

Managing Time

This is an important skill. We have a duty to the taxpayer to work efficiently. And we all need to balance the demands of work, family and friends, as well as find time for ourselves – to get enough sleep, to relax and to pursue our own interests.

So why are we so often poor time managers? Perhaps we recognise that a good time manager is essentially lazy, and only does what is really important. We are all reluctant to appear lazy, even if this is a natural accompaniment to great efficiency. Nevertheless, it is worth following these rules:

Concentrate On Your Objectives and Don't Let Others Control Your Time. Do not be too reactive. It is important that you decide how to spend your time, and that you do not organise your time so as to please other people. First, cut out any activity which does not take you nearer to one of your objectives. For instance:

- P** Consider whether that meeting, lunch or conference is going to help you achieve your objectives. If not, don't go.
- P** Read what you need to know, not what it's nice to know. Is it really likely that those papers will contain important new information? Will reading them take you nearer to one of your objectives? If not, don't read them.
- P** Do you get your hard information, such as statistics, direct from source? If so, why read endless commentaries on them? Take yourself off all those circulation lists.
- P** Consider whether it is really essential that the Minister should speak at, or attend, a particular event. Don't forget that you will in due course have to find the time to prepare briefing and write a speech.
- P** Consider whether you really do need to accompany the Minister.

Don't hesitate, when under pressure, to take control of your time by closing your door, borrowing an empty office, or working at home, in order to avoid interruption. Colleagues should be assured that they can disturb you if it is really necessary, but otherwise you should tell callers that you are 'a bit tied up at the moment'.

If you want a brief word with a colleague, go to see them so that you can bring the conversation to an end when you are ready, rather than wait for them to leave you. And if you want the discussion to be a short one, don't sit down!

Don't worry about refusing to go to a meeting which clashes with an important prior engagement. If the organiser had thought it vital that you were there, they would have first checked your availability. There is more of a problem if you want to be at the meeting, but the organiser does not much care whether or not you are there. You then have to decide which is the most important. But unless the second engagement is clearly more important, it is common courtesy to stick with your prior engagement.

If you do organise or attend a meeting, make sure there is a clear agenda, and

decide in advance how much time the subject is worth. If the subject is of some interest to you, but not worth more than a few minutes of your time, ask the person chairing the meeting if you can attend for the key part of the discussion, or tell him or her that you have to leave in so many minutes. Or get someone else to attend on your behalf.

Indeed, the solution to many time management problems is to . . .

Empower your Colleagues. Empowerment requires a certain amount of courage and patience. Work should generally be done by the most junior colleague that can be expected to do it properly, and find it stimulating. The only exceptions are non-repetitive tasks that you can do quickly and easily yourself. It then often takes less time to do it yourself than to tell someone else what needs to be done.

Few of us empower effectively. A significant proportion of what we do could generally be done by colleagues, if we were prepared to invest a little time in training and guidance. This investment of time can seem a burden if you are already under pressure, but the pay back can be amazingly quick. You will not only free up your own time, you will also improve the quality of your colleagues' jobs.

So now you are thoroughly lazy, but still have too much to do. You must now improve the way you organise your work. The essential first step is to . . .

Prioritise Your Activities. It is in the nature of our work that 80 per cent of our results will come from 20 per cent of activities. It is therefore very helpful to prioritise your work fairly frequently. You should then concentrate on those tasks which are going to be the most effective in getting you closer to your objectives. Leave the lower priority tasks to later in the day, or tomorrow. By definition, it does not matter if you do not finish them today. You can then go home at a reasonable time, secure in the knowledge that you have done your most effective work.

In prioritising your work, it is useful to decide whether it is (a) urgent and (b) important. If it is both urgent and important, you should do it as soon as possible. If it is urgent but not important, delegate it to someone else. If it is important and not urgent, do it later. If it is neither urgent nor important, don't do it!

Paper Handling. A very good rule is to handle each piece of paper only once. For instance, if you read a letter, and know what you want to say in reply, dictate the reply straightaway. Otherwise you will just have to re-read the letter, and rethink the reply, on another occasion. Alternatively, delegate the paper to someone else, or throw it in the bin. The only paper that should be put on one side is that which is (a) important, (b) requires considerable thought, and (c) is not urgent.

Finally . . .

We All Procrastinate. We therefore all need to adopt our own solution to this problem. Once you realise that you are putting off a difficult task, plan your campaign accordingly. Set aside a time and place to tackle it. Decide that you will not have lunch, or not go to bed, until you have done so. Spread the papers out. We each can develop our own individual technique. The important thing is to begin the process. You know very well that the task will appear much easier once you have started.