

Time Management

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10 strategies for better time management

The term **Time Management** is a misnomer. You cannot manage time; you manage the events in your life in relation to time. You may often wish for more time but you only get 24 hours, 1,440 minutes or 86,400 seconds each day. How you use that time depends on skills learned through self-analysis, planning, evaluation, and self-control.

Much like money, time is both valuable and limited: it must be protected, used wisely, and budgeted. People who practice good time management techniques often find that they:

- Are more productive,
- Have more energy for things they need to accomplish,
- Feel less stressed,
- Are able to do the things they want,
- Get more things done,
- Relate more positively to others, and
- Feel better about themselves

(Dodd and Sundheim, 2005).

Finding a time management strategy that works best for you depends on your personality, ability to self-motivate and level of self-discipline. By incorporating some, or all of the ten strategies below, you can more effectively manage your time.

Analyze where most of your time is devoted— job, family, personal, recreation, etc.

1. Know How You Spend Your Time

Keeping a time log is a helpful way to determine how you are using your time. Start by recording what you are doing for 15-minute intervals for a week or two. Evaluate the results. Ask if you did everything that was needed; determine which tasks require the most time; determine the time of day when you are most productive; and analyze where most of your time is devoted – job, family, personal, recreation, etc. Identifying your most time-consuming tasks and determining whether you are investing your time in the most important activities can help you to determine a course of action. In addition, having a good sense of the amount of time required for routine tasks can help you be more realistic in planning and estimating how much time is available for other activities.

2. Set Priorities

Managing your time effectively requires a distinction between what is *important* and what is *urgent* (MacKenzie, 1990). Experts agree that the most important tasks usually aren't the most urgent tasks. However, we tend to let the urgent dominate our lives. Covey, Merrill, and Merrill (1994) categorize our activities into four quadrants in their *Time Management Matrix*: urgent, not urgent, important and not important. While activities that are both urgent and important must be done, Covey et.al. suggests that we spend less time on activities that are not important (regardless of their urgency) in order to gain time to focus on activities that are not urgent but important. Focusing on these important activities allows you to gain greater control over your time and possibly reduce the number of important tasks that do become urgent.

One of the easiest ways to prioritize is to make a "to do" list. Whether you need a daily, weekly or monthly list depends on your lifestyle. Just be careful not to allow the list-making to get out of control and do not keep multiple lists at the same time. Rank the items on your "to do" list in order of priority (both important and urgent). You may choose to group items in categories such as high, medium and low, number them in order, or use a color coding system. Keep in mind that your goal is not to mark off the most items; rather you want to mark off the highest priority items (MacKenzie, 1990). Having a prioritized "to do" list allows you to say "no" to activities that may be interesting or provide a sense of achievement but do not fit your basic priorities.

3. Use a Planning Tool

Time management experts recommend using a personal planning tool to improve your productivity. Examples of personal planning tools include electronic planners, pocket diaries, calendars, computer programs, wall charts, index cards and notebooks. Writing down your tasks, schedules, and memory joggers can free your mind to focus on your priorities. Auditory learners may prefer to dictate their thoughts instead. The key is to find one planning tool that works for you and use that tool consistently. Some reminders when using a planning tool are:

- Always record your information on the tool itself. Jotting notes elsewhere that have to be transferred later is inefficient.
- Review your planning tool daily.
- Carry your planning tool with you.
- Remember to keep a list of your priorities in your planning tool and refer to it often.
- Synchronize electronic planners with your computer and recharge the batteries in your planner on a regular basis.
- Keep a back-up system.

Suggestions for Using a Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) for Time Management

Capabilities of PDAs vary by the model and some users include WiFi or cellular technology on their handheld device. Some suggestions for using your PDA to its capacity are:

- Assign a different color for each calendar item so that you can distinguish personal appointments from business meetings, for example.
- Use the task application feature to manage projects. Most PDAs allow the user to group tasks under separate headings, prioritize tasks and assign deadlines.
- Use the repeat function for recurring dates such as birthdays, anniversaries, and regularly scheduled meetings.
- Investigate additional software and hardware that is compatible with your PDA. You may be able to enter information more quickly using a portable, detachable keyboard rather than a stylus, for example. Or, you may want the ability to access the Internet for retrieving files or checking other calendars. (Beckwith, 2006)
- Place a notebook the size of your PDA in your carrying case for writing down “to dos” if you have difficulty recording them with your PDA’s task application feature (Morgenstern, 2004).

4. Get Organized

Implement a system that allows you to handle information only once.

Most people find that disorganization results in poor time management. Professional organizers recommend that you first get rid of the clutter. A frequently used method is to set up three boxes (or

corners of a room) labeled “Keep” – “Give Away” – “Toss.” Separate the clutter by sorting items into these boxes. Immediately discard items in your “Toss” box. Your “Give Away” box may include items you want to sell, delegate, or discontinue so find a method to eliminate these items such as a yard sale, charitable donation, or gifts to friends or family members outside your home. With the clutter gone, the next step is to implement a system that allows you to handle information (e.g., tasks, papers, e-mail, etc.) less, only once, when possible. Basically you have 5 options for handling information:

1. Throw it away, delete it, or otherwise get rid of it.
2. Delegate it: give it to someone else to do, file, or respond.
3. Act on it yourself. Then throw it away or file it.
4. File it temporarily until it needs action or until additional information is received. Follow-up: a “tickler” file can be useful for holding temporary information.
5. File it permanently where you can easily find it later.

(Dodd and Sundheim, 2005).

5. Schedule Your Time Appropriately

Even the busiest people find time for what they want to do and feel is important. Scheduling is not just recording what you *have* to do (e.g., meetings and appointments), it is also making a time commitment to the things you *want* to do. Good scheduling requires that you know yourself. Using your time log, you should have determined those times during the day when you are most productive and alert. Plan your most challenging tasks for when you have the most energy. Block out time for your high priority activities first and protect that time from interruptions. If you know you will have waiting time or commuting time, schedule small tasks such as writing a letter, jotting down a shopping list, reading or listening to educational audiotapes to capitalize on the time loss (Lakein, 1973). Try to limit scheduled time to about 3/4ths of your day, leaving time for creative activities such as planning, dreaming, thinking, and reading.

Block out time for your high priority activities first and protect that time from interruptions.

6. Delegate: Get Help from Others

Delegation means assigning responsibility for a task to someone else, freeing up some of your time for tasks that require your expertise. Delegation begins by identifying tasks that others can do and then selecting the appropriate person(s) to do them. You need to select someone with the appropriate skills, experience, interest, and authority needed to accomplish the task. Be as specific as possible in defining the task and your expectations, but allow the person some freedom to personalize the task. Occasionally check to determine how well the person is progressing and to provide any assistance, being careful not to take over the responsibility. Finally, don't forget to reward the person for a job well done or make suggestions for improvements if needed. (Dodd and Sundheim, 2005)

Another way to get help is to "buy" time by obtaining goods or service that save you a time investment. For example, paying someone to mow your lawn or clean your house, using a computerized system, or joining a carpool to transport your children to their extracurricular activities can allow you free time to devote to other activities.

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7. Stop Procrastinating

You may be putting off tasks for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the task seems overwhelming or unpleasant. Try breaking down the task into smaller segments that require less time commitment and result in specific, realistic deadlines. If you're having trouble getting started, you may need to complete a preparatory task such as collecting materials or organizing your notes. Also, try building in a reward system as you complete each small segment of the task.

Perhaps the task seems overwhelming or unpleasant.

8. Manage External Time Wasters

Your time may be impacted by external factors imposed by other people and things. You can decrease or eliminate time spent in these activities by implementing some simple tips listed below.

- Use voice mail and set aside time to return calls.
- Avoid small talk. Stay focused on the reason for the call.
- Stand up while you talk on the phone. You are more likely to keep the conversation brief.

- Take any necessary action immediately following the call.
- Set aside times of the day for receiving calls and let others know when you are available.
- Keep phone numbers readily available near the telephone.

- Establish blocks of time when you are available for visits.
- Tell the visitor politely that you cannot meet with them at this time and schedule the visit for a more convenient time.
- Set a mutually agreeable time limit for the visit.
- When someone comes to the door, stand up and have your meeting standing.

- Know the purpose of the meeting in advance.
- Arrive on time.
- Start and end the meeting on time.
- Prepare an agenda and stick to it. Use a timed agenda, if necessary.
- Don't schedule meetings unless they are necessary and have a specific purpose or agenda.

- Set aside a specific time to view and respond to your mail and e-mail, but don't let it accumulate to the point that it becomes overwhelming to sort.
- Turn off instant messaging features on e-mail.
- Handle each item only once, if possible. Practice the options for dealing with clutter listed earlier.

- Sort mail near a garbage can and delete junk e-mail immediately from your electronic mailbox.
- Answer written messages by responding on the margins or bottom of the page.
- Establish a master calendar for each family member to post their time commitments.
- Make each family member responsible for consulting the master calendar for potential conflicts.
- Create a central area for posting communications such as appointment reminders, announcements, and messages.

9. Avoid Multi-tasking

You lose time when switching from one task to another, resulting in a loss of productivity.

Recent psychological studies have shown that multi-tasking does not actually save time. In fact, the opposite is often true. You lose time when switching from one task to another, resulting in a loss of productivity. (Rubinsteim, Meyer, and Evans, 2001).

Routine multi-tasking may lead to difficulty in concentrating and maintaining focus when needed.

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10. Stay Healthy

Scheduling time to relax can help you rejuvenate both physically and mentally.

The care and attention you give yourself is an important investment of time. Scheduling time to relax, or do nothing, can help you rejuvenate both physically and mentally, enabling you to accomplish tasks more quickly and easily. Learn to manage time according to your biological clock by scheduling priority tasks during your peak time of day, the time your energy level and concentration are at their best. Poor time management can result in fatigue, moodiness, and more frequent illness. To reduce stress, you should reward yourself for a time management success. Take time to recognize that you have accomplished a major task or challenge before moving on to the next activity.

Regardless of the time management strategies you use, you should take time to evaluate how they have worked for you. Ask yourself a few simple questions: Do you have a healthy balance between work and home life? Are you accomplishing the tasks that are most important in your life? Are you investing enough time in your own personal wellbeing? If the answer is “no” to any of these questions, then reconsider your time management strategies and select ones that work better for you. Remember that successful time management today can result in greater personal happiness, greater accomplishments at home and at work, increased productivity, and a more satisfying future.

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