

*Ordinary time-management techniques simply don't help some people. But if you understand the four distinct varieties of time abusers and the inner conflicts that distress them, you can find ways to work more productively together.*

## Chronic Time Abuse

by Steven Berglas

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Managers categorize their employees in many ways. Some like to distinguish between extroverts and introverts. Others prefer to look at how willing or unwilling their employees are to take risks. Only rarely do top managers group their people according to their use or abuse of time, which is surprising given the impact it has on an organization's productivity and profitability. Anyone who has ever managed people who abuse time—whether they are chronic procrastinators or individuals who work obsessively to meet deadlines weeks in advance—knows how disruptive time abusers can be to a business's morale and operations.

Time abuse is very different from the common and well-covered problem of time management. While the vast majority of us can benefit from practical insights on how to organize our lives better, lessons in time management will have little impact on time abusers. That's because real time abuse results from psychological conflict that neither a workshop nor a manager's cajoling can easily cure. Indeed, the time abuser's quarrel isn't even with

time but rather with a brittle self-esteem and an unconscious fear of being evaluated and found wanting. That's why you should focus your efforts on what makes a time abuser anxious instead of teaching him how to organize his day.

Consider Scott Gartner, a Clio Award-winning creative director for a major apparel manufacturer. (All the names in this article have been changed to protect people's identities.) At the start of his professional career, Scott's perfectionism was tolerable to his team members; though it often made him late, he always handed in superb work. Unfortunately, as he progressed in his career, his perfectionism became self-defeating, like a filibuster that prevented any real work from getting done. Finally, after he received a Clio, his inability to meet deadlines assumed epic proportions.

Scott's excuse was always the same. As a deadline approached, he found himself "forced" to fire a key member of his creative team for submitting substandard work. This

“forced” him to work endless nights to generate a creative product. Inevitably, exhaustion “forced” him to miss marketing meetings that could not proceed without him. One year, his perfectionism resulted in advertising cost overruns of nearly 15% and the loss of two members of his creative team.

After his boss called me in to work with Scott, I found out that his chronic failure to meet deadlines was deeply rooted in his background. Scott grew up an army brat and was raised by a staff-sergeant father who used to harangue him about fulfilling his potential. The problem was, nothing Scott ever did satisfied his father. For example, if Scott scored well on an exam, his father would bark, “So how did the top student do?” Years of being subjected to such pressure made Scott almost physically afraid of receiving feedback. He resolved the dilemma by learning to manipulate deadlines to increase the likelihood of his getting a positive evaluation or, at the very least, to ensure that he wouldn’t get a negative one. For Scott, it was better to be obsessive and late than to fall short of his father’s demands. Indeed, he found that if he took the time to deliver the expected goods, he would often be forgiven for any chaos that he had created along the way.

Scott Gartner is not alone in his abuse of time. As a clinical psychologist and executive coach, I have observed hundreds of time abusers like him and have worked one-on-one with more than a dozen in their battle with the clock. Of course, perfectionists like Scott are not the only type of time abusers. Over the years, I’ve come across three other kinds as well: *preemptives*, who in an effort to control their lives hand in work far earlier than they need to, making themselves unpopular and unavailable in the process; *people pleasers*, who commit to far too much work because they find it impossible to say no; and *procrastinators*, who make constant (and often reasonable sounding) excuses to mask a fear of being found inadequate in their jobs.

Managing these four types of people can be challenging, because time abusers respond differently from most people to criticism and approval. Praising a procrastinator when he is on time, for instance, will only exacerbate his problem, because he will fear that your expectations are even higher than before. In the following pages, I will describe the typical time abusers in the workplace—the “Four Ps,” I call

them—and will suggest some appropriate interventions for helping them manage their problems.

### The Preemptive

Regardless of the different ways they might disrupt colleagues, time abusers are alike in that they are all highly inflexible individuals who believe deeply that they are doing the best job possible. This is most true for preemptives—the rarest of time abusers. Preemptives are the people who compulsively beat the clock. They finish assignments weeks ahead of schedule and always seem to be in control.

So what’s the problem? Often, there is none. In fact, preemptives can thrive for long periods in organizations without ever drawing negative attention to themselves precisely because managers delight in having what appear to be low-maintenance workers. Over time, however, preemptives can cause morale problems because they ignore how their behavior affects others. Indeed, preemptives are seldom team players. While their work is often first-rate, they are typically asocial individuals who, while not actively hostile, fail to take their group’s needs into account. For instance, their obsession with beating deadlines makes them move on to other assignments just when they should be accessible to colleagues on the previous one. And if their attempts to stay in control are viewed by colleagues as maneuvers to curry favor or to overshadow the efforts of others, serious dissension can erupt.

Why do people become obsessed with beating the clock? Although a small percentage of workers become preemptives as a result of traumatic experiences in adulthood—say, severe illness or the sudden loss of a job—it is largely a response to being raised in a highly disruptive environment. Far from demanding punctuality—which would provide a sense of predictability and orderliness that, while usually resented, does not produce fear—the parents of future preemptives are always changing the rules. A future preemptive may be cleaning her room (as ordered to), then suddenly find herself chastised for not doing her homework. As a result of this arbitrariness, preemptives believe that if they don’t comply immediately with a directive, the request may be changed at a moment’s notice and they will be open to criticism. By minimizing the extent to which anything but their own behavior deter-

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mines their fate, these early birds seek to make a preemptive strike against that feeling.

Consider Jennifer Goddard. She received a bachelor's degree in computer science from Stanford University before going to work for a leading software firm in Silicon Valley. In her six years with the company, Jennifer was swiftly promoted to the position of quality control engineer. Thorough and reliable, Jennifer would complete her analysis of any code she was asked to test well ahead of schedule. Because she always wanted to get a leg up on the next project, she would immediately begin a new assignment after finishing the previous one.

During the early phases of her career, Jennifer's style of moving on quickly to other projects annoyed other engineers, but they put up with it. As her group progressed into the final, beta phase of developing a major software program, however, they were no longer tolerant and expected Jennifer to be available 24/7 to correct and rewrite code. Instead, to the consternation of the team, once her work was done, Jennifer left the office. Although she logged on from home, that didn't appease the team. The first time Jennifer completed her own portion of a major assignment and tried to move on, she was bombarded with angry e-mails. On the second occasion, all hell broke loose. Eventually, some of her colleagues demanded that she be fired. When their boss defended the quality of Jennifer's work, his arguments fell on deaf ears. She wasn't a team player, her coworkers said, and they wanted her out.

Jennifer wasn't fired, but a lot of damage was done. Every time she completed a subsequent analysis ahead of schedule, coworkers deluged her with gratuitous requests for help. Because this hazing prevented Jennifer from getting a head start on other assignments, her preoccupation with achieving control was frustrated and she grew anxious and depressed. Although her boss made several attempts to get her to discuss and resolve her problems with the other members of the quality control team, his efforts proved to be too little, too late. Less than a year after the beta-testing debacle, Jennifer quit her job and went to work for another firm.

So how do you manage the Jennifers of this world? In my experience, the only way to get them to confront their fear of disorder is to put

them in a position where they think they are getting more control when in fact they are being forced to interact with their peers.

One way to do this is to promote your preemptive to a position such as unit head or director of a subdepartment. Through socializing and accepting responsibility for others, the preemptive will gradually learn to accept unpredictable demands while becoming more flexible in the process. Another approach is to get this person to mentor others. Since preemptives have an acute need for praise from authorities, mentoring is a way for them to get the kudos they crave. A preemptive can virtually be guaranteed that her work will be appreciated both by her mentee and by you. Ultimately, as this role becomes a trusted part of her repertoire, it will lead her to develop greater social awareness and interpersonal skills.

### **The People Pleaser**

Another type of time-challenged employee who can appear at first glance to be a dream come true is the people pleaser. While the vast majority of us want to be helpful—and let's face it, anyone who constantly says no will quickly be shown the door—this doesn't alter the fact that saying yes all the time is highly dysfunctional. When a person chronically takes on more and more responsibilities out of a fear of confronting authority, he will inevitably commit too much of his time to unproductive projects—for instance, he will sit on a project that he should have passed on to someone else much earlier.

Like preemptives, people pleasers develop problems with time because of difficult interactions with authority figures. The distinguishing feature of a people pleaser's background is the fact that in her early environment, her feelings were not sufficiently valued. Much like Cinderella, who was forced to clean house so her stepsisters could go to the ball, people pleasers are taught to subordinate their desires for the good of others, notably their parents. The covert message that they should subordinate their needs not only breeds resentment of being controlled but can also evoke feelings of rage.

In the workplace, the people pleaser often resorts to time abuse to vent her anger. For example, she agrees to take on a task she doesn't want and then devotes obsessive attention to

its minutest details. Although this form of overcompliance can win approval from others, unchecked it can lead to conflicts with the very authority figures she is endeavoring to please.

Consider the story of Brooke Miller, head of human resources at a rapidly growing software company. Because Brooke was a good writer, the CEO often tapped her to write his speeches and reports in addition to doing her full-time HR job. She always seemed to comply with good cheer, though she usually just made the deadline—and the delays got worse over time. Three times, Brooke's boss had to have reports FedExed to off-site locations because Brooke had been late in preparing them. Matters came to a head for both sides when the CEO asked Brooke to draft him a keynote address for a major IT exposition. As usual, Brooke worked assiduously to prepare the speech while altogether ignoring the deadline of three weeks. When the CEO testily confronted her about needing to see an early proof of the speech, Brooke turned away, mechanically tidied up her desk, and walked out of the office—never to return. When Brooke's boss came back from the exposition, he found her letter of resignation, criticizing, among other things, his exploitation of her.

Brooke's boss should have known that something was up long before he got hit with her resignation. When a person goes the extra mile, it's normal for her to ask for recompense or recognition. Brooke did neither, but her lateness got worse. While people pleasers seem humble and self-effacing, the truth is that like everyone else—possibly, more than others—they need public acclaim. If that recognition is not forthcoming, not only will their problems grow worse, but they may even attempt to topple the authority figures they feel have been controlling them.

As the story indicates, people pleasers often nurse deep anger. So if you have a direct report who is an inveterate people pleaser, you should consider getting him some form of assertiveness training. Your people pleaser needs to learn better how to set limits and, ultimately, how to handle his anger. Managing his lateness, however, is more complicated. The clear message you have to send is, "If you don't hear it as a direct request from me, don't do it." Beyond that, you can institute regular meetings to monitor what your people pleaser is doing for whom. People pleasers routinely ac-

cept work beyond the boundaries of their jobs. So if you hear that one of them is preparing materials for another department, then calmly take some of his assignments away from him and assign them to another employee. A simple "I need you here with me" also addresses the people pleaser's chronic need for appreciation, which is the real reason he is always doing more. By discussing workloads in this realistic way, managers can do a lot to help people pleasers meet their deadlines.

Finally, managers should hold frequent evaluation meetings with their people pleasers. These should not be the kind of meetings in which you judge performance but rather the type that helps you to determine whether the people pleaser feels appreciated or not. The reason people pleasers engage in so much extra work is that they get more recognition for doing somebody else's work than they get for doing their own. If you want your people pleasers not to go to unreasonable lengths for praise, make sure you tell them they are far too valuable to your team to work as freelancers for the rest of the company.

### The Perfectionist

Like people pleasers, perfectionists are time abusers who can hold people hostage for indefinite periods of time. But perfectionists do it out of anguish rather than rage. They take more time than allotted to satisfy extremely unrealistic but deeply internalized standards of excellence. And they get away with it because they do first-rate work.

For a perfectionist, performance is all or nothing; good enough will never suffice. To achieve such high ideals, the perfectionist posts psychological Do Not Disturb signs all around him as he works. Emotionally isolated in this way, he frequently appears arrogant and dismissive. Whether that is true or not, the fact is, the perfectionist does require absolute control over the quality of the product he produces.

People with a passing knowledge of psychiatry often assume that perfectionists suffer from obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCD)—and with good reason. Both perfectionists and people who suffer from OCD tend to worry incessantly, be overscrupulous, and be extremely preoccupied with exerting control over people, places, and things. But a hallmark of OCD is an obsession with rituals and rules, which helps allay anxiety. Perfec-

*The people pleaser often resorts to time abuse to vent her anger.*

tionists don't let rules get in the way: In their pursuit of excellence, they ignore all the regulations, often to the dismay of colleagues who seldom, if ever, see value added from the perfectionist's determination to turn in a flawless product.

So what makes perfectionists tick? While there is no single theory, it's widely assumed that if a child is shamed for failing to meet impossible standards while his self-image is forming, he will later develop a keen sense of humiliation in his personality. One manager I worked with traced the origin of his perfectionism to the tactic his father used to get him to learn the piano. Every Friday, he was forced to sit at the piano until he learned to play a piece flawlessly. Such harsh demands on a child can be traumatic. According to the eminent psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, at a critical juncture in early childhood, a person either learns to feel autonomous or starts to distrust himself. If parents do not help the child build inner confidence at this stage, he will be haunted by a chronic sense of inferiority for which he will constantly overcompensate by trying to achieve perfection. A perfectionist, then, is someone who is too vulnerable to feeling ashamed of his productions ever to give anyone less than the best. Even the most rudimentary assignment deserves an all-out effort.

A related theory about the origins of perfectionism concentrates on the development of self-esteem. A cardinal law of psychiatry is that parents must respond to a child with respect and empathy if he is to acquire a healthy sense of self-worth. Otherwise, the child will develop so-called narcissistic vulnerabilities that drive the person to seek escape through grandiose fantasies and a sense of entitlement. In this view, perfectionism is an inevitable by-product of a narcissistic disorder. The perfectionist copes with his vulnerability by doing all he can to prevent criticism: "If my work is beyond reproach, then no one can find me wanting."

Whatever the condition's precise cause, perfectionism can undoubtedly be stressful for the perfectionist's colleagues and employers. Take the case of Alex Whitman, CEO of a national restaurant chain, who hired his brother-in-law Mel Davis to be head of purchasing, only to discover Mel was a perfectionist. When a vendor's contract came up for renewal, Alex asked Mel to find out whether a new supplier could be substituted for the old in an effort to drive

down costs. Mel prepared a report as detailed as an FDA investigation. When Alex protested, Mel explained: "We can't afford to overlook anything. Oversights are costly." Because Alex wanted to avoid the domestic strife that would arise from firing his wife's brother, he began assigning Mel's work to others. But that only gave Mel even more of an incentive to perfect his work. On one occasion, Alex asked Mel to get bids on new ovens for the restaurants. Mel secured over a dozen bids, but since some ovens used natural gas, Mel went on to get bids for new ventilation systems as well. Then he contacted the building and fire departments to see what permits Alex would need to bring the various facilities up to code. When one architect, a friend of Alex's, called to congratulate him on his expansion plans, Alex furiously confronted Mel, who just looked at him scornfully: "I am never going to do a half-assed job."

Unlike preemptives and people pleasers, perfectionists feel that they must demonstrate extraordinary proficiency to succeed or be accepted in organizations. Unfortunately, their perfectionism also makes them very uncompromising colleagues. Paradoxically, a perfectionist's strategy for winning acceptance is precisely what makes it hard for him to gain acceptance.

Managing perfectionists is almost impossible. Unlike the preemptive and the people pleaser, who are looking for your praise and who are therefore open to suggestions, the perfectionist wants only the approval that was unattainable in childhood. Since his childhood was fraught with impossible demands, the perfectionist should truly be viewed as traumatized—someone who can't get real relief from his symptoms without professional help.

In my experience, only one technique has any possibility of succeeding with perfectionists—a technique that behavioral psychologists call flooding. Flooding is typically used to treat people who suffer from germaphobia, a morbid fear of contracting contagious diseases from normal daily interactions (such as using a public phone). Germaphobes are helped by being forced to deal with potentially contaminated substances—like shaking hands and afterwards, without washing, eating a sandwich—and learning that they can survive. Using the flooding technique, you can encourage your perfectionist to get as many colleagues as possible to evaluate his work prior

to his submitting the perfect version for your final approval. The benefits of this tactic are twofold: First, it inoculates the perfectionist against a dread of evaluations by exposing him to low doses of what he most fears—criticism. Second, it changes the public persona of the perfectionist from that of a rigid social isolate to that of a contributory team member.

### The Procrastinator

Procrastinators are the Michelangelos of time abusers. They are the kids back in school who used to complain that the dog ate their homework. The most common type of time abuser, procrastinators leave assignments until the 11th hour and then throw themselves (and others) into a panic, working round-the-clock in a vain attempt to meet a deadline. If asked by his boss, “Where is that work you promised?” the procrastinator sincerely responds, “I’ll show you as soon as I get this monkey off my back.” The problem is, the monkey never goes away.

Procrastinators resemble perfectionists in that they both run shamelessly late. But while a perfectionist is sweating to achieve an A+ because that’s the only grade that’s acceptable to him, a procrastinator postpones doing any work because he secretly fears that he cannot produce an A+. A developmental history known to give rise to such chronic self-doubt is being raised by parents who praise the child too early and too often in the mistaken belief that only positive feedback is good for the child’s self-esteem. Typically, the parents of future procrastinators do not respond to average performance by providing corrective feedback or reacting with disappointment. Instead they say, “You must not have been yourself when you did that, because the real you is perfect.” Unfortunately, when parents raise a child this way, the child develops an exalted opinion of himself that he fears losing. And unless a child knows that the praise is real, he becomes doubly disillusioned. On one hand, he resents being trapped by unrealistic performance expectations. On the other, because he comes to suspect his parents’ admiration as false, the procrastinator unconsciously distrusts the praise that he receives from others.

A common feature of both perfectionists and procrastinators is that their symptoms often grow worse after receiving public acclaim. But the situation is particularly acute for the procrastinator, whose performance can

worsen if he feels that his lofty status has grown even loftier. Whereas normal workers react to promotions by assuming, “Well, they’ve recognized that I’ve done good work,” the procrastinator reacts to rewards by assuming that authorities only want more and better work from him. Essentially, the procrastinator fears that a promotion will increase his likelihood of failure; even well-earned praise serves only to exacerbate his need to finesse another deadline.

Of course, the procrastinator doesn’t simply refuse to work—he gets interrupted by other assignments or is sidetracked by unexpected crises: illness, family problems, or just plain old car trouble. These excuses not only provide a justification for producing inferior work but can, paradoxically, serve for a time to enhance others’ perceptions of the procrastinator’s ability. If the end result of his work is poor, there was always the handicap. But if it’s decent despite the handicap, then the procrastinator gets bragging rights: “Imagine how good the brochure would have been had I been functioning at full strength!”

In extreme cases, the procrastinator will unconsciously sabotage his own work on the basis that “if I don’t get up to bat, I can’t strike out.” Dave Caldwell, the son of two Columbia professors, is a case in point. Dave knew he should be a stellar performer because his high-achieving parents repeatedly told him he was a star. And indeed, he was always on the verge of grabbing the brass ring. Unfortunately, he seemed fated never to get it. In college, for example, he didn’t graduate magna cum laude because skiing accidents put him in the hospital—rather than the library—weeks before crucial exams. But despite this and other setbacks, Dave did manage to get an MBA from an Ivy League university, where he finally seemed to get the break he deserved.

After graduation, a business school friend asked Dave to join a computer game company that he had been building since college. Although Dave had no real-world experience in selling, his friend assured him that all he needed to do was work in lockstep with the firm’s marketing director to represent the company at various industry trade shows like Comdex. In fact, the only string attached was that Dave had to begin work immediately after graduation in order to be ready for the fall Comdex show. Dave signed on, full of hope

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## Tips for Managing Time Abusers

Managing your time abusers is not about managing their time; it's about helping them confront their inner demons. While you are limited in what you can and cannot do in this respect—some time abusers really need professional treatment—the following advice may be helpful:

### Promote.

Make *preemptives* feel in control by putting them in charge of other people. This will enforce socialization, which should make them more comfortable with uncertainty.

### Praise and protect.

Keep a close eye on the workloads of your *people pleasers* to make sure their time isn't consumed by others' requests. Also, praise your people pleasers for their regular work so they don't take on others' work to get that praise.

### Flood.

Expose *perfectionists* to frequent low doses of evaluation—progress reports, updates, and so forth. This lowers their fear of final approval. (Often, however, they won't get relief from their symptoms without therapy.)

### Attack the fear of failure.

Force *procrastinators* to confront their fears, and help them dissociate their specific output from overall performance evaluation. They'll be less likely to sabotage themselves.

that his equity in the start-up would make him millions.

In the months leading up to his first show, Dave appeared to be doing all the right things—familiarizing himself with the product, making important contacts, devouring as many books on sales techniques as he could. Then bad luck struck. Dave was always a white-knuckle flyer, but he knew that a single Valium could help him tolerate plane trips quite well. Then he “accidentally” forgot his pills and was forced to reschedule his flight. As a result, he arrived at the Comdex show half a day late.


That wasn't the only time Dave didn't pull through. Similar oversights plagued his entire tenure at the firm. At his second exhibition, he forgot to include order forms in the materials he FedExed to the convention site, and he had to handwrite orders for two days, slowing down company sales. On another occasion, he neglected to bring his PC power cord to a trade show and lost hours of exhibition time looking for a replacement. Although none of the disruptions precipitated a major crisis, each one prevented him from representing the company as professionally as his friend expected. After watching Dave stumble for more than 18 months, his friend reluctantly decided to terminate him.

The only way to rescue a procrastinator like

Dave is to strike at the heart of what he most fears: his failure. One helpful technique for doing this is what I call “empathic catastrophizing,” which involves helping the procrastinator feel more comfortable imagining all the bad things that might happen if he were to turn in work on time but not up to par. By helping a procrastinator air his anxieties, you can help him understand that he can do remarkable work even if he is not always the superhero his parents wanted him to be. This process also helps the procrastinator realize that he can survive managerial feedback, which is not always as positive as his parents' was. Another technique that has been very successful is to put off the day of reckoning. If you can convince your procrastinator that judgment will hit only in the distant future—long after the presentation is due—then the threat associated with not succeeding on the immediate tasks is greatly diminished.

Lastly, you can help a procrastinator lower his absurdly high expectations by telling him that a project you want him to complete is like a preseason game or a beta test—that is, he should be looking for flaws that can be removed over time. By telling the procrastinator that you expect glitches to occur in “preliminary trials,” you give him license to report problems to you. In the process, you also lower his anxiety about less-than-ideal performance.

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Time abuse is a symptom of a problem, not the problem itself. It is therefore impossible to cure a person of time abuse by actually managing his time. Instead, you must understand your time abuser's need for control and fear of evaluations. Of necessity, helping the time abuser change his ways will be a slow process—the motivations for such abuse are unconscious, and many time abusers will be in a state of deep denial that only long-term therapy will ever completely cure. Yet the rewards of that kind of investment in your people can be great, indeed. The motivations that cause the time abuse are often the same ones that drive people to perform well, so it is very likely that your company's worst time abusers will also be its top performers. 

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