

# Time at the Top

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## Productive Work Habits from CEOs and Top Executives

By Ann Gomez and Mark Ellwood

**W**e all face the same constraint: there are only 24 hours in a day. But some people seem to get so much more done each day. How are they able to fit it all in? Are they sleep deprived? Super human? Or just incredibly productive?

To get to the bottom of this, we interviewed a group of successful CEOs and other top executives to find out how they are able to get so much done. We discovered a number of straight-forward techniques that employees at any level can use to fit more into their days.

### 1. Know Your Priorities

At the core we found that executives are extremely focused on their top priorities. For most of them, this means planning. Research from **Pace Productivity** indicates that top executives spend an average of 18 hours per week or 27% of their time in this area. Setting aside this time for planning is a disciplined practice and all executives interviewed cited the importance of staying focused. Minimizing administrative busy work is imperative for them. In addition, executives noted that planning requires more than simply updating their *To Do* lists.

Michael Cloutier, former CEO of **AstraZeneca Canada**, uses a technique called “3 Balls” to manage his priorities. “Glass balls must be handled in 24 hours as they are urgent, and directly impact a major objective. The value of completing them is short term.” Cloutier comments that if you “drop them”, they break and there is a direct consequence or a significant missed opportunity. “Rubber balls take second priority. If you drop them, they bounce back once and you get a second shot.” However, Cloutier adds, “you must complete them when that second chance occurs; otherwise, there are again consequences.” Cloutier goes on to say that, “Lead balls fall to the ground and sit there.” He notes that these lead balls are rarely addressed as he usually ends up with new glass or rubber balls. “While occasionally one or two lead balls survive, if we’re honest the impact of lead balls is minimal and they don’t need to be a priority.”

Jim Estill, CEO of **Synnex Canada** uses a technique that he calls, “What do you want to accomplish?” Every day he starts with a list of the things he wants to complete by close of business. The action of writing a daily plan allows him to focus on his priorities and avoid getting side-tracked with other things.

Andrew Barlow, General Manager of **Machine Control Systems** stays focused on getting his “top three” tasks done as soon as possible, despite having a much longer list of other tasks.

Brian Fetherstonhaugh, Global CEO of **OgilvyOne**, identifies his top three priorities to accomplish on a weekly basis “despite the 27,000 other tasks that invariably arise”. He also maintains a flip chart in his office of key priorities, to keep them top of mind.

### 2. Focus on One Thing at a Time

There is a wealth of research indicating that focusing on one thing at a time improves personal productivity. Top executives are not immune to a barrage of requests, action items, routine items, and emergencies. To succeed, they must stay focused. Fetherstonhaugh states that the “focus muscle” is vital to productivity and that it is important to keep this focus muscle strong. He relies on his ability to focus intensely and switches tracks quickly when he needs a break.

Focusing on the most important matter comes naturally to Tim Penner, President of **Procter & Gamble Canada**. He gravitates towards the exceptions, the things that are really broken. “If things are inside the control barriers, I’m okay; my people are managing it quite nicely.”

Penner also attributes much of his productivity to being highly focused. “Whatever I’m doing, I’m going to absolutely dedicate myself to doing it. If that means that we’re in a meeting and we’re talking about things, I’m in the meeting. I’m not going to be answering my Blackberry.”

Pat Merrin, Managing Director of **Lucas Milhaupt Europe**, speaks about the dangers of allowing oneself to be frequently pulled off track. “Dealing with urgent issues can be a fun place to operate because you get

immediate rewards and you feel as though you're accomplishing something. But you end up in a constant firefighter mode and can lose sight of the more important things."

Cloutier evaluates his list of priorities every week. He questions every task, project and assignment as to whether they directly impact his strategic plan or personal objectives. If they do, Cloutier ranks them in terms of impact, time required to move to the next step and the probability of getting something done. Cloutier states that this process really makes the true priorities stand out. He then focuses on the highest priorities and doesn't allow himself to be swayed until they are completed.

Estill believes that people who don't get a lot done are not highly focused, which he admits requires a lot of energy. "The biggest thing is that people don't have rules and don't know what they should be focused on. So they spend their time in the wrong areas." He sets time frames for his work and challenges himself to improve on those times.

### 3. Manage Your Interruptions

How do senior executives manage their inevitable interruptions? Chuck van der Lee, President and CEO – **Rogers Retail**, believes it is important to stay focused on one thing at a time. He does this by actively managing interruptions and making sure his schedule has time blocked off for important things.

Cloutier ignores all interruptions (except calls from his family) until he has a break in his planned schedule to address them.

Bruce Bowser, President & CEO of **AMJ Campbell**, has a restricted access policy when he is working and asks that people speak with his assistant. When he sees colleagues during the day, he tries not to interrupt them because he wants them to be just as productive as he is.

Executives also talked about ways to effectively handle interruptions when they occur. When people walk into Fetherstonhaugh's office, he finds that they often assume he has been sitting there thinking about their issue. Usually, he is dealing with another issue, so he coaches people to spend two minutes giving him the context and background before presenting their question. This allows him to effectively switch gears and focus on their issue.

### 4. Be Strategic About Your Email

Jordan Banks, Former Managing Director of **eBay Canada** and Former CEO of **Jump TV** personally reviews the 300+ emails he gets in a day because he wants to decide on what is important for himself. He relies on the preview pane to scan the subject line and first two sentences. He uses non-prime working time to respond to emails. He mentioned that he can even get through a few emails in an elevator ride! Meanwhile, Estill advocates speed reading to process email.

Many executives talk about the importance of making time for email. Cloutier books time mid-day and late day to work on his emails. While this approach works for the most part, he has his assistant send him a text or urgent email if an important email has been sitting in his inbox for too long between his email sessions. Cloutier also works on email late in the evening to ensure that he is providing people with quick answers and to ensure that he is not a bottleneck.

Other executives apply what we refer to as the *Touch it Once* principle. They push themselves to act on each email the first time they read it. Not all emails require a response and the *Touch it Once* principle can be as simple as deleting the email. Penner is big on 'deselecting' work and tends to delete irrelevant messages immediately. He doesn't mind being copied on emails because he can very quickly determine whether he wants to read them or not. If he decides to read something, it is because it is important. Other executives like Bowser prefer not to be copied on emails unless their help is absolutely needed.

### 5. Run Efficient Meetings

Being productive in group meetings can be as much a challenge for the senior executive as it is at any level in an organization. Penner consistently reinforces the designated start time by always closing the door when he walks in, and starting right away.

Banks is a stickler for punctuality and starts meetings exactly on time. Recognizing that people need time to transition from one meeting to the next, he scheduled most meetings to start exactly five minutes after the hour while at eBay Canada. This allowed all meeting participants to use the first five

minutes of the hour for transit time to the meeting or in another productive way.

Estill relies on agendas and a follow-up summary for meetings. They are timed and very structured so they do not last more than an hour.

Bowser keeps his meetings to a minimum and always uses an agenda. Even if the time allotted is an hour, he affirms that it doesn't need to last that long. "If you can wrap the meeting up in thirty-five minutes then do so." Everyone wants to have their voice heard says Bowser, but he tries to prevent someone from re-framing what someone else said to save time. He tends to ask opinions from people, but expects quick, concise thoughts to keep things moving.

Penner points out that having a facilitator who can say, "We've got a follow-up step; let's move on," is helpful because many discussions can turn into endless loops.

Finally, most executives interviewed said they had a "no Blackberry" policy in meetings.

## 6. Be Decisive

Executives are faced with making decisions every day. Van der Lee knows that efficient decision making is a key driver of productivity. He says that "top performers make good decisions on 80% information".

Estill agrees, stating that "perfectionism can kill" and that "imperfect decisions are better than slow decisions". Estill advises his team to stick with a decision once it is made.

Likewise, Penner believes that people can suffer from "ponderosity" when they think about decisions too much. "At some point, you have to pull the trigger; action is better than making no decision at all."

Bowser makes a decision with the understanding that there is a test period and then he pulls the plug if it doesn't work. He would rather do ten things and have two fail and scrap them quickly, than do an exhaustive study and implement only three things in a year.

Other executives talked about the importance of committing to a decision, once made. Cloutier said "I make a decision once and go with it. I don't allow my executive team to revisit a decision unless there is a case that is so compelling (i.e., brought on by new information or the discovery of a mistake)."

Jordan Banks mathematically breaks down decision-making into 75% data and 25% gut instinct. Like many executives, he puts pressure on himself to decide quickly. He also insists that he does not need to be involved in every decision as he spends an inordinate amount of time ensuring that he hires people who he can trust to make the right decisions when called upon.

For Merrin, very few decisions are made unilaterally. He generally makes decisions by seeking a consensus of his senior managers, often taking the direction the local manager recommends. At the same time, Merrin enables people to make their own decisions, which helps them gain confidence. Barlow holds the same philosophy, "Don't mess with people when you've given them something to do."

## 7. Leverage Your Team (a.k.a. Delegate)

The executives we spoke with all strongly rely on their management team to leverage their own abilities.

Having a strong team allows Banks to feel comfortable delegating a lot of tactical work and partnering with them on strategic direction. He strikes the right balance between tactical and long-term issues by using a combination of weekly one-on-one meetings, weekly management meetings and quarterly off-site meetings.

Bowser told us it is important to be disciplined about delegating and then stay out of the details. "If you are going to grow your business, you have to hire the right people and let them do their job. If you micro-manage, you are going to de-motivate people, and you don't free yourself to do other things."

Merrin gives his senior executives the freedom to make decisions that won't be second guessed. "Most of the time people don't make totally wrong decisions. They may make decisions that could have been better. But if you're going to give them freedom, you also have to give them freedom to make mistakes and offer support to fix any negative outcome that may result from the decision. People have to feel as though they aren't going to be hung out to dry if they make a 'wrong' decision."

With regards to his team, Fetherstonhaugh accepts that his role is one of influence and that he cannot do everything nor control every detail. He is

very specific when he delegates unless he is seeking creative input or is dealing with the unique person who can handle ambiguity. Fetherstonhaugh also tries to spend a few extra minutes with the person he is delegating the task to with a focus on empowerment. On the delivery date, he provides feedback to help people grow.

Estill meets with each of his team members to review their 'to do' lists. He tries to determine how he can help, including assisting with re-ordering priorities.

Cloutier talks about the importance of helping his team manage their workload. "When people are overwhelmed, they are often stuck in the 'doing' versus the 'leading'." Cloutier finds that some people get caught up in making promises and that they need to have the discipline to say "no". Cloutier coaches his employees to establish a plan to deliver on their commitments and follow-through on the plan before taking on anything else.

## 8. Take a Break

One has to wonder whether the hectic life of a senior executive automatically means that they get no time for breaks. On the contrary, all of the executives placed great importance on their lives outside work.

Fetherstonhaugh cites the dangers of allowing oneself to get run-down, especially when everyone wants something from you. "Managing energy levels is a life skill, not just a work skill." Consequently, Fetherstonhaugh is very aware of his work pace because he tracks his time (and has been doing so since 1983). He recommends that people be conscious of their optimal cruising altitude (the maximum hours they can spend in a work week before they burn out). In his case, this is 57 hours per week.

Merrin believes in the quality of time invested at work instead of quantity of hours.

Jordan Banks strives to come to work at his best each day. He maintains a high energy level by working out four or five times a week, always eating breakfast and drinking a lot of water while never drinking coffee. While he says that it is easy to eat fast food when he is busy, he avoids succumbing to this.

Estill structures his work days based on his energy levels. He has high energy levels in the morning

and schedules things that require his creativity at this time of day. A big fitness advocate, he also incorporates running into his schedule several times a week – regardless of whether he is in town or out of town. He also focuses on eating well and knows what sorts of things energize him and what sorts of things don't.

Bowser, another keen fitness advocate, goes to the office gym in the morning. He knows that he needs to stay fit to help minimize stress. Consequently, he books time with the on-site fitness trainer three times a week.

Cloutier agrees that breaks are critical. Cloutier schedules his breaks whether it be a short "walk about", trip to the gym, or a quick "heads down" time at his desk. "An occasional quick 15-minute siesta has worked wonders at 3:00 p.m. in the past!"

## Putting It All Together

The issues facing executives at the top of an organization are not fundamentally different from managers at any level. A lot of work needs to be done and there are always opportunities to do more. A major theme that emerges from our interviews of senior executives is that they are pro-active about how they manage their work. Rather than haphazardly allowing themselves to be overtaken by activities, they are clear about what needs to be done to be their most effective. In articulating how they achieve maximum effectiveness, they are simply preaching what they practice.

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