



Effective Time Management

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Good time management has always been an important skill, but in these tough times, it is now essential. Factors such as widespread corporate restructuring, accelerating change, information overload and the need to sell more whilst balancing private and working lives have put the squeeze on us all to get much more from our working day.

This means working harder and smarter so that you get your share of the business that is still out there. Remember, 95% of people don't have a plan and the key to success is confidence and planning.

Definition

Time management is a vital aspect of self management. It involves utilising time to create maximum personal effectiveness and efficiency. This is achieved by planning how best to use your time and successfully implementing the plan.

Advantages

Effective time management enables you to:

- achieve control over your activities and increase the efficiency of your work
- achieve a good balance between work, rest and play
- become proactive rather than reactive in your management style
- deal with problems as they arise rather than letting them grow
- build in time for constructive personal development
- save money by increasing efficiency and achieving more
- complete important tasks on time and avoid wasting time on unimportant tasks
- have time to listen to others
- be well-perceived by others and differentiated from less well-organised colleagues
- relieve pressure and stress
- achieve your goals / targets
- go home from the office on time.

Action checklist and tips

1. Establish how your time is spent

Look back through your diary or logsheet to work out how you spend your time. If you have not done so, log your activities for a period of two weeks to see where your time is going. Ask yourself:

- how much of your activity was a result of planning and how much was unplanned
- how accurate your planning was - did you complete tasks in the time allowed?
- how much time was spent on routine activities which could be delegated
- how often interruptions diverted you from your tasks
- at what time of day you accomplished most.

2. Determine your problem areas

What is making you use time inefficiently? Split problems into the Enemy Without and the Enemy Within. The Enemy Without includes external factors beyond your immediate control, such as mistakes or inefficiencies of other departments, unexpected extra tasks, and complaints. The Enemy Within is personal inefficiency, and includes poor planning, lack of assertiveness in turning away unwanted callers, and putting off problems and unenjoyable activities.

3. Be clear on your objectives and priorities

Before you can successfully manage your time, you must make sure that you are familiar with your job description and with what you should and should not be doing as part of your job. Agree your precise role, objectives and targets with both your superiors and subordinates so that everyone knows what is expected of you, and put this in writing.

4. Tackle the Enemy Without

If you find that problem relationships, complaints, and reaction to situations beyond your control take up too much of your time, try to minimise this by:

- setting service level agreements which detail what each department expects from others, and improving interdepartmental communication
- reviewing complaints procedures and setting up a more efficient system
- examining personnel policies which might be giving rise to interpersonal tension or inefficient work practices
- asking colleagues to be concise when giving written or oral reports.

5. Tackle the Enemy Within

Make more constructive use of your time by:

Planning

- map out your activities a week in advance
- spend five minutes each morning reviewing your time plan and adjust it as circumstances change
- build slack time into your schedule so that you do not constantly overrun
- have a back-up plan for contingency situations - decide which tasks can be dropped, who can be called on to help out, and who will need to be notified if you are consequently delayed with other activities
- plan time for relaxation and recreation as well as work.

Prioritising

- rank tasks in order of importance - try to be objective and avoid ranking highly those tasks which you enjoy but are not that vital
- be firm but polite in refusing to do tasks which are not your responsibility
- maintain clear objectives on what you are trying to achieve and allocate your time accordingly.

Delegating

- assess which tasks can be delegated to someone else
- choose carefully who you delegate to - is the person knowledgeable and competent in this area? Does he or she have the time and willingness to do the task? Will you be offending anyone else?
- make sure you give clear instructions so that the task is done well
- give regular routine tasks to your secretary - fifteen minutes spent showing him or her how to do it will result in hours being saved over a year
- involve others in projects and share the workload
- train your employees to manage their time effectively too.

Reviewing how you work

- plan to do important activities at the time of day when you function best
- break down complex tasks into manageable chunks
- avert unwanted interruptions - if necessary, ask your secretary to ward off unwanted callers, work somewhere other than your office, or simply put a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door (make sure that people know it means what it says)
- work at home for a day occasionally, if this is allowed and if home is a quiet environment
- talk to people instead of writing - this can result in a quicker response and quicker decision making
- avoid task hopping - concentrate on one thing at a time
- batch similar tasks together
- have breaks or switch tasks when you feel tired or have a mental block
- keep accurate records and an organised filing system to save time locating information or having to compile documents again
- make use of new technology - but only if it really will save time
- minimise paperwork and avoid unnecessary duplication
- make sure the meetings you attend are really necessary and if running one yourself make sure it is well-organised
- look at your travel arrangements for commuting or work trips - can you eliminate unnecessary journeys or shorten them?

6. Do it now

This is based on a great book called *Do it Now: Break the Procrastination Habit* by William J. Knaus. It encourages us to get things done straight away, rather than spending our lives shuffling piles of paper and writing lists. If it can be done quickly, just do it. This particularly applies to the jobs people avoid like planning and prospecting.

7. Understand the Pareto principle.

80% of our effective work tends to be done in 20% of our time. We waste a lot of time being busy. Here is another statistic. Most people spend only 5% of their time in productive situations. In a study carried out across Europe, it was also found that 41% of the average person's time is spent in the car. Our aim must be to increase the time we spend productively.

8. Make time to play

Overwork is counter-productive. It can cause stress and unhappiness, and decrease the time efficiency which you worked so hard to achieve. However well-organised you are, there are still only 24 hours in a day and you need to devote an adequate proportion of them to yourself. Don't be afraid to take ten minutes for a tea break or a walk around the park, or an hour to go to the gym. Try to maintain a healthy work / home-life balance.

Dos and don'ts for effective time management

Do

- Clarify your objectives and targets.
- Assess priorities and constantly review them as circumstances change.
- Be firm and assertive with unwanted time stealers.
- Make sure your time plan is efficient but realistic.

Don't

- Equate being busy with being efficient.
- Attempt to do more than you are capable of.
- Give priority to the loudest claim on your time - it may not be the most important.
- Assume your plans are rigid - environments and situations change and you will need to adapt.
- See time management as purely a work issue - it is a personal issue and spans both work and home and the balance between them.

Thought starters

- Do you feel in control of your day?
- Do you have a plan of what you intend to accomplish each day?
- Do you keep both a diary of appointments and a diary of what actually happened?
- Do you put off tasks which you don't like doing?
- Are you frustrated by interruptions and unnecessary demands on your time?
- Do you agree to do things that you know someone else should be doing?
- Are you kept waiting by other people? Do you keep others waiting?
- Is your social or family life suffering because of pressure at work and long hours?
- Do you get enough time to yourself?