Time management at work

Introduction

We spend half of our waking hours at work. At its best, work should be a source of meaning and creativity—a chance to dream up new ideas, solve problems, and help others. "Unfortunately," writes behavioral expert Nir Eyal, "many of us find our workday is a hectic mess, plagued by constant interruptions, pointless meetings, and a never-ending flow of emails." Many people try to correct this issue by simply working harder, but instead of getting on top of their work, they burn themselves out. In reality, the secret to doing your most effective work is not working more, but creating the right conditions for you to succeed. That begins with time management.

What is time management at work?

In the workplace, time management is a meta-skill—that is to say, a higher-order skill that activates your other abilities and allows you to do your best work. Good time management is almost invisible. Like an adept stage manager, it never steps into the spotlight, but is hard at work coordinating the action from behind the scenes. When you're managing your time well, things just seem to run smoothly. You feel inspired by new ideas, motivated to meet your goals, and confident in your ability to get everything done.

In fact, time management may be most noticeable when absent. Without it, things start to unravel. You might feel it in the crunch of a looming deadline, even though you had plenty of time to plan ahead. Or you find yourself staring bewildered at your overflowing to-do list, unsure of where to even begin. If this description resonates more with you—don't worry, you're not alone. Many people (even famous, successful ones) struggle with time management.

In this guide, we'll provide an overview of how to manage time effectively at work. Mastering time management will free you from working reactively and allow you to proactively focus on what's important, not just what's urgent. The strategies we'll share will enhance your creativity, reduce your stress, and improve your collaboration with your team. Sound good? Let's dive in.

Why is time management so important?

The downsides of poor time management are apparent—more stress, poor team collaboration, and rushed work that doesn't reflect your real abilities. But what about the benefits? Great time management has wide-reaching positive effects. Here are just a few examples:

1. Mastery

It takes time and practice to get good at anything. If you're always rushing to complete what's urgent, you'll never have time to work on what's important—the types of projects that challenge your abilities and force you to develop new skills. The impacts for your career trajectory are profound. By improving your time management skills you can unlock praise, promotions, and pride in a job well done.

2. Team harmony

While you might think of time management as an individual practice, it also has important implications for teams. When you're not stretched thin, your whole team is more creative, motivated, and supportive of one another. Good time management has the potential to reduce team stress and boost morale—leading to better collaboration.

3. Job satisfaction

Research has shown that some of the most important factors that influence job satisfaction are positive relationships with colleagues and high-quality outputs. People are happiest when they're part of a high-functioning team that's doing good work. Time management promotes both—enabling teams to work better together and individuals to strive for mastery.

4. Better-run businesses

When employees manage their time effectively, businesses become more profitable. Effective time management frees employees to focus on their most important, high-impact tasks—instead of getting tied up in minutiae that eats up hours. Businesses that put a premium on time management also tend to have lower levels of employee stress, leading to more creative, happy workplaces and lower

turnover.

Time management skills

While the benefits of good time management may be compelling, the execution isn't always so easy. If you want to get better at time management, it can be helpful to take a critical look at your habits, identify areas of improvement, and then work on honing your skills. Here are some of the key time management skills you can focus on.

1. Self-perception

Psychologists have discovered that the way we perceive ourselves has a profound impact on how we act—if you label yourself as "having poor self-control" or being "bad at time management," that can function as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Try reframing your self-talk so you aren't subconsciously sabotaging yourself.

2. Prioritization

Without a game plan, it's easy to feel unsure of where to start, or fall into common productivity pitfalls like focusing primarily on your most urgent tasks and neglecting non-urgent but important ones. To practice prioritization, you can try using time management tools like the Eisenhower Matrix.

3. Organization

You have lots of things vying for your attention and without that context, it can be difficult to make meaningful progress on important tasks—even if you know what your priorities are. To put your work in the context of deadlines, meetings, and other commitments, you can try organizing your day using a timeboxed schedule.

4. Boundaries

A lot of distraction comes from not knowing how to say no to others. And while it's good to be a team player, often the best way to help your teammates is to help yourself first. There's a reason, after all, why flight attendants advise you to put your own oxygen mask on before assisting others. Learning to say no is critical to

doing your best work—and maintaining good relationships with your colleagues.

5. Delegation

For people in leadership roles, one of the <u>hardest</u> time management skills to master is delegation. If you find yourself becoming too involved in the tactical side of projects, take a critical look at your team. Who could step up and take on more responsibility or learn new skills?

6. Mindfulness

Mindfulness plays a huge role in managing distraction. People with strong mindfulness skills are able to pay attention to their thoughts, recognize when they're veering off-task, and gently pull their attention back. Try practicing meditation to help you develop this skill.

Key time management strategies that everyone should master

As you're working to improve your time management skills, there are a number of <u>helpful strategies</u> you can use to help build new habits—both on an individual basis, and with your team. Here are a few we recommend trying.

1. Timeboxing

Many people are accustomed to keeping a to-do list to manage their tasks, but this isn't actually an optimal strategy for getting work done—even if it does feel satisfying to cross things off. In fact, the dopamine hit of being able to cross off a task may incentivize you to focus on easy, quick wins, while neglecting the more complicated (but important) items on your list.

Instead, try scheduling your tasks in your calendar. This is called "timeboxing" and it's a helpful strategy for getting work done because it forces you to think about your priorities, estimate how long each item will take to complete, and commit to when you're going to work on each task. If you use a shared calendar like Google or Microsoft, timeboxing your day in this way also makes your work visible to your

teammates, allowing you to better align on priorities.

2. Timers

One way to help improve your focus and enter a flow state is to use timers to help create an uninterrupted work block. You can follow an established time management technique like the Pomodoro Technique (working for 25-minute sprints with 5-minute breaks) or carve out whatever block of time works best for you. Time yourself using a dedicated time tracking app like Harvest, or just use the timer app on your phone.

Before starting a timer, mentally prepare yourself for the task ahead. Close your email, set your status as 'away' on Slack, don noise-canceling headphones, or do whatever you need to do to focus. By creating a ritual to mark the start of your work block—for instance, making a cup of coffee, closing extraneous tabs, and starting a timer—you create a routine and make it easier for your brain to associate these actions with entering a flow state.

3. Batch processing

The average office worker receives hundreds of emails per day and studies have shown that it takes the average person around 64 seconds to get back on task after checking email. In recent years, the growing popularity of team chat has also introduced new possibilities for distraction. While apps such as Slack and Teams have made it easier than ever to collaborate, these tools also make it easy to get off task.

That's why it makes sense to limit checking messages—whether email or chat—to certain times of the day, so it doesn't negatively affect your other tasks. This is known as "batch processing." By designating time blocks to tackle your inbox and group messages at regular, specific times throughout the day, you remove the anxiety that you might miss something important. The rest of the time, you can put your full focus into working on your most important projects.

4. Gamification

To motivate yourself to carve out time for deep, focused work, track your time and use your log as a personal scoreboard. Try to set a challenging, yet achievable goal

you can strive for. For instance, you might aim for 20 hours of focused time a week, about half of your total working hours. Consider: What daily or weekly "score" is attainable, but would still push you to the limits of your abilities?

Teams who track their hours for billing or other purposes can also use gamification to make the process more fun. For instance, at The Charles creative agency, gamification is baked into their time tracking process, through polls and other guessing games. These kinds of activities get the team excited about time tracking and—as a bonus—disseminate valuable insights that can help them as they're thinking about future work.

Achieve work-life balance and avoid burnout

One of the most important reasons to invest in better time management skills and strategies is to find a healthy, sustainable routine that allows you to do your best work while maintaining good mental health. Unfortunately, this is far from the reality for most workers. According to research by Deloitte, 77 percent of professionals say they've experienced burnout—an extremely unpleasant emotional state characterized by exhaustion, low motivation, and physical symptoms.

As much as experiencing burnout can make you feel like a failure, the truth is that burnout often comes from caring too much. While it's great to be invested in your work, it's important to balance exertion with rest. If you notice the symptoms of overwork starting to creep in, here are some strategies you can use to find your equilibrium again.

1. Create set work hours

Experts recommend designating official work hours, and sticking to them. That means no responding to emails in between scrolling Instagram in the evening, and no more telling yourself "Oh I'll just quickly do this little thing" on a Sunday afternoon. Outside of work hours, turn off your email and Slack notifications, and resist the urge to check when you're bored.

2. Designate a specific workspace

Along with temporal boundaries around your workday, spatial boundaries can also work wonders for avoiding burnout. Whether it's your kitchen table or your living room couch, if you always work in the same place, your brain will begin to associate it with getting work done.

3. Take little breaks throughout the day

It may seem counterintuitive, but studies show that spending less time on your work can actually help you get more done. According to the Harvard Business Review, by taking frequent breaks, you're actually helping your brain function optimally. What should you do with your break? Anything that isn't staring at your screen will give you a cognitive and emotional boost—like following a guided meditation, doing some gentle stretches, or eating a healthy snack.

4. Create a "shut-down ritual"

To keep your reserve of emotional wellbeing full, create a ritual for yourself to signal the transition at the end of the workday. After the shut-down, tell yourself that work is officially done and you can't check email or do any small tasks.

5. Take your vacation days

One of the most obvious (but overlooked) methods of dealing with burnout is to take your allotted vacation days. Unplugging is a crucial part of staying emotionally healthy and keeping your mental acuity sharp. Nielsen research demonstrates that "employees who take time off are happier with their jobs, more engaged, and less likely to quit—or have a heart attack—than their non-vacationing peers."

6. Use your company benefits

Many employee benefit plans offer a wide range of resources that can help guard against a dreaded case of burnout. If your plan covers therapy, it can be an excellent resource for talking through life's stresses and gaining important insights. Since burnout can also have profound physical effects on the body, using benefits like massage, physiotherapy, a chiropractor, and/or acupuncture can help you feel calm and at ease.

7. Get enough sleep

Sleep is one of the body's most powerful natural recovery mechanisms, and if you're getting less than the recommended 7-9 hours per night then you may see a host of mental and physical repercussions. To get the best night's rest, aim to have your bedroom slightly on the cooler side, as dark as possible, and turn off all electronics a couple of hours before bedtime so the blue light doesn't keep you up.

8. Use a time tracking tool

Time tracking tools like Harvest give you insight into how you're spending your time, allowing you to make the most of your limited hours. Implementing a time tracking system may help you recognize where you can be more efficient or set better boundaries to protect your time and prevent burnout.

Achieve more with less stress

"How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives," writer Annie Dillard reminds us. Time management enables us to spend our working lives absorbed in deep projects, building meaningful relationships, and solving important problems that make people's lives better. Mastering this important meta-skill has a host of benefits—not just for your productivity, but also for your mental wellbeing. Try implementing some of the tips and strategies we've covered in this article, or check out the rest of the series.

Why is time management important?

Time management strategies

Developing good time management skills

How to avoid work burnout

harvest