**Time Management Tips and Tools**

**Purpose**



The purpose of this tutorial is to help you to manage time as a resource in the workplace and in your life optimally. In the modern times in which we live, many time pressures are placed upon people, as you will know from having had to cope with time constraints as a student.

You might also have done a time management course as a first-year student. Note similarities and differences as you work through this tutorial. How does time management as a student differ from time management in the workplace?

**Learning Outcomes**



By the end of this tutorial you will be familiar with some strategies that you can use to manage time more effectively.

**Key points**

This tutorial explores the following topics:

**What is time management?**

Time is a unique and scarce resource. It is irreplaceable and cannot be accumulated. In the times that we live in today, many time pressures are placed on people. How often do we hear people say ‘I just don’t have enough time for everything’?

Time management is a conscious attempt that we make to control and allocate our limited time resources. At the most basic level, it is self management, having the discipline to control your life. It is an ongoing process of analysing how we spend our time. It can be seen as the use of our time in order to keep control over ourselves and our lives. Ineffective time management can lead to your being overworked.

In the work context, more emphasis is placed on productivity and in many cases more pressure is placed upon the skilled workers that know how to do the work. This leads to stress-related problems and, in turn, places even more pressure on the skilled workers who remain. For this reason, it is very important to manage time effectively.

If you have a problem managing your time, your work life will be less fulfilling, less successful, and more stressful than it should be. If we want to accomplish our goals in life, we must learn how to save time and how to spend it wisely. This is of the utmost importance.

*Example*

John looked up from his desk to see his colleagues packing up to go home. It was already 17:30 and at the rate he was going he would be at work until 23:00. He stared at his to-do list and became depressed. He still had five more important tasks to do. What has he been doing the whole day and why didn’t he finish his work?

It is impossible to provide one identical set of rules to do time management, because human beings are so different. However, there are some guidelines that can be followed in order to manage time more effectively.

View the following video in preparation for the rest of this tutorial. As you read, jot down the ten tips that the narrator gives for time management and productivity. Van Dusen, P. (2018). *10 productivity tips and tricks that work*. (6:19). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FsEr8owBOc>.

Did you know the meaning of ‘procrastinate’? It means to put something off until the last minute instead of doing it immediately. Look at the following story that illustrates this characteristic.

Hiya, I am Gertrude. I was scheduled to attend a workshop on equity recently and two weeks beforehand the organisers sent through some online activities, saying they would take an hour or two. I was irritated because I was busy. Nonetheless, I started work as soon as I had half an hour to spare. It was lucky that I did because the activities actually took ten hours! If I had waited till the night before, I would have been in real trouble. I bumped into another participant a couple of days before the workshop. He had not begun the work as he had been busy. He didn’t finish the online activities and was unprepared for the actual workshop that asked participants to share some of the work they had done.

Did you note that the presenter in the video argued for a work-life balance? Managing your time means more than getting more work done. To keep focused during the day, you need short breaks. To focus optimally, you need to give your brain a rest. To remain healthy, and therefore productive at work, you need exercise and a social life.

Read the story ‘*I’m just a girl who can’t say no*’, then reflect on Tami’s experience in the light of what Van Dusen said in his video.

Hi, my name is Tami. I work in the public service. I make a ‘to do’ list of priorities and projects every month. I also ensure that my electronic diary is up to date with scheduled meetings and other commitments. I try to block out two hours per project per day to ensure I complete everything. I’m proud that I am respected for my diligence and accuracy. However, that means that my bosses often come to me when something special needs to be done. I don’t seem able to say ‘no’, so I often end up working fifty to sixty hours a week. My social life and health suffer. I often stop on the way home for a takeaway as I’m too tired to go home and start cooking. I sleep badly. I started putting on weight. Then I started to lose focus at work. The crunch came when my heart started fluttering. I went to see my doctor. She sent me for tests and booked me off for stress. She also sent me to a counsellor who helped me realise that time management is about more than work.

You no doubt noted that Tami had no work-life balance. She needs to say ‘no’, to build in breaks, to take exercise, to plan for outings with friends.

**Common time wasters**

The ability of managers and employees to manage their time effectively is influenced by a number of factors. An unplanned crisis must be dealt with immediately. Demanding customers call for more attention. The sudden illness of an employee or co-worker means that his/ her team members must adjust their workloads in order to get the work done. Factors such as these may be beyond your control, but many time wasters originate from individual behaviour or habits. Every one of us wastes time in some way or the other. Sometimes wasting time can help you to relax, but other times it can frustrate you.

A time waster can thus be seen as something that keeps you from doing things that have more value and importance for you. It is an activity on which you spent a considerable amount of time without reaching your primary goal.

Time wasters can be divided into two main sources, namely environmental and self-generated time wasters.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Self generated | Environmental |
| * Disorganisation * Procrastination * Inability to say ‘No’ * Lack of interest in the activity (attitude) * Stress and burnout * Gossiping with other people * Being an unnecessarily perfectionist | * People visiting you * Telephone calls * Junk mail * Waiting for someone * Unproductive meetings * A crisis that arise * Coffee time conversations * Unused reports that were unnecessarily prepared |

**Table 1**

An organisation’s environment is composed of institutions or forces outside the organisation that potentially affect its performance.

Environmental forces typically include suppliers, customers, competitors, government regulatory agencies, public pressure groups, strike actions (e.g. transport), and many more. These issues can all lead to a lot of time being wasted.

*Example*

Take a strike action in the transport system as an example: If the public transport system is down as a result of strike actions, workers will be late; supplies will be late, etc. These factors will all impact on how you manage your time. You will most probably have to change your work schedule, work plans, etc. to accommodate these changes.

Even though we do not have any control over the external environment, we still have to manage our time accordingly

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**Time management guidelines**

As was mentioned earlier, time management is a conscious attempt to control and allocate limited time resources. It is very important to start with your most important tasks first.

The 80/20 principle, also known as the Pareto Principle, named after economist Vilfredo Pareto, ‘specifies that 80% of consequences come from 20% of the causes, asserting an unequal relationship between inputs and outputs. This principle serves as a general reminder that the relationship between inputs and outputs is not balanced.’ (<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/p/paretoprinciple.asp>, Accessed 27 November 2019). The principle can be an effective guideline to use and works as follows: If all the items you have to do are arranged in order of value, 80% of the value would come from only 20% of the items, while the remaining 20% of the value would come from 80% of the items. In other words, if we have a list of ten (10) tasks to do and we do the most important two (2) tasks first, then 80% of the work will be done. So, start with your most important tasks first.

View the following short animation in preparation for the following section of this tutorial. As you listen, jot down the main points being made by the speaker. GCFLearnFree.org. (2018). Tips for effective time management. (2:00). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RiI1NkaDXlQ>.

As you work through the guidelines for using a time log in the next section, add any new ideas to the list you made based on the video.

Some professions allow you to manage your own schedule while others present you with a schedule – and one always allow for the unexpected. For instance,

* a teacher or lecturer is presented with a timetable;
* a doctor or dentist in private practice has a receptionist who schedules appointments;
* a lawyer might plan to spend a whole week in a court room but end up with the trial finishing early;
* a surgeon might have a long surgical list but end up working over time because of a complication in one operation;
* an administrator or manager would have to arrange his or her own schedule, usually around meetings organised by others;
* a nurse works shifts arranged by the hospital.

Does that mean that you do not need to plan your time if you are operating within a schedule determined by others? No. You still have to decide on what to do with your private time. Read the story ‘*I’m the guy who has it all*’, that illustrates this idea.

Hello, my name is Kgati. I teach geography at a high school. If I’m lucky, I have one free period a day to do my admin. When there is marking to be done, it takes up some of my evenings. The school expects us to commit to one after-hours activity, either cultural or sporting. I coach cricket – which also means I work on Saturdays during the playing season as well as spend some afternoons coaching. I enjoy action cricket and make sure I get in a game with my friends every week. My girlfriend and I like dinner or a movie every week, sometimes with friends or family, as well as the opportunity for a nice cycle ride together. I try to cycle every morning as well before setting off for school. I’m thinking of doing the Cape Argus next year. I’ve decided I want to do my Honours degree and am trying to plan my time so that I keep my social life as well.

To help you manage your time better, we are going to look at a time log as a diagnostic and planning tool for everyone and delegation as a tool available to managers or team leaders.

**Setting up a time log**

You clearly cannot manage time that has past, but you can surely examine how you have spent that time in an objective and realistic way in order to change how you manage your time in future. How can you do that? By keeping a detailed *time log*, you can examine how you have spent your time. A time log is a diagnostic tool used to analyse how you are spending your time. By keeping a log, you can determine the activities that waste your time and are not helpful in reaching your goal.

The principle of a time log is to divide each day for the next week into fifteen-minute intervals. At the end of each hour, you write down how you have spent that hour. It is very important to be extremely honest when writing down how you have spent your time. Otherwise it will defeat the purpose of the activity. If you are not honest, you are only depriving yourself of something that you could have learnt about how you really manage your time.

Try to keep your time log for a full week. The information that you get will definitely be fruitful in the future. Again, remember to be honest. If you are not willing to be honest, you will not get valuable information.

By keeping your time log, you can determine the strengths and weaknesses in your current way of managing your own time. When keeping a daily time log, remember the following:

* *Select a typical week*. Do not choose a week where you do something totally different from what you normally do, e.g. when you are on a course or ill. If you do this, you will get a wrong indication of how you manage your time.
* *Write down your activities after every hour*. You might forget some details. Be very specific when writing down what you do, e.g. a friend called me and we talked for half an hour. This is very important to help you distinguish between the productive and unproductive use of time. No matter how silly the activity may seem at the time, write it down. When analysing your time log, you may be surprised to see how many small, insignificant activities you have got in your day. It would help John from the earlier example account for where his time went.
* *Write down a comment after each activity*. For example, ‘I had a longer lunchtime because I had to speak to a client’. Make a note if things took longer than they normally do and why. This will help you to get an indication of unforeseen events in the future as well as possible time wasters to eliminate in the future.
* *At the end of the day, note whether this was a typical day, busier than normal, or less busy than normal.* This might be an explanation for some of the activities that you will analyse later after your time log has been completed. If you analyse your time log after a week, you may not remember why Tuesday was so full and the other days not. For this reason, you should note at the end of the day if it was more or less busy than usual.

By keeping a time log, you can determine if there are certain times of the day when you are busier or less busy. This information can help you to work out work plans for the future.

In order to analyse your time log, you should ask yourself the following questions:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Question** | **Discussion** |
| Which parts of the day were the most and the least productive? Why? | By getting this information, you can determine if, e.g. you are less productive early in the morning when you arrive at work or late in the afternoon before going home. You can then set some rules for yourself in order to use the time more productively. |
| What patterns of time wasters are recurring? | For example, do you often have to wait for someone else to sign documents before you can carry on with your work? As soon as you have determined a certain pattern, you can plan your activities around it: e.g. if you have determined that you must continually wait for another person to do something before you can carry on with that specific activity, you can continue with something else in the mean time that was also on your list of things to do. In this way you do not waste time waiting for someone else. |
| What do you do that may not be necessary (not your primary function)? | All of us do things that do not help us to reach our goals, e.g. doing favours for other people or not delegating tasks that can be done by someone else. If you are not busy, and you would like to help a friend or colleague, you can do that. There are two caveats:   * It is important to make sure that the favours you are doing are not interfering with your own work. * Beware of setting precedents.   If you also have work to do, tell the person that you would like to help, but unfortunately you also have a deadline to reach. |
| What do you do that might be out of place: that is, it should have been done at another time or is not part of your normal routine? | Sometimes there are activities that are done at a specific time, e.g. your monthly report on absenteeism that must be handed in early in the month. It can sometimes happen that reports are needed earlier and that you must hand them in halfway through the month, e.g. your supervisor must do a presentation to the senior management team on how many people have been absent from work over the last six months. There can also be a crisis in another department and you are asked to help out for an hour or two. |
| What opportunities do you have to increase your efficiency? | You may determine that you spend a lot of time making coffee for other people but it is not your primary responsibility. You may also determine that you waste unnecessary time on paperwork that should be done by someone else. By eliminating unnecessary activities that take up your time, you should not be surprised that you finish all your own work on time each day. |
| On what occasions do you allow enjoyment to override a priority task? | For instance, what do you do if the people at work decide that they want to go out for coffee because it is someone’s birthday? It is nice to socialise with your colleagues and it is also necessary but remember that your work must get done. You can always go for coffee with the person after work or at another time. |
| Which activities do not contribute to achieving your objectives? How can you change this? | Some activities that we do, do not help us to get the work done. They may be unnecessary activities that make the process of getting the work done longer. By analysing them, these activities may be eliminated and we can get to the same outcome in a shorter time. |
| On average, what percentage of working time are you productive? | Be very honest about this. How can you change this? You will be surprised how many times you leave the office to smoke, make coffee, talk to other people, go to the bathroom, etc. This can all cause you not to finish your work on time. If you fall into this category, you must work out a plan of action to save yourself some valuable time in the day. |
| Does the time allocation reflect your priorities? In other words, do you spend your time doing what you are supposed to do? | This is a difficult question to answer. None of us wants to take the blame for something, it is human nature. You must however be very honest with yourself when answering this question. You may be able to save time that you can spend with family or friends. |
| Are you spending time on work that could be done by your subordinates or other team members? | This is also a very big culprit in time wasters. Maybe you think that you can do the work better than someone else, and it may even be true, but you will not be able to do all the work in your department. You will have to ask other people to do some of it. This will allow you more time to do your own work. See the next section on delegation as a tool. |

**Table 2**

*Activity*

Using any format that you want, write down everything that you do during the day. If you wish, you can add a column for comments; otherwise, you can write the comments next to the activity. Complete the time log in as much detail as you can. You can access a Word of Excel template here if you like. If you have an electronic diary, you could alternatively enter your data there. You might end up with something like the example below.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Time log | | | |
| Date: | | Day: Wednesday | |
| Morning | | Afternoon | |
| Time | Activity | Time | Activity |
| 08:00 | Meeting | 12:15 | Lunch |
| 08:15 | Meeting | 12:30 | Lunch |
| 08:30 | Meeting | 12:45 | Preparing handouts |
| 08:45 | Meeting | 13:00 | Preparing handouts |
| 09:00 | Meeting (this meeting took longer than normal because everybody talked about a new programme that started on television) | 13:15 | Preparing handouts (this took longer than usual because a paper in the photo copy machine got stuck) |
| 09:15 | Coffee break | 13:30 | Preparing the venue |
| 09:30 | Preparing for a presentation | 13:45 | Preparing the venue |
| 09:45 | Preparing for a presentation | 14:00 | Presenting |
| 10:00 | Preparing for a presentation | 14:15 | Presenting |
| 10:15 | Preparing for a presentation | 14:30 | Presenting |
| 10:30 | Preparing for a presentation | 14:45 | Presenting |
| 10:45 | Helping a colleague | 15:00 | Presenting |
| 11:00 | Helping a colleague | 15:15 | Presenting |
| 11:15 | Meeting with a client | 15:30 | Presenting |
| 11:30 | Meeting with a client | 15:45 | Presenting |
| 11:45 | Meeting with a client | 16:00 | Presenting |
| 12:00 | Lunch | 16:15 | Getting ready to go home |
|  |  | 16:30 | Going home |
|  |  | 16:45 |  |
|  |  | 17:00 |  |
| Evening | | | |

**Table 3**

Can you see from this example that socialising when you are supposed to be discussing business wastes time and that things outside your control like a paper jam in a printer can also waste time. Is a single coffee break and a lunch break wasting time? Not if one understands that controlled breaks are necessary to keep energy and interest from flagging.

**Delegation**

Delegation is the assignment of a specific task or project by one person to another, and the assignee’s commitment to complete the task or project.

You can either be the person to whom the work is delegated or the person doing the delegation. If the former, make sure that you understand the brief and the timeframes. You could go off and spend days researching and writing a ten page report when all that is required is a one-pager. Ask questions for clarity right at the start and throughout the process if necessary.

If you are a manager and are delegating, you not only transfer work to another person, but you also transfer responsibility for completing the task according to set standards. Delegation is one of the most important skills demonstrated by a successful manager, but often one of the most misused and neglected. This can be as a result of managers being overworked and then just ‘dumping’ work that they do not want to do on employees, or as a result of a manager not knowing how to delegate.

It is thus important to learn to delegate tasks that someone else can take care of.

Delegation will allow you more time to do what you should do. If you have a very busy schedule, you will have to delegate certain tasks to subordinates or colleagues. When delegating, give clear instructions to the person to whom you are delegating. This will prevent your having to redo tasks that were not understood and thus done incorrectly. Do not delegate the boring routine tasks only, but give the person tasks that can be a challenge and stimulate his or her mind.

It is crucial to establish the right environment for effective delegating. The following are guidelines that you can use:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **GUIDELINES** | |
| ***Give clear instructions*** | Be very clear about what you want the person to do, the time frames and how the results will be measured. |
| ***Know your subordinates*** | Encourage colleagues to tell you about their special interests at work and also how much time they have available for new projects. |
| ***Focus on the department’s goals*** | Build a sense of shared responsibility for the department’s overall goals. |
| ***Engage subordinates in interesting projects*** | Avoid dumping only tedious or difficult tasks on your subordinates. Instead, delegate tasks that will spark interest and can be enjoyable. |
| ***Provide career opportunities*** | Delegate functions that have high visibility within the organisation. |
| ***Trust your colleagues*** | Delegate to people whose judgment and competence you can trust. This means that you must know your subordinates and their capabilities very well. |
| ***Use delegation as a learning experience*** | Remember that delegation is a learning experience for your subordinates, so offer training or coaching as needed. |
| ***Scaffold learning*** | Develop trust in less-skilled subordinates by delegating highly structured assignments to them. Provide the support that they will need to increase their competence. |
| ***Let the person see the whole picture*** | Whenever possible, delegate an entire project or function and not just a small piece. Doing this will help to increase motivation and commitment. |
| ***Monitor and evaluate projects*** | Monitor the progress of the task and provide constructive feedback. |
| ***Maintain open lines of communication*** | You can tell the subordinate to let you know if they experience any problems. |

**Table 4**

Before delegating a task or an assignment, make sure that you get the right person for the job. If you delegate an assignment to a person who does not have the skills to do it, you will place unnecessary pressure on that person. On the other hand, if the task is much too easy for a person, that person will lose interest very fast. Maintain a good balance.

Why is delegation a time-management tool? If you try to do everything yourself, you might burn out. Some managers try to do everything because they do not trust their subordinates. Such managers need to embark on skills building with those employees to ensure that they can manage projects on time, within the brief and within any budget that they might have. If you have to keep doing or re-doing the work of subordinates despite additional training, you might consider initiating a dismissal process as they clearly are not able to do the work for which they are paid.

**Additional resources**

If you have time, you might like to read the following tips.

Korkki, P. (nd). *How to make the most of your workday*. <https://www.nytimes.com/guides/business/how-to-improve-your-productivity-at-work> discusses the following:

Three basic principles of productivity

1. Trust the small increments
2. Be accountable
3. Forgive yourself

For the multitasker

* A biological impossibility
* More errors and less creativity
* How to monotask

When distractions take over

Mcleod, L. (nd). *7 ways to (always) leave work on time*. <https://www.themuse.com/advice/7-ways-to-always-leave-work-on-time> discusses the following:

1. Begin the day with the end in mind
2. Tell people when you have to leave
3. Allow 20 minutes to transition
4. Do the most important work
5. Stop wasting time during the day

**Assessment**



Based on this tutorial, the case studies, readings and videos, answer the questions below:

**Question 1**

What piece of advice would be least likely to appear on a list of tips for time management?

1. You can only do what you can during working hours: tomorrow is another day.
2. Refuse to do anything that is not in your job description or your performance contract.
3. In this uncertain job climate, do all the work you are given so that you are indispensable.
4. Plan your time so that you get your work done and have personal time as well.
5. Delegate everything you can to others so that the work gets done without burdening you.

**Question 2**

Scenario:

A colleague comes in late most days, wastes her own time and that of colleagues chatting then claims she is stressed and her health is affected when she is reminded to meet deadlines. Sometimes other people end up having to complete her work for her. As a victim of her behaviour, how do you feel she must change in a sustainable way?

1. She must commit to producing project plans and submit interim reports on their progress.
2. She must leave if she cannot abide by the basic conditions of service the rest of you observe.
3. She must work in the time she misses in the morning by working after hours.
4. She must start using some time management tools that can be sourced from Human Resources.
5. She must address her health issues and reduce her working hours if work is the cause of her stress.

**Question 3**

Why is it important to manage your time for your personal as well as your work life?

1. It’s too easy for a variety of reasons to be sucked into working all hours.
2. A work-life balance actually improves your ability to work productively and focus.
3. You only live once: enjoy life while you are still young.
4. You can fritter away personal time on unimportant activities if you don’t plan.
5. Your relationships and health will suffer if you have not time for a social life.

**Question 4**

How do you know what projects are part of the 20% of your work that will produce 80% of your outputs and therefore deserve 80% of your time?

1. Analyse your list of projects into those that are core to your job description and those that are not.
2. All social functions fall into the less productive workplace activities so do not warrant any of your time.
3. Taking breaks is not productive and should be eliminated from your schedule as far as possible.
4. Use deadlines to determine your priorities, working on those things that are due first.
5. Be value driven: complete what will have the biggest positive impact for others first.

**Question 5**

A time log should help you manage your time not just record it. How can it do that?

1. You can block out two hour periods per core project per day to ensure that you are not relying on chance to get things done.
2. By analysing the data on how you spent your time in the past, you can predict how you should spend it in future.
3. A time log is a tool that is first used for diagnosing problems with time use and then for planning optimal time use.
4. It would help if it were an online app that had the ability to record and manage your activities.
5. It can’t, actually, as only you can make the decisions needed to manage your time more effectively.

**Memorandum**

Question 1

d) Plan your time so that you get your work done and have personal time as well.

Question 2

a) She must commit to producing project plans and submit interim reports on their progress.

Question 3

b) A work-life balance actually improves your ability to work productively and focus.

Question 4

a) Analyse your list of projects into those that are core to your job description and those that are not.

Question 5

c) A time log is a tool that is first used for diagnosing problems with time use and then for planning optimal time use.