

Take Time

By Anita Devi

Time management strategies and case studies for SENCOs



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About the author



Anita Devi believes in ‘the joy of learning’. She is an education consultant, policy developer, change strategist and trainer with international teaching and leadership experience from EY to postgraduate. Anita has worked previously as a senior leader, SENCO, SEN advisory teacher and SEN school improvement advisor. Her background in Prince2 Management has helped to facilitate local, regional and national change projects. Since 2009, Anita has spoken at several national events to professionals in the SEND sector on professional wellbeing and time management. In addition, she has regularly led sessions on this as part of the National SENCO Award.

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Executive Summary

Think how different our productivity levels would be if we worked from a place of rest. When there is a lot to do it is too easy to believe ‘if I just keep going, it will get done!’ The truth is: there will always be something else to do.

In this ebook we aim to share with you tried and tested principles of an effective time management approach. There isn’t a ‘one size fits all’ answer and our personality type and personal identity, plus our individual life circumstances, will affect what approach we use and how. Nonetheless there are a few fundamental principles that, if applied to develop a personalised approach, can support growth in this area.

“Are you someone who works to a place of rest (i.e. exhaustion) or do you work from a place of rest (i.e. energised)?”

Why is effective time management important?

The unprecedented changes in education over recent years have led to the resurgence of discussion around teacher workload. This is not a new debate and nor will we find solutions that will work for everyone. The solutions we do develop may also be time-limited, but our fundamental commitment to professional wellbeing will remain. As educators, we are in the business of life-long learning, so we need to continually review and reflect.

Professional wellbeing in the workplace happens when leaders create the right cultural context for it to be a high priority and individuals equally take responsibility for their own health. It requires leadership and introspection.



What you can take away from reading this ebook

We encourage readers to see this ebook as an opportunity for personal growth through reflection. If you are able to, team up with others, discuss the ideas presented and encourage each other.

*“If you want to go fast, go alone.
If you want to go far, go together.”*

AFRICAN PROVERB

Professionals across a number of sectors, including SENCOS, who have adopted this type of methodology (personalised to their own context) have found after six weeks that they were ahead of where they thought they would be! They had time to do all the other tasks that they normally would have liked to do, but never previously had the time.



A teacher's story

An all too common example kindly shared by a colleague

I've always wanted to be a teacher, ever since I was in school. This was my dream. I worked hard and it wasn't always easy, but I got there. I received a lot of support from everyone during my training period, but then came my NQT year; I was exhausted. I had no time at the weekends and I was spending evenings and early mornings working. Being tired was not helping me be effective in the classroom; the children in my care were not getting the best of what they deserved. During my training I was on the fast track to being an excellent teacher – where and how had it all changed?

An experienced specialist teacher visited my school to support one of the children in my class. She asked me if I was making time on the weekends not to work, but to have fun. I was so taken aback; it was kind of her to ask and so I felt I could tell her the truth – I wasn't. This teacher sat down with me and said, 'Let's talk about your work patterns and time management'. I asked her why and she replied, 'I want to make sure the education of children and young people remains in good hands in the future. You are too a good a teacher for us not to invest in you.' I cried and then we talked.

“To be a sustainable SENCO you must invest in yourself as well as what you do”



tweet this

What I realised then was that during my whole career journey I had focused on what I do as a teacher – which is important – but I needed to invest time in being the best of me that I am as well. That meant thinking through life skills, including how I manage my time.

The transition wasn't easy and there were weeks when I slipped and lapsed into the old habits of non-stop working. The specialist teacher kept in touch with me and encouraged me to persevere. I did and I am so glad.

I am now in my eighth year of teaching and loving it. My specialist teacher friend always says to me, 'Four words: **Be kind to yourself**' – that was my mantra. Today I want to share two words with everyone who gives so much of themselves in education – **Take Time**.

Hopefully this will become your mantra too.



Principles of effective time management

In this section, we explore five fundamental principles that underpin a personalised time management system that works for you. Read through each principle and you'll find activities in the next section to help you process the principle and turn it into an everyday experience.

1. Who you are makes all the difference

We are all different, so it is important to develop clarity about our personal identity. The clearer we are on our identities, the better we are at making personal choices.

Our identity cuts across many aspects of our life – family, work, relationships, community, social interests and other networks. Too often, we define ourselves by what we do, rather than who we are.

Activity

Work through:

[Activity 1. This is me! p10](#)

[Activity 2. Control and beyond control. p10](#)

[Activity 3. Me time: personal reflection. p11](#)

“Wellbeing cannot exist just in your own head. Wellbeing is a combination of feeling good as well as actually having meaning, good relationships and accomplishment.”

MARTIN SELIGMAN



2. Task lists don't work, but activity lists do!

Most people get a lot of pleasure from ticking something off on a list. I know colleagues who write lists at the start of the day and then tick off as they go along. Others complete an action, write it down and then tick it off. Psychologically, there appears to be something quite gratifying about lists and ticking them off. We are effective when we let who we are determine and drive what we do.

However, the problem with lists is they are linear and our brains don't work in a linear way. We are wired to be dynamic, responsive and connected – we have circular and interconnected thoughts e.g. 'if I do this, then...oh but if this happens then...' and so on. A list does not always reflect the multitude and complexity of our thoughts and the action steps required to complete a task. Inevitably, we always underestimate the time a task can take.

Take Time Top Tip:

When you insert a meeting time in your diary, do you insert planning and prep time as well? Or do you stay up late the night before prepping for the meeting? Blocking off prep time at the point at which you book the meeting ensures it is in the diary and you have time.

Depending on the format you use, most lists do not always help to prioritise. If you work down the list you might get three things done in a day and then realise item four was the most important. When things come up unexpectedly, how do you decide to shelve other things? These decisions add to our mental processing load. It is like having a programme constantly running in the background of your computer that takes up space and slows you down.

Important and urgent

Take Time Top Tip:

Our approach to prioritising a task is, in the main, based on two dimensions: urgent and important. However, what is urgent and important to one person isn't always urgent or important for someone else.

Important and urgent	Important and not urgent
Urgent, but not important	Not urgent and not important



Too often we adopt other people's agendas. One way to redress the balance is when someone asks you do something, ask them where on the grid above they would place that task. It helps to start a dialogue about what else might be going on for you.

There are two key skills in effective time management.

1. Believe that it is OK to say no, politely of course. Give yourself permission.
2. Be clear on boundaries. Too often we articulate what we don't want rather than stipulating what we do want.

Responding, not reacting

Finally, the tragedy of task lists is they never end. You sent the email = tick! Then you get a reply with another question, which means another email and another task. Does it go to the bottom of the list or does it jump in and distract you from other tasks you are currently doing? What if you have no time left that week?

Take Time Top Tip:

With the use of mobile technology rapid response rates and expectations of instant response have increased phenomenally. Think about making time to **respond** not **react**.

Ever sent an instant reply to an email and then thought, 'I should have said xyz' which actually means writing another email tomorrow? Sometimes, by reacting in the moment we create additional work for ourselves. Obviously there are times when an immediate response is required, but not always.

Hopefully, you will now begin to see how task lists don't work for the complex roles and lives we now live in.

So what's the solution? The answer lies in activity lists. What's the difference?

Tasks are endless, but activities begin to group tasks together and when combined with time boundaries make for an effective time management system.

Activity

Work through:

[Activity 4. Reframing the to-dos. P11](#)



3. Set boundaries

People often talk about work-life balance. I find this a little nonsensical. Work is only one part of life. Also, if we focus on work-life balance, we are never going to achieve and sustain the perfect combination. Life happens!

Boundaries are different to barriers. Boundaries establish a perimeter, but you can still let people in and be flexible. By contrast, barriers define no-go areas, walls of blockage. Healthy relationships use boundaries to make the expectations of a relationship clear. Time management is in effect a relationship with time.

Activity

Work through:

[Activity 5. My boundaries. P13](#)

4. Nothingness time is not a luxury, but a necessity

How many of us cram so much into our diaries that when unexpected events occur, we have to drop something and then end up with a backlog? Suddenly our to-do lists become never-ending catch-up lists.

To counteract this, mark off half an hour a day in your diary structure as nothingness time i.e. a defined period when you insert nothing in.

6.00-8.00am	Personal time and research
8.00-8.30am	Travel to work
8.30-9.30am	Meetings or communications time
9.30-10.30am	Teach
10.30-11.00am	Break/duty
11.00-11.30am	Nothingness time



Where you place nothingness time in your day's structure is up to you and dependent on your personal circumstances. However, this is time that you guard and do not pencil anything in. Imagine the scenario where the SENCO/senior leader with the diary structure above is called to respond to an incident or emergency at 8.45am. It takes 45 minutes to address. The SENCO/senior leader now has no time to make the calls that were needed so they remain as something left to do. However, with built in nothingness time, the SENCO can make the calls and fulfil that task at 11.00am. Unexpected events don't happen every day so eventually you get to a point where you have an extra half an hour!

“Nothingness time can mean the difference between a mad panic and a peaceful cup of tea”



tweet this

Some people who use this approach timetable in nothingness time once a week during their non-contact time. Others who teach full time use before or after school hours. Depending on your role, level of responsibility, work contract and circumstances, when and how you allocate this time will differ. The point is to include it on a regular basis and guard the time boundaries you set.

 **Take Time**
Top Tip:

Persevere – there will be days or weeks when nothingness time goes out the window. Don't give up; it is about changing habits and developing a culture.

Activity

Now have a go at

[*Activity 6. Putting it all together and making it sustainable. P13*](#)

5. Regular review and refinement is essential

Back in the 80s, the Filofax era, companies were continuously advertising time management tools for life. But our circumstances constantly change and our roles evolve. Therefore, key aspects of any time management system are reviewing and refining.



I have successfully maintained two golden rules for my time management because I annually take time out to review and reflect on what's working and what's not working. I then (keeping hold of the underlying principles) adapt and adjust my approach.

I have two golden rules.

- My work day ends at 5pm.
- I don't work weekends.

"He who every morning plans the transactions of that day and follows that plan carries a thread that will guide him through the labyrinth of the most busy life."

VICTOR HUGO



Activity section: developing your own system

In this section I will take you through a number of steps to support you in developing your own effective time management system. There is logic to the chronological order in which they have been listed and this links to the principles presented in the previous section.

As you work through the activities make a conscious effort not to self-judge or slip into solution-mode. The activities are designed to help you understand what works for you and how to develop a lifestyle that you want.

***“Your beliefs become your thoughts,
Your thoughts become your words,
Your words become your actions,
Your actions become your habits,
Your habits become your values,
Your values become your destiny.”***

MAHATMA GANDHI



Activity 1. This is me!

These four activities can be spaced out over time. The purpose is to give you the space to discover a sense of who you are and what makes you tick.

A. Divide a sheet of A4 paper into three and fill in these lists.

What is important to you, across all areas of your life	What others think about you	How best to support you
<i>To help you develop your perspective and priorities.</i>	<i>Contact five people you trust and feel comfortable with. Ask them to describe you through three positive attributes or qualities.</i>	<i>Use positive and affirmative sentences.</i>

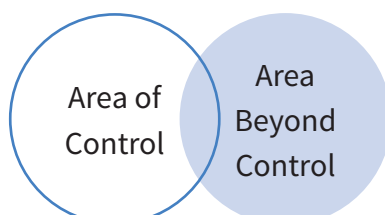
Congratulations! You've just completed your one-page profile – how do you feel? Share it with someone if you can.

B. 'Because I'm worth it': jot down your responses to the following.

- a. What does professional wellbeing mean to me?
- b. What are the tell-tale signs when I am stressed?
- c. What currently concerns me and who can I share these things with?


Activity 2. Control and beyond control

Dump the mental baggage! Look at the list of things that concern you: can you classify them into areas of control (AoC) and areas beyond control (ABC)?





Part of knowing yourself is being clear on your levels of influence. These can change over time with responsibility and through professional development. However, too often we carry things around that are in our ABC zone.

 **Take Time**
True story:

One SENCO shared with me how putting 'AoC/ABC' on a Post-it above her desk in her office helped to put things in perspective when challenges came along.

“Focusing on what is in your control & what is beyond your control can help put things in perspective”



tweet this

Activity 3. Me time! Personal reflection

‘Me time’ here is defined as personal space to just be, not do.

- Are you a morning person or a burn the night oil person?
- Is your choice based on habit, preference or optimum performance?
- How do you recognise your optimum energy levels to complete a task?
- How much ‘me time’ do you need/would you like in a day?
- How much ‘me time’ are you currently getting?

 **Take Time**
Fun activities:

This is great at the start of staff or team meetings:

- a. If you were to design your own personal fragrance after you (using a positive attribute), what would you call it and how would you describe it? For the more creative among you – design the bottle!
- b. If you were to describe yourself as a chocolate, what would you be and why? Again, share with colleagues



Activity 4. Reframing the to-dos

A. How much do I do in a day?

Take a blank sheet of A4 and list EVERYTHING you did the day before, preferably a workday. This includes everything from the moment you got up to when you went to bed. Be explicit: e.g.

- Got up.
- Read.
- Made the bed.
- Used the bathroom.
- Made breakfast.
- Made lunch.
- Took the dog for a walk.
- Brushed my teeth.
- Cleaned the kitchen.
- Walked to work.
- Bought a newspaper.
- Picked up post.
- Made two phone calls.
- Filed some papers.
- Taught Class 8A.
- Made tea.
- Went out on break duty.

This is the mental list we carry around in our heads – a complete energy sucker!

B. Activity groupings

Taking two different colour pens. Using the list you made in the activity above, mark tasks that are specific to that day. eg. break duty in one colour.



Personal time	Communication	Research and admin
Got up Read Made the bed Used the bathroom Made breakfast Made lunch Took the dog for a walk Brushed my teeth	Made two phone calls Read emails Responded to emails	Read

 **Take Time**
Top Tip:

The optimum number of categories is seven (plus or minus two). The reason for this is minimise the processing load.

“Most people can only remember 7 things at one time, so don’t give yourself too much to do”



tweet this



C. Daily format

Remember that daily table from the nothingness section?

Here's a one for a full day. Fill it in with your activity groups, remembering to include nothingness time.

5.30-6.30am
6.30-7.30am
8.30-9.30am
9.30-12 noon
12 noon-1.00pm Lunch
1.00-2.30pm
3.00-3.30pm
4.00-5.00pm
5.45-6.30pm Dinner
6.30-10.00pm
10.00-11.00pm



D. Weekly format

List the tasks that you highlighted as specific to a day during part A in a week format and include time where appropriate.

Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
		After - school club 4-5pm				

Now you have your tasks outlined you can start working on boundaries and time frames.

“You may not be perfect at managing your time, each failure is an opportunity to learn, not give up”



tweet this

Activity 5. My boundaries

Ask yourself the following questions.

- What time does your day start?
- What time would you like it to start?
- What other parameters would you like to include?

Obviously there are always going to be one-off exceptions to the rule when things happen, but they're a good place to start.



Activity 6. Putting it all together and making it sustainable

By working through the activities you have now:

- identified a personal profile – a clear idea of who you are, what makes you tick and what adds to your wellbeing or makes you stressed
- identified items as either in your area of control or in your area beyond control
- thought about the ways you work and whether you're leaving time for yourself
- listed the tasks you normally do on a typical working day
- grouped those tasks into activities
- allotted time for those activities using a day planner
- included nothingness time into your day or weekly plan
- noted on which days of the week some activities always occur
- decided on your work boundaries.

These activities will have given you a very clear map of how to manage your time in the best way for you. The next step is making it sustainable.

The key is fidelity to the principles and seeing it through for at least six weeks before you see any fruits of your labour. There will be days when it goes pear shaped, but that's OK! Acknowledge it, move on and get back on track. Some of the glitches you experience may provide you with feedback about what to refine and change. Try and use failure as an opportunity to learn, not give up!

Part of the initial 6-week journey is about educating people around you of your new way of working. You may get some initial resistance, but pursue this. After all, this is about your wellbeing and living a lifestyle that works for you. When you do get resistance, be open to communication. Share with others what you are doing and why. You could invite them to encourage and support you in your experimental phase.

Most of all though, celebrate each milestone!



Thirty years ago my older brother, who was ten years old at the time, was trying to get a report written on birds that he'd had three months to write, which was due the next day. We were out at our family cabin in Bolinas, and he was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books about birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother's shoulder, and said, "Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird."

ANNE LAMOTT, BIRD BY BIRD: SOME INSTRUCTIONS ON WRITING AND LIFE



Case studies and examples

Does it sound too good to be true? Using the structure and the nothingness time concept a number of SENCOs have shared how they are now ahead of themselves.

Make others part of the solution

I appreciate we all have different work environments. One SENCO confided that she had very little time to do her SEN paperwork and this was always being interrupted by things the SLT thought were urgent. Using the Take Time approach, when that next happened she gave the SLT a choice: 'I have this much time. I need to do ABC and you are asking me to do XYZ. What would you like me to prioritise?' The response from her SLT: 'We had no idea what your workload involved.' The result has had a long-term impact as her timetable has been adjusted and she now gets more time to do her SEND work.

“Good time management is implicitly bound to taking care of yourself and doing your job well”



tweet this

Review and refine

One assistant head in a secondary school has commented on Take Time: 'I shared it with a friend. It's a great system. But I am struggling with the discipline to stay on track, especially when tired.'

What this means is the assistant head needed to look at optimum energy time. Clearly things were being scheduled when they were too tired. They made an adjustment to when they scheduled difficult tasks and are back on track.

Time optimisation

When working with other stakeholders, you may need to schedule a lot of meetings. One way is deciding on a slot for meetings and letting the other parties know that these are your meetings slots. Choose your times carefully, for example, to ensure parents can attend if necessary. At first you may receive resistance, but over time it will become such an effective system you should be able to get all the parties in the room at once.



Use signals and markers to guard time

Taking a phone call while you are trying to analyse data or write a report can be a great energy sucker! The call leads to something else and by the time you return, you have lost your chain of thought and have to start over. Have a shared signal that informs others in your office or your admin team that this is your report writing time and you are not taking any calls, but you will call back during your allocated time. One example is having a polite sign to put on your desk. This will enable you to get your work done much quicker and you can return the call when you have the information to hand.

Focusing on wellbeing and time management at the University Of Worcester

As a National SENCO Award Provider, Dr. Sean Bracken has the following to say.

One of the key NASENCO learning outcomes identifies that participants ought to be enabled to 'Deploy and manage staff effectively to ensure the most efficient use of resources to improve progress of children and young people with SEN and/or disabilities'. This is indeed central to the roles and responsibilities of SENCOs.

One of the focuses within the provision at the University Of Worcester (UW) concerns the management of the central resource of time that SENCOs have at their disposal over the course of a day, a week, a term or a year. The effective use of time management is implicitly bound up with the care of oneself and the capacity to conduct one's role efficiently and effectively.

For this reason, during the second module at UW where the focus is upon working effectively with others, we commence the module with a reflective focus on how SENCOs can make best use of their own time and energies. This assists course participants to step away from their daily engagements and to critically reflect on how time as a resource might be used to greater effect. This focus generally has a significant impact on subsequent professional practices within schools. It does so because SENCOs become more aware of how best to manage their own time. In some instances, this has led to challenging conversations with school leaders who may not have been aware of the demands of the role and its implications for resourcing the role effectively. Moreover, as SENCOs become more adept at having greater critical capacity to manage time as a resource for their own role, they also comment upon how self-management strategies are transferable to the effective management of others.



Example of a daily schedule



Take Time

Top Tip:

Use colour-coding to link to your diary layout.

5.30-6.30am
Personal time – exercise, read, get ready
6.30 – 7.30am
Research/breakfast/domestic time Home: read new emails, respond to previous
8.30 – 9.30am
Parent/class teacher/SENCO/headteacher meetings
9.30 – 12 noon
Obs/assessment/MA meetings/CPD
12.00 – 1.00pm Lunch
1.00 – 2.30pm
Admin/prep/call/thinking/nothingness time
3.00 – 3.30pm
Parent/class teacher/SENCO/headteacher meetings
4.00 – 5.00pm
Staff meeting/ read new work emails and respond to previous
5.45 – 6.30pm Dinner
6.30 – 10.00pm
Personal/family time
10.00- 11.00pm
Unwind and prep for sleep



Example 2 based on activity groupings

As my role evolved to work on a number of projects, the schedule changed too.

	Teaching in higher education	Consultant	Trainer	Working at home days
5.30 – 6.30	Personal time – exercise, read, get ready			
6.30 – 7.30	Research/breakfast/domestic time Home: read new emails, respond to previous			
7.30 – 9.00	Travel/meetings			Read/research
9.00 – 12.30	Lecture/research	C. Work	Training	Focus time
12.30 – 1.30	Lunch			
1.30 – 2.30	Nothingness time			Rest
2.30 – 5.00	Lecture/research	C. Work	Training	Focus time, prep and op. time
5.00 -5.45	Travel/meetings			Respond to emails
5.45 – 6.30	Dinner			
6.30 – 10.00	Personal/family time			
10.00 – 11.00	Unwind and prep for sleep			

Evenings

Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
Home		Small Group	Charity Accounts	Movie Night		



Keep in touch

We would love to hear how you are getting on or if you have questions, suggestions, inspiring quotes and top tips that have worked for you in using this Take Time ebook.

Feel free to email us at **evelyn.prysor-jones@optimus-education.com**

Or tweet **[@OptimusSEND](#) [@Butterflycolour](#) [#TakeTimeSENCO](#)**

We would love to hear how you are getting on or if you have questions, suggestions, inspiring quotes and top tips that have worked for you in using this Take Time ebook.

This ebook is the product of many hearts, hands and conversations over time. I am grateful to all who have contributed either directly or indirectly. There are too many to mention, but you know who you are, thank you. A special thanks to Sean Bracken from The University of Worcester and the creative Optimus Education Team: Evelyn Prysor-Jones (content lead), Nitin (design) and Nadia (marketing) who have approached this journey with an open mind.



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