Self Assessment Paper on:
The Strengths and Weaknesses of My Time Management Skills

In my opinion time management is required only when there is paucity of time or when more than one activity needs to be done almost at the same time, i.e. with overlapping time periods. Growing up, as a kid, rarely required any thoughtful time management.

Going back in time, the earliest tryst I had with time management was studying for tests. During my school days, I found the subject matter easily manageable, so I used to study for a test one day before the test. My 'study day', as I used to call it, used to start off by planning what to study. I used to be extremely meticulous in planning what to study at what time of the day. My study day used to run from 9 am to 5 pm with a one-hour break for lunch at 12:30 pm. I was habituated to watching cartoons from 5 pm and then hanging out with friends from 6 pm onwards.

Sometimes, I used to run into trouble planning my day, because either there was too much to study, or I could not start my day at 9 am due to school in the morning. I used to circumvent this problem by cutting into my leisure time and sometimes by cutting into my sleeping time. I realized that I was sub-consciously prioritizing my activities.

I continued this routine through to my undergraduate years. By that time, the amount of studying to be done had increased tremendously. So it could not be done in a single day.

In India, where I studied, the final examination at the end of the semester accounts for almost 90% of the grade. We had to enroll for 8 courses per semester and were given two weeks to prepare for our finals. These two weeks were called the 'study leave' and this was the time when most of the studying was done.

This required some modification to my practice of planning for the tests because the subject matter was complicated and was voluminous. So I used to start off with a master plan for the whole of two weeks and plan for each day on the morning of that day.
This approach helped me a lot during my undergraduate years, because:

- I could start studying on day one without having nightmares about not giving enough time to other courses, since I had a plan.
- My ‘day plans’ were scaled down to hours, so I knew what I would be doing at what time of the day.
- At the beginning of each day I knew roughly how much leisure time I could afford.

At times, I had to postpone some activities to the next day because the material I had marked for one day was either too complicated to be done in one day, or there were some unavoidable interruptions during the day. The unavoidable interruptions were either:

- my girlfriend calling up, or
- some friend calling up, wanting to discuss some issues regarding the exam (since I preferred to study alone at home)

Also, I had a habit of not prioritizing what to read. This coupled with the interruptions caused a lot of grief to my planning. However hard I tried, I failed to stick to my plans, even though at one point I was changing my master plan everyday.

I began to plug the holes in my time management by prioritizing my readings and reading the more important material first. This helped to an extent in achieving reasonable grades, but the amount of effort I spent in planning demanded a better end-result, i.e. better grades. So I did what was probably not a very social thing to do, I asked my girlfriend and my friends to call me up during a specified time of the day. At first I thought that they would not take it in the sense that I intended. But it turned out that everybody quite understood and respected my schedule and called me up only if there were extremely critical issues. The criticality of issues was again an individual’s perspective, but we handled the issues in a very mature and adult manner and respected one another’s points of view.

This turned out to be a very effective time management practice. I graduated ranked second in my class and attributed my success to the way I managed my time.
At this point I would like to point out what I had learnt till I graduated:

- The key to effective time management is a good plan.
- A good plan should break down the activities into as many small indivisible parts as possible because it is always easier to manage smaller activities.
- Every plan can be affected by external circumstances completely unrelated to the plan, no matter how personal the plan is.
- A good plan succeeds in helping to achieve the final goal.

At this point in time, I was wiser with regard to time management, but was still informal in my approach. After graduating, I started working for a Dutch company, The Baan Company. There I was imparted training in something called the Personal Software Process (PSP). This was a three week full time training session and included:

- how to estimate the time required to complete a piece of code (a software engineering jargon that can be co-related to an activity)
- how to maintain a time sheet that maintained the activities that an individual performed during the course of a working day
- how to interpret the time sheet
- among other things.

The time sheet was consolidated at the end of the week and was sent for processing required to budget projects depending on man hours spent on each project.

This training session provided a formal outlook to the time management activities. At work, I could plan better and estimate the time I needed to complete various activities. But the most important thing I learnt was about the time sheet. I religiously maintained a time sheet for the two years that I worked at Baan. At the end of the day, the time sheet provided a summary of the activities that I had performed at work.

- I could get weekly, fortnightly and also monthly summaries of the activities that I had logged in the time sheet.
- This helped me understand how productive my day was and if I slipped on my schedule, why I slipped on my schedule.
- I could check if I was taking too many or too few coffee breaks, if the coffee breaks were too long or too short.
- I could find out which days were busy with regards to customer interaction and could plan to schedule some extra time for customer interaction on those days.

Unfortunately, after I left Baan to pursue a Masters at Texas A&M, I lost the privilege of using the time sheet. But I do maintain an electronic calendar. I update the calendar every morning and it helps me in identifying if I have simultaneous activities planned.

Lastly, I feel that nobody can be perfect at time management; we can only try to get better. There will always be days when Murphy’s Laws strike and things will take their own course. I look at such days as invaluable experiences in life that serve to prepare backup plans.