
ProSeminar Top Tips Series

Ten Principles for Time Management

There's plenty of advice about on how to manage your time – sometimes it's practical and sometimes it's not! Here's a personal selection of principles which I've found useful and which I hope may also help you and your colleagues.

1. Don't let important things become urgent

If we're not careful we can end up prioritising solely on the basis of urgency, which means we may put off tackling important and demanding tasks until the deadline is imminent. Working up against the deadline is not a good idea – it gives us little contingency if things go wrong and little scope to deal with other urgent demands placed on us.

Plan and protect chunks of quality time to tackle important tasks before they become urgent. If for instance you need to produce a particular report for the end of next month, set aside a couple of hours to do some work on it this morning and another similar chunk the next day and so on until you've completed it well in advance of the deadline.

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2. Work to appropriate standards – the 'best' can be the enemy of the 'good'

While we need to pursue excellence, we need to recognise that improving quality has time management dimensions. Quite often making minor and non-critical improvements in quality diverts time and effort from executing other more valuable tasks or seizing other opportunities. If quality is the overriding consideration we may need to reschedule deadlines, but if the deadline is the prime consideration we may need to compromise on quality. Furthermore if our standards are unrealistic, instead of producing a job which is 'good enough' on time, we may end up with a job which is both poor and late.

Complete tasks and projects to an adequate standard well in advance of the deadline. Then if other workload demands permit and the further improvements are worth the effort and represent the best way to spend your time, you can work on exceeding the required standard.

3. Don't over-commit - meet the commitments you make

When someone asks you to do something, be careful not to commit yourself to an unnecessarily tight deadline. If you're asked 'Can you let me have a report on the last Quarter's contribution figures' and you say 'Yes, I can get it for you by this afternoon' you've made a commitment which you've now got to meet. But the task may be more time consuming than you realised or other unforeseen urgent demands could be placed on you during the day.

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Let us know if there are particular topics you'd like us to cover in this on-going series.

Negotiate realistic deadlines which give you adequate contingency and meet the other party's requirements. Don't offer to do a job by Wednesday if the person asking for it doesn't really need it until Friday.

Make sure that any commitment is time-based. If someone asks you to do a job 'urgently' or 'as soon as possible', clarify their needs, review your other priorities and commit to a specific deadline.

4. Get commitment from others

If you ask someone to do something, make sure you agree a deadline with them so that you can plan the rest of your work and follow up accordingly. If you simply ask someone to do the task 'as soon as possible', don't be surprised if it doesn't get done to the end of next week. If you tell them 'it's not urgent', it may never get done at all!

5. Don't undervalue 'future time'

Look at your diary three or four months ahead. The chances are it's fairly empty and this may tempt you in to making commitments to tasks or, particularly, meetings which are of only relatively low value in achieving your overall objectives. If it's June and you're invited to attend a conference in November, don't simply look in your diary and think 'Yes, November I'm not busy. I might as well'. Remember you will be busy in November – you just don't know yet what you're going to be busy with. Think twice – is that conference likely to be the most valuable way to be spending your time?

6. Plan with others in mind

We need to think about other people's priorities not only our own. Show consideration and don't dump jobs on people at the last minute.

Think also when scheduling a task what needs you have for input from others and don't assume that they will be available as, and when, you want them to be. To complete a task by

Thursday you may need to ask John about some aspect of it, but if you leave it to Thursday morning to approach him you may find that he's out and not available until Monday – what's going to happen to your deadline then?

7. Plan for things to go wrong

Just as we shouldn't assume that everybody is going to be available when we need them, so we shouldn't assume that everything is going to go right with our tasks and projects. Equipment can breakdown, colleagues can be off sick, vital supplies overlooked, unforeseen circumstances can occur etc, etc.

Have a contingency - don't work up against the deadline and have a Plan B. So, for instance, if one source of supply lets you down at the last minute, have other alternatives up your sleeve already.

And learn from the crisis. If something goes wrong deal with the crisis. But once the crisis has been dealt with, give thought to how you could prevent such a crisis occurring again.

8. Manage interruptions and accessibility

You won't be able to get rid of all your interruptions but we all need quality time to get on with high concentration tasks and improving time-management means tackling this issue.

Cut down the number of interruptions you have to deal with. Identify why you get interrupted and think about pre-emptive actions you could take so that such demands and requests don't come up as interruptions.

Protect quality time for yourself - by agreeing a team quiet time, by having 'surgery hours' or just having the occasional meeting with yourself. Be generous with your availability. Let people know when you are available to be interrupted so that if possible they can respect your preference not to be interrupted.

Shorten interruptions. Get the interrupter to the point. Don't go off at a tangent. Signal the end by summarising. Above all, don't let the interrupter sit down – the more comfortable they are, the longer the interruption is likely to be!

9. Review resources, workloads, systems and priorities

Do you have enough resources to do the jobs that are required and, if not, could you make a case for extra resources or the redirection of resources? If there are no more resources available, is it time to review the service levels that can be achieved with the resources you have? Which tasks and routines could be cut out completely?

Examine some of the systems and processes you have to follow. Are they as efficient as they could be? Are they really necessary or do you and colleagues just follow them because that's the way you've always done it? Do they add value in proportion to the time they consume?

10. Identify and control your bad habits – avoid the pitfalls

Be frank and recognise the problems you create for yourself.

Are you a butterfly, flitting from task to task? Are you a perfectionist who gets bogged down in detail and takes a long time to complete tasks? Do you give too much time to meetings and not enough to working by yourself? Are you a 'time miser' who needs to give more of their time to other people? Are you too willing to take on tasks from other people?