

Priorities and Time: A New Skill to Embrace: Are Ugandans Ready?

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between time orientation, priority-setting behaviour, and economic and social outcomes in the Ugandan context, arguing that the management of time and priorities constituted an increasingly critical competency for Ugandan individuals, households, organizations, and government actors in a rapidly globalizing and digitalizing environment. Drawing on a nationally representative survey of 1,842 adult Ugandans conducted across all regions of the country, supplemented by qualitative interviews with 86 urban and rural respondents, the study explored cultural attitudes toward time, the priority-setting practices of individuals and households, the organizational time cultures of public and private sector institutions, and the gap between existing time management practices and the requirements of Uganda's economic development aspirations. The findings revealed that Uganda was characterized by a complex and internally varied time culture that combined elements of what the literature described as polychronic time orientation comfort with multiple simultaneous activities, flexible scheduling, and relationship-prioritized temporal decisions with growing aspirational alignment with monochronic time norms associated with formal employment, digital technology use, and international business engagement. The study argued that rather than requiring Ugandans to wholesale abandon indigenous time orientations, the cultivation of priority and time management skills required the development of a contextually intelligent temporal flexibility the capacity to navigate between different time cultures as context demanded and that this capacity was both learnable and urgently needed.

Keywords: Priorities, Culture, Time, Skill and development

Introduction: Time, Culture, and Development

The relationship between cultural orientations toward time and economic development had been a persistent theme in development economics and cross-cultural psychology since at least the mid-twentieth century, when scholars began to examine the degree to which attitudes toward time, punctuality, planning, and future orientation contributed to differential economic outcomes across societies (Julius, 2024). Max Weber's foundational analysis of the Protestant work ethic had identified temporal discipline the regular, methodical application of effort over time toward distant goals as a key psychological condition for capitalist economic development (Julius & Kazaara, 2026). Subsequent scholars had built on this foundation to argue that cultures with strong future orientations, high levels of conscientiousness, and strong norms around the punctual fulfillment of commitments were better positioned to generate the sustained productive effort that economic development required (Julius, 2024).

This theoretical tradition had attracted significant criticism from scholars who argued that it reproduced colonial hierarchies of cultural value under the guise of psychological analysis, that it ignored the ways in which material conditions rather than cultural orientations explained differential economic outcomes, and that it misread the temporal

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sophistication of non-Western cultures through the distorting lens of European standards(Julius & Kazaara, 2025b). Edward Hall's influential distinction between monochronic and polychronic time cultures had offered a more descriptive and less evaluative framework for understanding cross-cultural temporal differences(Julius & Kazaara, 2025a). Hall described monochronic cultures characteristically Northern European and North American as organized around the sequencing of activities, the strict observance of schedules, and the treatment of time as a resource to be carefully managed and allocated(Julius & Kazaara, 2025c). Polychronic cultures characteristically Mediterranean, Latin American, and African were described as organized around simultaneous multiple activities, flexible temporal arrangements, and the prioritization of social relationships over clock schedules(Julius & Kazaara, 2026).

Uganda's particular cultural relationship with time had been a subject of popular commentary and increasingly scholarly attention, particularly in the context of debates about governance efficiency, business competitiveness, and the requirements of Uganda's Vision 2040 development agenda(Julius & Desire, 2025). The phenomenon known colloquially as 'Africa time' the flexible, relationship-prioritized temporal culture that was widely observed in Ugandan social and professional life had been the subject of both affectionate celebration as an expression of cultural identity and concerned critique as an obstacle to economic modernization(Julius & Nancy, 2025b). This study sought to move beyond the binary terms of this debate to provide empirically grounded analysis of how Ugandans actually oriented to time and priorities across different contexts, what consequences these orientations had for individual, household, and organizational outcomes, and what forms of skill development could most effectively support the cultivation of productive temporal competencies without requiring the wholesale rejection of culturally rooted temporal values(Christopher et al., 2022).

Literature Review: Time Orientation and Economic Behaviour

The psychological literature on time orientation had developed considerably since Hall's foundational cross-cultural work, generating multiple frameworks for understanding how individuals and groups related to time across its temporal dimensions of past, present, and future(Julius & Kazaara, 2025h). Philip Zimbardo and John Boyd's time perspective theory distinguished six temporal orientations past-positive, past-negative, present-hedonistic, present-fatalistic, future, and transcendental-future and had generated substantial evidence linking these orientations to a range of behavioral and economic outcomes(Julius & Audrey, 2025). Individuals with strong future time orientations were found to be more likely to save, to invest in education, to plan systematically, and to delay gratification all behaviors associated with economic advancement. Individuals with strong present-fatalistic orientations, in contrast, showed lower rates of savings, investment, and planning behavior, consistent with a worldview in which future outcomes were seen as outside one's control(Julius, 2025).

The organizational literature on time management had evolved from its origins in Frederick Taylor's scientific management approach which had treated time efficiency as the primary organizational virtue through the humanistic management critiques of the mid-twentieth century to the more nuanced contemporary frameworks that recognized the contextual and cultural variability of appropriate time management practices(Brian et al., 2024). Research on

organizational time culture had demonstrated that different industries, functions, and task types were associated with different optimal temporal orientations: routine, high-volume operations benefited from strict temporal discipline and sequential task management, while creative, exploratory, and relational activities were frequently better served by more flexible, iterative approaches to temporal organization(Nancy & Audrey, 2026).

The African organizational literature had addressed time culture primarily in the context of two concerns: the governance efficiency of African public institutions, where delays, late meetings, and poor scheduling were cited as significant contributors to administrative inefficiency; and the competitiveness of African businesses in international markets, where misalignment with international temporal norms was identified as a barrier to partnership and contract fulfillment. Research from South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria had documented the negative economic consequences of temporal unreliability in business contexts, finding that perceptions of poor time management by African firms contributed to lower credit ratings, higher transaction costs, and reduced foreign investment attractiveness(Julius & Nancy, 2026b).

Research Design and Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods design combining a nationally representative household survey with in-depth qualitative interviews and an organizational case study component(Olanrewaju et al., 2021). The household survey was conducted across all four regions of Uganda Central, Eastern, Northern, and Western using a stratified random sampling procedure that ensured representation across urban and rural populations, gender, age groups, educational levels, and occupational categories. A total of 1,842 completed household interviews were obtained, representing a response rate of 84% from the 2,191 households approached(Abiodun Nafiu, 2012).

The survey instrument measured four primary constructs: time orientation, using an adapted Ugandan version of the Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory; priority-setting behavior, using a purpose-designed scale measuring how respondents allocated time across competing demands in their daily lives; time management self-efficacy, measuring respondents' confidence in their ability to manage their time effectively; and economic and social outcomes, including measures of income, savings behavior, educational attainment, and reported stress and wellbeing. The survey was conducted in English, Luganda, Acholi, Runyankole, and Lugisu, with back-translation procedures used to ensure conceptual equivalence across language versions(Nelson et al., 2022).

Table 1: Time Orientation and Priority-Setting Scores by Demographic Category.

Demographic Category	N	Future TPI Score (/10)	Present-Fatalistic TPI (/10)	Time Management Self-Efficacy (/10)	Priority Setting Score (/10)
Urban Employed (formal sector)	312	7.2	3.1	6.8	6.4

Urban Self-Employed	287	6.4	4.2	5.9	5.8
Urban Unemployed	198	5.1	6.3	4.1	3.9
Rural Agricultural	614	4.9	5.8	3.8	4.1
Rural Non-Agricultural	241	5.6	5.1	4.4	4.7
Students (all types)	190	7.8	3.4	6.2	6.1
Total Sample	1,842	5.8	4.9	5.1	5.0

Source: Primary Research Data — Nationally Representative Household Survey Uganda (2023). N=1,842.

Table 1 presented the mean scores on the four primary time orientation and management constructs across the six demographic categories examined in the survey. The data revealed striking variation in temporal orientation across demographic groups that was highly consistent with theoretical predictions about the relationship between economic context, aspirational alignment, and time orientation. Urban formally employed respondents had recorded the highest future time perspective scores at 7.2 out of 10 and the lowest present-fatalistic scores at 3.1 out of 10, indicating a temporal orientation strongly aligned with future planning, goal-directed behavior, and confidence in one's ability to shape future outcomes. Students had recorded the highest future orientation scores at 7.8, consistent with their investment in education as a long-term strategy for future advancement. Rural agricultural workers had recorded the lowest future orientation scores at 4.9 and the second highest present-fatalistic scores at 5.8, reflecting the temporal constraints of subsistence agricultural life, in which immediate survival demands dominated temporal experience and the perceived controllability of future outcomes was genuinely limited by weather, market volatility, and institutional exclusion.

The Cultural Architecture of Ugandan Time

The qualitative interview data provided rich contextual elaboration of the survey findings, revealing the complex cultural architecture within which Ugandan temporal orientations were formed and reproduced. Interviews consistently indicated that Ugandan respondents did not experience themselves as operating within a single undifferentiated temporal culture but rather as navigating between multiple temporal registers that were contextually activated by different social situations. The same individual who arrived late to a social event and experienced this lateness as culturally normal and socially comfortable might be rigidly punctual in a formal work meeting with international clients and anxiously time-conscious about the arrival of a text message from a romantic partner.

This temporal contextuality the capacity to deploy different temporal orientations in different social contexts was widely recognized by interview participants, who described navigating what several characterized as 'two time systems' in their daily lives. The first system was what respondents variously called 'African time,' 'Uganda time,' or 'village time' — a temporal orientation characterized by relationship primacy, flexible scheduling, the acceptance of interruption and diversion, and the understanding that social obligations took precedence over formal schedules. The second system was what respondents called 'office time,' 'business time,' or 'international time' a temporal orientation

characterized by strict punctuality, sequential task management, the treatment of schedules as binding commitments, and the subordination of relationship demands to temporal discipline.

The capacity to navigate between these systems was not equally distributed across the population studied. Respondents with higher levels of formal education, longer experience in formal employment, and greater exposure to international business and digital communication demonstrated greater facility in switching between temporal registers as context required. Respondents with lower formal education and limited formal sector exposure reported greater difficulty with the temporal demands of formal employment and digital work contexts, describing experiences of temporal disorientation in which the temporal norms of the formal workplace felt alien and anxiety-producing rather than natural and manageable.

Table 2: Prevalence of Time Management Challenges by Demographic Group.

Time Management Challenge	% Respondents Reporting as Significant	Urban (%)	Rural (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Difficulty planning ahead more than 1 week	61.3%	48.2%	71.8%	57.4%	65.8%
Frequent lateness to formal engagements	54.7%	42.1%	64.2%	51.3%	57.9%
Inability to say no to social demands	67.8%	62.3%	72.1%	59.4%	75.2%
Procrastination on important tasks	58.4%	55.6%	60.8%	56.9%	59.8%
Phone/social media distraction	71.2%	81.4%	63.1%	73.4%	69.1%
Poor work-life time boundary management	63.9%	68.7%	60.2%	58.4%	69.3%
Inability to prioritise among competing demands	69.4%	64.8%	73.1%	63.7%	74.8%

Source: Primary Research Data-Nationally Representative Household Survey Uganda (2023). N=1,842.

Table 2 documented the prevalence of specific time management challenges across the survey sample, disaggregated by urban/rural residence and gender. The most frequently reported challenge across the full sample was phone and social media distraction, with 71.2% of respondents identifying this as a significant problem in their daily lives a finding that reflected the rapid penetration of mobile internet access in Uganda and the particular temporal disruption that constant digital connectivity created (Julius & Nancy, 2025d). The inability to prioritize among competing demands was reported as a significant challenge by 69.4% of respondents, consistent with the broader finding that priority-setting skill was deficient across the population (Julius & Kazaara, 2025h). The inability to say no to social demands a finding that spoke directly to the relationship primacy dimension of polychronic time culture was reported

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by 67.8% of respondents and was significantly more prevalent among female respondents (75.2%) than male respondents (59.4%), consistent with gendered social obligations that placed disproportionate time demands on women through domestic responsibilities, community participation expectations, and care work requirements (Julius, 2025).

Time Management in Ugandan Organizations

The organizational component of the study examined time management and priority-setting practices in twelve Ugandan organizations drawn from the public sector, private sector, and civil society. These organizations were studied through a combination of direct observation of meetings and working practices, document analysis of organizational calendars, meeting records, and planning documents, and interviews with organizational members at multiple hierarchical levels (Julius & Kazaara, 2025d). The organizational data complemented and extended the individual-level survey findings by examining how individual temporal orientations aggregated into organizational time cultures and what consequences these cultures had for organizational effectiveness (Julius & Audrey, 2025).

The most consistently observed temporal pathology across the organizations studied was what the research team designated meeting culture dysfunction a cluster of related practices including consistently late meeting starts, meetings without clear agendas or time allocations, meeting discussions that expanded to fill available time regardless of agenda requirements, decisions deferred from meeting to meeting without resolution, and meeting attendance that was irregular and unpredictable (Julius, 2025). These practices had direct and measurable costs for organizational effectiveness, consuming productive time without generating proportionate output and creating organizational cultures in which planning commitments were treated as aspirational rather than binding (Julius & Kazaara, 2026).

The public sector organizations in the sample showed the most severe forms of meeting culture dysfunction, consistent with international evidence on bureaucratic temporal culture and with the specific political economy of Ugandan public administration, in which meeting attendance and participation could be performed as a substitute for substantive work rather than as an instrument of it (Julius & Nancy, 2025a). Private sector organizations showed more variation, with multinational subsidiaries and organizations with significant international partnership relationships demonstrating significantly more disciplined temporal cultures than domestically oriented small and medium enterprises.

Table 3: Organizational Meeting Culture and Productivity Indicators by Organization Type.

Organization Type	Meeting Start Punctuality (%)	Agenda Completion Rate (%)	Decision Conversion Rate (%)	Annual Time Wasted (hours/employee/year)	Productivity Score (/10)
Multinational Subsidiary	78%	71%	64%	142	7.1

Large Private Domestic	52%	54%	48%	287	5.8
SME (formal)	44%	46%	41%	334	5.2
Central Government Ministry	29%	31%	24%	521	3.8
Local Government	22%	27%	19%	614	3.2
NGO/INGO	61%	58%	52%	241	6.1

Source: Primary Research Data-Organizational Case Studies Uganda (2022–2023). N=12 organizations.

Table 3 illustrated the striking relationship between organizational time management practices and productivity scores across the six types of organizations studied. Local government organizations had shown the most severe temporal dysfunction across all indicators, with only 22% of meetings starting punctually, 27% completing their agendas, and 19% of meeting decisions being subsequently implemented generating an estimated 614 hours of wasted time per employee per year, equivalent to more than fifteen full working weeks. Central government ministries had performed only marginally better, with a 29% meeting punctuality rate and a decision conversion rate of 24%. These figures were particularly concerning given the centrality of government effectiveness to Uganda's development agenda and the significant public resources consumed by organizations with such poor temporal management practices. Multinational subsidiaries had demonstrated the best performance across all temporal management indicators, with 78% meeting punctuality, 71% agenda completion, and 64% decision conversion, achieving an estimated 142 hours of wasted time per employee per year still significant, but less than a quarter of the local government figure.

Building the Skill: What Would a Ugandan Time Management Pedagogy Look Like?

The research findings pointed toward a specific set of principles for a culturally grounded Ugandan time management pedagogy that acknowledged the genuine strengths of Uganda's relational and polychronic time culture while developing the temporal competencies that economic and social participation in a globalizing world increasingly required. This pedagogy needed to be distinguished from the wholesale adoption of Western monochronic time management frameworks, which frequently proved either ineffective or destructive when applied without cultural adaptation to African contexts(Julius & Nancy, 2025b).

The first pedagogical principle was contextual intelligence rather than temporal uniformity. Ugandans did not need to become uniformly monochronic the relational, flexible, and social dimensions of polychronic time culture generated genuine value in many important areas of life, including family relationships, community building, and the kind of collaborative creative work that rigid temporal structures could inhibit(Julius & Kazaara, 2025f). What was needed was the capacity to discriminate between contexts in which relational temporal norms were appropriate and those in which temporal discipline was required, and to deploy the appropriate temporal register in each. This contextual

intelligence was learnable and many Ugandans already possessed it to varying degrees, but it was not equally distributed, and intentional pedagogy could accelerate its development(Julius & Kazaara, 2026).

The second pedagogical principle was priority clarity as the foundation of time management. The survey data had demonstrated that the inability to prioritize among competing demands was one of the most prevalent time management challenges among Ugandan adults, and the qualitative data had elaborated the specific social and cultural mechanisms through which priority clarity was undermined(Julius & Kazaara, 2025d). A priority-focused pedagogy would begin not with the mechanics of scheduling and time blocking but with the more fundamental question of values and life goals what mattered most to the individual, the household, or the organization, and how did current time allocations reflect or contradict those priorities(Julius & Nancy, 2025c). This values-grounded approach to time management was more culturally resonant in the Ugandan context than purely efficiency-focused frameworks, and it created the motivational foundation for behavioral change that mechanical scheduling approaches frequently lacked.

Are Ugandans Ready? The Readiness Assessment

The final analytical question of this study whether Ugandans were ready to embrace priority and time management as a new skill required a nuanced answer that resisted both the pessimism of cultural determinism and the optimism of voluntarist self-improvement discourse(Nancy & Prudence, 2024). The evidence from the study suggested that Ugandans were simultaneously ready and unready for this skill development in ways that were meaningfully differentiated by demographic, educational, and occupational context(Julius & Nancy, 2025a).

Ugandans were demonstrably ready for time management skill development in several important respects. The survey data had revealed high levels of frustration with existing temporal patterns and strong aspirational alignment with more effective time management across all demographic groups. Eighty-one percent of survey respondents agreed with the statement 'I would like to be better at managing my time,' and 76% agreed that 'better time management would significantly improve my life(Julius & Audrey, 2026).' These figures indicated a widespread motivational readiness for behavior change that was not matched by access to effective skill development resources. The rapid uptake of digital calendar and task management applications among urban Ugandans was evidence of active individual-level adaptation to temporal demands, suggesting that technology-mediated time management tools had the potential to reach large populations if designed with Ugandan contextual requirements in mind(Julius & Kazaara, 2025e).

The structural barriers to time management skill adoption were more significant than the motivational barriers, however, and addressing them required attention to the systemic conditions of Ugandan economic and social life rather than merely to individual skill deficiencies. Precarious employment that gave workers minimal control over their working hours, domestic care responsibilities that created unpredictable time demands particularly for women, unreliable transportation infrastructure that made punctuality dependent on factors outside individuals' control, and institutional cultures in public organizations that penalized rather than rewarded temporal discipline all created conditions in which individual time management skill could not be effectively exercised(Julius & Kazaara, 2026).

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System-level reform of public sector institutional culture, of urban transportation infrastructure, of care work distribution, and of formal employment conditions was therefore a precondition for, rather than a consequence of, effective time management skill development at the population level.

Table 4: Time Management Readiness Indicators by Demographic Group.

Readiness Indicator	Overall (%)	Urban (%)	Rural (%)	15-30 age (%)	31-50 age (%)
Desire to improve time management	81%	87%	76%	89%	79%
Belief TM training would help	74%	79%	70%	82%	71%
Currently uses calendar/planner	38%	56%	24%	52%	34%
Has received any TM training	14%	21%	9%	18%	13%
Employer provides TM support	11%	17%	6%	12%	11%
Reports high time-related stress	58%	63%	54%	64%	56%
Willing to pay for TM training	49%	61%	39%	57%	46%

Source: Primary Research Data. Nationally Representative Household Survey Uganda (2023). N=1,842.

Table 4 presented readiness indicators for time management skill adoption across the survey sample, revealing a pattern of high aspirational readiness combined with low actual skill development access and application. The desire to improve time management had been expressed by 81% of the full sample and 89% of the 15 to 30 age cohort figures that confirmed the motivational foundation for a national time management skill development initiative (Julius & Nancy, 2026a). However, only 14% of respondents had received any form of time management training, and only 11% reported that their employer provided time management support evidence of a massive gap between the demand for skill development and the availability of relevant learning opportunities (Julius & Kazaara, 2025g). The finding that 58% of respondents reported high levels of time-related stress indicated that the inability to manage time effectively was already generating significant wellbeing costs across the population, costs that were disproportionately concentrated among urban dwellers (63%) and young adults aged 15 to 30 (64%), precisely the demographic segments whose productivity was most critical to Uganda's economic development trajectory.

Conclusion: Time as a National Development Resource

This article had argued that the management of time and priorities constituted not merely an individual self-improvement opportunity but a national development challenge of considerable significance for Uganda. The empirical evidence gathered had demonstrated that poor time management and priority-setting were widespread across

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the Ugandan population, were associated with measurable individual and organizational performance deficits, imposed significant wellbeing costs through time-related stress, and represented a structural barrier to Uganda's economic competitiveness and development aspirations.

The answer to the question posed in this article's title are Ugandans ready to embrace priority and time management as a new skill? was a qualified yes, with important caveats about the conditions required to translate motivational readiness into actual skill development and behavioral change. Ugandans had demonstrated clearly that they wanted to manage their time more effectively, that they believed skill development could help them do so, and that they experienced significant costs from their current temporal patterns. What they lacked was not motivation but access: to high-quality, culturally grounded time management education; to organizational environments that modeled and rewarded effective temporal practices; to the basic infrastructure reliable transportation, affordable childcare, stable employment that would allow effective time management to be practiced rather than merely aspired to.

The policy implication was clear: developing Uganda's human capital for the demographic dividend era required attention to time and priority management as a foundational competency alongside the literacy, numeracy, and technical skills that educational policy already addressed. This required investment in teacher and trainer capacity to deliver contextually appropriate time management education, reform of public sector organizational culture to model the temporal practices that government expected of its citizens, and the infrastructure investments that would make punctuality achievable rather than aspirational. Time, as this study had demonstrated, was not merely a cultural attitude but a structural condition and transforming Uganda's relationship with time required structural transformation as much as attitudinal change.

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