simply pick a task, set a 25-minute timer and spend that full time working on your one chosen task without distractions. Once the timer goes off, you take a five-minute break before setting another timer and continuing the process again [7]. The advantage of the timeboxing system over the Pomodoro Method is that it's much more flexible: Whereas the Pomodoro Method breaks your day down into rigid 30-minute chunks, timeboxing allows you to customise your time management to the task at hand. You will need more than 25 minutes to complete a complex programming job, so setting such a narrow timeframe is unfeasible. However, by applying the same mindset (work for a set amount of time, break for a set amount of time), you will be able to manage every facet of your day easily.

Of course, timeboxing isn't a one-size-fits-all solution. There are some instances where setting a fixed period to accomplish something may cause you to cut corners, reducing the overall quality of your work. If you see that you only have twenty minutes left to complete a task that is 90% complete, the temptation will be to rush to get everything finished, leading to the last 10% of the project coming out sloppy and mismanaged. This can obviously be avoided through a degree of self-discipline, but if you're planning on using the timeboxing method with another person, it might be worth letting them know up front that if they want something done within a narrow time frame, they may have to compromise on certain features.

Similarly, timeboxing might not work for you if you find yourself easily demoralised or stressed by unfinished tasks. It is always possible that you come to the end of your allotted task with some work outstanding: this is natural, especially if this is your first time trying to timebox your schedule. If this does become a problem, it might be worth taking some time at the end of the work day to go over any unfinished tasks, working out how much time it would take to wrap up any loose ends the following day.

Timeboxing is far from rigid, and it might take a few weeks of consistent change and adjustment to get the balance right.

So to recap, the timeboxing method works by streamlining your work into set timeframes that you then plan your day around. Unlike to-do lists and time blocking, timeboxing allows you to plan your workload in the context of the other work you have to do, letting you properly prioritise tasks while ensuring that everything – big and small – gets done.

If this sounds like the method for you, we've provided some further reading that you can use to make your timeboxing technique fit your specific workload. Why not try to timebox the rest of your day today? What tasks do you have left to do? How long will it take to complete each task without any distractions or unnecessary work?

That's all for today. Thanks for listening, and keep striving to be your best self.

[1] *The Pomodoro® Technique*, Francesco Cirillo (1980)  
<https://www.pomodorotechnique.com/>

[2] *Timeboxing*, Clockify  
<https://clockify.me/timeboxing>

[3] *How Timeboxing Works and Why It Will Make You More Productive*, Marc Zao-Sanders (2018)  
<https://hbr.org/2018/12/how-timeboxing-works-and-why-it-will-make-you-more-productive>

[4] *Take Control of Your Learning at Work*, Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic (2018)  
<https://hbr.org/2018/07/take-control-of-your-learning-at-work>

[5] *To-Do Lists Don't Work*, Daniel Markovitz (2012)  
<https://hbr.org/2012/01/to-do-lists-dont-work>

[6] *How to Prevent Anxiety From Causing Procrastination*, Katharina Star, PhD (2022)  
<https://www.verywellmind.com/procrastination-and-panic-disorder-2584095>

[7] *The Pomodoro Technique*, todoist.com  
<https://todoist.com/productivity-methods/pomodoro-technique>