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Time Management Amongst Small Business Owner/Managers: An Analysis of Retail Pharmacies in Western Australia

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Abstract

The usage of time by small business owner/managers is a relatively poorly understood phenomenon. Whilst several studies have previously attempted to measure *how much* time owners spend working on their business, few researchers have tried to evaluate *what* activities and tasks consume that time. This is an important issue for small firms, because time is a limited resource and its use needs to be maximised if an owner is to achieve all the goals set for his or her business.

A study of 155 retail ("community") pharmacy owner/managers throughout Western Australia sought to measure what proportion of their time was spent on each of six different management responsibilities: marketing; client relations; dealing with external stakeholders; record-keeping & paperwork; business planning and strategy; and other issues (such as staffing matters or technology issues). The study also sought to evaluate what, if any, links existed between the owner's age, their gender, firm size and the variations in the pattern of time usage.

It was found that no clear links could be established between time consumption and any of the above three variables. However, three distinctively different types of managerial time styles were identified – "shop floor" owner/managers (who are focused on customer contact and relationships), "proactive" managers (who focus on business development, marketing and strategic planning), and "duty bound" proprietors (who concentrate on administrative tasks).

Introduction

Time is a limited commodity. Unlike many other resources, it cannot be extended or grown. It has limited dimensions, and therefore its use is a key issue in the management processes that take place within firms. It is often argued that a lack of time is one of the key resource constraints on small business owner/managers (Hisrich & Peters 1998). However, the study of time usage and time management within small firms is a relatively poorly understood phenomenon, and one in which only a limited body of research has been conducted to date (Lane, Ding, Dandridge & Rudolph 1999).

In comparison to many other resources, time has some unique properties. If wasted, it cannot be replaced. If saved, it cannot be stockpiled for future use. If lost, it cannot be retrieved. Whilst other business assets such as capital, labour, information, and customers are often unequally distributed, all managers have an equal supply of time. How well they choose to use it is entirely at their own personal discretion (Robbins, Bergman, Stagg & Coulter 2000).

This paper examines the use of time by small business managers within one particular industry - the retail (sometimes also known as "community") pharmacy sector in Western Australia. It is an industry which provides a unique mix of both retail and professional services, and is a field in which, by law, all firms are restricted to operating as small or medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) run by an owner/manager. As such, it provides a rare opportunity to comprehensively study time usage patterns within small firms.

Background

Most management studies of time usage to date have only examined the general dimensions of time as a whole. Researchers have largely been concerned with simply measuring the quantum of time (i.e. *how much* time) is consumed by business managers. Within this framework, it has often been found that small firm owner/operators spend very large amounts of time on their work and activities associated with it. Most business owners tend to work very long hours (typically 50-60 hours a week); often sacrifice their weekends and social time to concentrate on their business; and usually only take very limited holidays each year. They often also report a sense of "chronic time shortage" to small business researchers (Clayton 1998; Yellow Pages 1994; Department of Employment, Workplace Relations & Small Business 1998; Industry Commission 1997). However, the composition of time usage *within* the typical small business has rarely been examined. As a result, how this large amount of time is used is poorly understood.

As Lane et al (1999) has pointed out, time availability and usage rarely operates at its most efficient level within small firm managerial positions. Many small business owners report a lack of time to achieve all the tasks available for their completion, or for so-called "non-core" activities such as business planning, staff development, or community liaison (Clayton 1998; Industry Commission 1997). Most effort is concentrated on day-to-day administrative and technical activities, rather than on long-term strategic development. As a result most SME owners tend to spend their time "working in the business, not on it" (Gerber 1986). Time management is rarely performed well in a small firm, and time management skills are often lacking (Gaujers, Harper & Browne 1999). This is a significant issue for SMEs, because the presence or absence of sufficient time to understand, analyse and act upon business problems is a key determinant in the successful management of any enterprise (Svenson & Maule 1993).

In contrast, there have been a number of attempts to measure and evaluate time usage by managers in large organisations (Kotter 1984). For example, Mintzberg (1973) examined the role of senior managers in large firms and found that their work tended to be categorised by a large number of varied, brief and ad hoc roles, which employed a variety of different interpersonal, informational and decision-making responsibilities. However, similar studies within SMEs have been very limited to date.

One of the few attempts to evaluate such internal patterns of usage in SMEs has been the work of Lane et al (1999). Their study of sixty small and medium-sized enterprises in the USA sought to measure the amount of time spent by owner/managers on different tasks, including key typical functions such as customer contact, prospecting for new sales, production of goods or services, and administrative responsibilities (see Figure 1). They found that usage patterns varied with the size and age of the firm, and strongly suggested that more research into this area could help lead to a greater understanding of time usage patterns, as well as helping identify what factors correlate with particular levels or styles of time management.

Figure 1: Time Usage in North American SMEs (n=60)

During a typical working week, what is the proportion (percentage) of your time spent on the following activities?

Contacting prospective customers	*9.9*
Dealing with current clients	*21.5*
Contacting other important people outside your firm	*10.0*
Planning, record-keeping & paperwork	*24.9*
Producing your product or service	*33.7*
TOTAL	*100%*

(Source: Lane et al, 1999)

What Factors Are Related To Time Usage?

The initial work of Lane et al (1999) described above is worthy of further examination and validation. Lane et al (1999) also suggested a number of improvements and refinements that could be made to the original survey instrument. Therefore, in addition to replicating the survey to determine its validity and reliability, the authors have attempted to examine a number of factors that may possibly be related to patterns of time usage.

Three items that may have a bearing on time consumption are those of firm size, firm turnover, and the gender of the owner/manager.

The first issue, firm size, would appear on the surface to be a significant issue. The number, range and complexity of managerial tasks can usually be expected to vary within firms as they grow larger. The very smallest of businesses, for example, usually require the owner/manager to take responsibility for almost all activities. However, as firms become larger in size, managers have the opportunity to delegate more of their sales and production workload and to concentrate on certain key strategic and planning issues instead (Storey 1994). They spend less time on making and selling their goods or services, and more on managing the enterprise.

There is certainly a clear link between firm size and the total number of owner working hours. A recent study of enterprise operating hours amongst Australian firms (DEWRSB 1998) found that the total number of working hours between firms varies significantly, with larger firms reporting longer operating hours and micro-enterprises recording the lowest amount of opening time (see Figure 2). However, these figures are distorted because they include a large number of micro-firms that operate as part-time ventures.

Figure 2: Average Number of Daily Operating Hours For Australian Firms

Firm Size	**Hours**
1-4 persons	8.9 hours
5-19 persons	10 hours
20-99 persons	11.4 hours
100-199 persons	12.9 hours
200 or more	13.1 hours
Total all firms	**9.4 hours**

(Source: Department of Employment, Workplace Relations & Small Business (1998:34))

Firm size can be determined on a number of different bases. One of the most common is that of the number of employees. In Australia, for example, SMEs are usually broken down into the following categories devised by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1998):

- Micro-enterprises: Businesses which employ less than five staff members. This group includes the self-employed, and firms run by two or more partners without any support staff.
- Small businesses: Those which have 5-19 staff in addition to the owner/manager(s).
- Medium-sized enterprises: Firms with 20-199 staff.

Another way to determine firm size is on the basis of its financial turnover. This criteria is commonly used in a number of European and Asian countries, although collecting accurate data about such sensitive matters as sales revenue, profitability and after-tax income can be extremely difficult.

It therefore appears that the following hypotheses are worthy of investigation:

Firstly, that there is a difference in time use patterns between micro and small firms. We predict that managers of micro-sized firms will spend more time in client contact than larger firms. This concentration on client focused duties will be at the expense of time allocated to any other duty.

Secondly, we expect that there will be a positive correlation between the turnover of a firm and the amount of time a manager spends in marketing, contact with external agencies, planning, and administration, while there will be negative correlation with time spent with clients.

Another possible indicator of different patterns of time management may be based on gender. Many writers have argued that the management styles of men and women can be significantly different, with each emphasising very different aspects of their role (Robbins, Bergman, Stagg & Coulter 2000). Women, for example, are often portrayed as more likely to encourage participation, to share power and information, and to emphasise interpersonal skills, whilst males tend to adopt a directive, command-and-control style. As a result, women spend more of their time communicating with staff and dealing with individuals (Josefowitz 1984). These differences also spill over into the way in which women manage and run their own small businesses. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (1998) has reported substantial differences in time patterns between the two genders. Overall, women tend to work for shorter hours than men, which in part appears to be a reflection of the fact that disproportionately more female owner/managers operate part-time and/or micro-sized business enterprises. As a result, most of their efforts are concentrated into less working hours per week. Similar results have been reported from other developed economies, such as that of the United Kingdom (Storey 1994). In recent years across the developed world there has been a substantial increase in the so-called "feminisation" of the pharmacy profession - that is, in the proportion of registered pharmacists who are female. This has lead to a substantial transformation in the way in which practices are managed, how they operate, and the priorities of the owner/managers, although such changes have not yet been fully understood or even measured (Hassell 2000).

This gives rise to the third hypothesis examined in this study:

We predict that female managers will allocate more of their time to client focused activities than males.

The final issue we examined was whether individual pharmacy managers found solutions to the time management problems mentioned earlier. Both Lane et al (1999) and Gerber (1986) emphasised the difficulty reported by managers of small firms in finding time to deal with non-core management issues. Gerber (1986) has also argued that small business managers fall into essentially three groups of time managers: those who spend most of their time working in the "shop floor" of the business (such as making goods or selling to clients); administrators, who focus on compliance and paperwork duties; and entrepreneurs, whose main focus is on proactively growing the firm. The first two group spend most of their time "working in the business", and so ignore strategic opportunities, whilst the latter are more concerned with "working on their business."

To examine this we developed three management profiles from the data, to test whether solutions could be found to time management demands. While development of such profiles is ultimately ad hoc, we developed four criteria. Firstly, we wanted to explore Gerber's dichotomy of "working in the business" versus "working on the business". Within the "in the business" group we wanted two profiles, those who spent more time on the shop floor with clients (the 'shop floor manager'), and those who spent more time on administrative duties (the 'duty bound' manager). These were compared against managers who spent more time on marketing, planning and liaising with external agencies (the 'proactive' or entrepreneurial manager). To improve statistical validity, it would be desirable if each group contained a sizeable proportion of the total sample (ideally this would be about one third of the sample for each group), and was, as far as possible, mutually exclusive (Tabachnick and Fidell 1989). As there was a small amount of overlap between the membership of duty bound and proactive profiles, and there are some cases that do not fit any profile, comparisons were most meaningful when made between a profile and those not in the profile, not *between* profiles. The best combination of profile criteria was:

- Shop Floor owner/managers – Greater than 80% of time spent dealing with clients.
- Proactive – Greater than 20% of time spent on marketing, planning and external relations.
- Duty bound – Greater than 20% of time spent on administrative duties.

From these we made the following predictions as hypothesis four. In each of these three cases, we also examined age differences, but without any prior expectation of the direction of differences:

"Shop floor" owner/managers will work in smaller firms than non-shop floor managers, and are more likely to be female.

"Proactive" business owners can be expected to work in larger firms than non-proactive managers.

"Duty bound" managers will also be concentrated in larger firms.

<u>The Community (Retail) Pharmacy Industry</u>

A "community" or retail pharmacy refers to a business enterprise that advises and dispenses pharmaceutical goods to the general public, as well as supplying a range of other ancillary retail products. The first retail pharmacy operation in Western Australia commenced trading in Perth in 1838, and since that time the industry has expanded widely in the scope of its operations, number of registered pharmacists, and the range of products which stores provides (McWhinney 1975; Haines 1988). As of January 2000 there were 484 registered pharmacy stores in Western Australia (Small Business Development Corporation, 2000).

The overwhelming majority of retail pharmacies fall into the category of small or medium sized enterprises (SMEs). The Western Australian Pharmacy Act (1964) stipulates that a pharmacist may not carry on business in, nor have a pecuniary interest in, more than two pharmacies. The Act also requires that they must personally supervise the store, or do so via an assistant. The same legislation specifically limits the legal structure of community pharmacies to either sole proprietorships or partnerships. As a result, most firms operate as stand-alone businesses run by owner/managers, although many such firms work together co-operatively under a common marketing name. These groups provide owner/managers with the opportunity to bulk purchase goods, increase their marketing capacity, and to advertise collectively.

Today the industry is heavily regulated by a wide range of state and federal laws, including the Pharmacy Act [WA], Poisons Act [WA], Therapeutic Goods Act [Cwlth], Narcotic Drugs Act [Cwlth], and the National Health Act [Cwlth]. Pharmacists must also be registered with the Health Department of Western Australia and the Pharmaceutical Council of Western Australia. This suite of legislation also provides pharmacists with a monopoly on retail drug and pharmaceutical dispensing in the state, whilst Commonwealth government policies restrict the entry of new practices in areas where firms already exist. As a result, the industry is also a relatively stable one, with only a few new entrants and exits each year ("Pharmacy Closures Normal" 1998).

Dispensing prescriptions represent 60% of all sales turnover; Western Australian retail pharmacy stores dispense an average of more than seven hundred prescriptions a week. Front-of-shop (retail) sales provide the remainder of a typical firms' revenue (Dickson 1998). Firms in this industry are characterised by a relatively high sales turnover and a low number of staff, which allows operators to operate as quite small, but nevertheless highly profitable, enterprises (Financial Management Research Centre 1999). Figure Three provides an overview of the key performance indicators of WA retail pharmacies, drawn from a larger nationwide review of Australian pharmacies in 1998.

Figure 3: Average Performance Data for Western Australian Pharmacies

Total Income	$1.34 million
Gross Profit Margin	$450,000 (33.4%)
Net Profit Margin	$157,000 (11.6%)
Total Number of Firm Staff	8 per firm
Staffing Composition	1 owner 1 other pharmacist 6 assistants
Trading Hours Per Week	62
Hours Worked By Proprietor	49

(Sources: FMRC 1999; Pharmacy Guild 1999)

Methodology

The data for this project was collected as part of a larger study into management processes and patterns amongst Western Australian retail pharmacies by one of the authors. Questions relating to time usage were based on the form previously used by Lane et al (1999), and modified to take into account recommendations made by Lane for future researchers. A copy of the relevant questions is shown below.

Figure 4: Time Usage Questionnaire

During a typical working week, what is the proportion (percentage) of your time spent on the following activities?

Marketing & promotion	
Dealing with current clients	
Dealing with other important people outside your firm	
Record-keeping & paperwork	
Planning, business performance improvement & strategic development of the business	
Other issues (staffing matters, technology issues)	
TOTAL	*100%*

All pharmacy owner/managers who were members of the Western Australian branch of the Pharmacy Guild were surveyed in March 2000. A follow-up mail out was conducted in early April, targeting those firms who had failed to reply in the first round. Out of a total of 437 members, 155 responses were received. The total reply rate of 35% clearly surpasses the acceptable minimum response level of about 30% for mail-order surveys (Sekaran 2000; Cooper & Schindler 1998). In addition to providing information about their time usage patterns, respondents were also asked to complete details about their gender, the number of staff they employed, and to nominate their total annual turnover. Pre-testing of the measurement instrument showed considerable sensitivity about this final variable, as a result of which respondents were simply asked to select which one of eight different classificatory bands their gross annual sales turnover fell into.

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the sample. It can be seen that most managers spend the majority of their time in contact with their clients (almost 60%), with administration being the second most popular duty (14.29%). The large standard deviations and ranges recorded for each type of time use indicates that there is a great deal of variation in the way different managers allocate their time. For example, some managers spend up to 95% of their time serving customers, while others do not ever serve customers.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

		Marketing	Clients	External	Admin.	Planning	Other
N	Valid	154	154	154	154	154	154
	Missing	1	1	1	1	1	1
Mean		7.71%	58.22%	5.42%	14.29%	6.53%	7.77%
Median		5.00	60.00	5.00	10.00	5.00	5.00
Mode		5	50	5	10	5	5
Std. Devn.		7.90	23.37	5.67	11.50	6.19	9.54
Range		60	95	40	55	35	80
Minimum		0	0	0	0	0	0
Maximum		60	95	40	55	35	80

These figures show some interesting differences to the data collected by Lane et al (1999). In particular, respondents in this sample appeared to spend more time on client contacts, and less time on activities such as marketing, administration and planning. This finding is best explained by the difference in samples. In our study the sample consisted entirely of pharmacies, while Lane et al (1999) examined a broader range of firms with a greater variety of management practices. Our alterations to Lane et al's (1999) questionnaire may also contribute to this difference.

Hypothesis One: Differences Based on Employment Size

The first issue we examined was the differences in time use between micro, small and medium sized enterprises. While there were large numbers of cases for the micro (n=46) and small (n=99) business sizes, there were very few medium sized enterprises (n=8). Such a sample size is troublesome for accurate inferential statistics (Tabachnick and Fidell 1989), but rather than discard the data, the medium-sized enterprises were subsequently included with the small business category. While we have not reported it, the effect of including or excluding the medium sized businesses was trivial.

The differences were examined using a t-test, set at a level of significance of 5%. It can been seen in Table 2 that there were only two clear differences between the two business sizes in time use. Managers of micro sized businesses spent more time with clients (65.70% vs 55.27% of time, $t_{151} = 2.57$, $p<0.05$) and managers of small to medium sized business spent more time on other duties (4.98% vs 8.90%, $t_{151} = 2.36$, $p<0.05$). There was no difference in time allocation on the tasks of marketing, dealing with external agencies, administration or planning and development. This finding confirms some, but not all, of our first hypothesis.

It can also be seen from Table 2 that the most substantial variation in time usage is not *between* the different sized business, but rather lies *within* each group. The large standard deviation scores indicate that there are greatly differing time allocation practices within similar-sized enterprises. For example, whilst there is a large group of managers in each size category who spend less than half their time with clients, while there are also others who spend over 80% of their time face to face with their customers.

Table 2: Proportion of Time Allocated to Different Tasks in Micro and Small/Medium-Sized Businesses

	Business Size			
Task	*Micro* Mean (sd.).	*Small/Medium* mean (sd.).	*Difference*	*Significance*
Marketing and promotion	7.11 (7.86)	7.91 (7.92)	0.81	NS
Dealing with current clients	65.70 (24.34)	55.27 (19.58)	10.42	p<0.01
Dealing with other important external persons	4.85 (6.58)	5.63 (5.28)	0.79	NS
Records and paperwork	13.80 (11.28)	14.45 (11.68)	0.64	NS
Planning and improvement	5.46 (5.55)	6.92 (6.45)	1.46	NS
Other duties	4.98 (5.1)	8.90 (10.76)	3.93	p<0.01

Hypothesis Two: Differences Based on Firm Turnover

Our second hypothesis, the relationship between turnover and time use, was examined with Pearson correlation, again at the 5% level of significance. As Table 3 shows, there was no correlation between the size of the turnover of the firm, and any of the time use categories, with one exception. There is a small, but significant, negative correlation between the size of the business and the amount of time that the manager spent with clients ($r=-.19$, $p<0.05$). As the size of the organisation increases, the amount of time that the manager spends with clients decreases. However, the relatively small correlation indicates that there were a substantial number of managers with large turnover firms who did spend a great deal of time with clients. This provides some support for the second hypothesis, but the lack of positive correlations between firm turnover and time allocated to marketing, dealing with external agencies, administration and planning contradict our expectations.

Table 3: Correlations Between Firm Turnover Size and Time Allocation

Task	*Correlation*	*Significance*
Marketing and promotion	.07	NS
Dealing with current clients	-.19	P<0.05
Dealing with other important external persons	.10	NS
Records and paperwork	.07	NS
Planning and improvement	.10	NS
Other duties	.07	NS

Hypothesis Three: Differences Based on Owner/Manager's Gender

Our third hypothesis was the examination of gender differences in time allocation, employing a t-test at the 5% significance level. Examination of the business and demographic variables (Table 4) showed that female pharmacists were on average almost ten years younger (34.66 years to 44.25 years for males, $t_{(151)} = 4.66$, $p<0.001$), but ran businesses with approximately the same size (9.05 staff to 9.10 staff for males) and the same turnover (both in the $900,000 to $1.2 million range). Contrary to our expectation, there were no gender differences in the proportion of time allocated to various duties. Table 4 shows that there were no significant differences in the mean time allocated to any of the six areas of interest. This provides no support for our third hypothesis.

Table 4: Gender Differences Between Mean Time Allocated to Different Tasks

	Gender		
Task	*Male*	*Female*	*Significance*
Marketing and promotion	7.23	8.86	NS
Dealing with current clients	59.17	56.19	NS
Dealing with other important external persons	5.27	5.83	NS
Records and paperwork	13.57	16.14	NS
Planning and improvement	6.23	7.19	NS
Other duties	7.96	7.10	NS

Patterns of Management Styles

The fourth issue we investigated was what, if any, different management styles were related to different types of enterprise. As stated previously, we developed three profile types, based on different time uses. These were the 'Shop Floor manager', the 'Proactive' owner/manager, and the 'Duty Bound' proprietor. Table 5 shows how the managers within a profile compared on the factors of age, gender, staff size and business turnover compared to those outside of each particular profile.

Table 5: Three Different Styles of Managerial Time Allocation

	Profile 1 'Shop Floor Managers'		Profile 2 'Proactive'		Profile 3 'Duty bound'	
Criteria	*>80% clients*	*< 80% clients*	*>20% develop[1]*	*<20% develop[1]*	*> 20% admin*	*< 20% admin.*
N	35	114	50	105	47	106
Age (years)	42.1	41.8	40.7	42.1	40.1	42.4
Gender	30.8% female	25.8% female	30.0% females	25.7% female	37.5% female*	22.4% female*
No. of Staff	7.6*	9.6*	10.9*	8.3*	9.8	8.8
Turnover Size (median value)	$900K - $1.2 M	$900K - $1.2 M	$1.2 M - $1.5 M*	$900K - $1.2 M*	$900K - $1.2 M	$900K - $1.2 M

*significant with $p<0.05$

[1] includes marketing, liaising with external clients and planning and development.

It can be seen that these three profiles have some distinct differences in business time allocation. In profile 1, it can be seen that managers who spend more than 80% of their time with clients employ fewer staff (7.6 vs 9.6, $t_{(151)}$ =2.06, p<0.05), but have equivalent dollar turnovers, compared with managers who spend less than 80% of their time with clients. Profile 2 pictures managers who spend much of their time on business development, either through marketing, strategic planning or developing relationships with important external clients. Managers who fall into this category have more staff (10.9 vs 8.3, $t_{(151)}$ =2.55, p<0.05) and a larger turnover ($Chi^2_{(df=2,\ N=155)}$ = 7.51, p<0.05). Profile 3 examines managers who spent over 20% of their time dealing with administrative duties. The only distinguishing characteristic of this group is that they are disproportionately female ($Chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=155)}$ = 4.47, p<0.05), compared to those who allocate less than 20% of their time to administrative duties.

<u>Conclusions</u>

There are numerous publications that tell managers how they should organise and spend their time (see, for example, Salerno 1984; Douglass & Douglass 1993; Hope 1994). However, researchers have paid insufficient attention to measuring what actually goes on in a small firm, and in the factors which might be related to different patterns of time usage.

As this study has shown, there appear to be few clear links between time usage patterns and the variables of firm size, turnover and/or gender. Variation seems to be the rule. However, this study has tentatively identified three different groups of owner/managers, each of whom run their businesses is quite different ways, and who therefore have quite clearly different patterns of time usage. The "Shop Floor" profile employed fewer staff, but interestingly had a similar turnover to managers not using this style. The "Proactive" style employed more staff, and had a greater turnover than those managers not using this style. These are, however, only tentative conclusions, since the analysis results are not sufficiently strong as to allow us to make definitive statements.

While these findings are interesting, they do not imply directions of causation, and must be interpreted with the limitations of the study in mind. The results are based on voluntary self reporting, which leads to three problems. Firstly, it is possible that only those pharmacists who had spare time and motivation responded to the survey. Secondly, the respondents may be inaccurate in their estimation of their own time use. Thirdly, respondents may have different interpretations of the time use categories. For example, the distinction between planning and administration may be blurred when applying for building approvals. Another limitation on the study is that it was conducted in a period of change in the Australian tax system, which may have lead to more administrative duties than normal.

However, despite the limitations noted above, this data is one of the most extensive surveys of time allocation by managers in the micro and small business sector. Whilst such findings can only be treated as preliminary, they do indicate that time usage is an area worthy of much more research attention in future. In particular, do the different approaches to time allocation taken by small business managers represent solutions to business problems, or are they based on personal preferences of the manager? And further, do the different styles of time allocation led to demonstrably different business outcomes?

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