

Personal Time Management

Project managers have numerous pressures on their time, need to balance work with other aspects of their lives and achieve a high rate of productivity. This White Paper takes a pragmatic look at some of the options that can help achieve the maximum output from your valuable working time.

The key thing to remember is you will never be able to '*get it all done*' and if you do, someone will give you more to do. So effective personal time management is not so much a focus on how you will get it *all* done but rather what you chose to do, what you chose to delegate and what you chose not to do. The skill is choosing the things to do or delegate that are valuable to you personally, your project and your organisation. By focusing on these 'important' jobs you maximise your productivity and the value you create.

As a starting point there are a few important things to do:

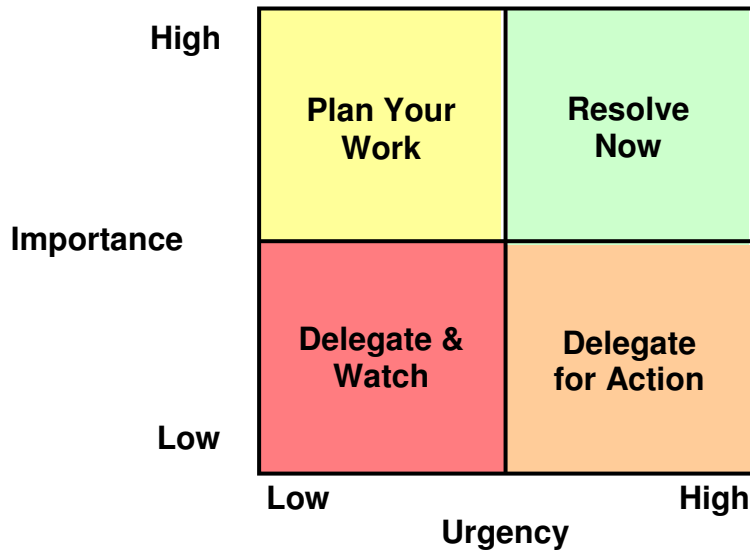
1. **Consolidate:** all of your tasks into one simple, structured, list or place. Structured subheadings makes navigation easier, and keeps related tasks together - design a structure that works for you.
2. **Communicate:** People around you will want to know what you are doing and why you have changed your way of working. Where appropriate involve your team in consolidating and developing the task list - they will often identify tasks you hadn't thought of.
3. **Break *insurmountable* tasks into smaller, less procrastination-prone components.** Think of it as a Work Breakdown Structure for tasks,
4. **Be aware of dependencies and sequence.** Often a high priority task or a key delegation will require something else being accomplished first that may appear to be a low priority.
5. **Manage your time:** The rest of this White Paper has ideas you can use.
6. **Update:** At the start of every day, update your list by removing the tasks you've completed and re-forecasting/delegating/managing the tasks you still have ahead.

The Urgent / Important Matrix.

The first step in achieving high levels of productivity is to offload as much unimportant work as possible. *Urgent* is not synonymous with *important*. The differences between the two are:

- Urgent tasks are deadline based. This is usually driven by others. The sooner the task needs completion the more urgent it is.
- The importance of a job drives how much 'time' you want to spend on it. Notice that this is independent of 'urgency' and is what you want to do.





This matrix separates the potential work into 4 categories:

- **Urgent and important** jobs must be worked on now. These are critical and also support your goals so make a decision to complete them. They can include:
 - o A genuine crisis affecting an objective that is important.
 - o ‘Must do’ time critical emergencies, eg, a medical emergency.
 - o Last minute preparations for scheduled activities.
- **Urgent but not important** jobs tend to be generated by others. Because you don't really want to spend much time on tasks not connected with your goals delegate them to a competent assistant. Examples include:
 - o Some mail and reports
 - o Many ‘pressing’ activities associated with someone else’s panic.
 - o Many meetings.
- **Important but not urgent** jobs that need to be completed before they become urgent. Ensure you allow adequate time to do them. This category includes many future oriented activities such as:
 - o Exercise and true recreation – you need time to keep yourself at peak performance levels.
 - o Relationship building with key stakeholders and in your personal life
 - o Most planned project activities, including taking the time to plan properly.
 - o Preventative action and activities.
- **Not urgent and not important** jobs are probably not your work anyway. Delete as many as possible particularly if they have been on your ‘list’ for several months. Delegate the rest to a team member. Keep a watching brief just in case the work escalates in importance or urgency. Most of the rest including:
 - o Junk mail
 - o Time wasters – both people and your ‘escape activities’
 - o Much email and ‘instant messaging’
- **Be aware of dependencies** think about the work and recognise any jobs that need to be done first to allow other (possibly more important) work to start.

The **UID Technique** (Urgency, Importance and Delegate) is similar and can be incorporated into the matrix. The delegate component prompts you to decide if a task should be delegated. For the rest assign “urgency” and “importance” numerical values to each task remaining on your list. A simple 1 for low, 2 for medium, and 3 for high will suffice. Multiply the urgency and importance factors to determine the task’s priority. Sort the priorities in descending order.



The power of 'NO'

Be prepared to say **NO**. One of the best ways to manage your list of jobs is to avoid putting a job on the list in the first place:

- Say **no** to the jobs to want to do but do not need to do I know these are 'fun to do' but really are a waste of your valuable time – focus on what matters, delegate the rest.
- Say **no** to routine jobs that 'everyone does' that simple do not add value to your work or the organisation. You may need to work on some process improvement¹ to achieve this...
- Say **no** to other people trying to offload their responsibilities onto you. Judgement is required, helping a colleague in trouble, helping achieve a critical organisational deadline, an opportunity to learn new skills or simply being a good friend may shift the balance towards taking on the work. But being a 'nice guy' can be taken advantage of – you are paid to deliver your responsibilities.

Delegation

Delegation is when you assign responsibility to another person to carry out a specific task, and is one of the most important management skills. Effective delegation saves you time, develops your people, grooms a successor, and motivates. If you are offloading 'your work' Make sure you let the team know the process you've been through, the fact that you need their help, and the relevance and value of the tasks you are delegating². Some tasks should not be delegated, these include:

- Tasks you are not prepared to do yourself.
- Tasks you are personally responsible for performing yourself (ie, ones you are supposed to physically do rather than ones you are responsible for seeing get done).
- Tasks that require a level of authorisation the team member does not have.
- Tasks that cannot be accomplished efficiently due to lack of tools, equipment or other constraints.

Make time to be effective

Make time to focus on the important jobs by blocking out time in your diary (calendar). When you have a complex or detailed task to undertake, it can take a while to get into the right frame of mind so allow an adequate block of time; a 2 hour block twice a week is probably more effective than 1 hour a day. Ideally this focused work period should be at a regular time, tuned to your circadian rhythm (see below) so everyone gets into the habit of letting you work in peace.

Good time management that supports an effective work/life balance and makes you a better leader and more productive you need to divide your day into 3 different 'Zones':

- The '**Go Zone**', a couple of hours once a day with no interruptions where you focus on one important task. You focus intently and work hard so this needs to be limited to 2 hours.
- The '**Slow Zone**', the rest of the working day where you multi-task, attend meetings and deal with the business of your job.
- The '**No Zone**', specific times where for an hour or two you focus on a hobby, the family or anything but work. By completely switching off from the problems at work you allow your subconscious the freedom to work on difficult issues, so keep a notepad handy to write down any insights that emerge so you can quickly get back into your 'No Zone' having saved the ideas for later.

¹ For more on **process improvement** see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1046_Process_Improvement.pdf

² For more on **delegating actions** see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1091_Delegation.pdf



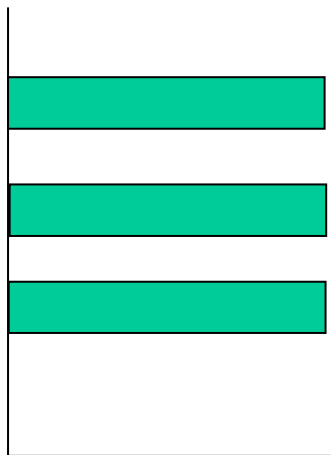
To preserve the ‘Go Zone’ and ‘No Zone’ times, it is important to let the people who work with you know that you should not be interrupted because you will be working on ‘xxx’ which is important to you and possibly the team. This requires discipline and planning, some things to consider include:

- Letting a limited number of key people know how to contact you in an emergency or if something comes up that is urgent, and leaving this particular communications channel open to them.
- Switching off your electronic and phone messaging tools and turning off or setting your status on your instant messaging application to *Offline* or *Do not Disturb*.
- Hanging a *Do Not Disturb* or *Priority Interrupts Only* sign outside of your room.
- Allow adequate time to focus into the work and try to avoid procrastination (see below).

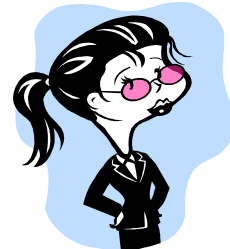
Avoid Multi-tasking

Multi-tasking tries to please everyone and ends up pleasing no-one. The images on the following page are from our scheduling course and need no explanation.....

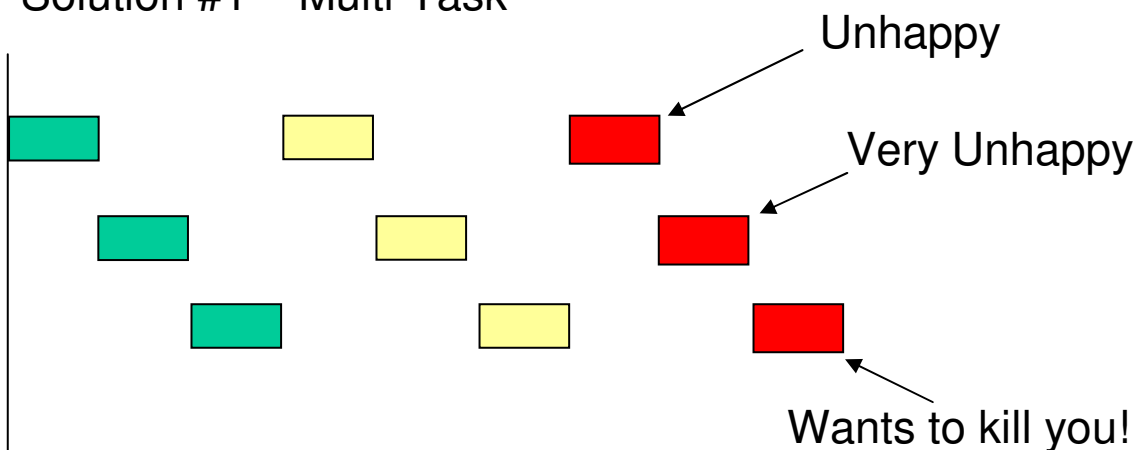
The Problem



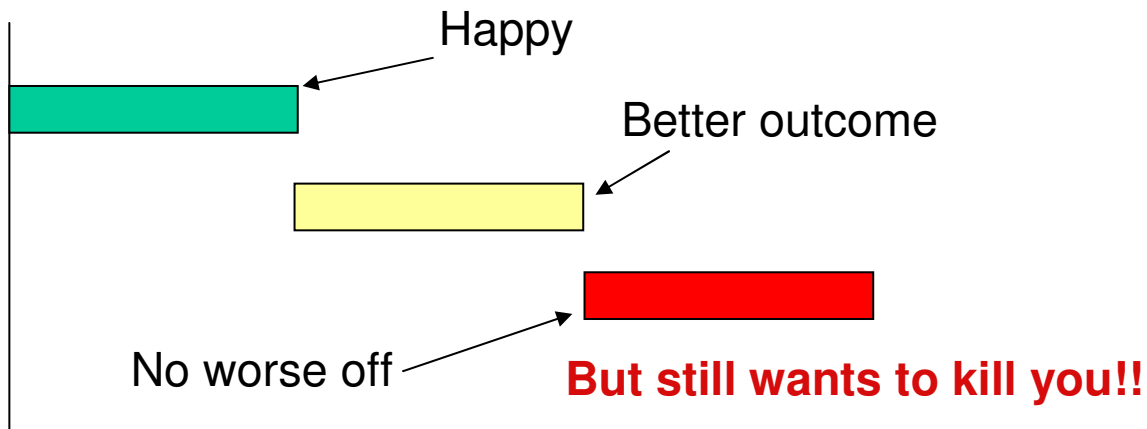
One resource
3 x 1 day tasks
All needed ‘today’



Solution #1 – Multi-Task



Solution #2 – Don't Multi-Task



Note: There is no allowance for the additional inefficiencies caused by 'job swapping' in this example! The time taken to refocus each time you swap jobs will add to the overall timeframe to complete the work.

A 1990's study by Kim Clark and Steven Wheelwright on the impact of multitasking on productivity found the amount of time spent on value-adding tasks decreases with three or more concurrent tasks.

Their findings indicate that the total amount of time 'on task' goes up when a person has two tasks to work on. After that, however, Clark and Wheelwright found that time on task decreased. With three tasks the amount of time 'on task' decreased to less than when an individual had only one task to work on.

This makes sense; if you only have one task to work on it is almost a certain that you will occasionally be blocked, waiting for someone to return a phone call, answer an e-mail, approve the design, etc. With a second low priority task to work on you can temporarily change tasks and keep being productive. However, Clark and Wheelwright did this research in the early 1990s, communication improvements in the last 20 years may have changed the paradigm reducing the probability and frequency of 'blockages'.

The main reasons that multitasking is so inefficient is the cost involved in task-switching. There is significant overhead in getting started on one task, switching to another, and then switching back to the first. The more tasks or projects you are involved in, the more likely you are to be interrupted while working on them. The probable optimum solution: one project and one priority task plus a low priority back up job 'just in case'.

Make effective use of your circadian rhythm

Everybody has an intrinsic pattern of daily rhythms of physiology and behaviour that are driven by their circadian clocks. If you understand when you focus best, set this time aside for important work. Use less productive times for meetings, emails and other distractions. By bunching your distractions together and fitting them into your 'down times' you will be more effective and more efficient.

Work with procrastination

The human psyche seems designed to procrastinate! Some of the key drivers include:

1. **The brain is built to firstly minimize danger, before maximizing rewards.** Any threat to self is minimized, any handy reward is tempting. This alone accounts for a great deal of our procrastination as

we avoid tasks that threaten the self, and we discount future rewards in favour of immediate gratification³. A little more focus on emotional intelligence⁴ can help here. Too often, feelings trump reasons, and we give in to feel good.

2. **Too much uncertainty feels dangerous.** It feels like possible pain so we avoid it. Task uncertainty is a major correlate of procrastination. It feels dangerous; and we want to avoid this feeling so we do. We procrastinate. The uncertainty in our modern world isn't a predator lurking, but our stone-age brain doesn't know this, we simply feel the potential for disaster. We need to strategically reduce uncertainty rather than just run away.
3. **Our conscious processing capacity is small, which makes us terrible at a lot of things, including predicting what might make us happy.** The planning fallacy and our poor ability at affective forecasting create a very difficult situation for accurately setting realistic goals and sticking to them⁵. We can enhance the skills needed to improve our predictions, but this takes practice and conscious work.
4. **Our capacity to regulate emotions is limited, depletes fast and needs to be used quickly to be effective.** Willpower, that sadly limited resource, is a key issue in our self-regulation. Fortunately, it can also be bolstered, restored and used strategically to serve our intentions and goals.
5. **Our intentions and goals alter the information that the brain pays attention to.** Yes, but there is often a big gap between our intentions and our actions, and this is a defining aspect of procrastination. Understanding the first four of these "quirks of our brain" helps us explain just how our intentions and goals alter our attentional processes, for better or worse. Supplementing goal intentions with implementation intentions can help.

Research suggests you will usually a better outcome by negotiating with yourself and allowing 'rewards' such as reading emails when you have accomplished something rather than trying to apply 'brute force' and just trying to 'do the right thing'. Earn your distractions, recognise these activities as the breaks they are, and use them as rewards.

Some useful techniques to combat procrastination:

- **Write down specific goals:** If you are procrastinating about a 'goal' of some sort (personal or professional), research has shown that people who write down specific goals for their future are far more likely to be successful than those who have either unwritten goals or no specific goals at all. And that people who wrote down their goals, shared this information with a friend, and sent weekly updates to that friend were on average 33% more successful in accomplishing their stated goals than those who merely formulated goals.
- **Apply the Rule of Five:** Jack Canfield, author of *Chicken Soup for the Soul* developed the Rule of Five. "Know your priorities and identify the five powerful action steps that you intend to take to move your initiatives forward each day, if you go to a tree with an axe and take five whacks at the tree every day. It doesn't matter if it's an oak or a redwood; eventually the tree has to fall down". Take five steps – baby steps are fine – every day and you will get there.
- **Start the day with a minor achievement:** Get one task done before you sit down at your desk each day. It might be a phone call you've been meaning to make, or a conversation you've been meaning to have or some sorting you've been meaning to do.

³ This is a form of hyperbolic discounting. **Hyperbolic discounting** says that humans will choose a lesser reward in the short term versus a greater reward in the long term. The further away the deadline, the easier it is to put it off. Something as simple as staring at the fly on the wall is a more rewarding task than actually accomplishing what we need to do. We are choosing something that makes us happy now (a reward) instead of the greater reward (a job well done) next month. For more on our innate biases see: **The innate effect of Bias**
http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1069_Bias.pdf

⁴ For more on **Emotional Intelligence** see WP1008:
http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1008_Emotional_Intelligence.pdf

⁵ For more on **scheduling** visit our planning 'home page' at <http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Planning.html>



Confront the unpleasant issues

It's not easy to confront head-on the one thing that you realise is crucial but are uncomfortable putting squarely on the table for resolution. Often the most uncomfortable part of difficult conversations is the anticipation, the sooner you have the conversation the shorter the period of painful anticipation, regardless of outcome. This is a logical reason to get on with it and confront the issue; the 'procrastination drivers' outlined above work in the opposite direction.

Risk management principles also apply. Identifying and dealing with issues or risks sooner is much less costly than waiting⁶. Waiting gives the issue longer to meander down the wrong path; it allows good effort to be wasted, precious time to elapse without a solution, and fixes become progressively more expensive. To make sure you focus on the important issues today try the following:

1. Write down the names of one or two critical topics you are avoiding, that you know need resolution. Don't try to identify or solve every open issue right now; just identify the top one or two.
2. Think about why you are avoiding these topics. Write down the key reasons so you see them. Seeing the reasons in writing might help you overcome them.
3. Imagine the likely result of doing nothing. Can you state or even guess an impact?
4. If the impact of doing nothing is likely to be worse than your reasons for procrastination, schedule a conversation. It could be a formal meeting with a deck, a short phone call, or an in-person conversation over coffee. Often a one-to-one conversation is the best place to start.
5. Acknowledge at the outset of your meeting that this conversation is difficult for you, and why. This should take some of the tension out of the conversation, and may actually help you to collaborate in finding an answer⁷. It will keep a human element at the forefront, and help the other party realize that you care enough to do something that's uncomfortable for you. Also, be willing to acknowledge that you may not know the full answer, but that it is important to recognize the issue and work toward an answer together.

Despite some discomfort, taking the steps needed to deal with the issue will make you a better project leader.

Use tools effectively

It's easy to hide in issue logs, risk assessments, action item lists and all the latest tools and processes. None of these are of any use on their own. The value of the tools and systems comes when they are used collaboratively to communicate with and motivate your team.

Meetings are probably the most misused time consuming tools in modern management. Some meetings are essential and some are even useful but only if the meetings are managed effectively⁸. For the rest, don't call the meeting if you have control and either don't attend or delegate attendance to someone else if the meeting is called by someone else.

Be effective!

Renowned author Stephen Covey, who died 16th July 2012, age 79, defined the *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* in his all-time best-selling book, which sold 20 million copies. Here's a summary, but we recommend you buy his book⁹:

⁶ Effective **decision making** is a key requirement. To understand the different types of decision you may have to make see WP1053: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1053_Decision_Making.pdf

⁷ For more on **win-win negotiating** see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1032_Win-Win_Negotiating.pdf

⁸ For more on running **effective meetings** see: www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1075_Meetings.pdf

⁹ See Amazon: http://www.amazon.com/The-Habits-Highly-Effective-People/dp/0743269519/ref=pd_sim_b_1



- **Start the Night Before.** *Sun Tzu* is quoted as saying, “*Every battle is won before it is fought.*” He strongly believed having a plan in place, along with options, was critical to success. We can apply his logic to your workday. Your success tomorrow starts with proper planning tonight. Create an action plan on how you want the day to go. What are the major objectives/goals you want to accomplish? When will you do them during the day? The key is to be proactive, not reactive.
- **Be proactive.** As human beings, we are responsible for our own lives. We have the independent will to make our own choices and decisions, and the responsibility to make the right choices. You have the freedom to choose your own fate and path, so having the independent will, imagination and self-awareness to make the right move makes you a proactive and not a reactive, person.
- **Begin with the end in mind.** Mental visualisation is extremely important. Covey said that all things are created twice: first, the mental conceptualisation and visualisation and a second physical, actual creation. Becoming your own creator means to plan and visualise what you're going to do and what you're setting out to accomplish and then go out and creating it. Identifying your personal statement and your principles will help.
- **Start on Time.** It goes without saying that the earlier you rise, the more time you have to accomplish all your goals for the day. Have a proper breakfast to fuel your body and kick-start your day. And keeping to a regular start time ensures that the day runs according to your schedule and that you aren't in a frazzled state of mind. This means leaving ample time for your commute, coffee, etc. If you are the type of person who takes a little while to get going once in your office, consider sitting down a bit earlier and focusing on the day. Close your eyes and take some deep breaths before you turn on your computer or even consider a 30 minute yoga class every day before work.
- **Move Out Smartly.** When you start work, start with the biggest goals or the toughest assignments first. They will require the most effort, which you can give when you have the most energy (see: circadian rhythm above). Leave the easier, less stressful things to do until the end of the day.
- **Put first things first** With your power of independent will, you can create the ending you want to have. Part of that comes with effective time management, starting with matters of importance. Then tasks should be completed based on urgency after you deal with all the important matters. If you deal with crises, pressing problems and deadline-driven projects first, your life will be a lot easier.
- **Expect the Unexpected.** Things never go according to the original plan. Having a “plan B” in place can limit the downtime for your business. At some point during the day, you'll get a call from a vendor, disgruntled customer or one of your employees. The call will threaten to derail your entire day. Without a plan, this can easily happen. Assess your situation and prioritize. Can you delegate part of your work? Can you move something to the next day? Rehearse these conversations so when they do occur, you've already gone through the options and know what to do.
- **Think Win/Win** If you believe in a better way to accomplish goals that's mutually beneficial to all sides, that's a win/win situation. Everyone feels good about the decision and committed to the action plan. Covey wrote, "One person's success is not achieved at the expense or exclusion of the success of others." If you have integrity and maturity, there's no reason win/win situations can't happen all the time.
- **Seek first to understand, then to be understood** If you're a good listener and you take the time to understand a concept, it will help you convey your opinions, plans and goals to others. It starts with communication and strong listening skills, followed by diagnosing the situation and then communicating your solution to others.
- **Synergize** Synergistic communication, according to Covey, is "opening your mind and heart to new possibilities, new alternatives and new options." This applies to the classroom, the business world and wherever you could apply openness and communication. It's all about building cooperation and trust.
- **Take a Break.** Every 45 to 60 minutes, stop what you're doing to recharge your batteries and clear your mind. Go for a walk, stretch or do something that gets you away from your work and lets you 'sharpen the saw'. There is no medal for working 12 hours a day without taking a break. If taking a break doesn't come naturally to you, for 30 days, set a timer on your phone for breaks during day



- **Sharpen the saw** Sometimes you're working so hard that you forget about re-energizing and renewing yourself to sharpen yourself for the tasks in front of you. Some sharpening techniques include exercise and nutrition (including drinking water), reading, planning and writing, service and empathy, and commitment, study and meditation. Also, leave your phone behind.
- **Know When to End Your Day.** “Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof” - there will always be one more phone call to make, one more email to send and one more proposal to write. Set a time to end your business day. Leave 30 minutes to clean off your desk and create your list for tomorrow. The better your plan, the better chance you have for success.

Some useful tactics to manage your work:

1. Take Stephen Covey's advice and create a plan for the next day each night before you sleep. The plan gives you a the opportunity to plan efficiency into your day:
 - Batch similar tasks together to generate synergy and efficiencies.
 - Allocate a time limit to each task. Be clear that you need to finish X task by 10am, Y task by 3pm, and Z item by 5:30pm. This prevents your work from dragging on and eating into time reserved for other activities.
 - Leave a 5-10 minute buffer time in between tasks to cover off all of the unplanned activities in the day.
 - Time box your activities¹⁰.
2. Work the plan:
 - Stop when you need to. The number one reason why things overrun is because you don't stop when you have to. Don't be afraid to interrupt in meetings or draw a line to cut-off a discussion or task.
3. Eliminate your time wasters.
 - Look at what takes your time away your work? Facebook? Twitter? Email checking?
 - Incorporate the times you will use for checking these business and social connections in your daily plan and diary.
 - Switch off instant-chat and 'alert' options – you can do without the interruptions.
 - Manage emails and other e-messages effectively, at your scheduled times (twice daily is sufficient):
 - Eliminate emails that are ineffective (and train your contacts), email is not the only or best option for communication – telephone, Skype and talking face-to-face can frequently be more time effective ways to deal with high priority, or urgent things, as well as those that need discussion and joint input / creativity / decision making.
 - Sort the rest quickly:
 - Set up filters to automatically park 'information' and other non-action emails into labelled 'Document folders' for reference if needed.
 - Delete emails that do not need an action.
 - Delegate any that can be handled by someone else¹¹.
 - Deal with any that can be completed in less than 2 minutes; it's the most time effective option.
 - Defer the rest for planned action today or in the future
 - Use the urgent/important criteria for deferred emails:

¹⁰ For more on **time boxing** see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1020_Time_Boxing.pdf

¹¹ For more on **delegation** see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1091_Delegation.pdf



- Prioritize and action urgent emails ‘today’ and review this list daily
 - Schedule a time to deal with other major work items in your forward plan.
 - Set reminders for any ‘pending’ items that need something else.
4. Use a synchronised calendar and an organizer. The calendar tells you when things are needed; the organiser should be your central tool to organise information, to-do lists, projects, and other miscellaneous items.
 - Know your deadlines. Mark the deadlines clearly in your calendar and organiser. Set reminders 15 minutes before important events.
 - Plan to be early. When you plan to be on time, you’ll either be on time or late.
 - Have a clock visibly placed in your workspace.
 5. Don’t waste time on unimportant details and unnecessary perfection. You will never get everything done in exactly the way you would like, and perfection is only needed in a very limited number of places. Being a perfectionist may not be an asset.

Check on your progress daily!

Create a daily check-in or checklist of 3-5 questions to ask yourself at the end of each day. They should be questions with answers that are either yes, no, or a number. At the end of every day, ask yourself your predetermined questions (as many as you like) to check whether you are on track. The questions should address a mix of short-term and long-term goals as well as personal and professional goals. Some examples include:

- How happy was I today on a scale of 1 to 10? [*personal improvement*].
- Did I make progress on my top two tasks today? [*management*].
- Did I keep myself on track today? [*leadership*].
- Did I lose focus or get lost in the minutiae sometime today? [*leadership*].
- How many minutes did I spend doing ‘x’ (where ‘x’ is an important activity you identified)? [*management*].

For greater effect, you can also use this technique with a trusted peer in that you each ask each other that person’s questions. This technique gives you a safe accountability partner. It holds you accountable to another person and makes it more likely that you will follow your plan and stay on track. When a peer asks another person their list of questions, feedback is rarely necessary, so the process could only take 5 minutes. However, if feedback is given, the rule is it must be positive feedback, not negative.

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