

Chapter

1

Time Management: What Is It?



I was going to write you a short letter, but I didn't have time so I wrote you a long one instead.

Mark Twain

I asked a friend of mine, a talented graphic designer who works in a thriving local design practice, to give me his definition of time management. He raised his hands to his face in horror. 'Oh no, don't ask me,' he pleaded. 'First, I'm terrible at time management. This isn't because I don't think it's important, or even that I don't know how to do it. The problem is that my brain just isn't wired up to think of time as being the slightest bit important.'

This intrigued me because I thought that everyone had an awareness of time. He continued, 'Ask any of my colleagues. I rarely know what time it is without looking at my watch. Hours seem to pass like milliseconds. Any task always takes much longer than I expect, or rather than I hope. In addition, I am a professional procrastinator of Olympic standards.'

I pressed him to elaborate. 'Well,' he replied hesitantly, 'when I finally manage to get involved in a task that is long overdue, because I am so stressed out that I haven't tackled it, I find my attention instantly being drawn to the nearest magazine, website, piece of irrelevant paper etc. The result can be . . . er . . . not a lot.'

He went on to explain that he consoled himself with the thought that all this was a sign of a massively creative mind, and

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that deep down in his subconscious he is putting new things together and worrying about dizzyingly important questions of the universe or the next entrepreneurial opportunity. In fact he fears that it's really a tendency to bunk off.

Fascinated by his candour and honesty about his time management failings, I spoke to another friend of mine, a high-powered professional, who works in London for a firm of property developers, running their marketing department. Because she has a young child, she sometimes works from home but regularly battles to meet deadlines and juggle priorities both in the office and at home.

I asked for her opinion on time management. 'Look,' she said, 'you shouldn't be asking me. Only last year my company sent me on an extremely expensive time management course that they could see I really needed. Unfortunately I arrived so late I wasn't even allowed in, so I missed it all!'

Does either of these examples strike a chord? I meet lots of people who are often short of time and are trying to get more things done in the day, but have no idea of what it takes to be organized.

If you have problems with time management, help is at hand. I have a passion for organization and have been paid to organize projects, people and events for most of my career. The advice contained here should help you to find ways of coping better with these issues.

The time and stress crisis

Stress (a definition)

A mismatch between perceived demands and perceived ability to cope.

To get the right balance you need to reappraise how you perceive and interact with your environment.

Are so many of us short of time because we simply don't understand the importance of controlling it? Why should you bother about managing time? Does managing your time really matter? Is it important? *Yes!*

Most of us have problems with time management because of our inability to plan. You need to plan your time and avoid both interruptions by people and the telephone. Procrastination is the single biggest cause of time management problems and is dealt with in more detail in Chapter 3. Crises can and do occur. Unless you have an effective time 'buffer zone' you will be unable to do anything better than fire-fight when having to deal with them. The ability to make decisions is the best way to combat time management problems. If you can develop the way to prioritize then you will be capable of solving the most difficult issues – and sometimes the seemingly impossible ones!

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Kickstart tip

If you can remove the stress – your ability to cope with time will be infinitely greater. You should then be sufficiently relaxed to make the correct decisions when you need to make them.

Maybe I should mention here that I believe time management isn't really about time. It is all about tasks. It is about achieving, output, results. To be successful you need to develop skills and habits that, when used correctly, work positively on your behalf. These skills are not only necessary for doing a job successfully, they are also essential if you want to be seen as a competent, capable person.

To achieve anything today, it helps to be organized. In the office as well as at home, it is not good to be perceived as a headless chicken, led by events rather than being in control.

Kickstart tip

You may work hard, but sometimes you need to learn to work **S M A R T**

S specific – do you know what you want to achieve?

M measurable – do you have an idea how much use it will be?

A achievable – are you sure you are really able to tackle it?

R relevant – does it really matter?

T time based – how long is it going to take?

The techniques of time management are many and varied. Like most skills they cannot be learned by rote. You need to absorb and adapt the rules and apply them to your own individual circumstances – a tailored approach. Every constructive habit you can develop helps you kickstart your time management.

Kickstart tip

It's not the hours you put in, it's what you put into the hours.

We all know how true this really is. There's nothing worse than getting to the end of the day and feeling that you haven't achieved enough. For many people this is one of the most stressful things about life. Some of us struggle more than others, and have to work constantly to force ourselves to plan ahead and generally be aware of the fact that time is passing.

Why are we always so short of time?

Procrastination is opportunity's assassin.

Victor Kyam

If it's urgent – do it now! Don't procrastinate. Today's emergency could be tomorrow's disaster if it's left undone!

We all have too much to do. We have too many choices and many of us are unable to prioritize. This leads to a huge number of Olympic-standard procrastinators.

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Kickstart tip

To learn how to prioritise, imagine that you have time to do only one task before leaving the country for an indefinite period. Which task would you choose?

The causes of procrastination are mainly tasks that are too big or too daunting. Or it could be due to a personal preference, dislike of a particular activity. Fear of failure is another cause. Also, lack of understanding of the perceived value or purpose of the task and the task being too boring. (See Chapter 3 for good habits to kill procrastination.)

Added to that, most people today expect instant gratification. Those who have studied animal behaviour will know that the inability to wait for something is a basic instinct of any lower species. Humans are not a lower species and therefore should not succumb! Yet how many times have you witnessed embarrassing outbursts from fully grown adults because of some insignificant hold-up in proceedings? There are frequent instances of road-rage, supermarket trolley rage, post office and bus queue rage. If there is a built-in buffer zone of time, there is less need for anger. People would probably be able to wait and show a little patience and tolerance when things take longer than expected.

Some common assumptions

Kickstart tip

The key element in effective time management is measuring the outcome, not the activity. Manage your time according to what will produce the best outcome.

Perfection is not necessarily the key

Time management does not mean being perfect and always getting everything done. It is more about being prepared for any eventuality. If, for instance, you know someone or have colleagues who panic because something unexpected happens, building extra time into the daily schedule (as a buffer) to counter-balance any time eroded unexpectedly would go some way to averting a time crisis.

It is often other people's inefficiency, rather than your own, or someone's arrogance or lack of respect for others that creates time management problems. One colleague told me how worried she was the other week because of a nearly missed deadline. Her boss had asked her to finish a piece of work by Friday provided that she was handed the task on Monday. Because of something beyond her control it wasn't ready for her until Tuesday. This caused her schedule to be one day short and through no fault of her own she spent two evenings working late at the office to complete the task. I indicated that there was a need here for assertiveness and boundary building.

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When ‘good enough’ is sufficient

When working recently to produce a report for a specific deadline, a trainee was called by a director of his company to an urgent meeting. It turned out that this meeting should have, and could have, been scheduled in advance. Even more annoying, it transpired that it wasn't really urgent or important and could easily have waited. As a result the trainee was faced with a dilemma: he didn't have enough time to do the work. If he decided to complete the task to his own high standards he would miss the deadline, or he could hand in a ‘good enough’ job by the time agreed.

To avoid getting stressed or wasting any more time he spoke to his boss. He explained that the unexpected meeting had upset his schedule and advised that the work would not be ready by the agreed deadline. He knew how important it was that the work was received on time because it was required for a meeting with other people that could not be rescheduled. He offered his boss the work that he had already completed in the hope that it was a ‘good enough’ job. His boss accepted and he delivered his report.

This proves the Pareto principle (otherwise known as the 80/20 rule): the manager was prepared to accept 80 per cent of the work. It was sufficient to get him through the meeting with his associates. The extra 20 per cent (had the trainee insisted on completing it) would not have added any significant amount to the end result.

Learn to know when ‘good enough’ is all that is needed. Stop fiddling endlessly with something if it already meets others’

requirements and use the time that would otherwise have been spent on tinkering for something more important.

The Pareto principle (Figure 1.1), known as the 80/20 rule, was invented by Vilfredo Pareto (1848 –1923), an Italian economist. It is that 80 per cent of wealth is owned by 20 per cent of the population.

Kickstart tip: Using this principle

80 per cent of business comes from 20 per cent of clients
80 per cent of accidents are caused by 20 per cent of drivers
80 per cent of all beer is consumed by 20 per cent of the population
80 per cent of results come from 20 per cent of time
20 per cent of your day is spent on important tasks
80 per cent of our day just gets used up!

Main issues

The cost of poor time management is easily quantifiable in terms of wages or salary. However, these costs are probably the least of the problem. For most people, particularly during working hours, other costs can include:

- loss of control
- stress

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- underachievement
- waste of resources
- opportunities lost
- poor communication
- lack of motivation
- missing out on quality time at home
- low morale
- slow response to change

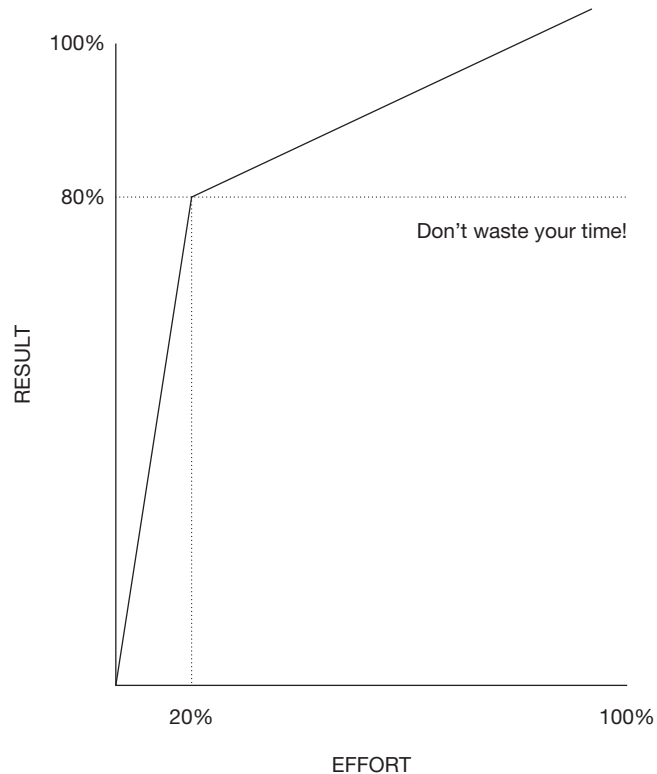


Figure 1.1 The Pareto principle (or the 80/20 rule)

The list is endless. If you don't manage your time (i.e. take control of what you *do* with your time) you will be inefficient. Tasks will take longer than necessary, mistakes will occur, and things will get left out or lost.

Managing time creates opportunities for you to do the things you really should be doing. Remember, it's not only about time, it's about tasks. By improving your performance you should be able to plan and manage your time better and achieve the outcome you want.

Kickstart tip

'If you do what you have always done, you will get what you have always got. If you don't like what you are getting, then you must change what you are doing.'
(Borrowed from the principles of neuro-linguistic programming)

In the following chapters you will learn about yourself, how to plan, prioritize and write task lists. You will start by forming good habits, creating systems that work smoothly and discovering strategies for coping with unexpected situations.

Summary

- Time management isn't just about time – it's about tasks.
- It is a real asset to anyone's productivity and effectiveness.
- Time management is about staying in control.
- Time management helps you cope with interruptions, problems and crises.

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- Time management avoids procrastination.
- Eliminates fire-fighting.
- Time management helps you learn to say 'no' and create boundaries
- Sometimes 'good enough' is all that is needed (Pareto).
- Learning new habits and skills will enable you to achieve more.
- If you can remove the stress, your ability to cope with time will be infinitely greater.