

Time Management

Systems Administration

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Managing one's time as a systems administrator is difficult for the same reason that it is interesting. Sysadmins' work is unpredictable and driven by interruptions.

THREE TASK TYPES

From a time management perspective, we can group tasks in three groups.

- ▶ Routine tasks
- ▶ Planned projects
- ▶ Responding to unpredictable events

All three of these things are happening all the time.

TIME MANAGEMENT APPROACHES

We're going to use three big ideas to help with time management.

- ▶ Tools (mostly software)
- ▶ Work practices
- ▶ Implicit strategies and habits

But we're not so much going to split them up for discussion. Instead we'll try to see how these things weave together.

KEY ASSUMPTION NUMBER ONE

Nobody really knows what sysadmins do, and for the most part they're happier not knowing. But they do need to be confident that we know what we're doing and that we're doing it well. Good time management will help give them that confidence, which in turn give you more freedom to manage your work.

KEY ASSUMPTION NUMBER TWO

Nobody cares how much you work or how hard your work. They only care about *what gets done*.

KEY ASSUMPTION NUMBER THREE

People expect easy things to be done quickly and hard things to take longer. They don't always know which things are easy and which things are hard. To some extent we can teach this.

MORNINGS ARE SPECIAL

The first hour or two of your workday are likely to be the most productive. Generally that's because nothing has gone wrong yet and nobody has come up with a reason to interrupt you. Use your mornings well.

- ▶ Avoid meetings in the first two hours of the day.
- ▶ Do not start the day by reading email. Skim your inbox for anything critical and then close it.
- ▶ Take the first ten minutes of your day to make a plan.

HOW TO PLAN YOUR DAY

First, you need some sort of diary or day planner. This can be a paper one, an online planner, or a mobile app. Just find one that works and use it.

- ▶ Maintain a global todo list of outstanding tasks with estimates of time required for each one. Note which of the three types (routine, project, issues) of tasks each one is.
- ▶ There are a few tasks that need to be done today. Do those first.
- ▶ Look for some low hanging fruit - things that can be done in 30 minutes or less - and put a couple into your plan for the day. Pay special attention to items that are visible to your users.
- ▶ Leave some blocks of time open to respond to issues that arise. Pick a low priority or annoying task to work on during such times if there are no issues¹.

At the end of your day, review what you got done. Anything you planned to complete and didn't should be a high priority tomorrow.

¹It could happen

USE BLOCKERS

You are going to be interrupted to handle issues. It's literally part of your job description. The purpose of blockers is to route those issues into a lane where you can deal with them effectively.

Examples of blockers:

- ▶ A ticketing system
- ▶ A team member taking a turn in the triage role.
- ▶ A daily schedule that includes uninterruptible *and* interruptible blocks of time.

AUTOMATION

We know we're supposed to automate things but how do we go about it?

- ▶ Use your ticketing system and schedule planner to identify things you do often. Those are candidates for automation.
- ▶ Document the procedures for those things. Documentation is just a low budget form of automation.
- ▶ Refer to the documentation when you execute the procedures. Use this to refine the documentation.
- ▶ When your documentation is well proven, you have a good spec for an automated process.

EFFICIENT EMAIL

Email can suck up a huge amount of your productivity. But we've been using email for over 50 years, so the tools and methods for handling it are pretty well developed.

- ▶ Use rules to pre-sort your email.
- ▶ Most email is, by definition, not urgent. Check your email a few times a day when it won't disrupt other work.
- ▶ Don't bother looking at you email when you don't have the time to fully handle it.
- ▶ Set up rules to archive your email so it doesn't sit in your inbox forever.

BUILD HABITS

The value of (good) habits is that they lead us to do the right thing without taking the time to think about it. Here's an example: When I open a new terminal window, I *always* start tmux immediately.

- ▶ It takes less time to type “tmux” than it does to decide I didn't need it after all.
- ▶ When I think, “I'm just going to do one thing; there's no point in starting tmux,” I'm wrong a good fraction of the time. Then I have to adjust what I'm doing and start tmux.
- ▶ It's a small thing, but the accumulation of small savings in time and mental energy adds up.

ONLY HANDLE A TASK ONCE

Ideally, you start working on a task and continue until it is done. The world is not ideal, especially for sysadmins. However,

- ▶ Don't start working on a task without a plan and a schedule to see it through to completion.
- ▶ Try to schedule some time to work on the task almost every day.
- ▶ For especially big or complex tasks, take a team member out of on call rotation so that they can focus on the big task.

DO NOT BE DISTRACTED BY SHINY THINGS

As tech people we like the novelty that comes from building and using new things. But sometimes that's a losing proposition.

- ▶ There's efficiency in using a familiar tool really well.
- ▶ There's overhead from switching to the new thing. Even if it's better, the marginal improvement may be too low.
- ▶ New isn't always better.
- ▶ There's always a newer thing².

We can still try new things. Look for things that function poorly and try to replace those. It's not like they're in short supply.

²Every time someone starts a new web framework, God kills a kitten.