## How Good is Your Time Management?

“How Good Is Your Time Management?: Discover Time Management Tools That Can Help You Excel.” *From MindTools.com*, [www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE\_88.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_88.htm).

#### Instructions

For each statement, click the button in the column that best describes you. Please answer questions as you actually are (rather than how you think you should be), and don't worry if some questions seem to score in the 'wrong direction'. When you are finished, please click the 'Calculate My Total' button at the bottom of the test.

| 15 Statements to Answer | **1****Not at All** | **2****Rarely** | **3****Sometimes** | **4****Often** | **5****Very Often** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **1**The tasks I work on are the ones with the highest priority. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **2**I find myself completing tasks at the last minute, or asking for extensions. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **3**I set aside time for planning and scheduling. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **4**I know how much time I spend on each of the various task I do. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **5**I find myself dealing with interruptions. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **6**I use goal setting to decide what tasks and activities I should work on. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **7**I leave contingency time in my schedule to deal with "the unexpected"? |  |  |  |  |  |
| **8**I know whether the tasks I am working on are high, medium, or low value. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **9**When I am given a new assignment, I analyze it for importance and prioritize it accordingly. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **10**I am stressed about deadlines and commitments. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **11**Distractions keep me from working on critical tasks. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **12**I have to take work home in order to get it done. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **13**I prioritize my To Do list or Action Program. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **14**I confirm my priorities with my boss. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **15**Before I take on a task, I check that the results will be worth the time put in. |  |  |  |  |  |

Calculate My Total

**Total = 0**

## Score Interpretation

| **Score** | **Comment** |
| --- | --- |
| 15-30 | Ouch. The good news is that you've got a great opportunity to improve your effectiveness at work, and your long term success! However, to realize this, you've got to fundamentally improve your time management skills.  |
| 31-45 | You're good at some things, but there's room for improvement elsewhere. Focus on the serious issues, and you'll most likely find that work becomes much less stressful. |
| 46-75 | You're managing your time very effectively!  |

As you answered the questions, you probably had some insight into areas where your time management could use a pick-me-up. The following is a quick summary of the main areas of time management that were explored in the quiz, and a guide to the specific tools you can use for each.

### Goal Setting

(Questions 6, 10)

To start managing time effectively, you need to set goals. When you know where you're going, you can then figure out what exactly needs to be done, in what order. Without proper goal setting, you'll fritter your time away on a confusion of conflicting priorities.

People tend to neglect goal setting because it requires time and effort. What they fail to consider is that a little time and effort put in now saves an enormous amount of time, effort and frustration in the future. Mind Tools has two great articles on goal setting that are must-reads for everyone.

### Prioritization

(Questions 1, 4, 8, 13, 14, 15)

Prioritizing what needs to be done is especially important. Without it, you may work very hard, but you won't be achieving the results you desire because what you are working on is not of strategic importance.

Most people have a "to-do" list of some sort. The problem with many of these lists is they are just a collection of things that need to get done. There is no rhyme or reason to the list and, because of this, the work they do is just as unstructured. So how do you work on To Do List tasks – top down, bottom up, easiest to hardest?

To work efficiently you need to work on the most important, highest value tasks. This way you won't get caught scrambling to get something critical done as the deadline approaches.

### Managing Interruptions

(Questions 5, 9, 11, 12)

Having a plan and knowing how to prioritize it is one thing. The next issue is knowing what to do to minimize the interruptions you face during your day. It is widely recognized that managers get very little uninterrupted time to work on their priority tasks. There are phone calls, information requests, questions from employees, and a whole host of events that crop up unexpectedly. Some do need to be dealt with immediately, but others need to be managed.

**However**, some jobs need you to be available for people when they need help – interruption is a natural and necessary part of life. Here, do what you sensibly can to minimize it, but make sure you don't scare people away from interrupting you when they should.

### Procrastination

(Questions 2)

"I'll get to it later" has led to the downfall of many a good employee. After too many "laters" the work piles up so high that any task seems insurmountable. Procrastination is as tempting as it is deadly. The best way to beat it is to recognize that you do indeed procrastinate. Then you need to figure out why. Perhaps you are afraid of failing? (And some people are actually afraid of success!)

Once you know why you procrastinate then you can plan to get out of the habit. Reward yourself for getting jobs done, and remind yourself regularly of the horrible consequences of not doing those boring tasks!

### Scheduling

(Questions 3, 7)

Much of time management comes down to effective scheduling of your time. When you know what your goals and priorities are, you then need to know how to go about creating a schedule that keeps you on track, and protects you from stress.

This means understanding the factors that affect the time you have available for work. You not only have to schedule priority tasks, you have to leave room for interruptions, and contingency time for those unexpected events that otherwise wreak chaos with your schedule. By creating a robust schedule that reflects your priorities and well as supports your personal goals, you have a winning combination: One that will allow you to control your time and keep your life in balance.

## Key Points

Time management is an essential skill that helps you keep your work under control, at the same time that it helps you keep stress to a minimum.

We would all love to have an extra couple of hours in every day. Seeing as that is impossible, we need to work smarter on things that have the highest priority, and then creating a schedule that reflects our work and personal priorities.

With this in place, we can work in a focused and effective way, and really start achieving those goals, dreams and ambitions we care so much abo

# 0 Common Time Management Mistakes

## Avoiding Common Pitfalls

How well do you manage your time? If you're like many people, your answer may not be completely positive! Perhaps you feel overloaded, and you often have to work late to hit your deadlines. Or maybe your days seem to go from one crisis to another, and this is stressful and demoralizing.

Many of us know that we could be managing our time more effectively; but it can be difficult to identify the mistakes that we're making, and to know how we could improve. When we do manage our time well, however, we're exceptionally productive at work, and our stress levels drop. We can devote time to the interesting, high-reward projects that can make a real difference to a career. In short, we're happier!

In this article and in the video, below, we'll look at ten of the most common time management mistakes, as well as identifying strategies and tips that you can use to overcome them.

**Watch this video to find out how you can avoid several common time management mistakes.**

## Mistake #1. Failing to Keep a To-Do List

Do you ever have that nagging feeling that you've forgotten to do an important piece of work? If so, you probably don't use a To-Do List to keep on top of things. (Or, if you do, you might not be using it effectively!)

The trick with using [**To-Do Lists**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_05.htm)  effectively lies in prioritizing the tasks on your list. Many people use an A – F coding system (A for high priority items, F for very low priorities). Alternatively, you can simplify this by using A through D, or by using numbers.

If you have large projects on your list, then, unless you're careful, the entries for these can be vague and ineffective. For instance, you may have written down "Start on budget proposal." But what does this entail? The lack of specifics here might cause you to procrastinate, or miss key steps. So make sure that you break large tasks or projects down into specific, actionable steps – then you won't overlook something important.

You can also use [**Action Programs**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_83.htm)  to manage your work when you have many large projects happening at once. (Action Programs are "industrial strength" versions of To-Do Lists.)

## Mistake #2. Not Setting Personal Goals

Do you know where you'd like to be in six months? What about this time next year, or even 10 years from now? If not, it's time to set some personal goals!

[**Personal goal setting**](https://www.mindtools.com/page6.html)  is essential to managing your time well, because goals give you a destination and vision to work toward. When you know where you want to go, you can manage your priorities, time, and resources to get there. Goals also help you decide what's worth spending your time on, and what's just a distraction.

To learn how to set SMART, effective goals, read up on [**Locke's Goal Setting Theory**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_87.htm) . Here, you'll learn how to set clearly defined goals that will keep you motivated.

You might also enjoy our Book Insight into [**Long Fuse, Big Bang**](https://www.mindtools.com/community/BookInsights/GettingThingsDone.php) by Eric Haseltine. This book teaches you how to focus on your long-term goals without overlooking your short term priorities.

## Mistake #3. Not Prioritizing

Your assistant has just walked in with a crisis that she needs you to deal with right now, but you're in the middle of brainstorming ideas for a new client. You're sure that you've almost come up with a brilliant idea for their marketing campaign, but now you risk losing the thread of your thinking because of this "emergency."

Sometimes, it's hard to know how to [**prioritize**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_92.htm) , especially when you're facing a flood of seemingly-urgent tasks. However, it's essential to learn how to prioritize tasks effectively if you want to manage your time better.

One tool that will help you prioritize effectively is the [**Action Priority Matrix**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_95.htm) , which will help you determine if a task is high-yield and high-priority, or low-value, "fill in" work. You'll manage your time much better during the day if you know the difference.

You might also want to go through our Bite-Sized Training session [**How to Prioritize**](https://www.mindtools.com/community/Bite-SizedTraining/HowtoPrioritize.php), to further enhance your skills.

## Mistake #4. Failing to Manage Distractions

Do you know that some of us can lose as much as two hours a day to distractions? Think how much you could get done if you had that time back!

Whether they come from emails, IM chats, colleagues in a crisis, or phone calls from clients, distractions prevent us from achieving [**flow**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_86.htm) , which is the satisfying and seemingly effortless work that we do when we're 100 percent engaged in a task.

If you want to gain control of your day and do your best work, it's vital to know how to [**minimize distractions**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/distractions.htm)  and [**manage interruptions**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_94.htm)  effectively. For instance, turn off your IM chat when you need to focus, and let people know if they're distracting you too often. You should also learn how to[**improve your concentration**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_78.htm) , even when you're faced with distractions.

Additionally, our article on [**managing email effectively**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/managing-email.htm)  teaches you how to gain control of your email, so that it doesn't eat up your entire day.

## Mistake #5. Procrastination

Procrastination occurs when you put off tasks that you should be focusing on right now. When you procrastinate, you feel guilty that you haven't started; you come to dread doing the task; and, eventually, everything catches up with you when you fail to complete the work on time.

Start by taking our [**procrastination quiz**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_99.htm)  to find out if procrastination is a problem in your life. If it is, then learn the strategies you need to [**beat procrastination**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_96.htm) .

For instance, one useful strategy is to tell yourself that you're only going to start on a project for ten minutes. Often, procrastinators feel that they have to complete a task from start to finish, and this high expectation makes them feel overwhelmed and anxious. Instead, focus on devoting a small amount of time to starting. That's all!

You might also find it helpful to use [**Action Plans**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_04.htm) . These help you break large projects down into manageable steps, so that it's easy to see everything that you need to get done, and so that you can complete small chunks at a time. Doing this can stop you from feeling overwhelmed at the start of a new project.

#### Tip:

Our Bite-Sized Training session, [**Overcoming Procrastination**](https://www.mindtools.com/community/Bite-SizedTraining/OvercomingProcrastination.php), gives you more in-depth strategies and tips for dealing with procrastination.

## Mistake #6. Taking on Too Much

Are you a person who has a hard time saying "no" to people? If so, you probably have far too many projects and commitments on your plate. This can lead to poor performance, stress, and low morale.

Or, you might be a [**micromanager**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMM_90.htm) : someone who insists on controlling or doing all of the work themselves, because they can't trust anyone else to do it correctly. (This can be a problem for everyone – not just managers!)

Either way, taking on too much is a poor use of your time, and it can get you a reputation for producing rushed, sloppy work.

## Finding This Article Useful?

You can learn another 60 time management skills, like this, by joining the Mind Tools Club.

[**Join the Mind Tools Club Today!**](https://www.mindtools.com/signup/monthly/usd?trackingtag=ra)



To stop this, learn the subtle art of [**saying "yes" to the person, but "no" to the task**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newCS_92.htm) . This skill helps you assert yourself, while still maintaining good feelings within the group. If the other person starts leaning on you to say "yes" to their request, learn how to [**think on your feet**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/ThinkingonYourFeet.htm) , and stay cool under pressure.

## Mistake #7. Thriving on "Busy"

Some people get a rush from being busy. The narrowly-met deadlines, the endless emails, the piles of files needing attention on the desk, the frantic race to the meeting... What an adrenaline buzz!

The problem is that an "addiction to busyness" rarely means that you're effective, and it can lead to stress.

Instead, try to slow down, and learn to manage your time better.

#### Tip:

"Do More Great Work", by Michael Bungay Stanier, is full of ideas and tips to reduce the "busywork" that you're doing, so that you're more excited and engaged in the work that matters. Click [**here**](https://www.mindtools.com/community/BookInsights/DoMoreGreatWork.php) for our Book Insight on it.

## Mistake #8. Multitasking

To get on top of her workload, Linda regularly writes emails while she chats on the phone to her clients. However, while Linda thinks that this is a good use of her time, the truth is that it can take 20-40 percent more time to finish a list of jobs when you multitask, compared with completing the same list of tasks in sequence. The result is also that she does both tasks poorly – her emails are full of errors, and her clients are frustrated by her lack of concentration.

So, the best thing is to forget about [**multitasking**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_75.htm) , and, instead, focus on one task at a time. That way, you'll produce higher quality work.

Our Expert Interview with Dave Crenshaw, looking at [**The Myth of Multitasking**](https://www.mindtools.com/community/ExpertInterviews/DaveCrenshaw.php), will give you an enlightening look at multitasking, and will help you explore how you can manage simultaneous projects more effectively.

## Mistake #9. Not Taking Breaks

It's nice to think that you can work for 8-10 hours straight, especially when you're working to a deadline. But it's impossible for anyone to focus and produce really high-quality work without giving their brains some time to rest and recharge.

So, don't dismiss breaks as "wasting time." They provide valuable down-time, which will enable you to think creatively and work effectively.

If it's hard for you to stop working, then schedule breaks for yourself, or set an alarm as a reminder. Go for a quick walk, grab a cup of coffee, or just sit and [**meditate**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTCS_79.htm)  at your desk. Try to take a five minute break every hour or two. And make sure that you give yourself ample time for lunch – you won't produce top quality work if you're hungry!

## Mistake #10. Ineffectively Scheduling Tasks

Are you a morning person? Or do you find your energy picking up once the sun begins to set in the evening? All of us have different rhythms, that is, different times of day when we feel most productive and energetic.

You can make best use of your time by scheduling high-value work during your peak time, and low-energy work (like returning phone calls and checking email), during your "down" time. Our article, [**Is This a Morning Task?**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_79.htm)  will teach you how to do this.

## Key Points

One of the most effective ways of improving your productivity is to recognize and rectify time management mistakes.

When you take the time to overcome these mistakes, it will make a huge difference in your productivity – and you'll also be happier, and experience less stress!

#### Tip:

To continue improving your time management skills, take our [**Time Management Quiz**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_88.htm) , which will help you identify where your strengths and weaknesses lie. You can also take our Bite-Sized Training session, the [**Time Management Audit**](https://www.mindtools.com/community/Bite-SizedTraining/TimeAudit.php), to hone your skills to the next level.

**How Productive Are You?**



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**Are you as productive as you could be?**

When we want to get more done, many of us simply work longer hours, move deadlines around, and multitask.

Although these strategies can provide some short-term relief, they aren't sustainable in the long term. Pretty soon, this approach becomes a way of life, leading to high levels of stress and eventually, poor productivity.

Productivity is a measure of how much you accomplish – not how busy you are. So it's far better to learn how to work intelligently, and to use leverage to achieve more with your time and resources. This will increase your productivity – and help you find extra time to do other things.

The quiz below will help you to understand how productive you are. Then, the discussion and resources that follow will help you identify strategies that you can use to increase your productivity, so that you can do more, with less stress.

**How Productive Are You?**

**Instructions**

For each statement, click the button in the column that best describes you. Please answer questions as you actually are (rather than how you think you should be), and don't worry if some questions seem to score in the "wrong direction." When you are finished, please click the "Calculate My Total" button at the bottom of the test.

| **16 Statements to Answer** | **Not at All** | **Rarely** | **Sometimes** | **Often** | **Very Often** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **1**I delegate appropriate tasks to others to work more efficiently. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **2**I organize my day to take advantage of natural highs and lows in my energy and motivation. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **3**I actively look for ways to improve the flow of my work, and the way that I approach tasks. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **4**I can maintain focus on one task for a significant period of time. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **5**I spend lots of time looking for information or documents, or locating missing items. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **6**I actively look for ways to avoid wasting time and effort - both for myself and for my team. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **7**I multitask. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **8**I use the talents, time, and expertise of other people on my team to help get the work done. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **9**I use techniques like skimming and note taking to identify the key points from the documents that I receive. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **10**I use a formal tracking system to understand how I spend my time. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **11**I have a clear plan for dealing with disruptions and interruptions. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **12**The volume of correspondence and documentation that I receive on a daily basis overwhelms me. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **13**I delay difficult or unpleasant tasks until the last minute - or until the issue disappears on its own. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **14**To ensure that things are done right, I keep close track of the activities and decisions of others on my team. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **15**I find that my mind wanders, and it's hard to concentrate for long. |  |  |  |  |  |
| **16**I do all of the tasks that are assigned to me, and hope that I can keep up with the volume of work. |  |  |  |  |  |

Calculate My Total

**Total = 0**

**Score Interpretation**

| **Score** | **Comment** |
| --- | --- |
| 16-36 | You have some work to do to become more productive. It's inefficient simply to fill your day with tasks or to try to do too much without considering your limits and priorities. Use the information and resources below as your motivation to work smarter, not harder. The good news: you'll soon be accomplishing very much more, in less time. (Read [**below**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/productivity-quiz.htm#Explanation) to start.) |
| 37-58 | You're on the right track with your productivity efforts, and you probably get your most important work done. However, you could be more productive. Use the productivity techniques and resources outlined below to become more productive and efficient in your daily life. (Read **[below](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/productivity-quiz.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22Explanation)**to start.) |
| 59-80 | Fantastic! You have a clear understanding of your priorities, and you use your time to maximize your output. You also think about how to use leverage to get the most from your time, and to use it to the organization's advantage. This makes you a real asset. Where appropriate, use the resources below to continue to build on and improve your productivity skills. (Read [**below**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/productivity-quiz.htm#Explanation) to start.) |

This quiz highlights five key elements of working productively – organization, attitude, delegation, information integration, and effective use of systems. We'll look at these key areas below. By increasing your performance and effectiveness in these areas, you'll accomplish more in your day. You'll also begin to understand where to focus your time and energy to improve your productivity, and get better results.

**Organization**

(Questions 2, 5, 7, 10, 11)

The first step in any productivity improvement plan is to get organized. Think about how to arrange your physical space so that it helps, rather than hurts, your performance. Messy desks and drawers affect your productivity because you spend valuable time searching through piles of documents, instead of doing high-value activities. Learning [**how to be organized**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_76.htm)  is an art, and you need to work on it every day. From [**organizing email**](https://www.mindtools.com/community/ExpertInterviews/MikeSong.php) to [**organizing your files**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_85.htm) , there are many great systems that can help you order your working environment.

Organization also involves self-awareness, and becoming aware of how you spend your time is essential for improving productivity. An [**Activity Log**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_03.htm)  shows you exactly where you use your time well and where you waste time handling low-priority work, interruptions and distractions. Activity logs also uncover whether you rely on [**multitasking**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_75.htm) : doing more than one thing at a time actually decreases productivity.

Self-awareness also helps you to understand when you do your best work. Some people do their best work early in the morning, and others aren't fully productive until the afternoon or evening. Understanding your work pattern preferences will help you schedule important priority tasks for the times of day when you perform the best. Our article [**Is This a "Morning Task"?**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_79.htm)  explores this in more detail.

**Attitude**

(Questions 4, 13, 15)

The next part of improving productivity is related to your attitude and approach to your work. [**Self-motivation**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_74.htm)  is very important if you want to maximize your productivity. Learn what motivates you to do your best work - and then create the best environment possible so that you to do so. Also, when you create an environment that supports productivity, you can get [**in flow**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_86.htm) . This is a state that allows you to focus intensely on your work to achieve incredible results.

To get into this high-productivity zone, you must also minimize or eliminate disruptions. Have a plan for [**managing interruptions**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_94.htm) , managing your stress, and [**improving your concentration**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_78.htm) . As you take positive steps to control your time and schedule, you'll likely reduce your stress, which will allow you to experience more positive energy. This is essential for getting "in flow", so that your whole productivity plan supports and improves itself once you get started.

Your mindset is fundamentally important for increasing productivity and improving overall time management. Think positively, and take small actions to improve your performance. This will give you the motivation and inspiration that you need to continue moving forward with your plan. Start now by adopting a [**positive perspective**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_78.htm) , and by believing that you can, indeed, be productive and accomplish your goals.

**Delegation**

(Questions 1, 8, 14)

Being productive is not a lone sport. To be truly productive in a work setting, you must rely on your team to help you. That's why work teams are the preferred way to reach goals - together, you can achieve much more than with the single efforts of individuals.

To use the power of teamwork, you must know how to delegate effectively. Delegating isn't simply having others do your work – [**successful delegation**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_98.htm)  ensures that the right person performs the task, regardless of who is ultimately responsible for getting it done. When people are able to work on their high-priority tasks, then everybody - and your organization - wins. If you spend too much time doing work that other people could do, and you have no time to make progress on your own key objectives, then you need to reevaluate who should be doing what on a regular basis.

Delegating effectively means providing sufficient support and resources so that another person can complete the job well. It doesn't mean [**micromanaging**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMM_90.htm)  the process and checking every 10 minutes that things are being done right (in other words, "your way"). To delegate successfully, learn how to let go and trust people to do what must be done. When you do this on a regular basis and build a team of people who all help one another as needed, your productivity levels will increase radically.

**Information Integration**

(Questions 9, 12)

Your productivity will also increase when you master how to identify and use information quickly. Emails, memos, trade magazines, published studies, status reports, operating statistics, financial results - these are just some of the information categories that you may receive on a regular basis. If you try to read each of these in detail, it might take a day or more each week!

So, look at strategies for [**overcoming information overload**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newISS_90.htm) . You must approach information with a critical mind. What do you need to know? What type of information will a particular document provide? How will you use this information to improve the way that you work? Your answers to questions like these will help you determine the level of detail you need from each document. You may simply be able to ignore some items, or quickly skim topics and headings of others. Use these and other [**active reading strategies**](https://www.mindtools.com/rdstratg.html)  to help you reduce the time that you spend dealing with information and documentation.

If you must read a lot of information in detail, learn how to [**speed read**](https://www.mindtools.com/speedrd.html) . Our article on the subject reviews several ways to read material quickly, and you can practice speed reading on your own. If you process and integrate information quickly and effectively, it will help you work more productively.

**Productive Systems**

(Questions 1, 3, 6, 16)

Finally, to increase your productivity, improve the way that you and your team work.

Improving organizational systems not only helps you accomplish more - it can also help your organization [**leverage**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newSTR_83.htm)  its assets effectively, to achieve its objectives and be more successful. Consider continuous improvement through practices like [**Kaizen**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newSTR_97.htm)  and other techniques like[**Kanban**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newSTR_87.htm)  and [**Job Analysis**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTCS_02.htm) . These will encourage you to look at everyday tasks, processes and practices, and review how you can do things better. Also, learn from [**lean manufacturing**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newSTR_44.htm) approaches, and ask "How can we do what we do with less waste?"

Whether it's [**reducing bottlenecks**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC_76.htm)  in a process or [**running meetings**](https://www.mindtools.com/CommSkll/RunningMeetings.htm)  more effectively, anything that contributes to a more efficient work environment will ultimately make you more productive.

**Key Points**

No matter how well you're performing right now, you can almost always improve productivity. When you're more productive, you contribute strongly to the overall success and profitability of your organization. And it feels good to be in control of your time, and know that you can produce the results that are expected of you.

To be more productive, get organized, have the right attitude, manage information you receive effectively, and actively seek ways to improve your working systems. Taking this approach will help you to increase your personal productivity and effectiveness.

**Action Programs**

**Becoming Exceptionally Well Organized**

We all know how useful To-Do Lists are when we get started in our careers. However, To-Do Lists can quickly become overwhelmed when we take on responsibility for multiple projects – as many of us do when we become managers.

One of the problems is that, for most of us, our To-Do Lists are not planned, focused, action lists. Rather, they are a sort of a catch-all for a lot of things that are unresolved and not yet translated into outcomes. For instance, specific entries, such as "Call Tina in Sales," might exist along with vaguer aspirations, such as "Write marketing plan." Often, the real actionable details of what you have "to do" are missing.

**Learn how to juggle a number of projects successfully with Action Programs.**

Another problem is that once you have more than, say, 20 entries on your list, it becomes cumbersome and difficult to use. This means that you start missing key activities and commitments.

This is where Action Programs are useful. Action Programs are "industrial strength" versions of To-Do Lists, which incorporate short-, medium- and long-term goals. They help you to plan your time, without forgotten commitments coming in to blow your schedule apart. And, because they encourage you to think about your priorities properly, you can focus on the things that matter, and avoid frittering your time away on low value activities.

Actions Programs also help you get into the habit of [**delegating**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMM_60.htm)  jobs. All of this lets you **save time – and get away on time** – whilst also increasing your effectiveness and productivity. As such, they help you bring intelligent prioritization and control back to your life, at times where you would otherwise feel overwhelmed by work.

**Tip:**

When you first hear about them, Action Programs can sound complicated and difficult to use. They **are** more complicated than [**To-Do Lists**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_05.htm) , but if you persist and spend a few hours learning how to use them, you'll quickly find yourself back in control of your workload – and a whole lot less stressed as a result!

**How to Use an Action Program**

Follow these four steps to create your Action Program:

**Step 1: Collection**

First, make a long list of all the things in your world that require resolution. Try to collect and write down everything that you feel is incomplete and needs action from you to get completed, whether it's urgent or not, big or small, personal or professional.

To an extent, this collection is taking place automatically. E-mail requests are getting stored in your inbox, memos demanding attention are being delivered to your in-tray, mail is reaching your mailbox, and messages asking for action are accumulating on your voice mail.

But there is also other stuff – stuff that is idling in your head, projects you want to run, things you intend to deal with lying at the bottom of the drawer, ideas written down on stray bits of paper – that need to be gathered and put in place too. Bring all of these actions and projects together and inventory them in one place.

And – this is really important – make sure that your [**personal goals**](https://www.mindtools.com/page6.html)  are brought onto this list.

**Tip 1:**
You can experience tremendous stress if you have too many mental "To Dos" floating around in your head. You never know whether you've forgotten things, and you'll always have that terrible feeling of not having achieved everything you want to achieve.

By writing **everything** down on your Action Program, you can empty your mind of these stressful reminders and make sure that you prioritize these actions coherently and consistently. This has the incidental benefit of helping you improve your concentration, simply because you don't have these distractions buzzing around your mind.

**Tip 2:**
The first time you create your Action Program, you're going to spend a while – maybe two hours – putting it together. This is the up-front cost of organizing your life. However, once you've done this, you'll be amazed at how much more in control you feel. It will take relatively little effort to keep your Action Program up-to-date after this.

**Tip 3:**
You'll find it easiest if you keep your Action Program on your computer as a word processor document. This will make it easy to put together, update, and maintain without a lot of tedious redrafting. Alternatively, use a personal project management app, such as [**Chaos Control or 2Do**](https://www.mindtools.com/community/App-Reviews/ChaosControland2Do.php), both of which can help you to organize and prioritize your tasks.

**Step 2: Pruning**

Now, process the list you made in step 1, by looking carefully at each item. Decide whether you should, actually, take action on it. A lot of what comes our way has no real relevance to us, or is really not important in the scale of things. If that is the case, then delete these things from your list.

**Step 3: Organizing and Prioritizing**

This step comes in three parts.

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**First of all**, review your inventory of projects and actions. Group together the separate, individual actions that are part of larger projects.

At home, for example, you may want to improve your bathroom and repaint your living room: these can go into a "Home Renovation" project. At work, you may be contributing to the requirements for a new computer system, and may be expected to test and train your team on this system: all of these go into a "Computer System Upgrade" project.

What you'll find is that once you start sorting list items, they will almost seem to "organize themselves" into coherent projects. (You also need to make sure that your personal goals are included as individual projects.)

**Second**, review these projects and [**prioritize**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_92.htm)  them in order of importance (for example, by coding them from A to F) depending on their importance. (Clearly, your personal goals are exceptionally important projects!)

**Third**, insert your projects into your Action Program (using the approach we describe below). The Action Program is split up into these three parts:

* **Next Action List** – this shows the small next actions that you will take to move your projects forward.
* **Delegated Actions List** – this shows projects and actions that you have delegated to other people.
* **Project Catalog** – this shows all of the projects that you are engaged in, and the small individual tasks that contribute to them.

The great news is that, by this stage, you've already created the largest part of your Action Program: the **Project Catalog**! This is the list of prioritized projects and activities that you've just completed.

Typically, the Project Catalog is at the back of the Action Program, as you often only have to refer to it during a weekly review process.

Next, create the **Delegated Actions List** by working through your Project Catalog, and identifying tasks that you've delegated. Record these under the name of the person to whom you've delegated the activity, along with the checkpoints you've agreed.

**Tip:**

If you haven't yet delegated anything, or you haven't yet agreed checkpoints, don't worry! What we're doing here is creating the framework you'll work with – you'll have plenty of time to use this framework later!

Typically, the Delegated Actions List sits in front of the Project Catalog in your Action Program document, as you'll need to refer to it quite often.

Finally, create your **Next Action List** by working through the projects to which you've given the highest priority – the projects that you want and need to move forward on right away – and extract the logical next actions for these projects.

The Next Action List goes on the front page of your Action Program, as you'll refer to it many times a day.

**Tip 1:**

If the Next Action is going to take less than a couple of minutes, then why not do it right away? Make sure, though, that you come back and complete your Action Program!

**Tip 2:**

It's this selection of appropriate next actions that takes a certain amount of judgment. If one of your projects is of over-riding importance, then have several Next Actions from this project on your list, and keep other Next Actions to a bare minimum. However, if you need to keep a lot of projects "simmering away," have Next Actions from each on your list.

**Tip 3:**

If possible, keep your Next Actions small and achievable, ideally so that they take no more than a couple of hours to complete. This helps you keep momentum up on projects, and strongly enhances your sense of having had a productive, successful day.

If Next Actions are likely to take longer than two hours, then break them down further. For example, if your Next Action is to write a report, break this down into research, planning, writing, fact checking and editing phases. Then make "Research" your Next Action, and put the rest of the stages as a project in your Project Catalog.

**Tip 4:**

You may find it helpful to number the projects in the Project Catalog sequentially (it helps if you number them 10, 20, 30 and so on.) When you bring next actions through onto your Next Action List, you can bring through the project number as well, so that you know which project the action belongs to.

**Tip 5:**

Where you have several Next Actions, [**prioritize**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_92.htm)  them from A to F, depending on their importance, value, urgency and relevance to your goals. (If you have trouble deciding whether a task is urgent or important, our article on [**Eisenhower's Urgent/Important Principle**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_91.htm)  shows you how to tell the difference.)

Then monitor your success in dealing with these actions. If you find that actions are "stagnating" on your list, consider whether you should either cancel these projects, or whether you should raise their priority so that you deal with them.

Whatever you do, make sure that you don't have too many actions on your Next Action List – if you have more than, say, 15 to 20, you'll start to get bogged down again. If your list is too cluttered, move some of the less urgent/important jobs back into the Project Catalog. If it's thin and under-challenging, pull up some more Next Actions from your Project Catalog.

**Tip 6:**

As you work through this process, ask yourself if there are any tasks that you can [**delegate**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_98.htm)  or, if appropriate, get help with. As you identify these, put these on your Next Action List, with the action being to delegate the task.

When you've delegated the task, move it onto your Delegated Actions List, along with the checkpoint times and dates you've agreed.

**Step 4: "Working" Your Action Program**

An Action Program is typically fairly long. But you don't have to run through the entire Program every day!

Usually, you'll only be dealing with the top page or pages, which are your Next Actions list and your Delegated Actions list. Some activities may be day-specific or time-specific. Depending on the way you work, you can either maintain these on the top page of your Action Program, or mark them in your calendar.

In effect, these top pages are just a new form of your old To-Do List. It's just that only specific short actions are outlined here, while the major projects to which the actions belong are stored in your Project Catalog.

What you must do, however, is **review and update** your Action Program periodically, for example, every week (put time for this in your schedule). Delete or archive items you've completed, move items from the Project Catalog to the front pages as you make progress on your projects, and add any new actions that have come your way.

**Key Points**

Action Programs are "industrial strength" versions of To-Do Lists. They help you to convert the projects that you want to run into actionable activities, and then manage them within a three-tier structure.

The "Next Action List" heading lists the precise, immediate actions that you need to perform to move your projects forwards.

The "Delegated Actions List" records details of the projects and actions you have delegated.

The "Project Catalog" heading lists the projects that you want to work on, along with other actions that you have gathered that will contribute to the completion of these projects.

This approach helps you maintain focus on daily jobs and long-term goals at the same time, and it means that you always have a plan for "next action" at any moment. This reduces stress, puts you in control, and gives you a real sense of achievement.

More than this, an Action Program helps you to manage and progress many projects simultaneously. This is particularly important as you progress your career, and as the jobs you take on become increasingly complex and challenging.

**Example Action Program**

Here's a simple example to help you understand how an Action Program fits together.

Rebecca has been experiencing tremendous stress at her job. She's leading a large team through an important project, and it seems like every day finds her further and further behind with what she needs to get done.

She decides to create an Action Program to help her organize and prioritize her many To-Dos.

**Step 1 – Collection**

After spending an hour brainstorming, Rebecca comes up with this list of current commitments:

* Research our target market to ensure advertising department will hit the right tone with product roll out.
* Finish cost-comparison report.
* Research local MBA programs.
* Speak with employer about getting help with funding for MBA.
* Contact recruitment agencies about advertising rates for Office Manager role.
* Write help wanted advert for Office Manager role.
* Order new desk and telephone for new Office Manager.
* Meet with Anthony to ensure he's gotten acclimated to the team; find out if he's on schedule with his project commitments.
* Contact major supplier to renegotiate contract, accounting for our larger orders in the upcoming year.
* Organize project folders.

**Step 2 – Pruning**

Now that Rebecca has made a list of everything she needs to complete, she takes a closer look at her list to see if any items could be pruned.

After considering each task, she realizes she doesn't really need to meet with her new team member, Anthony. She spoke to him yesterday at lunch and he assured her that he was acclimating well to his new role, and was on track to get all his personal projects completed by deadline.

She also decides that she doesn't need to organize her project folders.

**Step 3 – Organizing and Prioritizing**

Rebecca is now ready to inventory her items. She realizes she can group her to-dos into three major categories. As she groups her tasks, she assigns each one a priority from A-D, with A being top priority.

| **Category** | **Task** | **Priority** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Launch New Product | Research our target market to ensure advertising department will hit the right tone with product roll out. | B |
| Finish cost-comparison report. | A |
| Contact major supplier to renegotiate contract. | D |
| Study for MBA | Research local MBA programs. | B |
| Speak with employer about getting help with funding. | C |
| Recruit New Office Manager | Contact recruitment agencies about advertising rates. | A |
| Write help wanted advert. | C |
| Order new desk and telephone. | D |

She then creates her Action Program by splitting it into three parts:

1. Next Action List.
2. Delegated Actions.
3. Project Catalog.

She decides to put it into a word processor document (see Figure 1, below), numbering each project as 10, 20, and 30.



This site teaches you the skills you need for a happy and successful career; and this is just one of many tools and resources that you'll find here at Mind Tools. Subscribe to our [**free newsletter**](https://www.mindtools.com/subscribe.htm?tag=upsp), or[**join the Mind Tools Club**](https://www.mindtools.com/signup/monthly/usd?trackingtag=upsp) and really supercharge your career!

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Top of Form

Multi tasking is not effective

Rubinstein, J S, et al. “Executive Control of Cognitive Processes in Task Switching.” *Journal of Experimental Psychology. Human Perception and Performance.*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, Aug. 2001, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11518143](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11518143).

**Resource Leverage**

You can also exert leverage by getting the most from your assets, and taking full advantage of your personal strengths.

You have a wide range of skills, talents, experiences, thoughts, and ideas. These can, and should, be used in the best combination. What relevant skills and strengths do you have that others don't? How can you use these to best effect, and how can you improve them so that they're truly remarkable? What relevant assets do you have that others don't? Can you use these to create leverage? Do you have connections that others don't have? Or financial resources? Or some other asset that you can use to greater effect?

A good way of thinking about this is to conduct a [**personal SWOT**](https://www.mindtools.com/community/Bite-SizedTraining/PersonalSWOT.php) analysis, focusing on identifying strengths and assets, and expanding from these to identify the opportunities they give you. (An advantage of SWOT is that it also helps you spot critical weaknesses that need to be covered.)

**Tip:**

As you do this, think about how you can help others with your strengths and resources. Remember, when you can give to others, the more you're likely to get in return. (Just make sure that you're clear as to how you will be rewarded!)

**Knowledge and Education Leverage**

Another significant lever of success is applied knowledge. Combined with education and action, this can generate tremendous leverage.

Learning by experience is slow and painful. If you can find more formal ways of learning, you'll progress much more quickly. What's more, if you select a good course, you'll have a solid foundation to your knowledge, and one that doesn't have high-risk gaps. This is why people working in life-or-death areas (such as architects, airline pilots, medical doctors and suchlike) need long and thorough training. After all, would you want to be operated on by an unqualified surgeon?

While few of us operate in quite such immediately critical areas, by determining what you need to know, and then acquiring that knowledge, you can avoid many years of slow, painful trial and error learning.

In the same way, it's inefficient if many people in an organization have to learn how to do their work by trial and error. A much better way is for organizations to capture the knowledge gained by the first few in some way and pass it on to others. This is the core of "knowledge management." There's more about this in our [**article**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newISS_87.htm)  and [**Book Insight**](https://www.mindtools.com/community/BookInsights/IdiotsGuideToKnowledgeManagement.php) on the subject.

The keys to successfully leveraging knowledge and education are: firstly, knowing what you need to learn; secondly knowing to what level you need to learn it; thirdly, being very focused and selective in your choices; and fourthly, in taking the time to earn the qualifications you need.

Even then, having more education or more knowledge isn't necessarily a point of leverage. These become advantages only when they can be directly applied to your career goals and aspirations--and when they're used actively and intelligently to do something useful.

By hiring, consulting with, and outsourcing to other people, you gain the leverage of their knowledge and education as well as their resources. This only works if you choose the right people – the wrong ones can slow you and drag you down. Don't let this happen!

**Technology Leverage**

Finding technology leverage is all about thinking about how you work, and using technology to automate as much of this as you can.

At a simple level, you might find that all you need to keep you in touch with home and work is a laptop computer. Alternatively, a personal digital assistant (PDA) can help you maintain a single, convenient, properly-backed-up time management system. Cell phones that access email and browse the web are handy tools for making the best of your downtime during working hours or while traveling. If you're a slow typist, voice recognition software can help you dictate documents and save time.

At a more sophisticated level, you may find that you can use simple desktop databases like Microsoft Access to automate simple work processes. If you do a lot of routine data processing (for example, if you run many similar projects) you can find that this saves you a great deal of time. More than this, you only need to set up a process once with a tool like this – afterwards the process will be executed the same way each time, by whomever initiates the process (this reduces training, meaning that new team members can become productive much more quickly, meaning that you can scale your operations-and your success-more quickly.)

Businesses can choose from a wide array of software solutions. Some of these can automate or simplify tasks that are otherwise very time-consuming. Customer relationship management (CRM) databases can bring tremendous benefits for sales and customer service organizations, as can point-of-sale (PoS) inventory systems for organizations that need to track and manage inventory. Websites and web-based catalogs can give clients easy access to up-to-date product information, and help them place orders simply and easily. And blogs and email-based newsletters help people stay in contact with thousands of people quickly and easily. All of these use technology to provide tremendous leverage.

**Key Points**

Using leverage is the art and science of getting much more done with the same, or less, effort. At a simple level, this can free up your time to concentrate on things with the highest priority. At a more sophisticated level, it helps you achieve at a much higher level.

When you invest time and resources to leverage technology – as well as to leverage time, resources, and knowledge (both your own, and that of other people) – you have a recipe for unprecedented success. Use what you and others have to your advantage, and see how far it will take you.

**Apply This to Your Life**

* Complete a [**personal SWOT**](https://www.mindtools.com/community/Bite-SizedTraining/PersonalSWOT.php) analysis. This will help give you a real sense of what you're good at and what activities might benefit from some outside help. From there, you can start to build a leveraging strategy to maximize your productivity and performance.
* Look for a mentor who understands and uses leverage, and learn from his or her experiences. This is an example of using leverage to learn more about leveraging – so that exponential factor kicks in again.
* Increase your personal expectations. Take a look at your current goals, and ask yourself how much further you could push those goals by using leverage on a consistent basis. You may far surpass your pre-leverage goals once you commit to "working smart."
* Surround yourself with a network of great people who have skills, knowledge, and expertise that you don't possess. Look for opportunities to create synergy, and leverage the talents of everyone involved. When you work together, you can accomplish so much more than going it alone.

## Organize Your Day at Work

* **Use a notebook** – One strategy that many organized people use is to work with a notebook. This notebook is like a "catch-all" for your thoughts and for what you do during the day.
* For instance, use your notebook to take notes when you're talking with a colleague or with a client on the phone. If you're working and need to remember to tell your boss something, write it down in your notebook. If you have a brainstorming session in the afternoon, your ideas can go in there too.
* The advantage of a notebook is that you keep all of your thoughts, conversations, and ideas in one place. And, once things are written down, you don't have to waste mental energy remembering everything!
* It's helpful to start a new, dated page each day. This way, you can easily go back and find the information you need.
* **Get organized during the first 15 minutes of your day** – When you walk into the office in the morning, spend your first 15 minutes looking at what you need to do that day. Start with the "Next Actions" list from your [**Action Program**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_83.htm) , if you have one – or make a [**To-Do List**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_05.htm) , with your most important [**priorities**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_92.htm)  at the top. This gives you a solid grasp of what tasks are most important to complete first, and what you can complete later in the afternoon.
* During this organization time, knowing when you do your best work can also be a helpful scheduling tool. Find out more with our article [**Is This a Morning Task?**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_79.htm)
* **Clear your desktop** – Your desktop can often become a "catch-all" zone. There are old papers, future projects, files you're currently using, and a pile of papers you simply haven't put away yet. Although some people feel they work better with a cluttered desk, it's distracting and inhibiting for many of us.
* If you want to get organized, then clearing your desktop is a smart strategy. This can be a time-consuming task, so it might be best to work on this at the end of the day or at the weekend. It's important to do this slowly, especially if your desk is extremely cluttered!
* Start by clearing everything off of your desk. [**File**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_85.htm)  papers and reports that you've finished using, and recycle anything you don't need. Office supplies should go in a drawer or cabinet.
* The items that are left are probably files and paperwork that you currently need.
* **Create an "action area" on your desk** – Use this area for the materials you need to complete the project you're currently working on. As soon as you complete each "action," clear this area off to get ready for your next task.

Organize Your Day at Work

Use a notebook – One strategy that many organized people use is to work with a notebook. This notebook is like a "catch-all" for your thoughts and for what you do during the day.

For instance, use your notebook to take notes when you're talking with a colleague or with a client on the phone. If you're working and need to remember to tell your boss something, write it down in your notebook. If you have a brainstorming session in the afternoon, your ideas can go in there too.

The advantage of a notebook is that you keep all of your thoughts, conversations, and ideas in one place. And, once things are written down, you don't have to waste mental energy remembering everything!

It's helpful to start a new, dated page each day. This way, you can easily go back and find the information you need.

Get organized during the first 15 minutes of your day – When you walk into the office in the morning, spend your first 15 minutes looking at what you need to do that day. Start with the "Next Actions" list from your Action Program , if you have one – or make a To-Do List , with your most important priorities at the top. This gives you a solid grasp of what tasks are most important to complete first, and what you can complete later in the afternoon.

During this organization time, knowing when you do your best work can also be a helpful scheduling tool. Find out more with our article Is This a Morning Task?

Clear your desktop – Your desktop can often become a "catch-all" zone. There are old papers, future projects, files you're currently using, and a pile of papers you simply haven't put away yet. Although some people feel they work better with a cluttered desk, it's distracting and inhibiting for many of us.

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Start by clearing everything off of your desk. File papers and reports that you've finished using, and recycle anything you don't need. Office supplies should go in a drawer or cabinet.

The items that are left are probably files and paperwork that you currently need.

Create an "action area" on your desk – Use this area for the materials you need to complete the project you're currently working on. As soon as you complete each "action," clear this area off to get ready for your next task.

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Organize supplies or files you use often – The more often you use something, the closer it should be to you. Arrange your desk for usefulness, not for the way it looks.

How do you keep your desk organized? Spend five minutes at the end of each day clearing off your desk and keeping it organized. This way, you can come into work the next day with a clear, organized surface.

Organizational Tools

We live in a time of some amazing technology. Let's use it to get organized!

Use digital calendars or planners – Many people use these to help organize their schedules. These can be very helpful for keeping you on task!

For instance, many digital calendars, like Outlook and iCal, allow you to color-code tasks. You could use red for urgent, green for extended deadlines, and blue for low-priority tasks. Color-coding your day helps you quickly see what you need to do first.

Use a spreadsheet to keep track of your progress – Spreadsheets are helpful because you can use conditional formatting that alerts you when tasks are getting close to their deadlines. As a result, you can see at a glance which items are, or are not, on schedule. This is especially helpful when you're working with a team, and when you have to be aware of people's progress.

Personal Organizational Management

Offer yourself a reward – If you're finding it difficult to stay organized, try offering yourself a reward. For instance, if you complete four things on your to-do list, reward yourself with a cup of coffee, or with 10 minutes of free time to surf the web.

Use one calendar – If you enter some things in your PDA and some things on your desk planner, then you're probably going to miss key appointments and tasks.

Schedule small tasks – If a task or project requires action beforehand (like picking up bagels and coffee for the staff meeting), then schedule these related tasks into your planner as well. This helps you set aside enough time to get everything done.

Scan your documents – If you don't like having an office with lots of filing cabinets, then why not scan all of your documents and store them on your computer? If you have a personal assistant, this would be a great task to delegate. If not, then try scanning a few documents every day, and eventually scan all project documents over the long-term.

Choose organizing tools that you like – Pick products that appeal to you on a visual or emotional level. For example, if you decide to start using a notebook on a daily basis, then purchase a nice one that you really like. When your tools are visually appealing and comfortable, you're more likely to use them.

Key Points

Disorganization can cost you career advancement, decrease your productivity, and add stress to your life. Devoting time and effort to getting organized can help you tremendously in the long run.

Start by using a notebook on a regular basis to keep track of conversations, ideas, and reminders. And begin every day with a clean desk and an organized to-do list. Use technology to keep your schedule and projects running smoothly. Features like color coding and audio alarms can help you ensure that you don't miss appointments or deadlines.

**Managing Email Effectively**

**Strategies for Taming Your Inbox**



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**Feel more relaxed when you manage your email effectively.**

It's Monday morning. As Linda sits down at her desk she experiences that familiar sinking sensation in her stomach... She's not dreading the day ahead of her – she's dreading her email inbox!

Linda's in charge of a large team, and she receives at least 50 emails every day. Reading and responding to all of this mail takes a long time, and most of her work takes back seat to this daily chore. As a result, she's notoriously behind on projects, and she's started staying late, just to catch up.

When we use it appropriately, email is an incredibly useful communication tool. But, like Linda, many of us feel overwhelmed by the amount of mail that we receive and need to respond to.

However, there are ways to manage your email so that you're more productive. In this article, we'll explore strategies for doing this, so that you can get on with the real work at hand.

**Note:**

Keep in mind that these strategies may not work for everyone. So use your own best judgment when you think about how to manage your email.

**Checking Email**

Checking your email regularly during the day can be an effective way to keep your inbox at manageable levels.

However, the constant interruption and [**distraction**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/distractions.htm)  that comes from [**multitasking**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_75.htm)  in this way can dramatically lower your productivity, and disrupt your ability to enter a state of [**flow**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/flow-model.htm)  when working on high value projects.

One strategy you can use is to check email only at set points during the day. For instance, you may decide that you'll only check your email first thing in the morning, before lunch, and at the end of the day.

Here, it helps to set your email software to "receive" messages only at certain times, so that you're not [**distracted**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/distractions.htm)  by incoming messages. If you can't do this, at least make sure that you turn off audible and visual alerts.

You can also reserve time to read and respond to email after a long period of focused work, or at the time of day when your energy and creativity are at their lowest (this means that you can do higher value work at other times). Our article, [**Is This a Morning Task?**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_79.htm)  will help you identify when you're feeling least energetic, so that you can schedule time appropriately.

If you're concerned that your colleagues, boss, or clients will be annoyed or confused that you're not responding to their email quickly, explain that you only check email at certain times, and that they can call you or use [**instant messaging**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/using-im.htm)  if the matter is really urgent.

**Note:**

Clearly, in some roles, you will have to check email on a regular basis, especially if your business uses email as its main communication tool. As with all of these strategies, use your judgment, based on your circumstances.

**Reading Email**

When you read email, you can waste hours if you don't use this time intelligently.

First, try using the "Two-Minute Rule" (a concept from David Allen, the author of [**Getting Things Done**](https://www.mindtools.com/community/BookInsights/GettingThingsDone.php)) when you read your mail – if the email will take less than two minutes to read and reply to, then take care of it right now, even if it's not a high priority. The idea behind this is that if it takes less than two minutes to action, it takes longer to read and then store the task away "to do later" than it would to just take care of the task now.

For emails that will take longer than two minutes to read or respond to, schedule time on your calendar, or add this as an action on your [**To-Do List**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_05.htm) , to do later. Most email programs allow you to highlight, flag, or star messages that need a response, so utilize this handy feature whenever you can.

**Tip:**

Many of us also get lots of internal notifications. These are those "FYI" emails from the corporate office or from team members who want to keep us "in the loop." If you see your name in the "cc" field instead of the "To" field, chances are it's an FYI email. Consider filing it in a "To Read" folder, and tackle it when you have time.

**Organizing Email**

Can you imagine having an inbox with nothing in it? It almost sounds too good to be true!

Although a completely empty inbox (also called "inbox zero") might be unrealistic for many of us, keeping our main inbox cleared can make us more organized, and help eliminate stress.

First, set up a simple filing system to help manage your mail.

You could use broad categories titled "Action Items," "Waiting," "Reference," and "Archives." If you're able to stay on top of your folders – particularly "Action" and "Waiting" folders – you could use them as an informal To-Do List for the day.

If four categories sounds too simplistic for your needs, you can set up a more detailed system. For instance, you could create a folder for every project that you're working on, or have a set folder for each of your clients or sales reps.

The advantage when you create specific folders for processing email is that it makes it easier to search for past mail: instead of scouring your entire email system, you can simply search in that particular folder.

**Using Rules**

Most email programs, such as Outlook and Gmail, allow you to establish "Rules" that sort email into a particular folder as soon as it comes in.

For instance, you might get several emails per day that notify you of sales that your company has made. You want to receive these, because you want to see what's happening, but you don't want them to clutter your inbox.

This is where you could set up a rule in your email program that moves emails with, say, "Sale Notification:" in the subject line straight to the "Sales Made" folder as soon as they come in. This means that you don't need to manually file these emails, and allows you to keep all of the sales emails in one folder.

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**Non-Essential Email**

If you regularly receive email such as newsletters, blogs and article feeds, you could re-route these to another email address, or use rules, so that they're instantly delivered to a particular folder.

This will help keep your primary inbox clear, and they'll be in one place, ready to read at a convenient time.

**Tip:**

**Improve Your Concentration**

**Achieving Focus Amid Distractions**

How many times have you sat at your desk and tried to focus on a task, only to find that your mind is wandering?

Despite your best intentions, you just can't concentrate. We've all been in this familiar, frustrating situation, and it's something that can really undermine our performance.

In this article, video and infographic, we'll review strategies that you can use to improve your concentration and to reduce your daily distractions.

**Learn how to improve your concentration,
in this short video.**

**Environment**

Your personal work environment plays a large role in your ability to concentrate. The more comfortable and welcoming your environment is, the easier it will likely be for you to stay there and focus.

Here are some ideas for improving your physical environment:

* **Make sure you're comfortable** – Start by ensuring that your chair and desk are at the right height for you to work comfortably. If your chair is too high or your desk is too low, you'll be uncomfortable, and you'll be tempted to use this as an excuse to get up and walk away.
* **Put up pictures** – Viewing a natural scene or watching wildlife can help improve concentration. If you're able to put up pictures in your office or work area, then choose landscapes or natural images that you enjoy. This can help your focus, especially if you can see the pictures from your desk.
* **Shut out**[**distractions**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/distractions.htm)**as much as possible** – Listening to music can help, especially if it's instrumental music. Some people even use "white noise" apps – these produce a steady, non-distracting sound like ocean waves or falling rain. This steady background noise can drown out other noise, helping you focus better and ignore distractions.

**Nutrition**

Follow some simple nutritional tips:

* **Drink water** – Many of us don't think about drinking water while we're at work, yet dehydration can make us feel tired, irritable, slow, or even sick. When our brains don't have enough fluid, they can't operate at peak performance. Staying hydrated is an easy way to help improve your concentration during the day.
* **Eat breakfast** – Start your day with a healthy breakfast. It's much harder to concentrate when you're hungry, so eat a well-rounded meal before you go to work. You can also help your concentration throughout the day by keeping healthy snacks at your desk. Almonds, whole-grain crackers, fresh fruit, and vegetables are good choices.
* **Get up and move around** – Do you walk around during the day? If you're like many people, you probably don't move around enough. Research has shown that regular walking can help increase your focus during the day.

**Mindset**

Constant distractions, and the low productivity that's associated with these distractions, have become so commonplace in today's offices that doctors have even given it a name: Attention Deficit Trait, or ADT. And, they say that entire organizations can suffer from it.

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Follow some of these guidelines to help focus your mind:

* **Set aside time to deal with worries** – Many of us have trouble concentrating during the day because we're constantly worrying about other things. It could be an approaching deadline for a project you haven't started, a new colleague who's causing problems, or just the amount of work on your desk. If you find yourself distracted by worries, then note these down so that you don't need to hold them in your mind. Then schedule time to deal with these issues.
* **Focus on one task at a time** – It can be much harder to focus if you take minibreaks (15–30 seconds) to answer emails, send text messages, or take quick phone calls. Some researchers believe that it can take up to 15 minutes for us to regain complete focus after a distraction.
* **Close your email box and chat program** – Let your voice mail do its job. If your office allows it, close your office door or put up a "Do Not Disturb" sign to let colleagues know you need to focus. (If you're a manager and you want to operate an open door policy, then consider working from home or from elsewhere for times when you need to focus.)
* **Switch between high- and low-attention tasks** – This can give your brain a rest after heavy concentration. For instance, if you spend two hours working on your department's budget, you'll probably feel tired afterward. You can recharge your energy by working on a low-attention task, like filing, for 15 minutes before going back to your budget.
* **Prioritize** – Having too much to do can be distracting, and this sometime causes procrastination. Or, you may quickly jump from task to task, creating the illusion of work – but in reality, you're not accomplishing very much. If you're not sure which tasks to start or which are most important, take 10 or 15 minutes to [**prioritize**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_92.htm)  your [**To-Do List**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_05.htm) . Our article [**Overcoming Procrastination**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_96.htm)  can also help.

Limiting distractions allows you to get into the flow of your work – so you get more done. If you'd like to learn about improving your focus, read the articles [**In Flow**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_86.htm)  and [**Managing Interruptions**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_94.htm) .

**More Tips for Improving Your Concentration**

* **Take short breaks** – We can be masters at focusing, but eventually we're going to need a break. Our minds can struggle to focus intensely on tasks for eight hours a day. This is where it can be better to divide your work into one-hour segments, with a 5–10 minute break between tasks. This short break will allow your mind to rest before focusing again.
* **Do your hardest tasks when you're most alert** – This will help you maximize your concentration. Do you want to learn how to schedule your tasks around your energy levels? Read our article [**Is This a Morning Task?**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_79.htm)
* **Use a phone headset** – If you have a headset for your phone, consider using it for a few hours each day. If your colleagues think you're on the phone, they're less likely to interrupt you.
* **Promise yourself a reward** – For instance, make a rule that if you focus intensively for 45 minutes on one task, you can take a break to get a cup of coffee when you're done. Little "self-rewards" can often be great motivators.
* **Schedule email downloads** – It can be tremendously distracting to have emails pinging into your inbox every few minutes – you're tempted to stop what you're doing, and answer them right away. If you can, schedule your email to download only a few times each day, and deal with all of your emails in one go.

**Infographic**

Click on the image below to see how to improve your concentration at work, represented in an infographic:

****

**Key Points**

Sitting down to focus on one task can be difficult, especially when you're constantly interrupted.

To help increase your focus, start with a good breakfast, and drink plenty of water throughout the day. Don't multitask, close your door, and listen to music if it helps you concentrate.

Although it may sound somewhat counter-intuitive, taking short, regular breaks throughout the day can also help you focus.

Time boxing- Pomodoro technique

Trello



Find your peak time

# Managing Interruptions

## Maintain Focus, Keep Control of Your Time



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olaser**

**Avoid interruptions to your progress.**

Everyday interruptions at work can be a key barrier to managing your time effectively and, ultimately, can be a barrier to your success.

Think back to your last workday, and consider for a minute the many interruptions that occurred. There may have been phone calls, emails, hallway conversations, colleagues stopping by your office, or anything else that unexpectedly demanded your attention and, in doing so, distracted you from the task at-hand.

Because your day only has so many hours in it, a handful of small interruptions can rob you of the time you need to achieve your goals and be successful in your work and life. More than this, they can break your focus, meaning that you have to spend time re-engaging with the thought processes needed to successfully complete complex work.

The key to controlling interruptions is to know what they are and whether they are necessary, and to plan for them in your daily schedule. The tips that follow will help you do that, and so prevent interruptions from frustrating you and jeopardizing your success.

## Using the Tool

Use the following tips to understand and manage interruptions:

### 1. Keep An Interrupters Log

If interruptions consistently rob you of time and energy, or if they frequently push you off schedule and cause delays, it's time to keep an Interrupters Log. This is a simple record of the interruptions you experience in the course of a day.

Click here to download our free [**Interrupters Log Worksheet**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_94.htm?download=1). Figure 1 shows an example of it.

#### Figure 1: The Interrupters Log

| **Person** | **Date and Time** | **Description of Interruption** | **Valid?** | **Urgent?** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   |   |   |   |   |
|   |   |   |   |   |
|   |   |   |   |   |
|   |   |   |   |   |

Keep your Interrupters Log with you every day for at least a week, recording every interruption you experience, and marking down the person interrupting you; the date and time it occurs; what the interruption is; whether it was valid; and whether it was urgent (or whether someone could have waited until a better time.)

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Once you have recorded the interruptions for a week, sit down with your log and analyze the information.

Which interruptions are valid and which are not?

You need to deal with the valid interruptions. We'll show you below how you can schedule them into your day so that they get the attention they need, while you still have the time you need to adequately address your daily work.

As for the interruptions that are not valid, you must find a way to block these out in the future.

### 2. Analyze and Conquer Interruptions

To analyze and conquer the interruptions you find in your Interrupters Log, firstly look at whether the interruption is valid or not.

Could someone have avoided interrupting you by waiting for a routine meeting? Or was it something they should have asked you about at all?

If not, deal with this politely but [**assertively**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/Assertiveness.htm) .

Next, look at how urgent the interruptions were, and whether they could have been pre-empted. You can pre-empt many interruptions by holding routine meetings with people: If they're confident that they'll have access to you at a defined point in the near future, they'll learn to save up non-urgent issues until this meeting.

However, some interruptions are both urgent and valid. You need to be interrupted, and you need to deal with the situation.

From your Interrupters Log, you'll see how much time is taken up by these urgent, valid interruptions. Block this time into your schedule as "contingency time", and only take on as much other work as you can fit into the remaining time. You'll have to juggle this other work around the interruptions, but at least you won't be overloaded and stressed by the things that you haven't done because they've been displaced by emergencies.

### 3. Put Your Phone to Work for You (Not Against You)

A little bit of planning can go a long way in working to control telephone interruptions, which many people experience all day long. If you are on a deadline or your focus needs to be intense (and not interrupted), use your voice mail to screen calls, or have an assistant deal with messages for you. This way, you can deal with calls by priority, and at times that suit you. In fact, this telephone time can be planned into your schedule, and so become a normal part of your working day.

### 4. Catch Your Breath

When interrupted, it's easy to get caught up in the "rush" of the person who is interrupting, for they undoubtedly feel their request is urgent. In reality, however, most interruptions are not genuinely crisis-driven, and it can serve everyone best to take a little time before taking action.

Take a few minutes to consider the situation. Catch your breath and clear your head. A small delay, even one of just a few minutes, goes a long way in assessing the situation accurately and reacting appropriately.

### 5. Learn to Say "No"

It's often acceptable to say "no" to requests or tasks if you are busy when someone else can handle it, if it is not an important task, or if it can be done later.

When this is the case, saying "no" in a courteous and sincere way, followed by a short explanation is the best course of action to take: "I am working against a very tight deadline on an important project right now so, I am sorry, but I can not jump in and help".

### 6. "Available" and "Unavailable" Time

Simple yet effective: Let people know when you are available. and when you are not. Make sure that people know that during your "unavailable time", they should only interrupt you if they have to.

You and your co-workers can also agree on a signal that everyone in the office can use when unavailable, like turning the nameplate on the door around, or simply closing the door. This alleviates interruptions and can avoid hurt feelings.

#### Tip:

Be careful here. If you're a manager, an important part of your job is to be available to people, to handle urgent issues which arise, and to coach your team so that people are as effective as possible.

If you put up barriers that are too high, you won't be able to do these jobs. By all means, use "unavailable time", but don't over use it, and make sure people know they can interrupt you if there is a genuine crisis.

### 7. "Invitation Only" Time

Schedule regular check-in times for the individuals you talk to most often. Ask these people to keep a running list of things that they need to discuss, so you can cover all the points at one time. And, force yourself to do the same.

An open-door policy is good, but you should limit the number of people you invite to your work area. For instance, if you're scheduling a meeting, offer to meet your co-worker in his or her office or a conference room. This way, you can excuse yourself after you accomplish your purpose. Additionally, it's much easier to get up and leave than it is to get people to leave your office once they're seated and comfortable.

### 8. Uncontrollable Interruptions

There are interruptions that, no matter how hard you try, you simply cannot control.

Most people are happy to schedule a more convenient time, but when this does not work, quickly set the parameters by saying something like, "I only have five minutes to talk about this right now," and stick to it.

Do not ask the interrupter to sit down and do not engage in small talk. Encourage the interrupter to get right to the point and if a solution cannot be reached before the allotted time runs out, set a time for getting back to them and, again, stick to it.

**Minimizing Distractions**

**10 Ways to Take Control of Your Day**



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AlexanePhotography**

**Stay focused at work to increase your productivity.**

"So, what did you do at the weekend?" begins the water cooler conversation. It can feel like some welcome downtime from your intense workload during a busy day, but time flies and, 15 minutes later, you realize that you're late for a meeting with your manager. And the stress returns.

Sometimes, it seems as though our workplaces have been designed to break our focus. Even when you're "snowed under" with work, you'll still likely check your [**emails**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/using-email-effectively.htm)  regularly, read customers' Twitter comments, or – even though your manager would disapprove – surf the Internet for cheap vacation flights.

Dr Gloria Mark, Professor of Informatics at the University of California, Irvine, says that distractions such as these are both stressful and costly. She has found that it takes [**an average of 23 minutes**](http://www.fastcompany.com/944128/worker-interrupted-cost-task-switching)for a person to fully regain his or her focus on a task after being distracted.

The Overload Research Group – a collection of academic and corporate researchers dedicated to reducing the amount of information that people have to deal with – has found that U.S. workers waste about 25 percent of their time dealing with "an incessant stream of data," losing their employers a staggering [**$997 billion a year**](http://www.basexblog.com/2010/12/16/io-997/).

In this article, we'll identify the 10 most common distractions that we face at work, and examine strategies for managing them, or even eliminating them altogether.

**1. Personal Technology**

Our smartphones – and now smartwatches – have blurred the line between personal and professional communication. We can now receive work emails and phone calls on the same device as private Facebook comments, Instagram photos, and an array of other personal information.

Given such technology's addictive nature, policies to control their use at work are rarely effective, as it's hard to enforce rules about what people can look at on their own devices.

It's usually more helpful if individuals understand and manage the challenge themselves. For example, you and your colleagues could agree to put away your phones for a certain time during the day, to help you to focus on a particular piece of work.

**2. Email**

Many of the emails in our inboxes are not particularly important. However, we often feel the need to look at them as soon as they arrive. So, here are five ways to manage those messages so that they don't take you away from important tasks.

* **Schedule checking time** – Turn off the alert that appears on your computer screen when you receive an email, and check and respond to messages at set times of the day. Give yourself a maximum of 30 minutes for each session. Manage your co-workers', manager's and customers' expectations about how and when you will reply to them.
* **Choose "low productivity" times** – There are likely certain times of day when you [**do your best work**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_79.htm) , maybe in the morning or maybe late at night. Schedule an email check-in for your less productive times, and save your peak hours for high-value work.
* **Turn emails into actions** – If you need more than a few minutes to read or reply to an email, add it to your [**Action Program**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_83.htm)  or To-Do List.
* **Use the trash** – Don't keep emails forever. If you do, you run the risk of losing sight of the important ones as your inbox grows, and of your inbox becoming harder and harder to manage. Once you've replied to them, put the ones that you don't need in the trash, and archive or file the ones that you want to keep.
* **Smartphone syncing** – Try redirecting your email to your smartphone, to help you to free up your computer from distractions. Then apply the advice we've given above to your personal device.

**Tip:**

Take a look at our articles, [**10 Common Email Mistakes**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/10-common-email-mistakes.htm)  and [**Overcoming Information Overload**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newISS_90.htm) , and listen to [**Mike Song on Managing Email**](https://www.mindtools.com/community/ExpertInterviews/MikeSong.php) for more on this type of distraction.

**3. Social Media**

Social media offers us new ways of communicating with unprecedented numbers of people. It can also be a productivity killer, taking our attention away from work tasks and breaking our concentration.

Organizations can no longer just block people's access to websites that aren't work-related – smartphones can get around this, as they operate on cellular networks independent of any work-based Internet access. So, people must be gently encouraged to use social media responsibly, so that their productivity and focus aren't affected.

A [**study**](http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1205&context=sferc) by Myrian Herlle and Vivian Astray-Caneda, of Florida International University, recommends that organizations apply [**Adams' Equity Theory**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_96.htm)  to explain to team members the serious impact on output of excessive social media use.

Try tracking your own social media activity over the course of a week, and noting down just how much time you spend on these sites during work hours. Then, schedule a few moments each day for posting updates or answering messages.

**4. Instant Messaging (IM)**

Many workplaces use an IM platform to keep team members in touch with one another. However, it can also be a source of distraction, thanks to non-essential notifications and emojis.

Get into the habit of [**Using IM**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/using-im.htm)  for small, quick queries only, not for conversations. Resist the pressure to reply instantly, and consider setting specific times during the day when your status is "online."

**5. Browsing**

Reading the latest headlines, checking sports scores, and ordering new clothes online (even for the office) can easily steal 30 minutes of our time, as well as often being a breach of workplace rules.

Turning off access to the Internet isn't normally an option, as organizations are increasingly using cloud-based software that requires an Internet connection to work fully. But, you can install blocking software, such as [**Freedom**](https://freedom.to/), to help you to decide which websites or content you want to block for yourself.

If it's acceptable within your organization, use a brief personal browsing session as a reward for an hour or two of high-quality, focused work. The [**Pomodoro Technique**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/pomodoro-technique.htm)  could help you with this approach.

**6. Phone Calls**

The ring of a phone often prompts an intense need to answer, even if we're deep in concentration. To minimize this source of distraction for you and your team, consider arranging a rota so that team members can take calls for one another. They can use IM to check if people are able to deal with the call.

If you don't want to turn off your personal phone because of family concerns, pre-program some quick text replies, such as "In a meeting – will return your call ASAP." You can also explain to friends and family that you will only be available for calls at lunchtime or in the evening.

**7. The Work Environment**

Rather than trying to ignore such distractions as strong cooking smells or loud colleagues, get away from the problem. Set yourself up in an empty meeting room to regain your focus. Wear noise-cancelling headphones, or play "white noise," to blank out anything that would otherwise grab your attention.

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**Tip:**

Some people are much more easily distracted than others. Take a look at our articles on[**Managing Highly Sensitive People**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/managing-highly-sensitive-people.htm)  and [**Managing a Person With ADHD**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/managing-adhd.htm)  to find out more.

**8. Confusion**

Always try to have a manageable [**To-Do List**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_05.htm) . Having one that's too long can lead to[**procrastination**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_96.htm) , as you wonder which task to tackle next. Commit to accomplishing the two most important tasks on your list today, and put the rest on hold until tomorrow.

If you discover that you are frequently dealing with urgent but unplanned enquiries, try to dig deeper into these issues and use [**problem solving techniques**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/creative-problem-solving.htm)  to uncover their [**underlying cause**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC_5W.htm) . Addressing this should help you to minimize the disruption, or even eliminate it altogether.

Remember, you're part of a team, so ask your co-workers to share the load in busy periods. If you're a manager, learn to [**delegate effectively**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMM_60.htm) .

**Tip:**

You might manage someone who allows himself to get distracted too easily. Encourage him to identify and tackle the root causes of this behavior, and to develop [**better habits**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/bad-habits.htm) .

**9. Other People**

Unless you're part of a virtual team, colleagues visiting your desk could be a big source of distraction. But, you're also a manager who wants to be available for your team members.

So, if you don't want to be disturbed at times when you need to focus on a task, consider working at home, or in a conference room, as a way to avoid inadvertently inviting interruptions. If you have your own office, close the door and tell your team that you need to be left alone to [**concentrate**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_78.htm) for a while.

In an open plan office, make your workspace less hospitable by removing extra chairs, or standing up when a colleague arrives.

If you have a frequent disrupter, talk to her about the problem, as she might not even realize that she's distracting you.

**Tip:**

Our article, [**Managing Interruptions**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_94.htm) , offers more help in this area.

**10. You**

You're going to need a lot of mental and physical energy to juggle your priorities, manage visitors, and have the discipline to control your use of technology. So, it's vital that you take care of yourself.

Many people don't get [**enough sleep**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTCS_94.htm)  because of the distractions of technology at home, so employ best practice there too.

Dehydration can make you feel tired and impact your thinking, so try to drink plenty of water. Get some fresh air and take a brisk walk during the day – both will energize you. Try to avoid heavy lunches and sugar-laden snacks, as they can lead to a slump in concentration later in the day.

**Tip:**

[**Research suggests**](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/05/opinion/sunday/a-focus-on-distraction.html) that you can improve your performance and general time management by acknowledging that some distractions are inevitable and [**preparing for them**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_07.htm) .

**Key Points**

We all face distractions every day. They lower our productivity and increase our stress. Think about what distracts you the most during your working day, and technology will likely be high on the list.

Try to adopt new habits to help you to control your distractors. Carefully assess your phone, messaging and email usage, and limit the time that you spend on social media.

Make it clear to people when you don't want to be disturbed, or get away from distracting environments to find somewhere quiet to work. Keep your To-Do Lists concise and manageable.

Implementing these measures should mean that you, and your team members, get more done.

**How to Stop Procrastinating**

**Overcoming the Habit of Delaying Important Tasks**

It's Friday afternoon and the clock is ticking. You're working furiously to complete a task before the five o'clock deadline, while silently cursing yourself for not starting it sooner.

How did this happen? What went wrong? Why did you lose your focus?

Well, there were the hours that you spent re-reading emails and checking social media, the excessive "preparation," the coffee breaks, and the time spent on other tasks that you could have safely left for next week.

Sound familiar? If so, you're not alone!

Procrastination is a trap that many of us fall into. In fact, according to researcher and speaker [**Piers Steel**](https://www.mindtools.com/community/BookInsights/TheProcrastinationEquation.php), 95 percent of us procrastinate to some degree. While it may be comforting to know that you're not alone, it can be sobering to realize just how much it can hold you back.

In this article and video, we look at why it happens, and we explore strategies for managing and prioritizing your workload more effectively.

**Do you choose more enjoyable tasks over high-priority ones?**

**Is  Procrastination the Same as Being Lazy?**

Procrastination is often confused with laziness, but they are very different.

Procrastination is an **active** process – you **choose** to do something else instead of the task that you know you should be doing. In contrast, [**laziness**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/lazy-people.htm)  suggests apathy, inactivity and an unwillingness to act.

Procrastination usually involves ignoring an unpleasant, but likely more important task, in favor of one that is more enjoyable or easier.

But giving in to this impulse can have serious consequences. For example, even minor episodes of procrastination can make us feel guilty or ashamed. It can lead to reduced productivity and cause us to miss out on achieving our goals.

If we procrastinate over a long period of time, we can become demotivated and disillusioned with our work, which can lead to depression and even job loss, in extreme cases.

**How to Overcome Procrastination**

As with most [**habits**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/bad-habits.htm) , it is possible to overcome procrastination. Follow the steps below to help you to deal with and prevent procrastination:

**Step 1: Recognize That You're Procrastinating**

You might be putting off a task because you've had to re-prioritize your workload. If you're briefly delaying an important task for a genuinely good reason, then you aren't necessarily procrastinating. However, if you start to put things off indefinitely, or switch focus because you want to avoid doing something, then you probably are.

You may also be procrastinating if you:

* Fill your day with low-priority tasks.
* Leave an item on your To-Do list for a long time, even though it's important.
* Read emails several times over without making a decision on what to do with them.
* Start a high-priority task and then go off to make a coffee.
* Fill your time with unimportant tasks that other people ask you to do, instead of getting on with the important tasks already on your list.
* Wait to be in "right mood," or wait for the "right time" to tackle a task.

**Tip:**

Take our self-test quiz, [**Are You a Procrastinator?**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_99.htm) , to identify how much you procrastinate.

**Step 2: Work Out WHY You're Procrastinating**

You need to understand the reasons **why** you are procrastinating before you can begin to tackle it.

For instance, are you avoiding a particular task because you find it boring or unpleasant? If so, take steps to get it out of the way quickly, so that you can focus on the aspects of your job that you find more enjoyable.

Poor organization can lead to procrastination. Organized people successfully overcome it because they use prioritized [**To-Do Lists**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_05.htm)  and create effective [**schedules**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_07.htm) . These tools help you to organize your tasks by priority and deadline.

Even if you're organized, you can still feel overwhelmed by a task. Perhaps you have doubts about your ability and are worried about [**failing**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/fear-of-failure.htm) , so you put it off and seek comfort in doing work that you know that you're capable of completing.

Some people fear success as much as failure. They think that [**success**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/fear-of-success.htm)  will lead to them being swamped with requests to take on more tasks.

Surprisingly, [**perfectionists**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/perfectionism.htm)  are often procrastinators. Often, they'd rather avoid doing a task that they don't feel they have the skills to do, than do it imperfectly.

Another major cause of procrastination is poor decision-making. If you can't decide what to do, you'll likely put off taking action in case you do the wrong thing.

**Warning:**

For some people, procrastination is more than a bad habit; it's a sign of a serious underlying health issue. For example, [**ADHD**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/managing-adhd.htm) , [**OCD**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/manage-controlling-people.htm) , anxiety, and depression are associated with procrastination.

Also, [**research**](http://studiemetro.au.dk/fileadmin/www.studiemetro.au.dk/Procrastination_2.pdf) suggests that procrastination can be a cause of serious stress and illness. So, if you suffer from chronic or debilitating procrastination, one of these conditions could be to blame, and you should seek the advice of a trained professional.

**Finding This Article Useful?**

You can learn another 60 time management skills, like this, by joining the Mind Tools Club.

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**Step 3: Adopt Anti-Procrastination Strategies**

Procrastination is a habit – a deeply ingrained pattern of behavior. This means that you probably can't break it overnight. Habits only stop being habits when you avoid practicing them, so try as many of the strategies, below, as possible to give yourself the best possible chance of succeeding.

* **Forgive yourself for procrastinating in the past.** [**Studies**](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191886910000474) show that self-forgiveness can help you to feel more positive about yourself and reduce the likelihood of procrastination in the future.
* **Commit to the task.** Focus on **doing**, not **avoiding**. Write down the tasks that you need to complete, and specify a time for doing them. This will help you to proactively tackle your work.
* **Promise yourself a reward.** If you complete a difficult task on time, reward yourself with a treat, such as a slice of cake or a coffee from your favorite coffee shop. And make sure you notice how good it feels to finish things!
* **Ask someone to check up on you.** Peer pressure works! This is the principle behind self-help groups. If you don't have anyone to ask, an online tool such as [**War on Procrastination**](http://www.simplyeasy.cz/war-on-procrastination/) can help you to self-monitor.
* **Act as you go.** Tackle tasks as soon as they arise, rather than letting them build up over another day.
* **Rephrase your internal dialog.** The phrases "need to" and "have to," for example, imply that you have no choice in what you do. This can make you feel disempowered and might even result in[**self-sabotage**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTCS_95.htm) . However, saying, "I choose to," implies that you own a project, and can make you feel more in control of your workload.
* **Minimize**[**distractions**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/distractions.htm). Turn off your email and social media, and avoid sitting anywhere near a television while you work!
* **Aim to "**[**eat an elephant beetle**](https://www.mindtools.com/forums/viewtopic.htm?t=424)**" first thing, every day!** Get those tasks that you find least pleasant out of the way early. This will give you the rest of the day to concentrate on work that you find more enjoyable.

**Tip:**

An alternative approach is to embrace "the art of delay." [**Research**](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15959999) shows that "active procrastination" – that is, deliberately delaying getting started on something so you can focus on other urgent tasks – can make you feel more challenged and motivated to get things done. This strategy can work particularly well if you are someone who thrives under pressure.

However, if you do decide to actively procrastinate, be sure to avoid putting your co-workers under any unnecessary, unpleasant and unwanted pressure!

If you're procrastinating because you find a task unpleasant, try to focus on the "long game."[**Research**](https://www.mindtools.com/community/BookInsights/TheProcrastinationEquation.php) shows that impulsive people are more likely to procrastinate because they are focused on short-term gain. Combat this by identifying the long-term benefits of completing the task. For instance, could it affect your annual performance review or end-of-year bonus?

Another way to make a task more enjoyable is to identify the unpleasant consequences of avoiding it. For instance, what will happen if you don't complete the work? How might it affect your personal, team or organizational goals?

At the same time, it can be useful to reframe the task by looking at its [**meaning and relevance**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/find-purpose-work.htm) . This will increase its value to you and make your work more worthwhile. It's also important to acknowledge that we can often overestimate the unpleasantness of a task. So give it a try! You may find that it's not as bad as you thought, after all!

If you procrastinate because you're disorganized, here are six strategies to help you get organized:

1. **Keep a To-Do List.** This will prevent you from "conveniently" forgetting about those unpleasant or overwhelming tasks.
2. **Prioritize your To-Do List using**[**Eisenhower's Urgent/Important Principle**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_91.htm)**.** This will enable you to quickly identify the activities that you should focus on, as well as the ones you can ignore.
3. **Become a master of**[**scheduling**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_07.htm)**and**[**project planning**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/main/newMN_PPM.htm)**.** If you have a big project or multiple projects on the go and you don't know where to start, these tools can help you to plan your time effectively, and reduce your stress levels.
4. **Tackle the hardest tasks at your**[**peak times**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_79.htm)**.** Do you work better in the morning or the afternoon? Identify when you're most effective, and do the tasks that you find most difficult at these times.
5. **Set yourself time-bound**[**goals**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_90.htm)**.** Setting yourself specific deadlines to complete tasks will keep you on track to achieve your goals, and will mean that you have no time for procrastination!
6. **Use task- and time-management apps.** There are numerous apps designed to help you to be more organized, such as [**Trello**](https://www.mindtools.com/community/App-Reviews/Trello.php) and [**Toggl**](https://www.toggl.com/), for example.

If you're prone to delaying projects because you find them overwhelming, try breaking them down into more manageable chunks. Organize your projects into smaller tasks and focus on **starting**them, rather than on **finishing** them.

In his 2011 book, "[**The Procrastination Cure**](https://www.mindtools.com/community/ExpertInterviews/JefferyCombs.php)," Jeffery Combs suggests tackling tasks in 15-minute bursts of activity. Alternatively, you can create an [**Action Plan**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_04.htm)  to organize your project. Start with quick and small tasks first. These "small wins" will give you a sense of achievement, and will make you feel more positive and less overwhelmed by the larger project or goal that you are working towards.

Finally, if you think that you are putting something off because you can't decide what action to take or you find it hard to make decisions, take a look at our range of [**decision-making tools**](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/main/newMN_TED.htm) to help you to develop your decision-making skills.

**Key Points**

Procrastination is the habit of delaying an important task, usually by focusing on less urgent, more enjoyable, and easier activities instead. It is different from laziness, which is the unwillingness to act.

Procrastination can restrict your potential and undermine your career. It can also disrupt teamwork, reduce morale, and even lead to depression and job loss. So, it's crucial to take proactive steps to prevent it.

The first step to overcoming procrastination is to recognize that you're doing it. Then, identify the reasons behind your behavior and use appropriate strategies to manage and overcome it.

<https://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/sk/time.htm> Time management questionnaire- 40 questions

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| * [**Setting goals**](https://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/sk/time.htm#Goals)
* [**Breaking tasks down into steps**](https://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/sk/time.htm#tasks)
* [**Prioritising**](https://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/sk/time.htm#Prioritising)
* [**Using lists**](https://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/sk/time.htm#Lists)
 | * [**Persevering when things get difficult**](https://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/sk/time.htm#Persevering)
* [**Organising your work and meeting deadlines**](https://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/sk/time.htm#Organising)
* [**Revising for examinations**](https://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/sk/time.htm#Revising)
* [**Avoiding procrastination**](https://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/sk/time.htm#Procrastination)
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Time Management Skills List and Examples

Examples of Time Management Skills for Resumes,

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By [Alison Doyle](https://www.thebalance.com/alison-doyle-2058389)

Updated July 02, 2017

What are time management skills and why are they important to employers? Time management means working efficiently, and employers in every industry look for staff who can make optimal use of the time available to them on the job.  Saving time saves the organization money and increases revenue.

Why Employers Want Strong Time Management Skills

Employees who manage their time well are more productive, more efficient, and more likely to meet deadlines.

 They focus on the most important and time sensitive tasks and limit the amount of time wasted on non-essential duties.

Effective time management requires staff to analyze their workload, assign priorities, and maintain focus on productive endeavors.  Employees who are excellent time managers can eliminate distractions and enlist support from colleagues to help accomplish their goals.

During a Job Interview

Time management skills, like other [soft skills](https://www.thebalance.com/what-are-soft-skills-2060852), are in demand. Interviewers will be asking questions to assess your ability to manage your time, and the time of your team if you’re in a supervisory role.

Review these [time management interview questions](https://www.thebalance.com/time-management-interview-questions-2061286) prior to your job interviews, so you’re prepared to respond with specific examples of how you effectively manage your workload.

Also, review these time management skills for ideas of what to share with prospective employers.

Top Time Management Skills

**Prioritizing**
It is usually impossible to do every single that you need and want to do all at once, but if you prioritize well, you should be able to complete the most important tasks in an order that makes sense.

Is your balance way off?

Your account balance, that is. Here's how much money the experts say you should keep in your checking and savings accounts.

**GET IT RIGHT**

When assigning priority, consider such factors as when each task needs to be done, how long it might take, how important it might be to others in the organization, what could happen if a task is not done, and whether any task might be interrupted by the need to wait for someone else.

**Scheduling**
Scheduling is important, and not only because some tasks have to be done at specific times.

Scheduling affects your day, your week, your month, as well as other people, their projects, and their short and long term plans for projects and tasks. Most people also have specific times of the day when they are more and less energetic, and become more productive when they schedule themselves accordingly. Schedules can be a good way to avoid procrastination, too.

**Keeping a To-Do List**
To-do lists (properly prioritized and integrated with your schedule) are a great way to avoid forgetting something important. They are also a great way to avoid spending all day thinking about everything you have to do. Remembering tasks takes energy, and thinking about everything you have to do all week can be exhausting and overwhelming. Split all the necessary tasks up into a list for each day, and you won’t have to worry about any of it anymore. Just look at today’s list.

**Resting**
Resting, even though it may seem contradictory, is an important time-management skill. Although working long hours or skipping breaks can sometimes improve productivity in the short-term, your exhaustion later will ensure that your average productivity actually drops. Except for rare emergencies, it is important to resist the temptation to over-work.

Include necessary breaks, and a sensible quitting time, in your schedule.

**Delegation**
Depending on what type of work you do, you may be able to [delegate some tasks](https://www.thebalance.com/delegation-skills-2059688). Knowing what to delegate and when is a skill. Some people resist delegating, either because they want to maintain control or because they want to save money by not hiring assistants. Both approaches ultimately hurt productivity and raise costs.

Remember too, however, that if you practice time management diligently and still can’t get everything done, you may be trying to do too much. It is better to succeed at a few tasks than to attempt and then fail at many.

Examples of Time Management Skills in the Workplace

**A - E**

* Adapting plans to changing circumstances
* Allocating time for specific tasks
* Analyzing processes and selecting the simplest way to accomplish a task
* Asking for help when overwhelmed with demands
* Assertiveness to say no to inappropriate demands that distract from central duties
* Attacking more complex tasks when you have the highest energy and sharpest concentrations
* Auditing how time is spent
* Avoiding excessive small talk with co-workers
* Avoiding procrastination; acting instead of worrying
* Breaking broader goals into smaller parts and focusing on one step at a time
* Breaking up projects into manageable parts
* Creating daily, weekly and monthly “to do” lists
* Creating schedules
* Delegating more routine tasks to lower level staff
* Eating well to maintain energy
* Eliminating time wasters
* Exercising and participating in other stress reducing activities during leisure time to maximize energy when at work

**F - Z**

* Facilitating efficient meetings; sticking with time frames for meetings
* Grouping similar tasks together to limit transition time
* Maintaining an organized work area
* [Multitasking](https://www.thebalance.com/multitasking-skills-with-examples-2059692); shifting smoothly from one task to another
* Openness to more efficient ways of doing things
* [Organizing](https://www.thebalance.com/organizational-skills-list-2063762) digital files for easy retrieval
* Planning your day the night before or first thing in the morning
* Prioritizing requests and demands
* Prioritizing a list of projects and focusing on higher value tasks with more immediate deadlines
* Punctuality
* Putting cell phones aside to eliminate the distraction of  personal messages unless required for work
* Reviewing performance and eliminating deviations from priorities
* Setting daily, weekly and monthly goals
* Setting realistic standards for quality and avoiding perfectionism
* Setting specific times for responding to email
* Taking short breaks to restore energy
* Touching each piece of paper or reading each email just once, whenever feasible

**Skills Lists:**[Employment Skills Listed by Job](https://www.thebalance.com/employment-skills-listed-by-job-2062389) | [Lists of Skills for Resumes](https://www.thebalance.com/list-of-the-best-skills-for-resumes-2062422)

**Related Articles:** [Soft vs. Hard Skills](https://www.thebalance.com/hard-skills-vs-soft-skills-2063780) | [How to Include Keywords in Your Resume](https://www.thebalance.com/resume-keywords-and-tips-for-using-them-2063331)

Lou Gerstner, the former CEO of IBM, once said, “Never let anyone own your schedule.”

I don’t know about you, but I *love* that quote. It’s so simple, yet true. After all being deliberate with your time is one of the best [ways to have a happy life in the business world](https://calendar.co/blog/design-a-happy-life/). Of course, try as hard as you can, that’s not always the reality. Life is kind of known for throwing a monkey wrench into your plans every now and then.

But, it’s still possible to manage your schedule like a boss by following these can’t-beat tips.

**Related:**[**15 Time Management Tips for Achieving Your Goals**](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/299336)

**Create a routine.**

Next up you need to create, and stick, to a routine.

Start by blocking times for specific activities, such as checking emails, exercise and spending time with your family. You can then convert your calendar into a series of blocks for you to place activities in the prepared spaces. If something isn’t planned and placed into a block, don’t do it.

Keep in mind that your routine will probably change throughout the year. But, it’s better to have a plan that changes than no plan at all. For example, if you’re launching a [startup](https://www.entrepreneur.com/topic/startups), then you should block times for activities like customer discovery, coding and hiring. Next year you may have to block out times for marketing, growing your business and customer service.

**Related:**[**5 Things No One Tells You About Working at a Startup**](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/300393)

**Carry a schedule and record all your thoughts, conversations and activities for a week.**

“This will help you understand how much you can get done during the course of a day and where your precious moments are going,” write Joe Mathews, Don Debolt and Deb Percival on [Entrepreneur](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/219553).

“You'll see how much [time](https://due.com/time/) is actually spent producing results and how much time is wasted on unproductive thoughts, conversations and actions.”

**Add time buffers to manage your schedule.**

Have you missed a couple of [deadlines](https://www.entrepreneur.com/topic/deadlines) because you jumped from project to project? It’s probably because your didn’t add time buffers. A buffer is something like this:

You just landed a new client for your freelance business. They assign you a deadline to complete the task. Instead of entering their exact deadline, your put your own deadline that’s 24-48 earlier. Those hours are the buffer.

Why’s that such a big deal? When you have a buffer, and something happens that you can’t control, you still have those 24-48 hours to meet the deadline.

**Related:**[**6 Tips to Crushing Your Deadlines**](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/287159)

**Schedule your calendar like a to-do-list.**

If you have things on your schedule that *have* to be done, I personally like scheduling out time on my [calendar](https://calendar.co/) for them. Much like a meeting, they have a set and scheduled time for this task to be accomplished.

For some people like myself, this includes blocking out time for working out, eating, walks and other important activities in my life. If I don't make time for them, other things will always get in the way. I find that when I block out those times on my schedule, I'm much more proactive as well as I feel better about myself.

**Related:**[**Billionaire Richard Branson Credits To-Do Lists as a Key to His Success**](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/297018)

**Use batching and time-blocking.**

In my early days of freelancing I multitasked like it was going out of style. I eventually realized that doing more than one thing at a time is ineffective and stressful. I was stressed beyond endurance because, as research now shows, the human brain isn’t capable of multitasking.

A study conducted by [Microsoft Research](http://erichorvitz.com/taskdiary.pdf), shows that switching from task to task is less productive than staying on the same task, or the same types of tasks, over a block of time. That’s why batching is so awesome.

[Batching](https://michaelhyatt.com/how-to-use-batching-to-become-more-productive.html) is basically where you find similar tasks and then lump them all together to make a task-batch. You then sit down, set a timer, and focus only on those similar tasks. For example, setting aside 6 am to 7 am to check emails and then 8 am to 10 am to write blog posts.

Another strategy that you should try is using time-blocks. When you have outside meetings, block two and a half days per week for those meetings. Only attend those outside meetings during those time-blocks. To make blocking more effective, [color-code your calendar](https://marketingartfully.com/2014/12/30/planner-manners-how-to-color-code-your-time-and-your-life/) so that you can visually glance at your calendar.

Chandler Bolt wrote a great book, [*The Productive Person*](https://www.amazon.com/Productive-Person-how-productivity-entrepreneurs/dp/1497400147/ref%3Das_li_bk_tl/?tag=weightlossr06-20&linkId=a5782aaa57c51ac146dc637d70c16454&linkCode=ktl), that you should read if you want to learn more about time-blocking.

**Related:**[**This Productivity Hack Completely Changed My Life, and It Can Improve Yours**](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/249475)

**Optimize time for different meeting types.**

To be honest, 30-minute meetings and 10-minute calls are ideal. A 10-minute phone call with a prospective client is more than enough for me to know what their needs are and if we click. Better yet, Google Hangout or Skype can be used to see the person instead of just hearing them.

If you have a remote team, you can host a virtual meeting via Zoom,RingCentral Business, Zoho Meeting, Join.me or GoToMeeting. Here are some suggestions on the types of meetings that you might want to book and schedule:

* 45-minute meeting that’s outside of the office. Allow 15 minutes for travel and 30 minutes for the meeting over coffee.
* 30-minute weekly staff meeting.
* 30-minute meeting in the office to get to know colleagues or catch up.
* 15-minute daily standup if you’re a startup or leading an engineering team.
* 10-minute phone call to offer someone advice.

Whatever meetings you decide to [hold a meeting](https://due.com/blog/tips-making-sure-meetings-dont-get-way-running-a-business/), you should group them into blocks. If you think that a particular meeting needs more or less time, then you can adjust the block accordingly.

Still, just remember that it's impossible to get everything done. “Also remember that odds are good that 20 percent of your thoughts, conversations and activities produce 80 percent of your results,” say Mathews, Debolt, and Percival

15 Time Management Tips for Achieving Your Goals

*Serious goal setting requires an unblinking focus on effective time management.*



[R.L. Adams•Guest Writer](https://www.entrepreneur.com/author/robert-adams)



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A Note From The Editor

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One of the most effective skills you can have in life is powerful and effective [time management](https://www.entrepreneur.com/topic/time-management). If you're not managing your time well, there's no way you're going to reach your goals at work and the life outside of it. Sure, you might make some progress. But your time management will be an uphill battle if you don't take your time seriously. For people who squander and waste the precious little time they do have, they know all too well how difficult achieving even mildly difficult goals can be.

The truth is that time is the greatest equalizer in life. No matter who you are, your age, income, gender, race or religion, you have the same amount of time as the next person. Whether you're filthy rich or dirt poor, your time is the same. It's not about how much time you have. It's about how effectively you [manage your time](https://www.wanderlustworker.com/how-to-effectively-manage-your-time/).

**Related Video:**[**20 Quick Tips for Better Time Management**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bzNZh-HolUU)

So if you're serious about achieving your goals, not only do you need to set those goals the right way, but you also have to get serious about avoiding distractions and becoming too immersed in the [bad habits that you know you need to quit](https://www.wanderlustworker.com/how-to-quit-your-bad-habits/). Time-wasters need to fall by the wayside, and serious grit-and-bear-it hard work needs to take its place.

The trick? Find a good time management system and work it. There are many. It's entirely up to you on which one to choose. But if you don't want to become part of the [92% statistic](https://www.wanderlustworker.com/the-harvard-mba-business-school-study-on-goal-setting/)of people who fail to achieve their long-term goals, then you need pay attention to how you use the precious little time you do have in this world.

**What are the best tips for managing your time?**

One of the biggest problems that most entrepreneurs have isn't just in how they can get enough done in such a demanding market, but also how they maintain some semblance of balance without feeling too overworked. This isn't just about achieving and going after goals around the clock. This is also about quality of life.

Balance is key. If you lack balance in your life, you're going to feel stressed out. Even if you're able to effectively juggle your responsibilities, without proper balance you're going to eventually reach your breaking point. So, it's important to not only follow a system that will help you get things done, but also one where you prioritize personal and family time.

Don't forget to do things like take a walk in the park or just sit and listen to your favorite music with headphones on, or paint a picture, go on a date night and so on. That's more important than you can think. And when you do that, you achieve some semblance of balance. [Life is short](https://www.wanderlustworker.com/life-is-short-8-steps-for-embracing-it-and-following-your-dreams/). So don't ignore those things while you reach for your bigger goals. With that said, here are 15 crucial time management tips for getting the proverbial job done.

**Related Video:**[**How to Manage Time With 10 Tips That Work**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=go5XyuI7DkA&t=9s)

**1. Set goals the right way.**

There's a right and wrong way to set goals. If you don't set your goals the right way, then you'll lack the proper targets, which will force you to fall off track. But when you set them the right way, the sky is the limit. Use the [SMART goal setting](https://www.wanderlustworker.com/smart-goals-will-help-you-achieve-anything/) method to help you see things through. And when you do set those goals, make sure you have powerful deep down meanings for wanting to achieve them.

**Related:**[**Exercise Is a Waste of Time. Set Goals and Start Training to Achieve Them.**](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/299318)

**2. Find a good time management system.**

One of the tips for managing your time is to find the right system to actually do it. The quadrant time-management system is probably the most effective. It splits your activities into four quadrants based on [urgency and importance](https://www2.usgs.gov/humancapital/documents/TimeManagementGrid.pdf). Things are either urgent or important, both, or neither. Neither (quadrant 4) are the activities that you want to stay away from, but it's the not-urgent-but-important quadrant (2) that you want to focus on.

**Related:**[**How to Manage Time With 10 Tips That Work**](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/219553)

**3. Audit your time for seven days straight.**

Spend seven days straight assessing how you spend the time you do have right now. What are you doing? Record it in a journal or on your phone. Split this up into blocks of 30 minutes or an hour. What did you get done? Was it time wasted? Was it well spent? If you use the quadrant system, circle or log the quadrant that the activity was associated with. At the end of the seven days, tally up all the numbers. Where did you spend the most time? Which quadrants? The results might shock you.

**Related:**[**8 Great Time-Tracking Apps for Freelancers**](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/269991)

**4. Spend your mornings on MITs.**

Mark Twain once said, "If it's your job to eat a frog, it's best to do it first thing in the morning. And If it's your job to eat two frogs, it's best to eat the biggest one first." His point? Tackle your biggest tasks in the morning. These are your [most important tasks (MITs) of the day](https://www.wanderlustworker.com/defining-the-most-important-tasks-mits-of-the-day/). Accomplishing those will give you the biggest momentum to help you sail through the rest of the day.

**Related:**[**The Psychology of Getting More Done (In Less Time)**](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/234958)

**5. Follow the 80-20 rule.**

Another great time management tip is to use the 80-20 Rule, also known as the [Pareto Principle](https://www.wanderlustworker.com/how-to-harness-the-pareto-principle/). This rule states that 80% of the efforts comes from 20 percent of the results. In sales, it also means that 80 percent of the sales come from 20 percent of the customers. The trick? Identify the 20 percent of the efforts that are producing 80 percent of the results and scale that out. You can do this with meticulous tracking and analysis.

**Related:**[**The 80/20 Rule and Listening to Your Inner Procrastinator**](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/230962)

**6. Instill keystone habits into your life.**

Charles Duhig poignantly coined the keystone habit in his book entitled, *The Power of Habit.*In architecture, the keystone is the stone that holds all other stones in place. Similarly, [keystone habits](https://www.wanderlustworker.com/how-keystone-habits-can-improve-your-life/) help to not only solicit other good habits, but also help to eliminate bad habits as well. Focus on keystone habits and you'll get much better at managing your overall time by making your habit development much easier.

**Related:**[**25 Best Habits to Have in Life**](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/284473)

**7. Schedule email response times.**

Turn off your email throughout the day. When your email is pouring in, it's easy to get distracted. Schedule time to read and respond to emails. If there's something urgent, someone will call or text you. But when you have your email open, those distractions interrupt your thought flow and it's harder to get back on track.

**Related:**[**The Hidden Costs of Ignoring Email**](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/244751)

**8. Eliminate bad habits.**

One of the biggest time-wasters we have are our bad habits. Whether it's Netflix binge-watching, excessively surfing social media, playing games, going out frequently to drink with friends, or so on, those bad habits take away the precious little time that we do have. Use your time wisely by eliminating your bad habits if you're serious about achieving big goals in life.

**Related:**[**10 Bad Habits You Must Eliminate From Your Daily Routine**](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/284214)

**9. Take frequent breaks when working.**

[One study](https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/09/science-tells-you-how-many-minutes-should-you-take-a-break-for-work-17/380369/) suggests that you should work for 52 minutes and break for 17. You might not have the luxury to do that. But you should take frequent breaks. If you're an entrepreneur working for yourself, this is crucial. It's easy to run on fumes and not even know it. Keep your mental, emotional and physical states at peak levels by breaking frequently.

**Related:**[**The Secret to Increased Productivity: Taking Time Off**](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/237446)

**10. Meditate or exercise every morning.**

You might not think that this will help to better manage your time, but meditating and exercising every single morning gives you balance. Cut the toxins out of your life and get serious by doing this and watch as your energy, stamina and mental focus takes a drastic shift.

**Related:**[**7 Things Every Entrepreneur Should Do Before 7 a.m.**](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/290427)

**11. Make to-do lists in the evening for the next day.**

Every single evening before bed, make a list for the next day. Look at your goals and see what you can do to help move you closer. This doesn't happen overnight. It takes time. But by making to-do lists, you're effectively setting goals for the day. Daily goals are easier to achieve while helping to move us towards the longer and bigger goals. But that happens by creating to-do lists.

**Related:**[**How to Spend the Last 10 Minutes of Your Work Day (Infographic)**](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/296898)

**12. Find inspiration when you're feeling lackluster.**

Turn to YouTube, TED Talks and any other inspirational source you can turn to when you're lacking inspiration. It's hard to stay on track with your time when you lose that drive inside of you. Find ways you can turn the fire back on by focusing inspiring content and seeking out others who've achieved big goals.

**Related:**[**10 Ways to Stay Inspired for Life**](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/284711)

**13. Get a mentor who can guide you.**

Finding a mentor is crucial. It's easy to get distracted and dissuaded when you don't have someone guiding you. But when you can personally rely on someone who's been through the wringer and can help you achieve your goals, it's easier to stay on track with your time. Find a good mentor that can help you along your path.

**Related:**[**Choose Your Mentors Wisely: 3 Traits to Look for in a Great Mentor**](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/298739)

**14. Turn off social media app alerts.**

Incessant social media app alerts aren't helping you with your time. It's definitely hurting you. Turn them off. You don't need alerts every moment or to know everything happening with your friends. It's not important. What's most important is to have some peace of mind and be better able to focus on the task at hand.

**Related:**[**There Are Always a Million Distractions. Here's How to Silence the Noise and Pay Attention.**](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/236395)

**15. Declutter and organize.**

[Studies have determined](https://unclutterer.com/2011/03/29/scientists-find-physical-clutter-negatively-affects-your-ability-to-focus-process-information/) that clutter in our environment helps us to lose focus. When we lose focus, we lose time. If you want to avoid that, declutter and organize. Don't do it all at once. Start small. One drawer today. A shelf tomorrow. Maybe a closet the next day. Just one per day. You build momentum and eventually find yourself turning into an organizing warrior.