

TIME MANAGEMENT DEMYSTIFIED

WHAT IS TIME MANAGEMENT?

Time management is not just a habit to be changed or a skill to be learned. It is a point of view, a set of priorities and perhaps even an emotional state.

Many people try some type of external method of time management – a planner system, a Palm Pilot or some other gismo – but fail to solve their basic time management problems. They run into difficulty and then they simply quit. This creates feelings of guilt and frustration, as if they’ve failed at something crucial in their lives.

Perhaps a different approach would be more helpful. Consider the following question: What do you think is effective about your time management system? What isn’t working? If the answer is fraught with hopelessness and frustration, it is clear that there is an emotional component that is getting in the way. We’ll have to deal with emotional issues, as well as the practical steps required, to improve time management skills.

It is therefore beneficial to try to separate the emotional aspect of the situation from the skill sets. We do this by:

- Exploring what *does* work
- Making adjustments to that program
- Allowing time to learn the new system
- Assessing for further changes and improvements

Throughout this skill building process, it is useful to discuss what the emotional process is, too.

But what if you find that all of your to-do lists and calendars don’t address your larger need, and you are not meeting your goals? It might be because you are not prioritizing these goals. You need to determine which are the most important objectives, and to spend time on those things first. As a bonus, when goals are clearer, the steps to get there are also more evident.

So how do you decide which are your priorities? By first determining what is most important – today. “Today” is important, because reassessment of goals and direction is key, and should be a constant, ongoing process.

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HOW TO ASSESS PRIORITIES

- Find some quiet time to explore what are your highest priority goals. While more easily said than done, this step will save you more time in the long run.
- Use that time to simply write. Don’t edit yourself or try to put it in any particular order. Stream of conscious works best at this point. Start with broad categories like these:
 - Work/Career
 - Home/Family
 - Self Development/Hobbies
- Ask what is most important to accomplish within each of these areas?
- Take a break from writing and come back to it later – an hour, afternoon, even a day later. Review your lists then and if you’ve left anything out, add it now.

You now have a working list of the most important things in your life!

THE BIG FOUR

In exploring what has worked successfully for leaders, the *FranklinCovey*™ Program for Time Management describes four main areas that are necessary for any system to be effective:

1. **Tasks** – all of the big and small things you must DO
2. **Appointments** – nonnegotiable times for meetings, phone calls, lunches, doctors, et cetera
3. **Notes** – information passed on to you in those meetings, or elsewhere that you want to remember
4. **Contacts** – the numbers and addresses for everyone you know

Let’s look at each of these categories in more detail:

TASKS: What do you have to do each day? When many people start this list, several years of pent-up to-do items come tumbling out – they include more things to do than they could possibly accomplish in a day. Breaking down the tasks by

categories helps you focus on their relative importance. The frequency of each task is important, too, for example monthly, weekly and daily. These categories make it easier to update your lists regularly. Doing so makes it simpler to stay current with shifting priorities.

APPOINTMENTS: Note your appointments as they arise, regardless of what method you are using to do so. Remember:

- Include the time spent commuting to and from the appointment. Forgetting about commute time is a common reason for running behind.
- Do you have a meeting with someone who is always late or runs over allotted time? Schedule it – add 15 minutes onto both ends of the meeting. If the person is late, you have a few extra minutes to look at your notes or work in your planner.
- If you need prep time for that weekly meeting or project, schedule that in your calendar as well. Give yourself enough time to prepare properly – think of this as having an appointment with yourself.

NOTES: Keep your notes where you can find them. For example, create a category in your planner or notebook for each of your regular meetings or clients. There are managers who keep a category for each of their employees. Be wary of a creating hodgepodge “Notes” section, with all of your important information in one undifferentiated area. Finding the note you need will be much more difficult – if not impossible.

CONTACTS: Everyone you know in your life, business, community or local charity is likely to have several numbers: E-mails, cell phones, office numbers, faxes, websites. And you never know

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when you need one of them right now. So an easily located and updated method for tracking them is crucial. A mobile method is also helpful; you can take advantage of “down time” between activities (you know – waiting for an appointment to show up or sitting in traffic) to make a call or review your list. However, you must have a method for backing up this critical information, like a palm that backs up to your computer, so in case you lose it (yikes!), you still have all of that information.

Finally, in creating your personal time management program and developing your system, consider your existing preferences. For example, are you high tech or low tech? Do you enjoy gadgets like a Palm Pilot, Outlook list or Blackberry? Or do you find that low-tech is more comfortable or practical? Of course, many people use a combination of high tech and traditional methods to stay organized, say a palm pilot for appointments and contacts (easy to update) and a notebook for notes and tasks (easier to write lengthy or complex notes). Sub-files or tabs work well to keep categories clearly defined and easy to locate.

Schedule time to update lists, appointments and contacts. Take a few minutes every day or two to reflect, plan and prioritize. Re-assess your system regularly, too. Remember that this system is a tool. Like any tool, you want to keep it in working order. If you find that you are struggling with some aspect of your time organization, change it.

Another way of developing and perfecting your system is to talk to people who seem to be organized. How do they do it? Read articles or books for new ideas, and try methods that sound good to you.

Prioritize your goals and stay on top of your lists, and you will find that you are working on the most important things each day. Most of all, be proud of what success you have had in planning your day and time better and accomplishing your goals.



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