

DON'T JUST TRACK YOUR TIME; MANAGE IT!

Many people mistake time tracking for time management. They religiously keep track of everything they do each day, for weeks or even months. And then they stop doing it because they haven't realised any positive changes.

But keeping track of how you spend your time isn't time management. Time management is about making changes to the way you spend your time. For effective time management, you have to apply a time management system that will help you see where changes can and should be made.

Keeping track of your many daily activities is just a preliminary step to effective time management. The first step of time management is to analyse how you actually spend your time so you can determine what changes you want to make.

This is where many people's attempts at time management fail. They look at a specific day in their Day-Timer or Outlook calendar or on their Palm which is packed with activities from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. and don't know what to do with it. So they fall back on the tried and true techniques and eliminate a few events and prioritise others. But they haven't really managed anything; they've just rearranged it. All the perceived problems and frustrations of the day's activities are still there – and at the end of their day they're still frazzled and frustrated.

Manage Your Time With Time Management Categories

How do you actually manage time? The secret is in the categories. Look at your calendar for tomorrow. It's probably already full of events and activities that you're hoping to accomplish. As you work or afterward, you'll be filling in the blank spaces.

Now look at the list and categorise it. ***How much time during your working day did you actually spend:***

- 1) Putting out fires.** An unexpected phone call. A report that's necessary for a meeting that should have been printed yesterday. A missing file that should be on your desk. How much of your day was actually spent in crisis mode? For most people, this is a negative category that drains their energy and interferes with their productivity.
- 2) Dealing with interruptions.** Phone calls and people dropping by your office will probably top the list when you're assigning events to this category. Once again, for most people, this is a negative category because it interferes with (and sometimes kills) productivity.
- 3) Doing planned tasks.** This is the most positive use of time during your work day. You are in control and accomplishing what you intended to accomplish. Planned tasks can include phone calls, meetings with staff, even answering email – if these are tasks that you have put on your agenda.

- 4) Working uninterrupted.** You may not be working on a task you had planned to do, but you are getting to accomplish something, and for most people, this is a very productive, positive work mode.
- 5) Uninterrupted downtime.** Those times during the work day that are used to re-energise and regroup. Lunch or a mid-morning break may count IF they're uninterrupted. If you're lucky enough to work with a company that offers on-site work-out facilities or nap rooms, that would count, too. Everyone needs a certain amount of uninterrupted downtime built into their day to be productive during their work time.

A Week Of Your Past Is The Key To The Future

Now that you understand the time management categories, it's time to use them to analyse your "typical" work week. Using whatever calendar system you use for listing appointments and activities in your daily life, go back and select a recent typical week. Go through the entries of each working day and categorise them according to the time management categories above. Keeping a running total at the bottom of each day will make it easy to see just how you've spent your working time each day.

Now you have the data you need to make changes to the way you spend your time at work. Are you spending too much time putting out fires? Then you need to make the organisational or physical changes to prevent or defer these constant crises. Clean up and reorganise your desk, for example, so you can find the files you need easily, and establish a routine of putting the files you need for the next day out on your desk before you leave for the day. Not getting enough uninterrupted downtime during your working day? Then you need to build it in. For instance, stop eating lunch at your desk and physically leave the building for your stipulated lunch time.

By applying my work categories of time management, and making the changes you need to make to spend more of your time during your working day in the positive categories and less time in the negative categories, you'll truly be able to effectively manage your time at work – and accomplish the true goal of time management, to feel better.

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