

Time Management: How to Make Time Work for You

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Time is one thing you cannot make more of. It's arguably your most valuable commodity. Time management is the process of planning and controlling how to spend your time on specific activities to achieve your goals and increase your productivity. If done properly it reduces stress & burnout, improves efficiency, and balances work, social life, family and personal interests. Most people struggling with truly understanding how long time is. It can feel slow or fast to various people given what is going on in that moment.

There are a variety of reasons that people struggle with time management. Some of these include:

- Bring a micromanager: You struggle with delegation and spend your time ensuring you manage others at a detriment to your own time management.
- Lack of resources allowing you to be successful (that includes people, time, etc): Sometimes there is not enough time in the day. Sometimes despite the individual having great time management, they struggle with accomplishing goals due to a lack of having appropriate resources.
- No support from others: Good time management may require help from others so you are provided the time and resources needed to get things done.
- Distractions: People are their own worst enemy. It's hard to stay on track when your brain wants to wander.

Despite all the reasons why time management may be a struggle, distractions still are the large majority of the reason why individuals struggle with time management. Cell phones, other people, pet patients, emails and more are always causing a distraction. Since distractions are the largest issues in the inability to manage time appropriately it should be the largest area of consideration. It also is the something that can be controlled with regards to time management. Often, more employees, other people or lack of resources are uncontrollable for time management.

One area of time management that all people struggle with is when it comes to task transitions. When shifting from one task to another or even one patient to another there will be time lost between two items because it takes a certain amount of time for your brain to shift gears. The more complex the task, the more time lost in-between. On average it takes 5-15 minutes to fully shift to a new task.

There are apps dedicated to task management and task switching. When tackling projects utilizing an app may help you keep on task complete with timers and an accountability app. Some of these include "Be Focused", "OurHome", "Prioritize" and "Toggl Track"

Ultimately all time management issues can be corrected through one of four methods:

- Organization
- Clear obtainable goals
- Clear understanding of goals
- Accountability check-ins

Organization:

The more you try to mentally try to track things in your brain, the less productive you will be.. The first step to making a better to-do list is to get it out of your head. Getting things out of your head means you have freed up space allowing you to focus on the task at hand. Your brain doesn't have infinite space. It learns to retain information it knows it needs to remember (like how to drive a car), but it also learns where it can find information so it doesn't store information you don't need (like using google maps). Writing down tasks, deadlines and due dates in one place will allow you to actually work on the tasks rather than worrying about remembering you need to do them.

Organization also requires time management skills. There are a variety of techniques out there, but all require individuals to try them out, practice with them and decide what works best.

Time blocking: Time blocking is when you block off chunks of time. This may work well for patient management or meetings, but being able to block off all events like eating, breaks, etc will help improve your time management even further. If you are not good at time blocking you may struggle with accomplishing everything you want to in a day.

Time boxing: For each task, create a goal to finish it by a specific time. Time boxing is a productivity technique that involves allocating fixed time periods, or "boxes," to specific tasks or activities. Instead of working on a task until it's complete, you commit to spending a set amount of time on it, regardless of whether it's finished at the end. This method helps to create a sense of urgency and can prevent procrastination, as you're more likely to stay focused and motivated when you know you have a limited time to work on something. Time boxing also encourages better planning and prioritization, as you need to think about how much time to allocate to each task. It can be particularly useful for managing large projects or balancing multiple responsibilities, ensuring that you make steady progress without getting overwhelmed.

The Pomodoro technique: The Pomodoro technique can help you get hyper-focused work done. It's a simple structure developed by Francesco Cirillo in the late 1980s. It's named after the Italian word for "tomato," inspired by the tomato-shaped kitchen timer Cirillo used during university. The technique involves breaking work into intervals, traditionally 25 minutes in length, called "Pomodoros," separated by short breaks. After four Pomodoros, you take a longer break, usually 15 to 30 minutes. This approach encourages sustained concentration and helps to minimize distractions, making tasks more manageable. The frequent breaks can also help improve mental agility and reduce burnout. By tracking the number of Pomodoros completed, you can get a better sense of how you spend your time and find ways to increase your productivity.

Eat the frog: It might sound like a weird time management technique, but the eat the frog method comes from a famous Mark Twain quote: "If it's your job to eat a frog, it's best to do it first thing in the morning. And if it's your job to eat two frogs, it's best to eat the biggest one first." The idea is to tackle your most challenging and important task—the "frog"—first thing in the morning, before anything else. By doing this, you set a positive and productive tone for the rest of the day, as you've already completed the hardest task. This method helps to overcome

procrastination and build momentum, ensuring that you focus on what truly matters and make significant progress towards your goals.

Managing Emails

Contrary to popular belief, Inbox Zero doesn't always mean having zero emails in your inbox. This email management philosophy was created by productivity expert Merlin Mann. The goal is to keep your email inbox empty, or nearly empty, at all times, ensuring that no messages are left unread, unprocessed, or pending a response. The "Zero" doesn't refer to having zero emails, but to the amount of time and mental energy you spend on your inbox. The strategy encourages regularly checking and processing emails, then taking one of five actions: delete, delegate, respond, defer, or do. Working through your emails from top to bottom is more productive than picking and choosing. By following this approach, you can prevent email overload, reduce stress, and maintain focus on more important tasks.

Clear Obtainable Goals

Is it even possible to accomplish what you want to in the time you want to? If the goals are not obtainable then it doesn't matter. For example, if a veterinary technician has 20 patients the goal of getting through all the treatments and patient care in two hours is not obtainable. First asking yourself if the goals you have are even obtainable in the time frame allotted is the first step in time management.

Clear Understanding of Goals

Does the individual or even you have an understanding of the goal you need to accomplish? For many, the lack of guidelines and expectations end up hijacking time. Ensuring that descriptions of projects are written down or job roles is important.

Accountability check-ins

Who is holding you accountable? Without any check-ins time can be easily abused. Even telling your friends or family that you are working towards a goal is more likely for you to accomplish it. Using reward based systems can also help you in your accountability. If you know that you do XYZ you will treat yourself to a movie, meal or walk outside will likely keep you more on track.

Neurodivergent Individuals

This is a term used to describe people whose thought patterns, behaviors, or learning styles fall outside of what is considered normal or neurotypical. In the United States the statistics are about 15-20% of the population are neurodivergent. There is a huge range of disorders, each of which is unique in their needs for learning and working. Most of the disorders result in the person having difficulty staying on task or following through.

While you cannot suggest that the person is a neurodivergent if it is something the individual discloses you need to ask them what they need. It is not the responsibility of the leadership to know what works best for every team member, but it is their responsibility to ask what their needs are, how they can help and do the best to accommodate unique needs.

Most neurodivergent individuals do well with many of the same techniques as other:

- Breaking down large tasks into smaller, more manageable ones
- Set deadlines (realistic ones)

- WRITE IT DOWN!! Use an in-your-face planner or calendar
- Set reminders and visual ones
- Speak to a professional skilled in that neurodivergent behavior

Coaching Styles

Leadership often plays a direct role on how well a time manages their time throughout the day. A Gartner 2018 study looked at 7,300 employees and what resonated with the employees as effective coaching styles. They coded 90 variables, which went into defining four coaching styles. The study stated that of the four coaching methods, employees resonated with one or two significantly more than the others.

The four coaching styles that were defined were:

1. Teacher Managers: They coached employees using their knowledge and experience. They provided clear instructions on how to accomplish tasks.
2. Always-On Managers: They provided continual coaching and stayed on top of the employee's development. Employees constantly received information about their performance.
3. Connector Managers: They provided targeted feedback in their areas of expertise but sought to connect employees with others on the team who had better skillsets in other areas.
4. Cheerleader Managers: They took a hands-off approach, delivered positive feedback, and put employees in charge of their development.

The study concluded that employees responded least favorably to the Always-on Managers. While the researchers did agree that the management knowledge of these managers was far superior to the other three coaching styles, the constant hands-on approach was overwhelming and detrimental to the employees. For most people the Always-on Manager style is often referred to as a micromanager. When managers are micromanagers they waste their time and others.

The manager that employees resonated with the most was the Connector Manager. Connectors, the research found, spent more time than the other types assessing the skills, needs, and interests of their employees. They got to know their employees. Connectors were able to recognize that some skills were taught more efficiently by other people. When the Connector Manager did not have the answer, they looked to the team for help. They delegated.

Delegation

It is not your job to do everything. No matter what you are doing in life you should learn what tasks you have to do and which ones you can delegate.

How Do You Know If You Need to Delegate?

Red flag No. 1: You say things like, “I’m overwhelmed. I get sucked into too many meetings,” or “I’m drained by all of the decisions that I have to make.”

Red flag No. 2: Your ability to unplug can only be measured in hours, not days or weeks.

Red flag No. 3: You don’t delegate a task because a portion of the process is complex or has exceptions.

Red flag No. 4: You once tried to delegate a responsibility and it didn’t go well, so you took the task back.

Red flag No. 5: You find yourself stuck in a decision bottleneck, leading to inaction on many fronts.

Red flag No. 6: You aren’t happy or fulfilled at work.

Red flag No. 7: You claim you don’t have time to delegate or train someone.

Six Steps to Letting Go & Delegating

Recognition is First

The first step in delegating is recognizing you need to. It’s not just about you; it’s about creating trust and respect in your team. Yes, delegating will help you in a leadership role, but it is going to provide even more benefits to your employees.

Choose an Item to Let Go

Make sure you pick the right task to let go. Choose something easy to train and will make someone else successful. Don’t choose something that should only be your responsibility (e.g., payroll).

Pick the Right Person

You need to know who on your team has the highest number of relevant skills for a task so that they will be successful. Too many leaders will delegate tasks to whoever has the least amount on their plate or who they are most comfortable with. Many leaders think that giving up a task or asking for help is a sign of weakness. They will only give the task to someone who they know will not judge them. Pick the best-suited person.

Provide Clear Instructions

This is where I went wrong. I handed someone a blank order sheet and told them to order. As a leader, if you have specific preferences for how the task should be carried out, then you need to include that information. If there are deadlines or milestones, you need to make them explicit. Including instructions and details will avoid most communication issues in the future. No employee likes just to be handed something with no instructions and then told they did it wrong.

Trust, but Also Double Check

Let the employee know that if it is a task that will be repeated, you are going to check the work the first few times to make sure that it was executed correctly. For example, if you decide to transfer the task of scheduling front desk employees to another employee, you should double-check the schedule for the first two months. Make sure there aren't any errors before allowing them to publish it. Don't hover over them every step of the way. Let them work through this task using their own style. If it is a task that only occurs once, you should check in periodically and ask how it is going.

Offer Feedback

If the employee completed a task that was a one-and-done, tell them how they did. Coach them if they need help. If it is a job that gets done periodically throughout the year or even once a month, be sure to thank them for helping you. We certainly do not want that employee to think you are taking advantage of them. They should feel a sense of pride that they have this responsibility and are playing a crucial role in helping the team, not just you. They should feel appreciated.

Setting Boundaries

Those around you need to understand and respect your boundaries. Being interrupted constantly will hijack your time. Using sentences like "Is this something I need to address right now" or "Do I need to stop what I'm doing to address your concern" are valuable teaching methods in teaching others to respect your boundaries.

Conclusion

Time management is hard for most people, but utilizing some techniques and learning what works best for you will help you and others in your time management journey.