

Rapid Skill-Builder®

Time Management



If your bank credited your account with \$480 every morning, and then every evening took back whatever amount you had failed to use, what would you do? Withdraw every dollar and every cent you could, right?

Time works a little like a bank. Every morning you are credited with 480 minutes in an eight-hour work day, or 1,440 minutes every 24 hours. Every night whatever time you have failed to invest in a good purpose is "lost". Time cannot carry a balance forward and it does not allow overdrafts. Each new day it opens a new account with you, and each night it burns the record for the day.

If you fail to use your day's deposit of time, the loss is all yours. There is no going back, no drawing against tomorrow. Managing our personal time to get the most out of our work day – and of course, our life – involves using the minutes in each day as effectively as you can. This booklet will help you to do that.

▼ Thinking

One useful way to think about how you “spend” your time is to use a simple matrix with two scales.

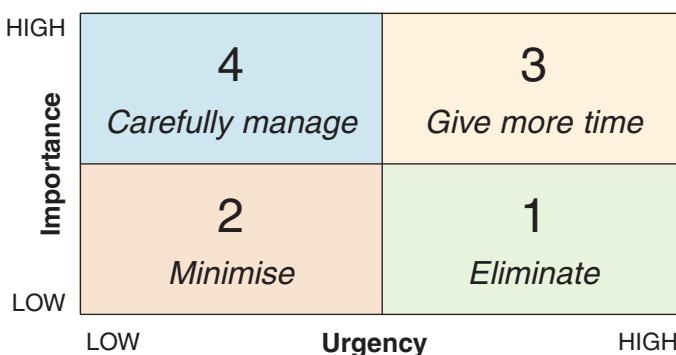
These are:

1. **Importance** (how important the activity is).
2. **Urgency** (whether the activity needs to be done immediately or can be deferred until a later time).

Once constructed, this matrix creates four categories into which your activities can be plotted. These are as follows:

- 1 Low urgency and low importance.** This category is full of activities that are not particularly important to your work or your personal goals and that can be done almost any time. These include activities such as trivia, gossip, going through junk mail, and “escape” activities. All of these things can be **eliminated** in one fell swoop and perhaps give you back 20-40% of your time.
- 2 Low importance and high urgency.** Items in this category look like they need dealing with immediately, so they “assume” an importance that may not be deserved. Many phone calls and a lot of mail fall into this category, as well as memos, reports, and visitors who just drop by for a chat. Half of these activities can usually be **minimised** or eliminated altogether.
- 3 Low urgency and high importance.** Activities in this category tend to confuse people. Many time management approaches advocate discontinuing all low urgency tasks. However, this category contains activities that demand **more** of our time – time to plan or prepare and prevent further unnecessary work in the future. Lack of urgency shouldn’t prevent us from doing people-management, relationship-building, and just plain thinking.
- 4 High importance and high urgency.** This category contains activities that are generally seen to be the most difficult to manage. Significant crises or problems, quickly-called meetings, and many so-called high-level or strategic demands on our time are included in this category. All of these activities need to be **carefully managed**, but the real question is whether they could have been avoided with more planning (category 3 above).

One statistical study of 400 people in a manufacturing business revealed that people spent time according to the percentages shown in the matrix below:



▼ Planning

Before you take any kind of approach to managing your time, you must realistically understand where you stand today. Don't guess how much time is spent where. People will naturally ignore the time taken on some tasks, think more time was taken for tasks they don't enjoy and think less time was taken on tasks that they do enjoy. **The only way to overcome this situation is to gather some facts.** This can be done in a variety of ways.

In random fashion

This is where you note the start and finish time of each new activity you undertake, and end up with a list at the end of the day. Unfortunately, this popular approach is prone to error and distortion because of interruptions, forgetfulness, lunch breaks, phone calls, etc. These are the very activities that you are trying to capture on your list!

In semi-organised fashion

In this situation, the individual selects a full morning or a day or a week and uses a prepared form that captures all the major activities in which they are typically engaged. This checksheet approach looks like this:

	Jobs/tasks	Start time	Finish time	Duration
1.	Meetings/talking			
2.	Mail/e-mail			
3.	Memo-writing			
4.	Reports			
5.	Phone calls			
6.	Informal discussions			
7.	Other activities			
8.	Breaks			

In a fully-organised work study

In a complete work study, the approach taken in the method above is done more rigorously. This generally means developing more detailed activity categories (mail, for example, can be broken down into:

- reading mail
- responding to mail
- filing/passing mail on to other people.

This becomes a much more time-consuming task in itself, but the quality of your data will be much greater if it is done properly. The best approach to take will depend upon the individual. Stick to the facts, be completely honest, and make sure the information reflects the reality of what you normally do. For most people, simply jotting down what they are doing every 15 to 20 minutes should yield enough data over a few days to move to the analysis phase.

Once you have the information recorded in a log, spend time analysing it (especially if the data is on a computer). Just use the same approach as the log, with a number of categories assigned to reflect specific activity (symbols or abbreviations can be developed for each of these).

The following are useful categories.

- **meetings**
- **incoming phone calls**
- **informal discussions**
- **outgoing phone calls**
- **mail – hard copy**
- **e-mail**
- **travelling time**
- **writing memos**
- **formal visitors**
- **writing reports**
- **time at desk or computer**
- **informal visitors**
- **formal discussions**
- **interruptions**
- **planning/thinking**
- **breaks/meals**
- **waiting**



The actual categories will depend on the job that you do. A travel agent might be quite specific about the time it took to talk to airline booking companies or hotels. A nurse might note the amount of time taken to give medication, to feed patients, and to respond to an emergency.

The main reasons for gathering all this data and collating it into a usable form is to educate yourself about where you are **actually** spending your time (as opposed to where you think you're spending it). Many people will be surprised at how haphazard and fragmented their use of time is or amazed at the amount of time committed to low-return activities (e.g., the sales representative realising that most of their time is spent with low-margin, low-volume customers, or spent travelling to and from appointments).

At this stage, look for activities and tasks that appear to be trivial or unimportant. This is only a preliminary assessment, but it is designed to spot the obvious candidates for change or discontinuation. Once again, a pre-prepared form will help you make sure that the task is easy to complete.

Of course, there will be a few individuals who are too busy or too rushed, or even unwilling, to keep any kind of diary. If this is you, make the effort to at least jot down some notes, or if necessary, just reflect upon the past week and try to fill out the form from memory.

▼ Prioritising

Before any priority to-do list is developed, you must focus on the tasks that are really important to achieve in a given day, week, etc. This quiet, reflective thinking is absolutely critical to effective time management (especially since urgent issues will continue to jump to the top of your list).

Critical objectives or goals are very subjective. Nonetheless, at this stage, individuals should take the long-view (even weeks and months). This long-range thinking is critical because it can significantly alter what you work on in the short-term.

Urgent items will always (by their nature) push themselves to the top of your to-do list. In these circumstances, assess urgent issues carefully to test them for real importance. **Many urgent issues masquerade as important issues.** For example, a colleague might request a discussion or meeting on a topic that is important. However, you should decide whether or not it is important to *you*.

Once you have thought about what is important to achieve and weeded out the urgent issues that have little real importance, you can write out your to-do list (like the one shown below). Write each item in an action-oriented or outcome-focused way: Use statements such as, "Call Sarah for a decision on the photocopier contract" instead of "Speak to Sarah" or, "Photocopier contract". This list would ideally be written at the beginning of a day or at the very end of the day in preparation for the next day. In either case, stick to a regular time and avoid generating multiple pieces of paper with notes written to yourself to do something later. You should have only one master to-do list, ideally written on one side of a piece of paper.

Things to do today

1. Bill's appraisal discussion
2. Jenny has been late again!
3. Send off professional association fee
4. Send out candidate rejection letters
5. Call boss about lunch this week
6. Call meeting on parking-space allocations
7. Prepare salary reviews
8. Thank Peter for his project work last week
9. Sort out the filing system
10. Margaret needs to see me about something important

A to-do list only captures what activities in the next day or week need to be tackled. The only requirement at this stage is to make sure that the list is complete. We now need to start assessing each item on the list and prioritise what to work on first. This means engaging the left brain (the organised) and the right brain (the creative) to think about quick and effective ways of getting things done in the best possible way.

How to prioritise

The first step in prioritisation is to do a simple ranking into the following three categories:

- **A or must:** Items that are important to achieve, come what may.
- **B or should:** Try to complete in the time available, but not at the expense of MUST items.
- **C or nice if there's time:** Items that would be valuable to complete, but only if time is available after A and B items have been tackled.

This ranking should immediately draw attention to the higher priorities on the list. However, you might have ended up with a considerable number of A's and B's. As such, it is important to determine which of the A's should be done first. Ideally, this should be done independently of when tasks need to be completed; this is because an early deadline creates a strong and possibly over-riding urgency, which can falsely promote the item up the list. This is ultimately a necessary modification, but it is best left as one of the later arbiters.

After you have moved things around on your to-do list, do a final one. If it is neat enough, this might only mean using a numbering system to create or rank-order the priorities. You also can simply rewrite the list from top to bottom. Once again, remember that this list is ordered essentially in terms of importance.

A simpler method may be to type your tasks straight into a spreadsheet, then, once you have allocated priorities (A, B, C) and added numbers if appropriate, sort the list by those priorities. You can then just print it out.

Deadlines or target-completion dates can now be introduced. Every item on the master list needs to have a deadline. This target date is based on two considerations:

1. The inherent deadline in the tasks (e.g., if a report is needed by Friday morning, it must be written by no later than Thursday evening).
2. Your choice as to when it is possible to do the task (which might even be considerably earlier than an inherent deadline).

Assigning target completion times is always a tricky exercise. Maintain a balance at all times between what is theoretically possible and the capacity you have to complete the task. Remember too that effective time management is fundamentally about making sure that the items you are able to complete on time are the important ones. You **cannot** do every task, and some tasks will **not get done at all** (at least by you, unless you have delegated it – see later section).



▼ Adjusting

Distractions are the natural enemy of effective time management. They come in many forms and are often deceptive in the sense that they look important or urgent or (even worse) of no great consequence. These may or may not generally be a problem. However, a procrastinating personality or an individual who enjoys talking or is always willing to help will affect how soon and how effectively you achieve your priorities.

The first task is to identify the kinds of distractions that occur in your daily schedule and how frequently they occur. Many of them will fall into the “Eliminate” and “Minimise” boxes that we reviewed at the beginning of this booklet: idle visits by colleagues, discussion-based phone calls, interruptions of all sorts, organisational politics, general complaining, etc. However, some distractions will be more important and will need to be handled sensibly and sensitively.

You cannot easily plan for distractions because they are by nature usually random events. The best approach to take is to plan times when you can accept the necessary interruptions. This means letting your colleagues know that there are either times when you would prefer not to be interrupted, or suggesting one or two times a day when you are happy to see people casually. You also need to think about your own personal style – some people need to work quietly behind closed doors because they think it is impolite to ask interrupting people to come back later. Others, however, are happy to work in an open room and can cheerfully handle any amount of interruptions.

Many people plan their day or week without any spare time built into the schedule. Unfortunately, an activity-filled eight-and-a-half-hour day or forty-two-hour week can force you to work through coffee or lunch breaks to catch up. These are usually short-term solutions, but they will take their toll. In addition, what starts as a one-time event will become customary; your bosses and colleagues might begin to expect you to work through lunch, stay late, etc. This trap can be avoided by making sure that personal time and breaks are built into your schedule and taken – even if you only eat an apple or get away from your normal work area to go for a walk.

Like distractions, unexpected events are very demanding because they present themselves as being urgent. Be sure you evaluate unexpected events in the light of other to-do items on your list. If personal time is not to be invaded, must-do items will take greater priority and the unexpected event will take a lower priority. Once again, a certain amount of stubborn willpower will be necessary to deliver this message. However, knowing that you will deal with the matter they are raising at some point in the future is often sufficient to the person interrupting you.

For example, you could politely let them know that you are unable to address the issue now, but will be happy to meet with them at a specified time and date (of your suggestion), when you can give the matter your full attention.



At this point, you will have a better feel for what is unnecessary or less important. We have been concentrating on tidying up our time management activities to this point (e.g., introducing spare timeslots, or discontinuing obviously trivial issues). We now have to more carefully test what we are doing and the extent to which it is really valuable. A “Pareto” diagram or bar graph to show the proportional use of our time will help us carry out this more rigorous review.

Pareto invented the 80/20 rule. In time management terms, this rule suggests that only 20% of the tasks we undertake in a day or week account for 80% of the outcomes we achieve. On this basis, the other 80% of activities achieve very little. Consequently, we waste much of our time on completely unnecessary tasks, or take too long to complete others.

Many people begin their day intending to do eight or ten really important tasks, only to find that only one or two actually get done. We seem to have been distracted or interrupted by all sorts of minor events and this is where focus and intent, a clear plan, and strong follow-through are needed.

If a task appears to be unimportant or serves no obvious useful purpose, discontinue the task immediately. This has the effect of switching the onus to others to ask for the task to be resurrected and to explain why this adds value. Of course, such an approach must be handled carefully (particularly in strongly autocratic cultures, where meetings, reports, or other tasks are required by the boss with little in the way of explanation).

This focus on value-added is a simple measure of usefulness. In question form, this means constantly asking, *“Who is this activity useful to, and why?”* This emphasises that every task has an “owner” – the initiator or the recipient of data or information. In all cases, however, it is the responsibility of the owner to explain why the task is necessary, to offer help and assistance to do it more effectively where possible, and to advise people quickly when needs change or the task is no longer required.



▼ Delegating

Delegation, a major topic in its own right, can only be dealt with briefly in the context of time management. Every individual has opportunities to delegate. Obviously, it is easier for a supervisor or manager to delegate, but it is also possible for an individual operator.

In the final analysis, delegation is about sharing the work for which you are responsible. Individuals can trade or help one another smooth out workloads, but it can also be used where two people can achieve a task far more quickly and effectively than one. Most people delegate or share manual work or chores around the home, but then fail to apply the same lessons to everyday organisational tasks at work.

When thinking about your to-do list, always ask whether important and urgent issues can be better tackled by someone else. At its most simple level, this can mean someone in the organisation who has more time – temporarily, in which case it is one-time-only, or permanently, in which case some job task redesign and reallocation will be appropriate. However, apart from the simple transfer of a task, someone else might have more skill or competence to handle this activity or is already doing something similar. For example, if you are asked to provide a summary of a meeting you attended and you know that someone took a complete set of notes or minutes at the meeting, ask them to provide you with a short summary.

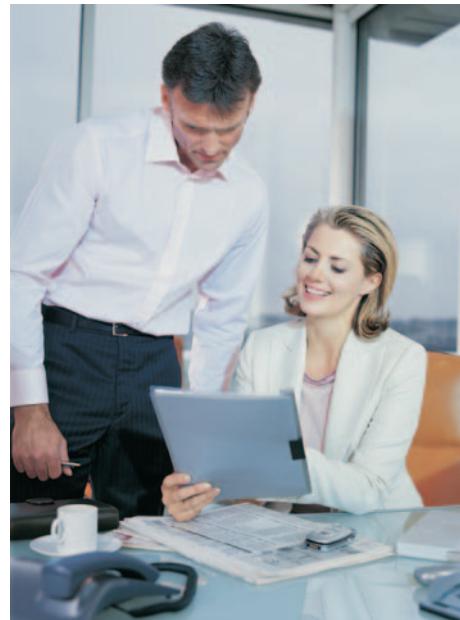
When delegation is possible, it is critical that you make sure the person to which the delegation will occur is fully involved and committed to carrying out the task. Too much delegation is passed on without explanation or the person spends too much time waiting for feedback or comment. This increases the chances that the task will not be done properly or not done at all. The best way to effect successful delegation is to talk to the person concerned wherever possible. This means asking for help with the task (**not** telling or dictating) and listening for any questions or comments that can help the task get completed the way you want.

In some organisations, task delegation will need to be discussed with your manager. When this happens, it is important to ensure that the person the task is allocated to feels supported and understands the need for the delegation and the contribution they can make.

Delegation does not mean that you should immediately lose responsibility or accountability for the task or activity. Instead, all delegated tasks should be logged (see the action template at the end of this booklet). Plan to follow up to ensure completion, even if this means providing help where it is needed or possibly re-inheriting the task.

Two important points to remember:

1. delegating should never be used as a way of avoiding tasks you don't like, and
2. if you really want to encourage a culture where appropriate delegation is accepted, you need to be willing to be delegated to as well, where you are the most suitable person to manage a task or activity.



▼ Relaxing

If there is a secret to time management, it is to constantly ask yourself whether there is a better way to do a job or task. It is always a good idea to think and reflect on what you face in your short-, medium- and long-term workload and carefully consider how to complete tasks so you can optimise your time. When people are asked why they have time management problems, they usually talk about being swept or carried along by events, with little opportunity to even catch a breath. It is the ability to stop and catch your breath, and reflect that ultimately marks the difference between the person who is in control and the one who isn't.

Time management is not a new issue or organisational fad. However, the pace of our lives is faster, and we need an effective approach. The explosion of new systems, new methodologies, and new technology helps the time-challenged individual. Wall planners, sophisticated diary systems, organisers of every variety, PDAs, high-tech filing systems, and computer software make valuable contributions. However, each exhorts us to plan and schedule, so these tools will be most effective when used by people with the right motivation and attitude. If motivation and a positive attitude are missing, your organiser or wall planner will not be used or you will be using a sophisticated system to continue to fly by the seat of your pants.

In the final analysis, we have to all recognise that there is only so much time in a day. Plan to include appropriate breaks, and learn to relax. Relaxation can take many forms, but it cannot be put off or shelved for very long without increasing the levels of stress and pressure and affecting your overall productive output. Even if it is only for an hour or two a day or one day a week, real relaxation (complete time away) will help you to manage the rest of your time **more effectively**, and help you to manage the many paradoxes of time management (shown on the next page).



Paradoxes in Time Management

Paradox	Applies/ does not apply
Open-door paradox. If you leave your door open in the hope of improving communication, you will likely encourage the wrong kinds of communication – trivial or socialising communication (which is needed but must take place at the right time, i.e., during breaks). Such unnecessary interruptions will distract people from far more important tasks.	
Planning paradox. Busy people often fail to plan because of the time required. Effective planning saves time in the end and achieves better results.	
Tyranny of the urgent paradox. We tend to respond to urgent rather than important matters, thus neglecting long-range priorities and thereby ensuring future crises.	
Crisis paradox. It is possible to over-respond to crises, thereby making them worse.	
Meeting paradox. If you wait for everyone to arrive before starting a meeting, you penalise those who come on time and reward those who come late. Start meetings on time. If you don't, those who were on time will come late the next time, and those who were late will come even later.	
Delegation paradox. A manager tends not to delegate to inexperienced subordinates because he/she is not confident that they are ready. Yet subordinates can win the manager's confidence only by gaining the experience that comes only through delegated authority.	
Cluttered-desk paradox. Many people leave things on their desks so they won't forget them. Then they either get lost, or, as intended, attract attention every time they are seen. Unfortunately, they become unintended distractions.	
Long-hours paradox. The more hours in a day you work, the more fatigued you become and the longer you assume you have to complete tasks. For both reasons, this slows you down, necessitating still longer hours.	
Activity vs results paradox. It is easy to confuse activity with results and motion with accomplishment. As you gradually lose sight of your real objectives, you concentrate increasingly on staying busy and can become a confirmed "workaholic".	
Efficiency vs effectiveness paradox. When you confuse efficiency with effectiveness you become more concerned about doing the job right than about doing the right job. No matter how efficiently a job is done, if it is the wrong job, it will not be effective.	
Paradox of time. No one has enough, yet everyone has all there is.	

Adapted from *Time Management Strategies for Women*. 1997: Schwartz and Mackenzie.

Time Management Skill Building Template