

Stealing Time: Time Management Techniques Add Hours to Each Day

Save to myBoK

by Nadinia Davis, MBA, CIA, CPA, RHIA

Time not only flies when we're having fun, but also when we're filing paperwork, checking e-mail, and looking for our car keys. But you can add hours to your day by managing yourself rather than time. Here's how.

As a nonrenewable resource, time is precious. There never seems to be enough of it, so we talk about managing it. However, we can't really manage time; rather, we can only manage ourselves.

It requires a great deal of discipline and self-awareness to understand whether we are being efficient or merely filling our days with activity. This article will spotlight some inefficient behaviors that may be wasting your valuable time.

Enslaved by Technology

Technology is wonderful. Those of us who learned to type on a manual typewriter deeply appreciate the efficiency and convenience of word processing. Many of us use our microwaves more than we use our ovens. However, in our rush to embrace the newest gadgets or software, we shouldn't overlook the purpose of technology—to improve the efficiency and quality of our lives.

Do you answer every e-mail message as it arrives? Perhaps you check your e-mail at 9 a.m. and review every message that comes in. When you look up again, it's 2 p.m. Similarly, do you respond immediately to every voice mail message? These communication tools can help us manage ourselves more efficiently. However, we need to balance the convenience of these devices with the burdens they impose. Here's how:

- Designate specific times during the day to review e-mail and voice mail. Consider reviewing messages in the early morning, perhaps before you go to work. Give yourself half an hour to quickly review the messages and respond to important ones
- Maintain multiple e-mail accounts. Online shopping, publishing your e-mail address, and participating in listservs can lead to spam, forcing you to sort through junk mail to get to the important messages. By using multiple accounts, you can control how often you review certain material and where that material goes. Start with at least two: one for personal use and one for business. I use six:
 - A company address for work-related correspondence: I review this account multiple times daily during the week and rarely on the weekend
 - An address just for my students: I review this account twice a day during the school year and biweekly over the summer
 - An address for special projects: I needed an address that I could publish on a Web site and didn't want to clog up my other accounts. I only check this once a week
 - An address for friends and family: I glance at this account about every other day, but not on the weekend
 - An address for online shopping and some listservs: I check this one once a week at most
 - The address that came with my Internet service provider: I don't give out this address, but it still gets junk mail, which I clean out about once every other month
- Ignore the phone if you get trapped on calls from friends, family, and colleagues. You should also get and use voice mail, subscribe to Caller ID, and consider leaving work-related voice messages during non-business hours if they are informative, don't require an immediate answer, or you merely want to avoid chatting

Is your day so busy you need a calendar software program or personal digital assistant (PDA) to stay on track? If not, a paper calendar may suffice. I entertain students and colleagues with my version of the PDA: a full-size wall calendar that folds into my briefcase. I stick notes to it, write messages to myself, log phone numbers on the fly, and keep track of my schedule. I take it wherever I go, it needs no batteries, and it doubles as a folder when I want to carry important documents in a memorable place. I keep personal and professional contact lists at my home office desk and carry sticky notes to write reminders.

Trapped at the Water Cooler

Networking and staying connected to the organizational grapevine are essential business communication skills. However, it's nearly impossible to get work done when you are constantly interrupted by coworkers dropping in for a chat or buttonholing you in the hall. Might you be guilty of this behavior, too? Stop talking and do something about it:

- Close your door for specific, finite periods and work. Don't answer the phone or check e-mail unless this is the task you have set yourself
- Don't wander the halls aimlessly. Walk quickly and purposefully. Don't stop to chat with passing colleagues
- Make an appointment before visiting a colleague. Specify a finite amount of time for the appointment and stick to it. Make a point of engaging in social conversation, but avoid protracted post-business chatting by scheduling another activity immediately afterward
- Don't visit if you can call instead. And don't call if you can send e-mail
- Wrap up aimless conversations with a "let's get back to work" gesture or phrase
- To encourage visitors to leave, use body language. For example, stand up and walk to your door. Leave piles of documents on chairs so your visitors can't sit down. Look at your watch frequently

Imprisoned by Clutter

When you can't find what you need to get a job done, work grinds to a halt. Take a hard look at your desk, your office, and your home and attack problem areas. Here are a few basic tips:

- Clear out the clutter. An old-fashioned cleaning may unearth long-forgotten resources and open up storage space
- Throw things out or give them away. Be ruthless or ask a ruthless friend to assist you. Go through all closets and drawers and get rid of clothes that don't fit or are no longer worn
- Get rid of piles or label them to ensure you don't put one project on top of another
- Clear off counters and shelves of unnecessary junk
- Reorganize furniture to optimize traffic and personal space
- If you can't keep it clear, at least keep your desk neat
- Schedule regular appointments with yourself for filing and paperwork
- Color code files for easy reference
- Keep active files on the desktop

To-do Lists Undone

Is your to-do list getting longer while nothing gets done? It could be that your priorities don't match your work flow and you need to re-evaluate what is really important. Don't mistake your to-do list for a wish list—keep the list of things you wish you had time to do in a separate place. Your daily list, if you make one, should only include those items that you can realistically accomplish.

Alternatively, don't make lists. Write sticky notes for each task and affix them to your computer screen, calendar, desk, or wherever is most appropriate to the task. This strategy reminds you continuously of projects, both long and short term, and forces you to focus on today's tasks. Other ways to tackle a to-do list are:

- Check your priorities: Are you avoiding doing what is really important? Are you letting others dictate what you should be doing? Rather than drop everything and respond to someone else's request, take the request and schedule it into your day at a more convenient time. Make realistic promises regarding when it will be completed
- Delegate tasks: Remember to give clear, preferably written, instructions. In many cases, the tasks will not get done exactly the way you would have done it. Is that really important? If so, ensure that your instructions are clear. If not, be

grateful for the assistance and let go of the ownership

- Consider working at home: Rather than staying in the office, try working at home for a few hours. Schedule creative work for your most productive time
- Get an early start: Do you need to be in the office to work? Consider arriving very early once or twice a week to clear your desk. Don't do this on a predictable schedule or you will soon have company. Don't answer the phone until normal business hours
- At the end of the day, if nothing on your to-do list is checked off, write down all the things you did instead and check those things off. It will make you feel better that you accomplished something. Then, analyze the list to see why the things you did weren't on your list in the first place

Idle Time Wasted

If much of your time is spent traveling or waiting, fill those hours with productive activities. For example:

- Always carry something to do or read. Keep the latest *Journal of AHIMA* and trade publications in your bag so that you can pull them out if you are delayed
- Before you leave to do errands, whether it's in the office or at home, think about everything you have to do. Plan an efficient route so that you don't backtrack. Can you combine errands or run them during your lunch hour?

Torn between Home, Work

Friends and family are critical components of a balanced life. However, they need to understand that your professional time is also an important component of your life. Educating them to respect that time alleviates tension and misunderstandings. If friends and family are intrusive, ask them not to call you at work unless it's an emergency. Don't return their calls from work. Follow up from home to reinforce that you want to keep in touch.

Additionally, don't neglect yourself. Get plenty of sleep. Go to bed early and get up early. Regular sleep is one of the best gifts you can give yourself and ensures you'll be at your best to tackle your day.

The other side of time management is balance. Finding the right mix of business and personal commitment is difficult. It also varies. There is nothing wrong with letting your house get messy while you handle a crisis at work just as sometimes you have to dash home to make dinner rather than clean off your desk. Understanding that perfection is nice, but not usually achievable, is an important step in finding balance. Can't get a handle on your life? Consider yourself a project:

- Identify personal goals and expectations
- Set timetables and milestones. Start with the completion dates and work backward to determine when things must be done
- Measure your progress toward your goals
- Operationalize successful components. When you find something that works, stick with it. If something doesn't work, don't be afraid to try a new approach

Make small changes and be persistent: the results are worth it.

Take Control, Page by Page

Whatever your personal management issues, whether it's determining your goals and objectives or just getting rid of clutter, there is probably a self-help book for you. The following resources vary dramatically in approach and perspective:

Aslett, Don. *How to Have a 48-Hour Day*. Cincinnati, OH: Marsh Creek, 1996.

Basso, Bob. *555 Ways To Put More Fun In Your Life*. Guilford, CT: The Globe Pequot Press, 1994.

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Cain, Herman. *Leadership is Common Sense*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1997.

Canfield, Jack, Mark Victor Hansen, and Les Hewitt. *The Power of Focus*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc., 2000.

Covey, Stephen R. *First Things First*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994.

Covey, Stephen R. *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989.

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Felton, Sandra. *How Not to Be a Messie*. New York: Galahad Books, 1999.

Ferner, Jack D. *Successful Time Management*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1995.

Frank, Milo O. *How to Run a Successful Meeting in Half the Time*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989.

Frank, Milo O. *How to Get Your Point Across in 30 Seconds or Less*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986.

Hochheiser, Robert M. *Time Management*. New York: Barron's, 1992.

Hopson, Barrie, and Mike Scally. *Time Management: Conquering the Clock*. San Diego: Pfeiffer, 1993.

Josephs, Ray. *How to Gain an Extra Hour Every Day*. New York: Plume Books, 1992.

Mayer, Jeffrey J. *Time Management for Dummies*. Chicago: IDG Books, 1995.

McGee-Cooper, Ann. *Time Management for Unmanageable People*. New York: Bantam Books, 1994.

Silver, Susan. *Organized To Be the Best*. Los Angeles: Adams-Hill Publishing, 1991.

12 Tricks to Save Time

- If junk mail is clogging up your desk (or taking over your dining room table), open your mail next to the garbage or recycling bin. Better yet, don't read your junk mail—just throw it out
- Organize your closet by category (pants, shirts, skirts) then color so that you can find things quickly. It is far easier to find items when they are organized this way
- Organize your jewelry based on how you use it. Be creative: use ice cube trays for rings, earrings, and small necklaces
- Keep a small notepad and pen in the car. Jot down notes and ideas when you're stuck in traffic
- A change is as good as a rest. Walk away from your desk, your office, your department. Walk upstairs on one side of the building and walk downstairs on the other side. Take 10 minutes twice a day and choose different routes.

- Take lunch. Choking down food at your desk may save time, but it doesn't give you the mental break you need to be efficient in the afternoon. Take turns in colleagues' offices for a 15-minute bag lunch. Or eat in your car. Eat at your desk, if you must, then take a walk. However, follow the corporate culture. Breakfast and lunch at work may seem like a waste of time to you, but if that's when networking occurs, don't miss it
- Start and end meetings on time. Don't wait for latecomers because they will learn if there are negative consequences to lateness, such as unwanted project assignments
- Use colored tabs to highlight information in memos and literature
- Clean up at the end of every day
- Make, maintain, and keep handy a list of frequently called and other important telephone numbers like the vet, car repair, etc.
- Keep important stuff within easy reach and file everything else

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