

TIME IN THE WORKPLACE: INTERRUPTIONS AND IMPEDIMENTS TO OPTIMAL USE*

The objective of this study is to obtain comparative results that may help to improve the design and development of courses, seminars and workshops offered by the University of Havana, Cuba, and by ISIDA, Italy. The paper describes the techniques used in a comparative investigation on two groups of managers, and discusses the results obtained in examining: a) the views of the two groups on statements related to the use of time; b) the time managers dedicate to different activities in a typical working day; c) the main interruptions and impediments to the optimal use of time.

Introduction

It is widely accepted that time is "... the scarcest resource and unless it is managed, nothing else can be managed" (Drucker 1985). Leaving aside the renowned discussion about cause-effect in time orientation as a characteristic of national cultures and development, it is important for managers and professionals in every country to understand how people use time in the workplace. This seems particularly relevant in a country like Cuba, which at present is struggling to find the most efficient use of its scarce resources, and in Italy (especially Southern Italy), where traditionally time has not been viewed as a scarce resource (Morello 1997). These are the main reasons why attitudes towards time has been included as a specific subject of research in an ongoing comparative study of social structures and cultural values in Cuba and in Italy.

The aim of this study is to identify the characteristics of the use of time in two groups of professionals and managers, in order to redesign, if necessary, current postgraduate training courses in the field of management both at the University of Havana (UH) and *Istituto Superiore per Imprenditori e Dirigenti di Azienda* (ISIDA).

Sample

The sample consists of a Cuban group of 50 men and women working as executives or officials in big- and middle-sized public enterprises in different fields, and an Italian group of 66 executives working for the Regional Government of Sicily, the Province and the Municipality of Palermo. Both groups are composed of men and women ranging from 35 to 50 years of age.

Given the experimental nature of the exercise, no attempt at national representativeness is built into the research design. However, although the subjects are limited in number, they were selected in a way that may be considered random. Thus the results we present here have an expected maximum

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error (p,q=50%) of $\pm 13,85\%$ for the Cuban group and $\pm 12,06\%$ for the Italian group, at a 95% confidence level.

Procedures and technique applied

A questionnaire was completed by each member of the sample during the period October to December 1999. The questionnaire had three aspects:

- A set of statements concerning the use of time in managerial tasks. The Principles of Time and Management described by Alec MacKenzie (1990) were used as reference. Eight sentence-concepts were submitted to respondents. Subjects were to answer 'right' or 'wrong', according to their views. Questions 1 and 5 were associated with planning, question 3 with communicating, question 4 with organizing, question 6 with controlling, question 7 with leadership and questions 2 and 8 with decision making.
- In order to determine the proportion of working time dedicated to tasks considered as planning/strategic or as operational/executive, the members of the sample had to define the five main activities which, for them, constituted 'a typical working day'.
- MacKenzie's internationally validated list of 'timewasters' was translated and used in Spanish and Italian, with minor adaptations. Subjects were asked to select what they considered to be the ten most relevant timewasters and rank them from 1 to 10 (1 being the most important, 10 being the least important). The purpose of this list was to identify the main interruptions influencing time efficiency.

The Cuban data were processed and analysed in Havana and the Italian data in Palermo. Group discussions, which were subsequently held with the participants in both of the cities, turned out to be of considerable interest to all those involved.

Results

About management

The sentence-concepts on time and management principles produced the results shown in Table 1. Results show that both Italians and Cubans agree with statement 1 related to the principles of planning. On statement 2, which deals with problem identification, percentages are low and fairly similar.

Also on statements 4 and 5, concerning principles of organizing and planning, both groups express a considerable degree of agreement.

Table 1 - 'Right' answers to statements on management (%)

No.	Statements	'Right' answers Italy	'Right' answers Cuba
1.	The time dedicated to planning determines total time saved in accomplishing the task.	98	100
2.	Identifying problems is the easiest part of problem solving.	5	19
3.	'Open door' policy improves a manager's effectiveness in dealing with his team.	16	90
4.	Authority delegation saves time, worries and responsibilities.	37	38
5.	What is important should come before what is urgent.	54	48
6.	The most efficient manager is the most effective.	75	18
7.	Those that work more have better results.	84	10
8.	The higher the level at which decisions are made, the better they are.	89	5

The Italian group tends to show more positive attitudes than the Cuban group regarding statements 6, 7 and 8, related to the principles of controlling, leadership and decision making.

The Cuban group expresses more positive feelings than the Italian group on statement 3, related to the principle of communicating.

About daily activities

The activities that represent 'a typical working day', the percentage of time allocated to these activities each day, and the priorities assigned to them appear below.

The activities that can be considered as typically operational are those to which more time is dedicated, both for the Cuban and for the Italian group: preparing information, writing reports, receiving visits and meetings with superiors. These are the main activities that characterize a typical working day for both groups.

Only the cases of programming, for the Italian group, and Information Analysis, for the Cuban group, can be considered activities associated to projection and planning, to which both groups respectively dedicate a significant percentage of their time.

It is interesting to note the relationship between the activities that take up a large part of working time, and the proportion of 'right' answers obtained to some of the previously analysed statements. Preparing information, carrying out tasks, meetings and receiving visits (Table 2) are high on both groups' list of priorities as regards the time dedicated to these tasks, while 54% of the Italian group and 48% of the Cuban group give the 'right' answer for the statement that what is important should go before what is urgent (Table 1).

Table 2 - Activities in 'a typical working day'

Activity	% for Italy	Priority Italy	% for Cuba	Priority Cuba
Preparing information	18	1	11	4
Carrying out tasks	16	2	17	1
Meetings	13	3	15	2
Meetings with colleagues	11	4	-	-
Preparing, writing reports	8	5	8	6
Receiving visits	8	6	9	5
Programming	7	7	2	10
Meetings with superiors	6	8	4	8
Mail control	4	9	-	-
Task control	3	10	8	6
Answering the phone	3	11	-	-
Coffee, breaks	2	12	0,7	11
Reviewing each day's work plan	1	13	2	9
Information analysis	-	-	12	3
Delegating, explaining tasks	-	-	5	7
Awaiting the boss' decisions	-	-	1	11
Self-study	-	-	3	9

The Cuban group ranks delegating and explaining tasks as the seventh priority in a typical working day (Table 2), but in the answers to the statement 'Authority delegation saves time, worries and responsibilities' (Table 1) only 62% of the answers are considered 'right'.

The results shown in Table 2 suggest the need to include aspects of planning and organizing in management development programs.

About timewaste

The last part of the questionnaire was devoted to the issue of what runs counter to the efficient use of working time. Subjects were asked to choose the ten most important 'timewasters', and to assign priorities (Table 3).

The three items associated with leadership that are considered to be among the most relevant for both the Cuban and the Italian sample are: lack of motivation, need for adequate staff and lack of coordination.

Both groups also agree that the following are among the ten most important timewasters: lack of coordination, not being informed, unclear communication, delayed information and paperwork. All these aspects are related to deficiencies in communication.

The Cuban group considers the most important timewasters to be: over-dependent staff, not saying “no”, multiple bosses, drop-in visitors and crisis management, related to the principles of leadership, organizing and planning. This finding is consistent with recent reports on competitive leadership in Cuban organisations (Calderon 1997, 1999).

In order to present a comparison of the above data with similar findings, Table 4 shows the priorities found by McKenzie in his international investigation.

Table 3 - The ten most important timewasters

Timewaster	Priority Italy	Priority Cuba
Lack of motivation, indifference	1	1
Under-staffed	2	10
Inadequate staff	3	-
Lack of coordination	4	5
Not being informed	5	4
Unclear communication	6	10
Procrastination, indecision	7	-
Lack of objectives, priorities	8	-
Delayed information	9	8
Paperwork	10	2
Over-dependent staff	-	9
Multiple bosses	-	7
Leaving tasks unfinished	-	10
Drop-in visitors	-	3
Crisis management	-	6
Not saying “no”	-	9

Table 4 – Timewasters for professionals in different countries

Timewaster	USA	Canada	Latin America	Europe	Asia	Australia
Telephone interruptions	2	1	1	1	2	3
Crisis management	1	2	7	4	6	2
Lack of objectives, priorities, planning	3	4	3	6	5	1
Drop-in visitors	5	5	2	5	4	6
Ineffective delegation	6	6	4	2	1	7
Attempting too much	4	3	6	3	7	4
Meetings	11	8	5	7	3	12
Personal disorganisation, cluttered desk	7	7	9	8	10	5
Inability to say “no”	9	9	11	9	9	9
Procrastination, indecision	10	11	16	13	17	8
Untrained/inadequate staff	13	16	10	10	12	14
Incomplete, delayed information	20	-	8	14	8	20
Paperwork	12	12	15	17	-	13
Leaving tasks unfinished	13	14	-	12	13	11
Unclear communication	18	19	12	16	11	-
Under-/over-staffed	16	14	14	19	20	-
Confused responsibility, authority	17	17	18	15	13	16

Regarding the ten most important timewasters, the results of our Cuban group resemble those of the other countries in: crisis management, drop-in visits and not saying “no”. Our Italian group is more in line with the other countries in lack of objectives/priorities.

The Cuban and Italian groups differ from the other countries in considering as less important timewasters: answering the phone, ineffective delegation, attempting too much, meetings, personal disorganization. The Cuban and Italian group differ from the other countries in considering unclear communications and paperwork among the most important timewasters.

Conclusions

Views on relationships between time and managerial tasks may contribute to the understanding of attitudes towards work. Identifying the amount of time dedicated to different activities during a typical workday provides information on how managers establish priorities among their planning and operational tasks. Highlighting ‘timewasters’ may provide criteria that can be acted upon in order to decrease their negative impact.

All this information can well be used in the design and implementation of management education programs, inasmuch as it helps to determine learning needs, with the objective of improving courses, seminars and workshops in the area of management. This is currently taking place at the University of Havana and at ISIDA, where the results of the investigations are used as a diagnostic tool.

The results obtained from the questionnaire reveal that the Cuban and Italian samples express similar views on the main principles of time and management. Aspects related to planning, organizing, controlling, leading, decision making and communicating in particular should be taken into account for training aims.

Both Cubans and Italians dedicate most of their time to tasks considered as operational. It is therefore necessary to stress aspects related to the role of strategic direction, and to discuss the techniques for putting them into practice when designing training programs.

The Cuban and Italian samples both consider the following to be important timewasters: lack of motivation, need of adequate staff, lack of coordination, not being informed, unclear communications, delayed information and paperwork. This points to the need for training in the communication area.

The comparison with other countries suggests that unclear communications and paperwork are among the ten most important timewasters for the Cuban and Italian sample, but not so for the other countries examined. Answering the phone, ineffective delegation, attempting too much, meetings and personal disorganisation were less important in Cuba and in Italy than in the other countries in question.

On the whole, the similarities between the Cuban group and the Italian group are stronger than the dissimilarities. This finding is in line with the results of other research (Morello 1999a, 1999b). The scientific interest of cross-cultural comparisons, as well as the practical implementation of results obtained to date, constitute an incentive for continuing the joint studies in time and management that are currently being developed in Havana and Palermo.