

# Managing Your Time More Effectively

Phil Yates explains how make the most of your working day.

HAVE YOU NOTICED how incredibly busy everyone is these days? Customers, colleagues, competitors – life is crammed full of activity. The things we want to do today get postponed until tomorrow and we wonder at the end of each day just what exactly we have achieved? Those of us who prefer to be organised and well-planned find ourselves fire-fighting and managing crises, whilst even those of us who enjoy the stimulation of the last minute rush begin to experience excessive pressure.

We can be excused for believing that “there aren’t enough hours in the day” and that “time flies”; however, it is highly likely that we can learn to manage both our time and ourselves more efficiently. So let’s begin by acknowledging those common ‘time robbers’.

## TIME ROBBERS

Imposed upon us	Self-inflicted
Unclear job definition	Personal disorganisation
Interruptions	Failure to delegate
Waiting for answers	Poor attitude
Unnecessary meetings	Absent-mindedness
Too much work	Failure to listen
Poor communication	Indecision
Shifting priorities	Socialising
Equipment failure	Fatigue
Disorganised boss	Lack of self-discipline
Bureaucracy	Leaving tasks unfinished
Conflicting priorities	Paper shuffling
Low company morale	Procrastination
Untrained staff	Outside activities
Colleague or customer demands	Cluttered workspace
Lack of authority	Unclear personal objectives
Travelling	Perfectionism
Mistakes of others	Poor planning
Revised deadlines	Preoccupation
Meetings	Taking on too much

Not all of these time robbers are avoidable. Some, like meetings and lack of authority, may be beyond our control. Many of them creep into our lives and steal time away. Look at the above list and identify the time robbers that cause you personally the greatest difficulty and give them a ranking from one to ten. After reading this article, you can then develop an action plan to eliminate them.

It will come as no surprise that one of the basic principles of time management is prioritisation. Pareto’s rule states that 20% of what we do delivers 80% of our results. The alarming implication of this is that 80% of our time is spent being only 20% effective! It

therefore follows that in order to identify the 20% of activities that will make us successful, we first need to be absolutely clear about our role within the organisation and exactly what we are expected to achieve. That discussion with your line manager may well be an activity to prioritise!

So what about other activities – how should they be prioritised?

All activities may be classified against two criteria. Is the activity **urgent** and is the activity **important**? Something urgent requires immediate attention, for example a ringing telephone. Have you noticed how Receptionists will often answer a telephone before dealing with people who are standing in front of them? The fact that something is urgent, however, does not necessarily mean that it is important. Something important contributes to your job purpose, your objectives, and indeed to your values. All activities that demand your time and effort therefore may be classified against these two criteria of urgency and importance. By then evaluating these classifications within a simple matrix, we can choose a strategy to deal with them.

We will definitely encounter some urgent, important activities in our day-to-day life; however, some of us focus too much within this quadrant and are driven by the urgency of the task more than its importance. If this is the case, then you will be constantly reacting to crises, fire-fighting, rushing around being very busy and feeling pressured. In the short term, being in this quadrant can feel good, exciting and stimulating – however, in the

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	Do it now Do it yourself	Do it later
Not Important	Delegate it	Don’t do it

longer term it can be exhausting. You will not be in control of your own diary or your own life and when you do occasionally move out of this quadrant, it will be to spend time on non-urgent, unimportant activities to recover from the exhaustion

Much of our time is taken up with urgent, unimportant activity. Many of the time-robbers listed above fall into this category and, again, some people are overly focused on these activities. These are extremely busy people who continually react to the urgency of tasks, often given to them by someone else. These tasks may make little or no contribution to them achieving

their own objectives and perhaps require some investigation before being prioritised over other more important tasks?

Non-urgent and unimportant activities may be very tempting to undertake. These may include reading junk mail, responding to some e-mails and making some phone calls. Sometimes we are tempted to focus on these activities before we start working on our more important tasks, but of course they take longer than we had expected and we slip into procrastination. These tasks do not require immediate attention and make little contribution to our objectives. They are often used as an escape from the stress of the urgent tasks. Being in this quadrant short term might feel good and stress-free but longer term we may wonder what we have achieved.

Ideally we should try to prioritise activities which are important but not urgent, to prevent them from eventually becoming important and urgent. If we adopt this approach, we are able to plan ahead, schedule tasks into our diaries, regain control of our lives and allocate time to those activities which contribute to our success. These tasks make a valuable contribution to our role, objectives and values. By planning ahead, we are also able to create time for other activities such as coaching others to develop the ability to take on some of our routine tasks. We can also ensure that we prepare effective business plans and then schedule time to review progress and modify our actions accordingly.

I mentioned procrastination earlier. Procrastination is postponing (often unpleasant) activities until later and is indeed the thief of time. We are all tempted to put off making sensitive or emotionally disturbing phone calls. We often postpone larger tasks until we have ‘time’ to do them and we have that one more cup of coffee before commencing activities. In some cases, procrastination occurs through fear of failure or self-doubt and in others, the desire for perfection will lead us to procrastinate.

So how can we help ourselves to manage time more efficiently? Here are a few suggestions.

## Interruptions

Firstly decide which category the interruption falls into.

- Unnecessary interruptions occur when someone drops in unannounced or calls on the phone, mistakenly assuming that you care, that you have the required information, or that you are responsible. If none of

these are true, then this is an unnecessary interruption - a waste of time. This interruption is to be avoided or terminated quickly.

- Necessary interruptions are those about which you do care and for which you have information or responsibility. A necessary interruption has value, and you should handle it at once, unless it is untimely.
- Untimely interruptions are necessary, but come at an inconvenient or inappropriate time. They should be re-scheduled and handled at an appropriate time.
- Use a "point question" to determine into which category the interruption fits.

"What can I do for you?"

"How can I help?"

- Once the interrupting person has explained their need, you can decide what to do about it and when. Be assertive in explaining that it is not a good time and make an appointment to discuss their issue when it suits both of you. Analyse your interruptions and take steps to avoid them in the future.
- Don't waste other people's time; keep small talk to a minimum at work.

### Procrastination

- When you procrastinate, ask yourself what you are avoiding.
- Set yourself a deadline. This will create urgency where previously there was none.
- Do the most unpleasant part first. The more enjoyable tasks then become a reward for completing the others.
- Build in a reward. Promise yourself that cup of coffee or chocolate after you have completed the task, not before. Give yourself an incentive!
- Adopt a Single-Handling approach. Try to complete the task before you put it down and be decisive with the contents of your in-tray and e-mail. Answer post by writing comments on each letter immediately, so that you know what action is required. Respond decisively to e-mail messages.
- Cut short non-productive activities, such as long telephone conversations.
- Never put low priority work in front of high priority tasks.

### Shifting priorities

Welcome to the "crisis of the week club". When working in an environment where things are moving quickly, management will often change the priorities to keep up with the changing environment.

- If you feel that you are spending a lot of time doing things which are urgent but unimportant, challenge the reasons and the process. Check that what you are doing is contributing to your success.
- If the changing priorities are necessary and important you will at least now understand why and plan accordingly. You can also ask for advice if you feel torn between several tasks. Making other people aware of your important things, and asking the person who may be making urgent requests to help you prioritise, often results in some greater clarity around the prioritisation and helps you to make more informed decisions.

### Planning

- Plan at least a week ahead. Schedule your important, non-urgent tasks first and allocate times to these when you are at your most effective. Protect these slots and plan other activities around these.
- Set aside your most productive time period each day for creative work.
- Be clear on your role and responsibilities. Delegate things to others to free up time where possible and appropriate. Agree deadlines whenever you delegate projects to others.
- Prioritise tasks against your role and the deadlines. We often do things as soon as they are upon us, when very often, if you checked when it was needed by, you could have done it later. Ask yourself "What is the worst that could happen if I don't do this?" This will help you to prioritise.
- Write "To Do" lists on a monthly, weekly, and a daily basis. Do your thinking on paper. It helps you organise and motivates you to continue because you can see progress.
- Use waiting time during the day to plan activities for the rest of the day and the future.
- Plan journeys to enable as many activities to be achieved as possible, with few unnecessary miles covered.
- When you read, skim for important words and headlines.
- Learn to say 'No' if people ask you for help on projects when you're already involved in too many things.
- Be clear about what you want to achieve at the beginning of every piece of communication, whether face-to-face or written.
- Save up all trivia (including some e-mails) for a 3-hour session once per month.

### Waiting for answers

Waiting for answers is a commonly identified

time-robber. Since it is environmentally imposed it often means that we have a lack of control, so adapting to the situation is often necessary. However we do often have more control than we realise and fail to make use of it. If the task is vital to your role then it becomes important to take as much control over the situation as possible.

- Call the person that you are waiting for and explain the problem and the priority. Ask for help or ask for their suggestions as to how to overcome the block.
- Follow up on all leads. Stress the needs that you have and the desired result.
- If you run into a higher management level than your own, ask for help from your own manager or an appropriate person at that level.
- Make sure that all involved know how to contact you as soon as possible after the answer has been given.

There is no one way to become more efficient at managing your time; however, greater attention to planning and self-discipline will undoubtedly help. If you are not in control of your own diary and destiny, then someone else is! Through objective prioritisation and decisive scheduling, we can all become more efficient, with obvious benefits to both our organisation and ourselves. ■

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### Further reading:

#### *First Things First*

Stephen R. Covey, A. Roger Merrill, Rebecca R. Merrill

(Simon & Schuster)

#### *The 10 Natural Laws of Successful Time and Life Management*

Hyrum W. Smith

(Nicholas Brealey Publishing)

#### *A' Time*

James Noon

(Chapman & Hall)

#### *The Time Management Pocketbook*

Ian Fleming

(Melrose)