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LIFE'S WORK

The 5-Minute M.B.A.

By [LISA BELKIN](#)

To write regularly about life and work means to think regularly about time. Nearly every technological tweak in the last decade is, theoretically, intended to speed us up and save us time.

We now text- and instant-message and BlackBerry. We do all those things and more while walking, or (for pity's sake, people) even driving. We've sped life up until it is a blur, all in the interest of doing better by doing more.

And every once in a while, when we have a moment of downtime, we find ourselves wondering whether all this sprinting and time shifting is actually getting us anywhere. It looks like efficiency, but could it merely be cutting corners? It feels like progress, but then why are we all so tired?

Last week I spent several hours in Manhattan eavesdropping on one new version of the fast lane, and pondering all this and more. Leslie Grossman and Andrea March are the founders of the Women's Leadership Exchange, which holds conferences around the country for businesswomen. At the conferences, participants can sign up for "speed coaching" — five-minute sessions (timed with a stopwatch) with experts in everything from marketing and sales to finance and law.

Think of it as speed dating without the flirting.

I asked to listen in on some sessions because I couldn't imagine that you could cram anything truly useful into five minutes. What I learned was that for two focused women, five minutes can be a very long time.

It took Lily Winsaft only 12 seconds, for instance, to explain that she was considering changing the name of her five-year-old headhunting firm because potential clients find Aldebaran Associates too hard to spell, pronounce and search for online. And it took Orit (who — perhaps to save time? — does not use her last name) another minute to ask a few questions and learn that Aldebaran is named after the lead star in the Taurus constellation and that the company's logo is a bull with a star for an eye.

"Don't change it," advised Orit, who is chief executive of the O Group, a business consulting and design firm in Manhattan. "It sets you apart. Once people know it and know you, it's like they get an inside joke. And this comes from someone who is always having to explain 'what kind of name is Orit?'"

Before the timer went off, Ms. Winsaft had decided to keep her company's name.

Heather Sue Mercer, a co-owner of Ruby et Violette, a chocolate chunk cookie boutique in Manhattan, also found answers during her five minutes with Colleen Stanley, a sales expert who runs SalesLeadership Inc. in Denver. Ms. Mercer took less than a minute to explain that she had been having Web site problems, and feared that she had lost orders and repeat customers as a result. “If they can’t just click, but have to call an 800 number instead, they just leave,” she said. (There’s that time theme again.)

Ms. Stanley suggested that Ms. Mercer start by directly addressing the problem on the Web site. “Something like ‘we are so sorry you have to take one extra step to satisfy your chocolate craving,’ ” she said. Then, she advised offering free cookies to everyone on the existing database as soon as the Web site was fixed and functional. The conversation took 4 minutes and 42 seconds.

It was oddly reassuring, however, that not every conversation could be completed in five minutes or less. Toni Roberts, for instance, is a jewelry designer who wants to expand her business from a home studio to an e-commerce Web site. Beth Polish, former chief financial officer of iVillage, a former chief financial officer of Goldman Sachs Ventures and now a consultant to entrepreneurs, barely got Ms. Roberts started in her five minutes.

Ms. Roberts began by proudly describing how she charged \$500 for a necklace that was “ritually energized to enhance the natural healing properties of the stones.”

Ms. Polish gently but firmly responded: “What does it cost you to make each piece? The cost of the stones? The wire or string? The boxes you store them in?”

Ms. Roberts didn’t know. “I need to start to think like a businessperson, don’t I?” she said. “I need to start seeing them as an e-product, rather than a labor of love.”

They agreed to talk longer at a later date, when a different kind of timer (pegged to Ms. Polish’s hourly rate) was ticking.

I came away from all this speed coaching reminded of how intense five minutes can be and how much can be covered if you really concentrate.

I also came away exhausted. Bursts of speed are good, but only if they’re interspersed with bursts of slowing down.

This column about the intersection of jobs and personal lives appears every other week. E-mail: Belkin@nytimes.com.

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