

# How many things do you like to do at once? An introduction to monochronic and polychronic time

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## Executive Overview

*Donna Vinton's preceding article provides an overview of many ways that attitudes, values, and beliefs about time can differ. This article presents a detailed look at one of those differences—between monochronic and polychronic time—which, respectively, distinguish between a preference for doing one thing at a time rather than doing two or more things simultaneously. Following an explanation of this difference, Kaufman, Lane and Lindquist's Polychronic Attitude Index, which measures the degree of an individual's polychronic orientation, is described, as is Bluedorn's Monochronic/Polychronic Orientation Scale, which measures the extent to which a department or organization is polychronic. Scoring information for both scales is included to enable readers to identify their individual orientations as well as to provide some indication of their departments' and organizations' orientations. This information can be used to manage one's self and one's organization more effectively, and advice on how to do so is presented.*

## Article

Right now you are reading this article in one of two fundamentally different ways. You may be reading and deliberately doing nothing else, or you may be reading and watching television or eating or conducting a conversation or perhaps doing all of these while you read. The former approach, focusing entirely on one task, is the *monochronic* approach to life: do one thing at a time. The latter approaches, simultaneously being actively involved in two or more activities, are termed *polychronic* approaches. And as is implied by the word "approaches," there are degrees of polychronicity, ranging from people who tend to be very monochronic to those who are extremely polychronic.<sup>1</sup>

A question that often arises about the idea of polychronicity concerns the meaning of "simultaneously" and "at once." For example, is working on three different projects during a one-hour period an example of polychronic or monochronic behavior? Are they actually carried out at the same time, or are the parts of one activity interspersed or "dovetailed" with the others? Actually, both patterns are considered to be polychronic time use.

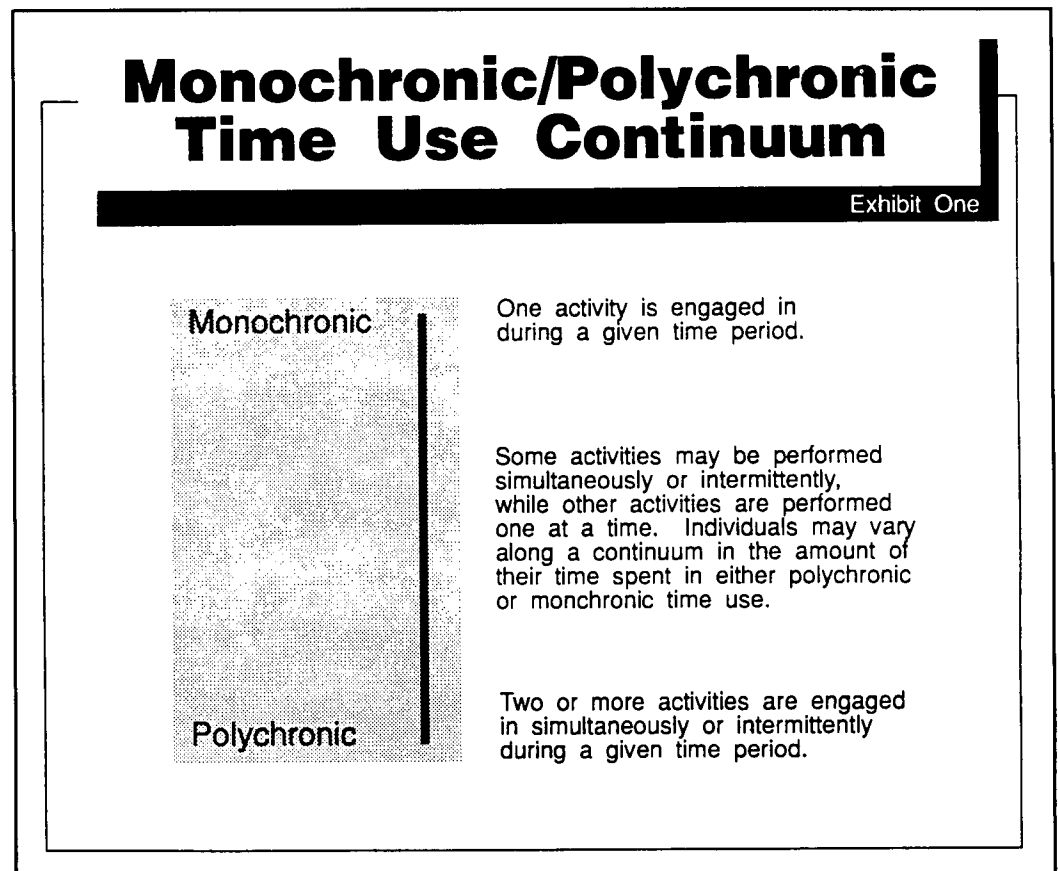
If three projects are dealt with completely and in sequence—A is begun and completed before B is started, B is begun and started before C, and C is begun and completed before any other project is started—the behavior is clearly monochronic, extremely monochronic. However, if the following intermittent pattern occurs—resume A from a previous time, stop A and begin B, stop B and return to A, stop A and begin C, stop C and return to B, etc., always making progress on each task, albeit slowly—a much more polychronic behavior pattern is being followed. Even more polychronic would be someone who is writing a

letter, talking on the phone, eating an apple, and listening to the *War of 1812 Overture* simultaneously.

In addition to the directly observable patterning of your activities, your subjective reactions to events are also indicators of polychronicity. Compare, for example, two managers who are both planning to write a report in the morning. Both begin writing, and after thirty minutes, both managers receive a phone call. Manager A regards the phone call as an interruption and attempts to reschedule the call for a time later in the day. Manager B answers the phone, has a complete conversation with the caller, and returns to work on the report after the call. Manager A is relatively monochronic because unplanned, unscheduled events are considered interruptions that should be minimized and not allowed to interfere with scheduled activities. Manager B is relatively polychronic because the unscheduled event was handled as a normal part of life, of equal or greater importance than planned activities (i.e., writing the report).

Thus, we need not consider the concept of "simultaneous," or "at the same time" as an absolute. Were we to do so, we would not be able to speak of degrees of polychronicity and would be forced to classify people as being either polychronic or monochronic. Instead, we can identify time use behavior more accurately along the monochronic/polychronic continuum presented in Exhibit 1.

Individuals vary in their orientation along this continuum as do organizations and entire cultures. You will soon be able to identify your own orientation along this continuum as well as recognize how monochronic or polychronic the cultures of your employing organization and department are.<sup>2</sup>



Donna Vinton's preceding article introduced you to time and some of the ways in which time varies between individuals and cultures. As she explained, many of these fundamental variations are so subtle that they often go unrecognized because they exist beneath the level of conscious awareness. Differences in patterns related to time horizon, pace, and punctuality can be found as well as tendencies to use time monochronically or polychronically. However, individuals are sometimes unaware of the particular aspects of their "time personalities," although they can readily report actual time use preferences and behaviors. Furthermore, polychronicity is important, not only because it is a fundamental distinction in and of itself, but because pioneering research indicates that it is related to many of our other important behaviors and attitudes.

**Anthropologist Edward Hall has observed that differences in space utilization and the priorities given to human relationships over task accomplishment vary with monochronic and polychronic cultural orientations.**

Anthropologist Edward Hall has observed that differences in space utilization and the priorities given to human relationships over task accomplishment vary with monochronic and polychronic cultural orientations.<sup>3</sup> His observations indicate that people with a monochronic orientation are task-oriented, emphasize promptness and a concern for others' privacy, stick to their plans, seldom borrow or lend private property, and are accustomed to short-term relationships with other people. Conversely, people with a polychronic orientation tend to change plans, borrow and lend things frequently, emphasize relationships rather than tasks and privacy, and build long-term relationships with family members, friends, and business partners. Because of these relationships and polychronicity's stature as a core defining characteristic of temporal attitudes and behaviors, an understanding of monochronic and polychronic orientations is vital to understanding our own behaviors, the ability to manage in the international arena, and the ability to manage in an increasingly culturally diverse workplace.

#### **How Polychronic Are You?**

Researchers Carol Kaufman, Paul Lane, and Jay Lindquist conducted an extensive survey of polychronic time use in which they examined individuals' tendencies to use time either polychronically or monochronically. They developed a scale, the Polychronic Attitude Index (PAI), which attempted to capture the respondent's general attitude toward performing more than one activity at a time.<sup>4</sup> Respondents were also requested to report the likelihood of their participation in some specific types of activity combinations. As anticipated, several activity combinations were found to be significantly correlated with the PAI. Thus, one's score on the PAI provides a preliminary indication of whether an individual has the potential and desire to combine activities in the same block of time. In contrast, prior research on polychronicity has been primarily qualitative and observational.

Kaufman, Lane, and Lindquist's work produced the four-item scale presented in Exhibit 2. We suggest that you complete the four-item scale right now and then score yourself. By completing this scale you will gain a better understanding of the monochronic/polychronic continuum and learn about an element of your own personality most people do not know about themselves.

Kaufman, et al.'s survey was completed by 310 employed adults in southern New Jersey. Their sample is fairly representative of the general U.S. population and provides the only existing baseline against which your response may be compared. The mean score in their sample was 3.128, which you can use as a point of comparison for your own score. Kaufman, et al. found that polychronic time use was negatively correlated with role overload (the more polychronic the individual, the less role overload the individual tended to experience), and positively correlated with education (the higher the education level, the more polychronic the respondent tended to be), working more than 40 hours per week (the more polychronic the respondent tended to work more than 40 hours per week), and social group and club membership (the more polychronic were more likely to belong to social groups and clubs). Polychronic time use was not, however, correlated with gender (contrary to Hall's suggestion), age, income, or marital status.

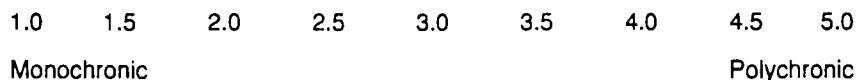
# Polychronic Attitude Index

Exhibit Two

Please consider how you feel about the following statements. Circle your choice on the scale provided: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree or strongly disagree.

I do not like to juggle several activities at the same time.	Strongly Disagree 5 pts	Disagree 4 pts	Neutral 3 pts	Agree 2 pts	Strongly Agree 1 pt
People should not try to do many things at once.	Strongly Disagree 5 pts	Disagree 4 pts	Neutral 3 pts	Agree 2 pts	Strongly Agree 1 pt
When I sit down at my desk, I work on one project at a time.	Strongly Disagree 5 pts	Disagree 4 pts	Neutral 3 pts	Agree 2 pts	Strongly Agree 1 pt
I am comfortable doing several things at the same time.	Strongly Disagree 1 pt	Disagree 2 pts	Neutral 3 pts	Agree 4 pts	Strongly Agree 5 pts

Add up your points, and divide the total by 4. Then plot your score on the scale below.



The lower your score (below 3.0) the more monochronic your orientation; and the higher your score, (above 3.0) the more polychronic.

## How Polychronic are Your Department and Organization?

After Kaufman, et al. had completed the first phases of their work, Bluedorn built upon it to develop a five-item scale for measuring the monochronic/polychronic continuum as a component of organizational culture.<sup>5</sup> Unlike Kaufman, et al.'s original scale, his scale asks respondents to report on the general time use orientations they perceive in their departments and organizations rather than about their own individual orientations. This scale, tested in a sample of 205 employees drawn from a medium-size bank in Missouri, is presented in Exhibit 3. We suggest that you complete the scale in Exhibit 3 for both your department and your entire organization at this time. Then follow the instructions to score your department and organization.

The results in Exhibit 3 reveal your perceptions of your department's and organization's location on the monochronic/polychronic continuum (they will not

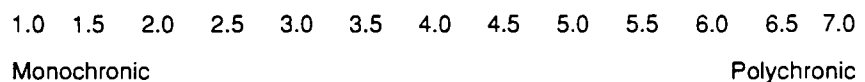
# Monochronic/Polychronic Orientation Scale

Exhibit Three

Please use the following scale to indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree that each statement is true about 1) your organization and 2) your department.

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neutral	Slightly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
We like to juggle several activities at the same time.	Organization	1 pt	2 pts	3 pts	4 pts	5 pts	6 pts
	Department	1 pt	2 pts	3 pts	4 pts	5 pts	6 pts
We would rather complete an entire project everyday than complete parts of several projects.	Organization	7 pts	6 pts	5 pts	4 pts	3 pts	2 pts
	Department	7 pts	6 pts	5 pts	4 pts	3 pts	2 pts
We believe people should try to do many things at once.	Organization	1 pt	2 pts	3 pts	4 pts	5 pts	6 pts
	Department	1 pt	2 pts	3 pts	4 pts	5 pts	6 pts
When we work by ourselves, we usually work on one project at a time.	Organization	7 pts	6 pts	5 pts	4 pts	3 pts	2 pts
	Department	7 pts	6 pts	5 pts	4 pts	3 pts	2 pts
We prefer to do one thing at a time.	Organization	7 pts	6 pts	5 pts	4 pts	3 pts	2 pts
	Department	7 pts	6 pts	5 pts	4 pts	3 pts	2 pts

Add up the points for your organization, and your department. Divide each total by 5. Then plot both scores on the scale below.



The lower the score (below 4.0) the more monochronic your organization or department; and the higher the score, (above 4.0) the more polychronic.

necessarily be at the same place on the continuum). To determine the "real" locations of your department and organization on the continuum, a survey drawn from a large sample of your department and organization would be necessary. However, your perception by itself is still useful because you can now use it to compare to your own orientation, as measured by the scale in Exhibit 2, your perceptions of your department and organization in Exhibit 3. We suggest that you now plot your results from Exhibits 2 and 3 on the scales in Exhibit 4, which will allow you to compare your personal time use orientation with that which you perceive in your department and organization.<sup>6</sup>

# Orientation Comparison

Exhibit Four

To compare your individual Monochronic/Polychronic orientation with your department and organization, copy your scores from the three scales onto this chart.

<b>Individual</b>												
1.0	1.5	2.0	2.5	3.0	3.5	4.0	4.5	5.0				
Monochronic					⋮	Polychronic						
<b>Department</b>												
1.0	1.5	2.0	2.5	3.0	3.5	4.0	4.5	5.0	5.5	6.0	6.5	7.0
Monochronic						⋮	Polychronic					
<b>Organization</b>												
1.0	1.5	2.0	2.5	3.0	3.5	4.0	4.5	5.0	5.5	6.0	6.5	7.0
Monochronic						⋮	Polychronic					

To interpret the scores, rather than using exact numerical values, use general comparisons such as "middle of the scale" or "clearly above" or "clearly below" the midpoint.

*The closer your individual preference score is to that of your organization or department, the closer your "fit" or "match" in terms of the monochronic/polychronic orientation, but the closeness of the match may indicate more than just a fit or misfit with the monochronic/polychronic continuum alone. Bluedorn's bank study revealed some very large correlations between a department's polychronicity and the extent to which it emphasizes an external focus (on customers, suppliers, changing technologies, etc.) rather than an internal focus (interpersonal relations and development, rules, procedures, etc.).*

The more polychronic the department, the more externally focused it tended to be. The more polychronic departments also tended to have longer time horizons. These results, which should be considered preliminary findings, may indicate that more polychronic individuals would also have better matches with departments that have longer time horizons and more of an external orientation.

### **Managerial Implications**

Although the monochronic-polychronic distinction creates as many potential implications for behavior and action as there are people, three behavioral domains are particularly prominent: individual time management, supervision/coordination, and cultural diversity.

#### *Individual Time Management*

Much of traditional prescriptive time management emphasizes a monochronic orientation. To wit: In an orderly fashion carefully plan your day by organizing a schedule based on your priorities with a specific allotment of time allocated for each activity. Kaufman, et al. have suggested that more polychronically oriented consumers may be more successfully marketed to by learning which types of activities they would like to have combined with others. For example, many people may like to drive and conduct business at the same time (cars and cellular phones) or watch the news and a ball game at the same time (picture-in-picture televisions). Their idea of identifying activities whose combination is attractive to customers can readily be extended to the personal time management enterprise through a series of questions.

- Which activities require your undivided attention?
- Which activities do you prefer to do in combination with other tasks?
- Which activities do you prefer to have grouped together?
- Which activities would you prefer not to be grouped together?

Candid answers to these questions and their corollaries can lead to a more sophisticated approach to time management by moving beyond the general use of priorities to establish schedules. Using this approach in addition to priorities establishes multiple criteria for deciding what things you plan to do when. By identifying which types of things seem to go together and which do not, a self-managed process of job enrichment can accompany the more traditional time management task.

Your own orientation—relatively monochronic or relatively polychronic—will naturally make some of the preceding questions and issues easier to deal with than others, and it will also lead you to different ways to deal with them.<sup>7</sup>

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*If you are relatively polychronic, you may find it more difficult giving an activity your undivided attention than will your monochronic counterpart. Conversely, if you are relatively monochronic, you may have more difficulty than your polychronic colleague grouping certain tasks together to be performed during the same time period; and the more diverse the activities, the more difficulty you are likely to have grouping them together.*

Earlier in this article we discussed behaviors associated with monochronic and polychronic orientations, one of which was the individual's degree of flexibility in regard to plans and schedules. The time management fundamental of the daily To-Do list that identifies your activities and assigns priorities to them is a plan and a schedule. Given the association of polychronic orientations with greater flexibility toward plans and schedules, polychronic individuals may be more flexible in their approach to the To-Do list.

First, they are likely to be less precise in scheduling completion times for tasks, if they even use them at all. Second, they should be more likely to modify the items on their lists (add, postpone, delete) as well as alter item priorities as the day proceeds; but this flexibility is neither a universal advantage nor a disadvantage. Flexibility in one situation may lead to the exploitation of an unanticipated opportunity, but in other situations it may lead to unproductive dithering. Third, the practice of using priorities to say no to lower priority requests, especially when the requested activities involve interaction with other people, should be more difficult for more polychronic people too.

### *Supervision and Coordination*

Regardless of whether you are a first-line supervisor managing a single work group or a CEO managing multiple divisions or departments, the polychronicity issues described for individual time management have direct analogues at these higher levels. Which tasks and assignments do your people seem to be able to handle simultaneously (e.g., selling computers and teaching customers how to use them), and which do they have trouble handling if assigned together (e.g., selling computers and repairing them)? Which tasks do they like to handle simultaneously and which ones are better if given one at a time (e.g., taking inventory)? And which tasks might the organization be able to *learn* to handle simultaneously (e.g., designing new computers and repairing current models), giving it competitive advantages in any environment where time-based competition exists?

All of these issues imply the universal management activity of *delegation*, an act that can be influenced by your own monochronic/polychronic orientation as well as that of your subordinate.

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***Although similarity between delegator's and subordinate's degree of polychronicity would seem to be the obvious route to harmony and successful delegation outcomes, the issue may be more complex than it appears at first glance. For example, an extremely polychronic boss may so enjoy the stimulation of multiple activities carried out simultaneously or in a short period that she fails to delegate enough tasks to subordinates. Not only would polychronic subordinates be potentially experiencing a too-monochronic environment for their own work satisfaction, but they would not be developing skills in a variety of activities, which is a major benefit and purpose of delegation.***

Or consider the very monochronic boss. He is so insistent on a tightly planned schedule—everything has its time and only one thing at a time is scheduled—that he delegates almost everything to ensure his ability to be working on only one task at a time. The resulting avalanche of delegated tasks may overwhelm the constantly inundated subordinate, especially if the subordinate has a relatively monochronic orientation too. The subordinate in this case will gain very little in terms of skill enhancement from the delegated tasks and will probably feel continuously overwhelmed and miserable.

Overall, you need to recognize your own orientation and that of your subordinate because you must take *both* into account to successfully delegate over the long term. If you and your subordinates differ in orientation, do not consider such differences impediments. Such differences may actually be complementary and provide opportunities to improve the results of delegation in your department.

### *Cultural Diversity*

"... when people or groups with different [temporal] perspectives interact, conflicts often arise. Misunderstandings occur when intention and action are judged, by different participants, on different temporal scales. Values are attached to these scales. *The differences in temporal perspective often go unrecognized by the participants.* [Emphasis added] But the differing temporal scales have values associated with them nonetheless, and the temporally divergent actions lead to value inferences by the participants about each other."<sup>8</sup> Thus has James Jones succinctly described the *raison d'être* for understanding temporal concepts such as monochronic/polychronic orientation when working with culturally diverse groups. To illustrate the problems that may occur if you do not understand these temporal differences, put yourself into the following situation.

*You are a sales representative for a U.S.-based company that is attempting to expand into overseas markets. As part of the expansion effort, you are travelling around the world to call on several potential customers. Your itinerary includes*

appointments in New York, Paris, Berlin, Tunis, and Seoul. You want to make a good impression on your firm's prospective clients in each location, but you are far from an expert on France and Germany, let alone Tunisia and South Korea. Thus, you are quite anxious about how people in these different cultures will react to your behavior, and you are equally concerned about your own abilities to attribute the correct meanings to the treatment you will receive from the French, Germans, Tunisians, and Koreans.

**If you and your subordinates differ in orientation, do not consider such differences impediments.**

That there will be language differences if obvious, but you were recently briefed that some of the greatest non-language difficulties in cross-cultural interactions are those arising from differences in beliefs, values, and behaviors concerning time. For example, what does it mean when a French manager keeps you waiting for thirty minutes after your scheduled appointment time? Does it mean the same thing that it means when an American or a Korean manager keeps you waiting? Similarly, should you end your appointment at the scheduled time if you have not covered everything you want to discuss, or should you attempt to continue your meeting even if you would be going beyond your scheduled time allotment? And should you try to keep going in Tunis, but not in Berlin?

Although you may not know the exact answers to the questions raised in the scenario, you have a competitive advantage over anyone who does not even know that there are questions, that there may be a difference in these matters between cultures, and that these differences are often crucial differences.

**when a relatively monochronic North American interacts with a more polychronic Latin American, misinterpretations and misattributions of behavior, if not friction and conflict, are likely to occur unless some attention has been paid to identifying and learning such differences in temporal behavior and norms**

It is hackneyed now to expound on the increasingly diverse nature of the American workforce, let alone the greater diversity of the global economy. But if, as analysts such as Hall and Jones assert, the temporal components of culture are the most fundamental, recognizing and understanding those components, and hence the differences among cultures concerning them, becomes essential for productive cross-cultural management and interaction.

For example, when a relatively monochronic North American interacts with a more polychronic Latin American, misinterpretations and misattributions of behavior, if not friction and conflict, are likely to occur unless some attention has been paid to identifying and learning such differences in temporal behavior and norms. The situation may be even more complex in interactions with the Japanese who tend to be monochronic in their use of technology and in dealing with non-Japanese, but who are very polychronic in respect to most other matters. Similarly, misunderstandings may occur among major subcultures within the United States.<sup>9</sup> And monochronic/polychronic time use, however important, is but one of many ways cultures may differ temporally. If people coming from different cultures and traditions understand these differences, or even that there may be differences, conflicts related to polychronicity and other temporal differences can be managed more effectively.

### **Conclusion**

The more polychronically oriented among you have not only finished this article, but have also finished lunch or are about to change the subject of your conversation; the more monochronically oriented are about to begin lunch or will now make that phone call. Either way, you have learned about one of the subtler yet more profound ways individuals can differ from one another.

As we have seen, an understanding of the monochronic/polychronic continuum can lead to better self-management as well as better management of our organizations and our relationships with people from different cultures and traditions. Given the increasingly international nature of business and management, the strategic competitive advantages will be held by the individuals, companies, and nations who learn how to successfully manage cultural diversity. And temporal differences such as monochronic/polychronic orientations are among the most basic cultural differences to manage.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Edward T. Hall developed the concepts of monochronic and polychronic time and presented them most extensively in his book, *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, which was published in 1983 by Anchor Press. Additional material is provided in *Understanding Cultural Differences* by Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall, published in 1990 by Intercultural Press.

<sup>2</sup> Some time writers (not all) such as James W. Gentry, Gary Ko, and Jeffrey J. Stoltman in "Measures of Personal Time Orientation," in Jean-Charles Chebat and Van Venkatesan (eds), *Time and Consumer Behavior*, (Val Motin, Quebec, Canada: Universite du Quebec a Montreal, 1990) reserve the use of the word "orientation" to refer to an individual's relative emphasis on the past, present, or future. Throughout this article we have used "orientation" in its more traditional, more generic sense of establishing a location or position with respect to some phenomenon.

<sup>3</sup> See Hall and Hall, Endnote 1.

<sup>4</sup> Kaufman, Lane, and Lindquist's research is reported in their article, "Exploring More Than 24 Hours a Day: A Preliminary Investigation of Polychronic Time Use," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 18, 1991, 392-401. The scale presented in Exhibit 2 produced an alpha reliability coefficient of 0.67 in their study.

<sup>5</sup> Allen Bluedorn's study is reported in the working paper, "Time and the Competing Values Model of Culture: Adding the Fourth Dimension," which is available from him at the University of Missouri-Columbia. The scale in Exhibit 3 produced an alpha reliability coefficient of 0.74 in the bank sample, and he is currently involved in research on a large insurance company to see if his results will replicate.

<sup>6</sup> Carol Kaufman, Paul Lane, and Jay Lindquist provide a much more extensive discussion of matching individual and organizational time styles and orientations in their article, "Time Congruity in the Organization: A Proposed/Quality of Life Framework," which is forthcoming in *The Journal of Business and Psychology*.

<sup>7</sup> We would like to thank the following individuals who suggested some of the implications of MP orientation for individual time management: Kevin, Adam, Barbara Braungardt, Greg Boivin, Steven Briggs, James Dawes, Matthew Harper, Mary Hass, Mike Ondracek, and Julie Witte.

<sup>8</sup> The quotation is from page 27 of James M. Jones' article, "Cultural Differences in Temporal Perspectives," in J.E. McGrath (ed), *The Social Psychology of Time*, (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> The relative orientations of North and Latin Americans are taken from Hall, *The Dance of Life*. The description of the Japanese is from Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall, *Hidden Differences: Doing Business With the Japanese*, which was published in 1987 by Anchor Press/Doubleday.

## About the Authors

Allen C. Bluedorn holds a Ph.D. from the University of Iowa and is currently an associate professor of management at the University of Missouri-Columbia. He has published widely on a large variety of organizational behavior and theory topics including time and organizations, organizational culture and strategic change, organizational effectiveness, employee turnover, and organizational structure. He is a past president of the Midwest Academy of Management and is currently a member of the Academy of Management's Board of Governors. He serves on the editorial review boards of the *Journal of Management* and the *Journal of Management Education*.

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Paul M. Lane is an associate professor of marketing at Western Michigan University. In collaboration with Carol Kaufman his research considers the perceptual, subjective aspects of time which span consumer behavior, marketing and management strategy, and new product development. Their work has been published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, the *Journal of Strategic Change*, and the *Journal of Business and Psychology*, and numerous conference proceedings. He is currently collaborating on a book with Carol Kaufman which presents several aspects and applications of time relevant to management.

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