

HRD

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ZOE BRUNSWICK
GROUP HR DIRECTOR
RSK





ARTICLE BY KATHY SOULSBY, MANAGING PARTNER - PERSONALLY VIRTUAL

MINDSPACE

"WHEN LEADERS CONSIDER OUTSOURCING OR DELEGATING TASKS,
THEY OFTEN WALK A TIGHTROPE BETWEEN TOO EARLY AND TOO LATE,
BOTH OF WHICH HAVE THEIR PITFALLS"

The ability to delegate effectively is a core management skills, but there are some who resist passing work on to others, because they believe they can fit everything into their day. What they perhaps are not considering is whether they should fit everything into their day. Right now, there are many reasons why leaders should outsource everything but their brilliance, because being able to do something - and sometimes even enjoying it - doesn't mean that it's right.

In his book *Deep Work*, author Cal Newport talks about the need for deep work in most knowledge works jobs. He explains how this concentrated effort is when people are performing at their absolute best, fully engrossed and delivering their best work. It sounds like the ideal work scenario and perfect balance. However, we only have a certain amount of energy to use in any given day at work and if we spend 50 percent of that precious time on emails, is that the best use of our energy, never mind our time? This is a very typical risk when leaders end up working long hours, because in order to work at their best, they need to have some proper downtime too. According to the *Gitnux Marketdata Report 2023*, the average worker spends a surprising 28 percent of their time dealing with unnecessary interruptions and then recapping and recovering from these

intrusions. For leaders with more responsibilities and a wider remit, that figure is of course bound to be higher. When businesses set their salary bands to attract the top talent, they do so as an investment, because in return, they expect nothing less from their top people than to hit targets and KPIs and make impactful decisions. However, as with any position irrespective of how senior it is, there is an inevitable amount of peripheral work and day-to-day distraction, that comes with a role in which people management plays a significant part, just to fulfil the day job and meet responsibilities. Whether that's managing a diary, keeping on top of a groaning inbox or timely administration around expense receipts and timesheets, it still needs doing. But many of those tasks simply go not need leader acumen and knowledge to accomplish them and this

will inevitably lead to admin tasks falling to the bottom of the pile, leaving people in limbo and business bottlenecks and the impacts can go on. When you consider the volume and speed of admin these days, there is still no substitute for a human eye on the ball and here, a designated assistant role can prevent leaders languishing in the deluge or tearing around on a paper trail.

Many tasks can be split - often a PA or VA works best with a hybrid approach - completing part of a leader's tasks to keep things moving along. As an example, let us look at a scenario where an HR Director has to deliver a report to the board and there is a set format for the presentation. The leader might give their VA/EA a download, a voice memo, a set of bullet points - or may just a conversation of what the report is to entail - along with perhaps some stats they want

to include. The EA/VA can produce a first pass in the right format, as well as research or ask for the necessary figures from other colleagues elsewhere in the business. This very rough first draft is then passed to the leader to tweak, edit and finalise. All of this shared procedure is much faster than the HR Director starting from scratch. Then once completed and checked over, the HRD can as a final action, pass it back to the assistant for a last proofread and format check, before being submitted. In this example, a considerable amount of time is saved by the leader, simply by giving their report in a quicker format first and then editing it later. Any time that leaders can claw back in any given day, is going to impact on how well they can do their job and potentially the bottom line of a business.

Carving out time for focused work to deliver on the tasks that needs completing is vital and there are two things often stopping that: The first is constant intrusions and interruptions, which inevitably break concentration. These are not just from colleagues, but alerts from email, virtual or phone calls, but all of these can be managed with some help and discipline. Time can be blocked in a diary to allow for meetings or interruptions, with an EA/VA managing a diary and freeing up an executive's time, making them more efficient and focused on strategy, planning and decision-making. This is where human assistants have the advantage over technology, as they can sense-check the diary, to make the most sensible decisions on meeting times and ensuring that prep time is booked too. Time is the most valuable resource for a leader and having someone whose job it is to manage that effectively, can be a huge game changer. The second challenge to carrying out deep work is mental load. It is incredibly hard to focus on a complex task when your mind is full of all the other things that you need to attend to. While most people have some kind of a task list, holding all the responsibility for doing a senior leadership job in your mind can be hugely taxing and in times of overwhelm can mean things fall through the cracks. That is where a good EA/VA

can act as a "second brain" and take some of that mental load away. As well as doing some low-level tasks themselves - booking meetings, chasing up papers and sending reminders - they can also be the keeper of the task list. It's a shared role in many ways, with each person in that role just taking on the more appropriate tasks. Knowing that someone else is scooping up the issues that need attending to, tracking what needs doing and when, can be a significant weight off a leader's mind. The art is to bring in an assistant at the right time, but that can be difficult. When leaders consider outsourcing or delegating tasks, they often walk a tightrope between

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too early and too late, both of which have their pitfalls. Too early and you may not have sufficient substantial tasks to keep your resource occupied and too late, you run the risk of being too overwhelmed with work to manage the process of bringing in the resources that you need.

Finding the sweet spot between these two extremes is essential, so here are some things to consider. *Workload Assessment:* Leaders should continuously assess their workload and determine which tasks align with their core competencies. As they approach a tipping point where peripheral tasks start to encroach on their valuable time, it becomes a signal to consider delegation. *Task Analysis:* Analyse the tasks at hand and differentiate between those that require their expertise and those that can be handled by someone else. This involves an honest evaluation of the tasks

and their impact on the leader's strategic objectives. *Budgetary Planning:* Senior leaders should also plan their budget accordingly. They must allocate resources for assistance in advance, ensuring that when the time is right, they have the financial means to hire a competent assistant. *Training and Onboarding:* Having a plan in place for recruitment and onboarding can make the process more efficient. Leaders can identify potential candidates or agencies well in advance, making the transition smoother. *Work/Life Balance:* Keeping an eye on work/life balance is crucial. As leaders feel the weight of their workload increasing, it's a sign that it might be time to bring in support to avoid burnout. So, the decision to outsource or delegate should be a thoughtful and strategic one. Whilst timing is key, when done at the opportune time, outsourcing or delegating tasks can free up a leader's time, reduce mental clutter and enhance overall effectiveness. For HR leaders, where people require so much interpersonal time and energy, this could make a huge difference to performance.

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