Reimagining Time Management in Project Environments through the 12 P's Lens [1]

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ABSTRACT

When projects are delayed, the excuses will tend to range from the fact that some other force is conspiring against the team, though a deeper scrutiny would unearth poor use of time as one of the biggest culprits. This article presents a novel approach to considering time management within the project domain, which has been modelled in the form of a 12Ps framework. The framework aims to disrupt time management from operating as an isolated discipline and move towards treating it as a multi-layered discipline affected by the quality of planning, prioritization, performance, progress monitoring and other vital considerations. Utilizing orthodox project management principles, insights into human behavior, and real-world experience, the paper provides an operational breakdown on how each "P" adds to better results. Whether it's figuring out when to pause or keep going or when to push forward or when to delegate non-essential tasks, the 12 Ps construct provides effective tactics for increasing focus, decreasing waste, and reaching escape velocity.

Keywords: Time Management, Project Management, Planning, Prioritization.

Introduction

Almost invariably, the reason for poor project performance is not incompetence, not lack of funds, not shortage of human resources, and not lack of tools of trade. Instead, the villain is often mismanagement of one's own time. Even though there are more project management tools and methods available than ever, a lot of teams still struggle to be able to deliver exactly what they need when they need it. Such failure to deliver would usually not be because people don't understand what needs to be done, but because they can't manage what's done when it's done. Time management underpins the success of activities, and it can be the difference between success and failure. To assist project teams in managing time well, this paper develops a model based around 12 loosely coupled 'P' factors that influence how time is managed. Building on time management theories, commonly accepted project management best practices (e.g., as defined in the PMBOK® Guide), combined with empirical observations, this approach views time management not as a singular skill, but as a composite discipline or practice that needs enough attention it deserves.

[1] How to cite this paper: Siavhundu, T. (2025). Reimagining Time Management in Project Environments through the 12 P's Lens; *PM World Journal*, Vol. XIV, Issue VIII, August.

1. Planning

Planning is the bedrock of successful time management when working within the project setup. It is the tool that gives order, sequence, and clearness to guide time and resources efficiently so that project objectives can be accomplished. The PMBOK® Guide, Seventh Edition reveals that "planning is iterative throughout the project and involves interactions among different knowledge areas and performance domains". A well-developed schedule synchronizes the activities to be performed by the project team and reduces confusion and uncertainty concerning what to expect and what is expected. Without it, teams often fall into reactive work rhythms that cause bottlenecks and missed deadlines.

The Ivy Lee Method is a century old and simple time management strategy that is recommended and still popular today. This technique was established in 1918 and involves listing the six main tasks to be completed the following day by order of actual priority and then focusing on them one at a time (Tracy, 2007). This deceptively simple method increases focus and decreases the amount of time one wastes on multitasking and indecision. Scaled to a project, this method mirrors the logic of a priority-driven work breakdown structure (WBS), an essential planning instrument of project management.

In more formalized projects, the planning stage is further enhanced through the use of tools like Gantt chart, critical path analysis (CPA), and project scheduling software (such as Microsoft Project and Primavera). These are not only used to illustrate task dependencies and timelines, but also for resource allocation and milestone tracking. The schedule management plan, which is a part of the project management plan, without a doubt, describes how the schedule will be created, monitored, and managed (PMI, 2021). Time must be managed in an integrated manner with the other sub-plans (e.g., scope, cost, quality, risk, and communications management plans) to prevent it from being dealt with in a reactionary way as the project life cycle progresses.

2. Prioritization

Prioritization is the art of intentionally deciding the order in which groups of tasks should be tackled, incorporating among other factors, the tasks' importance and urgency. In the time-restrained world that most projects exist within, prioritizing can mean burnout, lack of productivity, and missed delivery dates. Remember that advice "Eat a live frog every morning, and nothing worse will happen to you the rest of the day"? As it turns out, it's a Mark Twain quote: "If it's your job to eat a frog, it's best to do it first thing in the morning. And if it's your job to eat two frogs, it's best to eat the biggest one first." The metaphor here reflects the wisdom of focusing on the most difficult or essential task (the frog) at the beginning of the day, when one's cognitive power and will is at its strongest.

Prioritization, in project management terms, means organizing workflow with the 'critical path' - a sequence of dependent activities, the change of one will lead to a change in the project schedule. A task may seem big and important, but it does not mean it can always be the first task to be done if it is strictly required to be done after the completion of other smaller tasks. And here's where knowledge of task granularity and order really comes into play too. For example, in building a house, you can't paint (a big task) before you

raise the walls; even if painting takes more time and resources. Therefore, logical forward workflow, resource strength, and delivery dependencies must be intricately weighed against importance and urgency when prioritizing tasks.

Most notably, the Time Management Matrix from Stephen Covey's "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People" offers a structured approach to prioritization. The matrix categorizes tasks into four quadrants, according to urgency and importance:

Quadrant I: Urgent and important (crises, pressing issues),
Quadrant II: Not Urgent, Important (strategic planning, building relationships),
Quadrant III: Urgent but not important (interruptions, some emails), and
Quadrant IV: Not urgent and not important (unimportant activities, time-wasters).

Quadrant I needs the highest priority. However, Covey suggests spending more time in Quadrant II activities, many of which have a high impact in the long-term but are generally not done because they do not have a sense of urgency (Covey, 1989). In a project environment, that may mean spending time on risk assessments, stakeholder engagement, and team building before all of these become crises. So, effective prioritization is a matter not just of doing things right – it is about doing the right things at the right time.

3. Performance/Productivity

Performance and productivity are what underpin success no matter how the strategy the user is relying upon is structured. When it comes to project management, planning isn't enough. What matters at the end of the day is the manner in which tasks are carried out. Productivity is commonly viewed through the lenses of efficiency (a measure of productivity) and effectiveness (a measure of quality). The father of modern management, Peter Drucker, pointed out this difference when he stated, "Efficiency is doing things right; effectiveness is doing the right things" (Drucker, 1967). High performance project teams do both – they get the right things done right and they ensure that those tasks are moving the project toward strategic goals.

Productivity is not simply about being personally disciplined, it is a function of systems, tools, and environments. In today's digital age, the definition of productivity can include being tech-savvy. Applications such as Asana, Trello, Microsoft Project, and Jira have visual task management tools that help keep project teams accountable and focused by tracking progress, deadlines, and dependencies. Moreover, AI-powered tools such as ChatGPT, Notion AI, and Motion can schedule a meeting, take notes, or even sketch out project timeline or meeting summary, which takes the time-consuming task off the plate. AI and Automation can increase productivity at the workplace by up to 40% (McKinsey, 2017).

Good project performance can also be maintained through the setting of clear metrics, the development of an atmosphere of accountability, and creating frequent feedback cycles. Project managers can also increase team productivity by assigning tasks based on team members' strengths, removing the bottlenecks from the process and by rewarding continual improvement. In this sense, productivity is no longer just a way of

measuring how much work is being done, but an assessment of the effectiveness with which time and resources are being turned into valuable project outputs.

4. Progress

Monitoring progress is one of the cornerstones for good time and project management. It also guarantees execution according to schedule and makes it possible to timely correct deviations, if any. With a lack of oversight and follow-up, project tasks can become adrift with potential delays, waste, and non-delivery of some of the project's main outputs. The PMBOK® Guide Seventh Edition emphasizes the continuous tracking of performance domains and highlights that what is measured can be managed and the corrective actions can be taken for the project to remain on track (PMI, 2021).

Monitoring progress means gathering, assessing and sharing performance data on project scope, schedule, and cost. Methods such as Earned Value Management (EVM) give project managers a numerical measurement to determine whether the project is running ahead of or behind schedule, or over or under budget. For instance, if the EV of a construction project is $50,000 and the actual cost (AC) is $65,000, it is an indication of an adverse cost variance and should be analyzed immediately and perhaps corrective steps should be taken. As variances are identified, the project manager can generate change requests, which then invoke rigorous Integrated Change Control to bring the project back into line.

Progress reviews also support the ability to be agile and flexible. In agile approaches, the daily stand-up, sprint review, and retrospective provide near real-time feedback loops ensuring that short-term actions are feeding into longer-term goals. In waterfall-based approaches, frequent status updates, following the progress and making reports for stakeholders contribute towards transparency and accountability. Whether environments are predictive or adaptive, there is still need to aim for execution in the right direction, at the right speed, with the right resources. Most importantly, progress monitoring provides a way to turn project management from a rigid set of steps into a living dance floor of doing, learning, and delivering.

5. Pause/Pace

The role that work pauses or breaks play in boosting productivity and adding value to time management cannot be overemphasized. Science and common sense agree: Taking regular breaks is not a weakness, it's a performance enhancer. The human brain isn't designed for optimal focus in very long sessions; it operates best in cycles of intentional effort and rest. What will not happen without breaks is burnout, where one becomes mentally fatigued and loses focus. In this way, decision fatigue as well as inferior time management would inevitably affect output quality.

The Pomodoro Technique, a popular pacing through breaks time management rule, was invented by Francesco Cirillo in the late 1980s. The method uses shifting work durations, typically 25 minutes of focused work followed by 5 minutes of rest. It is advised to have

a waiting period of 15 to 30 minutes after four cycles (Cirillo, 2006). This strategy leverages the brain's capacity to focus intensely for brief periods and the routine breaks ensure sufficient energy and stamina are sustained throughout the day. For instance, a Project Manager who needs to peep through dozens of contractor reports can dissect the job in intervals of Pomodoro to ensure that they remain focused and accurate while carrying out the task, removing space for mental drift (which mostly is responsible for some of those pricey oversights).

Pacing isn't just about taking breaks: it's also about breaking big projects into smaller, more manageable chunks, so that work feels less overwhelming and motivation less fickle. This approach can be used to estimate human performance decay also in other areas, where better estimation of the duration of tasks is important for scheduling in project management. From writing a project charter, considering a risk register, the limbic laboring approaches encourage discipline, sustainability, and long-term project success. What "pausing and pacing" does by honoring human cognitive rhythms is help to work smarter, not just harder.

6. Patience

Patience, as time management skill, is usually forgotten and taken for granted. Patience is however a strong characteristic that facilitates how people deal with uncertainty, setbacks, and surprise obstacles with great resilience and poise. Disruptions can snuff out any well-laid plans, but patience is a skill that gives strength and optimism that planned endeavours will materialise. Patience can be a real virtue and being patient sometimes allows project managers and teams to think tactically, rather than reacting emotionally. As described in PMI's PMBOK® Guide Seventh Edition, uncertainty is a part of all projects and adaptability requires stability of mind (PMI, 2021). Patience isn't just about being laid back, it's about moving at an upwardly moderate pace, at a relentlessly steady rate of progress, in a determined, optimistic demeanor even when one feels like the going gets rough.

While rolling out a mystic IT system, for example, integration could take more time than the project manager thought. Rather than becoming disheartened, the patient project manager keeps their eyes on the bigger picture, is very open with stakeholders, and keeps leading the project. Developing resiliency can even lead to greener things and protect against hasty moves that can only dig one into a delay hole and/or compound risk. In addition, patience leads to a more pervasive environment of psychological safety and emotional health within the team. When people working on the team witness leadership respond with patience and clarity in the teeth of the storm, it bolsters morale and mitigates panic. It also opens up a reflective learning space where a process of ongoing learning and improvement is instrumental in gaining time-efficient performances in the next project cycles. "A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way," wrote leadership guru John C. Maxwell, and yet the wisdom of patience must often be a guide during stormy times (Maxwell, 2007).

7. Persistence

It is persistence that drives consistency and incremental progress in time management. It is the relentless feeling of wanting to push forward despite stumbling blocks or when the motivational flame has fizzled. There are lots of obstacles, short timelines, stakeholder demands, and the unknown factors (which never seem to be a small percentage of the whole) that exist in project management. Planning and prioritization and tools are important, but what really drives all this is consistency over time, even when it feels ugly.

It is during the prolonged or difficult projects where one will need persistence the most. There will be a time when the initial excitement wears off, and there's still work to be done. For instance, in the middle of a software project (after the underlying architecture has come into place, but testing and optimization remain highly repetitive), teams could become exhausted. It is at these times that doggedness keeps us going. This is consistent with the PMBOK® Guide's principle of steady performance and discipline over the life of the project and not relying on spurt acceleration (PMI, 2021).

Persistence allows for the reflection and learning that comes from bouncing back: classic features of adaptive and agile crew dynamics. For example, in an agile environment, teams have work sprints and iterate over and over again until the product is of the quality that is needed. It takes dedication in each cycle, and the final outcome is also sometimes less than what one hoped for. Instead of giving up, resilient teams do retrospectives, learn lessons, and get better, little by little. After many failed experiments, Thomas Edison had to say "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." This drive is instrumental if one is to remain on schedule and maintain the focus that will end with achieving the desired end.

8. Proactivity

Proactivity, as opposed to passivity and sometimes being reactive, is a key aspect of time management particularly in the highly structured, high-stakes realm of project management. It's all about the "what ifs" and creating pre-emptive actions and seizing time and results before problems grow. Stephen Covey explains in "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People" that proactive people understand they are responsible for their own choices and responses to situations. "Proactive people focus their efforts in the Circle of Influence" (Covey, 1989). In the context of time management, this means one can look ahead, see where issues may arise and what the potential pitfalls are and position their team to dealing with issues being prepared, rather than panicking. One time management technique that may align with proactivity is the 60-40 rule. This rule requires that about 60% is highly planned for and leaving the 40% for other ad hoc tasks that may emerge. This means that when some unplanned tasks emerge, planned tasks will not be affected when the former are executed.

Proactive thinking is also deeply rooted in risk management planning in project management. The PMBOK® Guide Seventh Edition highlights that being proactive and mitigating risk before it occurs is the key to managing the project schedule and the

efficient utilization of resources. For example, in a building project, if there's an advance warning of weather risk, that allows for schedule padding to mitigate the financial impact of costly delays. Likewise, providing backups ahead of time makes sure production doesn't stall while waiting for schedules to be sorted out. These are examples of management by exception (that is, avoiding fires), where managers exert their energies on variances from an expected course and have already thought and planned for dealing with the routine.

A lack of proactive thought leadership results in "management by crisis" in which the majority of time is spent fighting fires, not executing. When in reactive mode, teams lurch from issue to issue, often doing so under duress, heightening the risk of errors and missed deadlines. It is pertinent to mention that decisions made under stress are often regretted in the light of day. A proactive approach, on the contrary, distills some resilience into the project. This is for better transitions, quicker fixes and a sense of control over timelines. Time is saved not by an absence of problems, but by teams that are equipped to deal with them effectively.

9. Passing

One of the most undervalued techniques in time management is passing - removing (intentionally delegating, outsourcing or dropping) activities that do not significantly contribute to the project objectives or that can be better done by other people for the better reasons. Time is sometimes spent on what is not important, things that others could do or what one is not necessarily supposed to be doing. In a project-based world where people are constantly against the clock and trying to deliver results, learning to let go of tasks that don't make that much of an impact can be a relief, resulting in one pursuing high-priority activities with less cognitive load. As Greg McKeown (2014, p. 7) writes in *Essentialism*, "Only once you give yourself permission to stop trying to do it all, to stop saying yes to everyone, can you make your highest contribution toward the things that really matter."

One solution that explains the principle of passing is the Focus Funnel, which is a time management aider established by Rory Vaden in the book called *Procrastinate on Purpose* (Vaden, 2015). The model also urges individuals to put every task through a four-part funnel:

Eliminate/Delete - Do I have to do this thing at all?

Automate – Can a system or technology accomplish this?

Delegate - Can this be done 80% as good as you by someone else?

Focus/Concentrate - Otherwise, just do it yourself.

The Focus Funnel is a practical tool for individuals and groups to prioritize value work, and minimize the cognitive load associated with trying to manage it all at once. For instance, a project manager engaged in the rote reformat of a report to be handed off to

an administrative assistant or driven into an intelligent reporting tool to have more time for strategic planning, risk management, or stakeholder engagement.

"The pass" as it's called in project management, works well with managing resource allocation and job role definition. Project leaders are able to invest time versus simply managing it by assigning tasks to the best team members (in terms of skill, time and operating cost) for the job. Delegating does not mean abdicating; it means using your judgment and working together to achieve success.

10. Punctuality

Punctuality is an important but most of the time underrated part of time management. While time is not everything, punctuality (starting work, coming to meetings or finishing a task on time) is more than just about the clock: it's a way to practice being responsible, professional and respectful of others' time. In a project context, where many steps are reliant on preceding ones, and where end-dates are not adjustable, timing ensures a streamlined work trajectory without hiccups interfering with overall progress. As Benjamin Franklin famously said, "Lost time is never found again."

Habitual missing deadlines or failing to meet meeting starting times by team members and stakeholders creates schedule slippage and downstream delays, particularly in waterfall project methodologies where task dependencies are rigid. For instance, if the design team delays its deliverables by say three days, the development and testing teams in the next phase may need to compress their schedule, potentially compromising quality or overburdening resources. However, punctuality in project routines (such as weekly reviews, sprint retrospectives, and milestone submissions) builds momentum, cements team accountability, and reinforces trust with clients and other stakeholders.

The PMBOK® Guide, Seventh Edition emphasizes the importance of performance discipline, making it clear that time-related performance metrics (such as schedule performance index and milestone tracking) are vital tools for controlling projects (PMI, 2021). Punctuality supports these metrics by making sure that planned schedules translate into actual delivery, all things being equal. Punctuality is also a cultural signal: when leaders are exemplary in punctuality to meetings or meet report deadlines, they set a tone of professional consistency. This leadership by example sustains a time-conscious culture that benefits all stakeholders, taking organisations to greater heights.

11. Perfectionism (Avoid It)

There is nothing wrong with wanting the best, but perfectionism, if unrestrained, can be a huge obstacle to time management and success in projects. In project settings where the scope, time, cost and other constraints are continuously competing, perfection can delay the release of a product. Other possible undesirable outcomes of perfectionism include scope creep and gold-plating. Sometimes "done is better than perfect" as Sheryl Sandberg so wisely said (Sandberg, 2013). It's this kind of mindset that motivates

practitioners to just get their work done, rather than make a fetish of the project and hold up delivery waiting for the last 5-10% which an end user can take or leave.

"Gold Plating" is going beyond the requirements and doing more than what is necessary in the name of quality. Despite the best intentions, such initiatives frequently lead to delays in implementation, cost overruns, and unintended consequences. The PMBOK ® Guide, Seventh Edition deprecates those extraneous value-added enhancements that are not based on agreed deliverables, and this exemplifies the importance of balance between time and scope managed together in a change control system (PMI, 2021). For example, let's say there is a team working on a project to create a client-facing dashboard, and while great, it's likely that they will want to throw in a few additional visualizations, which they weren't originally asked for. While the looks gets better, the integration time is delayed and is more complex to test, risking the project release on time.

Perfectionism can lead to paralysis by analysis: overthinking or the need to get every detail right impedes progress. Instead, leveraging the minimum viable product (MVP) in some project phases, especially within agile projects, enables teams to provide essential functionality as early as possible while becoming more perfect over time based on users' opinions. Letting go of the false "illusion of perfection" and looking at the value delivery, stakeholder satisfaction, and the completion of a project are key tenets of time management as we know it. In other words, it is more important to concentrate on the "core product" that wasting time and resources on extras that are bit value-adding.

12. Procrastination (Avoid It)

The old adage "Procrastination is the thief of time" properly illustrates the detriment associated with postponing tasks that are due for execution. Procrastination endangers time management by creating a false sense of available time, only for deadlines to arrive suddenly, often when other equally important priorities surface. In the context of project management, procrastinations is extremely detrimental because projects operate under fixed timelines and interdependent tasks. The delay of task can unfavorably pass the effect on other succeeding task, especially when the tasks concerned belong to the project's critical path. This would potentially endanger the entire schedule.

Procrastination may lead to task accumulation, where the backlog worsens until it becomes difficult or impossible to manage. Cognitive overload, decision fatigue, and even anxiety are possible results of such task accumulation. In the end, it will become more difficult for one to establish the starting point. Piers Steel, author of ***"The Procrastination Equation***", asserts that procrastination is largely a result of poor self-regulation and the tendency to prioritize short-term mood over long-term goals (Steel, 2011). For instance, a team member might delay updating a risk register because it feels tedious, only for an unexpected issue to escalate because it was not documented and assessed timeously.

Procrastination violates essential time management tenets, such as schedule adherence, timely risk identification as well as effective stakeholder engagement. One way to avoid procrastination is through breaking large tasks into manageable, time-bound work packages and applying scheduling tools such as milestone tracking or time-boxing. Prioritization frameworks such as the Eisenhower Matrix and techniques like the Pomodoro Technique would also be instrumental in assisting individuals to stay focused on critical and prioritized tasks. Avoiding procrastination is not just beneficial to a single individual, but a strategic requirement that aids timely and successful project delivery.

Conclusion

Project planning and time management always go hand in hand as two sides of the same success coin. By not attending to any of them, the most well-endowed, technically astute projects will be defeated. The 12 Ps framework of Time Management introduced in this paper is an eclectic approach to managing time as needed in all phases of a project. Not just theoretical concepts anymore, these Ps have a lot more in common with the 10 Knowledge Areas in the PMBOK® Guide, Sixth Edition (integration, scope, schedule, cost, quality, resources, procurement, risk, communications and stakeholder management). By adopting and implementing these Ps, project professionals can be able to manage time better, improve performance, lower stress, and ensure repeatable, measurable, value-driven delivery in the modern world's Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) project-based environments.

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