Then and Now in the US Staffing Industry

Is there a difference between recruitment in the UK and US? We talk to Cathy Searby, CEO Palo Alto Staffing, about the evolution of American staffing agencies.

Plus

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Editor’s Letter

Voice Recognition
Throwing Transcription on the Scrap Heap?
Will voice recognition soon put transcriptionists out of business?

Procrastination and Fatigue:
A Deadly Combination
Find extra energy by striking items from your to-do list

Your Carbon Footprint
What Size Is Yours?
What is your office doing to help the environment?

Managing Personal Data In The Digital Age
Tailor your personal and organisational data storage to your own needs

Excuses Will Get You Nowhere
On achieving your goals

Meetings, Bloody Meetings!
Why meetings are so important
Happy Summer Days from everyone at DeskDemon! Even though we’ve had some pretty rubbishy weather recently, it’s still a beautiful time of year. At least the days are long and having been cooped up in the office all day, there’s still enough light to enjoy that evening drink outside.

This month the PA Enterprise cover story is on Cathy Searby, a woman who has created a successful business in the US administrative placement field. Is the US recruitment market very different from the UK? Cathy shares her story on how she started over 30 years ago and how times have changed: the placement agency, the internet and the general advancement of the profession in America.

“Corporate Carbon Footprints” are up for discussion in our next article. You may be surprised by the little things individuals can due to reduce the carbon footprint of an organisation which has a positive impact on the environment. I am a strong believer that small changes add up. If we all just turn off our computers completely each night or replace light bulbs with energy saving versions it makes a difference. One change may not seem a lot, but if we all make that “one change”, that turns out to be a much larger number of change and impact.

How do you make an easy task difficult? Simple...You put it off and you keep postponing it until it eventually becomes a big deal. It is one thing to procrastinate on the small things, but it’s quite another to procrastinate on the big issues in life. You can trace almost all your personal problems back to the failure to take effective and timely action.

Once again, we would like to thank you for all your comments, feedback and contributions, they really are very helpful, so keep them coming! As always, we are looking for PAs, secretaries and other office professionals who would like to contribute to the newsletter and pass on their skills and knowledge. If you’re up for it, just email me and I will put you on our database of writers and contributors for future issues. I would love to hear from you. Feel free to send me an email, editorus@deskdemon.com on what topics you would like to see in the future.

Until next month!

Susan Silva
Managing Editor
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Voice Recognition
Throwing Transcription on
the Scrap Heap?

By Irene Boston

Will voice recognition soon put transcriptionists out of business?

Voice recognition software still has very limited capabilities. It can be used to give computer commands (e.g. to save a file), and it can also be used to convert speech straight into a word processing document. However, the main disadvantage is that voice recognition software is a “dog for one master only.” It’s possible to use the software successfully for dictation, but it can’t cope with even one-to-one interviews and would probably go into meltdown if you tried it with group meetings or focus groups. The software needs to be individually “trained” to translate for each voice. Asking it to recognise and accurately transcribe the different voices of an interviewer as well as the interviewee, or the multiple voices of a group, is simply not possible at the moment. Even with one-voice dictation, the software still needs to be corrected and “trained” to recognise new and unfamiliar words or technical terms or names.

The only way to use voice recognition software effectively for an interview situation would be to listen to the recording and re-speak everything you hear—both questions and responses. Obviously this would be very time-consuming, having to stop and start the recording so that you can ‘speak’ what you’re hearing. Essentially you’re attempting to perform simultaneous translation—concentrating on listening to someone else’s speech while saying those words a few seconds later but without losing what’s being said next. Try it with a recorded TV or radio programme and you’ll see how difficult a skill that is to master. Add on the time taken at the end to...
proofread and tidy up the final document and it becomes clear that it would take far longer than the original interview length, and no different from the time taken by a professional transcriber to complete the transcription. Is that a valuable and productive use of your time? Magnify that time and effort many times if you then tried to tackle ‘speaking’ a focus group, especially if the recording was less than clear.

Another major factor when considering speech recognition software is its inability to judge which homonyms should be used. The latest versions are apparently now capable of recognising the more common ones in simple sentences, such as deciding whether it’s “there” or “their.” However, long, complicated sentences can defeat it. All this adds to your proofreading time at the end.

You also need to consider how the software will tackle commands for punctuation or formatting certain words in bold, for example. Most programmes require you to leave a pause between the command and the next chunk of ‘text.’ If the pause isn’t long enough, you’ll find those commands entered as part of the text itself, which will need to be edited out later. For an interview format, you will need to indicate a change of speaker with a new line and initials, and a tab command. Even if you just decide to enter a change of speaker on a new line and tidy it up afterwards, this all adds to the time taken. Allegedly, one of the latest versions will also punctuate for you—deciding where all the commas and full stops go. Be prepared to correct this later—it’s idea of punctuation will not be yours!

Because of my chosen profession as a transcriptionist, I, of course, am biased! But I’m convinced that voice recognition software is a useful tool fit for a specific purpose. That purpose will not advance to transcription of all recordings in all circumstances in the near future.

Irene Boston is owner of IB Transcription Services—http://www.ibtranscriptionservices.co.uk—which offers professional and cost-effective transcription services for both digital and analogue media. Feel free to browse our Web site where you will find information on our services, together with recording tips and helpful advice about making the most of your transcription. IB Transcription Services is part of IB Secretarial Services—http://www.ibsecretarialservices.co.uk—and IB Editorial Services—http://www.ibeditorialservices.co.uk.
How do you make an easy task difficult? Simple...You put it off and you keep postponing it until it eventually becomes a big deal. It is one thing to procrastinate on the small things, but it’s quite another to procrastinate on the big issues in life. You can trace almost all your personal problems back to the failure to take effective and timely action.

The effects of procrastination are primarily indirect and often far-reaching. One of the most devastating effects of procrastination is fatigue. In fact, procrastination and fatigue go hand in hand. Procrastination is not only the result but also the cause of fatigue. Because of procrastination, you keep postponing important tasks; and because you postpone important tasks, you become fatigued. There is a big difference between being tired and being fatigued. Fatigue is emotional and mental while tiredness is mostly physical. Getting enough rest can solve the problem of being tired, but it won’t really do much for fatigue.

We all have a mental capacity which determines how much we can comfortably deal with in our lives. Everything that’s ‘on your mind’ is something that you have to deal with on a mental and emotional level. When you deal with it, you feel a sense of accomplishment and like a load has been taken off your proverbial shoulders. In reality, this sense of relief is the result of offloading some of your emotional load by dealing and completing some task that was on your mind.

Everything you put on your mental or printed task list has some value to you. We only procrastinate about the things we care about, otherwise whether we finish it or not wouldn’t concern us. It’s only when we fail to take action that procrastination sets in. Every time you fail to take action to complete a task, you fail to offload what’s on your mind. This tends to add to your ‘emotional load.’ And since we all have a limited capacity, you tend to feel fatigued.

Fatigue can lead to more serious issues ranging from depression to sleeplessness to a loss of self-confidence. When you procrastinate, you can easily turn the simplest task into a mountain. And the more you think about it, the harder it gets. Now you have to climb a mountain in your mind every time you think about doing it, and every time you fail to act on it, your mountain gets bigger and your fatigue get worse.

One of the most important things to remember when you suffer from fatigue due to procrastination is that a sense of accomplishment is self-reinforcing. Every time you finish a task, you feel good, and it’s this feeling good that motivates you to do more and to be more effective. It’s one of the most effective ways to conquer procrastination. More than anything, procrastination is an emotion - it’s a feeling. And by taking charge of your emotional state, you can take back control and empower yourself to take action and complete what you know you ‘must’ do. Unfortunately this fact is also responsible for fatigue. When you fail to complete a task, or worse,
when you fail to even start, you create the opposite effect. You feel bad, and you tend to act on this feeling, which is what keeps you from approaching the task in the future.

Procrastination and fatigue is a cycle: one tends to lead to the next. And because it’s so self-reinforcing, it tends to keep many people tied up in an immobilised state of mind where they can’t seem to make any real progress. One of the simplest ways to snap out of this pattern is to design a simple task that you can easily complete and then gradually build your emotional strength. If you are procrastinating on something, break it up into three or four simpler tasks, and then focus only on one at a time - forget about the rest. Each time you complete one, you will ‘offload’ a bit of emotional baggage. Your load will feel lighter, and your sense of accomplishment will motivate you to do more.

Procrastination is like running on an emotional treadmill - you keep running without going anywhere. It only leads to an emotional tiredness or fatigue that can greatly jeopardise your sense of well being, your level of motivation and your personal happiness. We all have a desire to progress with our lives and in the back of our minds we all know what we can do to move forward and make our lives better. When we don’t act on these ideas, we feel a certain strain that comes from knowing we are not advancing. This strain contributes to fatigue and adds to the emotional load you have to carry around with you. We all carry a little ‘to-do list’ around in the back of our minds. Ever time something comes along that you ‘have to do,’ it automatically gets added. As a general rule, the longer your list, the more fatigue you will experience.

To effectively deal with fatigue, you simply need to shed your ‘emotional load.’ You have to deal with everything that’s on your mind. And the most effective way to deal with it is one by one. Start with the tasks you are procrastinating most about as they will give you the greatest sense of accomplishment. Procrastination makes an easy task hard, but action makes a hard task easy. Just do it. Break it up into smaller simpler tasks and just do it piece by piece. It’s ironic, but the more you do, the more you can do. The more you do, the less emotional baggage you have - the lighter your load, the more you can carry. The wonderful fact about procrastination and fatigue is that when you eliminate the procrastination, you can eliminate the fatigue. Be kind to yourself. Free yourself from procrastination. Free yourself from fatigue!

This article is published with the permission of the author, Deon Du Plessis. He is the founder of The Self Improvement Gym, and author of (in)action, a groundbreaking new action guide on eliminating procrastination. For more of his in-depth insights into personal development and access to his free self improvement library, visit http://www.TheSelfImprovement–Gym.com
Your Carbon Footprint - What Size Is Yours?

By Nicola Bullimore

What is your office doing to help the environment?

If one person can change things to reduce their carbon footprint and make a positive difference on the environment, imagine the difference a whole office can make. The things we do in our everyday lives have a huge impact on our environment. Whether we realise it or not, every day we are adding to the problem of global warming. Let’s look at some tips that can help you reduce your office carbon footprint and help the environment by not adding to the global warming issue.

Did you really need to print that?

So, you’re sitting at your desk and receive an e-mail. You decide you want a copy of the email, so you print it off. Was that really necessary? Statistics show that we use over 11 million sheets of paper a year. That’s a lot of paper! By reducing the amount of paper you use for printing, you are not only saving money, but you are having a positive effect on the environment, because the less paper we use, the less trees need to be cut down and the more oxygen we have.

Whose turn is it to water the plants?

Talking about trees and oxygen, by having a plant or two in your office you are, in fact, helping your office environment. Imagine all those systems running in your office, such as computers, faxes, printers, photocopiers and scanners. All these things deplete moisture in the air. So by having plants in your office, you are increasing the humidity in the air.

Has your printer cartridge run out?

What do you do when the printer is ready for a refill? Or perhaps the question should be, what do you do with the empty cartridge? In the last ten years, 250 million print cartridges have ended up in either landfill sites or have been incinerated. It would take 1,000 years for one cartridge to biodegrade. If all the thrown-away cartridges were laid end to end, they would stretch across the radius of the moon! There is now no excuse for anyone to throw an empty cartridge in the bin. More often than not, when you open the box of a new cartridge, there is a bag supplied for you to recycle the old one. All you need to do is put the empty cartridge in the bag and post it off for recycling.

Did you turn off your computer before you left?

Leaving your computer switched on, leaving the lights on, leaving the windows open and leaving office equipment on standby all burn up unnecessary energy. All computers come with a power-saving device, so there is no excuse to leave your computer on standby when you leave work for the day. By changing your office equipment to power down systems, you are making massive savings to the energy we waste every day. You can also change your light bulbs to energy-saving compact fluorescent bulbs. These will greatly help you reduce the amount of energy you use in your office on a daily basis. And did you know that by leaving a window open overnight, you are wasting enough energy to drive a small car for 35 miles? It isn’t necessary to leave windows open or lights on in an office overnight or over a weekend for that matter. So makes sure the lights are off, the equipment is off and no windows are left open when you leave your office.

Whose turn is it to do the stationery order?

In the UK we throw out enough rubbish every two hours to fill up the Albert Hall! There is now a wide range of products that we can buy that come from recycled material. So it isn’t always necessary to buy brand new products that have not been part of a recycling process. Next time you are flicking through the stationery catalogue, watch out for products that have utilised recycling. Buying recycled office stationery and equipment helps reduce the amount of rubbish we need to throw away, which means less rubbish ends up in landfills.

So there you have it. A few tips to help the environment by having a more environmentally friendly office.

Nicky Bullimore is in Search Engine Marketing and has been writing articles on various topics for a number of years. For more information about how you can make a positive difference on your office environment, visit the Environmentally Friendly Office website: www.yourenvironmentalguide.com
Then and Now in the Staffing Industry

By DeskDemon

Cathy Searby, CEO Palo Alto Staffing talks about the evolution of staffing agencies.

Cathy is the CEO of Palo Alto Staffing, an agency in Silicon Valley California that specialises in placing EAs, AAs, PAs, Secretaries, in temp, temp to hire and permanent placement jobs. After starting out in politics, her husband’s job took them to the west coast of the United States where she started looking for a new career, finally settling on a job in the hiring industry. Cathy went to three employment agencies and each ended up offering Cathy a job within their own offices. Even though Cathy had no administrative experience, she had good people skills and they felt she would do well in the staffing recruiting field. She accepted a position with Palo Alto’s Snelling and Snelling, a franchise recruiting agency. Soon the franchise went up for sale and Cathy’s husband purchased it. It was then she was able to learn and run her own business. Within two years, Cathy brought her franchise to the number one franchise out of Snelling and Snelling’s 650 offices worldwide. This was 25 years ago, and out of Cathy’s eight original staff, five were with her for over 25 years! Over the years Cathy has most enjoyed the development has staff has gone through and the success they have achieved. Many staffing agencies make money through their staff, but it is Cathy’s philosophy to make money for her staff. She is passionate about the placement business and the people she helps, both internally and externally.

Changes over the years
Cathy has seen the placement industry evolve. 30 years ago they were called “employment agencies” and the focus was on permanent placement. These days they are referred as “staffing firms” and the focus is usually on temporary staffing or temp to hire placements. About 10 years ago, Cathy left the Snelling and Snelling franchise to start her own, independent one office location, Palo Alto Staffing. Along with eight recruiters, four admin staff, Cathy focuses on permanent placement which is known in the industry as “direct hire”. They have also added a temporary staffing division so are a full service independent staffing organisation whose focus is on the secretarial profession. This includes category includes receptions, HR assistants, PAs, secretaries, office managers, and even executive assistants. Primarily they do C-level executive assistants, in the Bio-Tech, Venture Capital, legal, and hi-tech industries in Silicon Valley.

As well as changing the general name from employment agencies to staffing agencies, over the years the skills and what the agencies do have changed as well. Not only that, the test and qualification requirements...
have changed as well. Historically, candidates would get a spelling test, proof reading test, and typing test. In the digital age, things have taken a drastic change, and now the focus is on what customer service, reference/background checks, and how well one can function with computers and their complex programs. The way one looks for jobs has also changed with the times, as online job boards have nearly relegated the black and white classified ads in the newspaper extinct.

**Agencies or Job Boards?**

Cathy says that many people claim it is too time consuming to apply to job boards. Candidates find job boards impersonal and are disturbed by the usual lack of responses and feedback. As for the companies, they can be flooded with hundreds of responses, making it difficult to narrow down worthy candidates. Cathy has found over the past seven years the need for staffing companies such as Palo Alto Staffing has grown. With the increased pressure for high productivity, hiring managers are finding they don’t have the time to go through a myriad of ad responses. There is less and less time and applicants will often go to an agency and may ask to see the top three jobs, where as a company may ask an agency for the top three applicants. This saves everyone time and streamlines the job search, and hiring process.

What is the difference between going to a company and going to an agency? By going to a job board it is very hard remain confidential. Cathy’s company keeps everything confidential. They ask permission before sending a CV out to a company. Many times a company may not want the general public to know that an EA to the CEO has given notice. The confidential side is very important. Most applicants to staffing firms are currently employed and don’t have the time to dedicate when someone leaves can’t take the time to search for qualified applicants.

**Open Jobs Vs. Candidates?**

The answer to this question is there are there never enough “qualified” applicants. Top quality candidates as well as clients, can use a personalized service that serves both their needs. Cathy can never have enough candidates or clients! Cathy looks for the cream of the crop for the openings she has. It is hard to find qualified candidates particularly with a stable track record and background. For C-Level, Cathy looks for top quality PAs with previous experience with CEOs. She looks for entry level fresh out of college job seekers who need help and guidance in finding their first job.

**What it takes to be hired**

Skills and qualifications are important, but another element is personal chemistry. Cathy estimates over 80% of the hires are based on the chemistry between the applicant and the company. If she can match the basic skills to a position the decision ultimately will be made on personality, presentation, professionalism, etc. A company can go to Cathy and ask for a person, say with 10 years experience, friendly personality, and someone who can work well under pressure. These are not items that are generally on the descriptions that are on the job boards.

Despite recessions, and fluctuating economic conditions, Cathy’s company has remained stayed strong and prosperous. She takes pride in her company and her staff and has built relationships with the organizations in her area. From staring out 30 years ago and evolving her business to the full service staffing agency it is today, they are definitely here to stay!
Managing Personal Data In The Digital Age

By Richard Leyshon

Tailor your personal and organisational data storage to your own needs

Despite having immensely powerful computers on our desks, most of us still don’t – or can’t – organise our personal data effectively.

Here’s an example... Today I called up for a motor insurance quote and there were, like there always are, a million questions. For example:

**Insurer:** “Have you ever made a claim on your insurance?”

**Me:** “Well yes, I was hit by an uninsured driver...must have been, oh, over ten years ago now.”

**Insurer:** “Have you any penalty points on your licence?”

**Me:** “Well, maybe. I did get a speeding penalty, when was it - five years ago? I think it’s probably spent now, but…”

How can it be that I was sitting in front of my PC and yet not have software in place that could answer these questions immediately for me?

Sure, we all know that, somewhere, we have a piece of paper that should give us the answer, but how often is that the paperwork hard or impossible to find?

How Should We Store Valuable Information?

Well, the simple answer is, there’s no simple answer. It also depends on what kind of data you want to store. We can consider “data” to be of several types and no doubt you could add to the list.

Firstly, there is entertainment, music, films and so on. This type of data is well catered for in the software world and not really the focus of this discussion.

Secondly, there is what could be termed “static” data. It’s a piece of fairly constant data that may be changed infrequently. Some examples of this type of data include recipes and your address or bank details. Data of this kind can be really well organised using text files or word processor documents within the filing system on your PC. It is not an intellectual challenge to have a folder called “Recipes” which may contain another folder called “Beef”...
recipes” which may in turn contain named recipe files.

Sure, you may wish to make a change once in a while if you discover an improvement to the recipe but the data is essentially static. Even so, if you wish, you can purchase software to deal with this sort of information – for example, Microsoft’s One Note.

Of more importance to most people is the management of what may be termed “dynamic” data – ongoing chains of events that are linked and follow a logical pattern. Again, an example is perhaps the best way forward.

A couple of years ago, I was in regular daily contact with around a dozen organisations. In some cases there was a single point of contact and in others, many. All involved updates and changes to ongoing accounts and letters, calls, emails and faxes were frequently exchanged.

Attempting to organise the information using text documents proved to be a nightmare. The number and size of the summary documents soon became unmanageable. If I knew that I had sent a document to a certain person, I would have to search the whole collection of data to get the details.

If you think about it, a huge part of our lives revolve around events – things we do or participate in and things that happen to us. Yet you probably have no software on your PC that is designed to assist us with recording this kind of data.

When, for example, I am arguing by phone with someone from a company that is consistently failing to serve me, I do not want to have to keep referring to a pile of letters and hand written notes in my filing cabinet. I want to be able to get the information in real time whilst I talk.

What Did I Do About It?
Well, I looked for software but couldn’t find any. Luckily, I was in a position to devote a bit of spare time to writing some software myself. Anyone who has the skills and knows exactly what they require can do this in a few weeks.

So, just by looking at a couple of examples like those above, I found myself able to provide an outline definition of what was required in a dynamic data tool.

1. Events
We need to be able to store data relating to events of all kinds including making or receiving a call/email/fax, attending a meeting, having a motoring accident and so on. In fact the list is endless so we need to be able to define our own events.

2. Contacts
More often than not, we will interact with someone and need to know his or her name when referring back to the record in the future. We might also want to have full address and contact details for them.

3. Organisations
Often, we will deal with organisations such as electricity or the insurance company. Details need to be stored and, just like 2. Contacts, we may want to store details of addresses, phone numbers and email addresses.

4. Dates
Naturally, we would want to store information about when the event happened. Also, it might be useful to store data relating to when the record was created and when it was last edited. This can allow us to authenticate when data was entered and prove that we haven’t created false records of past events.

5. Text Notes
We need to be able to store extensive notes (if we wish) detailing the event and maybe a separate field for storing details of the outcome.

6. Other files
The system would need to be able to link to other files that may be related to the event. For example, if a chain of events began by receiving a letter from the bank then, even if we keep the original paper copy, we may wish to store a scan of the document on the PC so that all data is available from a single place. This file ought to be accessible from within the application.

What features would we like to see in such a system? Here’s my personal wish list...

Multiple or Single User?
There are advantages to both approaches so why not combine the two? Firstly, create a multi-user system with username and password protection. Then allow users to make events (or contacts) either public or private. That way, they can share information that may be relevant to all of the family or all of the sales team, but still maintain their own private data if they wish.

However, it may also be appropriate to have the ability to maintain more than one database. For example, you may wish to store work and home data in different files so that if, for example, you move jobs, you can pass on the work data to your successor and keep the personal data.

As we may be working in a multiple user situation, it would clearly be appropriate to be able to view either all public events or filter the list to display just our own data. We need this available at the click of a button.

Address and Contact Data
Firstly, an organisation may have many addresses, so we need to be able to store unlimited addresses for each one. Any change to an address (such as an office move) should update all contacts based at that address.

Secondly, contacts may also have more than one address. There may be a need to store a home address or there may be a need to store a work address (or both).
As we have the ability to store address data, in the interests of efficiency we need to be able to print an address label. To do this, we need to be able to work with any label sheet layout.

As we can store email details, we ought to be able to generate an email to the selected person or persons from within the application.

And, as we store details of events, naturally if we send an email or print an address label we need the system to create an event for us, leaving us only to complete the details of the contents of the letter or email.

Finally, I realised that we may deal with the same person in a number of different capacities so we need to be able to link a contact to more than one organisation. As an example, your bank manager may also serve with you on a committee or be a member of your sports team.

Sorting Events in Chronological Order
Obviously, for logical reading.

Filter Events
We need to be able to select any organisation or contact and view all our events for this organisation/contact in a list form, with the ability to view the details of any event we choose. For example, imagine the system was used by a health care professional. Each patient would be stored as a contact and simply by selecting them from a drop-down list and making a single mouse click, we could get a complete history of their visits to us along with all our notes.

Also, we must have the ability to search for keywords in the notes, outcome and event fields.

Printing
I may wish to have a paper copy of all my events or just a list relating to an organisation or an individual. For convenience, I may also wish to print a sheet of contact details for an individual.

To-do list
It seems logical, if we are dealing with events, to be able to store reminders for things we need to do in the future.

I believe that a system like this would be of enormous benefit to PC users in many situations, be it home or work. I implemented the system above and find it invaluable. Why not get a programmer in your organisation to set up a tailor-made system too?

Richard Leyshon is a director of software company Lware Limited, who supply the HomeSec personal data management system as well as ClubSec, designed for secretaries of member clubs. More information can be found at http://www.home-sec.info and http://www.clubsec.info
Make hay while the sun shines, because to become successful in life you don’t only have to do the right things, you have to learn to do them at the right time. Most of us have no problem coming up with excuses for not doing something important we are supposed to do. Although our excuses may give us temporarily relief, they are unproductive and a hindrance to our happiness, progress and success.

Excuses won’t pay the bills; they just allow us to escape feeling guilty from inaction and procrastination. So let’s look at three repercussions of making excuses, in order to discourage excuses stealing our destiny. And these are “should have”, “could have” and “would have”.

**I Should Have…**
Should haves can result from a wrongly perceived mental, emotional or physical barrier. It could also be the result of making an excuse before getting the whole picture. Or sometimes should haves happen as a result of fear. But undoubtedly should haves usually result in missed opportunities. With hindsight should haves are always something we should have done. Usually, people see things clearer with hindsight than with foresight.

However, our foresight is usually more productive than our hindsight. Foresight can help us to envision our goals, whereas hindsight usually results in regrets. Should haves are the kinds of excuses that make us yo-yo from avoidance to denial and to regrets. And all these are potential robbing emotions.

Excuses are nothing but thieves of our time, our triumph and our future treasures. So before we pass up any opportunity, we should research it and think it through, because some opportunities are diamonds in the rough. With a little buffing, the rest will be history...

**I Could Have…**
Without a doubt, could haves occur
as a result of possibilities that we once passed up that we now regret, due to new insights we received about the situation. Maybe someone went on to do it and was successful at it. We are not necessarily jealous of them, but maybe a little. But more importantly, we wished we were getting the same benefits they are now getting, had we not made excuses for not doing it. A lot of ways we could have gone about it are running in our heads.

But I’ve got some news for you: it’s never too late until you win. Be like a child learning to walk: when you fall short of something due to any past excuses, rise again and go for it, no matter how long it’s been. If you’re that determined, no past mistakes can stand in your way.

The Bible says in Micah 7:8 “Don’t laugh at me my enemies; if I fall I will rise again.” A winning mentality makes us focus on priorities, and empowers us to let everything else go into a mental dustbin. The way out of “could have” is to replace our excuses with a can-do attitude any time we see an opportunity. You owe it to your successful tomorrow to invest your time in your priorities today. Otherwise that successful tomorrow will never come. A lot of us are living our poor choices today, and not our maximum potential.

Dream Killers

Excuses are toxic, they are dream killers, so to stop should haves manifesting in your life, start feeding your mind with powerful reasons why you need to make dreams a reality. You need to get rid of the payoffs your excuses are giving you, stopping you from going after your dreams. Payoffs are the benefits you get from making an excuse. For example, a student gets an unhealthy thrill of going clubbing instead of revising for his pending exam and so receives his payoff but fails the exam and hence stalls his dream from manifesting.

So how else can we get away from should have, could have and would have? The answer is living mindfully. I mean are you living everyday of your life on purpose? If the answer is no, then life will just toss you to and fro at will. The truth is, you were made to choose for yourself, so don’t let life walk all over you. Start today by changing all your “I can’t”s to “How can I do this?” Because if you never give something a go, how do you know you can’t? You might just surprise yourself.

Henrietta Elegunde is an author, life coach, ordained minister and motivational speaker. She is the author of Hallowed Be Thy Name. For more information on the book or booking her for an event, contact her at helegunde@hotmail.co.uk.
Introducing DeskDemon’s new resident Agony ‘Uncle’ - Paul Pennant

“I’d like to offer you a warm welcome to my new Agony Uncle page on DeskDemon. Whatever issues you face daily, it’s almost certain that I or one of the many PAs I train, have come up against them before - and worked out how to handle them successfully. As a former PA myself, I’m also a member of the IQPS, with a post-graduate business qualification, so I can talk the talk and walk the walk - especially as I’m in touch with my feminine side!”

“As managing director of Today’s PA (todayspa.co.uk) and its principal trainer, I meet and train many PAs from all types of business and organisations around the world every month, so I have a wealth of experience and wisdom to share with you. I’m really looking forward to helping you solve the problems that challenge and frustrate you at work.”

“So, don’t suffer in silence, because we’re all in this together, right? 

“Go on - use me - I love it!”

http://www.deskdemon.com/pages/uk/agonyuncle
“Meetings are a waste of time. I’m just too busy to spend time in meetings. I’ve got too much work to do.” Sound familiar? When I hear this I often see people flying around frantically fire fighting, often getting lots of interruptions and not being at all sure where they are going. Does that sound familiar too?

I like to think of meetings as gaining leverage for myself, making sure that people know what I am trying to achieve and helping me forward. Likewise, I like to know what others are trying to achieve and helping them forward. This way I cut down on my interruptions and know I will have a focussed discussion with my colleagues – so I don’t need to interrupt them and hopefully they don’t interrupt me.

It’s not that I’m anti interruptions – what I call corridor conversations. There will always be the unexpected and that’s fair enough. It’s just that I’d rather be better organised than that and have my mind clear to discuss important matters when my mind is really focussed on the topic rather than in the middle of five million other important things I am trying to achieve.

So What Are the Constituents of a Good Meeting?

• A leader. All teams need leaders. Leadership styles need to change with the situation. In the middle of a crisis we need a dictator – “Just do it!” But more often it is someone who can set up a discussion, draw in different opinions and only then conclude. It may be a good idea to rotate the leadership of a meeting – it helps people develop and enables them to run meetings as they think they should be run. It also helps them understand that running meetings is not as easy as they might think – which might make them more supportive at the next meeting!
• A plan. The meeting needs to know its direction: how long
the meeting is going to take, what we are going to discuss. Too often meetings try and boil the ocean all at once. Provided I know that the topic is coming up in the meeting I don’t need to bring it up in the middle of another topic. It is the role of the leader to manage this plan.

- Minutes. These are a useful way of asking people to discuss the issue outside of the meeting – or to do something. It enables the meeting to move on and not get bogged down in the detail. They are also a good reminder of what was agreed.

How Long Should a Meeting Last?
My view is that anything more than two hours is beyond my concentration limit. If it needs to be more than that then there should be a scheduled break. That way people stay focussed and therefore effective. It can be very useful to make it clear that the meeting will last no longer than a certain time. This can be achieved by telling people that we will stand up at a certain time. It is amazing how much more quickly meetings go when people are standing up!

How Often Should a Meeting Take Place?
For management teams my view is that we should meet once a month on a rhythm that fits the business – I find the third Thursday of the month is quite a good time. However, in some situations that require tighter management, once a week is effective – first thing Monday morning, or Friday morning. These become more tactical meetings dealing with day-to-day issues. I find them more effective with junior staff and less necessary with experienced staff or teams.

How to Deal with Follow-ups
How do you get people to do the actions that they have agreed to in a meeting? Its no good leaving it to the next meeting to review whether people have done the actions they agreed from the last meeting. I have found it effective to re-circulate the minutes a week before the next meeting. Instead of Portrait I set them up as Landscape with another column for people to record what they have done with the action.

All I am really looking for is “done” – or an explanation on progress. If people haven’t done the action they are often reminded to do it before the meeting – if nothing else to avoid the embarrassment of saying they haven’t done it. Once everybody has commented the completed follows up can be re-circulated prior to the meeting. If people still haven’t done their action by then I have found that they will now try to get it done.

But what if they still haven’t done their action? This is where the leader has to step in and deal with the individual on a one-to-one basis. There is probably some more fundamental problem that needs addressing. Maybe they are struggling with their workload, and maybe not delegating effectively, and maybe they need help with running their own meetings.

Team Briefing
Once the team meeting is over, it can be a good idea to make sure that the key messages/decisions are communicated onwards. Often those who attend important meetings don’t realise their responsibility to pass on information at their own team meeting. A written brief may be the most effective way of doing that – or sometimes the minutes can be a useful reminder.

Do get the minutes out quickly. I have always favoured quick and cheerful rather than slow and 100 percent accurate. Fundamentally, minutes are there to remind people of what they agreed to do.

What Do I Do if Some People Can’t Attend?
My view is that the meeting should run anyway. From time to time people can’t attend. However it may be important to deal with persistent offenders on a one-to-one basis.