



UNIVERSITY OF
FLORIDA

EXTENSION

Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

Managing Time in the Workplace¹

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Introduction

According to Time Management Training.com, fifty percent of management time is spent processing information, and eighty percent of that information is of no value (Time Management Training.com, 2002). Therefore, managing time is very important. The following are five time-managing tips for managers in the workplace:

1. Prioritize your tasks;
2. Get the job done right the first time;
3. Do not waste time;
4. Delegate tasks;
5. Avoid procrastination.

Tip 1: Prioritize Your Tasks

As a manager, there will be interruptions, questions, and probably some disasters throughout the workday. The key is to remain focused on important tasks and small jobs that must get done to prevent overlooking anything. According to Marshall Cook in *Streetwise Time Management* (1999) one of the best ways to prioritize is create a “to-do list.” Creating

the list can be very important because there are a few *do's* and *don'ts* to remember. First, list all the tasks that need to be accomplished, and to be most efficient, rank them in order of importance. Remember to keep the list realistic. If the list is too long it will be discouraging and overwhelming. Some tasks may need to be carried to the next day's list if they are not completed by the end of the day. If the high priority tasks are large, break them down into smaller jobs, which will be less overwhelming (Cook, 1999). Figure 1 is a list of things a manager should remember when prioritizing tasks.

Things to Remember When Prioritizing Tasks

1. Do not overload your list—be realistic!
2. Rank tasks in order of importance.
3. Schedule time for breaks and mistakes.
4. Schedule long-term tasks and short-term jobs.

Source: *Mind Tools, Inc.*

Figure 1. Prioritizing Tasks.

The second step to prioritizing is asking *what is important* and *what is urgent*? When a task or job needs attention immediately, it is urgent. Something is important if it relates to your core values or

1. This is EDIS document HR 014, a publication of the Department of Food and Resource Economics, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL. Published May 2002. Please visit EDIS at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>
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motivations in life (Cook, 1999). According to Marshall Cook in *Streetwise Time Management (1999)*, every decision you make falls into one of four categories:

1. Urgent and important;
2. Important, but not urgent;
3. Urgent, but not important;
4. Neither important nor urgent.

Decisions that are *urgent and important* will need immediate attention and will impact life values. For example, you receive a telephone call that the conveyor belt at work has shut off, and you have to make a big presentation in two hours (Cook, 1999). Both decisions need immediate attention, and both are important.

Decisions that have no sense of immediacy are *important but not urgent*. For example, long-term strategic planning or associate evaluations are two cases of important decisions that need to be made but are not urgent.

Decisions that do not relate to your key values are *urgent, but not important*. For example, a colleague needs to talk to you about a client or the e-mail icon is flashing.

All other decisions you make in the workplace are *neither important nor urgent*. Examples of these decisions are reading the newspaper or surfing the Internet.

Once you are able to categorize your decisions you will be able to prioritize better, which should help you manage your time more efficiently.

Tip 2: Get the Job Done Right the First Time

Thirty percent of a manager's time is spent "fire fighting" or fixing problems that do not have to be problems (Time Management Training.com, 2002). These problems are due to mistakes that managers and associates make as they execute their jobs. The key to avoiding mistakes is acknowledging the problems that cause the mistakes and then correcting

the problems and determining what *to do or not to do* to prevent them from reoccurring.

It is extremely helpful to question associates about what you are doing as a manager that is adding complexity to their tasks. Be sure that you do not discipline the associates when they criticize tasks. If the associate suggests a solution, it is imperative that you follow through with the request. The benefit to this approach is gaining respect and trust from associates as well as solving problems in day-to-day tasks. This should minimize the time spent on each job.

A manager should be able to detect a pattern of mistakes and find a simple resolution to the problem. For example, if associates are having difficulty remembering how to use the photocopy machine, it may help to post instructions on using the copier close to the machine to prevent wasting time. If time could be saved every day, it could be used for additional tasks (Cook, 1999).

Tip 3: Do Not Waste Time

When associates do not fully understand the purpose of their jobs, a lot of time is spent questioning the significance of specific tasks. This can result in tasks being done incorrectly, which wastes time. This is why it is important to spend the initial time explaining the procedure of the task, its purpose, and its significance. The associate should work more efficiently if he understands the task.

Another way to eliminate wasting time is to reduce the time spent in meetings. Figure 2 gives a summary of quick tips for streamlining meetings. As a meeting organizer or chairman, everything should be ready and prepared before the associates arrive. Meetings should be organized so that associates can review and process the information and prepare ideas or questions before the meeting. This would ensure more productive meetings.

Tip 4: Delegate Tasks

Because effective time management is the goal, delegating should be a tool in your time management tool kit. While delegating tasks may not actually save time, its real purpose is to give tasks to the

Quick Tips for More Efficient Meetings

1. Announce purpose of meeting beforehand.
2. If decision is to be made, give time limit for replies.
3. Limit meeting to set amount of time, do not run over!
4. Begin meeting at 11 am—discourages long meeting.

Source: Perry Smith, "Rules and Tools for Leaders, 1998.

Figure 2. Efficient Meeting Tips.

appropriate people. If you as the manager spend a lot of time supervising the associates, it would be valuable to have an assistant to sort through messages, open your mail, and answer the phone. This requires a certain level of trust and confidence, and you must let the assistant accomplish the tasks in his own way.

It is also useful to “swap” or assign certain tasks to specific associates that complement their actions (Cook, 1991). If one person likes answering the phone but hates to file paperwork, and the other prefers to file rather than answer the phone, assign the responsibilities accordingly. Of course this would require observing the associates and discussing their actions and their *likes* and *dislikes*. As a result, the associates should be more efficient and productive.

Tip 5: Avoid Procrastination

Time management is at its worst when people procrastinate. Some people procrastinate because they simply do not want to do the job. The job could be as simple as filing a stack of papers or more complex such as fear of failure, lack of adequate information for the task, or bad habits (Cook, 1999).

Fear of failure is a common reason for procrastination. If fear has been identified as the problem, focus on the source of the fear and try to determine the consequences of action or lack of action. This should help reduce the fear so that tasks can be undertaken quickly (Cook, 1999).

If procrastination is due to lack of information, consult with a supervisor or research the task to obtain the necessary information. Stop wasting time thinking about the problem and fix it.

Unfortunately, if procrastination is basically a bad habit, it is going to take effort to correct the

problem. One suggestion provided by Marshall Cook is to focus on the positive benefits of completing the task.

Conclusion

Focusing on these common areas of managing time should reduce the amount of time spent on each task. Prioritizing is simple once a to-do-list is utilized that fits your style; this requires the ability to distinguish what is important and/or urgent during the day. Adjusting the way tasks are executed will save time and minimize procrastination. Delegating tasks to the most appropriate person will reduce wasted time for you and others. Finally, dealing with the sources of procrastination will go a long way to making you an effective manager of time.

References

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