

Time Management Strategies for Busy Geeks

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ABSTRACT

If you're a busy technical support professional, then time management is an important skill for getting your work done, finding a satisfactory work / life balance, and keeping your sanity.

Searching for time management at Amazon.com reveals over 14,000 books on the subject. These tomes promise to teach how to stop procrastination, develop new habits, simplify your life, and unclutter your office and home. Their focus seems a bit off, though, for the modern geek who wants to maintain an even keel while juggling the expectations of managers, coworkers, employees, employers, children, spouses, friends, grandparents and even the dog.

This paper will present strategies of time management, how best to apply them to our ever-changing, technology-laden lives, and when to avoid them.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.7.4 [The Computing Profession]: Professional Ethics – *codes of good practice*.

General Terms

Management, Performance, Human Factors.

Keywords

Time management, Prioritization, Organization, SUNY Geneseo.

1. INTRODUCTION

The phrase “time management” encompasses a wide range of tools, skills, and techniques related to accomplishing specific tasks and goals. Originally, time management was a phrase often brought up in job interviews and performance evaluations to assess how well an employee was able to achieve their assigned duties and goals in a timely manner. The term has now spread to personal activities as well.

Scattered among the romance novels, science fiction volumes, and children's books in my personal library are self help books designed to reduce stress, help take control of my life, set

boundaries, and teach me to get organized. An avid reader – and someone who strives to find balance and peace among all of my responsibilities – I have read a bit of each of the books. Not one of them, however, is the panacea for all of my to-do lists, calendar entries, and obligations.

Software developers have also created packages to help track appointments, project progress, and deadlines. The types of software range from the complexities of AtTask and Microsoft's Office Project Server to the Simplenote Dashboard Widget that syncs my notes between my laptop, iPad and iPhone and a text file on my desktop.

Let's not overlook the reliability of an attractive notepad and favorite pen – not to mention the satisfaction of actually checking off an item on your to-do list. An organized workspace is also an excellent tool for promoting productivity.

Successful time management also encompasses many examples of productivity. A day where I'm able to answer all incoming emails, install a new computer for a customer, prepare my to-do list for tomorrow, pick up the dry cleaning, and attend a movie with friends leaves me feeling productive and on top of things.

2. DRIVING FACTORS

Before we explore the different tools of time management, it is important to examine the driving factors for improving our use of time and resources.

2.1 Goals and Deadlines

Goals and deadlines are the foundations of any time management system. There are a variety of complexities of goals in each of our lives, from the routine of brushing our teeth every day to a complex project at work. Larger goals are frequently broken down into smaller tasks or objectives to ensure progress toward the final product.

Realistic goals and objectives ensure success and a sense of accomplishment. Deadlines should be established, yet flexible. Emergencies and difficulties can disrupt our days; a flexible deadline will provide an opportunity to succeed by completing the objective in a different way.

2.2 Prioritization

There are several philosophies for analyzing and setting priorities.

2.2.1 ABC Analysis

ABC analysis ranks tasks by their importance, with A tasks being the most urgent and important. B tasks are important but not urgent. C tasks are not urgent and less important. This ensures that time is spent on the most important objectives.

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2.2.2 Pareto Analysis

The Pareto analysis applies the 80-20-rule to improve productivity by completing the most tasks. Tasks are sorted into two parts, and 80% of the tasks can be completed in 20% of the time. The other 80% of your time can then be spent on the remaining 20% of tasks. Dividing objectives in this manner increases productivity by helping to focus on the tasks that can be completed quickly.

2.2.3 Fit

Fit takes into consideration time constraints, and recommends that the task that best fits the available resources should be completed first. Resources to consider are time available, time of day, location, and finances.

This method is the one that I use most frequently. I find it more efficient to use the 15 minutes before my staff meeting to complete a task (or several small tasks) rather than start a task that would take several hours.

It is also vital in this method to carve out time to work on longer projects, or they will never get started or completed. Breaking large projects into smaller objectives will provide milestones along the project's timeline.

2.2.4 The Eisenhower Method

The Eisenhower Method is attributed to US President Dwight D. Eisenhower, and is outlined in a quote attributed to him, "What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important." All tasks are put in the according quadrants of Table 1 and completed as seen below.

Table 1. The Eisenhower Method

	Important	Unimportant
Urgent	<i>Tasks done immediately and personally</i>	<i>Tasks are delegated</i>
Not Urgent	<i>Tasks get an end date and are done personally</i>	<i>Tasks are dropped</i>

On his website, *43folders.com*, Merlin Mann offers a simple mnemonic to remember the Eisenhower method: "Delete, Delegate, Respond, Defer, Do".

2.3 Procrastination

Strategies for overcoming procrastination are vital to productivity. There are three criteria for a behavior to be classified as procrastination: it must be counterproductive, needless, and delaying.¹ While it is normal to procrastinate to some degree, chronic procrastination can severely impact task completion.

At times, I deride myself for being a master procrastinator. After more careful examination of my behavior, however, I see that prioritizing my tasks by Fit and completing many smaller tasks while avoiding a looming project does not take away from my productivity. Instead, I realize that by focusing on deadlines, I am able to complete projects by carving out the time necessary to focus on them completely.

¹ Schraw, G., Wadkins, T., & Olafson, L. (2007). Doing the things we do: A grounded theory of academic procrastination [Electronic version]. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol 99(1), 12-25.

3. TOOLS OF TIME MANAGEMENT

3.1 Your Personal Assistant

The central tool for time management is your personal assistant. Whether you select a Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) or Personal Analog Assistant (PAA), it is important to put all of your information in one place. Your personal assistant should contain your calendar, to do list, and goals.

Throughout my career, I have wavered between a paper calendar / notebook combination and various electronic gadgets – a Palm Pilot, an iPod Touch, and now my iPhone. It has been difficult for me to give up the security of pen and paper, and I find that this leads to several to-do lists scattered about.

3.2 Calendar

The basic principal of successfully using a calendar is to always record everything. A calendar typically has three types of entries: appointments and meetings, milestones such as birthdays, company holidays, and vacations, and future to do items.

Maintain one consolidated calendar for all aspects of your life. This helps to prevent your work life from overrunning your personal life, and ensures that all aspects of your life are kept in balance.

Each morning, take a few minutes to review your calendar entries and plan your day.

When I first read about combining my obligations into one calendar in Thomas Limoncelli's "Time Management for System Administrators", I was skeptical. My perception was that by keeping my personal and professional items separate, I would be better able to maintain the balance I craved. I decided to try his philosophy for three months, and I have utilized this method ever since. One calendar helps me quickly see work and personal appointments and ensures that I do not compromise my time by over committing.

3.3 To Do Lists

To do lists should also be stored in your personal assistant. When you trust your assistant to keep track of your lists, your brain can focus on the task at hand. Using one combined to do list for work and personal tasks ensures you do not have to learn two systems or carry two assistants!

Select a prioritizing method for your to do list. Remember to break large projects into manageable objectives.

Make a list of tasks to complete today, taking into consideration your schedule and the possibility for emergencies. At the end of the day, work any uncompleted tasks into future days.

Occasionally, I will rewrite my never-ending to do list to get a fresh start on the items I need to remember. Each time I complete this, I find that there are things on my list I forgot to cross off, delegated, or no longer need to do. Starting with a new list also helps me to re-prioritize the items properly.

3.4 Life's Inbox

We are constantly flooded with incoming messages. Time management methods frequently offer tips for handling one type of "inbox" (for example, email), but to realistically handle and prioritize our tasks, I believe we need to look at it all – email, phone calls, text messages, RSS feeds, new work requests, and people.

Merlin Mann's Inbox Zero articles describe how to convert your email into actions. He encourages filtering and handling incoming emails immediately to empty your mailbox. It is also an efficient idea to deal with each email only once.

Other ways to efficiently manage incoming email are establishing email filters, archiving email that no longer needs to be acted on, and the delete key.

I prefer to handle other interruptions and "inboxes" by setting aside time to manage them each day. All but the most urgent requests are added to my to do list or entered into my calendar.

3.5 Organization

It is important to establish a plan for organization that conforms to your personality. Someone else's system will certainly not be as successful in your life, simply because you are different!

A simplistic approach of selecting organizing habits for your life would be to determine if you are right-brained (visually oriented) or left-brained (word and list oriented). Right-brainers should investigate their clutter patterns and select creative containers to store their items. Left-brainers are more inclined to crave designated locations, options with compartments, and keeping things out of sight.

Store things where they naturally land. Make an effort to store things where you naturally place them neatly, rather than try to conform to a standard location.

Reclaiming your desk from the clutter will also increase productivity. Sort papers and notes into three piles: work to be completed today, pending work that will be done within a week, and work that can be filed or thrown away. Remember to empty your pending tray at least weekly so that work can be re-prioritized.

Each Friday at work, I dedicate the last hour of my workday to re-organizing my desk. This habit ensures that every note and paper gets touched and acted at least once a week, and I am able to catch things that I forgot about because they were buried on my desk. I am also able to toss those items that I no longer need.

4. CAVEATS

For those of us who work in higher education, we experience very distinct annual work patterns. Prepare to handle the back-to-school stress with well-prioritized lists and realistic goals. As

September approaches, I modify my prioritization categories to utilize only two: "Before students return" and "After Labor Day".

Don't get thrown by the day where a sudden crisis at work or home causes the task list to be thrown out the window. One way to still feel accomplished on a busy day is to add the urgent items to your list and cross them off right away. As you reflect on the day, you'll discover that you still were productive – just not in the way you originally planned.

As service professionals, our priorities are often set by customers and their perception of the work they have asked us to do. Be sure to take into consideration the impact your work has on them when determining priority and scheduling time to complete the task.

Multitasking – when we let go of some things, others automatically come into clearer focus. When I am reading email at home and helping with my son's homework, I am not focusing well enough on either task. While at work, I try to work on one item at a time and group together several similar tasks.

It takes time for a new time management technique to develop into a habit. Consider making one or two small changes at a time, for even something that seems so small, such as where you store your keys each night, will have a big impact on your productivity.

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