

Time Management Techniques

Most of us wish we had more hours in the day to get everything done. Poor time management can lead to more stress at work and a decline in your performance. The key to maximising your resources is excellent time management skills. With a bit of effort and time, you can become more effective and efficient both at work and in other areas of your life.

Examine How You Spend Your Time

Many busy people say 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 emails. Set aside a time at the end of your recording period to review and analyse the information.

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

At the same time, consider when:

- You delay working on a task simply because it is unpleasant.
- You could delegate tasks to other people. The aim is to free up time so you can focus on tasks that demand a higher level of skill. We've all been guilty of thinking it was easier to do things ourselves rather than wait for others or teach them how to do it.
- 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 manager for clarification and agree on the expected results.
- You could work more effectively if you were not constantly brought off one task to work on another. This issue is a bit trickier to handle and will require tact. It could be helpful to work with your manager to establish priorities, allowing you to organise your tasks more efficiently.

Prioritise

If you're like most employees, the tasks you carry out vary widely in importance. By prioritising your activities, you can put the most effort into your important tasks. To prioritise 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 line
- Low priorities that have little value and direct bearing on what you do now, such as filling in forms
- Activities that are a total waste of time, which you should probably stop doing

The goal is to make the most of your time. You can do this by:

- Grouping 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 into the habit of filling in an appointment book or calendar on a weekly or monthly basis with all appointments, meetings, and deadlines. Once you get a 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 to do, make sure you have the materials on hand to write it. If you have a meeting to attend, block out time to write up any notes afterwards.

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 chunks that you can easily achieve. This will help you gain momentum and enable you to ensure quality as you complete each task. You can also benefit from time saved if you complete a section faster than expected.

Coping with Deadlines

Deadlines are not generally flexible. However, many projects are beset with unexpected problems and complications. When working on a large project with a fixed deadline, make use of any free time to get ahead and avoid a last-minute scramble.

Another strategy for managing deadlines is to review a list of competing tasks and confirm the priorities. Review priorities with your manager or colleagues to decide the order of importance for tasks associated with a project.

You also need to consider whether the deadline is realistic. If you know there is a problem with a project, you need to discuss how to manage the situation in its early stages. If you do not tackle issues early, you are at a higher risk of failure and will likely face increased stress when completing the project.

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

Remember the Little Things

Planning goes beyond keeping track of your own time. It's important to factor in tasks completed by others, like typing reports, distributing memos, or conducting research, when planning your schedule. Ensure that you set deadlines for others and communicate the nature of their tasks.

The Payoff

Time management involves the application of simple, specific strategies. With very little effort, you can achieve major results. A close examination of 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 reduce stress.

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