



11 Time Management

It's not how many hours you put in, it's what you put into the hours that counts. Time Management is a well-worn concept that now supports an industry of courses and tools, all based upon applied common sense. The tools are, in the main, things we have been using all the time like diaries or organisers (paper or electronic), calendars and software programmes like Lotus Organiser or Microsoft Outlook.

At the heart of good time management is Attitude. Unless you find the discipline required to manage your time, all the gizmos in the world will be no more effective than the proverbial back of an envelope. Actually, if you can muster the discipline, you will probably be able to manage your time with the simplest of tools – a notepad, a diary and a calendar.

First, let's consider some of the symptoms of poor Time Management.

'Job Confusion' Syndrome

A number of tasks need to be addressed, and each one is picked up then put down without any of them actually being started. "I can't start A because B needs to be done, but I can't start B because A needs to be done".

'Kid in a Toy Shop' Syndrome

In the process of dealing with one task, an item of interest appears and the focus then diverts to the new item before the first one is completed. "Wow, a new thing! Great!"

'Overload' Syndrome

Extra hours are worked before and after the normal day when it's quiet and no-one interrupts. "I get so much done then..."

'Open Management' Syndrome

"My door is always open, even when I'm conducting a meeting. I will always answer the phone even if it interrupts a meeting". And so on..

'Revolving Doors' Syndrome

Meetings are continuously having to be re-arranged because a more 'important' meeting cropped up. "Sorry, but I've got to change the meeting we had in the diary for two months, because one just cropped up that I have to go to".

Does any of this sound familiar? Here are some ways in which to improve what you put into the hours. Some things are strategic and others are tactical.

Strategic Time Management

Remember Vision, Mission, Strategy and Goals? These are the guiding lights when it comes down to tactical decisions such what to spend time on today, especially the Goals.

Trained and empowered employees don't need to keep referring things to their manager and interrupting meetings in so doing. Company values and culture provide the environment to make this possible. A culture where all managers from the top to the bottom respect the lines of command is a good hedge against endemic time-wasting.

Effective communication between internal customers (for example between sales and production to ensure that no time is wasted in poor specifications or misunderstood external customer requirements).

Tactical Time Management

Some or all of these techniques can be useful.

Time Log

Where does the time go? There are two ways to check this out. One is to keep a note of every activity that you perform and what time it starts and finishes. After a couple of weeks it is possible to analyse the results.



Transforming Business Performance

The other is similar but based upon sampling techniques. Draw up a grid with your list of activities across the top and times down the side at 15-minute intervals. Then at each designated time, tick the box of the activity you are currently engaged in. Do this for two weeks and again you can work out the percentages spent on each activity.

Either way, the results can be surprising, but only useful if you take steps to reduce the time-wasting elements that have been discovered. If you honestly can't find anything that you consider to be a waste of time, try applying money as a measure. How much are you worth per hour - £70? £300? What have you been doing that could be done by a £6 an hour employee?

Prioritise Your Work

Hopefully there are elements to your work that you enjoy. Since our tendency is to do the enjoyable things first, it pays to offload things you don't enjoy to someone else. If you can't do that, then discipline has to be applied and the tasks prioritised regardless of enjoyability.

If two tasks seem to have the same degree of importance, list the benefits of their outcomes and the negative effects of not doing them, then compare the tasks again. Hopefully one will emerge as the priority.

To Do Lists

Get into the habit of making To Do lists, a technique as effective as it is simple. Finish each day with a To Do list for tomorrow, each week with a To Do list for the next week and each month with a To Do list for the next month. The daily list will go into more detail than the weekly list, which will be more detailed than the monthly list. Then at the beginning of every day look at all three lists and make sure that the daily tasks tie in with the weekly and monthly ones.

If a task looks too big, break it down into its component parts and put them on the list instead.

Scheduling

Important regular meetings, such as one to one review meetings with staff, board

meetings, sales meetings and production meetings should be booked in for the whole year in advance. This doesn't mean that they can't be changed, or even called off, but they are more likely to happen if they are in the diary to start with.

There may be other tasks for which time can be blocked in. Once done, communicate that fact so that everyone knows not to interrupt you during those times. Then during those periods, resist the temptation to do anything other than the intended task. Set yourself a mini-objective: 'At the end of this session I will have made n phone calls, or written the XYZ report, or..'

Meetings Discipline

Set a duration for the meeting and stick to it. Turn the phone off, or if this is not possible tell any caller that you'll ring them back later.

For meetings of groups of people, ensure that there is a published agenda, a nominated chairperson and a minute-taker, as well as a stated duration (you can even nominate a time-keeper). The chairperson must then stop all digressions and keep the meeting focused on its principle purpose.

In Summary

Time Management is about discipline and attitude as much as anything.

Vision, Mission, Strategy and Goals are necessary to provide the right environment for effective Time Management.

Symptoms of poor Time Management include not knowing what to do next, continuously being interrupted, butterflying between tasks, repeatedly re-arranging meetings.

Tools to enable good Time Management are calendars, diaries, notepads and organisers.

Techniques for Time Management include Time Logs, Prioritising, To Do Lists and Scheduling.

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