

Increased Efficiency through Effective Time Management

by Douglas Rothschild, SIOR

Effective time management is an important tool for success in our fast-paced, highly technological society. By examining one's work patterns, identifying timesaving techniques, and making appropriate changes, the outcome—which will vary by individual—can include less stress, more free time for personal enjoyment, or additional time to take on added responsibility. Whatever the results, a sense of accomplishment will arise from knowing that one has been effective and made decisions that freed up time for more desirable activity.

Set the Stage

There isn't a set pattern to follow when trying to achieve effective time management, and therein lies the challenge. The very core of this skill lies in understanding the many techniques available, and adopting those that will be most conducive to each individual's job function, personal responsibilities, and work habits. The most important step is acknowledging that effective time management can directly improve one's overall quality of life.

Begin the Task

An ideal starting place is the employee workstation. A messy desk could indicate disorganization, which means time wasted on unproductive activities. To get organized make three piles of all your papers: 1) one for action, 2) one to throw away or file, and 3) one to pass along. Specific items that take precedence will quickly present themselves. Items that require immediate attention, whether for review or response, should go in the action pile.

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Next eliminate any unnecessary items. This can be items that don't require personal attention, outdated materials, or irrelevant items. These items should be thrown away. If you prefer not to throw out something for fear that it may be needed later, file it. Next, make a commitment to review the filed folders items at least every six months. Make this "file-and-review" a habit.

The final pile is the pass-along pile. If action steps are necessary before passing this information along, don't procrastinate.

Prioritize these items to be completed promptly, and then pass them along. If no action steps are called for, pass along the materials the moment they hit the desk.

Keep a List

Once the desk has been purged, create a daily plan of action. A daily plan of action consists of everything in the "keep" pile that needs to be taken care of soon. In order for a plan of action to be effective, it needs to be written down. Writing down all of the projects and tasks to be completed creates a visual aid and increases the likelihood of remembering the most critical projects. This will also decrease the chances of forgetting about or overlooking a project. A plan of action saves time, prevents chaos, and helps you avoid anxiety as deadlines present themselves.

Projects that are written out are easier to schedule and the time they take is easier to manage with the knowledge of all priorities. Large projects should be scheduled earlier in the day when most individuals are more alert and focused. Meetings and smaller projects

should be scheduled toward the end of the day, when you are more likely to need the breaks in concentration that these provide.

As projects and tasks get completed, cross them off of the list. Not only will this provide instant gratification, it reinforces the motivation to continue working effectively through to the end of the day.

When writing out a daily action plan, schedule adequate time for each project. Be generous: meetings always run longer than scheduled, traffic is always heavier than expected, and people always run late. Too much time is better than not enough time. If extra time presents itself between projects because a meeting actually ends as scheduled, take a break, stretch, check voice mail, and return e-mail. The break in the schedule will offer an energy boost that is probably needed before the next assignment gets underway.

Prioritize Personal Time

Don't forget to schedule personal time. Whether you take vacation time or just a few days off, if personal time isn't scheduled, there will never be a "good" time to get away. If you don't prioritize personal time and personal well-being along with other work-specific assignments, you will eventually burn out.

A daily planner is one of the best tools to keep track of schedules and daily action plans. This can be a hard-bound daily planner in which to store written notes, scheduled meetings, phone numbers, and addresses, and so on. It can also be an electronic planner, such as a palm pilot that offers the convenience of being compact and mobile, with the capacity to transfer information to a desktop or laptop computer.

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Identify Goals

Goal setting is another step on which many professionals rely. Although this is a much more macro approach, identifying goals that are important—professionally and personally—makes determining priorities easier. Projects that don't directly support major goals should be delegated or eliminated. Goals should be reviewed often—at least quarterly—to stay focused. The quarterly review also serves as a form of motivation for delegating, eliminating, and completing tasks.

One final tip on effective time management: be patient. The tips and techniques listed in this article cannot be implemented in one week, or even within a month. Effective time management, like any other skill, takes practice and perseverance. Schedule the time to learn time management skills! ♦



Douglas C. Rothschild, SIOR, is a principal of CLW Real Estate Services Group, Tampa, Florida. CLW is a national commercial real estate firm providing tenant representation, project and construction management, management consulting, and investment sales throughout the United States. With more than 20 years of commercial real estate experience,

Doug heads up business development for CLW, in addition to strategic development for many of CLW's corporate clients. He is the founding co-chairman of the Florida Chapter of the International Development Research Council (IDRC) and serves on the IDRC National Leadership Committee. Doug received his bachelor's degree from the University of Tampa.