

Time Management Techniques

Most of us wish we had more hours in the day to get things done. Not using your time wisely can make work more stressful and lower your performance. The key to maximizing your resources is excellent time management skills. With just a little effort and time, you can be more effective and efficient at work and in other aspects of your life.

Examine How You Spend Your Time

Many busy people comment that they do not know where all their time goes. Keeping a log can help you better understand how you spend your time. For a week or so, keep a record of what you do each day and how much time you spend doing it. Create a simple calendar to keep on your desk to track dates, tasks, and the start and end times for each activity. If you are being totally honest, you should keep track of the time you spend on personal tasks, such as phone calls and personal email. Set aside a time at the end of your recording period to review and analyze the information.

Think about the types of activities you regularly perform. Group them into rough categories, such as meetings, office email, report writing, etc. Next, calculate how much time you devote to these tasks. Ask yourself if they take longer than they should. Determine how much time these activities realistically should take, and try to stick to that time limit in the future.

At the same time, make note when:

- You delay working on a task simply because it is unpleasant.
- You could delegate tasks to other people. The idea is to free up time so you can apply yourself to tasks that require higher skill levels. We all have been guilty of believing it is simpler to do things ourselves rather than to wait for others to do them or teach them how to do them.
- You are spending time helping others do their work.
- You could handle work better if it was more clearly defined. If this is the case, you should ask your supervisor for clarification and obtain agreement on expected results.
- You could work more effectively if you were not constantly pulled off of one task to work on another. This issue is a bit trickier to handle and will require tact. You may wish to work with your boss to set priorities so you can better schedule your activities.

Prioritize

If you are like most workers, the tasks you perform range broadly in importance. By prioritizing your activities, you can put the most effort into your important tasks. To prioritize your activities, break your tasks down into categories:

- High priorities that either have a direct value to what you and others do now or have pressing deadlines
- Medium priorities that will pay off later down the road
- Low priorities that have minor value and little direct bearing on what you do now, such as filling out forms
- Activities that are a total waste of time, which you most likely should discontinue.
- The goal is to make the most of your time. You can do this by:
 - Batching tasks according to priority whenever possible
 - Focusing the majority of your efforts on those tasks that only you can do
 - Delegating or eliminating low-priority tasks to others.

Manage Your Time

Get in the habit of filling out an appointment book or calendar on a weekly or monthly basis with all appointments, meetings and deadlines. Once you get the feel for your schedule, consider whether you can move, shift, or even eliminate any appointments. Make sure you clearly understand project deadlines.

You also can manage your time better by being prepared for short-term tasks. Review existing and new assignments daily. If you have a report scheduled, make sure you have the materials on hand to write it. If you have a meeting scheduled, block out time to write up notes afterward.

When working on a deadline that involves the delivery of a report, meeting or presentation, make sure the project is clearly defined. Break down the task into smaller pieces you can accomplish easily. This will help you build momentum and allow you to build in quality assurance as you complete each piece. You can also benefit from time saved if you

complete a section faster than expected.

Deal With Deadlines

Deadlines generally are not flexible. However, many projects are plagued with unexpected problems and complications. When working on a large project with a set deadline, take advantage of any free time to work ahead to prevent last-minute crunches.

Another strategy for coping with deadlines is to go over a list of competing tasks and seek confirmation of priorities. Review priorities with your boss or co-workers to decide the order of importance for tasks associated with a project. You also need to consider whether a given deadline is realistic. If you know there is some problem with a project, you need to discuss how to handle the situation in the beginning stages of the project. If you do not address problems early, you stand a greater chance of failure and will likely encounter more stress in finishing the project.

Do not forget to think of the rest of the people on your team. Other people or activities may depend on the timely completion of your task. If it is clear from the outset that you cannot complete a project on schedule, you should inform others as soon as possible.

Remember the Little Things

Planning goes beyond keeping track of your own time. You must figure into your schedule tasks done by others, such as typing reports, circulating memos or researching issues. Make sure you set deadlines for others and have made the nature of their tasks clear.

The Payoff

Time management involves the application of simple, specific strategies. With very little effort, you can realize major results. Taking a close look at how you spend your time can reveal potential problems and allow you to address them effectively.

Keeping track of your time can provide you with valuable information for future planning. Careful planning not only will save you time, but will also help eliminate stress.

Resources

- U.S. Department of Labor: www.dol.gov
- National Institute of Mental Health: www.nimh.nih.gov

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