

2022-12-04 12-32-57

📅 Wed, Jan 04, 2023 10:10AM ⌚ 45:04

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

capture, email, demands, messages, points, people, defect, stacey, problem, inbox, stacy, potential, solutions, inboxes, manage, apps, digital, episode, world, email address

SPEAKERS

Francis Wade



Francis Wade 00:00

It's theTask Management and Time Blocking Podcast, episode 23. You're a productivity and technology enthusiast, which means that you're managing lots of inboxes. Each time you sign up for a new service, they give you another. But is that a good thing? Or is it just another loose end you need to account for in your weekly review?



Francis Wade 00:25

If it's the latter, then why? In this episode, we tackle the problem of capture points, physical and digital places where potential tasks are sitting, waiting. We'll talk about your need to handle each and every one of them, or else. That is, if you hope to develop a flawless reputation for being on top of all the stuff people send your way, waiting a response, and wanting a response. Join me on this solo episode, as we explore this challenge that affects every single knowledge worker in the entire world. It happens to be a continuation of episode 21 on capturing, I'm Francis Wade, and welcome to the Task Management and Time Blocking Podcast.



Francis Wade 01:41

Welcome back, and if you're brand new to our podcast, let me tell you why this is a little bit different than maybe the other ones that you've heard. Let's start off with a quote from Albert Einstein. He said if I had an hour to solve a problem, I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about solutions. So great quote, because a little bit about the similar to the approach that we take here. We're going to spend the first part of the show looking at the problem of excess inboxes...different capture points that we need to manage in order to be effective. Once we've done a pretty deep dive the way Einstein would recommend, then we'll look at solutions because the idea is that if we take a deep enough dive, then we should come up with some pretty good solutions. But it's a question of the quality of our diagnosis.



Francis Wade 02:38

So let's start with a story. Stacy is a certified project manager. She's also a gadget and app freak who can't resist experimenting with the latest technology, especially if it promises to enhance her productivity. But she's still reeling from a message she read two weeks ago. Her best friend from high school was having a life saving operation and needed a loan which Stacy could easily afford. She loved this particular friend, as the friend bailed her out several times when she needed help and some spare funds. Her friend left her three messages. The first was sent to a social media inbox she rarely used. She missed that one entirely. The second was to her voicemail, which she never checks. A third was sent to the correct email address, but ended up in spam. And the fourth was sent to her via snail mail, a physical letter to her old address in another state. It was forwarded two weeks later, and it came today.



Francis Wade 03:55

Stacey called her right away. But her friend's mother answered in tears. She was too late. The friend passed away the day before After delaying the surgery in order to raise the funds. There's no way to know if a more timely response would have helped. But if before her morning is over, Stacy knows what it's like to try and reach someone urgently without lock. She knows it's frustrating. So she decides with only a little touch of guilt and some sadness that this cannot continue. The truth is a minor version of this happened at work only three months ago. She escaped with only a slight reprimand from her boss. It did lead to her coming in the following weekend to clear out all her work email in 1x10 hour binge session. Awful stuff. But where should she start with all of her other digital communication, another 10 hour been session or two, or three? Sshe needs some answers.



Francis Wade 05:14

So how many of you could relate to Stacey, if you're in front of me right now, I'd ask you to raise your hands. Because, like, Stacey, we have a really freaky time taking care of all these inboxes. So let me define what a capture point is for the purposes of our show today. So why don't we back up a little bit, I will cover some of the stuff that we covered in the episode on capturing, which I believe was episode 21. So the core idea that we focus on here at the Task Management and Time Blocking Podcast is that of a time demands - that's the core, the core sort of the atom of our universe. And a time demand is an individual and internal commitment to complete an action in the future. I will say that again, it's an internal and individual commitment to complete an action in the future. In other words, it's a kind of a task. It's a variety of tasks. And it's in a way, it's a promise that you make to yourself. So it's an internal commitment, you promise yourself to do something in the future.



Francis Wade 06:37

So capture points are physical or digital places, where limit potential or actual time demands sit, waiting for us to process them. So an inbox capture point. Sorry, an inbox is a particular kind of capture point. So there's two kinds of capture points. There's automatic, and there's manual. Okay, so a manual capture point could be... if you're watching me on video, I'm going

to hold up a piece of paper and a pencil. When you write down a time demand, in order for you to do it later, you're capturing it, manually capturing it. And up until the mid 1990s, that was that was the state of the art with respect to capture points. Also, we had physical mail, that was a capture point as well.



Francis Wade 07:41

But since then, since the advent of email, and other digital tools, we've had asynchronous communication, which has allowed us to set up automatic capture points. So automatic capture points capture incoming potential time demands from anyone in the world. You know, we're so lucky, right? When email first came out, at potential time demands was a great thing... Getting a piece of email, man. Oh, boy, you felt like you were favored. Right? Like you were special. But now. As Stacey realized, we have a challenge managing all of these automatic capture points. Most of them are inboxes, but some of them aren't. They're all these places where other people are sending us potential time demands. Now, I say potential because an email that you get from... like the emails that she got from Stacey, were all potential time demands until she actually opened one of them, and read the message. And then so for example, she got the physical mail, the one that came two weeks late... she opened the mail. That potential time demands became an actual time demands as soon as she read it. psychological shift, right? Because no, she had to get on the phone. The time demand was "Called the friend immediately because this is an emergency." So the potential became actual, once she processed the piece of mail, snail mail that was in her physical mailbox. And the same applies for email and other capture points.



Francis Wade 09:34

Okay, so with those distinctions in mind, this show is all about the fact that we don't have those distinctions. We don't use them. People who design apps also don't use them, apparently, from what I can tell. They don't really they're not thinking of the big picture. They don't care about how many time demands you have and whether their potential or actual time demands and whether you have automatic or manual capture points, they don't care. They are just giving you a nice innocuous looking inbox. Okay. And we're struggling to stay on top of all of them.



Francis Wade 10:14

So maybe this story of Stacey may resonate with you a bit. If you have email addresses that maybe one person uses? Or do you have voicemail that you no longer check? Is your spam filter sort of something that you look at now and again, but not regularly. Those three examples are examples in which Stacy's capture points weren't being managed, effectively. And that's what caused the problem and caused all the downstream trouble. So if this relates to you, you're in the right place, you're, you're tuned into the right kind of conversation. Usually, you know, all of us have kind of a higher level aspiration, which is why you may be interested in this conversation... It's that you do want to be seen as someone who handles everything that's important to you. And you want to be seen as someone who handles them in a timely manner, not not only by other people, although that's certainly a part of the whole thing. You want to know yourself as someone that you can be relied upon as someone who others can trust.



Francis Wade 11:41

However, those other people are a problem. Because when you open up an email address for the very first time in Gmail, or wherever, and then tell the whole world that here's my gmail address, essentially, what you're doing is advertising the fact that you have a public capture point. And what people do with that piece of knowledge is that they now happily start to send you messages. And, you know, back in the day, when we got one or two pieces of email, per week, back in the mid 90s, when, when a message came in, it was cause for celebration, right? That capture point, had a high signal to noise ratio, right, the number that were coming in chances, there was a high possibility that actual conversion from potential to actual was really high, right? If you got three emails a month, chances are back in 1995, all three emails were converted from potential time demands into actual time demands, right? Pretty, pretty good numbers, right? 100% or close to it.



Francis Wade 12:57

Now, I don't know about you, but I get somewhere in the order of 150 to 220 emails per day. And of those. If I get 10 may think that are converted to actual time demands in and of themselves, then that's probably a high number. It's probably an extraordinary day to get that many. It's probably a conversation I'm having with some folks back and forth. And that's what creates the actual time demand. But today, the signal to noise ratio for most people is really low. And that means that we are, you know, we innocuously setup email addresses thinking probably that (or hoping that) we would have a nice signal to noise ratio, and we end up with a lousy one.



Francis Wade 13:58

So the world is almost not cooperating with us. I have created this nice inbox. And now it's full of crap. And I have to deal with the crap, or do? We Will see! So other people really don't care. How many other pieces of email that you're getting spammers don't care. The newsletters that you signed up for in the last 10 years. Those senders don't care, advertisers don't care. And also, as I mentioned before, the app developers don't care that all the different apps that you have picked up that have their own inbox, or their own version of an inbox, they don't care either.



Francis Wade 14:43

So WhatsApp doesn't have an inbox per se, but WhatsApp, or a Telegram account is a capture point. Each one of them right Snapchat, a capture point. They're all places where messages can come in. And messages come in asynchronously 24 hours a day. And they are coming in. They're unfiltered. There are people who come in or not, they don't care what else you have coming in. So there's multiple inboxes, every email address that you've ever had, that's still available or open, there are messages coming in there as well. Even even chat programs like Facebook or, or LinkedIn, anywhere that you have a, an incoming asynchronous piece of digital messaging is a potential time demand. And frankly, in our world, you know, we now have to battle, all the people who want to send us stuff. And we have to battle the fact that we're, we

open up as we join an app, and all of a sudden, we open up the floodgates. So we've exposed ourselves. In other words, we've given ourselves... assigned ourselves a job that we never thought we had.



Francis Wade 16:32

So for the case of Stacey, and for us, we find ourselves in a bit of a struggle, because we now have to manage all these messages. And if we don't do that, well, as I hinted up before, our reputation takes a hit. So in some companies, you know, the the person who replies to email the quickest is seen as being responsive and productive. Now, we all know that's crazy, the guy who, whose replies to email the fastest is probably doing nothing of any value. But it goes to an expectation that when someone sends you a potential time demand, they expect you to do something with it, they don't expect it to fall through the cracks.



Francis Wade 17:20

You know, Stacy's friend probably expected to get an email back, or a call immediately, especially after she left the voicemail after she left. After the different things that she tried, she probably passed away, being disappointed that Stacy didn't, didn't get back to her. So we have a problem. Now, of course, this is an exaggeration. But there's this story, Stacy story is an exaggeration, but there's lots of things that are happening in our lives. And we don't have a way to think about this new world that we have set up because we're the ones who set it up, right. It's not what we intended. But it's what we have. Underneath it all, you know, we probably feel feelings of frustration, and there's some anxiety. And you know, we're concerned. We're obviously not taught these skills anywhere. We're just muddling our way through, hoping that it'll eventually work out.



Francis Wade 18:32

And we don't want to be seen as people who don't care or people who are unreliable, or people who are incompetent. You know, whatever judgments people may have, you know, the friends family may have a judgment or own Stacey, because they know the friend was trying to reach her and she never got back to her. They might say, Oh, well, and have some thoughts about Stacey. With respect to it.



Francis Wade 19:07

So but deep down, you know, we say to ourselves, there's got to be a way to understand this problem. And an easy way to understand this issue that could give us some actual answers. This is, this should not be this ridiculous situation. It shouldn't be. It shouldn't be all crazy. It shouldn't be all random, there should be language that we could use to attack this problem. Because if we don't, if we don't deal with it, the future is not going to just hand us any nice solutions to this to this challenge. We can hope that it'll all go away. But what's more likely is that you're/ I'm going to be dealing with 300 emails per day, five years from now. And I'm going to be complaining but I need some I need some have some answers. I'd need some way to, to manage the future but also now, you know, without it, it means I'm living basically in fear.



Francis Wade 20:16

And I can't do and you can't do what Stacey did that one time at work with a weekend, we call those kamikaze weekends, by the way, where you go in for a weekend just to catch up on digital communication, for example. Sometimes it's paperwork, but you're behind you go in, on your own time, tell the family that you're going to the office... don't call, not to call you and you spend the whole weekend digging out. Because truth is the problem that the issues that created the problem have not gone away, you've just given up your discretionary time to have a temporary Band Aid. Because what comes after that is not you know, you haven't systematically solved anything, you're just going to realistically hope for the best. Because you can't control the volume of email that comes into your inbox. So we'll talk about ways to manage it, but you can't control it.



Francis Wade 21:12

So that approach doesn't work, obviously. And why hasn't? Why are we talking about this problem? Well we are talking about it at the level of complaints, so we're complaining about it, but we aren't talking about it at the level of thinking through the systematic solutions that an individual needs to put in place.



Francis Wade 21:38

We aren't even talking about the societal or the corporate kind of solutions, either most companies, it's just a problem with no end in sight. And hopefully, from this podcast, you've already gotten that there's some there's some distinctions you could bring to bring to the party that could make a difference. And we're going to apply them and see what we can come up with.



Francis Wade 22:03

The 24 hour per day inflow of you know, of potential time demands, that's not going to that volume. That's not going to stop, it's always going to be 24 hours per day. We thought that was so great when it first encountered it. Now, we read our email in the morning without with trepidation, because Oh, my God, what's what's the day going to be like? And, you know, we think that some some magical solution, like Slack, for example, may be the answer. I think by now, if you've been using Slack universe, it's not. It's, it's nowhere near that. So it's just more of the same problem. Just another capture point, from the point of view of what we're talking about.



Francis Wade 22:54

So our goal today is to try to get some traction, to come up with some practices that Stacey could use so that you could also use we need, we need some a little bit of theory. And I've already shared some of the theory that I have that we've worked on here. And you know, that

we're looking for a whole new kind of solution, a systematic solution, that basically discards the old, Clean up and clean up on a weekend and catch up non solution. Let's try to go for a real solution. I'm going to assume that you're someone who does want a solution to this problem. And that as you look to the future, you don't want to just just surrender. What most of us have done.



Francis Wade 23:52

So for me personally, I remember you know, when email was a privilege, I was, you know, I first time I encountered digital inbox was in college, where I used to exchange email with my girlfriend we had, this was the 80s. So there was no real email. This was just a messaging system that she found on her end and I found on my end, we found that we could change exchange messages between colleges. And there was no there was no email protocols that were widely used at the time. This was a really like one off IT stuff and I was not an IT person. But we just happen to know the right people who told us Oh, yeah, you can send the message there...it really was only the IT departments that were using it. The nerds were using it at that time. I used to be careful about using email, you know, between that time when I would send one email every two weeks. Then I worked for AT& T and we had an internal email. Even up to the time when I left there was no public email. That came two years after I left in what 1995. thereabouts with AOL, AOL was the one that everyone most people got first or CompuServe. Back then for a while email, you could be very careful about email, manage it, make sure you read your messages. And then at some point, I like everybody else just kind of gave up. And kind of try it hope that this didn't matter that I didn't get all my emails. There was some point of no return, which you and I decided that you were not going to process every piece of email. That it's going to come in to the capture point. And we're going to make some wishful thinking and hope that nothing important. Nothing, no, no actual time demands are actually sitting out there waiting to bite us on the butt.



Francis Wade 25:52

But, you know, if we were to be honest, I think we will say that we've all had Stacey moments. So our goal here is to reduce these Stacey moments. These are occurrences where potential time demand comes in. And because we didn't process it and turn it into an actual time demand, quickly enough, lead to some disaster. Okay.



Francis Wade 26:19

So solutions, wow. I mean, the problem itself is kind of dire. But in the last podcast in not the last one, one before at 21, episode 21. I focused on capturing, I shared the idea of email being a defect. And it's a sub optimal form of communication, that the preferred way to communicate with people is to communicate with them in a live conversation, either computer or phone, to have a two way dialogue, and not to have it go asynchronous. So our objective, if you accept that premise is that if we can't rid ourselves of email, if we're planning to hope operate in the real world. Well, we can reduce it...to absolutely reduce the volume of email that we receive? How do we do that? Well, let's talk about the capture points. In the last episode 21 I focused on manual capture points. Manual of course, again, those are the capture points like a paper pad that you write in these are and you always are writing potential time demands all the words,

you wouldn't write them. But the automatic capture points are different because they all have potential time demands, not actual ones, potential ones. So the manual ones always have actuals the automatic ones always have potentials.



Francis Wade 28:02

So when you read the time demand or you process it, at that moment, something triggers in your mind and that triggering is the birth of a time demand whether you like it or not. It gets created. And you can't help but create it so and that goes for physical as well as digital. So let's look at some of the different physical capture points that exist.



Francis Wade 28:33

So physical automatic capture points. So I mentioned your mailbox, your physical mailbox, one people send snail mail to but then there's all these other places where people leave messages for us and expect us to find them. So your chair in your office some people like to leave messages on your chair for you or on a post it note on your computer, or leave you a message to say that somebody called, or your kitchen counter in it, that's where you leave messages for each other or the fridge or you know wherever your spouse or family members may leave you a message (the expectation is that you will see it)... those are all physical capture points. Okay. Now let's define those you could probably think of others and at some point you know, after I define digital capture point, you should probably stop this recording and make a list of all of them okay? Because you may find a.. we'll see why in a minute.



Francis Wade 29:53

So a digital capture point. All those places in which potential time demands may arrive from other people actually some generated automatically by AI nowadays, or a computer or computer automatically sends you some kind of alert. So a smartphone, of course, is a massive capture point, and I am holding up my smartphone for emphasis. The apps on that smartphone, whether you think of them as apps like Slack, Instagram, direct messages, Facebook, Twitter. LinkedIn has its messages, LinkedIn messages. Messaging services that I mentioned before, like WhatsApp, and Telegram, on Snapchat, all have there ways of accumulating potential time demands on your behalf, right. And then there's all these miscellaneous apps that create these inboxes for you, that you don't really want. But they force you to accept them, because they're built into the software. And if you're going to use the software, you're going to use their inbox, because that's how they use it. So whenever I run into these, I get really upset. I don't want another inbox.



Francis Wade 31:37

Especially if that inbox doesn't send a notification to my main email. I hate those, because they're giving me extra work to do. Because no, I have to go check. So of course, I could just ignore and hope for the best. But is that effective? No. But the designers of those inboxes. As I said before, they don't really care. Every email that address that you have ever created and never closed down, is a potential place...for time demands, your spam folder, your Gmail, or

Outlook or whatever program you're using is automatically filtering what it thinks are spam messages into some special location. That's a capture point, that spam inbox. And if you've, you've had the experience of someone sending you an important piece of email, you're looking looking looking, it's not coming. There you go. You send them something, you don't know why they haven't gotten it. Finally, you discover that it's in your spam inbox. So managing your spam folder, your junk folder, has now become a new competency. A skill. A necessary skill, because that's just another just another capture point.



Francis Wade 33:08

So you're very rigorous here and look around your life for these digital capture points. And if you accept that email is a defect, and each message is a defect, a low quality way of communicating, then the first thing that you should try to do is to eliminate capture points and get rid of them. So what does that mean? Well it means also going going back to those those old email addresses and closing them down. You could also, if you need to have a particular email address on a particular kind of server, then create a different one. But get rid of them so that there's no more time demands, potential time demands coming in. So that your peace of mind is preserved. Ultimately, this is what we're going for here. Consolidate them into the smallest number possible. So smartphones have been great because you could actually consolidate many capture points into at least the same device, if not into the same software, at least the same device. You can have messages coming in. So at least you're not saying I have check the computer over here, check my phone over here, check my tablet over here. At least we're not talking physical locations. The technology has improved to the point where we can at least check them on one device. But that's not you know, that's not much. So this is the point where I think you should stop, stop this recording and make a list. A rigorous list all the different capture points, SMS, voicemail boxes as a as a Stacey found out..Anywhere, messages could be sitting with potential time demands. All right, well stop the video, stop the stop the video, stop the recording, make a list, especially look for those ones that could cause you trouble and then come back.



Francis Wade 35:23

And welcome back. So you will always have capture points. And in my book, I make a very big deal of consolidating these capture points into as few (automatic and manual, but let's focus on automatic) ...on as few automatic capture points as possible, so that you can process them effectively and you don't have surprises.



Francis Wade 35:53

In Episode 19, I talked about email. And that's where I introduced the idea of defects. Sorry, I made a mistake before Episode 21 was about capturing. Episode 19 was about email. But in this context, the all three of them are all very closely related to each other. I also talked about notification failures because notifications are also potential time demands. And I talked about that in episode 13. And you need to manage them also. So here we're just focusing on the capture points themselves. But what about the items coming into the capture points? Well, I did

focus on that in episode 13. And I said, You need to be filtering as dramatically and as radically and as harshly as possible. So that you can reduce the number of you know all those newsletters that you signed up for? Reduce that number to the minimum.



Francis Wade 37:00

And I mentioned a program that I use, which creates another capture point. But essentially, it's moving all of these messages into this completely completely different capture point...a program called Unroll. And it sends all my newsletters into one place, or my bulk email into a single place. So I treat those as if they are very low probability, potential time demands. That there's no one sending me a personal message through those channels. And separated it don't know the technology is not perfect, I still have to do a scan. But I'm longing for the day when there's better technology that will separate all bulk email from all personal email. And even allow you to, to put in different treatments.



Francis Wade 37:52

Now there are ways to program Gmail and Outlook to use filters to do these things. But it's extremely time consuming to do it. If you do it on an email sender by email sender basis, but you can see what you're trying to do, you're trying to triage the potential time demands. So that the ones which have a high signal to noise ratio, actually make it to to one of your few chosen capture points and not end up in any of the others. So you're being very proactive, and aggressive and you've got to use new technology like Unroll.



Francis Wade 38:33

Because there is no way to scale up certain behaviors like for example, inbox zero was a great idea introduced by Merlin Mann. And the idea there was that periodically, you will work on your email down the point where it's empty. So you get rid of all your backlog and get to empty. So in the world we live in today however, with 100 and something, most of them are low, low potential time demands low, they have very low possibility of becoming actual. I don't need to read them. I don't want to read them. I just want to get the gist through a program like Unroll. So there's a different interpretation we need to apply the idea of Inbox Zero to today's reality and to the reality going forward. We need concepts like Inbox Zero, we just need to apply to high potential time demands, the ones that are likely to turn into actual time demands. We need concepts like that or we need tools like Unroll.



Francis Wade 39:53

So it's not a case of where you can just set this and then forget it. This is more a case of have constant vigilance and ongoing improvement. Because you'll always be sort of in this balance of managing the potential time demands coming in using the best techniques that you can find, with the fewest capture points that you can get away with. You're always looking alike. So you always need to be looking for ways and opportunities to cut down the volume, minimize the capture points, use principles like Inbox Zero, but then apply them in places where they make sense.



Francis Wade 40:42

You know, the, the flip side is that if you don't do this, you're likely to, at some point tip into overwhelm. No, I didn't mention that Stacy was in overwhelm, per se. But she is experiencing defects in the way that she is managing her messaging. So she had two defects that I mentioned one with a friend who was who was ill, needing surgery. And the other one, something happened in the workplace, and her boss reprimanded her because she had another defect there. So they, in competencies that she has, in her regular system, they created these two problems.



Francis Wade 41:31

So as you look at your own life, you may blame the volume of email, and you may blame the number of people who are sending you messages, people who keep nagging you. But a more fruitful way to tackle the problem or even to think about it is where do I need to take my practice so that I don't create defects.



Francis Wade 41:55

So for a Stacy it may mean sitting down and looking at those two defects and getting to the root cause of both of them. And then once she's makes sure that it won't happen again, at some level, then going beyond and saying, Okay, how do I prepare myself for a world in which that's another level. So I don't be ever become a victim, or I don't ever have defects like this happen again. That's a whole nother level. And I invite you to think about the problem of capture points from that point of view.



Francis Wade 42:34

Because we're talking about a moving target folks. If I do this, the same podcast episode, the same focus, if I do it two years from now, I probably have a whole bunch of new things to say. Because things are always moving and they are changing. So jump on the new technology, find the new new ideas, use concepts like the ones that I've shared today, mix and match them to think about the way you need to tackle your email.



Francis Wade 43:04

So final assignment, think about the last defect that you experienced related to your capture points. And what was the cause of it? I know it's tricky to think about defects in this way. What if you think of a defect as an unwanted result that failed to meet a particular standard, bam... defect. And that defect can take you to a place where you can make improvements in which that kind of problem won't happen again. And that's worth the price of admission in teh case of this podcast, and I hope you do take it on, actually, to stop, you know, stop, pause, make that list of capture points, automatic and manual be extremely rigorous. And you know, go looking

in your email to see, where are these messages coming from the notifications, look at your apps, where do I where am I ignoring a whole bunch of capture points, make that list and then think about past defects and go back to the source.



Francis Wade 44:26

So I trust that this has been useful to you. I know there's a lot of brand new language in here and a whole bunch of new concepts. And I would love to hear from you. If you could share with me through any of the channels that I have mentioned on my website that are mentioned in the show notes. Just send me back a message to let me know your thoughts and whether this was useful to you or not. And keep listening. There is more coming up about our next episode here at the Task Management and Time Blocking Podcast. Keep listening.