

Time Management Tips for the Busy Manager

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Cool and Organized

Your day is fast-paced. As a business person, you must sift through a barrage of information, from sales reports to P&L statements to balance sheets. It's hard sometimes to make sense of it all, and see which pieces of information actually impact your business in significant ways. What will happen next is never certain. Business plans that you've developed may not match current economic conditions. When things don't click, and fall into place in the way that you had planned, it can be stressful, confusing, and frustrating. In all the confusion, it's vital that you keep cool and organized. Rather than try to do too much with the little time and energy you have, it's vital that you stay focused.

The pressure to get things done in a short time can be a significant source of stress. And when your plans don't seem to be working out, there's psychological pressure to make difficult decisions quickly. Should you stick with your current plans, or look for new opportunities? There's a need to be careful. You don't want to make the wrong decision and miss out on a rare opportunity. When you feel that you have too much to do and not enough time to do it, it grates on your nerves. Suddenly, everything can seem unorganized, unstructured, and confusing.

One of the most effective ways to cope with the pressure to get more things done than you have time for, is to change your time perception. Time perception is the degree to which people perceive their use of time as structured and as contributing to a specific goal or set of goals. When you're frustrated and unsure of what to do next, you can feel that you are moving aimlessly back and forth among alternatives and getting nowhere. It's as if you are out of control. At these times, it is necessary to return structure into your life. When you perceive that your time is structured and that you are working toward a specific purpose, you will feel calm and satisfied.

When frustrated by business pressures, you can become an extreme perfectionist, afraid to make a mistake and unsure which path to take. To gain control, it is necessary to set clearly defined and realistic goals, and make specific plans for how to reach these goals. When you feel especially confused, it makes sense to pick a few projects or goals, and focus on implementing them. Which should you pick? Pick the ones that seem to match the current business conditions, but don't get hung up on it. Many managers make the mistake of thinking that they must choose the one right plan or else they will miss out on an important opportunity or goal. That may be the case. You may indeed pick a project or goal that wasn't the best, but you could be wasting more time deliberating among goals and projects than taking decisive action, which can restore a feeling of control and direction. Once you implement at least one item on your task list, you will naturally reward yourself, and feel that you have achieved a meaningful goal. You'll feel back in control.

Taking Responsibility and Taking Control

Management involves coping with uncertainty. There are potentially endless factors that may go against your business plans. For example, your information systems may go down at a critical moment, your accountant may predict that you will miss earnings expectations, or a competitor or vendor may suddenly move against you. When one of these unexpected events ruins our plans, our first instinct is to find an excuse: "It's not my fault. Everything is just going against me." It's easy to find excuses and many times there is, indeed, little we can do. Winning managers, however, take full responsibility for all aspects of their business.

Taking full responsibility is crucial. Managers and executives who don't take full responsibility will devote the bulk of their psychological energy to defending themselves against their mistakes. Rather than focusing exclusively on observing their business or department, they tend to get sidetracked by a burning desire to avoid blame. In addition, while one is finding an excuse for an adverse event, no time and energy is devoted to anticipating adverse events and thinking of preventative strategies to neutralize them. Taking full responsibility doesn't necessarily mean blaming yourself for "mistakes," however. Taking full responsibility can merely mean sifting through all possible negative events and taking precautions to minimize their potential negative impact.

An awareness of all possible adverse events allows you to make specific plans. For example, if you know that your Internet line may go down unexpectedly, or that your computer may crash, you can make a backup plan. When all seems to go wrong, you won't panic, but you can effortlessly take decisive action. If you intuitively feel that an adverse event will likely thwart your plans, you can stand aside or cautiously manage risk should time go against you. The more you consider all possible adverse events, the better you can plan, and the more easily you will come out of it unscathed.

It's useful to consider all possible adverse events. That said, it's important to remember your limitations. Some people go overboard when trying to figure out what can go wrong. It's possible to take things a little too far. If you become obsessed with every possible catastrophe, you may become an extreme perfectionist who has trouble setting goals and starting projects. Other people may take so much responsibility for negative outcomes that they become excessively pessimistic. It's important to take a more balanced approach. Be realistic. There's only so much you can account for and only so many precautions you can take. But, if you consider what you can control, take all possible steps to control it, and at the same time, accept what you can't control, you'll work your day more effectively. You'll remain calm and make moves decisively.

Time Management Tips

"If you don't measure it, you can't manage it." Keep a log of your activities for a week or more. This helps you analyze your time and answer questions like: what is your most productive period of time, what is your least productive time, did you achieve your goals and how could you have done what you were doing more effectively,

Daily Schedules

There are a variety of time schedule systems that can fit your personality. These include engagement books, a piece of poster board tacked to a wall, 3 x 5 cards or electronic PDAs. Once you decide upon the style, the next step is how to use it. It's best to allow spaces for each hour, half-hours for a busy schedule. First, put down all of the necessities: meetings, appointments, projects due, dinner arrangements, etc.

Make sure to schedule in downtime or breaks. Be realistic on how many meetings you can attend or appointments you can keep. To succeed in business you need to have the time to learn – classes, reading, videos, etc. If you find you don't have time to expand your horizons and you're not socializing to an extreme, you might want to consider lightening your load.

Tips for Saving Time

Now that you know how you spend most of your time, take a look at it. Think about what your most important things are. Do you have enough time? Chances are that you do not. Below are some tips on how to schedule and budget your time when it seems you just don't have enough.

Don't be a perfectionist

Trying to be a perfect person sets you up for defeat. Nobody can be perfect. Difficult tasks usually result in avoidance and procrastination. You need to set achievable goals, but they should also be challenging. There will always be people both weaker and stronger than you.

Learn to say no

Many people are afraid to let others know how busy they are, but it's important that if you are overworked that you speak up for yourself. Also don't get yourself in a bind by saying yes to too many projects. Politely saying no should become a habit. Saying no frees up time for the things that are most important.

Learn to Prioritize

Prioritizing your responsibilities and engagements is very important. Some people do not know how to prioritize and they become procrastinators. Understand the difference between urgent and important. You may want to create lists of what must be done by the end of the day, what should be done by the end of the day

and what you'd like to do by the end of the day. Try it or come up with your own method, but do it.

Combine several activities

Another suggestion is to combine several activities into one time spot. While preparing for today's presentation, I have also come up with my next speech for my Toastmasters Club meeting and articles for my newsletter and weblog. You probably already multitask and don't realize that you are: While showering you make a mental list of the things that need to be done; When you watch TV, laugh as you pay your bills. These are just examples of what you can do to combine your time, but there are many others. Above all be creative, and let it work for you.

And In Conclusion

After scheduling becomes a habit, then you can adjust it. It's better to be precise at first. It is easier to find something to do with extra time than to find extra time to do something. Most importantly, make it work for you. A time schedule that is not personalized and honest is not a time schedule at all.

Do your best to stay on top of things. A regular review of your tasks and commitments will be key. As you get a handle on the blur of activity that is your business and personal life, you'll feel pretty cool.

Handhelds vs. Day Planners

Over the past few years I have taught many executives and managers to more effectively use their time. If a diehard paper day-planner walks by during a training session, I am invariably asked, "Why do you use one of those gizmos when you can use this?" as they lift their 10-pound, leather-bound, paper-strewn, workout planner.

Here are a few benefits of a handheld versus a paper day-planner. First when I talk about day-planners I mean a hand written to-do list and calendar keeping system, as in DayTimers, Franklin Covey or DayRunner. Handheld or PDA is referring to a personal digital assistant (PDA) that uses the Palm operating system or Windows CE, though it may be manufactured by anyone.

So what is it that makes a pocket-sized PDA better than your handwritten notes?

Data can be shared easily. You can beam appointment information from one user to another very quickly and without errors (you can even add an alarm to remind the other person). You can e-mail an appointment or contact information by clicking one button on your computer.

Recurring events need to be put in only once. So recurring group meetings, anniversaries, and association meetings need to be inputted only once.

PDAs are proactive. A handheld has an alarm that can alert you to an appointment or event. Day-planners do not unless the little sticky note falls out at the right time.

Better organization of data. You only need to put a person's birthday or anniversary in once and it will show up every year for you. It will even remind you a couple of days in advance to pick up a present (but you need to pick out the present).

Data is secure. You can lock the PDA so it requires a password to turn it on. Or you can lock specific items so they require a password. Day-planners can be encrypted using horrible handwriting.

Corrections are easy to make. You don't have to erase or scratch out mistakes or reschedules.

Multiple calendar views. You can view your calendar for the day, week, or month on your Palm.

Easily add contact information. The name and phone number of your contact can appear automatically along with the event with two strokes of the stylus.

Copy and paste. If an appointment is rescheduled, you can copy and paste the data where you want it. Or you can just edit the entry, and it will automatically go to the new date.

Automatic back-up. This is a great feature because both PDAs and day-planners can be lost or destroyed. The PDA's information is backed up on your computer.

Search for data. The find function allows you to find text or numbers in any of the programs. You can input a partial phone number or a first name, and it will seek out all matches.

Data is typed. So, if you take a note, it can be copied into a word processing program for easy use and formatting.

Reprioritize things to do. If you need to reprioritize a list of things to do, you do not need to re-write the entire list, rather tap one item.

Input on the computer. If you are like me, you can type faster than your write. So, if you have lots of appointments, take it to your computer then sync the data with your handheld.

It fits in your pocket. How small will it get?

This was a comparison of just the Calendar and the To-Do programs. That does not include the thousands of other programs that are written for handhelds, many of which are free. Here are a few other uses for a handheld:

- Contact management
- Write reports
- Read news
- Calculator
- Maps
- Dictionary and Thesaurus
- Read books
- Write e-mail
- Take spreadsheets with you
- Take Word documents
- Clock and stopwatch
- Database access
- A TV remote control
- Listen to music
- Internet access
- Cell phone

If you decide to join the new age, do it slowly. Keep your day-planner - you already know that system. Eventually, you will use the day-planner less frequently as you become familiar with the handheld - just as you did when you went to using your day-planner rather than your memory and sticky notes.

Resources

Books:

Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity
By David Allen

No B.S. Time Management for Entrepreneurs
By Dan Kennedy

Paper Time Management Systems:

DayTimers – <http://www.DayTimers.com>

Franklin Covey – <http://www.FranklinCovey.com>

DayRunner – <http://www.DayRunner.com>

Time Management Software:

Outlook
Microsoft – <http://www.microsoft.com/outlook/>

ACT
Best Software - <http://www.act.com/>

Goldmine
FrontRange Solutions – <http://www.frontrange.com/>

Personal Digital Assistants:

PalmOne – <http://www.palmone.com/us/products/>

Blackberry – <http://www.blackberry.com>

Pocket PC - <http://welcome.hp.com/country/us/en/prodserv/handheld.html>