

Managing your time

Time is like money. If you control it, you can create a satisfactory and productive working environment. If you do not control it, you can spend your working life in an exhausting and depressing muddle.

This briefing explains how to make time work for you. It covers:

- Prioritising and planning.
- Creating routines and systems.
- Handling information and minimising distractions.
- Using time management aids, and analysing your use of time.

1 Setting goals

Few people have the time to do everything. So it is important to focus on priorities.

1.1 Establish **your goals** if you want to allocate your time effectively.

- Aim to spend your time on activities which help you to achieve your goals.

1.2 In allocating your time, activities which are **important and urgent** should get the highest priority.

- For example, important activities involving other people where your input is essential. Any delay by you may cause delays all down the line, reducing other people's ability to function effectively.

1.3 High priority should also go to things that are **important but not urgent**.

1.4 Consider whether you need to spend

time on things that are **urgent but not important**.

- Can you delegate them to someone else?

1.5 Consider whether you should be spending any time at all on things that are **neither important nor urgent**.

2 Planning

Base your plans on your priorities, taking into account your own way of working.

2.1 You may find it useful to start by **planning your week**, then your day.

- Assess the tasks to be done for their importance in achieving your goals, and allocate your time accordingly.

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2.2 Allocate time each day to **clearing the decks**.

- Get small, urgent tasks (for example, dealing with email) out of the way.
- Delegate work if other people can do it more quickly, cheaply or effectively.
- Ensure other people know what they should be aiming to achieve that day.

2.3 Divide the principal tasks for the day into achievable **blocks** of work.

Time management aids

Although the impetus to improve your time management must come from you, there are various aids that will help you do it.

- A** Use your **diary, personal organiser, personal digital assistant (PDA)** or **personal information management system (PIM)** for both day-to-day organisation and forward planning.
- They provide a record of how you have spent your time, act as an aide-memoire and can store useful information such as to-do lists and contact details.
 - An electronic diary or personal organiser, which can be accessed by your colleagues, will enable them to identify the gaps in your schedule in which they can organise meetings or discussions.
- B** One of the simplest forms of time management aid is the **to-do** list.
- This will remind you what you have to do and help you find out how realistic you are in scheduling.
- Note down what you have to achieve today, or this week.
 - Tick off tasks as you accomplish them. Seeing what you have achieved will boost your confidence.
 - Remember to add any new tasks that arise from a completed job.
- C** For longer-term projects, it makes sense to use a **project planner**.
- This may take the form of a wall chart or electronic project planning aids. These can be anything from memos listing key dates and tasks, to flow charts and software packages.
 - You can see at a glance how well you are performing and whether you need to reschedule tasks or provide additional resources.

- Tackle them one at a time.
- Ensure they are achievable on a daily basis.

2.4 Set realistic **deadlines** for all your activities.

- With longer-term projects, set interim deadlines, as well as a final deadline.
- Allow time for contingencies. The longer the project, the more contingency time will be needed.
- Decide whether your deadlines are fixed or flexible.
- Do not allow work (particularly less important work) to take longer than it should. If ten minutes is all a job is worth, make sure it is done in ten minutes.

2.5 Schedule your work to suit your **state of mind** at different times of the day or week.

- For example, if you are at your liveliest and most outgoing in the late morning, schedule your customer calls at that time.

3 Routines and systems

Create systems for routine business.

3.1 Consider investing in **contact management software** and other technology to help you schedule and manage regular calls and activities.

- Establish your own contacts database, carefully set up for your requirements.
- Use email for regular contact with customers and employees.
- Programme your telephone with the numbers you dial most frequently, and use the redial facility.
- Carry a pocket recorder to record ideas.
- Use a personal organiser or diary (see box).
- Consider investing in voice recognition software to allow you to dictate letters.

3.2 Create **standard templates and forms** for regular communications.

- Make sure word-processing facilities are set up with standard templates and letters, so that it only takes minutes to write formal letters and regular documents. For example, the letter that accompanies a standard pack that is sent out to answer to general enquiries.
- Have standard forms for recording details you collect regularly eg sales enquiries.

3.3 Have a specified place for **files and documents**.

- Make sure you have good filing systems, and everyone knows how to use them.
- Ensure that filing is done daily.
- Optimise your personal space. Keep your desk clear, except for your current project.
- Empty your in-tray daily.

3.4 Establish **procedures** for dealing with common events.

Typical pitfalls

These are the most common problems, with suggested solutions.

A Trying to do **everything yourself**.

It is impossible. Aim to delegate:

- Jobs which are routine, require no special skills or are time-consuming, and regular tasks planned in advance.
- Jobs which someone is keen to take on — delegation can be good training.

B Failing to **brief** people properly.

- Explain the objectives before you explain the task.
- Encourage 'ownership' of the project by whoever is taking it on.
- Agree support and deadlines.
- Arrange procedures for monitoring.

C Aiming for **unnecessary perfection**.

Most customers would rather have a good job, completed on time, than a perfect job, three weeks late.

D Agonising over **toss-up decisions**.

- If the balance of arguments is in favour, go ahead.
- If the balance of arguments is against, do not go ahead.
- If the balance is even, all the available information has been considered, and there is no alternative, do either. There is an equal chance of being right, and there is no point wasting time deciding.

E Chaotic **filing systems**.

Regularly set aside time to throw out all general information over one year old, and to ensure files are in order.

F Not keeping your **focus**

- Your focus determines how effectively you use your time.

- For example, establish systems for handling sales queries, logging customer contacts, processing sales and processing invoices.

3.5 Build unpleasant or longer-term tasks into your **routine**.

- For example, automatically call up late payers the week a bill becomes overdue. Or, if you have to monitor a project, make sure everyone knows you will want information at the same time every week.

3.6 **Delegate** routine tasks wherever possible.

- Arrange procedures for monitoring performance, until you are certain the tasks are being performed efficiently.
- Once systems are established, in many cases you should be able to stop worrying.

4 Handling information

Find ways of dealing with information overload.

4.1 Ask for the information you need in a **form** that suits you.

- Ask for summaries, or charts, if you find them easier to deal with.
- Consider regularly analysing or summarising the information coming in. For example, summarise reasons for complaints, and then draw up ways to tackle specific causes.

4.2 Restrict your information-gathering to what you really **need to know**.

- Exclude areas which are outside your responsibility and do not affect you.
- Ignore unnecessary detail.

4.3 Apply this **four-part procedure** to all paper that comes across your desk.

- Act on it — if it is relevant and important.
- Delegate it — if it is relevant but less important.
- File it — if it is relevant but not immediately important.
- Otherwise, bin it.

4.4 Set **deadlines** for making decisions.

- Do not wait until you know everything.

5 Minimising distractions

However carefully you prioritise your use of time, your attempts to manage it efficiently will

be undermined unless you can find effective ways of dealing with distractions.

5.1 It is easier to deal with **mail** at the beginning of the day.

- It may have a bearing on your activities during the rest of the day.
- You will be in a position to deal quickly with any subsequent queries.

5.2 Make up your mind not to waste time on unnecessary **phone calls**.

- Set times at which you are prepared to receive and make calls.
Do not ring people with every idea.
- Limit the time spent on each call.
- Differentiate between calls from VIPs, regular contacts, and timewasters.

5.3 Insist that all **visits** are pre-arranged.

- Find some way of signalling to colleagues that you do not want to be interrupted.
- If necessary, arrange times when you are prepared to be interrupted.

5.4 Avoid unproductive and inefficient **meetings**.

- Agree start and finish times in advance.
- Establish a timed agenda.

5.5 Use **email** as a less intrusive form of communication.

- You can pick up your messages when it suits you, rather than having to respond immediately.
- Be disciplined — deal with email first thing in the morning and at a set time in the afternoon.

5.6 Ensure that your **office environment** is conducive to the efficient use of time.

- Minimise clutter.

Do not cut yourself off completely, or you could stifle the flow of ideas and creativity from your colleagues and contacts.

6 Time analysis

Monitoring your own use of time is an effective way of improving your time management.

6.1 This involves **logging** your activities in some detail (say, in 20-minute blocks) over a given period, for instance a week.

- You will have to do this anyway if you charge for your time.

6.2 Once you have worked out how you spent your time, **analyse** your activities.

- To what extent did they contribute towards achieving your goals?
- To what extent could they be classified as urgent and important, important, urgent but not important, or neither urgent nor important (see **1.2–1.5**)?
- You may well find you are spending 30 per cent of your time on unnecessary activities.
- This analysis will help you to decide what to delegate and what to abandon.

6.3 If you compare your actual use of time against your plans, you can identify the tasks that you **fail to do**, or fail to do on time.

- If they are important (or urgent) for your business, you know that you will have to reduce the time spent on other activities.
- Or you will have to take other measures (for example, acquiring a partner) to ensure they get done.

7 Take action now

To improve your use of time, start now.

7.1 Plan your workload.

- Commit to deadlines.

7.2 Review your activities.

- Decide what to delegate and what to cut out.

7.3 Sort out your systems.

- You do not have to do everything at once. Tackle large projects in sections.

7.4 Note the results and act on the **feedback** you get.

- Amend your scheduling if necessary.

7.5 Share your success with your colleagues.

- Encourage them to work more effectively.

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