



McCRUDDEN
MEDIA

Making Great Learning, Great Fun

Time Management & Prioritisation

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*“The bad news is time flies.
The good news is you’re the pilot.”*

Michael Altshuler

SECTION 1:

Introduction To Time Management

Have you ever reached the end of a busy day, a day where you haven’t really stopped, but when you sit back to reflect you realised how little you’ve really achieved? Or perhaps you’ve felt that there just aren’t enough hours in the day to undertake the mountain of tasks you have to accomplish?

Being overwhelmed by tasks or feeling like you cannot successfully complete anything can create feelings of frustration and powerlessness. Especially, when we see

*Invest the right amount of time,
in the right activities, at the right point
in your day.*

others around us seemingly in control of their workload.

But why is this? Time is, after all, the one thing that regardless of age, sex, or job title, we all have in common. We all have precisely 168 hours per week, no more, no less. With that being the case why is it that some people achieve far more with their time than others?

It doesn’t mean that they’re more talented than the rest of us or have some magic secret that enables them to fit more into their day. Put simply, the answer lies in good habits, prioritisation and organisation. High achievers excel at good time management.

*“Until we can manage time, we can
manage nothing else.”*

Peter F Drucker

What is time management?

The phrase 'time management' is something of a misnomer. In the same way King Canute couldn't stop the tide, none of us can manage time. We can manage our priorities and productivity. We can improve how we organise and plan our day and minimise distractions and time wasters.

To be clear, being a good time manager doesn't mean being robotically efficient with no 'down time'. Quite the opposite in fact, excellent time managers know the value of low intensity tasks, and of taking regular breaks. That is part of what makes them productive.

Productivity and good time management are about making the best use of our time.

T.O.A.D. – Know the symptoms!

Scientists have recently diagnosed a new disorder that affects an individual's ability to successfully complete tasks. Total Overload (of) Activities Disorder, or TOAD for short, occurs when a person fails to complete a single task because they take on too many things simultaneously, that their conscious mind is unable to focus.

One overloaded sufferer describes a typical day in their life:

One Monday morning I decided to get to work earlier to tidy my desk before too many people got into the office.

As I walked into the building, I saw Saturday's post on the floor, and I decided that I should sort through that first. As I flicked through the letters, I noticed several weren't for me, so I decided to drop them off to their intended recipients before I opened my post.

On the way to drop off the post, I noticed that the printer was flashing with a red light. Knowing I was going to need to print some papers later that morning, I decided to fix the problem before I dropped off the letters.

The printer was out of paper, so I put the post down and decided to go and get some paper from the cupboard. Halfway down the corridor I remembered the paper cupboard is right next to one of the offices that I needed to drop letters to. So, I went back for the post.

On the way back, I bumped into my colleague who'd just arrived, "Ah" he said, "I was hoping I'd see you – do you have the notes from last week's meeting?" "Of course," I said, "they're on my desk, I'll get them for you". "No hurry" he said, "anytime today will do."

continued...

I decided to do it there and then, so I didn't forget. I went to my desk, where I found I'd left my dirty coffee mug on Friday night and it was starting to go mouldy. I decided that I'd better clean that out while I thought about it. As I headed to the kitchen, a plant in reception caught my eye as it was desperately in need of water.

I walked to the kitchen with the dirty coffee mug and the plant and noticed my reading glasses next to the sink – I'd been looking for those all weekend. I must have left them there on Friday night.

I decided I'd better put them in my coat pocket so I didn't forget them again, but first I thought I should put boiling water in my mug. I put my glasses back down and filled my mug with washing-up liquid and hot water.

Then I remembered the plant – so I poured some water into the pot, but quite a bit spilled on to the floor. I decided I should mop it up because it was a health and safety hazard. I got a mop and cleaned up the mess. I headed back down the corridor, trying to remember what I had been planning to do.

By lunch time, my desk was still a mess, I hadn't given out the post, or opened my letters, the printer still didn't have any paper, I hadn't given my colleague the documents he'd asked for, my coffee mug was still soaking, the plant still didn't have enough water and I couldn't find my reading glasses!

And to cap it off, I couldn't remember what I'd done with my car keys!

I tried to work out why I had not got anything completed as I was really confused because I knew I hadn't stopped all morning. I realised it was a real problem for me, so I went on the internet to try and find some help for it. Then a message popped up saying that I had a new email, so I decided to look at that first...

Why should I care about time management?

The benefits of learning to improve our time management are many in number:

Financial: Reducing our wasted time and being more productive overall contributes to financial efficiency for our organisations. Even for those of us working in non-profit organisations, the ability to complete our work quickly helps to make the organisation financially viable.

Less stress: Think of a time when you've been under pressure to hit a deadline when you faced a continual stream of interruptions and then more work arrived. How did you feel? Finding ways to manage our workload is an essential tool in reducing stress levels.

Better work-life balance: Whilst we can't create more time, critically evaluating where we invest our time and focusing our efforts where they matter most can increase the free time we have available to us.

Improved productivity: Getting the right tasks done with clarity and focus reduces the frequency of mistakes and being organised means less chance of forgetting things. How often have you had to make another trip because you forgot something, or add an urgent task to your to do list because it had slipped your mind?

Feel better: Being more productive and finishing tasks

Top ten time stealers:

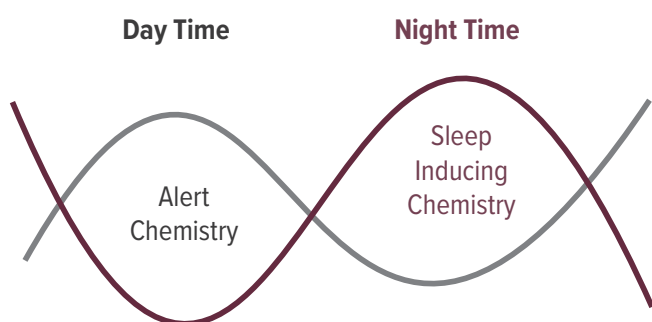
1. Lack of planning & prioritisation
2. Other people's problems
3. Email & phone
4. Meetings
5. Procrastination
6. Not saying 'no'
7. Technology failures
8. Not enough time for yourself
9. Crises
10. Lack of, or ineffective, delegation

releases dopamine, a happy hormone in our brains. So, successfully managing our workload can literally make us feel happier.

Better decisions: The pressures we face when we don't prioritise and organise often lead to us making emotional rather than rational decisions. Conversely, when our minds aren't overwhelmed, we believe we have the time to consider options. Good time managers are calm and in control. They make better decisions.

***Illich's Law:** After a certain number of working hours, productivity significantly decreases and we reach a negative productivity threshold, a point after which we struggle to maintain our attention and begin making mistakes.*

Reputational: Greater productivity, improved efficiency and more effective decision making all have a knock-on effect on our professional reputation and increase the chances of realising our career goals.



There's no shortage of advice on time management tips around. A quick internet search generated over 3 billion results in under 1 second.

Yet 34% of UK workers say that don't have enough time in the day to get their jobs done, and according to Dr Donald Wetmore, only 20% of the average working day is spent on important tasks. Most workers are using around 13 different tools to manage their time. That sounds exhausting in itself!

Managing our time well is multi-faceted. Take a look at the top ten time stealers and you'll see what we mean. It's likely that there are some aspects of time management you're already really good at, and there are probably some areas that are holding you back.

Part of the problem is that few of us are actively taught how to manage our time well. Most of us rarely consciously think about how we invest our time. We muddle through, 'borrowing' ideas from others (like writing to do lists) and developing our own time management habits. Some of these habits may serve us well but some may actually be sabotaging our efforts.

In working through this study guide, you'll first reflect on your current approach to time, looking for the things that you're already good at, and the areas that you can improve. Then the guide will walk you step-by-step through idea and tips that could help!

SECTION 2:

Assessing Your Current Approach

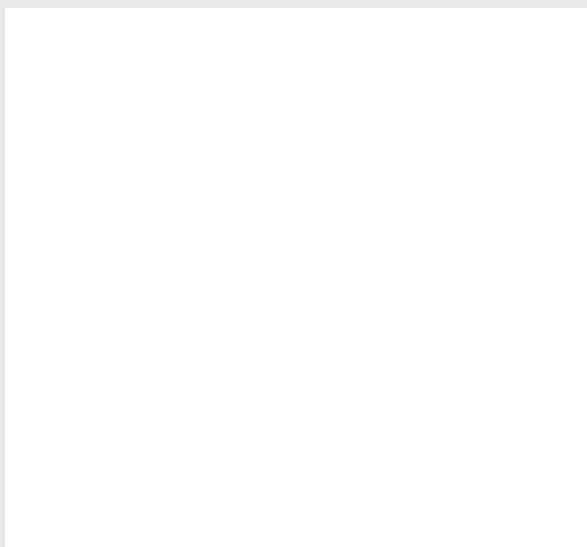
The first step towards improving your time management is to begin to understand how you currently use your time.

Circadian Rhythms (Illich's Law)

Coming from the Latin circa (meaning around) and diem (meaning day), circadian rhythms are natural, internal processes that regulate sleep-wake cycles in most living things, including us.

EXERCISE:

Are you a wolf, a lion, a bear or a dolphin?



Governed by a group of neurons in the hypothalamus called the suprachiasmatic nucleus, our circadian rhythm is effectively our internal clock that determines when we feel energised and when we feel exhausted. During day light hours alert chemicals are released by our brains. As light fades, sleep inducing chemistry usually takes over.

Although influenced by daylight, we all have our own pattern. Dr Michael Breus author of 'The Power of when', developed four characters that reflect common circadian patterns:

The Wolf

The proverbial night owl. Tends to be drowsy early in the morning, wolves peak between 12-2pm and then again in the evening.

The Lion

The early bird, like a lion they are most active in the early morning, becoming less productive in the afternoon and evening.

The Bear

Time	Task working on	What you actually worked on/interruptions	Category
8.00am	RESOLVING ISSUE with classrooms	Got a text about IT ISSUES in classroom. Tried to resolve, had to organise alternative equipment	Unforeseen issue / crisis
8.15am	Reading minutes for team meeting	Reading meeting notes	Meeting admin
8.30am	Travel	-	Travel
8.45am	Travel	-	Travel
9.00am	RESOLVING ISSUE with classroom IT	Set up new equipment in classroom	Unforeseen issue / crisis
9:15am	Emails	5mins on emails then Naomi interrupted with questions	Emails / Interruptions
9:30am	Emails	Emails	Emails
9.45am	Emails	Emails	Emails
10.00am	Team meeting	Team meeting	Team tasks

10.15am	Team meeting	Team meeting	Team tasks
10.30am	Team meeting	Team meeting	Team tasks
10.45am	Team meeting	Team meeting - Iain went off track for 10mins	Team tasks
11.00am	Team meeting	Team meeting	Team tasks
11.15am	Team meeting	Team meeting	Team tasks
11.30am	Should have been reviewing new IT policy	Impromptu 1-2-1 with Naomi (UPSET)	Team tasks
11.45am	Should have been reviewing new IT policy	Impromptu 1-2-1 with Naomi (UPSET)	Unforeseen issue / crisis
12.00pm	Reviewing new IT policy	Started reviewing policy. Interrupted by member of lecturing team wanting to know about ordering IT equipment	Strategy / Interruptions
12.15pm	Reviewing new IT policy	Working on comments on new IT policy - 2 phone calls from users with IT issues	Interruptions
12.30pm	Reviewing new IT policy	Finalised comments on policy	Strategy
12.45pm	Travel to off campus project meeting	Travel - took a call about locked email account en route	Travel / Unforeseen issue
1.00pm	Travel to off campus project meeting	Travel	Travel
1.15pm	Project meeting	Arrived late (traffic) Listened to project to develop new courses	Meetings
1.30pm	Project meeting	Listened to project to develop new courses	Meetings
1.45pm	Project meeting	Listened to project to develop new courses	Meetings
2.00pm	Project meeting	Listened to project to develop new courses	Meetings
2.15pm	Project meeting	Gave IT input on new course	Meetings
2.30pm	Project meeting	Listened to project to develop new courses	Meetings
2.45pm	Project meeting	Listened to project to develop new courses	Meetings
3.00pm	Travel from project meeting	Travel	Travel

3.15pm	Travel from project meeting	Travel	Travel
3.30pm	Emails	Replying to emails	Emails
3.45pm	Emails	Replying to emails	Emails
4.00pm	Email migration	Started working on planning email migration. Interrupted by Iain - no real reason	Interruptions
4.15pm	Email migration	Naomi didn't know how to run the regular back-ups. Took on doing that	Interruptions
4.30pm	Email migration	Running the regular back-ups	Interruptions
4.45pm	Email migration	Phone call from someone in the project meeting with additional questions	Interruptions
5.00pm	Email migration	Working on email migration project	Project work
5.15pm	Email migration	Working on email migration project	Project work
5.30pm	Email migration	Working on email migration project	Project work
5.45pm	Email migration	Working on email migration project	Project work
6.15pm	Email migration	Working on email migration project	Project work
6.30pm	Finished work	Left for home.	-

Notes: I started the day keen to make progress on the email migration project and felt frustrated about being asked to do things that weren't my job. The project meeting was especially frustrating because they didn't really need me there, but I'd been asked to attend by a senior manager. By the time I got back I didn't have the energy or will to focus on the migration project.

Patterns that follow the sun and the moon. Most alert mid-morning and may feel an energy dip during mid-afternoon.

The Dolphin

Lighter sleepers who often feel sleep deprived. Most

Time logs can also be kept using tech tools and apps such as Toggl, Harvest or Rescue Time.

EXERCISE:

Write down everything, including interruptions and breaks, every 15 minutes. Update your log periodically throughout the day rather than entering all the information at the end of the day (our memory is often a poor guide of what we've been doing). At the end of

each day, make a few notes on how you felt during the day. Complete a time log for 3-5 'typical' days so that you have enough data to see patterns emerging. You may find it easier to create categories of activities after you've created a few days of data.

Print the form on the following page to record your activity

Now try to estimate the percentage of your working hours you have spent on each task. For example, over 3 days you might have spent a total of 4 hours in irrelevant meetings:

$3 \times 7 \text{ hour days} = 1,260 \text{ minutes (420 minutes per 7 hour day)}$

240 minutes spent in irrelevant meetings

$240 / 1,260 \times 100 = 19\%$

That's a 5th of your time wasted!

How many hours and minutes did you work in the period you logged? ____ hours or _____ minutes

Category	Total minutes spend on activity	% of time working on activity

Now look at the details in your log and answer the following questions:

- Considering your circadian rhythm, are you scheduling your key tasks when you're most focused?
- Are the same colleagues or employees interrupting you?
- Are you procrastinating on important tasks by being distracted by more appealing or easier tasks?

productive mid-morning to mid-afternoon.

Why is this important? Well, if you know when you're at your peak, you can do your most complex work and avoid interruptions and distractions. Wherever you can, try to hold meetings outside of your peak time and deal with low intensity tasks like filing or tidying when you're most tired.

You will never have enough time to do everything – the trick is knowing what is worth doing.

EXERCISE:

You are one of only two full-time staff in a high-end independent restaurant. The restaurant has a total of six staff working the busy week evenings.

To do:

Plan + price the specials menu
Check the butcher's delivery
Set up front of house
Get cover for the kitchen porter who's ill
Check wine stocks
Clear out the perished foods
Schedule staff breaks
Prep the veg
Do the seating plan for the evening
Prepare the stock for the meat courses
Clean the glassware
Finish restaurant cook book for publisher
Get slow cooked lamb on
Record fridge temperatures
Handle booking enquiries
Collect laundered table cloths
Promote special mother's day lunch
Make breads
Beer and wine inventory + ordering
Get ice cream made
Sort payroll

You are getting the restaurant ready for a busy Friday night. Review the list of things on your to do list and prioritise them.

To do:

The chances are you may have found the previous exercise somewhat challenging. Would it have been easier if you'd been told that you were the head chef?

This illustrates the importance of knowing the purpose of your role, before you start to prioritise tasks.

Think back to the sample time log in Section 2. If Alejandra's objectives were specifically around team management and high-level projects, it becomes easy to see that advising people about buying IT equipment, sorting out technology failures and completing regular back-up jobs are not priority tasks for her. These are the tasks she should be delegating and coaching her team to do.

EXERCISE:

Think about your role and the objectives you may have been given. What are your top priority tasks?



To do lists

To do lists are commonly used tools to plan and prioritise workloads. Some people write a simple list of things to do each day, or each week. For those of us who prefer a weekly to do list, it's advisable to allocate a few minutes at the start of each day to review and confirm the list.

Smart time managers take it one step further and prioritise their to do lists, rating each task on how important it is. Some people use a 1-3 rating, with 1 being top priority and 3 being lowest priority. Others suggest that we should then review every 2 rated task and make it either a 1 or a 3. That tasks are either important or not important, and there shouldn't be tasks that are rated 2.

However, you decide to rate your tasks, the mere act of prioritising tasks helps to focus your attention on the work that is most important for your job!

Pareto's law or the 80-20 rule, states that 80% of the results come from 20% of the effort. Also known as the law of the vital few and the trivial many, if you want to succeed, you need to concentrate your efforts on those tasks which will give you the maximum reward. This involves taking the time to prioritise your work, removing the 80% of trivial stuff that won't prove to be as effective and spending your time on the areas that really matter.

Urgent or important

When prioritising our to do lists, it's essential not to confuse important with urgent. Urgent means that a deadline is close. Important means it has the biggest impact on your role or the organisation.

One of the most common mistakes that we make when prioritising our work is to focus on urgent rather than important.

EXAMPLE

It's Tuesday morning in the middle of the month, and Ishmael works as a finance administrator in a local authority. He's looking at two jobs on his to do list – order stationery stock and produce summary reports for each department on their budgets.

The stationery suppliers need orders by 11am on Tuesday to dispatch items this week. It would be easy for Ishmael to assume that the stationery order is his priority because it's urgent.

However, assuming that our cupboards aren't completely empty of stationery – the summary finance reports are likely to be more important, because helping the departments manage their budgets is Ishmael's primary role. The stationery order could wait until another day.

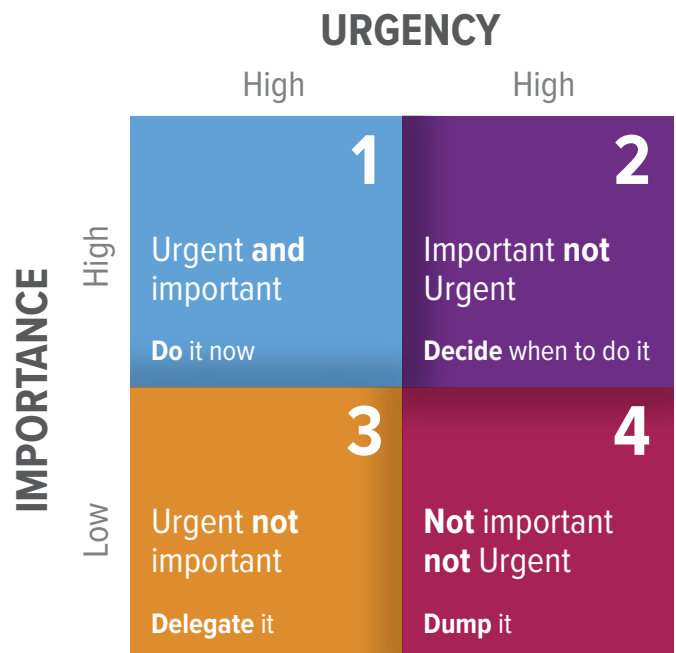
The Eisenhower Matrix (also known as the Urgent-Important Matrix) is a powerful prioritisation tool that takes a linear to do list and puts tasks into one of four quadrants.

Before becoming President, Dwight Eisenhower served as a general in the army, and as the Allied Forces Supreme Commander during World War II. Eisenhower was faced with many tough decisions concerning the tasks he needed to focus on every day. This inspired him to invent a principle that helps to prioritise our tasks by urgency and importance.

Tasks that are important (essential for our role), and have a pressing deadline naturally become our top priority and should be completed immediately. This would include genuine emergencies, pressing problems and projects with fixed deadlines.

Many of us are instinctively driven by urgency, and then proceed to do other urgent tasks (phone calls, reports, other people's emergencies). The matrix encourages us to next schedule in other tasks that are important to our role within the organisation (for example, planning, collaborations, relationship building) above those with short deadlines but are less important.

Those activities that have a short deadline, but are less important to our role, can be delegated or pushed back, and we're encouraged to dump tasks that add little or no value and aren't important.



Studies of prioritisation across organisations have found the most effective organisations spend most of their time (around 65%) working on tasks in box 2. They spend only 30% of their time in box 1, because their focus on box 2, means they have been planning ahead and spend less time 'firefighting'.

Advanced prioritisation tools.

"Every minute spent in planning saves 10 minutes in execution."

Brian Tracy

While these straight-forward approaches to prioritisation can help us on a day-to-day basis, what about when we're looking at the bigger picture, deciding which projects we should focus our attention on?

In order to make decisions about where to invest our time at a strategic level, more robust tools are needed.

The Action Priority Matrix (also called the impact-feasibility matrix) is a diagramming tool that helps you to select tasks to make the most of your time and opportunities.

Each task or project is ranked on two separate scales ranging from 0 (low) to 10 (high). First the impact the activity will have on achieving your overall objectives is scored, and secondly the level of effort involved in completing the task is also rated 0-10.

Those ratings are then used to plot activities on a grid, landing them in one of the 4 categories:

Those ratings are then used to plot activities on a grid, landing them in one of the 4 categories:

- **Quick wins** – attractive projects that give you a good return for minimal effort. This is where our primary focus should be

- **Major projects** – give us good returns but demand a time investment. Major projects can quickly overwhelm other tasks so we should limit the number of active major projects we have. If you have more than one major project, you should give careful thought to which needs to be completed first.

- **Fill ins** – these tasks are great if we have spare time, or for when our energy and focus is depleted. We might consider delegating these activities.

- **Thankless tasks** – these tasks use up our time for very little reward. They are the types of activities we should consider dropping.

Common sense needs to be applied when plotting the tasks. A impact rating of 4.5, or 5.5 is only a one point difference, but could mean a task is considered a thankless task or a major project.

Another way of evaluating your tasks is to substitute impact for 'financial return' or effort for 'hours of work'.

EXERCISE:

Task/project	Impact (0-10) 0 = no impact 10 = maximum impact	Effort (0-10) 0 = no effort 10 = maximum effort

EXERCISE: continued



Scheduling tasks:

Once priorities are planned, they then need to be scheduled (fitted in to the time you have available). Effective scheduling ensures that you don't take on more than you can handle and protects your work-life balance.

Scheduling involves identifying the time you have available, using your objectives and priorities to order the tasks that need to be completed, estimating how long each task will take and then setting yourself some challenging but realistic deadlines.

Deadlines improve our concentration. Have you ever noticed how efficiency and focus improve as deadlines gets closer? However, the deadlines we set for ourselves should motivate us, not increase our stress levels. They need to be realistic.

Once you've set some deadlines, proactive time blocking (planning out your day, dedicating specific hours to key tasks in your diary), can help some people stay on track. The aim is to define and limit the amount of time you

allocate for specific activities. Time blocking is a way of creating an artificial deadline and preventing work expanding.

If you decide to practice time blocking, you share your diary with others, communicate to colleagues when you're available and when you shouldn't be disturbed.

Whether you choose to schedule your work on a monthly, weekly or daily basis, first block out time for your high-priority tasks, ideally at the time of day when you know you are at your most productive. If you manage others, make sure you leave time available to communicate with and support colleagues (reactive time blocking).

Finally, include discretionary time; time to work on your personal goals and add in low effort 'fill in' tasks for your least productive times of day.

Parkinson's Law: *The demand upon a resource, in this case time, tends to match the availability of that resource. Too much time can kill time. If you decide to create an article in one day then it will take you a day to write it. If however, you leave a task until the last minute, then it's completed much faster.*

Leaving gaps in your schedule:

Murphy's Law: *Nothing is as simple as it seems, and anything that can go wrong, will go wrong. Things that can derail a project, or cause difficulties always seem to happen at the most inopportune of times.*

How do you know how long a task will take? Estimating how long a task will take could be more art than science. Though there are some approaches that may help.

Use similar tasks you've completed as a guide. If you've not worked on anything like this before, ask people who have and then add a reasonable amount of additional time. (Experts will complete tasks quicker than someone new to it).

For complex tasks, taking a weighted average of a pessimistic, optimistic and most likely time estimate can be highly effective. This is known as PERT (Program Evaluation and Review Technique), where:

- The pessimistic estimate (P) is where everything goes wrong
- The optimistic estimate (O) is where everything goes smoothly
- The most likely estimate (M) is the time needed under normal circumstances.

To generate a weighted average the following formula is used $(O + P + 4 \times M) / 6$.

Moving immediately from one task to the next can have a detrimental impact on your productivity. The human brain has a time-limited ability for intense concentration. Leaving a buffer between tasks to take a moment to clear your mind, can help you ensure you enter your next task ready to focus.

The Pomodoro Technique is a scheduling tool based on our limited attention capacity. In an attempt to improve his ability to study for exams, an American student used a tomato shaped kitchen timer to set alternating study and rest periods in relatively short bursts. For example, you might complete 25 minutes of focused work, then take a 5-minute break before starting another 25 minutes on the same task, or something new.

None of us, regardless of our abilities, can manage our time perfectly all the time. There are often too many variables to take into account, or unforeseen factors will crop up to put a spanner in the works.

Smart time managers allow a little extra time for tasks, and don't fill 100% of the slots in their diary. They protect gaps in their scheduling that can be used to deal with the unexpected.

Top tips for improving planning and prioritising:

- 1.** For each task, estimate how long it might take. Set realistic deadlines and stick to them. Remember the key is REALISTIC - deadlines are meant to be helpful not a major cause of stress.
- 2.** Protect 'free time' in your diary, take time to talk to colleagues, or just take a short break. Scheduling 'down time' will ultimately make you more effective and productive.
- 3.** Don't rely on your memory alone. Create 'to do' lists, then prioritise your tasks in order of importance. If you have difficulty prioritising tasks, try asking a colleague or friend for a second opinion. You can even use different colours to denote the importance of each task.
- 4.** At the start of each week, block out 15-30 minutes to plan your schedule for the whole week. Then, take 10 minutes each day to revisit the plan, checking off accomplished tasks, or amending for urgent actions that have arisen.
- 5.** Time spent looking for lost papers can easily add up and research suggests that each piece of paper on your desk will distract your attention an average of 5 times a day! Keep your desk clear of everything but the task at hand. Block out time in your schedule to tidy your desk and ideally schedule such 'low energy' tasks for when you know you work least effectively.
- 6.** Be decisive! Only 'touch' each piece of paper or email once – skim read it, then use the DRAFT technique: Delegate it, Read it, Act on it, File it, or Toss it.

SECTION 4:

Interruptions

Interruptions are any number of things that distract us, including emails, the internet, phone calls, or other people (internal or external to your organisation) distracting you with work-related or non work-related conversations.

“Either you run the day, or the day runs you.”

Jim Rohn

It's important to be clear that there's a difference between interactions (beneficial interruptions that simply shift your thinking to another one of your priorities) and distractions. Distractions lead us to get involved in work that isn't really our remit.

Why are they such a problem? Our brain needs time to reach its full capacity and become completely engaged in a task. Once your brain has reached this level of productivity or creativity, it's better to continue the job until completion as, according to the principle, the interrupted job will be less effective and will take longer than that which runs continuously.

Carlson's Law: *means that uninterrupted work is more efficient. When working on a task continually, it takes less time to accomplish than it would when working on it over several sessions.*

The truth is it's impossible to avoid being disturbed at times during the day. Having skills to deal with interruptions is essential.

Interruptions are one of the most significant time stealers. Studies have suggested that the average office worker only gets an average of 3-11 minutes clear time to work on a project before being interrupted. The average interruption is thought to last between 6-9 minutes and recovering from that interruption (time taken to regain your concentration)

can be anything up to a further 5 minutes. This means that each interruption could cost you 15 minutes, in addition to the interruption itself.

It's easy to see how a small number of distractions can affect your plans to complete tasks. In fact research by Basex suggests that interruptions could account for 28% (2.1 hours) of an average working day.

This doesn't mean that you should shut yourself off from other people in your place of work, but there definitely needs to be a balance between being available for your colleagues and constantly being interrupted. Equally, there may be unavoidable interruptions that you must deal with, however this section will help you to minimise non-essential interruptions.

No one should multi-task

Let's start by dismissing the misconception that multi-tasking is a good thing.

The human brain is not designed to multi-task. We may be able to do it, but we are not efficient, and it frequently leads to mistakes. Have you ever forgotten an attachment to an email that you were writing whilst on the phone to someone else? Or written the wrong word in a report whilst dealing with a question from a colleague?

Not convinced. Try the exercise below:

EXERCISE:

Firstly, get a stop watch and time how fast you can count from 1–10.

Reset your timer and time how fast you can recite the alphabet from A-J.

Typically, you'll have completed each task in just a couple of seconds. Now, reset your timer and this time combine the two. Starting with A1, B2 all the way to J10. In theory you should be able to do this in the combined time from the last two activities.

When we attempt to multi-task, our brains aren't running two parallel tasks, they are toggling between two tasks. It's not an efficient way to work. Make sure you focus on one task at a time and that means managing interruptions.

Strategies for minimising interruptions

The first step in managing interruptions is to understand how you are being distracted. Keep an interruptions log for around a week. Every time you're interrupted (by others, or by interrupting yourself), make a note of it.

Review the interruptions, and ask if they were valid interruptions? Did they need to be dealt with there and then, or could it have waited?

Then total up the time lost to interruptions, the time lost to distractions, and to non-urgent interruptions. Knowing the average time needed for genuine interruptions will help you to schedule this into your diary each day or week.

EXERCISE:

Person	Summary of interruption	Approximate duration	Interaction or distraction?	Urgent?
Total time				

To help you manage non-urgent interruptions, let your colleagues know when you'd like not to be disturbed, but make sure this is balanced with time when you are available. There are different ways to signal that you're concentrating, from closing doors, putting on headphones, moving to a quiet space like a conference room for a period of time or even placing a sign to the back of your chair.

We can minimise casual interruptions by ensuring we're not inviting them. Do you have an empty chair by you that invites people to sit and chat? Does your desk layout mean people can easily 'catch your eye'?

If people do 'drop in', it can be possible to manage their visit by getting up and walking to the kitchen or toilet. This combines a short screen break for you, with a time limit for the interruption – how long it takes you to walk to your destination.

If all else fails, you may need to politely but assertively tell the person that you are not available right now. Having a key phrase such as, 'I'm actually in the middle of something complex at the moment. Could I come and find you at lunch time?' prepared can lead to dealing with interruptions confidently.

*The 3 D's of dealing with interruptions:
Discourage them; Defer them to another
time; Deal with them if urgent.*

Interruptions don't always come from other people. In fact, Gloria Mark, Associate Professor at University of California studied workplace interruptions and found that 44% of interruptions were self-interruptions. Sometimes we allow ourselves to be interrupted, by checking our phones or glancing at social media. Fortunately, with a little discipline, it's easy to minimise personal distractions. Close your email program and only check your inbox at allotted times throughout the day. Consider an autoresponder that let's senders know that you're not always online, and when you open your emails sort them by sender allowing you to tackle emails from your most important contacts first.

'Hide' your personal phone and divert calls to voicemail when you're working on something that requires a high level of concentration. When answering calls, take control of the conversation by asking questions that steer the caller to get to the point. Standing up while taking a phone call can help your voice sound more assertive.

When the essential business is completed, signal to the other person that the conversation is over by using key phrases:

Is there anything else you need before I go?

I'm glad we got that sorted.

I'll complete those tasks for you as soon as this call ends.

Meetings

A 2019 European study of 2,000 workers across UK, France and Germany showed the average worker spends the equivalent of 23 days a year in meetings and that an estimated 56% of these meetings are unproductive. That's an incredible 13 days a year.

The management of meetings is a topic in itself, but for those of us participating in meetings there are things we can do.

Arrive on time for meetings and encourage the chairperson to start the meeting promptly. Waiting for late comers, not only wastes the time of those who arrive on time, but also sends a subconscious signal that it's not a problem if you're late.

Before accepting an invitation to a meeting, ask for clarity around the remit of the meeting, and how the organiser believes you can contribute. If necessary, attend only for specific agenda items, and at the start of the meeting make it clear that you need to leave at a defined time.

If you're organising the meeting, ensure you follow best practice for effective meetings.

Top tips for managing interruptions:

1. Block off set times a day to handle emails (first thing in the morning, lunch time and before you go home). Consider a permanent auto-responder that tells people that you look at your emails periodically throughout the day, and how they can reach you if they need an immediate answer.
2. Organise computer files logically. When you update a document add the date to the title; this can save wasted time looking for the latest version of a file.
3. Change the layout of your desk so that you are not facing 'traffic' and remove anything that encourages people to come and 'visit', like empty chairs that allow people to come and sit down.
4. Learn to politely, but assertively, tell people if it's a bad time, or if you can – move and sit somewhere 'out of the way' if you need space to concentrate.
5. Avoid having an 'open door' policy with staff or colleagues – make it clear when you are available and when you are not.
6. Only organise or attend meetings when there is a clear reason or benefit and consider only attending long meetings for the relevant sections.
7. Hold meetings in other people's offices/premises so that you can leave when you want to.

SECTION 5:

Attitudes To Time & Monkey Management

We all have our own attitudes to work, based on our experiences and up-bringing. Time management is no different, and our attitudes influence our ability to manage our time. For example, if you believe that there isn't enough time in the day to complete your work, there is a chance that you'll continually take on new tasks, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Learning to say no, is an essential time management skill.

Saying no:

- Show you've listened by paraphrasing the request
- Use the word 'no'
- Give a reason, I can't because...
- Use a friendly but firm tone
- Suggest alternative options

In this final section, we'll look at four of the most common attitudes and traits, that hinder our ability to manage time well – procrastination, perfectionism, disorganisation and failing to manage monkeys.

Procrastination

Procrastination is the avoidance or putting off a task until a later time, because the job is too difficult, seems overwhelming or you'd prefer to do something else instead. It's something we have all done. It can be easy to think, "Oh I'll do that later", or, "I'll do it tomorrow". This can become a dangerous habit.

Human brains have a finite capacity for making decisions, with the energy that allows us to do that being refreshed

every day. Think about it like having a bank account where each day £1000 is deposited. Once the £1000 is spent there's no more money until the next day. Every decision we make costs the same amount of brain energy – regardless of the size of decision. When we run low on decision making energy we tend to make decisions that present the easiest option – the path of least resistance. You may have experienced it yourself – have you ever found that you're struggling to make decisions at the end of a busy day?

If you have procrastinated, you may have put off the important decisions, meaning there's a risk you will be running low on your decision making balance and will take the path of least resistance rather than making the right decision!

Fraisse's Law: *Time is subjective. When working on something we enjoy, time passes faster, and it drags when we're working on things we don't enjoy.*

Whilst procrastination can be a problem, the solution to it is simple... if you have a job to do, do it now! The longer you procrastinate, the more it will clutter up your schedule. The task won't get any easier or more fun with time, so there's no point trying to put it off. Try breaking the task into smaller pieces and schedule a Pomodoro 25-minute burst for when you're most alert, to kick start something you're dreading. You may not finish the task in one go, but you may well take the fear out of starting it.

Personal disorganisation

Einstein famously said if a cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind, of what, then, is an empty desk a sign? That said, according to research in the Journal of Neuroscience, clutter on our desks competes for our attention causing stress, anxiety and guilt.

If your desk or files are cluttered, messy and poorly organised, you risk wasting time looking for important paperwork, the right tool or that vital document you need. In a 2012 global survey of 1,200 workers, the average

person wasted 4.5 hours a week looking for documents. Other research suggested that each piece of paper on your desk distracts your attention up to 5 times a day.

Get out of the habit of dumping things on your desk. Ensure there's a place for everything, whether that's papers, files, emails or tools.

Schedule a weekly clean up of stray files saved on your desktop. Set aside time every day to deal with paperwork, mail and other things that take over your desk area. Be decisive, and only touch each piece of paper or email once and invest a few minutes at the end of every day to give papers on your desk a quick DRAFT once over.

DRAFT technique:

- Delegate it
- Read it
- Act on it
- File it
- Toss it.

Perfectionism

A strong be-perfect driver can play havoc with your time management. On the surface, the desire to have everything 100% perfect seems like a good thing but when the drive for perfectionism leads to stress, missed deadlines, or incomplete tasks it becomes an unhelpful attitude.

Perfectionists can be hampered by self-doubt and having exceptionally high standards they can struggle with letting go of tasks.

Combatting perfectionism requires a number of approaches. Reviewing your prioritisation list can help. Release your perfectionism on really important tasks, and if you're struggling to let go of a task go back to your prioritised list and look at what other work is being delayed.

Remember Pareto's principle, 80% of the final product is done in 20% of the time you spend on something. Meaning

you're investing 80% of your time trying to make a 20% improvement in the quality. Is good, good enough? Enlist the help of trusted colleagues to tell when something has reached an acceptable standard. Be realistic, is there ever going to be a task that is 100% perfect?

Monkey Management

Bill Oncken and Donald Wass coined the term Monkey Management in 1974. A monkey is the next move in any particular problem or task. When someone brings a monkey to you, they're actually trying to work out what to do next. When we respond with 'leave it with me' or 'let me give it some thought'; we then become responsible for deciding the next move.

When presented with a problem by a colleague, instead of showing the colleague how they could deal with it, many of us take the problem on ourselves, making it our problem. Our desire to rescue people sabotages our time management and we end up with a troop of monkey's following us around and their real owners asking if we've had a chance to look at their problem yet. Over time we gain a reputation for being someone who readily accepts other people's monkeys.

Monkey's can come from all directions, usually a junior member of staff unsure of what to do next, but they can also be a 'sideways-leaping-monkey' – from a peer who brings their problem to you. In some instances, it can be a downward-leaping-monkey, if your boss gives you things to do.

The purpose of monkey management is to make sure that the right things get done the right way, by the right people, in the right time frame. The first step is recognising it is a monkey. Not taking responsibility for monkeys that aren't yours; with the caveat that in an emergency we may have to take on monkeys that wouldn't usually be ours.

The rules of monkey management should only be applied to monkeys that should live. Some monkeys are not worth taking on. In every organisation there are things that people stress and worry about doing, without ever asking 'why am I doing this'? If you can't give a strong business reason for the monkey, or taking the next move, then as awful as that

sounds, shoot the monkey and move on with your own tasks. (N.B. this shouldn't be taken literally. Anybody who works in a zoo should not shoot any actual monkeys, these are metaphorical monkeys only.)

Rule #1 – Identify the next move

Any monkey-related conversation should not end until the next moves have been clearly defined. We've probably all had chats with colleagues where an issue is discussed in great detail but no plan for the next move is identified.

If you run out of time before the next move is identified then the monkey owner should 'babysit' the monkey. Never say 'leave it with me'; instead try 'why don't we talk about this again in a couple of days, in the meantime you hold onto the issue in case you come up with a great idea'.

Rule #2 – One owner

Every monkey should have ONE owner, at the lowest organisational level consistent with their welfare. If the monkey is crucial to the organisation's future then it will be better if it's dealt with by someone senior. Run of the mill monkeys should sit with people lower down the organisation.

Making sure that monkeys are dealt with at the right level ensures that everyone has the time to deal with problems that pertain to them, and that they are qualified to manage.

Rule #3 – Insurance

The conversation doesn't end until all monkeys have been insured; designing the next step so that any mistakes that are made, are affordable mistakes.

This might mean 'recommend and then act' where the manager has to approve or sign off the identified next steps before any action is taken. Or 'act, then advise' where the monkey's owner is experienced and knowledgeable enough to take on a task, or the risk is low.

Rule #4 – Check ups

Before you complete any monkey-related conversation, ensure you have a date in your diary for check-ups. Check-ups are a chance for coaching of the monkey owner to develop their skills and understanding and to find and praise good work as well as spot potential problems early, preventing disasters.

Top tips for dealing with our attitudes towards time:

1. We usually have more trouble starting a task than finishing it. Break down complex tasks into smaller sub-tasks and then deal with the first one straight away.
2. Know when to let go! Seeking perfection can mean that you hang on to a piece of work too long.
3. Make sure you do at least one thing every day that you enjoy and allow time to celebrate/reward achievements.
4. Make yourself spend an hour on the task you are dreading when you know you are most alert. You may not complete it in an hour, but you may well take the fear out of it!
5. Challenge your own tendency to say 'yes' without scrutinising the request. Ask probing questions to find out what's involved. Then be realistic – if you can't do it – say so!
6. Many people become overloaded because they over commit. Learn to say 'no' to low priority requests, or things that really aren't your responsibility.
7. Identify monkeys and follow the rules.

SECTION 6:

Further reading:



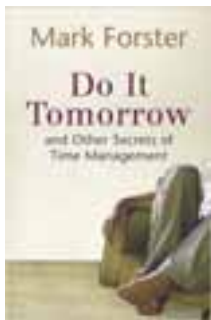
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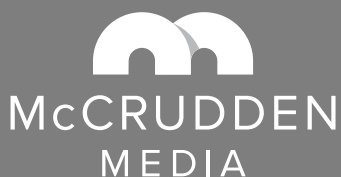
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EASTBOURNE OFFICE

Archer House,
Britland Estate
Northbourne Road
Eastbourne
East Sussex
BN22 8PW

01323 886138

Email: hello@mccruddenpartnership.co.uk

www.mccruddenpartnership.co.uk

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