

ep 15 system as a whole

📅 Mon, 8/29 8:31PM ⌚ 32:52

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

tasks, system, task, works, problem, people, management, lourdes, manage, mechanic, cases, improvements, knowledge, advice, fundamentals, understand, fact, skill, task management system, running

SPEAKERS

Francis Wade



Francis Wade 00:00



Francis Wade 00:21

The Task Management and Time Blocking Podcast, episode 15. You want to make improvements to your system of task management, you want to intervene at just the right place to have a positive overall effect. But if you don't know where to start, you already understand that you use a system to manage your tasks from the moments of creation, to the point where they're completed. Some people say that Making changes is easy, but you're not so sure. The system you use is full of idiosyncrasies those places where you do things your way, which is different from everyone else. How do you use this knowledge to make the right improvements? Can you make things worse by tinkering in the wrong place? Is it anything like trying to fix a car or an appliance where the wrong intervention can make things go terribly wrong? In this solo episode, I'll be sharing my thoughts about this problem, and where we need to take ourselves so that the confusion disappears. Welcome to the Task Management and Time Blocking podcast.



Francis Wade 01:35

And welcome back. If this is the first time you're visiting our podcasts, you may not know that this is a bit different than other podcasts that are out there. Also, well, we're about solving a problem and we break each episode down into three parts. The first part is a diagnosis of the problem, the current problem, the situation as it is today, the challenge. Second part, we'll get into solutions. And the third part will actually do with some implementation and how to make it work. And let's start with a story. Lourdes is a lawyer who is about to present two important cases before the high state.





Francis Wade 03:24

Let's start with a story. Lourdes is a lawyer who is about to present two important cases before the High Court in her state. She is expected to do a great job and based on her track record her colleagues expect nothing less. But she's losing sleep, waking up feeling overwhelmed. And it's not just because these are her first cases at this high level. She's also signed up for a marathon. And her partner is suffering from long COVID and needs extra support for the next few weeks just to move around their home. For a long time, she has delayed making necessary improvements to her system of task management. In fact, she uses an obsolete app on a smartphone that's six years old. The fact that it's running also an obsolete version of iOS has made her nervous for the past year. But now Apple has sent her a warning that the app and probably her iOS software...The operating system will stop running all together. She needs to make overdue improvements and updates but she's not sure. Whenever the state makes changes to the process that runs the cases submitted to the legal system...chaos rules for several months. That's an outcome she can't afford. But her app is a few days away from dying altogether. And she can't bear to have another night of fitful sleep, with her mind struggling to recall all the tasks, she's afraid, she'll forget.



Francis Wade 05:12

So how many of you can relate to this problem, that there is a change that you need to make? It may not be forced, in the sense that Lourdes' change is forced, but you do need to make one. And you're delaying, you're not quite sure how to proceed. You're not quite sure what to do next. You are aware, like Lourdes is, that this is a system that we're talking about. But making changes to systems is a bit tricky. Although there are many people out there if you listen to podcasts, and books and articles, and all kinds of people who give advice. And what they say is that it's easy that these things do you know, all you need to do is...And, there are only three steps. And as you follow these articles, and this advice, you are wondering, because there's a lot of simplification in what they're saying, there's a lot of trivializing the nature of the problem. And if there's a villain here, it might be the tendency for folks to downplay the complication and the fact that you're dealing with a system. They may not be mal-intended, I don't think they're malicious. And in fact, most of the advice written for and intended for people who are trying to make a change in their task management is for newbies. It's for people who are making their first change or the second change. And at that level, you know, almost anything you do kind of works.



Francis Wade 07:06

But if you know that there's a system at play, you're probably not a beginner, you've probably been around for a while. So if the villain is oversimplification, what's the actual nature of the problem? Well, knowing that you're dealing with a system, that means that if you make the wrong changes, you could end up in one of these feedback loops, where things actually get worse.



Francis Wade 07:39

So let's take the example of a car, your car won't start. So you, you know, you may very mistakenly believe that it has something to do with the tires. And you change the tires, hoping that that'll help at the start was like a silly example, right. But when you have no idea about

that that help at the start was like a silly example, right. But when you have no idea about how a system works, you'll try things like that, No, fortunately, if you change the tiles, then that won't make a difference. However, if you decide that the battery that you're using,



Francis Wade 08:21

although it's only six months old, there must be something wrong with it, which is why it's not starting. So then you start to play around with the connection between the wires and the terminals on the battery, and start to play with those. If you don't know anything about cars, you may be chasing down the wrong improvement. And you could make things worse, you could add to the problem of it not starting by giving it another reason not to start.



Francis Wade 08:54

So we don't know how a system works... a task management system. In the case of Lourdes, you could go pick up an app that actually makes things more challenging and more difficult for you. Especially if you don't have any guidelines. What do you feel when you do something like that? Well, there's kind of a confusion, an inner churning up of anxious emotions, because when you're pressed for time that we see is there's not a lot of room for error. You don't want to make the kind of mistakes that will jeopardize her cases.



Francis Wade 09:37

So you feel a level of annoyance or kind of a frustration because you want this to be easy. But the simplistic advice that you're hearing just makes you more and more annoyed because you know it's not that simple. And as you look around for help, you ask people you know who work with you or people in your family ... "What would you do in this case?" And what you get back often are just kind of bromides, you know, oh, I use this app, try that app. And you're thinking to yourself, just as easy as just picking up an app that somebody happens to recommend out of the blue? Maybe, maybe not. But as you keep asking, you realize that the people around you don't have the insight into how task management works, to give you good answers. Again, they're falling into that oversimplification. Oh, I read this book some 10 years ago, you should try it, try that book, just implement do everything exactly the way it tells you to, and you'll be fine. It really sounds like a long way to go. Because if you know, again, you know, Lourdes is a lawyer, she knows something about tinkering with the legal system. And when the tinkering does happen, it creates chaos. Cases don't get tried people's lives get put on hold. when mistakes happen, people spend more time in lockups waiting for trial. No bad things, bad outcomes can happen when a system - we play with a system - and don't quite understand how it works from the inside out.



Francis Wade 11:36

You know, there should be - she's thinking - there should be better advice. Everyone has a challenge of task management. She's not the only person. But why is it that folks are not talking about their task management as a system, if there if they were talking about it, there will be better advice, there would be at least an understanding that you need to understand and diagnose the system first, before making any individual changes, not go experiment with

all these different changes. That's what leads the system's breaking down like a car, or the legal system. So she thinks there should be better advice and better knowledge and a better grasp of task management so that she could take advantage of it. And you know, I think if you're listening, you may agree this is true. In sports, like for example, let's just take baseball, there's a huge amount of knowledge around individual skills like hitting or pitching. There's also a huge amount of knowledge, metrics, data, history around what it takes to manage a baseball team effectively. There's, there's



Francis Wade 13:04

there's a lot you can draw from it. And you don't go making changes just because you woke up one night and said, Oh, well, let me take the best pitcher out and save him for, you know, he'll only pitch a couple times for the season. And let's see what happens there. You don't go making changes like that. Because you have people around you who know better you have history to pull from you have books, you have training, you have all kinds of of knowledge and information to pull from. And that stops you from making mistakes. Well, task management as a system is one of those problems that not everyone has. Some would even denied it's worth even looking at those just go pick up, try this book. But it's one of those problems that you can expect to be with you for the rest of your career. No.



Francis Wade 14:06

If you're someone for example, who is committed to learning how to be a great mechanic, it's not like you go from the beginner level where you know how to change the water in the radiator, you know, to change a tire, you know, to pump gas, gas in the car, you know how to clean the exterior. It's not like if you start off from that level and you want to become a great mechanic that you can skip over the understanding that you need to have of how a car functions and the different subsystems that go into the effective operation of a car. You can't become a great mechanic and skip that lesson. not show up at mechanic school that day, that year. I call it at the end of knowing anything about it. Well, let's assume that you're someone who is like to see smart, creative and committed. So you work really hard, you come up with lots of different ideas. And you're smart in terms of how you go about problem solving, which means that you're always going to be creating more and more tasks. Even if you only do one project for the rest of your life, you will become so great at that project that you will create sub project as a sub project, you will come to an understanding of what that project calls for that no one else does. And you will arrive at that point where you create more than 168 hours of commitments per week. In other words, you will keep adding task volume.



Francis Wade 15:38

And as you do so, you must confront the fact that task management is a system of activity, and not an individual, or small or simplistic, single action or task. So if that's true, then you need to not just like solve this problem once and for all by understanding, you know, in a half an hour how the system works, you need to be improving your knowledge the way a mechanic would. Because there's always new cars coming out. There's always new technologies coming out. They're coming up faster and faster. As long as if you're going to be a great mechanic when you get to a particular level and stop and say, Okay, I'm done. I know, I know all there is about

to know about being a great mechanic. It's more like you're in school for being a great mechanic forever, and it'll never go away. And that's kind of what it is like for task management.



Francis Wade 16:37

If you don't crack this problem and understand and embark on a journey of improving your knowledge of task management as a system, then you'll always be running the risk of making haphazard improvements that don't work. And these haphazard kind of lucky experiments will only lead for you to experience kind of a loss of confidence. Kind of, eventually, it might turn in on yourself where you don't believe that you can add more tasks and add more sub projects and have them turn out effectively.



Francis Wade 17:24

Now most people, you know, may not even get to this point, they just keep trying random things. And it knows better to try something than nothing. They realize that where they're at is not working. They're seeing these unwanted symptoms. But the fact is, if all you're doing is trying random fixes to a systematic problem, you're just basically relying on luck and chances of being lucky more than once.



Francis Wade 17:52

You know, as I think I mentioned before that when people are novices, luck kind of works, because anything works. But at some point as you mature, and become more effective, luck stops working. And you have to rely on knowledge. And random, random approaches won't work, you actually do need to take a scientific approach, or take an approach that's based on some prior knowledge that someone else has gained.



Francis Wade 18:29

If you don't solve this, you may get to the point where you don't believe that you can add more projects. And what you find yourself doing is second guessing yourself. So that when someone says, "Hey, listen, do you want to take this thing on?" You want to like Lourdes, "Do you want to run a marathon?" You say, Oh, no, no, I could never do anything like that. And lots of people who live their life inside of, an "I could never do anything more than what I'm doing" rule. And they always say "No". And they say no to opportunities. They say no to learning. They say no to growth. They say no to making a contribution. They say no to all of these things that make life rich. And I'm not saying that you need to say yes to everything. But if you're no is coming from a place where you're afraid to add more tasks, today, we're talking about how to solve that.



Francis Wade 19:27

Fortunately, if you do make some progress today, when you make the right choices, you will be able to understand what's at play, put your arms around it and start to make some changes. That will give you the kind of confidence and skill so that you can make just the right

that will give you the kind of confidence and skill so that you can make just the right interventions and if you've been listening this far, I imagine that you do want this skill the way a mechanic has that kind of skill or a surgeon or a manager of a baseball team has that kind of diagnostic skill to be able to intervene effectively in a system.



Francis Wade 20:12

So, I come to this from bitter experience. Because I didn't understand how a task management system worked, I made the transition from using lists to using a schedule, doing time blocking, somewhere around 1999, 2000. I started doing it on my Palm Pilot at the time, I ran into some difficulty in around 2005. When I had a major life transition, I thought the problem was the time blocking, and decided to go back to using lists and to stop using my calendar as a place to manage my tasks. And things got 10 times worse. And I tried and persisted. And I've, you know, read, tried to understand what the advice from the person who said go do it. This happened to be GTD by David Allen, he said use this, don't do time locking, essentially try to understand why his system works. And what I was doing was working for me when I was following it. And nothing corrected itself until I went back to time blocking. It took me years - 4,5,6 years - to understand what I had done, and why it didn't work. In a nutshell, I didn't understand how a system of task management worked, how systems of task management work. And the fact that we have some commonalities between us.



Francis Wade 21:56

And here, we're going to transition now into solutions. That there is a system, a way in which we're constrained. We human beings all manage tasks in the same ways, the same basic fundamentals are the same for all of us. We cannot escape them. And they work the way they work because we have limitations to what we can do with tasks themselves.



Francis Wade 22:25

So tasks are psychological objects. They don't persist in the way that a physical object persists. Creating a pencil is not like creating a task. Creating a task, a psychological object is a difficult business. Even the act of creation, and then keeping it alive after it's been created, is extremely challenging for us as human beings



Francis Wade 22:53

I did not appreciate the fact that there is a set of actions that we take to manage our tasks. And once again, the way we humans think and act constrains the way that we do them, because what we tried to do is to treat these psychological objects, tasks as if they were physical objects, like pencils.



Francis Wade 22:53

So when you make a pencil, there's a whole process that you follow. And at the end of the process out comes a pencil, right? You start with all the components and the components of

subcomponents, and they're manufactured, and then they're brought together in an assembly and voila, pencil results at the end of it.



Francis Wade 23:39

So in task management, it all starts with a what I call that time demand, which is an internal personal commitment to complete a task in the future. So when you make this internal, individual commitment, you make it to yourself. And then you start to manage the process of ensuring that it makes its way to completion. When it's completed, it disappears. So there's a series of tasks it starts with, you may be familiar with frameworks like this, but it starts with capturing continues with emptying, tossing, acting now, scheduling, storing, listening, seven fundamentals. And if you don't manage those fundamental carefully and accurately, your system for managing time demands falls apart. Now, there are other fundamentals, but aside from the seven that I just mentioned, I won't go into them for the purposes of simplicity, but we all use these seven fundamentals to manage our tasks, but we don't understand is how each of them works, individually. How strong we are, in each fundamental how the fundamentals work together as a system, and therefore, how strong we are in working them all together.,when, for example, I'm strong in one and weaken all the others, what happens when my system looks like that.



Francis Wade 25:28

So there's multiple levels of information that we're missing, about the way that we execute our task management. Now fortunately, this can be learned. And I'm going to point you to some resources, where you can actually practice the kind of self diagnosis that I'm talking about, you know, kind of a fun way. So what do I mean by self diagnosis? Well, at the beginning of the improvements that you make in task management, you don't need much self diagnosis, because you're probably so weak that anything (I know this sounds terrible), but you're probably so ineffective that anything anyone tells you probably does move the needle a little bit. And you make your way and you move the needle, and you keep making improvements. And it's great and awesome, this, this, this apparently making some progress.



Francis Wade 26:30

And you get to the point where the progress slows dramatically. And to get to the next level, you now, need a different skill altogether. And that's a skill that a mechanic, or a surgeon, or a manager of a baseball team that would need... it's the skill of diagnosing your system to figure out where to intervene. No getting around the fact that there is some study that's required. Some knowledge and some information, some data, in order to be able to do an effective diagnosis.



Francis Wade 27:11

Now you could hire a coach. And what great coaches in task management do is that they very rapidly do an assessment. And then they tell you, Okay, well try this. And then what they're doing is they're filtering the 1000s of different options. And they're narrowing in on the one,

and the reason why they're worth their weight in gold is because they're able to narrow in on the next change that would give you what we call a Pareto improvement, which is a huge bang for your buck. A small change that produces huge results.



Francis Wade 27:50

If you have ever been to a great mechanic, you know, that they could just - "Oh your car is not starting?" They press down on a lever, and they say "Try it now." And it starts. And you're like "How did he do that? All he did was press...I tried changing the tires, tried, changing the kind of gas I was using, I tried changing the battery terminals". You know, in your mind, you're thinking of all the things that you went through, because you're poor diagnostician. Well, a great diagnostician knows, just the thing to do. Kind of like acupuncture, just where to press to make a difference.



Francis Wade 28:31

So the resources I'm going to give you, I'm actually going to point you in the direction of webinar during the webinar, I present three cases, Kumar, Dwayne and Anne. And let's imagine that they are just typical people, they're looking to make a difference in their task management. They've been facing some unwanted symptoms, and now they're trying to turn things around. And your job will be to advise them about the changes that they need to make.



Francis Wade 29:01

So it's, I have a whole explanation of how to become a great diagnostician. In the webinar, I'm going to drop the link in the show notes. And you'll have a chance to actually advise these three virtual people and three different cases. And as you do so, I'll introduce and give you some rules of thumb that are kind of introductory with respect to your diagnostic abilities. That's "don't try to improve that unless you've improved this" kind of advice. And to do that, you will need some resources you will see the a 13 component diagram, which describes the 13 fundamentals that we use here at 2Time Labs. And it'd be also share at the Task Management and Time Blocking Summit each year.



Francis Wade 29:54

It also points in the direction of a Medium article I wrote called "Three Ways to Improve Your Task Management as a System Vs a Collection", basically describing the difference between doing a diagnosis of a system versus just a group of random activities. I will also point you in the direction of a self assessment that you can do to understand your your own system right now.



Francis Wade 29:56

A couple of resources. One is my book another is a an online training that can get you starting to understand how your system works, if you're really committed to growing your capacity to manage more tasks in the future. Okay, so you'll get to choose which of these resources really

manage more tasks in the future. Okay, so you'll get to choose which of these resources really would be the ones you want to start with. And I recommend that you whether you use the ones I've recommended or not, I recommend that you take this particular course of action seriously, if so, if you're someone who sees yourself as maybe, as I said, creative, committed and you're a hard worker, smart, someone who is really looking to get to the next levels of achievement. Because the number of tasks that you can manage effectively, is a limit... a real ceiling on what you can accomplish as an individual. And if you want to accomplish and reach your potential, and surpass what people believe you can accomplish or what you believe you can accomplish. There is no doing that without contending with "how do I manage my tasks? How do I manage the system I use to manage my tasks."



Francis Wade 31:55

You must contend with it if you hope increase your capacity, improve your efficiency become more effective, experience fewer defects and fewer symptoms that you don't want to experience. And if you want to be in the game of continuous improvement so that you can fulfill some of your most important ambitions and dreams. So in a few minutes, I'll tell you about the next podcast that we have here in the series and keep listening. I will also share a couple of notes with you with respect to where you can make the most of this particular podcast. And stay tuned. There's some more coming up in just a few.