



# FINDING CLARITY IN A COMPLEX WORLD

Julia Hobsbawm

# Simplicity is an age-old concept.

Back in the 14th century, the British logician and Franciscan Friar William of Occam stated that simple works better than complicated. This clever chap wrote *Numquam ponenda est pluralitas sine necessitate*, which for those of you who, like me, did not advance hugely in Latin at school, translates as 'Never undertake plurality without necessity'. This has become known as 'Occam's razor'.

Even further back in time, the Greek philosopher Aristotle described *Eudaimonia*, which conveys a sense of happiness or blessedness—a thriving in the world. When you flourish, everything fits together, everything flows and just works, even if you are not completely sure why. Like a sixth sense, you just *know* when something is right, and it's a simple, certain feeling. In the modern world, we talk less about flourishing and more about 'resilience'—as if we must survive rather than thrive. It is hard to flourish in a world beset by speed, scale, stress and uncertainty.

Everywhere we look, we can see the hallmarks of progress mixed with setback for humans. We are caught in a web of complexity, binding us tightly into systems and layers which can feel suffocating. It has become normal to manage a blizzard of codes and passwords, and to hold in balance being offline and online as if we are all experienced jugglers. Is it normal? Well, the new normal. But it is often complicated.

Not that the quest for simplicity is only about mastering our use of technology. No one is saying that complexity began with the internet: certainly not me. We humans make what we use, and even the new generation of artificial intelligence and robotics will be

largely designed, built and monitored by us. The change—if we want to make it—is not modern, high-tech and expensive. It is ancient, low-tech and every one of us can afford it: we can think about and do things differently.

My proposition is simple. Complexity does not have to dominate, complicate or clutter our lives. We can learn to streamline and simplify what we focus on and where we place our energy and intelligence instead.

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The Simplicity Principle is based on two central ideas summed up in six words: Keep it simple, learn from nature.

- 1. Keep it simple.** Simplicity cuts through complexity. It brings focus, productivity, creativity and calm. Life is always going to be complicated, but we make it way more complicated than it needs to be. When we look around us, some of the basic systems of daily life, student life, working life and civic life are a tangle and jumble of 'systems' which are like a badly wound ball of wool. Simplicity brings balance between what is *complicated*—what can be laboriously unpicked—and what is *complex*, for which we need workarounds. It's time to push back. There are *always* things we can do to simplify and our ability to do so is often the difference between failure and success.
- 2. Learn From Nature.** We can look and learn from nature and science in order to use pattern in a simple way in a process I call Hexagon Action. The six-sided hexagon shape we see in the snowflake, hexagonal atoms surrounding carbon (one of life's key building blocks) and the bee honeycomb show us the simplicity and usefulness of shape. Meanwhile, the number 6 itself is the so-called 'perfect number' in mathematics and is a useful organizing number we can use. The six-sided hexagon is the poster-shape for simplicity. We can learn from its incredible strength and usefulness. And the poster-species for Hexagon Action is the honey bee. Like us, it is a 'social' species and a 'superorganism' which depends on others to be its best self.

In my new book, *The Simplicity Principle*, I lay out the detail of the Six Sides of Simplicity. It is the Hexagon Action in practice, and I'd like to focus here on the sixth and final side, time.

# Treat your time like your body

*For all the compasses in the world, there's only one direction, and time is its only measure. –Tom Stoppard, **Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead***

We can't stretch time. When I ask students or people in an audience what the number 168 means they often look blank. It is the number of hours in the week. It is almost as if we have become so in thrall to large numbers of data and digital limitlessness that a small, fixed number feels confusing—and way too small. But it's the reality.

The complexity of modern life eats into time, rather than keeping things simple. Research shows that the average internet user spends six hours a day online. Our time is spent zigzagging across a complex set of tasks including communication (250 billion emails are exchanged daily around the world), search (5 billion Google searches per day), shopping (we're spending more than \$3.5 trillion dollars annually across the world on the internet).

That is before you count the time we spend on social media and before you count the time we do other things like walk, talk, commute, eat and sleep. Yes, the way we spend time is often that of a helpless bystander as the egg-timer trickles the sand down in front of our eyes.

That is why the sixth and final side to simplicity is all about this most precious commodity and the axiom is simple: 'Treat your time like your body.'

## DEADLINE

*It's extremely hard to discover the truth when you are ruling the world. You are just far too busy. –Yuval Noah Harari*

**THE QUARTERLY RESULT** | Douglas Adams said that he loved deadlines: 'I love the whooshing noise they make as they go by.' I think the world divides into those who keep deadlines and those who don't. Like people who are always late and those who keep to time. Keeping to time, holding on to it, matters a lot. And deadlines are important because they give us focus and shape. So on the whole, I like deadlines. Lots of us rely on deadlines to power us over the line and get finished. I find a deadline is often a good thing, focusing my mind on what really matters. Ask any good journalist how they work and they will usually say 'to deadline'. But many of us work all the time to deadlines which are not really in our control at all.

Take the quarterly result. Businesses rely on a cycle of reporting to shareholders the status of various measurements in any given calendar quarter. Their standing on stock markets may depend on it, but the concept works across sectors and has become mainstream. In practice, what this means is that a short-term mindset often creeps into how we run things when it might be better to take the long view.

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In nature, the long view can be seen in our friends the trees. They too have seasonal deadlines, but the overall time frame is much, much longer. The Great Basin bristlecone pines *Pinus longaeva*, for example, date back 4,500 years—at least. The 100-year life, which for humans is finally becoming achievable thanks to science and medicine, is really at the low end for trees. They don't have quarterly results. They don't have any deadlines at all. Bees don't have specific deadlines: they have cycles, rhythms, routines. It's not the same as an unachievable fixed point that everyone has to abide by. Bees constantly adapt environmentally. Businesses and those tied to the quarterly cycle are doing something essentially un-natural, making the idea of a deadline something artificial.

The next generation of purposeful leaders will recognize this and I'll know the change has happened when we see the end of quarterly reporting.

**GROWTH STOCKS** | What about another measurement: Growth. In the investment business, a growth stock is one which is held and matures in value over time. This at least builds in fewer deadlines and more of a financial evolution. Let things take their own course. Warren Buffet often invests in stock which he can afford to see rise, fall, and rise again. We should learn from this kind of stock when we look at our own deadlines.

How instant do we need our gratification to be—or how fast are we gratifying someone else's idea of success? A deadline is a form of pressure and not everyone or everything thrives under pressure. There is a difference between 'eustress', the good kind of stress, and its opposite, 'distress'. A deadline can be false, too fast, and can cause distress rather than productivity. Deadlines matter if you want to be productive and grow, but you have to use judgement and integrity to get the best out of them.

**TIMELINE** | There is another kind of deadline to be wary of too, and that's the timeline of a corporate or a career politician. The electoral cycle as it is known often radically shapes policies which are often crunched to match politics, not people. One of the reasons why politics has become so distrusted—even the United Nations chief António Guterres has talked of a 'deficit in trust' in politics—is that simplistic promises are made based on political cycles and not reality. Certain things may not take 4,500 tree-years to deliver, but they take more than several hundred days. As the thinker Seth Godin put it:

***We focus on the days, making short-term decisions, instead of being cognizant of the years. We ignore the benefits that short-term pain can have in earning us long-term satisfaction. Which means that we often fail to invest, embracing a shortcut instead.***

Simplicity as I see it is about what can be realistically achieved, rightly pared down and focused on. Being simplistic is where you are wildly unrealistic. So, any time you have a deadline or a timeline which suggests something not possible, or where corners get cut to achieve it, I have one word for you: avoid.

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## SCHEDULE

Nobody knowingly lets someone else feed them unless they are unable to feed themselves. Yet what does happen on an everyday basis is that we lose control of our time or hand it over to others. It's called the schedule, the calendar and the diary. I find that the best way to apply the Simplicity Principle to my life is to control my time to the best of my ability. This covers when I am on- and offline, when I'm in meetings or not, and what I do with my time. I am one of the lucky ones. Not everyone can control their time and this is not just a case of 'time poverty', i.e. not having enough time, but of not being able to decide how to spend it.

In a famous study carried out in the 1970s, researchers gave a control group of elderly people in a care home a plant to take care of and an ability to choose movies, and compared their death rates over an 18-month period with another group who had no control over anything. I'm terribly shocked to relay that the death rate in the group with no control was *twice* as high as the one which had some degree of independence and choice.

And in a work context, having greater control of time leads to higher productivity. (I define productivity not just as the dry output of product per hour but of motivation, engagement, creativity). In Sweden, the Svartedalens study has shown that when you give workers control over their time by giving them a six-hour day, for instance, the amount of absenteeism from sickness and stress halves. So flexibility, what I call 'flexibilism', counts every bit as clock-watching does.

**OVERTIME** | All of this means that the new wealth in life is not just money, and not just health, but time. Research done by University College London and the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health found that a tiny bit of overtime is no bad thing, but that the minute you go significantly over that, the rate of heart attacks or coronary heart disease spikes by as much as 60 percent—another indicator that when someone else controls our time, we suffer. As more and more people enter the unstable job market, from zero hours to freelancing, every hour counts. So, when you decide to simplify your time, one of the first things to do is look at how your calendar is going to be shaped: what the pattern of time looks like and feels like. I never, for instance, agree to be on one side of town one hour and another side of town the next. I often have back-to-back meetings in the same place, and I try and build in a realistic amount of time for anyone I hire or work with to get what they need to do done. I'm not a fan of overtime, because it usually means you're spending someone else's time and not really paying for it. That's bad form.

**SWEETENING A TOUGH GIG** | Everyone's work requirements are different, and if you work in a shop-floor or factory-floor environment, then your scheduling issues won't be so much about meetings as about flexibility for time off. But more and more of us don't work in a fixed and scheduled environment, but in a more mixed way, with different jobs. Many of us now work in the gig economy, making our own luck. Research shows that as many as half of the US workforce is expected to be classified as freelance by 2030.

The World Economic Forum's *Future of Jobs* report in 2016 cited the changing nature of work and freelance working as the top trend to look out for, which shows that the United States often starts a workplace trend which other economies follow. Not everyone is suited to being freelance. Being freelance is tough because not only do you have to manage distractions, but you have to manage the time you dedicate to marketing and selling yourself.

Take a cue from the bee here. Try and make whatever you spend your time on stretch as far as it can. Imagine your product is honey. Or wax. The uses range from practical to medicinal. The same ingredients get reshaped, repurposed. The time it has taken to create them gets taken by humans and made into things people enjoy and can use. The freelancer of tomorrow will be that bee: identifying their own talents and skills and creating a way of using them again and again in creative and helpful ways. They will need luck, of course. And part of luck is timing. But what I mean is that, where you can control your time, use it well. If this means getting a new skill or qualification, use it. If it means doing one of Seth Godin's Udemy online freelance courses, to get better accustomed to being your freelancer self, do that. Fit into your schedule something which is going to give you a sweet reward if you possibly can.

## INTERRUPTION

**THE SHALLOW AND THE DEEP** | The world in which we spend around one-third of our lives working (around 10,000 days of our lives) is changing in superfast time. We know that we face huge disruption from the world of work itself—the AI, the shift to freelance, the shift from full-time office blocks to remote working and co-working spaces for instance—but perhaps the biggest challenge of all is a very human one: Concentration. Interruption is perhaps the biggest waste of time at work any of us face.

I love Cal Newport's work and his definition of 'deep work' which is work requiring undivided attention and deep concentration. In his great book *Deep Work* he writes: 'To simply wait and be bored has become a novel experience in modern life, but from the perspective of concentration training, it's incredibly valuable.' Shallow work is what the digital world creates a lot of. It is the kind that allows us to think we are multitaskers

when the human is a natural monotasker. It is when we imagine we are doing simple things but are making our workload and our mental load a lot more complicated. Deep work, on the other hand, is when we turn off our notifications, we shut the door to our office, we put on our headphones, we clear our diary and we focus.

**FLEXIBILISM** | The days of formally working fixed hours in a fixed place may be numbered. Many of the biggest corporations in the world already have smaller units working out of flexible co-working space (before its fall from grace in the markets in 2019 due to wild over-valuation, WeWork became one of the largest office tenants in the world with over 11 million square feet of office accommodation) because they understand the 'Teal Organization' mindset that small is better than big. But they also understand that somehow asking people to work in open-plan offices, which became the fashion in office design for several decades, doesn't really work for people. I think we all need 'flexibilism', which is to be flexible about where we work, for how long we work, and how we work.

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Some of us like to be in an open-plan atmosphere and it can be good for business. Creativity, brainstorming and the social sharing can all be vital. In his book about how to love work, Bruce Daisley writes about headphones being 'essentially a coping mechanism: they help their wearers avoid distraction where otherwise they'd be constantly interrupted.' He is right that for some people, some of the time, it's good for concentration and also a good and simple way to signal 'don't come near me, I'm doing deep work'. The British adman Rory Sutherland, who has pioneered applying behavioral change science to advertising, is very clear that the way we work in the office should be only social. He argues that it is pointless to imagine we will be able to concentrate when surrounded by others, when it is natural and good to gossip and catch up, and equally pointless to spend hours on a commute if all you do when you arrive is go on email. Incidentally, Rory believes that the next big digital change at work will be a revolution in the way email operates. He thinks that when we get that incoming ping it won't mean it should be answered immediately or even that when we write an email it will be sent immediately, but queued in a more efficient, time-sensitive and imaginative way. I entirely agree.

## **BODY CLOCK**

Being sensitive to time is exactly what humans are. I once spent almost all of a business call with the director of a multimillion-dollar global business discussing how we manage jet lag. (Tip: for me it's nothing to eat, drink plenty before the flight but less during, eye masks and melatonin on arrival.) The organizations which do well across different time zones recognize that the practical impact of time and time travel do matter. The idea of staggering on and off the red-eye, then being a good parent or spouse, while coping with altered time zones, is not a good recipe for productivity. These organizations have to create different time zones which reflect body and mind clocks too.

We now know a lot more about circadian rhythm—taken from the Latin *circa* (around) and *dies* (day) and also known as the body clock—than we used to. Our internal clocks reflect the earth’s rotation around the sun over 24 hours. All our metabolism, hormones and key functions fluctuate in peaks and troughs and are not a one-size-fits-all, nor are they one-time-fits-all either. For instance, the award-winning neuroscientist Sarah Jayne Blakemore uncovered how teenagers’ brains are altered during puberty, making most of the school structure they are forced to operate in wildly unproductive, while recent research from the University of Vigo in Spain has shown that taking blood-pressure medication at night can be more effective than taking it in the morning.

What I read into all of this emerging evidence about chronobiology and the study of our bodies in relation to time inside us is that we need to radically adjust the way we manage our time outside of our bodies. You could say that this is an example of where we need to avoid being simplistic in order to reach simple solutions. It is becoming obvious that to say that everyone needs to get up at the same time, go to work at the same time, and eat, drink and sleep in the same rhythm is a simplistic solution society has created. It overlooks what is real, which is, well, complicated. So how does the Simplicity Principle apply to this really challenging question of time? Well, start with KISS and Keep It Simple. If you realize you are more productive at one time of the day over another, work with that to the best of your ability. If this means changing policy so that teenagers can concentrate better, why not? That may be complex in the short term, but remember that short term doesn’t count in my book as much as the long term does. The long-term solution should be based on simplicity.

All of the shifts to work, the workplace, the working time zones and the working week are here to stay. The more we know about how humans operate, the more we can both adapt machines to help us—like programs to help workers communicate across different time zones by logging on and off at times to suit—and the more we can change our behaviors to suit the new realities. In addition to keeping it simple, the Simplicity Principle wants to learn from nature. So let's learn: the answer to our productivity crisis and stress crisis may be partly solved, simply, by looking at time and body clocks. Our internal time schedule matters as much as anything on the outside.

## PAST AND PRESENT

***The past is different from the future. Forwards makes sense, backwards doesn't make sense. –Carlo Rovelli***

We know there is no time like the present. *Carpe diem* is a wonderful Latin phrase which means 'seize the day'. It's a Simplicity Principle kind of a phrase. Like Nike's 'Just Do It'. It makes sense. It cuts down complexity. But letting go of the past can be hard, especially if you live and work in it. So much of how we live is still governed by the past.

We still live and work by an eight-hour office-based day, even though for most of us, our time and our lives is on a never-ending digital loop, where we can live and work in very different ways. The academic Judy Wajcman puts it well when she describes in her book *Pressed for Time* that the smartphone has become 'the quintessential time-space compression mechanism'. She points out that digital devices save time but also consume it. When you think that the average internet user is on it for six hours a day, she's not wrong. So, to be fully in the present, or to imagine the future (which is what humans are really

good at doing - imagining) we need to let go of the past. Or at least imagine it doesn't have to be copied. I contributed to a book of essays about how to transform life at work called *Being Present*. One of the essays is by the German generations expert Steffi Burkhart, who writes:

***In the past the availability of capital, technology and resources such as oil and gas were the most important drivers for growth, but next to information, data and knowledge gained in real time, human resources will be the scarcest resource of the future.***

What she refers to is human capital, human resource, or what we now call Talent.

The simple truth, sweetie, is that talent matters because it is human. You can forget about the machine if you overlook the human. We have to look at ourselves now, as we are, and apply the Simplicity Principle to our lives. This means making decisions now. This means embracing neurodiversity now. This means letting go of old ideas about productivity being about clocking on and off, and more about creativity and the ability to be curious.

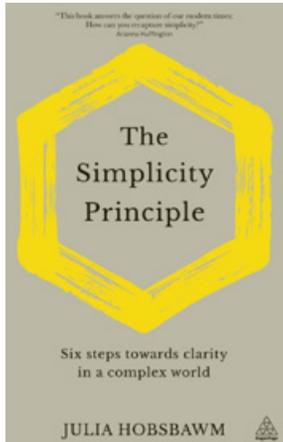
**You can forget about the machine if you overlook the human. We have to look at ourselves now, as we are, and apply the Simplicity Principle to our lives.**

It's about how we rest and reset, and it is about how we learn and understand our limits. How we curb infobesity. How we build relationships with each other. The past can teach us plenty, but we can only react to now. Do the waggle dance like the bee. Tell each other where the pollen is—and where it isn't. Not where it was, that was yesterday. But what's happening right now.

My late brother Joss, who told me to 'keep breathing deeply', is with me even though I completed this book five years after he passed away from lung cancer. He stays inside my heart, and so he is present. When he was alive he ran a theater company which brought back plays from across history into a contemporary setting. He called his theater company 'Present Moment'. **That's a simple instruction: live for today and you want to live tomorrow. But live in the here and now.** 📖



# Info



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Julia Hobsbawm is an entrepreneur and writer who addresses the problems and solutions of humans in the machine age. Described by James Harding, Founder of Tortoise Media, former Editor of the Times and of BBC News as 'one of the most important public intellectuals in the UK,' she is Honorary Visiting Professor of Workplace Social Health at London's CASS Business School. Her book *Social Health in an Age of Overload* was shortlisted for Management Book of the Year and Business Book of the Year. She is the founder of the acclaimed connection company Editorial Intelligence and Editor-at-Large of Thrive Global. She was awarded an OBE in The Queen's Birthday Honours for services to business.

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