



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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Use These Ten Time Management Skills to Take Control of Your Day

Have you ever started the day with great ambitions and then realized at the end that you did not get anything done? It happens to everyone. However, it happens to some people more often than others.

Time management allows you to have a higher degree of control over what you do in a day, in a week and in a month. You may not have total control, but you have a much greater degree of control. Time management skills help you control your day instead of allowing the events of the day to control you. Time management skills can't give you more hours in a day, but they can help you spend the hours you have on the things that are most important to you.

Organizational skills are easier for some people than for others. For instance, all time management advice is going to include some aspect of writing down what you want to accomplish. For many people this is easy and natural. Other people have difficulty creating lists and following through on them. It is a left-brain / right-brain thing and has to do with whether your brain prefers logic and structure, or whether your preference is on the creative and unstructured side.

If you feel like you are not very good at time management, you need to be doing something to take control. Time management requires discipline. If you are not prepared to be disciplined, then you are not going to be a very good manager of your own time.

Here is a top ten list of time management techniques.

Create a list of things to do each morning. You have to start with this basic activity. If you do not keep track of what you want to accomplish at the beginning of each day (or the end of the prior day), you are not going to have a chance for effective time management. The list can include business and personal items. This can be a paper list or it could be on your workstation, PDA, etc. Keep referring to the list off and on during the day to remind you what is there. For example, if you have ten minutes before a meeting, glance at your list. There might be an email you wanted to send that would only take ten minutes. When you complete each item, check it off. Many people derive satisfaction from being able to check off an item as complete, but this is also one of those left-brain / right-brain things.

Write down all follow-up items on your list. You start your day off with a list of things you want to complete. However, new things will come up during the day. How do you keep track of them? You got it – place them on your daily list. If your list is full and the activity can be completed tomorrow (or the next day), place it on your list for a day or two out. Have you ever wondered why people tell you they will do something and then 50% (or more) of the time they don't follow through? It is because they don't write it down.

Carry forward unfinished work and follow-up. Okay, now you have a list of work for the day, and you have added new items for follow-up during the day. What do you do



TenStep Supplemental Paper

with the things that you have not completed at the end of the day? Just blow them off? No, you carry them forward and add them on to your list for tomorrow. Don't be a procrastinator. You don't want to be carrying an expanding list of activities from day to day. If the activity is important, get it done. If it is not important, follow up with the person who is expecting something from you and tell him/her that you are not going to do the work.

Keep track of due dates. Use your list to keep track of due dates. This includes commitments from work colleagues and friends. Some people miss their due dates more often than they hit them. Part of the problem is that people don't write things down, and so they don't remember. If you are not clear, ask when an activity needs to be completed, write it down, and then use time management skills to make sure the work is done on time. If you cannot meet the commitment, communicate proactively ahead of time.

Create a list of priorities for this month and next. Many people make lists for today. However, how many make high-level lists of the things you need to do this month and next? Unless you have a transactional job where your timeframes are always short-term, you need to stop at the beginning of each month and determine what you want to accomplish. These are obviously at a high level, but, again, they keep you focused on what you want to accomplish. As the month progresses, start adding items to your list for next month.

Keep track of longer-term reminders. Your things-to-do list is not going to help you for follow-up that is out in the future. For instance, you may tell a colleague that you will follow up with him/her to check progress in two months. You need to have a way to keep track of this follow-up and to remind yourself two months in the future. Calendars are a simple way to accomplish this. Most online calendars have features for reminders. Place a reminder out for the date you want to follow-up. In fact, it may be helpful to place multiple reminders over multiple days so that if you miss one, you will catch the reminder the next day.

Keep a clean desk. It is usually true that people who have cluttered offices or cubicles are not very good time organizers. It is more difficult to be a good time manager when you spend a lot of time looking for stuff in a cluttered work environment.

Keep all of your current work in one area. Over time, you may work on many, many separate activities and initiatives. However, keep your things organized. It helps to keep all of your current work papers in one area where you can get at them easily. When you are done with a project or an initiative, you can move the folder elsewhere (see tip 9).

Purge files and documents you no longer need. Here is one that might startle you: Keep all your historical papers from completed work initiatives in just one file cabinet drawer. When you add new work folders to the front of the drawer, and when the drawer gets full, just throw out files from the back end. In other words, never keep more historical files than can fit in one drawer. Contrast that idea to your system of keeping endless years of paperwork that no one cares about any more and no one will ever care for again. Of course, this does not include user's manuals or reference material that you



TenStep Supplemental Paper

need. Just consider the work files you accumulate that no one cares about any more. And yes, once a year, you may wish you could go back and find something you threw out. However, usually you have the original documents online anyway.

Back up online files and then purge. There is a similar philosophy about online documents. About 95% of what you have online in your work files probably has a shelf life of three months or less. So, periodically back up your files to CD (or diskette), and then go through and quickly delete all the older junk you don't need anymore.

Summary

You can be a good time manager if you don't follow a fair amount of personal structure and discipline. Of course, you need to be flexible to deal with the unknown. You can't be a slave to your list. However, as you deal with the unknown as they pop up, you will at least have the perspective of knowing the things that are not getting done.

Personal time management basically boils down to two things. First keep track of what you need to do and then do it. Second, reduce the clutter. Keep your work environment clean and organized. There are many other techniques to make sure that you are spending your time most effectively. This includes delegating and saying "no" to distractions. However, the ten items described above will provide the fundamentals for you to control your day and make sure that you are focused on the activities you need to accomplish.