



Don't Waste Your Time

Wayne Turk

At one point in my Air Force career, I worked for a colonel who had his own ideas on time management. We were working a highly stressful, long-term, high-cost, extremely visible project; and we were frequently swamped. There were not enough hours in the day to get everything done. I should also point out that this was in the days before e-mail became prevalent as a means of communication, which would have made the situation even worse. One method the colonel used to cut down on his workload was ignoring everything (memos, requests, data calls, etc.) the first time they came in—unless it was from a general officer, that is. If the item came back again, it got added to the to-do pile (unless the colonel deemed it still unnecessary or worthless).

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While I don't recommend the colonel's tactic, I was shocked at how many of the requests, data calls, and the like never came back. While someone at some time thought that the item was important, most were just time wasters on somebody's to-do list. In a similar vein, during a consulting assignment, I discovered that many of the recurring reports (weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annual) that had to be produced by different parts of the organization I was helping were never read nor were the data ever used; they were just skimmed or filed away. They had been initiated at times when the information was important to some level of management but were never cancelled, even when no one was reviewing them. Those are true time wasters for too many people. Look into and question whether the reports or tasks you are required to do have any real use. If they are not useful, say so.

There are many, many other time wasters that managers face:

- Massive numbers of e-mails, many of which are unimportant and/or not related to your job (jokes, warnings, or personal missives)
- Meetings (some of which are very important but most of which are a waste of your time)
- Drop-in visitors (not all are time wasters, though!)
- Doing the work of others
- Doing tasks that could be delegated
- Urgent but actually unimportant tasks.

You know some of what wastes your time, but there are probably other things that you haven't thought about. This article won't really focus on what wastes your time; it will provide suggestions on how to more efficiently use the time that you have. After all, you can only manage *your* time. These suggestions come from a number of sources collected over time and have become generally accepted guidelines.

Create a Time Log

Some experts suggest that before you begin to make changes in how you manage your time, you need to track how your time is actually spent. That involves keeping notes for a suitable period (say a week). Create a simple table, make six copies, and carry a copy with you each day, filling in a row every time you change activities. Try to put in everything. If you talk to Joe for 10 minutes, answer e-mails for five minutes, review a report for 20 minutes, and attend a 30-minute meeting with a 5-minute conversation with Kim after the meeting, they all go in the table. I know that's a pain, but it can pay dividends by giving you a good idea of how you spend your time during the workday. You may be surprised. It also will make you more cognizant of some of your wasted time or non-useful activities.

There are various types of wasted time. Probably the most common are your social interactions, such as telephone calls, people stopping by the office just to shoot the breeze, and conversations in the hall or break room. Don't even consider trying to eliminate *all* of your non-work related activities—

all need breaks to recharge, and hallway conversations can help you in networking or the building stronger relationships with your employees. However, if it's a choice between talking with a friend and meeting a deadline, you really should have no choice. A time log will show you if this is a problem for you.

As you review each activity in your time log, decide how much time each was worth to you and compare that with the time you actually spent. An afternoon spent rewriting a report that no one will read, a meeting at which you gave no input and got nothing out of, or reading a memo that applies only to another department all constitute an inefficient use of your valuable time.

Plan Your Day and Week

Sure, unexpected things are going to come up, but if you start with a plan on how to allocate your time, you are much better off. Put it on your calendar. Block out time for what is important. Put as much on your schedule as is reasonable, but always leave some open time. You will probably need it when something on the calendar slips, you want a last-minute meeting with someone, or a crisis arises. Putting things on your calendar will also help you organize your time in a more meaningful and useful way.

While you are planning, think about your most productive time of the day. For some people it is first thing in the morning. For others it is later. Block out that time on your calendar and plan to get as much done as possible then. You should, if possible, disconnect yourself during that time. By that, I mean try turning off (or at least ignoring) your cell phone, Blackberry, and computer for an hour or two. It may be tough for Blackberry addicts to go cold turkey, but it can be done.

Make a To-Do List.

Create an ongoing to-do list and update it daily. You can make it electronic, handwrite it, or put it on a whiteboard. Some people like writing their list by hand because it shows commitment to each item, particularly if they rewrite it each day until it gets done. Other people like software that can slice and dice their to-do list into manageable, relevant chunks. Before I retired, I kept mine on the whiteboard on the wall in front of my desk. That way, I saw it every time I looked up. Wherever you keep it, mark off or erase things as you complete them. This gives you a sense of accomplishment.

Though it may sound tedious, keeping a to-do list along with your schedule, noting people that you need to talk to, and even jotting down important thoughts can keep your head clear so you are more in the moment during the day and more capable of handling situations that need quick thinking and problem-solving skills. Lists and schedules also keep you organized so you don't waste time trying to figure out where you are supposed to be, who you are supposed to meet, and what is important to get done. They also help to keep you from missing important things.

Don't forget to put some of your long-term activities or requirements on your to-do list; otherwise, they have a tendency to be forgotten or put off until the last minute.

Prioritize

Prioritize and do it ruthlessly. Some experts say that you should start each day with a short session prioritizing the tasks for that day. Others say to do it for the next day in the evening before going home so that you can start the next day immediately upon arriving. Look at your list realistically. How many items do you truly need to accomplish? Which are the most important? Which can be delayed or delegated? What is due or soon to be due? You can mark the things on your list by colors or numbers to identify which items are important and need to be accomplished ASAP, which are important but can be delayed, and which can be done when you find time.

Break the larger tasks into smaller chunks. That makes it easier to get started, and once you get started, it is easier to complete the task.

Determine urgent versus important tasks. There can be a difference between urgent tasks and important tasks. Admittedly, sometimes they are the same, but frequently, the urgent tasks are time critical and not always that important. Priorities should be by importance. Yes, get the urgent ones done, but only spend the appropriate amount of time based on their importance.

Batch Tasks

Often, people waste time changing between activities. For that reason, it is useful to group similar tasks together to avoid the start-up delay of each. If there are multiple things to be done out of the office, try to group them together. It is like when you are running errands on the weekend: You want to stop by the drugstore, the supermarket, the bank, and the dry cleaners all in one trip to save time and gas.

You can also batch your e-mail time. It's not an effective use of time to read and answer every e-mail as it arrives. Don't let it interrupt you when you are doing something else. Just because someone can contact you immediately does not mean you have to respond immediately. As long as people know you will answer and they know how to reach you in an emergency, you can answer most types of e-mail just a few times a day. Turn off the e-mail notification signal on your computer if you have one. That will help you ignore e-mails until you are ready to attack a number of them.

Identify and Eliminate Self-Interruptions

Too many times, you interrupt yourself. You're sitting at your desk working on a task when suddenly you think of something that you need to do or something that you need to talk to someone about. So you immediately start on the new task or you pick up the phone or dash off an e-mail to take care of whatever you were thinking about before you forget. Instead of interrupting yourself, just make a note of it and go back to what you were doing. You can come back to it later.

You can also get a three-ring binder, some loose-leaf paper, and A-Z tabs. Label a sheet for each person with whom you communicate frequently and add one for "others." When you think of something that you need to tell someone, note the thought or idea on the page for that person, and then go back to what you were doing. When that person's page has several thoughts or when you have a moment between tasks, call the person or send an e-mail.

Set Deadlines

By deadlines, I mean setting personal deadlines for the tasks that you have on your to-do list. Writing down the deadline makes it more real. If you set a deadline for yourself, keep it.

Sometimes you have deadlines or due dates set by other people. Set your own earlier deadline. For example, say the due date for personnel appraisals is Feb. 1. Rather than wait until they are due, set your own deadline to have the task complete by Jan. 15. That gives you time to look them over, and it gives you padding in case a crisis arrives and you can't work on the appraisals.

Once you have a deadline (self-imposed or otherwise), meet it. Don't let other tasks or people get in the way of that. Don't get sidelined by interruptions. If you're working on the last-minute details of a report for a meeting that starts in 30 minutes, don't accept a phone call or a drop-in visitor's request to talk to you for "just a minute."

Say No

Learn to say no. You can't do it all. You can't take on more when you already have a full schedule. Saying yes to every person that wants and needs something from you is *not* going to make you a better person or a better manager. It *will* set you up to be in a ceaseless losing battle to do your best at every task you agree to take on. Be realistic with your time and energy, prioritize what is truly important, and tell people no at times so you can put the right effort and the right time into everything that you do.

The suggestions in this article can all be helpful, and you should identify the ones that fit your style or preferences. Remember that your time is important. Find ways to use it effectively so that you can be efficient.

The author welcomes comments and questions and can be contacted at rwturk@aol.com.

"Time stays long enough for anyone who will use it."

Leonardo Da Vinci