

RACING AND CHASING - TRYING TO BEAT THE CLOCK

Poor time management is a frequent criticism from CEOs about employees from the shop floor to the C-suites. Rank does not seem to matter when it comes to the frustration caused by missed deadlines and broken promises. Time is either used or wasted, but once it is gone; it cannot be reclaimed. Time wasting also frustrates customers and other employees. It delays progress and costs the company money. How much money? It is estimated that as many as 90% of employees waste at least 10% of the workday. If the employee works 40 hours a week and earns \$25,000 a year, the cost of each wasted hour is \$15.63 (pay and benefits). That is \$3,251.00 a year for each employee and explains the reason executives continue to look for ways to help employees gain control over their time.

There are many reasons for poor time management. Two of the most obvious are personality and habit. Every personality type can develop good time management habits but first it is important to understand the problem. Time wasting employees share common anxieties and habits.

- They feel overwhelmed by the work.
- They work longer hours than necessary to get the job done.
- They blame other people for failing to get things done.
- They fail to meet deadlines, miss meetings or rush in at the last minute unprepared.
- They spend time telling others how busy they are.

TASK VERSUS PEOPLE

Task-focused employees have an easier time gaining and maintaining control over their time. They tend to enjoy working on tasks and are more aware of deadlines. They work alone comfortably and tend to be introverted or reserved. They are not easily distracted and may work long hours at their tasks without becoming mentally fatigued. Their body-language does not invite socializing. They may stop, respond to a question directly, and immediately return to the task at-hand. Their time-wasting issues are related to control. They have delegating issues and “analysis paralysis.” They are married to the myths that produce time-wasting and need to learn how to use their time more effectively with work only they should be doing.

People-focused employees lose track of time easily. They are open communicators and enjoy socializing. They tend to be extraverted. Without imposing self-control, they waste their own time and the time of others. It is easy for them to stop their work, answer the question asked of them, and then continue to socialize on a variety of topics that are totally unrelated to the work. Although they bring much needed warmth to the workplace, they may be too quick to explain that their time management problems are the result of their personality and they have little control. Wrong. Successful managers and those with a “warm and fuzzy” personality (including this writer) can learn to be effective time managers, but it is hard work and frustrating for them.

MYTHS ABOUT TIME MANAGEMENT

1. **Being busy and active is the best way to get things done.** Wrong. The best use of time comes from planning and organizing. What do you have to do and what do you need to get it done? This approach will allow you to do it right without doing it over. It addresses the new buzzword – focus.
2. **Hard work will solve time management problems.** No. It has long been recognized that smart work trumps hard work. In some companies employees who put in extraordinary hours and exhaust themselves are seen as a liability and poor producer. They tend to work first and plan

last, which creates a need to re-visit finished work when they realize they did not have all the information they needed to do it right the first time.

3. **If you want it done right, do it yourself.** Why? Those who adopt this attitude are often insecure. They believe that no one can do the work as well as they can. They are probably right, but managers must develop a tolerance for imperfection. They must also “inspect what they expect.” They must learn to delegate, which includes reviewing the finished work and correcting the problems. Delegation is critical to effective time management and painful for high control managers who are perfectionists.
4. **Basic day-to-day work requires no planning.** That’s a myth. Poor time managers forget to put the usual work on their calendars and then overbook themselves. Basic day-to-day work also includes interruptions. It is smart to include time on the planning calendar for interruptions.
5. **If you do excellent quality work, you are using your time wisely.** No. What should you do and what should be done by others? That is also an issue of delegation. Effective time managers do not work hard on the wrong stuff. They do not lose sight of what their company does that generates income. They know how revenue is generated and use their time to maximize the income/profit.

TIME WASTERS

Most time management speakers and writers talk about work activity that wastes time. They talk about these time wasters as if they should be eliminated. The very thing that can be a time waster is generally part of our routine work. Not only can they not go away, they are the very essence of what we do. Our goal is to understand the time-wasting aspect of each activity and get more done in less time.

Time is wasted when we spend it on the wrong thing or use more than is needed on the right thing. It is wasted when we are being paid and we allow others to use our time with nothing productive accomplished. Here are the most frequent time wasters. Test yourself from 1-10. Which ones have the most affect on how you manage your time?

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|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Meetings | <input type="checkbox"/> Losing Things |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Attempting To Do Too Much | <input type="checkbox"/> Inability to Say “NO” |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Drop-in Visitors (including online visitors) | <input type="checkbox"/> Procrastination |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Shifting Priorities | <input type="checkbox"/> Telephone Calls |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of Delegation | <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of Priorities |

The number one time-waster is shifting priorities, followed by lack of priorities and losing things. Most companies do not have time management improvement programs because they are complicated. Time and motion studies, charts, graphs, diaries, and time logs, are recommended activities to find out if you are spending time wisely or wasting it. Since proper use of time definitely raises productivity, it is worth the time it takes to invest in yourself. Keep in mind that time management is a skill that can be learned (like swimming). Once you learn it, you will have a lifelong management skill that can help you be more valuable because time management is an asset.

TIME MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

“Which time management system is best?” My answer to this frequently asked question is “None of them.” From the simple to the most elaborate system found in the office supply companies, on the Internet, or available at seminars, one size does not fit all. Although they can be extremely expensive and beautifully bound in leather, their destiny is the shelf of the office or the trunk of the car if the system is not right for you. Although no one system is designed for everyone, everyone **must** have a system. What works for you may not work for co-workers, but the tools are applicable to everyone. So, let go of one of the frequent time-wasters – procrastination – and build a system that works for you.

THE FIRST STEPS

The first step is to record a list of what you do for a few days (maybe three). Next, ask yourself three diagnostic questions recommended by Dr. Peter Drucker.

1. What am I doing that really does not need to be done at all, by me or anyone else?
2. Which of the activities in this time period could have been handled just as well, or maybe better, by someone else?
3. What do I do that wastes the time of others – other employees or my company?

Next, re-visit your job description to reaffirm what you are expected to do. Be sure you understand your priorities. Looking at your list, take an objective look at how you plan, prioritize, delegate, and supervise. Then, respond to these questions.

1. **Are you spending too much time on meetings?** Create and circulate agendas, start on time and keep control of social talkers. Some companies have stand-up meetings to avoid wasting time.
2. **Are you chatting too long on the phone?** Script a written statement that helps you end non-productive conversations such as “*I would love to talk to you longer but I need to*” (This will help you bring the conversation to an end).
3. **Attend too many meetings?** Suggest a phone conference, Skype, or email.
4. **Did you forget a commitment and had to rush at the last minute to meet it?** Write it down. Develop a method to record your work. If you work at a computer, you will find that a desktop task list and calendar are included in most office software. They are convenient and easy to learn. If you are mobile, you may have these tools on your Smartphone. You can program it to remind you of urgent work. If you are visual and want a paper copy, you can purchase a calendar at the office supply company or you can make your own.
5. **Did you do work that should have been delegated?** Do not cram 60 hours of work into a 40-hour week when your subordinates are stretching 20 hours of work into that same 40 hours. Learn to delegate and be sure to check the work for quality standards.

CORRAL THE TIME KILLER

We are in love with our Smartphones. The *Crackberry* addition is pervasive. Wherever we go, we are forever in a symbiotic relationship with the three by five instant connection to everything and everyone. Texting has replaced IMs on the computer as a continuing problem that distracts employees and wastes time. The amount of time employees spend texting is staggering. Innovative and creative companies have issued strict policies, which are ruthlessly enforced because the constant distractions are interrupting the creative thoughts of their employees. Customers are angry at distracted service workers, and the death and destruction caused by distractions from texting is front page news. It seems this valuable business tool is out of control.

It is essential to limit the personal use of cell phones and Internet browsing during work time, except during an emergency. Police yourself and require employees to keep phones turned off or silenced unless used only for work. Create a strict social networking policy (free to all client members), and enforce it. Discipline abusers by forbidding any personal phone at work. It is becoming a common practice to curtail abuse. Request a detailed billing for company phones and you can quickly see which employees have 8,000 (that’s right – 8,000) text messages in one month on a company issued phone. The use of Smartphones has created a contemporary business challenge and it must be managed.

Reduce time wasting by implementing some of the suggestions of writer Jane Fisher Chan and other productivity experts.

- **Turn off audible sounds that a message has arrived on the phone or computer.** This will lessen the temptation to open every message the instant it arrives.
- **Check messages only at certain times.** Even if you're expecting an urgent message, try to check while you are between other activities, not in the middle of them.
- **Cluster your responses.** Instead of responding to every message as you read it, if one person has sent several messages, read them all, combine your responses into one succinct message with a new subject line.
- **Don't check messages while talking on the phone.** This is not a good example of multi-tasking and it is distracting.
- **Never check messages in the middle of a meeting.** It is rude.
- **If you really need to concentrate, remove yourself from temptation.** Silence the phone and turn off the mail signal on the computer.
- **Focus on the message you are writing.** When you're crafting an important message, ignore new messages that appear in your message list.
- **Don't check messages just because you are bored.** Checking messages on the phone and computer is synonymous to opening mail at your desk. It should be a purposeful activity.
- **Use the phone for discussions.** If the email or text is complicated or long, pick up the phone and call. It is more productivity to have certain conversations on the phone.
- **SPECIAL NOTE:** *Never send a text message, email, photo, or any other graphic that you do not want to see 500 times on cable news or in a courtroom!*

THE BLUEPRINT FOR CHANGE

To become an effective time manager, you must accept that it is worth the time it will take to learn a new habit, and you will be frustrated often. It will take you three months. You will quit for a day or two, but if you are committed to improve, you will go back to it until you have learned this new skill.

Consultants have the good fortune to observe many executives, managers and other employees at work. It is easy to identify those who are both effective and efficient. They do not rely on their memory as a task list, because sooner or later it will fail. The best time managers I have seen have consistently had one time management habit in common. They have a journal. They use one single resource to write in. They use it every day, take it wherever they go and make notes of every description. They have it at their desk, in meetings, in their car and they take it with them when they pack their briefcase at the end of the day. What is in it? Their business life is in there. It may not be legible to anyone else but they make notes all day, every day that keeps them organized. It serves as a continuous reference of what they have promised and need to remember. A few use a commercially purchased time management system with daily pages, but not many use that technique.

Once I observed this consistent habit of effective managers and leaders, I began to ask questions?

Q. How did you learn to do that?

A. *I went to an Ivy League school and we were required to keep a journal from the first day of class, or, I worked for a Fortune 100 company and every manager was required to keep a journal as a planning and time management tool.*

Q. What do you write down in that journal?

- A. *Everything I need to remember. I make minimal notes to remind me. I write down phone numbers in case I need to call back and the number is not stored in my Smartphone. I write only what I need to remember because I am the only one who reads it.*
- Q. Do you take it everywhere?
- A. *Yes. If I go to a dentist or doctor and need to wait, I use that time to review, organize or make a list of unfinished work, transfer phone numbers to my Smartphone, or update my calendar.*
- Q. Why did you stick with this method?
- A. *Because it keeps everything in one place and does not require me to keep moving information around.*
- Q. Do you use other time management tools?
- A. *Yes. I have a calendar. As a Sales Manager (or other title), I am often away from the office, so I have a calendar I keep in the back of this notebook.*
- Q. Why do you choose this particular style notebook?
- A. *It is just a simple, three-ring type notebook that is easy to find and easy to write in. There are many different styles, including some fancy ones, but this one works for me.*
- Q. Do you use things like “stickie notes” or “yellow pads.”
- A. *No, and I do not write notes on my hand either. I don’t need to. I keep a notebook type journal, a manager’s log, business record, or whatever you call it. It is a record of my work. It is all in one place and it is chronological. I just turn the page, date it, and keep writing.*
- Q. What do you recommend to people who manage stores or warehouses? A shop floor manager is always mobile and the desk is not handy.
- A. *The supervisors in our production department have a three by five notebook with a wire spiral across the top and they keep it in their shirt pocket. It serves the same purpose.*
- Q. When your book is full, what do you do with it?
- A. *I put the beginning and end date on it and keep it for reference.*

Does this method work? Yes. I cannot describe how much difference it made in how I manage my time when I learned to use a journal more than 20 years ago. Time management is personal. Every employee must identify which time wasters are interfering in their success by causing them to work too hard, limit their success, or cause them to be embarrassed for failure to meet their commitments. They must proactively seek the right tools to address them and then be committed to actually follow through. Time management problems cannot be cured, but they can be managed effectively to minimize their impact on success. This management advisory is an impetus to those who need to overcome one of the top ten time-wasters - procrastination.

This is a business management advisory and is not designed to replace the services of a competent legal advisor. It is not specific to the laws of any state in the U.S. Nancye Combs is the endorsed Human Resources consultant STAFDA, FISA, HARDI, OPEESA, NAHAD, PEI, and consults with trade associations throughout the country. Nancye has more than 35 years of practical experience in human resources. A recognized authority, she speaks, writes, and offers expert witness testimony on management issues. She is a University instructor for human resources professionals seeking to become nationally certified by the Human Resources Certification Institute and a member of the faculty for those who are seeking to become a Certified Professional Management Representative (CPMR).

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