

# TIME MANAGEMENT: THE PICKLE JAR THEORY

By Jeremy Wright

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There's something about a nice crunchy pickle, isn't there? I mean the aroma may make some people puke, but for me it's the taste and the juice forcing itself into your mouth like a divine cascade of flavor. As a wise man once said, "It's like a taste explosion in your mouth!"

Well, this article really has nothing to do with pickles, nor does it have anything to do with eating or wise men at all. In fact this article has nothing to do with anything tangible, unless you choose to follow along. Though you don't have to, I would strongly suggest it as you could have quite the nifty little craft project by the end of this piece!

## The Jar

Time Management theories have come and gone. I've tried many of these and most have failed because of the sheer amount of time I needed to commit to the theory in order to save some time. The return just never seemed to justify the cost, if you know what I mean.

The latest theory of Time Management I heard has actually caused me to stop and think about how I run my entire life. This kind of thing doesn't happen very often, and no I don't mean thinking, cheeky readers! The theory that was recently taught in a Leadership course I'm enduring is called the Pickle Jar Theory.

## The Theory

Imagine if you will an, or for those crafty people among you just go get an, empty pickle jar. Big pickle jar, you could fit at least three of the largest pickles you've ever imagined inside of it. For those of you who don't like pickles, I apologize, feel free to substitute the words "pancake jar" for "pickle jar" as needed.

Okay, so you've got yourself a pickle jar. Now, put some large rocks in it. Put in as many as you possibly can. Let me know when it's full. Now, I know you think it's full, but put a couple more in anyway.

Okay, you've got a full pickle jar that you can't fit anything else into, right? Now, put some pebbles in. Put as many in as you can possibly fit, and raise your hand and bark like a pig when you feel your jar is full.

Now, take your full jar and take sand and, you guessed it, fill that jar until you can't possibly fit anymore in, and then add some water.

I am sure the significance of this little exercise hasn't escaped any of you. Each of us has many large priorities in our life, represented by the large rocks. We also have things which we enjoy doing, such as the pebbles. We have other things we have to do, like the sand. And finally, we have things that simply clutter up our lives and get in everywhere: water.

None of these are bad things. After all, we need the gamut of these objects—from large priorities to times of rest—in order to feel truly fulfilled. No Time Management theory should be without balance, and the Pickle Jar theory is all about balance. You make time for everything, and everything simply fits well where it is supposed to fit.

## **Me and My Day**

As an example of my pre-pickle day, my little to-do list looked a lot like this:

8:00: check and respond to email  
8:30: check various community sites and respond where required  
9:00: ensure all web properties are running properly  
9:15: set priorities for the day  
9:30: go for a walk, grab some water  
10:00: do website maintenance, remove outdated content  
11:00: draft an article  
11:30: polish next article to go out  
12:00: ensure all things web-related are handled, running well and all questions are answered  
12:30: lunch  
1:30: do programming on latest large project  
2:30: write letters to clients to keep them abreast of changes in the last three days to their projects  
3:30: check with team on progress, deal with issues  
4:30: ... etc., etc., etc.

Now, I may have actually accomplished a lot in this type of day; in fact, I typically did. All my websites were running properly, I'd written an article or two, I'd done actual work, I'd built client relationships, I'd ensured my team was working properly, so what could be wrong? Well, take a look at the first five hours of my day. Between 8am and 1pm, all I manage to actually get done that couldn't fit into other times when my mind tends to wander (and I tend to do these things anyway) was a little bit of article writing.

This part of the day was really a supreme waste of time. I often went to lunch feeling like I was convincing myself that I had been productive. At the end of the day I always believed that a lot got done, but my lunch times always felt slightly depressing.

Beyond that, this schedule did not work if a client walked in and needed an exceptional amount of work done, if a site had crashed overnight, or if I had an email that required more than five minutes of attention. If anything unexpected happened, which we all know should actually be expected, my whole morning and often my entire day fell apart.

## **My New, Improved Day**

In these post-pickle days, my schedule looks rather different. I now schedule in times when my rocks should get done and let my other priorities, the unexpected and little things I do all day, like surf the web, fill in the gaps. New schedule:

800: figure out rocks for the day (literally, this is what it says!) and deal with emergencies  
830: article writing as appropriate  
1000: programming  
1300: client correspondence

Suddenly I have what feels like a more open day. I have more time for programming, I get things done earlier, I am more relaxed, my schedule is more fluid. It all works incredibly well.

In the post-pickle days I realized that I needed to really figure out what my big rocks were during the day and not schedule time for anything else in my daily routine. Email is not a rock: I can go a few minutes and, wonder of wonders, even a day or two without touching it.

Email is a lot like the phone in that even though we all have our phones on just in case an important call happens, when we look back on our year it is rare that we can remember more than one or two occasions where we absolutely needed to answer our phone or email at that precise instant.

### **The Detractors**

There are of course those in the audience who will never have practiced Time Management techniques in the past. They feel they are productive enough and get “enough” done. I’m glad, way to go, give yourselves a hand. Now, grab your jar again. Empty it.

Fill your jar with water until it is completely full. Now, try and add some sand. What do you mean it didn’t work?

This is the essence of the Pickle (or Pancake) Jar Theory. By first ensuring that your large priorities are tackled, scheduled, and done for the day, you can then let the smaller but less important things in until you have somehow allowed time in your day for everything you needed to do, while still relaxing and having fun.

### **The Value of Water**

I strongly encourage everyone to use at least one Time Management System. It empowers you to actually *do* instead of scurrying about without any goals in sight. Whether you choose this particular system or not, remember: eat the pickles before you empty the jar, they are so good!