Chapter 2
What are Temporal Structures?

INTRODUCTION

Temporal structure, a key notion in this book, is defined as a patterned organization of time, used by humans to help them manage, comprehend or coordinate their use of time. The objective of this chapter is to provide a theoretical overview for understanding the role temporal structures play in personal time management practices. This chapter discusses how temporal structures are aligned with personal temporal constraints and how to understand the impact of these structures on personal productivity. This chapter first introduces the concept of temporal structure and its relationship to individual time management practices. Individual temporal experiences contain many different forms of temporal structures, which can be either explicit or implicit. A good example of explicit temporal structures is a deadline, which most individuals write on their personal calendar tools. An example of implicit temporal structure is an informal project meeting with a small group, which is not publically announced and is only known internally.

This chapter then discusses existing temporal structure related terms, which are temporal norms, temporal structures and sociotemporal norms. However, this book adopts only temporal structure as its key concept in order to avoid potential ambiguity and confusion. Next, this chapter presents a

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A comprehensive review of the existing temporal structure research, which serves as a theoretical base to understand how professionals are temporally constrained in a workplace. A few well-known studies in this area are reviewed, such as Roy’s banana time, Perlow’s quiet time and Zerubavel’s hospital time. Later, the chapter describes three real personal time management stories with an emphasis on finding out where and how temporal structures are manipulated in their personal calendar tools. The three profiles include a female professor also serving as a department chair, a male software developer, and a male network administrator. Following the three personal stories, two other main studies reported in this book, which include both interview and survey studies are briefly introduced. Finally, future trends and a short conclusion are presented.

BACKGROUND

It is useful to understand how individuals manage their time in organizations in today’s productivity-focused business environment. Individual time management is argued to be governed by the interplay of external organization constructs and individual internal temporal rhythm. Most professionals spend a large percentage of their time in a workplace. Organizations function with a set of temporal rhythms and norms that can dramatically affect an organization’s productivity, decision-making and management-directed changes (Ancona et al., 2001; Avital, 2000; Gersick, 1994; Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000; Waller et al., 2001; Webb & Pettigrew, 1999), and thus people working in organizations are dramatically restricted by these temporal structures or norms. Most professionals use either paper-based or electronic calendars to record and manage their working schedules, which are mostly explicit temporal structures. In addition, it may be helpful for individuals to understand the implicit temporal structures concerning their individual time management. For example, it is useful to be aware of their manager’s and other colleagues’ schedules and availability in the workplace if they are doing teamwork. These types of temporal structures are sometimes not explicitly and publicly announced in the workplace, but they become known when the individual gains a deeper understanding of their organization and other individual temporal behaviors. When these explicit and implicit temporal structures are synchronized with their own schedules, it is likely that they will create additional temporal structures in a personal schedule to meet demands and deadlines. These structures are likely to be based on their own understanding of the relationships between the temporal structures impacting them. This understanding helps their time management. Thus, individual time management is likely to be associated with both explicit and implicit temporal structures. Effective time managers might exhibit a better ability in capturing, using, and understanding of all types of temporal structures to support their individual time management. If this is so, we should see a relationship between time management quality and the use and understanding of the various types of temporal structures and especially of the implicit relationships between temporal structures. These are key assumptions made for this research.

TEMPORAL STRUCTURE RELATED TERMS

Because temporal structure is a key notion in this book, at this point, it is appropriate to give a detailed definition of the key terms that are associated with temporal structures. They are: temporal structure, temporal norm and sociotemporal norm. Table 1 below gives a definition and examples of each of these