

## TIME WASTED, TIME GAINED

Finding time, whether within the company or in the private domain, is a major challenge nowadays. According to economist and Nobel Prize winner Jeremy Rifkin, time is of far greater value than space and ownership; in his view, this change reveals the emergence of a new capitalism (*The Age of Access*). But time is money, says the proverb, so does wasting time mean losing money? Not necessarily.

A paradox of our age is no longer having time to waste because of wanting to gain time; meanwhile, as the battle for time rages the battle for quality is being played out in the background. The rediscovery of quality time, access to quality information or the creation of quality relationships are all guarantees of durability requiring a new economics of time to be thought up in association with co-workers, customers and partners. The question is how. The practice of *rubato* in music offers a possible approach. *Rubato* – literally stolen time – means the time expended in lengthening the first beat of waltz time, for example, and the subsequent speeding up of the following two beats. Without this, the music loses its sparkle. *Rubato* has been described as a "glorious larceny" (P. F. Tosi), subject to the restoration of the time stolen. It is this alternation of taking and giving back that the composer André Boucourechliev has in mind when he writes that the economic issue of time in music takes precedence over the aesthetic aspect. By "economic" he means the dynamic exchange between time lost – lacking precision, slow, suspended – and time gained – precise, rapid, directional. If this principle is transposed to the company it can be interpreted as a permanent back and forth movement between creative time where there is offer and loss and productive time where there is receiving and recuperating.

And where do we find time to waste? We can trim back such time-consuming activities as e-mails, statistics, reports and presentations, standards and rules, bureaucratic processes, piloting and monitoring procedures; their aim is to gain time and efficiency, but when taken to excess, they alienate rather than improve, isolate rather than bring together, impoverish rather than simplify.

Why waste time? So that we can listen more attentively to the organisation, to others and to ourselves, in the hope that something will emerge. A manager wastes time when he prefers to communicate via a face-to-face discussion rather than by e-mail but he hopes for better quality information. He wastes time when he shuts himself up to read a scientific article on management or to take notes and think, but he hopes to make progress, like Ed Catmull, the Pixar Animation Studios president, who after a successful film gives his co-workers a list of questions along the lines of "what would you do again?" and "what wouldn't you do again?" Wasting time is acting before, after and in between moments of production, risking failure to obtain any result, so as to observe, understand, speculate, catch one's breath or relieve pressure on the system. Sometimes, wasting time is taking the risk of departing from one's role and, for example, trying to find an answer that has failed to materialise, somewhere that one is not supposed to be looking for it. Henry Mintzberg says in *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning* that a single call with an unhappy customer can tell you more than a mountain of sales reports. The director-general of a big French company admitted in a lecture on talent management that he bypasses the hierarchy and procedures and contacts directly staff that he has heard have special potential.

When should we waste time? Firstly, when the situation is complex and a crisis or threat looms. In such cases, wasting time may become strategic if "strategy is knowing what to do when there is nothing to do" (Tartakower, chess-player). Secondly, in order to be present. A recent study has shown a greater degree of depression in work teams when management is not present (*Le Temps*, 11.05.12). The presence of a manager reinforces confidence and a sense of support. Thirdly, in order to create cross-links so as to encourage solution-sharing and not allow individuals to reinvent the wheel alone in their cells. Fourthly, for oneself. Ricardo Semler, the Semco chairman, proclaims that an afternoon nap is mandatory in his company, because a rested worker performs better. The investor Warren Buffett devotes a considerable amount of time to a profound understanding of the companies in which he intends to invest. The colleagues involved in a hiring process at Morning Star, a company with no managers, take a long time to assess a job candidate in order to be sure that he will adapt to their unusual form of organisation. And then, wasting time also means giving time. Christian Horner, principal of the Formula One Red Bull team describes his relationship with car designer Adrian Newey as follows: "Something I really work at is giving him time [...] That way I can get the best out of Adrian" (*Le Temps*, 16.04.11). It is perhaps because of this downtime that Adrian has refused a better-paid offer from a competitor.

The licence to waste time – granted to others and to oneself – is nevertheless a calculated risk. Marcel Mauss in *The Gift* describes how the potlatch ritual consisting in giving a guest lavish gifts entails the obligation to reciprocate. All gifts entail a counter-gift. Without being ingenuous, he demonstrates in his book how a gift creates a purely economic relationship but one that cannot be measured like a transaction. Time wasted, just like a gift, marks respect and trust that may stimulate creativity and reinforce a sense of responsibility. In the company, finding the right balance, the right alternation between the human equation "Time wasted, time gained" and the productivity equation "More work, less time", could enhance mastery of the economics of time, since wasting time is gaining time.

Claudio Chiacchiari,  
founder of *Saisir le Temps*®

Translator: Louise Bigwood