

Maker vs. Manager: How Your Schedule Can Make or Break You

READING TIME: 13 MINUTES

Consider the daily schedule of famed novelist Haruki Murakami. When he's working on a novel, he starts his days at 4 am and writes for five or six continuous hours. Once the writing is done, he spends his afternoons running or swimming, and his evenings, reading or listening to music before a 9 pm bedtime. Murakami is known for his strict adherence to this schedule.

In contrast, consider the schedule of entrepreneur, speaker, and writer Gary Vaynerchuk. He describes his day (which begins at 6 am) as being broken into tiny slots, mostly comprising meetings which can be as short as three minutes. He makes calls in between meetings. During the moments between meetings and calls, he posts on just about every social network in existence and records short segments of video or speech. In short, his day, for the most part, involves managing, organizing, and instructing other people, making decisions, planning, and advising.

“How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing. A schedule defends from chaos and whim. It is a net for catching days. It is a scaffolding on which a worker can stand and labor with both hands at sections of time.”

— Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*

The numerous articles we have all read about the schedules and routines of successful people like these often miss the point. Getting up at 4 am does not make someone an acclaimed novelist, any more than splitting the day into 15-minute segments makes someone an influential entrepreneur.

What we can learn from reading about the [schedules of people we admire](#) is not what time to set our alarms or how many cups of coffee

to drink, but that **different types of work require different types of schedules.** The two wildly different workdays of Murakami and Vaynerchuk illustrate the concept of maker and manager schedules.

Paul Graham of Y Combinator first described this concept in a 2009 essay. From Graham's distinction between makers and managers, we can learn that doing creative work or overseeing other people does not necessitate certain habits or routines. It requires consideration of the way we structure our time.

What's the Difference?

A manager's day is, as a rule, sliced up into tiny slots, each with a specific purpose decided in advance. Many of those slots are used for meetings, calls, or emails. The manager's schedule may be planned for them by a secretary or assistant.

Managers spend a lot of time "putting out fires" and doing reactive work. An important call or email comes in, so it gets answered. An employee makes a mistake or needs advice, so the manager races to sort it out. To focus on one task for a substantial block of time, managers need to make an effort to prevent other people from distracting them.

Managers don't necessarily need the capacity for deep focus — they primarily need the ability to make fast, smart decisions. In a three-minute meeting, they have the potential to generate (or destroy) enormous value through their decisions and expertise.

A maker's schedule is different. It is made up of long blocks of time reserved for focusing on particular tasks, or the entire day might be devoted to one activity. Breaking their day up into slots of a few minutes each would be the equivalent of doing nothing.

A maker could be the stereotypical reclusive novelist, locked away in a cabin in the woods with a typewriter, no internet, and a bottle of whiskey to hand. Or they could be a Red Bull-drinking Silicon Valley software developer working in an open-plan office with their headphones on. Although interdisciplinary knowledge is valuable, makers do not always need a wide circle of competence. They need to do one thing well and can leave the rest to the managers.

Meetings are pricey for makers, restricting the time available for their real work, so they avoid them, batch them together, or schedule them at times of day when their energy levels are low.

As Paul Graham writes:

When you're operating on the maker's schedule, meetings are a disaster. A single meeting can blow a whole afternoon, by breaking it into two pieces each too small to do anything hard in. Plus you have to remember to go to the meeting. That's no problem for someone on the manager's schedule. There's always something coming on the next hour; the only question is what. But when someone on the maker's schedule has a meeting, they have to think about it.

It makes sense. The two work styles could not be more different.

A manager's job is to, well, manage other people and systems. The point is that their job revolves around organizing other people and making decisions. As Andrew Grove writes in *High Output Management*:

...a big part of a middle manager's work is to supply information and know-how, and to impart a sense of the preferred method of handling things to the groups under his control and influence. A manager also makes and helps to make decisions. Both kinds of basic managerial tasks can only occur during face-to-face encounters, and therefore only during meetings. Thus, I will assert again that a meeting is nothing less than the *medium* through which managerial work is performed. That means we should not be fighting their very existence, but rather using the time spent in them as efficiently as possible.

A maker's job is to create some form of tangible value. Makers work alone or under a manager, although they might have people working with them. "Maker" is a very broad category. A maker could be a writer, artist, software developer, carpenter, chef, biohacker, web designer, or anyone else who designs, creates, serves, and thinks.

Making anything significant requires time — lots of it — and having the right kind of schedule can help. Take a look at the quintessential maker schedule of the prolific (to say the least) writer Isaac Asimov, as described in his memoir:

I wake at five in the morning. I get to work as early as I can. I work as long as I can. I do this every day of the week, including holidays. I don't take vacations voluntarily and I try to do my work even when I'm on vacation. (And even when I'm in the hospital.)

In other words, I am still and forever in the candy store [where he worked as a child]. Of course, I'm not waiting on customers; I'm not taking money and making change; I'm not forced to be polite to everyone who comes in (in actual fact, I was never good at that). I am, instead, doing things I very much want to do — but the schedule is there; the schedule that was ground into me; the schedule you would think I would have rebelled against once I had the chance.

The Intersection Between Makers and Managers

It is far from unusual for a person's job to involve both maker and manager duties. Elon Musk is one example. His oft-analyzed schedule involves a great deal of managing as the head of multiple major companies, but he also spends an estimated 80% of his time on designing and engineering. How does he achieve this? Judging from interviews, Musk is adept at switching between the two schedules, planning his day in five-minute slots during the managerial times and avoiding calls or emails during the maker times.

The important point to note is that people who successfully combine both schedules do so by making a clear distinction, setting boundaries for those around them, and adjusting their environment in accordance. They don't design for an hour, have meetings for an hour, then return to designing, and so on. In his role as an investor and adviser to startups, Paul Graham sets boundaries between his two types of work:

How do we manage to advise so many startups on the maker's schedule? By using the classic device for simulating the manager's schedule within the maker's: office hours. Several times a week I set aside a chunk of time to meet founders we've funded. These chunks of time are at the end of my working day, and I wrote a signup program that ensures [that] all the appointments within a given set of office hours are clustered at the end. Because they come at the end of my day these meetings are never an interruption. (Unless their working day ends at the same time as mine, the meeting presumably interrupts theirs, but since they made the appointment it must be worth it to them.) During busy periods, office hours sometimes get long enough that they compress the day, but they never interrupt it.

Likewise, during his time working on his own startup, Graham figured out how to partition his day and get both categories of work done without sacrificing his sanity:

When we were working on our own startup, back in the '90s, I evolved another trick for partitioning the day. I used to program from dinner till about 3am every day, because at night no one could interrupt me. Then, I'd sleep till about 11am, and come in and work until dinner on what I called "business stuff." I never thought of it in these terms, but in effect I had two workdays each day, one on the manager's schedule and one on the maker's.

Murakami also combined making and managing during his early days as a novelist. As with many other makers, his creative work began as a side project while he held another job. Murakami ran a jazz club. In a [2008 New Yorker profile](#), Murakami described having a schedule similar to Graham's in his days running a startup. He spent his days overseeing the jazz club — doing paperwork, organizing staff, keeping track of the inventory, and so on. When the club closed after midnight, Murakami started writing and continued until he was exhausted. After reaching a [tipping point](#) with his success as a writer, Murakami made the switch from combining maker and manager schedules to focusing on the former.

In [Deep Work](#), Cal Newport describes the schedule of another person who combines both roles, Wharton professor (and [our podcast guest](#)) Adam Grant.

To produce at your peak level you need to work for extended periods with full concentration on a single task free from distraction. Though Grant's productivity depends on many factors, there's one idea in particular that seems central to his method: the batching of hard but important intellectual work into long, uninterrupted stretches. Grant performs this batching

at multiple levels. Within the year, he stacks his teaching into the fall semester, during which he can turn all of his attention to teaching well and being available to his students. (This method seems to work, as Grant is currently the highest-rated teacher at Wharton and the winner of multiple teaching awards.)

During the fall semester, Grant is in manager mode and has meetings with students. For someone in a teaching role, a maker schedule would be impossible. Teachers need to be able to help and advise their students. In the spring and summer, Grant switches to a maker schedule to focus on his research. He avoids distractions by being — at least, in his mind — out of his office.

Within a semester dedicated to research, he alternates between periods where his door is open ..., and periods where he isolates himself to focus completely and without distraction on a single research task. (He typically divides the writing of a scholarly paper into three discrete tasks: analyzing the data, writing a full draft, and editing the draft into something publishable.) During these periods, which can last up to three or four days, he'll often put an out-of-office auto-responder on his e-mail so correspondents will know not to expect a response. "It sometimes confuses my colleagues," he told me. "They say, 'You're not out of office, I see you in your office right now!'" But to Grant, it's important to enforce strict isolation until he completes the task at hand.

"A woodpecker can tap twenty times on a thousand trees and get nowhere, but stay busy. Or he can tap twenty-thousand times on one tree and get dinner."

— *Seth Godin, The Dip*

The Value of Defining Your Schedule

We all know the benefits of a solid routine — it helps us to work smarter, look after our health, plan the trajectory of our days, achieve goals, and so on. That has all been discussed a million times and doubtless will be discussed a million more. But how often do we think about how our days are actually broken up, about how we choose (or are forced) to segment them? If you

consider yourself a maker, do you succeed in structuring your day around long blocks of focused work, or does it get chopped up into little slices that other people can grab? If you regard yourself as a manager, are you available for the people who need your time? Are those meetings serving a purpose and getting high-leverage work done, or are you just trying to fill up an appointment book? If you do both types of work, how do you draw a line between them and communicate that boundary to others?

Cal Newport writes:

We spend much of our days on autopilot—not giving much thought to what we are doing with our time. *This is a problem.* It's difficult to prevent the trivial from creeping into every corner of your schedule if you don't face, without flinching, your current balance between deep and shallow work, and then adopt the habit of pausing before action and asking, "What makes the most sense right now?"

There are two key reasons that the distinction between maker and manager schedules matters for each of us and the people we work with.

First, defining the type of schedule we need is more important than worrying about task management systems or daily habits. If we try to do maker work on a manager schedule or managerial work on a maker schedule, we will run into problems.

Second, we need to be aware of which schedule the people around us are on so we can be considerate and let them get their best work done.

We shouldn't think of either type of work as superior, as the two are interdependent. Managers would be useless without makers and vice versa. It's the clash which can be problematic. Paul Graham notes that some **managers damage their employees' productivity when they fail to recognize the distinction between the types of schedules.** Managers who do recognize the distinction will be ahead of the game. As Graham writes:

Each type of schedule works fine by itself. Problems arise when they meet. Since most powerful people operate on the manager's schedule, they're in a position to make everyone resonate at their frequency if they want to. But the smarter ones restrain themselves, if they know that some of the people working for them need long chunks of time to work in.

Makers generally avoid meetings and similar time-based commitments that don't have a direct impact on their immediate work. A 30-minute meeting does not just take up half an hour of an afternoon. It bisects the day, creating serious problems. Let's say that a computer programmer has a meeting planned at 2 pm. When they start working in the morning, they know they have to stop later and are prevented from achieving full immersion in the current project. As 2 pm rolls around, they have to pause whatever they are doing — even if they are at a crucial stage

— and head to the meeting. Once it finishes and they escape back to their real work, they experience attention residue and the switching costs of moving between tasks. It takes them a while — say, 15 to 20 minutes — to reach their prior state of focus. Taking that into account, the meeting has just devoured at least an hour of their time. If it runs over or if people want to chat afterwards, the effect is even greater. And what if they have another meeting planned at 4 pm? That leaves them with perhaps an hour to work, during which they keep an eye on the clock to avoid being late.

Software entrepreneur Ray Ozzie has a specific technique for handling potential interruptions — the four-hour rule. When he’s working on a product, he never starts unless he has at least four uninterrupted hours to focus on it. Fractured blocks of time, he discovered, result in more bugs, which later require fixing.

In *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking*, Susan Cain describes an experiment to figure out the characteristics of superior programmers:

...more than six hundred developers from ninety-two different companies participated. Each designed, coded, and tested a program, working in his normal office space during business hours. Each participant was also assigned a partner from the same company. The partners worked separately, however, without any communication, a feature of the games that turned out to be critical.

When the results came in, they revealed an enormous performance gap. The best outperformed the worst by a 10:1 ratio. The top programmers were also about 2.5 times better than the median. When DeMarco and Lister tried to figure out what accounted for this astonishing range, the factors that you’d think would matter — such as years of experience, salary, even the time spent completing the work — had little correlation to outcome. Programmers with ten years’ experience did no better than those with two years. The half who performed above the median earned less than 10 percent more than the half below — even though they were almost twice as good. The programmers who turned in “zero-defect” work took slightly less, not more, time to complete the exercise than those who made mistakes.

It was a mystery with one intriguing clue: programmers from the same companies performed at more or less the same level, even though they hadn’t worked together. That’s because top performers overwhelmingly worked for companies that gave their workers the most privacy, personal space, control over their physical environments, and freedom from interruption. Sixty-two percent of the best performers said that their workspace was acceptably private, compared to only 19 percent of the worst performers; 76 percent of the worst performers but only 38 percent of the top performers said that people often interrupted them needlessly.

A common argument makers hear from people on a different schedule is that they should “just take a break for this!” — “this” being a meeting, call, coffee break, and so on. But a distinction exists between time spent not doing their immediate work and time spent taking a break.

Pausing to drink some water, stretch, or get fresh air is the type of break that recharges makers and helps them focus better when they get back to work. Pausing to hear about a coworker’s marital problems or the company’s predictions for the next quarter has the opposite effect. A break and time spent not working are very different. One fosters focus, the other snaps it.

Remember Arnold Bennett’s words: “You have to live on this 24 hours of time. Out of it you have to spin health, pleasure, money, content, respect and the evolution of your immortal soul. Its right use ... is a matter of the highest urgency.”

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