



Effective Time Management

By

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Have you ever wondered, why some people are able to accomplish so much more than others? We all have the same 24 hours in a day, and yet some people seem to get more done in a day than others get done in a month. While some of the differences can be attributed to the variances in individual skills, limitations, responsibilities, or resources, some of the differences in productivity are related to the variances we have in time management skills. The better a person's time management skills the more productive they tend to be.

Time Is An Irreplaceable Commodity

Time cannot be replaced. Once you spend your time in a particular activity or place, you can never get that time back. When you "waste time" in a meaningless activity, you give up the opportunity to spend that time pursuing interests that are meaningful and valuable to you. As a result, an important first step in effective time management is to **be purposeful about how you spend your time**. Stated another way, the better you are at making what you do match what you want, the more productive you will be and the more meaningful your actions will be.

Identify Your Goals

If you don't know where you are going, how will you know if you are on the right path or taking the correct actions? While there are times in life that it is exciting to explore new things or just "go with the flow" and "see where life takes you", there are other times where a clear direction will help you prepare for the challenges of life and allow you to thrive in the midst of those challenges. For example, having clear financial goals about savings can help you be prepared for retirement, while not having any goals could set you up to struggle financially during your retirement years. Therefore, an important step in effective time management is to develop clear goals about what you are trying to accomplish.

Pursue Your Goals

The primary difference between a goal and a fantasy is action. If you have a dream about living on a tropical island, but never pursue that dream, then it is just that: "a dream". However, the moment that you actively begin to pursue the dream it becomes a goal. Then, if you manage your time and resources effectively that goal can become a reality. The problem that many people experience is that they mislabel fantasies as goals. As a result, they talk about what they are going to accomplish, but never really achieve what they say

they want. To prevent this, it is important to act in ways that support your goals.

Prioritize Your Goals

Sometimes people have competing goals. For example, you might have a goal of making more money by working overtime and a goal of spending more time with your family. Obviously these goals are in conflict. Remember that effective time management begins by being purposeful about how you spend your time. When you can't accomplish all of your goals, it is important to set priorities about which goals will receive the majority of your focus and energy. In fact, in many ways, **effective time management is really just effective choice management**. By prioritizing, you are making a conscious decision about which goals mean the most to you.

Schedule Your Priorities

Once you have identified your priorities, it is important to block out the time to pursue them. It is not enough to simply say something is a priority to you. Create a schedule that reflects your priorities and then follow the schedule. You will be surprised at how much you can accomplish if you do this.

Stay on Task

Distractions can easily take you away from your goals. For example, I had a friend who used to claim that he had the cleanest house on campus whenever finals began. He would start studying (which was a priority), but would suddenly notice dust on the furniture. This would of course lead to a thorough house cleaning before he could get back to studying. This in turn led to many late night "cramming sessions" because he ran out of time to study. It is amazing how many distractions we can find when we are faced with challenging tasks, even when those tasks are part of our goals.

To keep from "running out of time" in the pursuit of your goals, you have to minimize the distractions and stay focused on the tasks that support your goals. Remember, you get to choose how you spend your time and the more purposeful you are about those choices, the more effective you will be in accomplishing your own goals.

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Avoid Escapism

To maximize your effective use of time, it is helpful to avoid some of these common escapist activities.

- Daydreaming
- Desk straightening
- Watching TV
- Social Media
- Surfing the Internet
- Reading

While each of these activities may provide enjoyment at times or have a purpose to them, they can easily become a distraction. Learn to tell the difference between when you are relaxing vs. when you are avoiding.

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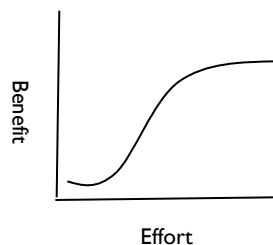
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Tips for Effective Time Management

1. **Break difficult tasks into meaningful steps** - Whenever a project can't be done at one time, it is helpful to break it into several smaller projects or steps. Then schedule time to work on those steps, so that you make progress toward your goal.
2. **Only touch a piece of paper once** - Make a decision about it, work on it, discard it, etc. Don't add to your work by having to review the same information more than once.
3. **Do difficult tasks first** - Worry and dread tend to fill as much time as you allow for it. Get unpleasant tasks out of the way quickly.
4. **Schedule difficult or unpleasant tasks during peak energy times.** - We tend to get energized by activities that we enjoy. Save those activities for your low energy times and do the hard tasks during your peak energy times.
5. **Get rid of the extra stuff in your life.** - The more stuff that you have the more stuff you have to manage or take care of. Simplifying your life will free up more time to do those things that are meaningful to you.
6. **Cut don't squeeze** - Decrease your stress by cutting things out of your day. Don't expect that you will be able to squeeze 2 hours worth of errands into an hour lunch break. Cut the excess out and you will have a more manageable pace.
7. **Do it now vs. Note it now and do it later.** - If a task can be easily done, then just do it. Don't create more work by having to manage an ever growing list of "things that need to get done."
8. **Learn to Delegate** - Do what you do best and delegate to others what they can do as well as you can.
9. **Don't make small decisions into life or death decisions** - Sometimes it is better to just flip a coin and then move on. Don't waste a lot of time on meaningless decisions.
10. **Learn to Say No** - Don't commit to more than you can do.

Learn to Use the 80/20 Rule

The 80/20 Rule is basically the law of diminishing returns. It states that at some point, you have maximized the benefit you are going to receive from a particular activity relative to the amount of effort that you put into that activity. Any additional efforts then only lead to smaller and smaller incremental gains. The following graph helps illustrate this concept.



For example, have you ever had a report that was due either at work or school? If so, you know that at some point, the majority of the information that you need to convey is in the report. However, you can spend an incredible amount of time revising, editing, and re-writing the report to make it better. The report, in fact, may improve, but how much time did you spend to get the small improvements that you gained? If you were following the 80/20 rule, you would stop editing the report at the point where there are diminishing returns relative to the investment in your time.

The advantage to this approach is that it frees up huge amounts of time to pursue other activities. People that follow the 80/20 rule tend to have huge

gains in overall productivity because they focus on tasks that maximize value rather than on tasks that give them only incremental gains. In other words, if you spend less time sweating the small stuff, you have more time to focus on the big things.

Focus on Adding Value Not Adding Volume

Just because you can do an activity well or can do it efficiently doesn't mean that you are using your time wisely. Many people mistake being busy with being productive. It is important to spend your time wisely by focusing on those activities that add true value. It makes no sense to do an activity well that you shouldn't be doing at all.



Useful Time Management Questions

- What is the Best Use of My Time Right Now?
- Am I wasting my time?
- Is there a way to simplify this task?
- What is it that I can Not Do?
- Does this task add value?
- Do my actions match my goals?