

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:06] DC: Time is one thing we can't make more of, but we can make more of what we do with it. Welcome to Time Management Tips in 20, where productivity expert Sarah Ohanesian, Founder of SO Productive, helps you take back your day one smart habit at a time. In each episode, Sarah shares practical, proven strategies to help you prioritize what matters. Get out of overwhelm and get more done without working more hours. Because when you use your time with purpose, productivity becomes less about output and more about making space for what matters most at work and at home. Let's begin. Your time starts now.

[EPISODE]

[0:00:54] DC: Hello, everybody. Welcome to Time Management Tips in 20. I'm Deborah Corn, your Intergalactic Ambassador, here with the time sherpa herself, Sarah Ohanesian, the CEO and Founder of SO Productive. Hello, Sarah Ohanesian.

[0:01:10] SO: Hello, Deborah. I'm glad to be back with you. This is the best.

[0:01:14] DC: We took a little break, because you got really, really busy. You were traveling everywhere, and luckily, you have now made time, because you know how to do that, to come back and help the printerverse manage theirs. Along those lines, let's dive in with something that everybody listening to this podcast, who works either by themselves or with a team, has encountered. Managing time within a project for yourself, for your team, and when you are the leader. Projects often derail not from bad ideas, but from poor time management, deadline slip, tasks overlap, and communication certainly breaks down when everybody's juggling multiple priorities and multiple devices. I cannot tell you how many times I accidentally open up an email on my phone and it's marked read on my computer, and I might miss it completely if I don't remember that I've done it.

[0:02:18] SO: Absolutely. I think part of the thing that's causing so much of the overwhelm that we're feeling today is this device is one, but also, just information spread across different tools. I was actually in an event this week, and they were talking about using AI more to help our tools

talk to each other, so things become more streamlined. Because there's so much fragmented information in these projects, and we're talking about projects today. These projects can end up living all over the place, and we're wasting time on thinking about the work and organizing the work, more than just doing the work at hand.

[0:02:56] DC: It's interesting that you mention AI helping you organize your tools for time management, because I would say, well, first you have to make time to learn about the AI.

[0:03:09] SO: Yes. However, I will say, it's been fascinating to me to dive into this world a little bit more, and the tools are getting easier, and obviously, they're getting a little bit smarter the more we feed into them. I think what's been interesting for me just to explore, and again, I'm not saying I have all the answers in the AI space, but just to play. I actually have a note, and I'm looking at it right here on my computer that says, "How can AI help me do this?" It's just a question I'm asking myself, because I don't know if AI can help or not, but I'm thinking about more and more like, is this something that only I can do, or is this something that maybe AI could help to save me a little bit of time? Because even if it saves me 10% of time, why would I not consider that? I will say with the caveat of always checking it and making sure it's spitting out the right information. I'm playing with it at this stage more and more than I was even six months ago.

[0:04:01] DC: Of course, I have a real-life example for you that just happened before this phone call, which is that I had a list of email addresses in a Microsoft Word document that was of no use to me at all. I'm sitting, looking at it, and I'm like, all right, now I got to cut and paste these email addresses. I was like, "Ah, hold on a second. Maybe a robot can do it." I put in the Word document, and I said, organize this so only clean email addresses are in column A, and give me a CSV file. Push, boom, done.

[0:04:33] SO: Yeah.

[0:04:35] DC: Time management right there. Now, all I have to do is whatever I'm going to do with that list, so awesome. Okay. We really want to focus today on time management inside a project and time management in your regular day-to-day work, which I think is different, because one, you're managing just yourself and what you have to do in the project. At the same

time, the project is moving along by itself. It's almost like the Earth and the Moon. We're rotating, and the moon is still going around us, and we're going around the sun, like everything's moving at the same time, but at different speeds, at different paces, it's facing different directions. How do you keep control of all of that?

[0:05:25] SO: The universe, no. The project. No, it's a really good analogy, Deborah. I think that what happens for so many of us is the key is really the deadline isn't moving. When it feels like this project is moving ahead, but I'm either not with it, or I'm moving ahead, and my team's not with me, so there's always these two things at play, like two planets that have to work really well together. There's always the work that we have to do on the project itself, and then there's the work that has to be done collectively to make that project succeed. But one of the crystal clear things is the deadline isn't moving, so what can we do to make sure that we're continually in alignment and adjusting to make sure that we are in alignment with that final deadline?

I think, one of the keys, my business partner Jeff and I have had a lot of discussions around, like, what is a due date? What is a deadline? It's actually an interesting conversation, because when we're thinking about projects, is it that there is a hard due date and that is when that item is actually due, we have to deliver it to a client, or is a little bit of a soft deadline, a little bit flexible. If it's Monday, or Tuesday, or Wednesday, even, that would be okay. One of the things I think it's really critical for you to define, whether you're the project manager or you're working with the team, is when we say deadline, when we say due date, when we say final deliverable, do we mean that actual date, or is that a little bit flexible? I think clarity around that's really, really critical at the beginning.

[0:06:54] DC: Well, in printing and marketing, there is a deadline. It's usually a real deadline. Although there's buffer room sometimes. But we don't really want to discuss that with people. We all have the reasons why we give the deadlines and don't give what we call the drop-dead deadline. But everybody's not in control of that, so you're still following a schedule, or a project deadline that has been determined already, and you might not be in a position to say, "Hold on. Is that the real deadline, or is that a loose deadline?" How does everybody get on the same page, especially when there are collaborative projects?

Just to give an example in printing, a collaborative project. You have a salesperson who has spoken to the customer. Maybe they're now talking to a customer service representative, who's taking their job inside. Then there's an inside process. Then there's an estimation process. There's a whole bunch of stuff going on, but it's all for the same project, including in the marketing world, you have a copywriter, you have an art director, in advertising, however. I mean, you could blow this out to a photographer or a video shoot for a commercial. Believe me when I tell you, whenever they were having broadcast shoots, we had to already have the print campaign mapped out, because we needed to take photographs at the broadcast shoot, so the people in the commercial were also on the billboards.

I can't tell you how many times we had to stop the art directors and be like, "You can't only shoot vertically. You have to also shoot horizontally, or all of our stuff has to be vertical, and it's not going to work out." Getting everybody on the same page is not always easy.

[0:08:52] SO: Definitely not. Deborah, I know you know this, but for our audience, my husband owns a printing and direct mail company. Direct mail is usually the last line. He says all the time, the art director missed the deadline, the copywriter missed a deadline, the printer – But he still has to hit the deadline the first of the month. It's an interesting thing how this backs up. I think that's where getting that clarity and alignment across everybody that's going to be involved in the project. When I say clarity and alignment, I mean, realistically.

So often, we live in this hopeful land of like, probably a week. It'll probably take us about a week. No. It's like, will it take a week with a little buffer room, or is that unrealistic from beginning? I see a lot of times with clients, setting unrealistic expectations and unrealistic timelines from the get-go, and that really sets us up for failure. One of the things that I love to do is to think about what is this really, truly going to take, and making sure that we're realistic about that. The hardest part about this is to sometimes say, "Okay, that's not going to be realistic. We need 48 hours to turn that around." Let's say, "But how can we adjust it?" Maybe we make a concession on the other side to accommodate this thing that's falling behind.

I think the real key takeaway here though is being realistic about what these things actually – how much time they actually take. Then the second part of it is being truthful and transparent about that. We've all worked with the person who cries wolf and says, "Oh, it's an emergency."

Is it really an emergency, or are you just saying that? I think, again, that relationship that we have with the other people who are going to be involved in the project is really, really important, because we have to know, one thing affects the other. What has to happen in what order? And realistically, how long do we comfortably need to outline that with a little bit of buffer room? Because so often, the people that I work with just are always saying, “We're behind. We're behind. Everything's behind. Everything's a dumpster fire. Everything's running late.” The real shift is being realistic and reframing how long things take. Yeah.

[0:11:00] DC: How is that pressure different for a project leader versus a team member on the same project?

[0:11:08] SO: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Well, it depends on who we're reporting to, really. I think, so often, we want to please the end client. We want to do the right thing for the end client. The challenge with that sometimes is at detriment to our own team. I talk a lot in my keynotes, especially around connection, and the connection between the role of the work of the company, right, like how we're serving the client, and the gap for what the individual actually understands. What I'm talking about is there's a gap between the individual person doing the work and their understanding of how their work and their role actually rolls up and ties up to that bigger goal. As a project leader or a leader of a company, you might think, “We have to do this. This is our biggest client. We have to do everything we can to get this done.” The person actually doing the work is saying, “Well, how does that impact me and my role?”

So much of what I talk about is around communication. I think that drawing the connections between at a high level, what this means for us and for our business, and making sure people understand what that means in their roles, it can paint a better picture and, actually, a lot of times, create some additional motivation around the work.

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[0:12:23] SO: I'm Sarah Ohanesian, and before I built SO Productive, I was a chief marketing officer. So, I get it. Tight budgets, growing workloads, and that constant pull between strategy and execution. That's why I now work with companies of every size, from two-person startups to teams of thousands. I help them to streamline operations, improve team alignment, and reclaim

time for work that truly matters to your bottom line. Whether you need a short-term fix or a long-term partner in productivity, my team and I will help you get clarity and build systems that actually stick. Find out more at so-productive.com.

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[0:13:09] DC: I will also add that sometimes it creates a little resentment, too, because you have the worker bees looking at the leader and saying, “Well, we're doing all the work, and you're not actually contributing to the to the thing, the task that we're doing. You're just asking us to do these tasks.”

[0:13:26] SO: You might be asking them to do it faster.

[0:13:28] DC: Yeah, exactly. I just want to say, as someone who was the director of production in an advertising agency, yes, I wasn't doing everybody's individual jobs and getting three quotes for all the jobs, but I was still responsible to make sure that all the quotes were done when they were supposed to be done. In effect, I was managing all the work of everybody, even though I wasn't doing it. You have to pay attention. There has to be a system. You're absolutely right. Communication is the most important thing, especially when you're juggling deadlines, which is –

[0:14:04] SO: Of course.

[0:14:05] DC: - mostly what everybody in print and marketing is doing at all times.

[0:14:10] SO: All times. Yeah. Deborah, can I add one thing there that –

[0:14:12] DC: Yes, please.

[0:14:12] SO: - I think is really interesting is around workload management and resource management. We use Asana as our task management software. We build that out for teams and companies. One of the coolest resources we're building lately is around managing how much work people can actually do, and making it real, making it factual. Because it's not about,

“I'm a little tired today and I'm complaining and I can't get my work done.” It's really about, I can only do so – let's say, we're processing jobs. I can only process so many jobs per day, because I know that they take an average of let's just say, two hours a job. That reality of as a leader, how much capacity does my team have? At some point, the math ain't mathing. I can't add more capacity to my team, and I think that's a realistic math problem that I see is not done on so many teams.

Just to think about asking people to say, how long does things actually take, but then also have the leader say, “Okay, the reality of these deadlines means we might have to say no to something, or push it to a later date.” Yeah.

[0:15:20] DC: This podcast is called Time Management Tips in 20. So, in our format 2.0, we are going to provide tips at the end of each of our discussions. In this case, we're going to discuss three tips. The first one is clarify the when before the what. What do you mean by that?

[0:15:41] SO: Well, we've touched on this a little bit already, but thinking about before you start the work, what is that realistic timeline? What does that look like? And again, setting those deadlines and then working backwards. I would be transparent about this with as many people as you can that are going to be involved, so they know, and then what's the ripple effect? If we miss a deadline, what does that mean? The hardest thing in your industry, especially, is then saying, that's going to now impact the job, or the client. I know nobody wants to tell the client that we're not going to make the deadline, but at some point, if we've missed every deadline, that becomes a reality.

It's almost just this openness around timeline, deadlines, and repercussions if we miss. I think the sooner you can have open, honest conversations around that, the better. Yeah, no surprises then.

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[0:16:33] DC: Are you looking to elevate your game, take your bottom-line customer relationships, and events to the next level? Then, I want to work with you. I'm Deborah Corn, the Intergalactic Ambassador to the Printerverse. I engage with a vast, global audience of print and

marketing professionals across all stages of their careers. They are seeking topical information and resources, new ways to serve their customers and connect with them, optimize processes for their communications and operations, and they need the products and services and partnership you offer to get to their next level. Print Media Centr offers an array of unique opportunities that amplify your message and support your mission across the Printerverse. Let's work together, bring the right people together, and move the industry forward together. Link in the show notes. Engage long and prosper.

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[0:17:36] DC: I would always say, don't commit to anything until you speak to the entire team and make sure that it can be done, which is usually the problem that we have in the advertising agencies, because the account people are like, "Yes, of course. The client wants it. The client wants it on this day." It's like, oh. Will the client also be running the printing press? Because –

[0:17:55] SO: On Sunday night at midnight? Yeah.

[0:17:56] DC: Yeah. Because nobody's there. Will they be delivering the paper that we can't get? Hello. There's more to it than just saying, yes. Which you all want to work towards, a yes, but an achievable yes. Not just the fluff, yes, that's going to turn into a maybe, that's going to turn into an, "Uh-oh. We can't do it." That's the worst.

[0:18:17] SO: Yeah. Set yourself up for success, not problems later, for sure.

[0:18:21] DC: 100%. Defining time ownership. We might have a throwdown in this section, because you know how I feel about this. But go ahead. You try, and we'll see if I agree with you.

[0:18:33] SO: Oh, this is what's so fun about doing this with you, Deborah. Really, this is about knowing exactly what is on people's plates. As leaders, we cannot overschedule people's time. It's one thing about time. It's another thing about people's energy. How much energy can you really have during the day to do high-quality work? There's a lot of research that says it's around four hours. If we're working eight, nine, 10 hours, which many of us are, at some point, there is a point of diminishing return. We're just not functioning as well.

Thinking about as leaders, like optimally, where should my team be? Then again, for team members, when we talked about this earlier, communicating how long does this work actually take? The reality of this, it takes me three hours, not 30 minutes. Again, two-way communication on that one.

[0:19:24] DC: Well, what are you taking responsibility here for? Your own time, the time on the project, the time somebody else needs? I mean, a lot of times if we just keep it with the advertising example, the copywriter might just not have gotten it right three times, and the creative director's like, "Na-ah. We're not doing the layout until the copy's right. Otherwise, we're going to have to keep redoing the layout. We're not going to do that." That is what it is, and that puts everybody back off. We can't go back to that copywriter and say, "Did you manage your time correctly?" Because they're doing the best that they can. But that affects everything. Where does the ownership of time come in that, when that deadline still has not moved?

[0:20:10] SO: Yeah. I think this is where, ultimately, everyone is responsible for time management, keeping the project on track. But ultimately, this does. It defaults to the leaders. I mean, who owns this project? At some point, it is your responsibility to keep this on track. I would say, if there is someone who is – we all have bad days, but if there's someone who's repeatedly missing a deadline, or taking longer than you think it's worth, or that you think it should take, again, that's an opportunity to have a conversation with that person through a couple of times and say, "I think we're missing the mark here. What's going on? How can I help you make better deadlines? How can I help you? If it's writing better copy, let's get the copy right." How can I help you, I think, opens it up so much more. Maybe there's a sticking point there that just needs to be identified, like a hole that needs to be plugged, essentially

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[0:21:00] DC: Leadership isn't a title, it's a journey. And Girls Who Print membership supports you at every step, with resources to grow your skills, boost your confidence, and expand your professional network. Through our member-exclusive programs, you'll tap into industry expertise, connect with mentors and peers, and access opportunities that open doors you didn't even know existed. Whether you want to lead a team, launch a business, or explore new possibilities in print, we are here to help you do it with community, not competition. Join Girls

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[0:21:52] DC: One of the ways that I try to preempt scheduling disasters and missing deadlines and all of that in advertising agencies was to create, let's say, master schedules for any type of job. A print ad takes six weeks, and this is how it's broken down. A brochure takes this week. How many weeks? Then, it would be divided, and this is how much time the creatives have to concept, then it's got to go to the client, and so on and so forth. Only if there was some critical crisis could the account people veer from that set schedule, the generic schedule that had buffer time in it, so that we could juggle when we needed to juggle. But what could never change is the date we promised to get it to the client.

Anytime it was to a client, or to a printer, it had to go to the client, and it had to go to the printer on the day it said, unless we built a buffer in, and there was no cost difference if we sent it late to cause a rush, or anything like that. But a lot of people resist adding buffer time. You even said it in the beginning of this podcast. Why is that, and I can give you a million reasons why you never tell anybody the deadline, I mean, the printers don't even tell me the real deadline, if they're smart.

[0:23:15] SO: Right, right. Well, because I think overall, we're optimistic. We're optimistic, and we think, this is only going to take four hours. Then when it takes eight, we think, "Oh, my gosh. It took eight hours." We believe that we can get work done in a reasonable amount of time. But so often, what I find clients are not accounting for, and I call them the fires, it's those unexpected things. "Oh, my gosh. The login didn't work. Oh, my gosh. We had ordered the wrong paper." Whatever these things are, everything takes more time than you think it does. Listen, if it goes faster, great. Go have a latte. Enjoy yourself. You're going to figure out something fun to do at that time.

More often than not, we are underestimating our time. Rule of thumb, I would say, 20%. Think of it like a construction project. It's probably going to cost a little bit more in terms of time and energy than you think it is if it happens to take what you thought, or less time, I promise, you will

find time to fill the day. But I think we're just generally optimistic, and then we don't account for, oh, it didn't go perfectly. I think the fires, then those unexpected challenges, are where we're missing the mark typically.

[0:24:25] DC: What would you define as a win in the managing time within a project area?

[0:24:33] SO: Yeah. I think alignment. I think alignment with the team, alignment where people feel good about the progress they're making. They feel like that was a reasonable timeline. I was able to accomplish my work in that timeline. Most people don't like to feel rushed. They don't like to feel the pressure of – to go back to the copywriter. “Oh, my gosh. Perform, right? Perfect copy right now and write it in the next three hours, because we need to give it to the client by 5pm.” Especially creatives, we want a little extra time if we need it. I think that alignment piece makes everybody just feel good. The timeline feels reasonable, the steps are clearly outlined. I know my responsibility is in this project. I know what your responsibility is in this project, and everything is well defined. I think that's what the magic happens on teams. Everybody knows what to do by when, and how we're going to get it done together.

[0:25:24] DC: Thank you so much, Sarah. Everything you need to connect with Sarah is in the show notes. Stay tuned for our next episode, which is measuring time, assigning real value to tasks. Until then, time management long and prosper.

[END OF EPISODE]

[0:25:42] DC: Thanks for listening to Time Management Tips in 20. To connect with Sarah at SO Productive and find links for any resources we mentioned in this episode, just check out the show notes. Remember, all the great programming from Podcasts From the Printerverse is streaming 24/7 on printfmradio.com, the world's first Internet radio station dedicated to print and graphic communications. Until next time, time manage long and prosper.

[END]

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