

Time Management

HOW TO STOP POSTPONING YOUR LIFE

Here are 20 valuable time-management strategies that can help you accomplish more with less stress and pressure.

By Jan Yager, Ph.D.

(Reprinted from *Working Woman* magazine)

We all have the same 24 hours in a day, as everyone else--no more, no less, no matter what your IQ is, your personality, or your family background. You might envy one of your friends who somehow finds the time to do research in her field, present papers at conferences, exercise, entertain, and still have great personal relationships as well. You might admire another colleague for his rapid rise at the brokerage firm and be impressed that he also finds time to spend with his family and do volunteer work. You might wish that you, too, could put in a productive day at work and rush off to a movie--but when YOU when you've trying "doing it all" your professional or personal performance suffered.

People who exemplify creative time management do exist; they are not Supermen or Superwomen. What they do, and what you can do, too, is to clarify goals so that as many of your professional or personal high priorities as possible will be accomplished.

Why is better time management so important? Poor time management causes missed deadlines, unfinished projects, disappointed employers, cancelled appointments, burnt dinners, miffed friends, and postponed vacations. Mismanagement of time also can lead to low self-esteem, depression, unfulfilled career aspirations, or children growing up strangers to their parents (and vice versa). Poor time management is also the cause of potential friendships that never progress past acquaintanceships, such self-destructive habits as overeating, smoking and inactivity, and even unsatisfactory intimate relationships ("I'm too tired tonight, dear," or, most pertinent of all, "There's not enough time.").

HOW TO LEARN TIME MANAGEMENT

Fortunately, effective time management is a skill that can be learned. Unlike genius in music or precocity in mathematics, expertise in time management uses skills that can be acquired and improved. Thus, for most of us, developing effective time management techniques means unlearning some poor habits (usually acquired haphazardly) and replacing them with more purposeful better-systematized patterns. The payoff is not only greater satisfaction in one's work and personal activities but better performance and, ultimately, greater achievement of goals in life as well. Ironically, it is those who effectively manage their time who appear more relaxed and self-satisfied; it is those who am constantly underestimating how long something will take or, who are poor planners, who seem frenzied, driven, and in terror of "the clock."

Those who handle their time well does it creatively; they show certain characteristics that separate them from those who are usually in a state of unprepared frenzy.

You can learn to develop time effective habits such as skillful *short- and long-term planning, setting and keeping realistic schedules, taking efficiency breaks and viewing tasks to be done as opportunities, not dreaded obligations. If you feel your time management needs help, you can change, if you really want to.*

You may need to alter the way you view your time, your work, your personal commitments, and your hobbies, or you may only need to by a daily calendar in which to record your current and future appointments. The benefits of "doing it right" – of being on time, of making (or even beating) deadlines, of following-up and following through on short and long-term goals-- are quickly observed-by you and by others-and that reinforcement encourages you to make those changes stick and to go further. You will wonder how you ever tolerated so much wasted time before: time you could have spent doing something else—reading, socializing, dancing, day-dreaming, learning a new instrument, going back to school, getting additional clients, attending trade shows, inventing a new product, catching up with old friends-whatever your pleasure.

There is no single *right* way to manage *your* time. Accomplishment is not the sole measure of effective management; executives may achieve their professional goals at great cost to their health, personal activities, or relationships. With creative time management, the same goals can be met but with added time for leisure activities as well as improved--and more satisfying--personal relationships.

Workaholism is often a symptom of poor time management: An inability to begin, pursue, and complete a project leads the workaholic to focus *solely* on the project. The squeaky wheel gets all the grease and the other wheels get none; the job becomes all. As one reluctant workaholic somewhat breathlessly explained it. "I keep working around-the-clock because I hope I'll get everything done so that someday I won't have to work so hard."

Pacing yourself and gaining control of your time lets you accomplish what you value at work, in school, or at home. Skillful management of time gives you more time for friends, family, and leisure activities. It also helps avert burnout—total loss of initiative or the ability to continue to work toward accomplishing the task at hand.

How to Work Smarter, Not Just Faster

1. Write down your "ideal" workday. What are your fantasies, dreams and visions of yourself as an efficient worker? How much time is spent getting dressed or commuting to the office? Working at home? How many coffee breaks? How long for lunch? The average phone call? Write a list or a paragraph about that particular workday.

2. Think about the work habits of a few people that you know intimately. Try to imagine how they spend their time and see if you think they are managing their time well or poorly. It may be easier to see time being wasted by others than by yourself. Plan how you would structure their workday to increase the level of efficiency.

3. Review *your* workday paragraph from question # 1 with the same attitude. What realistic improvements can you make to increase your own efficiency? Talking less on the phone?

Grouping similar tasks together? Spending less time at your PC (personal computer) reading e-mail?

4. Set one goal for improving your time at work. Concentrate on that one goal before you move onto another one. Don't tackle too many goals at once. Achieve that one goal; the success you feel will inspire you to go on to your next one. Here are six possible work-related improvements:

- Lengthen or shorten your lunchtime.
- Plan at least one vacation this year that you will really enjoy. Change your environment by going away. If funds are in short supply, consider lower cost vacations, swapping your home or apartment with someone else (there are services that help arrange such swaps), or even staying with relatives (if this will not be too stressful).
- Find a certain time each day (or each week) to keep up with your important correspondence.
- Figure out what essential work you were hired to do (or that you have to do to move your business or company along) and how to accomplish that first.
- Delegate any tasks that others could do as well as you; put your time and energy into what only you can do well.
- Reassess the number of work-related publications that you receive or read. Should you cancel some subscriptions? Begin others? Include time at the library and bookstore checking out what is new in your field as part of your weekly or monthly priority tasks.

MAKING PRODUCTIVE USE OF "HIDDEN" TIME

'Hidden' is time that you previously wasted or consumed with distractions, which you turn into productive periods for pursuing your priority tasks. What are *your* hidden times? Think about your average workday, weekday evening or free days. Are there moments you might reorganize into your hidden concentrated time? Set up a time log for yesterday or today and write down what you did during each hour. Identify your hidden time and decide how to use it.

Hidden time may be minutes you turn into productive use or longer blocks of time you restructure into your day. For example, you might use the five minutes you usually spend waiting for the bus or the half hour waiting in someone's office, to plan, dictate, or read. Time in your car can be spent listening to educational tapes; if you have a tape recorder on your seat, you could dictate memos or ideas for a new project as you commute to work.

What you are trying to achieve is an organized list that fits in as many activities and relationships as you need and want, without denying you the fulfillment of your own dreams.

This, of course, includes time to "do nothing"--for example, thinking, daydreaming or staring into space. Basically, you want to accomplish as much as the Type A (stressed) personality seems to achieve but with a Type B (relaxed) approach. A woman with three small children, a husband and a full-time job probably will have to be more organized--and work harder to find hidden time--

than a retired couple who may have lots more spare time. Time is relative, however, and a 76-year-old grandmother without job or spouse may be more rushed and disorganized than her 33-year-old granddaughter who has multiple obligations.

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This article originally appeared in *Working Women*, May 1985. It is based on *Creative Time Management*, originally published in 1984 by Prentice Hall Press, as well as the next time management title, *Creative Time Management for the New Millennium*, by Jan Yager, Ph.D. (Hannacroix Creek Books, Inc., 1999, \$19.95 trade paperback; \$28.95 hardcover). Available through local or on-line bookstores.

This edited article is reprinted for educational purposes only. All rights reserved. Dr. Yager is a workplace and relationship expert who speaks, consults, conducts seminars, and writes on time management and relationship issues. On the web: <http://www.DrJanYager.com> E-mail: jyager@aol.com (For reprint consideration, have the editor or permission department of the publication contact the author by e-mail jyager@aol.com or by mail at: 1127 High Ridge Road, #110, Stamford, CT 06905.)