

## **Stay competitive through tools that organize your work**

Many senior executives in business today feel like orphans. Accustomed to secretarial and clerical support, they find that the new “de-layered” businesses of today usually do not offer such assistance. It is rare for any but the top managers in a major organization to have a dedicated assistant today. Others must share administrative support or do without.

While organizations may feel that by providing the right technology in the form of e-mail access, computer-based record-keeping and voice mail, the fact is that many managers are less effective than they could be. This shows up in a loss of productivity – respected studies have found that executives spend an average of 150 hours per year looking for misplaced items or information.

Employees, particularly those in management, need better skills at managing their workflow for greatest possible efficiency. Technologies such as handheld computers and scheduling software can help, but the best technology is useless unless proper principles are applied. These principles apply whether one uses the latest software, or stays with hand-written, paper-based systems.

### ***Having a to-do list doesn't get it done***

One of the first steps many people take in organizing their work is to prepare a to-do list. They write down all of the tasks that they can think of, and then set about doing them. Some people will put the tasks in priority, with the idea being that they should do the most important ones first.

However, a to-do list is not a particularly effective way to get the work done, when compared to scheduling blocks of time for the various tasks.

To do this, start with considering your goals, whether personal or professional. Then, decide how you can have the greatest possible effect in reaching those goals, and select your tasks accordingly.

Estimate how long each task will take and then add 50 percent to that time – if you think a job will take an hour, assume it will take an hour and a half. This allows for unexpected complications in the task you have chosen, and for interruptions.

If it's a larger project, perhaps one taking 24 hours, acknowledge to yourself that you cannot work at it non-stop. This means that you should first determine the deadline for the project (perhaps seven weeks from now) and then give yourself an artificial deadline that is a week earlier (six weeks) – a buffer zone to allow for contingencies. Divide your 24-hour project by six weeks resulting in six weekly segments of four hours each. Schedule those four hours into two, two-hour blocks of time preferably during the first part of the week .

Avoid the pitfall of trying to schedule too many tasks into the time available. Be sure to build in some flex time; otherwise you will simply fall behind your plan and become demoralized about scheduling.

Distractions will inevitably intrude on the time blocks you have set aside, but they can be minimized. For example, you may suddenly remember that you need to phone somebody, or check on the status of a project. Resist the urge to “self-interrupt” – it is far better to do a brief reminder to yourself to do it, make a note and put it aside to do later, and get back to the task at hand. This way, you are not flitting from one task to another, leaving incomplete the projects that are most important to your goals.

### ***Know yourself***

To schedule your work most effectively, you need to operate with a clear understanding of your personal strengths and weaknesses.

Some people are at their best in the morning, and energy fades throughout the day. Others take time to get going in the morning, and are strongest in the afternoon and evening. Your daily rhythm will have “peak” times when you are most efficient, and also “valleys.”

Schedule your work so that you reserve your best times for the most crucial tasks. This could mean holding an important meeting or making important phone calls, or doing a project that is particularly vital to your overall goals.

In your “down” time you can do work that is less demanding, such as filing, dealing with e-mail or going through your mail. Additionally, there will always be “filler tasks” which may not be urgent but which are important and need to be done.

### ***Use technology effectively***

In setting your schedule, use technology that is appropriate. While you may prefer to use a paper-based schedule system, you also owe it to yourself to see what information technology tools are available. This is particularly important if other people in your workplace use technologies such as Lotus Notes and/or Microsoft Outlook to help them work more closely together.

If your work is largely desk-based and you rarely travel, you may be best off learning a system that is based on your computer. For those who travel more frequently, hand-held computing devices such as a Palm Pilot, Blackberry or I-Phone can be wonderful ways to make sure important tasks do not drop through the cracks. You can indicate for yourself final deadlines and interim deadlines, and set aside blocks of time to accomplish tasks.

However, simply buying a piece of technology is not the answer to workflow management. It is also important to invest the time needed to learn how to use it properly. Find out which of the product’s features are most useful to you in your situation, and learn how to use it effectively. Set aside time to go through tutorials and handbooks; it is an investment that pays off.

### ***Making it happen***

In my practice, which includes helping people organize their work, I frequently encounter an issue of pride and self-reliance, from people unwilling to admit that their work habits are limiting their success. Often, it takes the loss of a potential contract or existing customer to convince someone that they need to make some changes. Or, they could be simply fed up with living with the stress of not being in control of their work.

One of the biggest steps towards improving one’s work habits is to agree that something needs to change. Acknowledge that not everything can change at once – a lifetime of habits cannot be overcome with a single resolution. Start with easy steps, get some “wins” and then move onwards to greater efficiency.

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