

How to Negotiate Your Workload

Paul Newton



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How to Negotiate Your Workload
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Contents

	Preface	6
	Visit Our Website	7
1	Introduction	8
2	Identifying Situations of Over-work	10
2.1	Effects of Working under Stress	10
3	Examining Your Own Behavior	12
3.1	Saying 'No'	12
3.2	Retaining 'Control'	15

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4	Negotiating Your Workload	17
4.1	Identifying the Root Cause	19
4.2	Select Your Tactics	22
4.3	Learning to Say 'No'	24
5	Summary	29
5	References	30



Preface

Sometimes the pressures and demands of work seem overwhelming and it is all too easy to find yourself snowed under with impossible deadlines. This eBook provides practical strategies for negotiating your workload to a manageable level whilst still being seen as a hard-working and diligent manager.

You will learn:

- Why over-commitment will eventually damage your professional reputation.
- To identify and address the underlying reasons why you are overcommitted.
- The optimum tactics for negotiating your workload with your boss.
- How to modify your own behavior and regain control of your working day.
- The key questions you must ask before agreeing to take on a new task.

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1 Introduction

When it comes to personal productivity, the single biggest problem that people have is over-commitment, which simply means having too much work to do on a day-to-day basis. This issue is both the hardest to recognize and the most difficult to address.

What qualifies as too much work depends on so many factors that it is almost impossible to quantify and the only way you can decide for yourself is to ask yourself if you suffer from any of the following common symptoms of over-work:

Physical Symptoms	Psychological Symptoms
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Indigestion• Migraines /headaches• Unexpected weight gain or loss• Chest, joint, back pain	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Irritability• Feeling snowed under• Mood swings• Loss of motivation• Disenchanted with yourself• Feeling you can't cope• Inability to concentrate• Increased emotional reactions• Lack of self-confidence

Everyone reacts to stress and pressure in different ways depending on their personality and so therefore symptoms may vary. This is not an exhaustive list and many of the symptoms above may have causes other than over-work.

In addition to these symptoms, you may also become aware of changes in your behavior, changes that often close friends and family may also observe and be aware of, leading them to question some of your actions or perhaps tell you to stop 'over-reacting' to situations.

The changes might include:



Any of the above changes will occur over a period of time and if you feel that you have any of these symptoms and that over-work is the cause, then you need to take action straightaway.

2 Identifying Situations of Over-work

Whilst everyone is capable of putting in additional effort in order to get a project completed on time or to hit an important deadline, this additional effort can soon become normality and can prove to be unsustainable in the long term.

Developing clear goals, minimizing interruptions, delegating effectively, overcoming procrastination, and using the best personal productivity tools won't help your productivity much if you fundamentally have too much work to do.

Ask yourself, what would be the outcome if one week you achieved all of your work targets and left work on time every evening? Would you be congratulated on being so efficient or would you only succeed in being given even more work to do?

2.1 Effects of Working under Stress

It is quite easy to find yourself in a situation where you cannot cope with the work you have been assigned in normal working hours. It is easy to identify when this occurs, as you will feel as though you are always harassed, stressed, and working late. Even when you manage to complete all of your tasks, you are then assigned more work, which puts you back to square one, creating a vicious circle which is hard to escape.

Many people find themselves in this situation, with the two most common reasons for quitting a job being:

- Too much stress because of too high a workload
- A poor relationship with one's boss as a result

It may seem strange to cover this topic in an eBook about personal productivity but it is very easy to confuse being over-worked with being productive. All too often, work that is completed under stress is of a poor quality, which can lead to:

2.1.1 Motivation Problems

It is difficult to maintain motivation when you know that you have had to bypass important aspects in order to complete and submit the work within the allocated timeframe. Whilst allocating too much time to a task can lead to over-perfectionism, allocating too little can lead to feelings of powerlessness and apathy.

The allocation of insufficient time for a task or project can also cause you significant problems when briefing and motivating your team. Your ability to delegate properly is limited due to the lack of time, resulting in you needing to spend more time monitoring your team to ensure the task is completed punctually. These aspects then add to your own workload, which may already be excessive, which then adds to your own and your team's stress.

2.1.2 Reputation Damage

If a task you have been responsible for turns out to be completed to an unsatisfactory standard as a result of being rushed, then this can reflect badly on your professionalism and self-confidence. This poor image will also be reflected in your team and can lead to discontentment. This may result in many members seeking opportunities elsewhere to protect their own reputation.

On occasion, you may be asked to fix problems that have occurred as a result of having to rush a piece of work. This usually takes far longer than if you had done the task properly in the first place, adding to your already excessive workload and further undermining your motivation.

Another end result of continually having to re-work tasks or projects is that your team's morale will plummet. This can create situations of conflict and instances of your authority being questioned. Handling such issues further adds to the increasing amount of work you have been assigned.

Key Points

- Being over-committed means simply having too much work to do on a day-to-day basis.
- Over-commitment leads to physical and mental problems. It is the number one reason why people quit their job.
- It is the enemy of productivity. People who are over-committed are NOT productive.
- Insufficient time allocated for tasks will eventually have a detrimental effect on morale and self-confidence.

3 Examining Your Own Behavior

The biggest contributor to over-commitment is the inability to say ‘no’ to work requests, which results in people taking on far more work than they can realistically manage. This applies to requests from co-workers as well as bosses.

It is a natural response to want to cooperate with others and we don’t want to give the impression that we are unwilling to help. At the same time, however, we must retain control of our activities so that we have sufficient time and resources to complete them to our satisfaction.

3.1 Saying ‘No’

One of the major factors in developing the ability to say ‘no’ is to realize that if you take on things that you subsequently haven’t got time to do well, then you will be letting yourself down. A job done badly will reflect poorly on you, will undermine your relationship with your boss and your co-workers, and will chip away at your personal pride and motivation.



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It is always easier to agree to take on more responsibility, to be seen as keen and competent, than it is to admit that there is a problem and then to take action to remedy the situation. The culture of your organization may also be one that encourages long hours and rewards those seen to be performing in this way, making saying 'no' appear antagonistic and obstructive.

However, the long-term effects of over-work are potentially catastrophic for both your health and your career and need to be addressed, even if this means making some uncomfortable decisions in the short term.

The first thing you need to determine is whether your own behavior has contributed in any way, such as if you unintentionally encourage your co-workers to direct more than the fair share of work your way.

There are two questions that you need to ask yourself:



3.1.1 Are You Responsible for Tasks that Aren't Really Yours?

It is quite common for people who are conscientious to volunteer to take responsibility for something that they feel is a one-off task. It may have been a favor for a co-worker or just something that needed doing for which there was no obvious candidate.

Having done it once, they then find that it has somehow unofficially become their responsibility. Tasks like these tend to accumulate over time and become a major effort to stay on top of, even though there is no time formally allocated for them and no formal recognition that you are even doing them.

Such tasks also become a threat to your ability to effectively manage your own activities, and they create serious issues regarding your ability to manage your time effectively. These distractions can then develop into a major source of stress for you.

If you answered ‘yes’ to this question, then you need to document these tasks and detail exactly how much time they are taking up. It may be that your boss has no idea that you are even undertaking extra tasks, never mind how time-consuming they are. How and when to deal with such distractions and whether or not you need to bring these to your boss’ attention is discussed later.

3.1.2 Is Your Reputation that of Someone who is Always Willing to Help?

You need to examine your behavior and objectively review whether you are *always* the first to willingly offer to step into the void and take on an unwanted task, or is it something you do only when necessary? If you find that your behavior matches the former, then you should not be surprised that you have a high workload. You will need to examine and alter this to reduce your levels of stress caused by an excessive burden of work.

Always appearing willing to help is inextricably associated with taking on tasks that are not your responsibility. If you have in the past frequently volunteered to take responsibility for particular tasks rather than seeing them left incomplete, then it should not be surprising if your co-workers view you as someone who is always willing to help out.

Generally speaking, people are very sensitive to rejection and if you have a reputation as someone who is unlikely to reject requests for help then people will be inclined to approach you first, even if they suspect that you are over-worked. Remember this may be their way of managing their own workload!

If you answered ‘yes’ to this question then you need to make some changes in your relationship with your co-workers. This does not need to be particularly radical; you just need to change your own perspective from being focused on helping others, to being focused on accomplishing your own goals.

Remember, it is always easier to say ‘no’ to requests from co-workers than it is to say ‘no’ to your boss. Consequently, this should be the first area you tackle in your quest to balance your workload. Saying ‘no’ will probably feel very uncomfortable to begin with, but provided that you approach it in the right way, it will get easier. The best way to say ‘no’ is described later.

3.2 Retaining 'Control'

The extent to which you are able to control your workload will vary between different professions and industries, but in all situations you will still have an element of control over your own workload or that of your team. It is important to recognize what aspects you can control and those that you can't.



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You must always be mindful of how to control your workload by setting appropriate priorities for your tasks and accepting only new tasks that are either short term in nature, that replace an existing task, or offer you the opportunity to increase your knowledge or skills.

As a manager, it is extremely important that you maintain firm control of your team's workload to ensure they maintain levels of high performance and morale. You must act as their 'gatekeeper,' providing the level of protection that allows them to operate efficiently.

You are able to manage your own time and allocate resources according to your priorities. A key aspect of this is to avoid distractions from unnecessary interruptions, which occur when you don't say 'no,' or when you accept too many tasks. Part of your time management should include an element of contingency planning that enables you to absorb those aspects beyond your control.

Also, it is important that you ensure that once 'normality' has returned the responsibility for the task or project reverts back to its original owner.

It is only by being sufficiently assertive that you will retain control over the tasks and projects you accept responsibility for. It is through the art of 'negotiation' that you will ensure that you have an even workload. You will still have periods where you are given numerous assignments, which will give you that adrenalin rush and challenge, but the pressure will not be constant.

By exhibiting assertive behavior in a positive and constructive way, you will improve your own self-esteem and morale. You will also gain the respect of your boss and co-workers as someone who is a 'team player' not a doormat. You will also be able to coach any members of your team to adopt the same positive behaviors.

Key Points

- It is always easier to agree to take on more responsibility than it is to admit that there is a problem and to then take action to remedy the situation.
- If you feel as though you are being given too much work, then you will need to ask yourself whether your own behavior up until now has contributed in any way.
- Be aware of which aspects of work you can and which you cannot control.

4 Negotiating Your Workload

There are two main groups you will have to negotiate your workload with: your boss and your colleagues. Whilst you may employ the same tactics for both groups, the risks are greater when negotiating with your boss.

When negotiating with colleagues, you are in the stronger position, as they are the ones seeking you out and regard you as a method of reducing their own workload! As a rule, you should not feel obliged to accept such tasks or projects unless it is advantageous to you. Some examples of how you can benefit are:

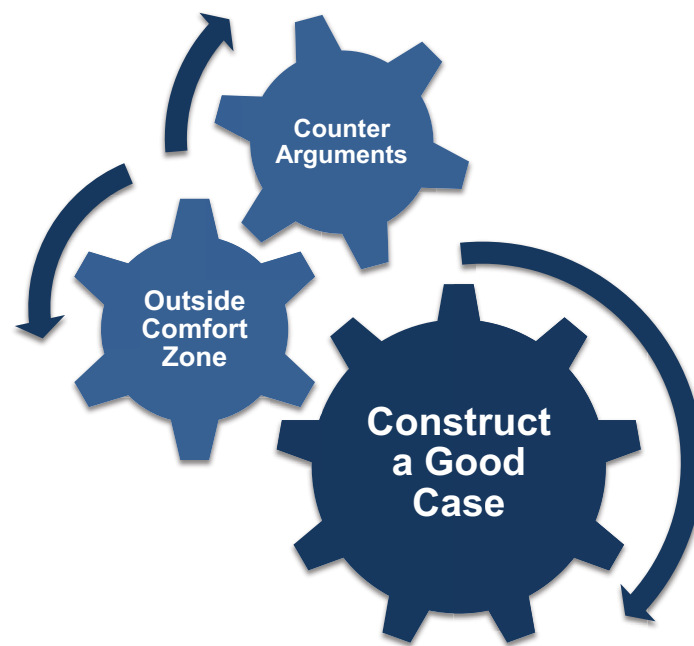
- There is mutual benefit to you and your colleague.
- You gain a promise of future help.
- Returning a past favor.
- Improves your visibility within the organization.
- Provides a unique opportunity to expand your knowledge or skill.

Your ultimate judgment should take into account how accepting this task would impact your own tasks and their deadlines. If you feel there is a significant advantage for you in performing this task and decide to accept it, ensure your terms of acceptance are clearly defined.

Negotiating with your boss is a more 'delicate' situation and there are two reasons why saying 'no' to your boss is difficult:

- 1) It could appear that you are refusing to do something that is a normal part of your job.
- 2) You may worry about giving the impression of not being as keen as your co-workers.

Both of these are valid concerns and mean that you need to go into this discussion fully prepared.



You must present your reasoning for this workload reduction by constructing a sound case, which often means that you have to be prepared to conduct this discussion outside your usual comfort zone. An essential aspect of this preparation will be to anticipate and prepare for any counter arguments your boss will present to you.

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This takes time and courage and it is very easy to put it off by convincing yourself that the situation will improve by itself. This is a short-sighted view as the cumulative effects of too much work usually results in either a prolonged period of absence from work due to illness, or denying jobs the necessary quantity of attention due to insufficient time, which can in itself have serious repercussions. In either case, you will be much worse off than if you tackle the underlying problem on your own terms.

4.1 Identifying the Root Cause

The first step is to get to the root cause of the issue that is causing you the biggest problem. You may need to think about this in detail in order to isolate it. Some common issues include:



Continuous and unrealistic deadlines

If this is the case, ask yourself why this is happening.

Is someone else within the organization sitting on information and only making it available at the last minute?

Are decisions being put off that could be made earlier?

Is there a problem with the organization's processes that needs to be fixed?

Questions like these may take some detective work to answer but they are all common reasons for unrealistic deadlines. Other people in the organization may not realize that something they are doing, or not doing, is causing you a problem. Similarly, some organizational processes or ways of doing things may have been developed without knowing all of the necessary information and may need to be changed or updated.

Dealing with crises on a daily basis

By asking some simple questions you will better able to identify the root cause.

Why are these crises occurring?

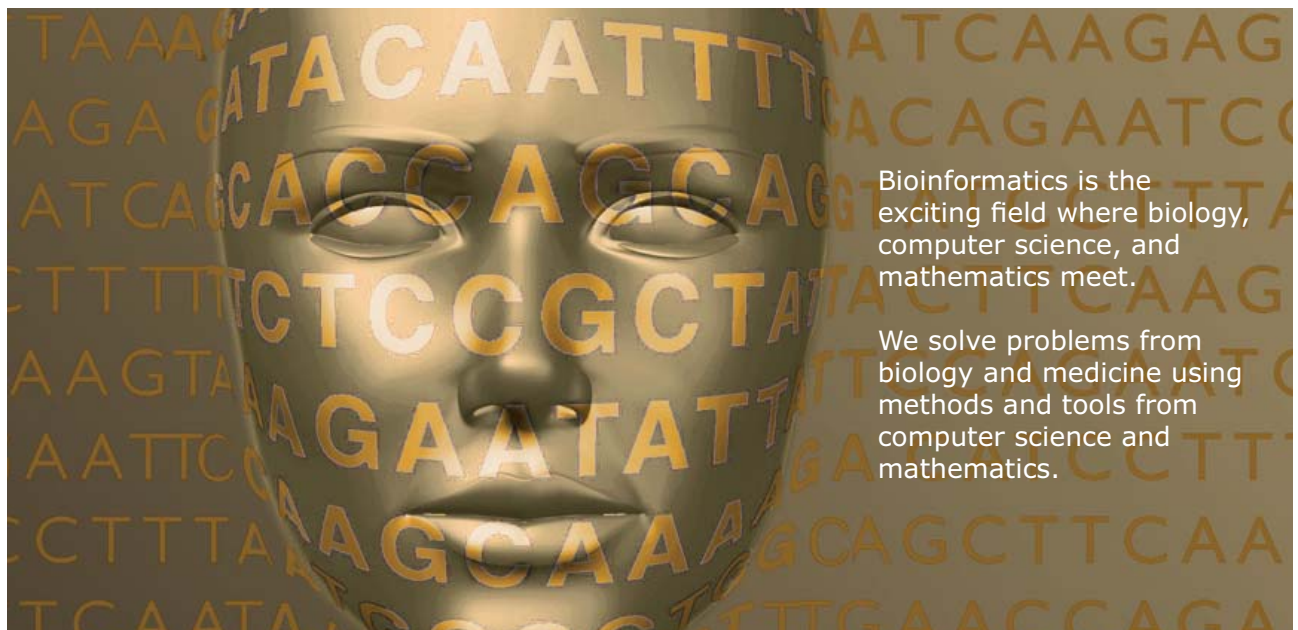
Does senior management even know about them?

Could they be pre-empted and avoided?

It is easy to assume that senior management know what is going on in your part of the organization but that is not always the case. It may be that once attention is drawn to the problem, then the underlying problem can be addressed.



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Role ambiguity and conflict

A common cause of problems is where roles are not adequately defined, which leads to uncertainty about who is responsible for doing what. A great deal of time is then wasted deciding something that should be clear from the outset. This particular problem often leads to the situation where more time is spent arguing over responsibilities than on actually completing the task.

This issue must be addressed, otherwise you will continue to create future problems for yourself, as the cause will not disappear without clear role definitions.

Inadequate support

Do you have everything you need to do your job as efficiently as possible?

This could be a tangible resource such as a piece of hardware, specific software, or additional training. It could also be something less definite: maybe someone is taking too long to get back to you with decisions.

The four issues above represent common root causes that should be relatively easy to identify once you start thinking about them. If you can identify something like this, then it will make the discussion with your manager much easier since you will be able to approach him or her with a solution to your problem, as well as the problem itself.

Unfortunately, it is also possible that none of these issues apply and that you simply are being expected to do more work than you can cope with. If this is the case, then you need to ask your boss to reduce your work schedule and distribute it to other team members, which can be rather daunting. Asking for a reduction in the amount of work that has been allocated to you is easier when you have a reputation as a hard worker.

4.2 Select Your Tactics

The most effective tactic is to restrict your discussion to a specific task or project that you can identify as causing you the worst problem. You can then plan how to put forward your case:



Decide on your objective

You need to be very clear in your own mind about your desired objective, as well as being convinced that it is reasonable and achievable. You need to make a clear recommendation as to how to solve the problem.

If you merely shift the problem onto your boss, they may help you solve it, but your relationship will be strained, whereas by offering an idea for a potential solution, you'll provide a framework for the negotiation and prevent the risk of your request being mistaken for a general complaint.

Prepare your evidence

Gather evidence by keeping a time log for a few days so that you can be precise about how much time you are losing and the impact it is having on your other tasks and deadlines.

The last thing you want is for your boss to say something like 'Surely you can't be spending more than five minutes a day on that.' If you have solid data from documenting the time, then the problem can't be dismissed as trivial, particularly if you can prove an associated monetary cost.

Prepare counter arguments to the likely objections

The best way to prepare counter arguments is to look at the situation from your manager's perspective. Seeing things from your manager's viewpoint should help you to devise a solution that they will find acceptable.

Be clear about any limits you have on your workload

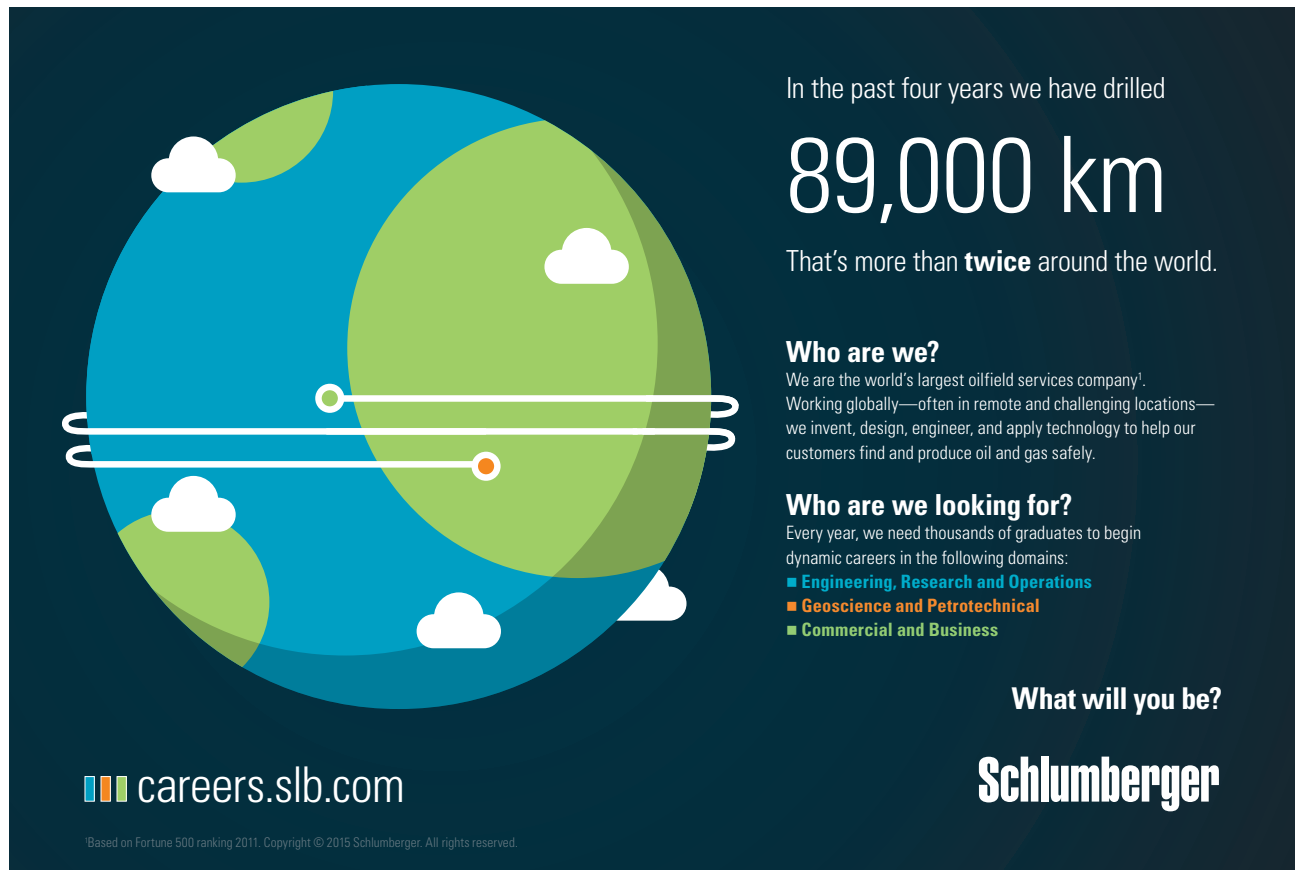
You will need to clearly illustrate how the additional workload will have a detrimental effect on your current priorities and objectives. You can add weight to your arguments by illustrating them in terms of the organization's objectives.

If you have family commitments or work-related goals that you are not prepared to compromise, then you will need to state them clearly. Ensure that you also raise any implications that changing your priorities to take on a new task may have.

Decide in advance what compromise you would accept

If both you and your manager are going to be happy with the outcome in the long term, then there may need to be some form of compromise. Decide in advance what issues you are likely to need to give ground on. Ask your boss to share his or her viewpoint, as this may give you new information or at least a different perspective.

It is important to construct a good case to support your argument; you should arrange your points in a clear and concise manner. You should also provide only a limited number of suggestions; providing too many invites your boss to use the weakest to undermine your whole case, without giving you the opportunity to develop counter arguments with your stronger points.



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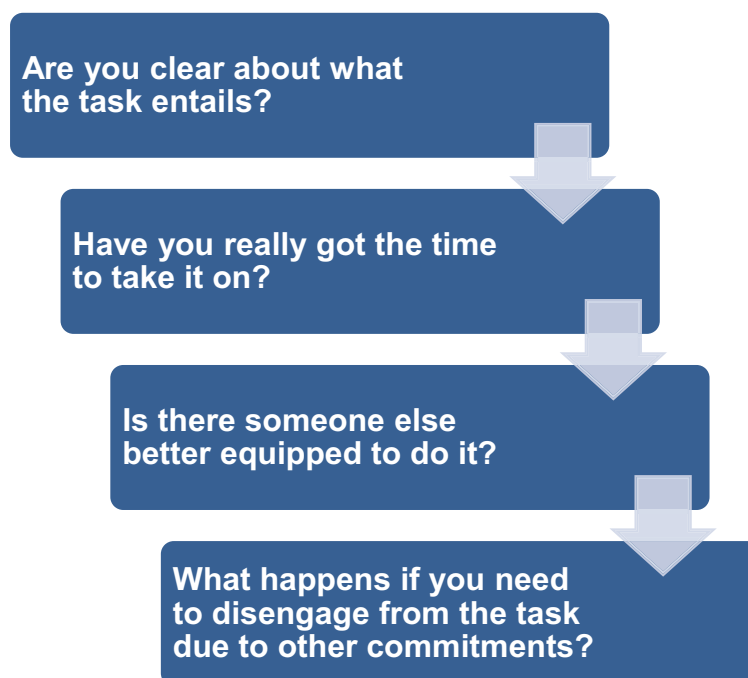
Key Points

- Restrict your discussion with your boss to a specific task or project that you can identify as causing you the worst problem.
- Decide on your objective.
- Prepare your evidence.
- Prepare counter arguments to the likely objections.
- Be clear about any limits you have on your workload.
- Decide in advance what compromise you would accept.
- Ask your boss to share their viewpoint.

4.3 Learning to Say 'No'

If you feel that you would like to become better at saying no, then try prompting yourself to think more carefully about the task involved each time that you are requested to take something on. You should also mentally assess what impact not saying 'no' would have on your current commitments.

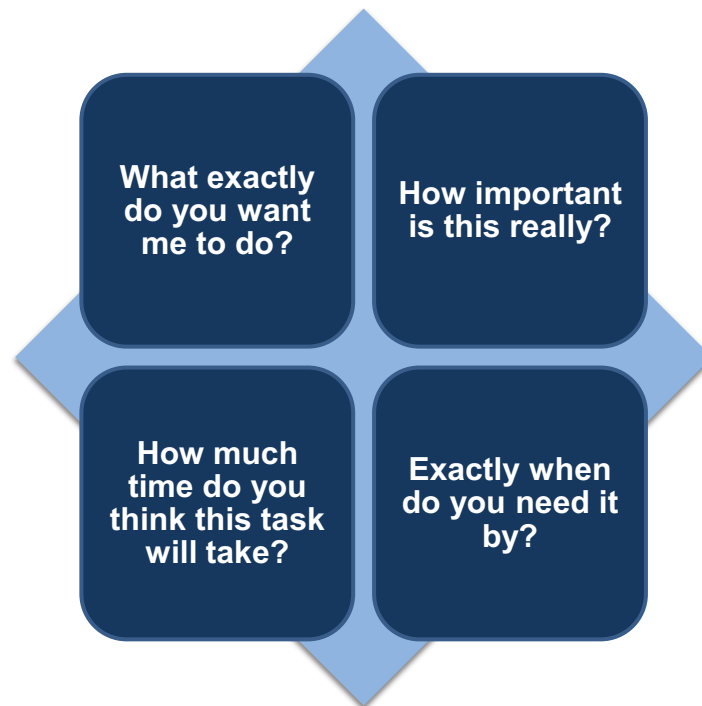
Your checklist of questions should include the following:



If your responses lead you to believe that you'd be unwise to commit yourself to completing the task, then it is in nobody's interest for you to agree to it. Try to clarify your reasons and explain these in a clear and concise way when declining the request.

Be clear about precisely what the task entails

Get into the habit of asking questions before you give any indication of whether or not you will take on any new work. The questions you ask and how you phrase them depends on the kind of person making the request and what kind of relationship you have with them. Some useful questions to ask at this stage are:



Asking a few pertinent questions is a good strategy to follow partly because it makes you look more professional – you want to know what the task is before you agree to take it on – and partly because it trains the other person to think things through, rather than dumping everything on you, with the additional benefit that it also allows you time to think about any implications of the work which may not be immediately obvious.

For maximum benefit, also coach your team to ask these pertinent questions whenever they are approached to take on another's task. This will develop your team members' skills in 'saying no' and ensure you are not interrupted with such requests, unless they feel the implications or repercussions need to be brought to your attention.

Give yourself time to think

If the task is straightforward then, if appropriate, you can agree to commence working on it straightaway. If you have any doubts, however, then the best course of action is to ask for time to check your other commitments and see if it is possible.

By doing this you not only give yourself time to make a considered decision, but also you avoid the possibility of being railroaded into a decision that you'll later regret. Say something like:

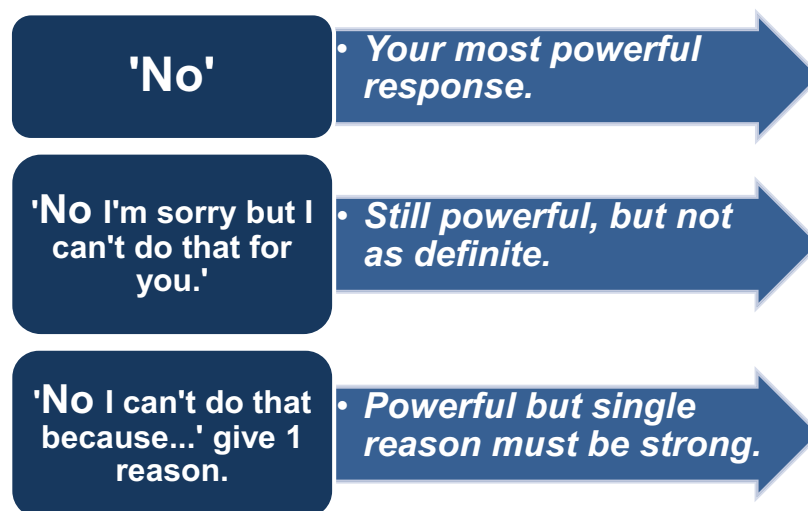
'Just give me time to take a good look at my diary and I'll get back to you in ten minutes.'

or whatever phrase is appropriate to the size of the task.

Say 'no' if appropriate

Sometimes the right thing to do is to say 'no.' When you decline a request, the fewer words you use the more powerfully you communicate the message.

Remember, it is natural for people to attack your weakest argument and if you are forced to give way on this, then your whole position is weakened. The best argument is always to say that another piece of work that you are already committed to will suffer if you take on this new task as well.



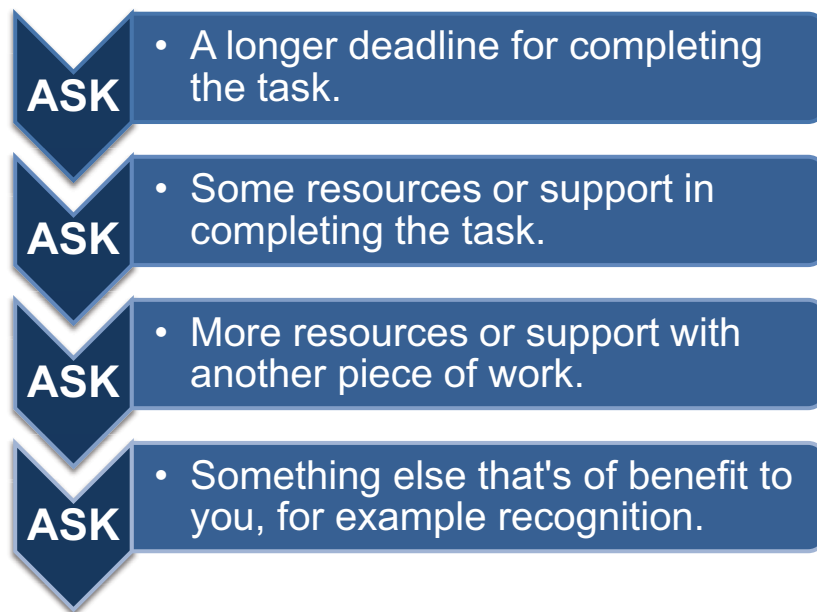
If you do say 'yes' then negotiate

You don't usually need to negotiate every time you are given additional work to do but it can have some positive benefits. If there is something you want from whoever is asking you to take on this task, then you are more likely to get it at this time than at any other.

Ideally you want to negotiate for something that's of high value to you but is very easy for the other person to provide.

Another good reason for asking for something in return is that it encourages the person asking to appreciate that you are doing something for them and that there is an associated cost to you.

Here are some of the things that you might ask for when negotiating:



Other people and colleagues are much more likely to appreciate the fact that you have agreed to take the job on if you make it clear that you require something in return, than if you just said 'yes' with no conditions attached.

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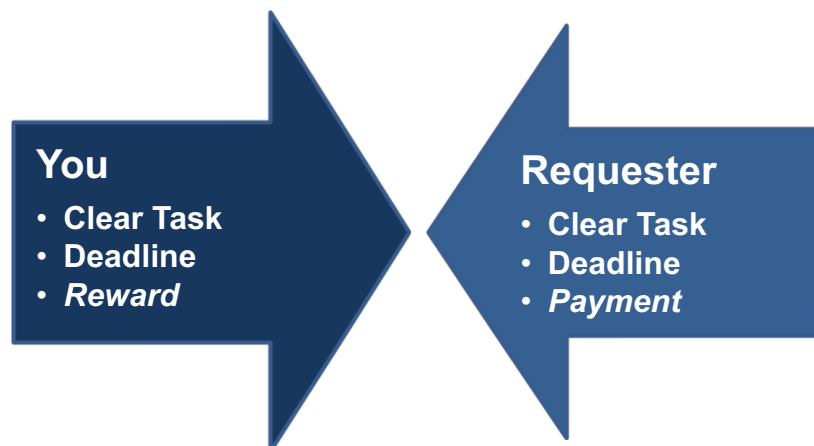
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Agree terms

Having done some negotiating and reached an agreement on what you will do and when, it's important to summarize the details of the deal.

Make sure you and the person making the request know exactly what you will be doing, and by when, and exactly what they will be doing in return and by when.



With larger or strategic projects it may be appropriate to summarize your agreement in an email.

Key Points

- Don't just automatically say 'yes' when you are asked to take on a new task.
- Be clear about precisely what the task entails.
- Give yourself time to think.
- Say 'no' if appropriate.
- If you do say 'yes' then negotiate.
- Agree and document clear terms.

5 Summary

If your workload is too high and too demanding, go to your boss and ask them to rebalance the load. Others will need to take on some of your responsibilities so that you'll be able to focus on the areas that can help you and the organization become more successful.

Before you accept any new tasks, you need to take into consideration all of the work that you are currently committed to. You should then ensure that the expectations that come with the project are realistic and fair.

The pressures and demands of work may seem overwhelming, but changing your attitude, learning to say 'no,' and negotiating with management and co-workers to decrease your workload, will make a tremendous difference.



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