Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy

**Author** _Melissa Gregg_  

**Reviewer** _Clem Guthro_ , independent librarian.

Gregg, the Principal Engineer and Research Director for Client Computing at Intel, has written an interesting and perhaps controversial book that attempts to recast the narrative on productivity away from the individual to the group. In four chapters, using both a feminist perspective as well as the work of German political philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, Gregg elucidates the problems that an obsession with time management and productivity have created for the modern worker. Her intent is to cause readers to rethink the advice being offered in such titles as Alex Genadinik’s 20 Principles of Productivity: Focus, Motivation, Organization, Habit Building, Time Management, Apps, Psychology, Goal Setting, Procrastination and More (2017), and David Allen’s Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity (2015).

Gregg sets out to review the established narrative of time management and productivity in US culture. She explores how the concept of productivity emerged and shaped how management and individual thought about the workplace. Using feminist, race, and class-sensitive histories, she helps the reader to rethink the history of time management as well as the theoretical underpinnings. Her ultimate intent is to challenge the role and value of “productivity” as a relevant concept for the modern workplace, especially a workplace world that is dominated by mobile and digital technologies.

Historically, any review of the history of time management would begin with the timekeeping studies of Frederick Winslow Taylor. Gregg rightly unseats Taylor by reviewing the history of time management that began with women in the home prior to industrialization. Guidebooks for 19th-century housewives addressed many time-management problems, similar to those that entered the factory. Christine Frederick (Household Engineering, 1915) and Lillian Gilbreath, wife of Frank Gilbreath of time and motion studies fame, showed that domestic engineering required the same time management skills that came to be the focus of the factory and the corporation. As part of foregrounding the role of women in time management, Gregg also correctly exposes the male bias as well as the racial and cultural superiority that were implicit in these guidebooks and ideas.

Gregg notes that from 1910 forward, there was a gradual shift away from a communal and religious perspective to self-improvement and individual accomplishment that became firmly ensconced in future ideas of productivity. Taylor, whose work is certainly influential in the time management arena, also championed this idea of the individual through his “ideal man” against which the work of others is judged. The flawed Hawthorne study conducted by Elton Mayo infantilized workers and silenced those who were powerless. As part of his study, Mayo incorporated ideas of athleticism, which Gregg traces through current time management approaches, especially those inculcated by apps and digital platforms.

While Gregg argues that the concept and history of productivity is owned by the individual and not the Organization, this is not a widely held view. She explores productivity through the lens of the genre of self-help books, noting that in some ways they have been succeeded by apps, TED talks, webinars, and influencer blogs. The self-help genre imparts the wisdom of the teacher to an audience seeking answers on being more efficient. Self-help embraces the terminology and ethos of individual athleticism with the teacher as the coach, and the learner as getting in shape. The self-help genre came into its own in an era of white male executives, and Gregg notes that it still maintains an air of white male privilege.

Gregg makes two arguments about the self-help system that should be questioned. She argues that a predominant role of self-help is to help in avoiding procrastination, rather than the more likely need to manage an overwhelming workload. She also states that self-help techniques separate the individual from the needs of others,
without providing convincing evidence as to why this might be true. Calling on the German philosopher and
cultural theorist, Peter Sloterdijk, Gregg argues that the
language of athletics provides a language for celebrating the
competitiveness that is seen in self-help’s emphasis on
training and self-enhancement. It is perhaps this athletics-
cism that Gregg sees as pitting the individual against the
group, though it could be equally argued that athleticism
is also a group or shared activity.

Gregg notes that in the rise of the digital economy and
personal productivity tools, there is a new and intentional
focus on aesthetics. Productivity apps and digital platforms
offer personal help with the how (schedules, workloads,
tasks) as opposed to the where work happens. The design-
ers intend to translate methods of productivity into the
daily practice of the individual. In order to be effective,
Gregg argues, the aesthetics of the app is related to the
appeal of downloading one productivity tool over another;
the apps aim for a “clutter-free feeling.” The simplicity
of design and colors is intended to encourage the users to
move from worry to productivity. These apps create an
aesthetics of activity which Gregg argues should mean that
going work done looks and feels beautiful and evokes
a sense of pleasure in leading an efficient and productive
lifestyle. These apps are at the core of today’s privileged
knowledge worker.

Gregg shows that productivity apps lead to a lifestyle
and regimen that is “always on”; work is constantly being
performed. It abandons the concept of work-life balance
as the apps facilitate a blurring of lines between work,
home, and leisure. Gregg, I believe, is overreaching in lay-
ing blame for the abandonment of work-life balance on
productivity apps, rather than work requirements, per-
sonal and family obligations, that became blurred in the
dot com era. Because the apps notify and prod, and at
times exhort, Gregg sees a religious or ascetic aspect to
time management. She also notes an external asceticism
that comes from overuse of the apps, and like mindfulness
practice, requires a stepping back, a switching off to allow
a time of reflection and rejuvenation. Gregg sees this as
a “productivity orthodoxy” which allows some freedom
to take time off but does not liberate from work obliga-
tions. She notes that this religious dimension isolates indi-
viduals from the concerns of others even while sanctify-
ing the actions of the individual. Gregg sees this ongoing
elevation of the individual over the concerns of others as
calling for a “different vocabulary for time and self-man-
agement.” Again, Gregg’s analysis here seems simplistic in
laying blame for the emphasis on the individual over the
concerns of others on time and self-management, rather
than the historic American culture of individualism.

Over time there has been a move to focus on work-
life balance and to see mindfulness as one tool that can
be helpful. Gregg posits a concept of mindful labor that
relieves “the burden of stress that productivity places on
individuals.” She argues for a move towards a shared pro-
fessional survival that is outside of the Organization. Based
on mindfulness, predominantly from the Zen Buddhist
tradition, Gregg argues against the regime of self-assess-
ment that is common in the productivity world, thus
egating technology evangelists who invoke mindful-
ness which emphasizes non-action while at the same time
requiring repeated training. She sees the technology of
productivity/mindfulness robbing workers of the experi-
ence that meditation is intended to create. Mindful labor,
Gregg insists, mitigates the damage done by productivity
by times of withdrawal and rejuvenation through non-do-
ing. While Gregg’s idea of mindful labor has merit and
could have significant personal health benefits, she does
not address how mindful labor actually works in the cor-
porate workplace, outside of some progressive organiza-
tions like Google.

Gregg ends her book with eight principles for post-
work productivity, her advice for building a work cul-
ture that is shared, mindful, holistic, and focused on the
worker and not on the Organization. While this could
be seen as Marxist rhetoric, Gregg’s intent is not a social-
ist collective but a work culture that does not destroy its
workers in favor of the Organization. Although Gregg sees
the principles as providing a framework for future work, I
remain skeptical whether the principles hold outside of the
gig economy and a small sector of upper level knowledge
workers. Nevertheless, Gregg’s analysis provides produc-
tive insights in the ways that productivity has framed the
work narrative, at times in less than beneficial ways.

This book is appropriate for the general public, sociolo-
gists, business professionals, freelance workers, and librar-
ians, concerned with the understanding the unhealthy
impact that the focus on time management and productiv-
ity may have on the workplace and their own lives.