

Time management can work but in unexpected ways, according to new research

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If you have a second, try typing "time management" into your favorite search engine.

You will get literally millions of results: books, tips, lessons, do's and don'ts.

It's a big industry. But as John Molson School of Business graduate researcher Brad Aeon asks in a new paper published in the journal *PLOS ONE*, does it actually work? Does time management correlate to professional and academic success?

To answer this question, Aeon and his colleagues Aïda Faber of Université Laval in Quebec City and Alexandra Panaccio, associate professor of management at John Molson, conducted a first-of-its-kind meta-analysis of time management literature. Their study pored over data from 158 separate studies spanning four decades, six continents and involving more than 53,000 respondents.

Their conclusion? Yes, time management does work. Though maybe not as one might initially think.

A balanced life is a satisfied life

"We found that it does have a moderate impact on work performance," Aeon says. "But we found that the relationship between time management and job performance actually increased over the years, and significantly so."

Aeon speculates that time management has become an ever-more vital skill set for an ever-more autonomous work force.

"People have more leeway in deciding how to structure their own time, so it is up to them to manage their own time as well. If they are good at it, presumably they will have a better performance," he notes. "And if they are not, they will have an even worse performance than they would have had 30 years ago, when they had more of their time managed for them."

Time management also had a [positive effect](#) on academic success,

though it was not as pronounced as on work. It had no discernible effect on standardized testing results, which Aeon says depend on a fluid type of intelligence that time management cannot address.

The researchers did find a stronger relationship between time management and overall well-being, in particular life satisfaction.

"Time management helps people feel better about their lives because it helps them schedule their day-to-day around their values and beliefs, giving them a feeling of self-accomplishment," he explains. Conversely, there was a strong negative relationship between the practice and distress.

Finally, the researchers looked at the impact of time management across demographics, such as [personality traits](#), age, gender, education and family status. They found the relationship far weaker than expected, though they had correctly anticipated that women would be slightly better at time management than men.

"The only trait that did correlate strongly with time management was conscientiousness," Aeon says. "That involves people's attention to details, their desire for organization, to be reliable and systematic. That is understandable, because there is a lot of overlap there."

They noted that people who have what they call an internal locus of control — meaning that they feel they have the ability to change or impact their lives—are more successful at time management than those who say they are subject to an external locus of control.

Keeping goals within reach

As the world continues to struggle through the COVID-19 pandemic, Aeon adds that it is important to avoid comparing time management with

supposedly more successful people. These misguided attempts at inspiration can lead to what he calls "time management shaming."

"You see these [social media posts](#) saying, 'Yes, there's a pandemic, but I learned a new language or I woke up at 5 a.m. and accomplished more in a few hours than you will all day,'" he says. "It makes the rest of us feel bad and creates unrealistic standards as to what we can and cannot do with our time."

More information: Brad Aeon et al, Does time management work? A meta-analysis, *PLOS ONE* (2021). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0245066](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0245066)

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