

Before You Say That You're Too Busy, Ask Yourself These 3 Questions

Despite the ubiquity of technological advances, for many of us, time management is more of a problem than ever. Professionals who are regarded as being especially competent and ambitious are expected to be in high demand and short supply on the job market. So, when we tell others that we're busy, we are suggesting (subtly or not so subtly) that we are in demand, which enhances our perceived status.

Regardless of whether we communicate being overwhelmed to send a message that our work is very important (and that we are, too), or because we truly feel the struggle of managing competing priorities, being too busy to get things done well isn't a professional asset. It puts stress on the system around us, emotionally and practically. It can also have reputational costs--especially if we're viewed by others as at risk of dropping the ball.

So, what can you do to manage your time more effectively? Well, stop asking yourself that question. Here are three better questions to challenge your approach:

1. What's my mindset about time management?

Maybe you believe that time management is something to be mastered. Or perhaps your mindset is closer to, "I'm not in charge of things around here, so what's the point?"

Whether or not you believe that time is beyond your control, your mindset is completely within your control. You choose how you think about your time, your priorities, and your abilities.

Whatever mindset you choose, know that it matters, as it will drive your behaviors and skill development around time management. Without a helpful, supportive, growth mindset, you're likely to stay stuck with the same old challenges.

2. How good am I at analyzing how much time each of my tasks will take?

For many of the leaders I coach, they have an accurate understanding of how long some tasks will take, a gut sense about other tasks, and no sense about another category of tasks. Chances are, if you're regularly missing deadlines for a particular type of task, you should sit down and track how long these tasks actually take.

You might think that writing a pitch deck will take you 10 hours, but if you're not tracking it, you'll likely forget that it actually takes you 30 hours, because you're coordinating with four other team members. And if you're thinking to yourself, "I don't have time to track how I use my time on tasks," guess what? You *definitely* need to track your time on tasks!

3. How regularly do I allow myself to be interrupted?

Research shows that people spend an average of 11 minutes on a project before they're interrupted, and it takes about 25 minutes to get back to the point they were at before a distraction, according to a UC Irvine study. The *International Journal of Stress Management* cites that professionals who are frequently interrupted have an increase in their levels of exhaustion and physical health problems, such as migraines or back pain.

Track how often you're interrupted at work--whether it's by your boss IM'ing you to ask for regular project updates, or by your colleague wanting to talk about last night's episode of *This Is Us*, or by yourself wanting to check out what snacks are left from the board meeting. Seventy-three percent of interruptions typically are handled right away without any consideration for priority.

If you want to get better at managing your time, you need to get better at managing other people's expectations of how quickly you'll put their interests before yours.

Pericles wrote, "Time is the wisest counselor of all." And your busyness can be managed if you're wise about how you think and act about how you're using your time.