

**Kerr, Robert (1998) “Keep your Head’s head above water” *Alumnus*, 1998, 7-16**

### **Keep Your Head’s Head Above Water**

That the typical day of a typical chief executive of a typical large-sized business firm is extremely busy is now taken as a matter of common sense. Even the frequent interruptions and the large number of different activities are seen as almost obvious, perhaps inescapable or even essential aspects of the job, although there is still something of a general perception that somehow the manager is able to spend lengthy periods of time planning, organising and controlling. It was Mintzberg, a quarter of a century ago, who first blew this notion apart and exposed it for the comforting myth which it is. In his seminal and famous book of 1973, he described the manager’s working life as being “characterised by brevity, variety and fragmentation” and he commented that “the lack of pattern among activities, with the trivial interspersed with the consequential, requires that the manager shifts moods quickly and frequently” (1973, 51). Mintzberg’s use of the word ‘brevity’ referred to the fact that each activity tended to have only a short period of time before being either interrupted or overtaken by something apparently more urgent, rather than any comment on the total length of time spent working by managers. One of the most disturbing aspects of Mintzberg’s findings was the fact that most managers themselves still thought that they were spending the bulk of their time on overall planning, organising, coordinating and controlling, in direct contrast to the actual evidence (Mintzberg, 1975, 49).

Since those ‘early days’ many authors have confirmed that this same set of nouns accurately describes the working pattern for virtually any manager, whether in commercial life or not and irrespective of the size of the firm. Included in this are educational managers, whether as school principals or administrators. This has also been shown to be a global phenomenon, with writers in the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, Nigeria and Korea, among others, showing school heads displaying the same trends of fast pace, overwork and lack of appropriate priorities, regardless of size, type or level of school. (See, for example: Arubayi; Blease and Lever; Chung and Miskell; Clarke; Edu-Con of Canada; Hall, Mackay and Morgan; Kmetz and Willower; Torrington and Weightman; and Willis.) Some studies have been outstanding in the depth which they have undertaken, such as those covering virtually twenty-four hours a day and spanning up to two full school years, as in the notable case of Wolcott’s famous ethnography which still eloquently describes the principal’s life today. The more recent studies included in the list above have tended to demonstrate that the general patterns still persist and that the resultant urgent need for appropriate training of managers, including school principals, is still real and may in fact be even more pressing that it was twenty-five years ago. It is to this list that Ireland has only recently been added. Hence we find authors such as Wilkinson in Northern Ireland and Leader and Boldt in the Republic confirming these same trends in the present decade. Indeed, this present writer undertook similar in-depth research within the past few years and concluded that principals in all sizes and types of second-level schools in this country work to patterns described so comprehensively for general managers by Rosemary Stewary and by Martinko and Gardner and that all heads are in dire need of training (Kerr, 1994).

However, as well as the confirmation of the existence in this country of the same general working trends as experienced in other parts of the world, there were some other, less expected, results. It was found, for example, that the heads of the smaller schools (that is, less than 400 pupils each) worked significantly longer hours per week (64.9 hours each on average) than the principals of the largest schools (more than 800 pupils each) who have an average working week of only 50.3 hours. The average working week for the heads of all the schools covered in the study was 60.2 hours, so that the working week for the heads in the largest schools was found to be more than 16% shorter than average, while their colleagues in the smallest schools work 8% longer than average. Indeed, “the longest week recorded by a principal in a large school (53 hours) was ... shorter than the shortest week for a principal in a small school (55 hours)”, which is an extraordinary discovery (Kerr, 1994, 79). Similarly, the heads of rural schools were found to work about 10% longer than those in urban schools and, perhaps not surprisingly, the boarding school principals’ working week was over 32% longer on average than for day schools. In fact, it is worth noting that the average working week for a boarding school head, at 70.8 hours, represents more than 10 hours a day, including weekends. Half of these principals recorded 14 or 15 hours as their working day during the week with a further almost 10 hours at weekends. Perhaps because of the small number of boarding schools in this country, there is little educational research into the effects of this punishing routine on the principals, and hence on their schools. The deficiency of the 1992 green paper on education in Ireland (Government of Ireland, 1992) by not even mentioning the existence of boarding schools has been somewhat remedied by acknowledgements in the 1995 white paper (Government of Ireland, 1995).

Kerr’s findings (194, 61-96) have not yet been fully substantiated by later research nor have definitive plausible explanations been offered, other than those proposed at the time of the original research. However, the conclusions reached then were clear and statistically significant, arising from a specifically chosen but fairly representative sample of the available population of secondary school principals in this country. This present paper considers the case of one of those principals in a little more detail. (From here on, this principal will sometimes be called “Clive” or “he”; this should not be taken as being indicative of the head’s sex.) Clive was chosen for this study because he had been in his present position as principal of a small secondary school for the previous six years and so he had a reasonable degree of experience in his job. The school itself is coeducational with a moderate-sized boarding element, in an area described by the head as being mixed urban and rural. There is no contention in this paper that this represents in any way a ‘typical’ principal or a ‘typical’ school, but it does help to indicate the pattern of daily activity for others in similar situations and positions. The principal concerned is a highly respected person of well-chosen words who says, for example, “when your work speaks for itself, don’t interrupt”. He is also resigned to the fact that life will be frantic, so he uses this to his best advantage, if at all possible, by, for instance, taking advantage of chance encounters as efficiently as possible.

The research in the UK by Torrington and Weightman devised a simple system of classifying the work activities of school principals and which was rendered memorable to analyst by the ubiquitous acronym, in this case “STAMP”, where S stood for “social activities” (i.e. those actions which were primarily verbal exchanges or other more formal social interactions), T was for “technical” activities (i.e. anything which was to do directly with pupils or arising because

of the head's own training as a teacher), A indicated "administrative" behaviour (including all forms of paperwork, telephone calls and certain types of meetings), M represents "managerial" work (i.e. most meetings where the principal is in the chair and other checking or controlling functions), and P is for "personal" events. Anything not classified by this system is labelled O, for "other". The complete set of seventeen categories is listed below:

- S1 Verbal exchanges, including social telephone calls connected with work
- S2 Social trips connected with work
- T1 Own teaching, preparing and marking
- T2 Meetings re curriculum or with pupils (though not for discipline)
- A1 Deskwork, including discussions with secretary, etc.
- A2 Meetings where the principal acts as secretary, etc.
- A3 Most telephone conversations
- A4 General (factual) announcements
- A5 Secretarial or other work not properly the principal's
- M1 Most scheduled meetings, including general assemblies of the school
- M2 Most unscheduled meetings, including disciplining pupils
- M3 Observing the school or teachers or pupils
- M4 Trips to managerial meetings (even within the school)
- M5 Boarding duties
- P Personal trips or work or telephone calls
- O Anything not readily classified as above.

In the end, no event was unclassifiable using "STAMP", so the "other" section remained unused.

Clive was observed from the start of his day at 7.00 a.m. Breakfast, at 7.30 a.m., was a quiet affair during which he read the post and papers and made notes for the coming day. This was also one of his few uninterrupted periods of ten minutes or more throughout the day and, apart from the usual domestic routines, there were no changes of activity or interactions with other (even the observer) until 8.10 a.m., when it was time for the five-minute walk to school. This was followed by another clear run of twenty minutes which was used for administrative work before the traditional chaotic increase in frequency of events began at 8.35 a.m., just before the timetabled day begins for the teaching staff and the pupils. In the 25 minutes leading up to the 9.00 a.m. bell, Clive was observed to take part in 28 separate activities, the longest of which was the three minutes spent walking to the staffroom!

The pattern of Clive's day broadly followed the pupils' (and hence the teachers') timetable, with short lull periods or respites when everyone returned to class or was otherwise timetabled. Thus we can note a single 14-minute event just after 9.00 a.m. (namely the morning assembly for the whole school), a stretch of 34 minutes mid-morning when there was a staff conference (at which 14 items were discussed), and a 32-minute continuous observation of the school from 12.50 p.m., when he was on lunch duty. However, during this latter period, Clive engaged in 26 separate interactions with others greater than just trivial greetings. Towards the end of lunch the principal himself went to eat and spent just four minutes at that before he had to abandon his food in favour of the next, scheduled, appointment, which was with the school prefects.

Clive's philosophy of always giving precedence to the pupils was very evident here. This was a regular half-hour meeting specifically set aside for the prefects to bring their concerns and difficulties to the head. This meeting was less formally structured than the earlier staff meeting and it was very interesting to watch how open the younger people were with their principal compared to some of the teaching staff who, although nominally equals with the head, seemed to have fallen foul of the "them and us" syndrome. Perhaps this represents a failing on the part of the principal, or perhaps it indicates the psychological changes that appear to take place in teachers as they become more established, but in any case it is outside the scope of this paper to consider such a phenomenon. What was evident, however, was the considerably higher level of enthusiasm and work rate among the prefects' meeting, with more suggestions and more conclusions for action to be taken than at the staff meeting, and with a much lower stress level evident in the head at the end of that gathering.

During the afternoon, Clive spent well over an hour with parents who had applied for a place in the school for their child. Half of this meeting time was confidential to the parties concerned, and was listed as M1, although inevitably there would have been at least a small amount of more social interaction included in that. The remainder of the time included a tour of the school, accompanied by the observer. Clive explained to the observer afterwards that he likes to give prospective parents a long interview since this makes them feel important and they are then more likely to send their child to his school. This had the negative result, however, that he had to immerse himself in a frantic series of activities after the interview in order to try to catch up on his work. This was represented by 29 separate events within the next 50 minutes, that is, an average of less than two minutes per event. 19 of these events were administrative, with a further eight being brief interactions with staff (S1). Only four of these minutes were spent on real managerial work. At the end of the observation period (5.00 p.m.) Clive was in a hurry away to have a quick tea before driving a considerable distance to attend a meeting and address those present. He expected that his evening would finish around midnight when he reached home, listened to the messages on his answering machine, and went to bed. Clive described this as "a very ordinary day" for him.

In the nine hours of recorded activity for that day, Clive was involved in exactly 200 activities, which averages at just two minutes and forty-two seconds per event. This is an incredibly small average when the large amount of time given to scheduled meetings (with staff, prefects and new parents) is recalled. Further analysis of these events shows that 76 of the 200 were of the S1 variety (i.e. brief encounters), many of which required the head to make an on-the-spot decision or arrange a later meeting. 85 of the events, that is, over 40% of the total, were administrative and very many of these could very easily have been handled more efficiently by a lower-paid administrator or secretary if only outside agencies such as parents and the Department of Education would accept this, leaving the principal freer to concentrate on managerial tasks. Only 35 activities were classified as managerial and only five of these were scheduled! That the principal's day is dominated by administration at the expense of real management is clear from a consideration of Clive's diary up to the start of his first scheduled meeting of the day – only 25 minutes before 10.45 a.m. were spent on anything remotely managerial, and these included eight minutes travelling to school and to the meeting and 16 minutes of unscheduled and unexpected interactions, leaving just one minute of more planned management activity! It is also worth noting that, during the day, only two activities were

classified as “personal”. These were the four minutes given over to the partly eaten lunch and two minutes when Clive was unobserved, namely when he went to the toilet!

Activity code	Number of events	Total time per activity
S1	76	36
S2	0	0
T1	1	26
T2	1	1
A1	31	122
A2	0	0
A3	26	73
A4	3	16
A5	3	2
A6	22	33
M1	5	136
M2	21	29
M3	3	50
M4	2	8
M5	4	2
P	2	6
Totals:	200	540

Table 1: Analysis of activities for one working day for principal “Clive”

However, the number of activities is only one aspect of the day. There is also the total amount of time spent on each type of work that is important. From Table 1 it can be seen that administration still wins, with a total of 246 minutes or slightly less than half of the total time observed, but not by the same dominating margin as before since there were 225 minutes (or just over 40%) spent on managerial activities. In fact, the total of 136 minutes spent on scheduled meetings was unusually high for the observed principals and shows a well-planned day with very few major interruptions and no disasters. In terms of the number of activities the day is almost entirely composed of the S1, A1, A3, A6 and M2 categories, which comprise 176 events or 88% of the total. When the time spent on each classification is counted, we must add M1 and M3 to the above list to get a similar figure. Now we find that 479 minutes (or 89% of the total day) was spent on these seven types of events alone. Indeed six of the categories (S2, T2, A2, A5, M5 and O) recorded only five minutes in total on that day or less than 1% of the time spent working.

Another interesting feature of the day which has already been alluded to, namely the variation in the frequency of new events which tends to mirror the day’s timetable for the teaching staff and pupils, is seen more clearly when the number of activities per fifteen minute period is considered. Here there are clear peaks just before and after the morning assembly, during the mid-morning break, and at lunchtime, with a further, smaller maximum at 4.00 p.m., the end of the teaching day, which is then followed by a steady decline over the next hour. A rather more crude analysis of the frequency of events, by considering the number of new activities begun each hour, shows a more even distribution although the early morning and lunchtime

peaks still show (Table 2). The very low number of new activities after lunch reflects the long period of time spent in meetings with the prefects and the prospective parents.

Time	Number of activities begun
08.00 – 09.00	31
09.00 – 10.00	25
10.00 – 11.00	25
11.00 – 12.00	24
12.00 – 13.00	41
13.00 – 14.00	4
14.00 – 15.00	4
15.00 – 16.00	20
16.00 – 17.00	26
Total activities:	200

Table 2: Number of activities per hour

When Clive’s work pattern is compared with other principals observed by this author over comparable lengths of time, a series of strong similarities emerge. Firstly, there is the somewhat astonishing, and perhaps even frightening, number of activities or events to which the secondary school principal had to turn his or her hand each day. This appears to be considerably higher than the totals observed in business and other forms of general management where there exists a real form of “middle management”, unlike school in Ireland. This level of activity results in a very short average length of time per event and demands an ability on the part of the head to change from the profound to the trivial and back again frequently and with ease. Other research (Kerr, 1996) has shown that school principals are not often given positive feedback on their work, and this continues to be a cause for concern and another indication that heads, teachers and board members alike are in urgent need of training, particularly in how to develop and maintain positive relations with other school workers.

A second direct result of this excessive workload is, obviously, fatigue. During the observation periods of all the principals it was noticed by the author that several people, usually teaching staff, came to see their head in a somewhat agitated or frustrated mood. It appeared that they had been trying to see the head for some time but that he or she was occupied with someone else. When contact was finally made there was no allowance made by the teacher for the fact that the principal had been working solidly all day and might be a little tired; rather there were signs that the teacher felt somewhat slighted at not being able to just walk into the head’s office and discuss whatever was on his or her mind. This in turn causes some considerable stress for the heads, which is further exacerbated by the demands of this very long working days.

This relentless pace of work, where the urgent tends to displace the important (often at the expense of the completion of the truly vital job), is, as has been mentioned earlier, universal both in the sense of apparently being found in all countries of the world and in all types of work. This is not helped in any way by the third common feature, namely the administrative overload which dogs all managers, and from which school principals are not exempt. This

colossal quantity of administration, which they have to complete each and every day, takes up 30 to 40% of their working time and leads to an inappropriate set of prioritised tasks. It is obvious that the time spent on low-level paperwork could more profitably be given over to real managerial tasks, whether planning curriculum development, building constructive relations with the teaching staff, or considering other problems. The fact that resources for this are not available indicates that both the Department of Education and the boards of management of most of the schools around the country lack both the understanding and the willingness to give school pupils the best opportunities they can by leaving their educational leaders free to concentrate on education.

From the author's own observations the general pattern of work displayed by the principal is independent of the size of the school, although the total length of time differs as described earlier. Of course, other differences of balance exist and are more obvious, for example, when comparing boarding with day only schools. The final result was that most, though not all, school heads managing was only their second biggest activity, with administration taking up the bulk of their time and the vast majority of the number of events each day.

A final note is required to comment on the possible effects of the observer's presence on the activities of the principals. Each head was well known to the author and each was completely happy to have a "shadow" for the day (and night, in some cases). Each told his/her staff about the observation and its function, but in many cases this seemed to dramatically reduce the number of casual visits by staff to the head's office, presumably for fear of interrupting the observation. Indeed, several of the principals reported that the day following the observation was dominated by staff calling to the office to discuss issues held over from the previous day!

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that school principals everywhere are deluged with work. Some swim, most tread water and a few sink, but suitable training is available and has proved advantageous for those who have taken it, in this country largely at their own expense (Kerr, 1994). Many feel that boards of management in schools should be concerned with how to keep their heads' heads above water. Until such time as the Department of Education takes a more enlightened attitude and encourages all school principals to become trained as school leaders and not just school managers (Kerr, 1995), and the principals begin to allow others to deal with trivial matters, it seems something of a forlorn hope that principals will learn to ride the wave of demands that hits their office doors each morning.

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