

To do: make a 'to-do' list

Lucy Kellaway decides it's time someone sorted her life out – some of it anyway

Right down at the bottom of my to-do list, below de-scaling the kettle, was to phone the woman from Buy Time.

Early last summer, the Weekend FT asked me to write about an agency that charges by the hour to do your chores for you. This should have been an appealing assignment for a harassed middle-aged woman: the newspaper was volunteering to pay a "lifestyle manager" £145 to help me sort out my life.

Yet I could not bring myself to pick up the phone. Months passed. I stared at the Buy Time advertisement. "Simply hand us your 'to-do' list and we'll take over, whatever the size or nature of the job," it said.

The trouble is, contrary to what I wrote above, I don't actually have a to-do list. I try not to think about my chores, and even when I finally get round to doing them I try to think of something else. Ringing the agency required marshalling my pending tasks, and no day had enough hours in it for that.

A second difficulty was delegation. If pressed, I might have come up with a list of my top four nagging tasks that looked like this:

1. Go to the dental hygienist.
2. Do Christmas shopping.
3. Go to Ikea.
4. Phone woman from Buy Time.

The first task doesn't lend itself to delegation, which is a great pity. I would be delightful to get someone else to go Ikea, but as the point of that shop is that it's cheap, paying someone between £25 and £35 a hour to queue at the tills rather defeats the purpose.

I could delegate Christmas shopping, though I'd need to have a



You can buy time but it costs too much for some hit-or-miss results

threw a tantrum as I considered them to be the wrong size.

Months passed, other chores got done, and eventually I tackled chore number four and phoned Claire Brynteson, founder of Buy Time. A year ago she made the eccentric career shift from being a Goldman Sachs banker specialising in capital markets to an entrepreneur specialising in other people's chores.

I explained my delegation problem. She wasn't impressed. "A lifestyle manager is like a PA. They are going to have to make judgment calls," she said briskly. No way was I going to discuss my scaled-up kettle with her. She talked about the things they had done for clients, including finding sound insulation experts for one person and for another "sourcing some fantastic salad servers in Harvey Nicks".

As I wasn't in the market for either insulation or salad servers, this didn't help much. In the end, after much thought, I decided to hand over the following chores:

3. Sort out computers at home. Broadband for whole house?
4. Find carpet cleaner.
5. Get someone to mend laminated floor following sewage catastrophe in basement.

It may seem odd to delegate car-buying when I can't delegate sock-buying, but maybe I care more about socks than cars. For ages I had been thinking about replacing

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our Ford Galaxy with a newer Fiat Multipla, but hadn't managed to do anything about it.

Within a day or two of e-mailing the list, I had the following results.

1. The excellent news that it

was worth practically nothing and that we might as well drive it until it died.

2. Online shopping. I had a fit when the first order arrived with fat-free yoghurt and chicken goujons rather than nuggets, but found this was the supermarket's fault. In fact, my internet grocery shopping is such a triumph, I've been trying to tell everyone about it. Alas, no one is impressed at all, because everyone else has been shopping this way for ages.

3. Computers. We now have an excellent computer consultant who is installing broadband throughout our house. We will never look back.

4. Carpet cleaning. A friendly man has phoned, and will come round in due course.

5. A carpenter came to look at the floor. It turns out that replacing it is going to be expensive, I am going to put a rug over the bad bit instead. Another triumph for laissez faire.

These results were pretty good and took Buy Time less than four hours. The bad news was that I had to do more strategic thinking and come up with further chores. Scraping the barrel, I came up with:

6. Buy blade for lawnmower.
7. Find fingerless mittens for my father's Christmas present.
8. Advice on strongest glass glue in the world to mend broken chandelier.

Two days later a blade arrived in the post and I celebrated with an unseasonal cut of the grass. The mittens have also been found. The glue wasn't quite so successful. The answer turns out to be super glue, which I could have worked out myself, and when you factor in the cost of my lifestyle manager consulting various DIY experts, the glue may be worth more than the light itself.

"Phone Buy Time" has now been replaced at the bottom of my non-existent to-do list with "mend chandelier". It will take me months