

TIME MANAGEMENT – THE MYTH



'How long a minute is, depends on which side of the bathroom door you're on.'
Zall's Second Law

In this article I'm going to give you some time management tips, but first I want to clarify what the term time management means.

Time Management

How many times have you heard the expression "Doing more with less"? This is a typical management expression and in a lot of cases is very pertinent to effective management of physical resources. However, time is not a resource you can have less or more of. You can't see it, hear it, feel it, taste it and so on - time is one of those things that exist but we don't have direct management of it. Some of you will tell me that you can see time by looking at a clock. Actually the clock is only a mechanical visual aid which allows us to simplify our understanding of time. The only control you have over the clock is to switch it on or off – this, however, has no real effect on time itself. Not convinced?

Put two clocks you own together and watch them for two minutes. You'll notice that they will tell you the same time (as long as they are running at the same approximate speed). Then note the time and switch one off. After an hour return to the clocks and see what has happened. I can more or less guarantee that one clock has remained stationary whilst the other has moved on an hour. The point? The clock you left switched off had no affect whatsoever on the continuation of time. How do I know? Because the other one you left on shows you the same time as any other clock left switched on.

Conclusion

You have the same amount of time as everyone else, no more, no less. You have no control whatsoever on time.

'The great dividing line between success and failure can be expressed in five words;
"I did not have time." Franklin Field

All is not lost because what you do have control over is deciding what you want to do within the time period you have set aside for consideration. This means that the skills of problem solving, option generation and decision making become crucial.

Procrastination

Before I give you the tips there is one other area to consider – procrastination. If you've found yourself putting off important tasks over and over again, you're not alone. In fact, many people

procrastinate to some degree – but some are so chronically affected by procrastination that it stops them achieving things they're capable of and disrupts their careers.

The key to controlling and ultimately combating this destructive habit is to recognize when you start procrastinating, understand why it happens (even to the best of us), and take active steps to better manage your time and outcomes.

This is an extensive area and will be covered in later articles, needless to say if this is an issue affecting you then contact Extreme Management Solutions.

Time management tips

Now that we're clear that you can't manage time but you can more appropriately prioritise and decide on the most appropriate option for implementation then these tips will enable you to be far more effective at what you do.

1. If you are a slave to your email system, and particularly if your pc is set up to notify you immediately upon the receipt of any incoming email, then turn off the pop-up or noise which notifies you that you have mail. For many people this is the single biggest obstacle to successful time management. Establish a new habit of checking your email at certain times in the day, when it is sensible for you and the business to do so – i.e. when you arrive at your desk or start work, just before lunch and finally around an hour before normal business closes.

You must decide when to look at your emails - this control should not rest with everyone out there who sends emails to you (nor indeed should this control rest with the spamming and virus-spreading community).

Involuntary email notification is the single biggest time management detractor in the world today. Decide not to be a part of it.

2. Manage your phone calls - don't let them manage you. Avoid continuous notification of incoming calls. Minimise the time that you are available to take unplanned phone calls, unless you are in a customer-facing, reactive role (customers can be internal too), and even if you are customer-facing, you must plan some time-slots when you are not available, or you'll never get anything important and pro-active done.

You could of course switch off the phone, or redirect to someone else. When I suggest this to some of my clients they either faint or look at me as if I suddenly became alien. My question to them, and now you, is – what's the worst that can happen if you [do this action]? The next question, irrespective of the response is:

'Whilst this is possible what's the actual probability of it happening?'

We tend to find that, in reality the impact will be minimal. Use it and see.

3. Really think about how you currently spend your time. If you don't know, keep a time log for a few days to find out. Knowing exactly what's wrong is the first step to improving it. Use a diary, and an activity planner to schedule when to do things, and time-slots for things you know will need doing or responding to. There is an example on www.exmt.co.uk.

4. Challenge anything that could be wasting time and effort, particularly habitual tasks, meetings and reports where responsibility is inherited or handed down from above. Don't be a slave to a daft process or system.
5. Plan preparation and creative thinking time in your diary for the long-term jobs, because they need it. The short-term urgent tasks will always use up all your time unless you plan to spend it otherwise.
6. Use an 'urgent-important' system of assessing activities and deciding priorities such as that devised by Stephen Covey.
7. Do not start lots of jobs at the same time - even if you can handle different tasks at the same time it's not the most efficient way of dealing with them, so don't kid yourself that this sort of multi-tasking is good - it's not.
8. Always probe deadlines to establish the true situation - people asking you to do things will often say 'now' when 'later today' would be perfectly acceptable. Appeal to the other person's own sense of time management: it's impossible for anyone to do a good job without the opportunity to plan and prioritise.
9. Break big tasks down into stages and plan time-slots for them. Think elephant. There is a common statement about breaking tasks into small pieces as an effective way to manage:

'You can't eat an elephant in one sitting but you can devour it if it's in small pieces.'

However, what they don't make explicit is that there are some pieces of the elephant that I wouldn't want you to eat let alone me. Some pieces will be extremely tough whereas others would be softer to chew. Which ones do you decide to tackle first? You have to decide. You could decide to eat the bad ones first and then look forward to eating the nicer ones later, or eat the nice ones first and then the bad ones. There is another option – keep the nice ones and get someone else to eat the bad ones. Delegate!

This approach works well with single tasks but how do you eat an entire herd? Same approach!

Finally.

Managing time is a myth, so most of the time management courses you have completed have been based on a false premise. What you can manage is the way you generate options, solve problems and make decisions – so remember:

'Time flies. It's up to you to be the navigator.' Robert Orben

Decide to use yours wisely and well.

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