



Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy

Author _ Melissa Gregg

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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. While her arguments against "productivity" as the defining category of American workplace culture have some merit, the new ideas she proposes appear only to have significant import for the gig economy and not the American workplace as a whole.

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 forefronting 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 athleticism 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 designers 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 getting 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 laying blame for the abandonment of work-life balance on productivity apps, rather than work requirements, personal 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 obligations. She notes that this religious dimension isolates individuals from the concerns of others even while sanctifying 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-management." 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 professional survival that is outside of the Organization. Based on mindfulness, predominantly from the Zen Buddhist tradition, Gregg argues against the regime of self-assessment that is common in the productivity world, thus negating technology evangelists who invoke mindfulness which emphasizes non-action while at the same time requiring repeated training. She sees the technology of productivity/mindfulness robbing workers of the experience that meditation is intended to create. Mindful labor, Gregg insists, mitigates the damage done by productivity by times of withdrawal and rejuvenation through non-doing. 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 corporate workplace, outside of some progressive organizations like Google.

Gregg ends her book with eight principles for post-work productivity, her advice for building a work culture 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 socialist 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 productive 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, sociologists, business professionals, freelance workers, and librarians, concerned with the understanding the unhealthy impact that the focus on time management and productivity may have on the workplace and their own lives.