
Managing and Controlling Your Use of Time

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“As sand through the hourglass, so go the days of our lives.” This bit of sentiment is unfortunately true and in approaching the problem of managing and controlling your use of time, we must acknowledge the inherent wisdom of that saying. Your life is like a giant hourglass which is slowly, but persistently, in the process of passing by. While this analogy may be uncomfortable, it does serve to put the situation in context. When you recognize the boundaries of time itself, you realize the need to focus on a better understanding of time and how you can manage it more profitably.

The essential task of management is one of wisely using resources whether they be people, machines, or dollars. Time is also a resource and can be subjected to the management cycle of planning, action, and control. The rewards you can expect from more effective use of your time will include greater efficiency, higher profits, fewer problems, increased productivity, and, more importantly — more time.

There are a couple of unique qualities which time as a resource exhibits, however. One is obvious; time is a fixed asset. It doesn't expand or contract with the market, the weather, or politics. It's fixed and immutable. There are sixty minutes in an hour, twenty-four hours in a day, and so many hours in a lifetime. There is absolutely nothing that can be done to increase it or extend it, to speed it up or slow it down.

Another unique quality of time is its perishability; once it's gone, it can never be recaptured, recycled, or reused.

When you view time as a resource, you view it either as a valuable or an inexpensive commodity. You treat most valuable resources with care, and use them to gain the maximum return from your investment. With resources that are cheap, you often have a tendency to be a bit more casual, careless, and wasteful. As you begin to consider ways to use your time more effectively, analyze your attitudes about the value of your time.

Another way to view the value of your time is to ask yourself: When I play, am I getting full value out of my time? When I work, am I getting full productive value out of my time? When I relax, am I getting full relaxation value for my time? Or, “Do I mix and confuse all of these so that full value is never experienced and realized?” Relaxation time can be contaminated by worrying about work; work time can be contaminated by thinking about play. If, however, you effectively use each of these time periods wisely, you will soon discover that there is ample time to effectively participate in all types of activities which are important to you.

Perhaps the most important observation about time as a resource is this: it is an essential ingredient to the achievement of all of your personal and organizational goals. As such, the obstacles which stand between you and the wise use of your time must be addressed. Do you want to develop a closer relationship with your children? What's standing in your way? Time? Do you want to earn a promotion or change careers? What stands in your way? Lack of preparation or knowledge? What keeps you from getting the required knowledge? Time. Do you want to be more productive, make more money?

What stands in the way? More productive work time. How do you get it? The answer is painfully obvious: since you can't get more time, you have to get more out of the time you've got. And that is essentially a management problem.

Planning Your Time

The first step of the management cycle is analyzing and establishing a relationship between what you want to accomplish, what you're currently accomplishing, and the resources you have at your disposal. In many ways, this is the most difficult step in time management. It demands that you examine what you would really like to accomplish, and then it demands that you examine what you are accomplishing presently.

What you are currently accomplishing can be determined by a factual, realistic analysis of how you are currently using your time. All that is required is that you keep a log of your actual time use over a period of five typical days. That sounds fairly simple, and it is. And yet, it is resisted and discounted by many people for an equally simple reason: it is psychologically threatening. Something within us fears that a record of how we use our time may reveal some behavior patterns we would rather not confront. We may see in such a log, absolute evidence of our wastefulness. We may quantify idleness and procrastination. We may give substance to a deep-seated fear that we are really not, after all, making much of a contribution. In reality, such fears are usually groundless and unfounded. Most people are surprised at what this analysis reveals on the positive side. They find confirmation to their notion that they are interrupted too much in their work, or that they are forced by habit or some other factor to spend too much time on a relatively

unimportant item. But now, instead of a notion or an impression, you have a data base from which to plan. Just be sure that, before you do your analysis, you check your attitude and commit to following through with a five-day log.

A familiar analogy from financial planners may help. They tell us that most people have negative thoughts about living within a budget and view a budget as a restrictive device which prevents them from doing what they want to do. In truth, however, a budget is the essential device which *enables* them to do what they want to do. And so it is with time management, the more effective you are at time management, the more time you have. Effective time managers are cheerful, happy people who seem to always have time. They get things done and still have time to read, engage in sports, pursue a hobby or simply socialize.

Taking Action on Your Time Plan

The second step in time planning involves looking at how you spend your time and reconciling that with how you want to spend your time. This is, in essence, a form of goal setting. The "Time Use Questionnaire," which is included at the end of this article will guide you in analyzing and interpreting the data your analysis provides and it will suggest some categories for time goals. One goal source to consider at this point is your job description. It contains a relative "proportioning" of tasks and responsibilities and probably suggests some built-in priorities.

You enter the action phase of time management when you move to implement the time-use goals you have established. One of the things you will quickly discover is that many of your choices about how you use time

are habitual. It is one thing to analyze your time use and set goals for its improvement; it is yet another thing to adopt the necessary behavioral changes that make that possible. There are four practices you can adopt which will help you take action on your time plans:

1. **Write.** Put your daily plans in writing. Use a pocket calendar system that provides enough space for you to write your schedule. Use your daily planner daily. Use your time effectively and efficiently. Plan your activities. Remember it's your life and your time! Use it or lose it!

2. **Prioritize.** Plan your daily time use by listing your activities in order of their priority. Often two columns are helpful for this task. One labeled "Must Do Today" and another labeled "Should Do Today." This exercise in itself is motivating. It is exciting to be able to strike out all the things accomplished in the "Must" column and also strike out things in the "Should" column. One usually transfers those items remaining in the "Should" column to the next day's "Must" column. As you begin to transfer fewer and fewer of your tasks to the next day's calendar, you find yourself discovering larger and larger blocks of time available for creative use. You have freed up time, not restricted it.

3. **Delegate.** Many of the tasks which you are presently performing can be delegated so that your time can be devoted to more important leadership functions. Where you are free to delegate and where you have the confidence in the reports to delegate, by all means do so. The time spent in developing the report's ability to handle the task might be extremely short in comparison to the time you will gain by having relieved yourself of it.

4. **Learn to say no.** One of the most important words in our vocabulary is the word "no." The desire to be courteous, polite, and socially accepted prohibits us from turning down numerous requests. The inability to say "no" is related to an attitude formed early in life. The best way to change this attitude is to begin saying it and observing the results. You will probably be most excited about the fact that the word "no" has a positive meaning for you because it salvages some of your very valuable time.

The well organized life leaves time for everything — for planning, doing, and following through. Begin in small ways. Make it a rule to be systematic and orderly when dealing with your mail and memos. Lay aside only those items which really need further thought or information.

Controlling the Use of Your Time

The final phase of the management cycle is that of controlling, and that is a critical function when it concerns the management of time. Unless you control your time, your time will control you. The nature of life and work is that many things compete for your attention and many people compete for your time. If you are to preserve the gains you have made thus far in your management of time, it is essential that you give some thought to a continuing program of time control. Controlling time means less stress and anxiety.

The biggest enemy of time is habits, *time wasting habits*. Insidiously, these habits work their way into the seconds and minutes of our day. As soon as we think we have eradicated all time wasters, we are surprised to see that new ones have appeared, overnight, like a field of dandelions. Professional managers

are aware of the nature of the problem and fight fire with fire. They make a habit of periodically analyzing their use of time. Many time management consultants recommend that managers make a formal analysis of their time use three or four times a year. This seems like good counsel and is simple to do. By making a habit of analysis, you continually review your strengths and nip time wasting habits in the bud.

One of the most common time-wasting habits is procrastination — the habit of needlessly putting off things that you should do. Procrastination is caused by negative attitudes, fear of failure, inertia, and/or lack of planning. It does more than almost any other habit we have to deprive us of satisfaction, success, and happiness. More than two centuries ago, Edward Young wrote: “Procrastination is the thief of time.” In fact, procrastination is much more. It is the thief of our self-respect. It nags us and spoils our fun. It deprives us of the fullest realization of our ambitions and hopes.

When things are put off until the last minute, we create pressure. Every step finds an impediment. We push ourselves into blundery by having to make hasty decisions and judgments and it actually becomes harder to do things. Herein lies the paradox. By trying to take things easy, we do not make it easy — actually we make it *harder*. It is possible to spend more energy in figuring out ways to escape a task than is necessary to accomplish it in the first place.

Do you remember postponing that report you should have finished on Wednesday? On Thursday and Friday, you found yourself loaded with important jobs and had to work over the weekend (now without secretarial help and without people you could have gone to for quick answers) to get it ready for that

Monday morning meeting. Or perhaps you procrastinated about visiting a sick relative until it was too late.

No one escapes his or her quota of difficult or unpleasant tasks. It is often these tasks which contribute most to our success. You will make great progress when you realize that they will not fade away if you ignore them or procrastinate. Eventually you have to roll up your sleeves and dive into them. Learn to do the unpleasant things first, get them out of the way so that you can do the things you like to do last.

Effective time managers have overcome the habit of procrastination by replacing it with a *Do It Now* habit. As Samuel Smiles said: “People who are habitually behind in their work are as habitually behind in success.”

There is another way in which analysis can help you control your time: analyzing the time-use consequences — the “time impact” of all new devices, procedures, and responsibilities. An executive who installs a new kind of speaker phone to save time may discover that the device actually wastes time if time is spent regularly answering the question: “Why do we sound like we’re in a tunnel?” Likewise, you might discover that agreeing to help out with the Christmas party makes it impossible for you to meet a production deadline. The point is simple: everything has a time price. Make sure you want it and can afford it before you buy it.

Always schedule your time. List the various jobs or activities you must do or would like to do on the day you would like to do them. Estimate the time needed for each job and schedule it both on your MUST DO list and in the appropriate time slot for that day.

Check each project or task off as you complete it!

A final tip for controlling your time is to begin to think in terms of target dates or deadlines. Deadlines possess a curious and potent quality. The force which a deadline is able to exert upon your behavior affects not only your physical condition, but also your mental and emotional states as well. It is a force which mobilizes you for action and heightens your awareness and energy. As a deadline approaches for completing a task, your efforts are frequently doubled or tripled to meet that deadline. Target dates are a critical component of any action-planning process for goals achievement. Deadlines provide a simple, but valuable tool to aid you in tapping some of your potential energy and applying it in a predetermined direction. Remember, time can be your friend or enemy, your ally or your competitor. It can be regarded as a valuable and expensive resource or shrugged aside as cheap and inexhaustible. The choice is yours to make as you desire. If you wish to be an achiever, however, you must put time to work for you and your goals.

Until you can manage your time, you will always be one step behind! You are so busy catching up on yesterday's tasks; you have no time to plan what you are going to do tomorrow. When you become a time manager, you become more productive, experience less stress and anxiety, and have more time to enjoy your life.

EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE

TIME

	Yes	No	Related	Not Related	Should be Related
1. Does my present schedule allow enough time for planning?					
2. Am I frequently late for appointments and meetings?					
3. Do I always use an agenda to keep meetings on target?					
4. Do I deal repeatedly with the same problems due to lack of written policy and procedure statements?					
5. Is the amount of time I spend on various activities proportionate to the amount of time I think I should spend on them.					
6. Do I make use of calculators, computers, copiers, etc., to streamline my use of time?					
7. Do I plan each day in advance?					
8. Do I respond in a timely fashion to letters, memos, and reports?					
9. Do I make frequent cancellations or changes of schedule?					
10. Would more time spent on planning help here?					
11. Do I work with a pocket calendar/appointment book?					
12. Do I constantly prioritize tasks?					
13. Do I regularly work overtime?					
14. Do I consciously attempt to keep written communications short and to the point?					
15. Can I take steps to control frequent interruptions?					
16. Do I procrastinate?					
17. Do people frequently have to wait in order to see me?					
18. Do I habitually consider the time implications before agreeing to take on additional, optional activities?					
19. Do I frequently have to take work home?					
20. Do I want to?					
21. Are production dates consistently met in my department?					
22. Do I save up several short, non-pressing items before calling a conference with someone?					
23. Do I have too many telephone interruptions?					
24. Can my telephone work be more effectively handled?					
25. Am I interrupted too often by people with questions?					
26. Could I develop a procedure to correct this?					
27. Do I have time to read professional journals, industry publications, and other material to keep posted on latest development in my field?					

Week Ending_____

TIME SUMMARY FORM

[illegible]

*To figure percentage, total the number of minutes in a work week and divide into the total number of minutes spent on each activity. Ex. - 180 minutes of telephone use out of a 40-hour week (2400 minutes) would reflect a 7.5% time usage.