Bite-Sized Training™
Time Management Audit

MindTools®

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Bite-Sized Training

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1. Introduction

Unless you're a practiced time manager, you may not be fully aware of how you spend your time. Chances are, you'll have a general idea, but you may be shocked by the truth!

It's important to keep track of time, because it's often the resource we have in shortest supply. Taking stock of your time will enable you to decide where best to allocate the precious hours you have.

It might help to think of your time as a product on a warehouse shelf. When your customers demand it, you dole it out on a first-come-first-served basis. This means that the shelf will soon be empty, but the people who got there first are not necessarily the most deserving of this precious resource.

Just as a business monitors its stock levels, you need to keep track of your time. How much do you have available? How much should you dedicate to certain activities? Do you have some available to deal with unexpected demands?

You can answer these types of questions by carrying out a time management audit.

In this **Bite-Sized Training™** session, we'll explore how you can do this. Since you can't increase the number of hours in your day, you need to be diligent about tracking and optimizing the time you have.

In this session, you will:

- Complete an **Activity Log**, so that you can track exactly what you do.
- Analyze the types of activities that take up most of your time.
- Create a system to manage your inbox effectively, using proven **delegation** and **prioritization** techniques.

Note:

We present this Bite-Sized Training™ session in a slightly different format from our usual ones. Instead of completing it in an hour, we ask you to spend a week tracking and recording your time, and then return to finish the workbook.

2. Where Does Your Time Go? (Part 1)

Before you can allocate your time effectively, you need to know how you spend it. And you may be surprised by what you discover, if you haven't tracked your hours before. For example, do you really know:

- How much of your day you spend on productive work?
- What percentage of your time you dedicate to your responsibilities?
- How many minutes (or hours) you dedicate to managing and recovering from interruptions?

To answer these questions, you need to estimate how long certain activities take, and then compare this figure with how much time you **actually** spend on them.

Action:

List the main activities that make up your working day on the next page. Start with the first tasks that you need to complete in the morning, and try to group similar jobs together. Include an "other" or "miscellaneous" activity for the things that aren't easily definable.

You don't need to worry about the "estimated" and "actual" columns until the next steps.

Activity	Estimated Time Spent (%)	Actual Time Spent (%)

Action:

Next, think about a typical working week, and add any activities that you haven't already included to the table on the previous page. When you are satisfied that your list covers your main tasks, complete the "Estimated Time Spent" column.

To calculate the actual time that you spend on these activities, you need to complete an Activity Log. This is an accurate record of everything you do over a certain period.

To record your time in an Activity Log, simply write down when you start a task, describe what you are doing, and then note how long you worked on it. You need to record the time, description and duration every time you change activities. Here's an example of a morning at the office:

Time	Activity	Duration	Value (High/Medium/Low)
8:00 a.m.	Check emails.	15 min	Med
8:15 a.m.	Team meeting.	10 min	High
8:25 a.m.	Chat to colleague in the hall after the meeting.	15 min	Low
8:40 a.m.	Check phone messages, return calls.	15 min	Low
8:55 a.m.	Get coffee.	10 min	High
9:05 a.m.	Software project.	20 min	Med
9:25 a.m.	Consultation: colleague comes to door to discuss the presentation we are making to the Board next week.	40 min	Low
10:05 a.m.	Take break in staff room.	15 min	Low
10:20 a.m.	Check new emails.	10 min	High
10:30 a.m.	Reorganize software project materials and get back to work.	30 min	Med

11:00 a.m.	Provide staff member with directions/ideas for the work they are doing.	10 min	High
11:10 a.m.	Software project – try to get back to work.	10 min	High
11:20 a.m.	Phone call with boss about the software project.	10 min	High
11:30 a.m.	Refocus on the software project work.	40 min	High
12:10 p.m.	Lunch.	65 min	
		Total Time: 315 minutes	

When you complete an Activity Log, it's important to fill in the "value" column. Here, you gauge how important a task is to your organization and to achieving your goals. Ultimately, you should aim to spend the majority of your time on high-value tasks, and minimize low-value activities as much as sensibly possible.

In our example, only 28.6 percent of the person's morning (90 of the 315 minutes accounted for) was spent on high-value tasks.

Action:

Use the Activity Log template on page 15 to record your tasks over the next week. Try to use the same activity categories that you used on page 3 (this will make it easier to compare your estimated and actual times).

Make a note in your diary to resume this training session in a week's time.

Tip:

See our article for more on Activity Logs.

3. Where Does Your Time Go? (Part 2)

Now that you've completed your Activity Log, are you surprised by where your time goes?

It's amazing to learn what we really do over the course of a day. This powerful exercise is often the turning point for people who struggle with time management. Knowing how long you spend on tasks enables you to start taking control with solid planning.

How well do you think you estimated your time usage? Let's find out!

Action:

Gather up your Activity Log sheets for the week. Calculate the total amount of time you accounted for, and record the percentage you spent on each activity in the "Actual Time Spent" column on page 3. Then, answer the questions below.

What have you learned about the way that you spend your time? Were your estimates accurate? If not, why do you think this is? What surprised you the most?

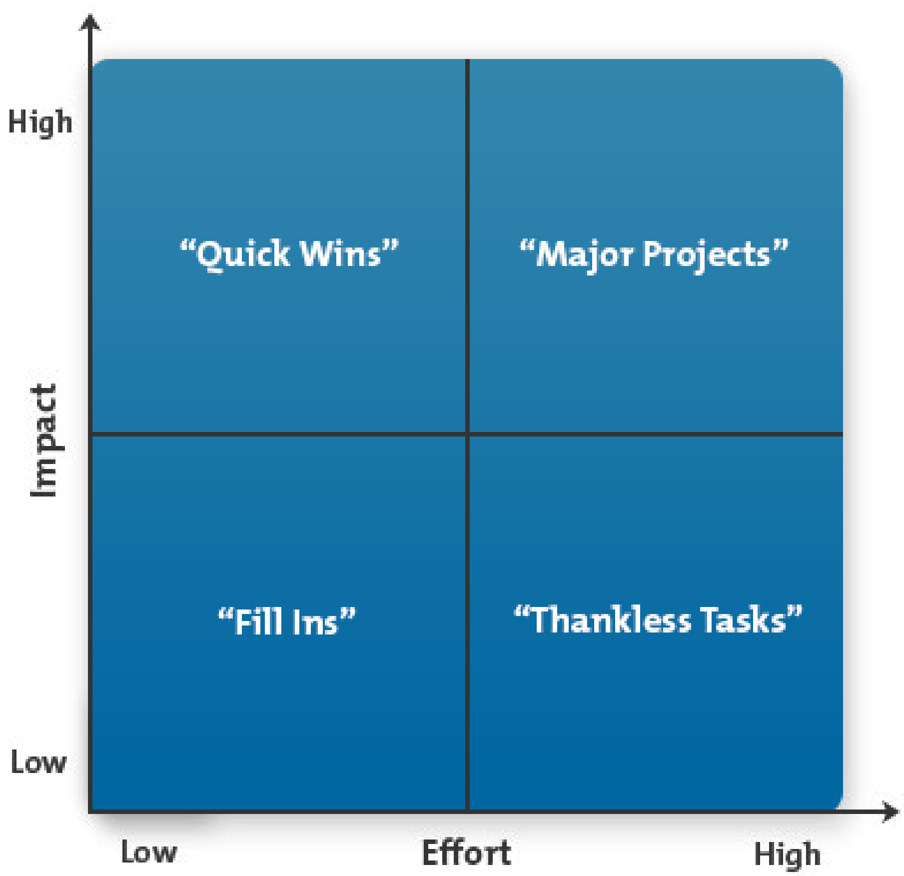
4. Is Your Time Well Spent?

So far, you've identified what you're really spending your time on, and you've categorized your tasks to show whether they are high, medium or low value. Next, we'll identify where your real priorities lie. This will help you to determine which actions you should keep doing, which you should do more of, and which you should stop doing.

The purpose of a time management audit is to allocate your available hours more effectively. To do this, you need to identify which activities are high priority and which are not, and this is where the Action Priority Matrix is useful.

You can use this tool (see Figure 1, below) to put each of your tasks into one of four categories, based on its impact and how much effort it requires.

Figure 1: Action Priority Matrix



The four quadrants are:

- **Quick Wins**: these are tasks that return high value for the time and effort you put in. The more "quick wins" you can accomplish, the better.
- **Major Projects**: these are high impact, high effort, time consuming projects. It's easy to let these monopolize your schedule, so you need to make sure that you're using your time efficiently.
- **Fill Ins**: these are the low impact, low effort tasks that you should complete in any time that's spare. If you don't have any capacity, these just don't have to get done!
- **Thankless Tasks**: these are the activities that give meaning to the phrase "work smarter, not harder." If you are spending lots of time and effort on something that will give you a low return, there is no reason to continue. Either drop the task, allocate it to someone who can do it quicker (a specialist), or delegate it to a more junior team member who may benefit from the experience or extra responsibility.

Action:

Determine the position of each of the activities that you identified on page 3 on the Action Priority Matrix, and record them on the next page. In the "Present" column, include an approximate percentage of time you spend on each.

Quick Wins			Major Projects		
Activity	Present	Proposed	Activity	Present	Proposed

Fill Ins			Thankless Tasks		
Activity	Present	Proposed	Activity	Present	Proposed

Action:

Take a moment to think about how efficiently you are currently allocating your time. Are there "Thankless Tasks" that you can delegate or drop? Are you spending too much time on "Fill Ins"?

In the "Proposed" column for each activity, indicate whether you will:

- Drop the item.
- Delegate it.
- Decrease the time spent – give a new time percentage.
- Increase the time spent – give a new time percentage.

This is the start of your new time management plan. You'll find it much easier to organize your day now that you have a "big picture" idea of how to allocate the hours you have available.

5. Auditing Your Inbox

For many of us, dealing with email and other communications takes up a large part of our day. Therefore, no time management audit would be complete without examining how best to handle this necessary but time-consuming task.

Some people check their emails every few minutes, excited by what might arrive. Others ignore their inboxes, hoping that the contents will disappear by themselves. Although it's important to keep on top of your emails, you risk wasting time and lowering your productivity if you check them too often.

How do you currently manage your inbox? Do you deal with messages in chronological or reverse order? By how much you like the sender? By how interesting the subject line sounds? By focusing on jokes, YouTube® clips, Buzzfeed® quizzes, or humorous memes first? Or maybe last?

Your goal is to handle emails in order of priority. When you have a system for prioritizing and dealing with messages, you will do it much more quickly, and you will be much more productive and effective.

Action:

Think about how you currently manage your inbox. How efficient are you?

Give yourself a rating from 1 to 10 (1 = inefficient, 10 = very efficient).

First, you should aim to schedule one or two blocks of time to deal with email throughout the day. For example, first thing in the morning and right after lunch.

Action:

Look over your time management audit on page 15, and decide how long to allocate to email management each day. Record this below.

Total time allocated to email management:	
Number of sessions I will divide this into:	
Session time:	
Session time:	
Session time:	
Session time:	

When you have a number of emails in your inbox, work through them in the order that you received them. This addresses the time-sensitive nature of some messages, and it ensures that you don't miss one by mistake. Check for any follow-up messages that you need to read before you reply (some email clients, such as GMail®, will automatically stack your messages into "threads" for you).

The 4 D System

You now know **when** you will deal with email, so the next step is to decide **how**. The "4 D" system is extremely effective for managing your inbox. For each message that comes in, you have four options:

1. **Do it:** for simple requests and responses, just do it! It's easier to hit "reply" and respond quickly than it is to set the email aside for prioritization. "Do it" also applies to items that you don't need to act on but want to file for reference.
2. **Delete it:** after you've skimmed an email and decided it's not actionable, and you don't need to keep it, delete it or archive it. If you're worried about permanently removing messages, set up a folder for "To Delete" items. You then take them out of your inbox, and you can deal with your "delete anxiety" later.
3. **Delegate it:** does someone else need to act on this information? Is it something you don't need to deal with personally? Try to delegate as much as you sensibly can.
4. **Decide its priority:** the emails that are left are the ones you need to act on. But first, you need to prioritize them. An email isn't the most important one just because you read it first, or because it came from your boss.

Action:

In the table below, record the last five emails that you received, and note down your action for each (Do, Delete, Delegate, Decide).

Assign a priority order for the items that are either "Delegate" or "Decide."

Email	Action	Priority

Tip:

For more on prioritization techniques, see our article and Bite-Sized Training™ session.

Action:

Now that you have an effective strategy for managing your inbox, how efficient do you think you'll be? More than before?

Give yourself a rating from 1 to 10 (1 = inefficient, 10 = very efficient).

This is a really simple way to tame your inbox. By cutting out the "noise" of unimportant emails that demand your attention, you will find that you can manage your messages effectively, and schedule email into your day like any other routine task.

6. Key Learning Points

You have little hope of taking control of your time until you know where it goes. Completing an Activity Log enables you to identify which tasks take the most time, and helps you to pinpoint both the unimportant and the high-value activities that fill your day.

Using the Action Priority Matrix gives you a very clear view of which activities you should be doing, and which you should delegate or drop. When you look at a task's impact and the effort it takes to complete, you might be surprised by what is actually an effective use of your time.

Finally, taking control of email is a huge step toward effective time management. With some decisive action and solid prioritizing, you can get your inbox under control and get on with the things that really need your attention.

Activity Log

Print off as many copies of this as you need for your personal use.

Time	Activity	Duration	Value (High/Medium/Low)