

Time Management: More Time, Less Stress

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Introduction

This document contains a selection of time management tips for anyone interested in improving their productivity and lowering stress in their workplace and personal lives. This is particularly important for project managers who must be able to manage their own time efficiently, if they hope to run successful projects. This document highlights common areas of failing and suggests a simple technique to help you improve your time management.



“The time for action is now. It’s never too late to do something.”

-Carl Sandburg



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1. Time

Let's start by thinking about time. Here are twelve important characteristics of time:

1. It is an economic resource.
2. It cannot be expanded or contracted.
3. It is irrecoverable and irreplaceable.
4. It is expensive and precious.
5. It is highly perishable.
6. Most of what is called 'cost' is the cost of time.
7. It is a flow from past to present to future in the context of experience.
8. It is a flow from future to present to past in the context of planning.
9. The flow is one way and irreversible.
10. It is quantifiable (seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years).
11. All processes that we manage are time processes.
12. Time is the dimension in which change takes place.

2. How and Why We Waste Our Time

You cannot save time, you only buy it and spend it. Saved time is bought or spent by reinvesting it in other activities. Here are some examples of how we waste our time:

- Do our own photocopying and filing.
- Make our own flight and hotel reservations.
- Find it easier to do things ourselves than train someone else to do repetitive tasks.
- Socialise instead of communicate.
- Work at tasks for satisfaction of physical accomplishment.
- Haven't the courage to say no nicely and take on too much work.
- Don't distinguish between important and urgent.
- Procrastinate and/or are indecisive.
- React to constant external impacts, with no planned system to shield us, to help get results.

Why we waste our time, our personality orientation:

- Task/Achievement: personally doing (working) versus managing and delegating.
- Leadership/Dominance/Decision: taking charge and doing (working).
- Impulsive/Physically Energetic: doing (working) and not planned.
- Socially Warm/Gregarious: people not task oriented.
- Theoretical/Detail/Structure: paralyses by analysis.

- Change/New Experience/Feeling: bored with routine, unstable, not a team worker.
- Fellowship/Defensive/Aggressive: to please others, bureaucrat, performance for accolade, argue with others.

3. How to Discover Your Time Wasters

You'll discover that you waste time in the same way every day. You must discover for yourself where this waste occurs. Here is a simple technique that can help everyone to start improving his or her time management.

It is not enough to learn from others. You need the amazing revelation of the great portions of time that you are working and wasting, but not achieving goals and results. Discovering them is easy. You need to use a simple time log for a couple of weeks to make a major breakthrough in your time management.

1. Take an A4 sheet of paper and divide it into columns.
2. Take the page and write your typical daily activities in the columns across the top.
3. Break up the horizontal rows into quarter hours from 06:00 hours until 00:00 hours, midnight.
4. Photocopy a number of pages for the coming days.
5. As you work through the day, from the time you get up, until the time you go to bed, place a dot in each quarter-hour of the relevant activity.
6. At the end of the day, add up the quarter hours in each column and enter this total at the bottom of each column.
7. Add up all column totals across the bottom of the page to give a grand total.
8. Convert each column total into a percentage to factually and quickly discover where and how you spent your day.

A spreadsheet can also be used for this purpose.

08-Apr	Activities				
Time	Email	Telephone	Planning	Meetings	Marketing
08:00					
08:15					
08:30					
08:45					
09:00					
09:15					
09:30					
09:45					
10:00					

Figure 1: Activity Log

Do this every day for one or two weeks and you will be amazed to discover that what you do with your time, is not what you believed. You can then start applying the tips and methods coming up, to greatly increase your productivity and relieve much of the stress in your daily working and personal life.

4. Controlling Demands on Your Time

4.1. Delegation

Our inability to delegate creates the biggest bottleneck in our work and personal lives. Try to achieve results through others. The do-it-myself syndrome may result from:

- Preference for operating not managing.
- Demand to know every detail.
- Refusal to allow mistakes, known as perfection syndrome.
- Disinclination to develop subordinates.
- Lack of organisational skill.

Delegation can produce major benefits such as:

- Extending results from what a person can do, to what a person can control.
- Releases your time for more important work.
- Develops subordinates initiative, skill, knowledge and competence.
- Maintains the decision level.

4.2. What to Delegate

1. Duties that can be assigned on a temporary basis.
2. Fact-finding assignments.
3. Preparation of rough drafts of written material, such as reports, resumes, policies and procedures.
4. Problem analysis and possible solutions.
5. Routine tasks.

6. Collection of data for reports and/or presentations.
7. Tasks that will challenge the subordinate.
8. Tasks to test your subordinate's ability in specific areas of responsibility.
9. Small units of work, assignments from your responsibilities and functions.

4.3. How to Delegate

1. Consider gradually increasing authority and responsibility.
2. Set clear, realistic goals for the task to be delegated.
3. Communicate the assignment clearly.
4. Give your support person complete information on organisational policy and procedure as it relates to the assignment.
5. Define the limits of responsibility as it relates to the assignment. After the delegatee thoroughly understands the limits of authority, allow him or her to go ahead.
6. When a subordinate has the responsibility for a decision, allow him or her to make it.
7. Resist making decisions for your support staff.
8. Take enough time to help a delegate solve an emergency problem, so when it comes up again he or she can go ahead without interrupting you.
9. When a support person comes to you with a question concerning a delegated task do not answer the question, but help him or her to think it through.
10. Set up a system that requires interim reports or checkpoints so you can review progress.
11. Establish a realistic completion date.

12. Delegate to the lowest level that can do the task, within your jurisdiction. If the subordinate of your subordinate could do the task, then say so, but delegate to your own subordinate. Let your subordinate re-delegate the task if he or she so chooses.
13. If a subordinate's decision must be reversed, permit him or her to reverse it. Never openly countermand your subordinate's orders. Back up your support person in their relations with their subordinates.
14. Give the delegatee the authority needed for carrying out the assignment, and inform others that he or she has this authority. This will lessen the resistance of co-workers when the delegatee seeks information and/or help from them in carrying out the assignment.

4.4. Interruptions in Your Workplace

Interruptions probably rate next to poor delegation practices as major time wasters. They are the number one stress generators. Not only do other people cause interruptions, we frequently interrupt ourselves:

- By losing concentration.
- Going to find out what's going on in the office.
- Email inbox curiosity.

The four major interrupters are:

4.1.1. Email

- To get results and relief you must establish a routine to deal with email in batches. Do not be a slave to your inbox.
- Give thought to the recipients of your emails. Avoid copying people unnecessarily, as this will lead to high volumes of return emails.
- The more precise you are with your writing, the less likely you will be to see emails asking follow-up questions and seeking clarification.

- Use rules to manage incoming email, marking their priority and moving them to specific folders.
- If you want to receive fewer emails, send fewer emails.

4.4.2. The Telephone

- To get results and relief you must control the telephone.
- Use your support person to buffer you.
- Return calls in batches when you plan to do so after initial preparation.
- Don't be a slave to the telephone.
- Regarding long distance calls. A long distance call is just another telephone call. Where is the priority in being in another city or country? There could be exceptions, but most people are slaves to the apparent urgency of long distance calls.
- Learn the difference between the important and the urgent.

4.4.3. Internal Visitors

- To get results and relief you must control access to your office or workspace.
- Closed door technique; you can't manage anything with open access to your office or workspace. At certain periods close the door or close off the entrance area to your workspace. A chair with a sign hung on it or a plant into the entrance space with a partition mounted notice.
- Learn to say no nicely. You are busy, sorry, come back after a specified time.
- If you are interrupted and must meet with a person, go to their office or workspace, this will give you better control over when you can leave.

4.4.4. External Visitors

- Again, to get results and relief you must control access to your office or workspace.
- Don't meet unknown visitors who don't have an appointment. Get the receptionist or support person's perception of the individual if you're in doubt.
- If the person is known and has no appointment, meet them in the reception area.
- If they manage to get into your office/workspace, hold a stand-up meeting. Don't ever sit down.

5. Effective Communications and Meetings

5.1. Communications

The communication process embraces five basic elements; thinking, acting, observing, talking and listening. Of these elements there are four primary communication skills:

1. Reading.
2. Writing.
3. Speaking.
4. Listening.

Behavioural and human resource specialists clearly state that the most important skill of these four is listening. Most of us are poor listeners. If a reasonable communication time distribution for one person in a two person typical conversation/discussion is 50% talking and 50% listening time, what percentage distribution would you estimate for yourself? How would your closest associates rate you as a listener?

The ten rules for good listening are:

1. Stop talking.
2. Put the talker at ease.
3. Show you want to listen.
4. Remove distractions.
5. Empathise with the talker.
6. Be patient.
7. Hold your temper.
8. Avoid interruptions and don't argue.

9. Ask some questions as encouragement.
10. Stop talking.

5.2. Meetings

Many of us spend up to 50% of our time in various kinds of meeting. Mastering knowledge of the function, structure and process of a meeting is essential to improving time management skills. There are three major elements:

- How many are attending?
- What is the process?
- What is the content?

This expands to:

- How many are attending? 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, etc.
- What is the process? Typically attendees do one or more of the following:
 - Feed forward (information/reports/ideas).
 - Feedback (evaluative/reactive).
 - Creative/brainstorming (planning/proposals).
 - Decision (decision-making).
- What is the content? (this is the meeting agenda).

If you consider the above permutations and combinations that escalate with the number of meeting attendees, it is obvious that the meeting function and process must be well understood, planned and executed.

5.3. Steps to a Better Meeting

1. Plan the meeting carefully, who, what, when, where, why and how many.
2. Prepare and send out the standard agenda, fully completed, in advance.
3. Come early and checkout or set up the meeting room as you want it organised.
4. Start on time. Begin the moment you have a quorum.
5. Get participants to introduce themselves, if they do not already know each other and state the expectations for the meeting. What are you there to accomplish?
6. Clearly define roles.
7. Review, revise, and order the agenda, if required.
8. Set clear time limits in the agenda, if necessary, revise.
9. Review action items only from previous meeting.
10. Focus on the same problem in the same way at the same time. Do not evaluate when you are brainstorming, or fall into further reporting information when you are decision-making.
11. Establish action items, who, what, when.
12. Review meeting notes to see if anything has been overlooked.
13. Set the date, place and time of the next meeting, if required, and develop a preliminary agenda.
14. Evaluate progress of the meeting just completed.
15. Close the meeting on time crisply and positively.
16. Clean up and if required, rearrange the room.

17. Prepare the meeting minutes. Most meetings can be written up in a simple memo form, long detailed minutes are not required. What was the point considered, what was the outcome, ideas, information reviewed, decisions taken, what action by whom, required when.
18. Follow-up actions items before the next meeting, and begin to plan the next meeting agenda. Get input from probable attendees on agenda items before the next meeting.

6. Getting Started on Your Personal Programme

Follow these fourteen steps for a less stressful, more productive working and personal life:

1. Become aware of time. We only have time and skill to manage and offer clients.
2. Accept that you cannot beat the clock. Work smarter, not longer and harder.
3. Start to manage yourself and thereby your time. You will accomplish more in the workplace and have more time for your family and leisure.
4. Use the time log to discover your unproductive and unprofitable time wasters. Keep using it and watch the weekly hour totals increase for productive priority type tasks. Allocate time periods into workable do-able portions.
5. Start or improve your 'to-do' list by planning and use it every day. Use a priority 1,2,3, or A,B,C system and reschedule tasks as necessary.
6. Identify your priorities by tasks that offer the highest return on invested time, not by their reported or apparent urgency.
7. Finish a task before you start another. If interrupted, return to finish it.
8. After one to two months set a goal to double your productivity. Block out time to do things like delegate more to others. Plan longer periods of uninterrupted time. Hold shorter more productive meetings. Work on the plane and train.
9. Maintain as much of a controlled daily schedule as possible. Make use of your 'to-do' list, calendar, smartphone, PC alarm and support person.
10. Try to cut down on interruptions both internal and external. Close your door, or obstruct the entrance to your workspace for privacy. Call forward your telephone for at least two hours each day. Organise and persuade those around you of the critical importance of time planning. Control your environment, don't let it control you.

11. Plan and allow short periods of time for crises and external interruptions. As you improve your time planning and control techniques you will discover that there will be fewer of both. We frequently generate our own crises, sometimes without realising.
12. Do not schedule junk work or volunteer organisational involvement. Give it to your support person or do it at home.
13. Delegate as much as possible to others. Use delegation as a primary training technique for yourself and your subordinates. Most routine work is delegable. Delegate the right to be wrong. Experience is a series of mistakes, only made once, hopefully.
14. When you feel bogged down and your time management techniques do not seem to be working, don't despair. Review these fourteen points to see where you may be slipping back. Progress in time management is a series of wins and losses; remember, you can't win if you don't buy a ticket.