
Book Review

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Time Smart: How to Reclaim Your Time and Live a Happier Life

by: Ashley Whillans

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Time Smart is a fun, quick, and practical guide to recent research into time use and happiness. The tone is ‘chipper’ – lively and cheerful – which makes for a pleasant read. The book is written for a popular audience and follows the standard formula of airport self-help books. There are anecdotes and personal stories to add a human touch, and short exercises at the end of each chapter to put theory into practice. Academics looking to do research in time use might be better served by reading Whillan’s papers in *PNAS*, *Nature*, and the like, but this book gives a good summary for those who just want an overview of the field. It might be quite personally beneficial! Academics are notoriously overworked and career-focused, and *Time Smart* could help some grow in time affluence and maybe even adopt healthier priorities.

Time Smart is split into six sections. The introduction immediately sets up time–money trade-offs as the focus of the book. Whillans contends that people overemphasise money to the detriment of their happiness, relationships, social life, and job satisfaction. She counsils a reversal of priorities (pg.12): “the secret to happier time is simple – prioritise time over money, one decision at a time”. The following chapters then work through this theme. Chapter 1 lays out some major causes of time poverty in advanced nations like the US, UK, and Japan. These include money focus, busyness-as-status, idleness aversion, and just plain undervaluing time, among others. Chapter 2 gets more practical, helping the reader to identify their attitude to time and analyse how they use it, and then offering a range of suggestions for how to secure more time. Chapter 3 is an exploration of behavioural commitment devices for making time affluence a foundational value in your life. Chapter 4 then takes “the long view”, analysing how major life decisions like employment and housing can be made in a time smart way. Chapter 5 steps away from the self-help focus on the individual to discuss ways that organisations and governments of various scales create time poverty and how they can rectify this. One suggestion that I’m sure all academics will support is the need for workplaces to stop imposing unnecessary administrative tasks on their employees.

The main strength of this book is its wealth of actionable insights. Tips to increase your time affluence come every 2 pages or so, which adds up to around 90 suggestions. Some of these are very quick, like muting all your notifications. Others are quite meaty and nuanced. For example, Whillans makes an extended and compelling case that we should spend money freely to remove onerous chores and commutes from our lives and

limit the need for comparison shopping. But on chores, she cautions that not all are created equal: many people would benefit from outsourcing some aspect of their meals, but those of us who enjoy cooking should only outsource to the extent of a recipe box delivery service.

A weakness is *Time Smart's* limited engagement with the question of what to use time *for*. Money and time are *both* mediums of exchange and it matters what we spend them on. There is an exhortation in chapter 3 to 'address your why', but this question is directed at frivolous time-wasting activities like scrolling Instagram. 'Why?' can go deeper. For example, people could introspect on their intrinsic motivations and authentic values. They can then assess how much time and money are required to pursue these things. Such themes are awkwardly missing from the otherwise thoughtful discussion in chapter 4 of planning job and other life-defining choices to promote time affluence. What if your intrinsic motivation is something like improving international law? Then how you want to spend your time is on your job, which just happens to come with a high salary. Whillans' target really seems to be unconscious people who make inauthentic choices to maximise income due to enculturation in materialistic values. There are a lot of such people and this book offers them a lot of help. But going beyond the simple binary of time > money may have offered them a more sophisticated therapy.

Overall, *Time Smart* is a welcome effort to bring happiness research to the people. There is a strong push at present to translate such research into policy. But if we change things like urban planning and tax systems to promote happiness without first changing values we are likely to promote a democratic backlash. People will be angry, for example, that they cannot find a 5-bedroom mansion or park their SUV because town planners, influenced by technocratic well-being research, have zoned all cities for medium-density, mixed-use, walkable neighbourhoods. We need more books like *Time Smart* that consciously convince (not just unconsciously 'nudge') people to change their preferences. Then culture will shift and people will vote for happiness. Whillans encourages individuals to speak to their bosses and representatives: "tell them I sent you". This is how we get change from the bottom-up.