Ep #45: Turnaround Times

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kori Linn

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This week we're talking about a tool that I call turnaround time, which will help you manage your workload, get things done in a timely fashion, and not find yourself overwhelmed and overworked in the process.

You are listening to Love Your Job Before You Leave It, the podcast for ambitious, high-achieving women who are ready to stop feeling stressed about work and kiss burnout goodbye forever. Whether you're starting a business or staying in your day job, this show will give you the coaching and guidance you need to start loving your work today. Here's your host, Career Coach, Kori Linn.

Hey y'all, happy Wednesday. This week I'm going to teach you about a tool that I've actually been using even longer than I've been a coach. So it's not 100% a coaching tool. I think it's more like just a job strategy tool. But I use this with my clients, and I teach it to them all the time because I think it really helps them manage their workflow and do really good work without stressing as much as a lot of them do before they come and work with me.

And the tool I'm teaching, I call it turnaround time. And it's very simple. Turnaround time is the amount of time that someone can expect it to take for you to deliver a piece of work. So this is a tool I used back when I worked in corporate IT. And I think I actually probably learned it just from the way that we did projects in that organization.

So I would work on all of these different projects. I was on the IT comms team, so I wrote basically communications for the IT department to the rest of the company. And I would be on all these different projects, going to all the meetings for all the different projects. And all of the project managers and all the meetings would be saying like, "Okay, when can you get this back to me? And how much time do you need?"

And through working with them I just developed kind of a system where I could understand, "Okay, if it's this kind of communication, here are the things I need from the stakeholders. And then here's how many days I will schedule, like I will tell them it will take for me to turn that item around from getting the inputs to being able to deliver the product that they want."

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And for me in this job, it wasn't as simple as how long it would take me to do the work. What I also had to take into account was I had to get approvals. And often, at least in the beginning, I was having to get approvals from people who worked in different time zones. So it wasn't like I could just text them, or email them rather, at like my lunchtime and get an approval by the end of the day. Because they might be in London, and they might be totally offline by that point.

So I was doing basically a little calculation in my head where I was like, "Okay, if I get everything I need from the stakeholder it's going to take me three business days to turn this around." And then what I would also do is I would add what I call fluff time.

Just like buffer time, a little extra time in case anything went wrong. Because guess what, in life sometimes things do go wrong. Things don't go according to plan, maybe an emergency project would come up or what if someone had a sick day, any of that stuff.

And what this allowed me to do was it allowed me to manage my workload, even though I was working on all these different projects with all these different stakeholders, and all these different project managers. But I was on point for the communications for most of the things I was working on.

So it allowed me to basically do all of that work, and then deliver the work in a timely fashion, when I said I would deliver it without getting bogged down. And I would kind of have an idea in my head of how many different things I was doing and when the various dates were. And I could use that to basically run my calendar.

And I love this concept because it works so well. And it works very well for a few reasons. Reason one is I have to get clear with myself on how long it actually takes me to do things and how much time I need also to be waiting on other people for the various parts of that.

My timeline wouldn't kick off until I got the information from my stakeholders. But my timeline would include me getting the approvals from my leadership. Which meant that I might have to send it for approvals, and

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they might send it back and say no, it has to have this other thing. And then I would have to add the other thing and then send it back. And it might be some back and forth.

So it helped me get really good at making those kinds of estimates. And by the time that I moved on from working there I had a pretty great system. And I didn't have to think too hard about it, I just knew like, "Okay, if you come to me with a communication, it's going to be three to five business days from when I get the information and blah, blah, blah."

But this is something that when my clients come to me, a lot of them don't have a system like this. And a lot of them are running on kind of like do it as soon as someone asks for it, but they also have 57 other things. And so they get really overwhelmed.

So they have all these different things and then some kind of like fire happens, not a literal fire but like a work fire. If that's not a term you're familiar with, it basically means like an emergency, like some shit went wrong, or there's like some kind of immediate need.

So, anyways, before my clients come to coaching a lot of them, as the high achieving perfectionists that they are, and sometimes people pleasers as well, basically they just want to do everything that's asked of them as well as they can as fast as they can. And if there's more work to do, they sometimes really struggle to stop working at the end of the day, even if they've scheduled that they're going to log off at 5pm.

They may be feeling a lot of stress about work that they're leaving undone. And then things also may be slipping through the cracks. Because a lot of people that I've worked with are kind of like just trying to manage it all sort of in their heads, or on some kind of to do list or a bunch of little sticky notes.

Actually, back when I worked in corporate, even with my turnaround time thing, I did have a bunch of little sticky notes. So nothing wrong with that methodology. But if we're just having the sticky notes or the to do lists and we're not incorporating the idea of turnaround time, then it's really easy, I

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think, for people to feel like they're behind and they're not doing things fast enough.

Because no matter how fast we can do things, we can always have that voice in our brain saying like, "You could be doing it faster. You could be doing it faster." So turnaround times are helpful because, again, we have to get clear with ourselves on what the estimate is of how long we think it will take.

And that's not just how long it'll take to do the work. It's if someone brings a work task to you how long it will take considering you probably already have a bunch of other shit on your calendar and you have to fit the new item into your workflow. You have to fit it in, and you have to prioritize it. And it might not be at the top of your priority list.

So it's about being clear with ourselves so that we can calendar appropriately. But here's the other thing it also does, turnaround times are also how we set expectations with other people.

So, for instance, there was a client I worked with earlier this year and people would often ask her to do urgent work. They would be like, "There's a rush on this, I need it in two hours." And she had a lot of other work to do and didn't always want to be taking on these rush orders.

And she had other work she wanted to do and other work that was important for her to get done for her role beyond just what these other people wanted and needed. And there's nothing wrong with doing a rush job when someone asks.

And as someone who is also a high achiever, I did a lot of stuff in a rush when I worked in corporate just because someone asked, and they needed it. If I had time, I was totally willing to do that.

But sometimes we don't have time, or sometimes it would derail another thing we're working on that's really important. And sometimes we also just want to teach other people basically that they need to give us more notice, so they don't keep coming to us with rush requests.

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So turnaround time is helpful for that as well because basically we can just communicate to other people, "Hey, if you need X, Y, Z kind of thing, this is how long you can expect it to take."

And for the client in particular that I'm talking about this is what we implemented, we came up with basically timeframes for like, if it's this kind of work it's going to be this many hours or business days. If it's this kind of work, it's going to be this many hours or business days.

And doing that helps other people know when they need to tag us in for work. And it helps them plan better and it helps us plan better. Basically, it helps everything run more smoothly. And it helps us to prioritize our work more clearly and we can leave space for emergency things that come up.

But it also, I think, really incentivizes for other people not to let things become an emergency. We can't control other people. So sometimes they might still bring us a rush thing.

But when we've been very clear about what our turnaround times are, it's much easier to say to someone else, "Hey, I'm not going to be able to do that in this timeline. I'm working on this other stuff. I would love to be able to partner with you on that. But that timeline is just not doable."

Now, obviously, just because we have a turnaround time doesn't mean we can't do things faster. When I worked in corporate, I made my turnaround times, like I said, with that extra fluff time so that in case anything went wrong, I wouldn't be late. But what that also allowed me to do was deliver things early most of the time.

And I love that because that's sort of that thing like, what is it, undersell and over deliver? Undersell and over deliver is not my favorite phrase because I don't want y'all under selling yourself. But I think it's more about if you're going to make a promise about a deadline, promise a super doable deadline. And then if you're able to deliver early and over deliver that way, awesome. But also, if you're not and you just deliver on time, that's still excellent.

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Here's what this kind of system also does, this kind of system that helps you set expectations with yourself and helps you set expectations with others, I think also helps you stop working when it's time to stop working.

If I'm just taking in work and taking in work and taking in work and like my brain is like, "Do it all immediately," because I haven't been clear about what the turnaround time is. And I think the way to be successful is just to do everything as soon as I get it. Then I'm going to be internally incentivized to always keep working.

It's going to be hard for me to stop my workday at five. It's going to be hard for me to not start my workday early. It's going to be hard for me to do the other important work on my calendar because I have all these open things that I need to give back to other people.

I don't think that helps us do a good job over time, for ourself or for others. I think it makes much more sense to have the turnaround times and then to be able to say to ourselves, "Okay, I feel that internal pressure to deliver everything at once. And that's also not the agreement we made and we know that this isn't due until let's say next Tuesday. So we can actually stop working on it for now. We can log off at the right time, we can prioritize the rest of our calendar."

And even as we get more work coming in, we can fit it all in. And then deliver the things on time and let that be successful without kind of trying to force ourselves to just go as fast as we can and deliver as much as we can.

Having turnaround times is also essential because it keeps your calendar from getting over full. If you have turnaround times you can only fit so many things in at once.

I guess this is a little bit turnaround times and a little bit calendaring. So when you have the turnaround times you get all the work in, and then you take all the work, and you prioritize it. And then you make sure it all fits in the timeframe you have.

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So that might sound complicated, but it's basically just math. All you have to do is look at your calendar and see where you have spaces where you can work. And if you're self-employed like me, you can kind of do whatever you want.

But a lot of y'all aren't self-employed, and so what it's going to look like is looking at your calendar, seeing how much of it's already full of meetings or existing work. And then when a work item comes in, where can it go? That'll be part of how you determine your turnaround times, is how many hours do you have available and what can fit in there? And then how do you prioritize it?

Here's the thing, I don't have the answers for how you prioritize your work because I'm not the expert on your work. But you are. And when you give yourself permission to have these established turnaround times and only do the work that you can fit on your calendar without cramming your calendar like super, totally extra full.

By which I mean you schedule work on your calendar, but you also schedule time for breaks, you schedule time for lunch. And if you have the kind of job where things do come u, that are true emergencies that turnaround time doesn't apply to, you actually are calendaring in time for that too. Instead of filling all eight hours of your workday with stuff and no room for anything to go wrong.

When we do this, what happens is we get a much more functional, manageable workload. And we're able to have clear conversations with other people about what they can expect from us when they want to collaborate with us, or they want us to complete something for them.

We also get a lot more control over our calendar. I know so many amazing, intelligent, wonderful humans who feel like their calendar is running their life. Who feel like the things people want from them at work are like running their life. No one else is running your life.

You are running your life, your calendar is a tool. And your work deliverables are your work deliverables. It's your job to figure out how to do

them in a way that is going to be sustainable for you, and then communicate that to other people.

Now listen, I do agree that it would be great if everywhere in the world workplaces also had a culture where they were very clear about like, we're not going to ask people to overwork and we're only going to assign as much work as people can do. And we're going to super support them. But a lot of our workplaces aren't like that.

And even when people are in workplaces like that, if we personally have internalized the idea that we have to do everything as fast as we can, as well as we can always, the culture of the workplace will not stop us from doing that. I see this all the time. A culture of a workplace can be totally pro taking vacation, but if individual people have it in their mind that it's not okay, they won't take it.

So I just want to be clear, I agree that the culture of workplaces has a lot of room for improvement in a lot of places. But what I'm doing on this podcast with y'all is helping you work on your relationship with work from the headspace of one. From just your mindset because that's where I see a lot of people really struggle.

So it's not to say that making changes at an organizational level wouldn't be helpful, it totally would. It's just that's not what we're talking about right here. And for some of y'all, your workplace is already super supportive of you not overworking, and you're just struggling not to overwork because of your internalized ideas about what it means to be a good employee and a good person.

For others of you, you might be working in a workplace where they absolutely are encouraging you to overwork. Here's the thing, I've worked with clients like that, where the workplace does encourage that. And we've still been successful together in their coaching, of teaching them how to employ things like turnaround time, and boundaries, and asking for what they want and other tools that I teach on the podcast, to create a better experience for them without them having to leave their work.

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So I think a lot of people think that if it's not going well or if your company culture encourages things that don't really align with you having the work life you want, you have to leave. You're certainly allowed to leave, that's always an option for you. I have a whole podcast on that about how to quit your job whenever you want for whatever fucking reason you want.

But what I also want to offer is that after coaching with me, a lot of my clients find themselves much more happy and satisfied. And less burnt out and stress in the exact same work environment that they used to find completely untenable and overwhelming. So it really is worth it to do the work on your own mindset and to see the ways that, basically, you're creating a career you don't like and address those.

Now, I want to be clear, I'm not saying you're creating a career you don't like in a blaming way. There's no need for blame here. It's just about understanding that the internalized socialization we have is really impactful to our experience of work. And when we unlearn that socialization, we can have a much better experience without other people necessarily having to change.

Okay, so we've covered a lot, like we do every week. So let's review. The basic idea that I want to teach here is that when people add work to your plate, you can have policies and ideas about how long they can generally expect it to take for you to do that much work.

Not just how long it'll take for you to do the work. But how long they can expect to wait between the time they asked you to do the work and when they can expect to have the work back from you.

I think turnaround times are super useful for a few reasons. Reason number one is it helps set expectations with other people about when they give us work, when they can expect to get that work back completed.

Number two is I think it helps us get clearer with ourselves about how long things actually take us and then how much extra time we need so that we can prioritize it and fit it into our workflow. And then we can get really clear on what we need to be successful.

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And again, that will help us not only to set expectations with others, but it also helps us to set expectations with ourselves and be able to do the work without overworking. Be able to end a workday even when we're not done with a project. And be able to take on work kind of consistently and sustainably without getting into sort of a feast or famine. And without overloading our calendar and schedule with too much work and not enough time to do it.

One little thing I think we didn't talk about actually is sometimes you may get too many requests, even with turnaround time. And I think when that happens, you're allowed to just communicate about that. Sometimes my clients are like, "Well, I set the turnaround times, but then I got 16 requests."

Here's the thing, you can only do what you can do. It's okay to have limits. And I think I guess I have to say that really explicitly. Because I think a lot of us, even though we know that logically it's okay to have limits, have internalized this idea that we need to do everything that's asked of us. Even if we're not actually able to do it, or we're not actually able to do it in our workday.

And the metaphor I use for this is if I had a $20 bill, and I was like, "Hey, give me some ones first 20. I want 40 ones." You would look at me like I was crazy pants. You would be like, "I will give you 20 ones I will not give you 40 ones for a $20 bill because that's not an even exchange." And yet I see people trying to do this in their workday all the time, where they're trying to do the equivalent of giving someone 40 ones for $20.

So I think turnaround time and setting clear expectations and then communicating if even with our turnaround time we've gotten too many requests for the same timeline is so helpful. And part of what will give you permission internally, because really, it's just you need to give yourself permission. Part of what will help you give yourself that permission is realizing that work is an exchange.

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Just because you have a job and people ask you to do 7,000 things doesn't actually mean that you need to be doing those 7,000 things to be completing your one job. I see people sometimes who are basically doing the equivalent of two or three people's jobs. And if they left the organization, the organization would have to hire multiple people to cover that.

But part of the reason for that is because those people probably most of the time are not saying, "No, I have eight hours in this workday, I will do eight hours of work. Here's my prioritization, here's the things I'm not going to do." And letting that just be.

A lot of people have a really hard time leaving work undone and still thinking they're a good employee. But again, if you wouldn't give them 40 ones for a $20 bill, why are you trying to give them 80 hours for a 40 hour a week position? I think really sit down with yourself and ask yourself that question if that is something that applies to you.

So that's a little aside from the turnaround times. But I think it's super relevant and super important in a world where so many of us are overworking. Not even necessarily because it's expected of us, but because our brain has such a problem setting limits and saying no.

And again, of course we have a problem with that because we've been socialized to say yes, and not set limits. But now that we know that, it's our job to change it for ourselves because no one else is going to do it.

Okay, so that's what I have for you today. I cannot wait to see how you use this turnaround time concept to create a workflow and a workload that's more manageable and fun for you to do, and to create a less stressful environment for yourself at work.

If you have questions about it or want to tell me how you've succeeded in employing this tool, reach out to me on Instagram @KoriLinn. I'll talk to you there. All right, bye.

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Thank you for listening to Love Your Job Before You Leave It. We'll have another episode for you next week. And in the meantime, if you're feeling super fired up, head on over to korilinn.com for more guidance and resources.