

PRODUCTIVITY ROAD TEST

Stop time slipping away

Chunking work tasks can save you hours, writes **Sue White**.

We've all heard the same riddle: "You can't own me but you can use me. You can't keep me but you can spend me. What am I?"

Well, *Senor Time*, look out; I'm about to start spending you like a miser, and start treating you as if December 21, 2012, really is going to be the last day of the world ("What? You haven't heard?").

We all waste time and, let's face it, there's often real pleasure in doing so. But when we're on the clock, wasting time just means more hours in front of a screen or behind a desk.

So, how to conquer time? According to time-management master Tim Ferriss, the author of *The 4-Hour Workweek*, it's all about chunking tasks. Ferriss points out that we needlessly whittle away hours on small, repetitive tasks that would be better done in batches.

Put like this, it sounds suspiciously like I'm about to turn my work week into a modern Model T Ford assembly line but, nonetheless, I analyse my schedule task by task to see where time can be chunked. According to Ferriss, email is the first culprit; attack it, like everything else, in productive bursts, rather than languid dribbles.

While his experiment of only checking email for two hours on a Monday apparently worked wonders for his business, for us mere productivity mortals, Ferriss suggests 11am and 4pm are optimum email "checking" times. More than that, time's a-wasting.

Next up is my weekly schedule. My calendar shows a mix of interviews, researching and writing, alongside more mundane tasks such



Illustration: Kerrie Leishman

as paying invoices, going to meetings and sorting out problems.

Pre-time mastery, I happily mixed things up a bit, but now tasks are chunked together at optimum periods, factoring in variables such as "predictable motivation levels" (low to nil on a Friday afternoon) or "traffic" (hint: never plan cross-town meetings to coincide with peak-hour traffic).

It's surprising how much time can be saved by planning around these recurring events.

For me, writing is far more efficient in the morning; I know stringing a written sentence

together after about 4pm is an exercise in frustration, so now I write mostly in the mornings, with the phone off to avoid distractions.

Per-week gain of working this way? Countless hours.

Chunking tasks means time savings, but it also means discipline.

Feel like procrastinating? You need to choose where to waste your time. Don't open the mail or pay an invoice to avoid another task; these jobs are far quicker when grouped and done once a week.

While this almost kills me with the mail (and I fail on letters that look like they are real correspondence

rather than a form letter, or envelopes that may contain parking fines), it does work. Time saved a week? About an hour.

Of course, the problem is then what to do with all the gained time.

I like to think I'll use it for a higher purpose, like making more time for people, or passions. If it turns out the answer ends up being more work, then maybe time has won after all.

Sue White is a freelance writer focused on productivity, working sustainably and only opening mail on Thursdays at 3pm. Follow on Twitter @suewhitewriter.