



Time in a Bottle

By Linda S. Eck, MBA, RD, FADA

Use your hours and minutes to optimum advantage by adopting these proven time management techniques.

You have a bank account where \$1,440 is deposited every day. But, at the end of each day, what you haven't spent is taken from you. How would you spend all this money every day? In reality you have 1,440 minutes to use every day and what you don't use you lose. So, how do you use them?

Time management is a big challenge for many professionals who try to juggle a myriad of responsibilities in their life. Is your life in balance for home, leisure, and career? Or, do you find yourself spending a disproportionate amount of time on just one of these activities? Take a minute and check where you stand. Rate each of the items below

- | | |
|---------------|------------|
| 5 = always | 2 = rarely |
| 4 = often | 1 = never |
| 3 = sometimes | |

Home

1. There are so many demands placed on me that I feel anxiety and stress.
2. Responsibilities at home are so great that I feel angry with my lot in life.
3. My family complains I don't spend enough time with them.
4. I insist those around me live up to my expectations.

Leisure

1. I feel cheated out of time "just for me."
2. My favorite hobby has been ignored.
3. I feel guilty when I take a vacation.
4. I put off getting regular exercise.

Career

1. I feel guilty about devoting so much time to my career.
2. I resent having to bring work home.
3. An inadequate income causes me frustration.
4. I feel guilty when my productivity at work suffers because of home demands.

Now, count the number of each 5,4,3,2,1 you have. Take each of those numbers and multiply by the number you assigned to the statement. For example, if you scored 3 statements with a 5, you have 15 points. Add all the points together. If your score is 10-20 you have excellent balance in your life; 21-30 is good balance; 31-40 is fair balance; and 41-50 is poor balance.

You need to evaluate what you are doing compared to what you must do, what you should do, and what you don't have to do. Have you considered prioritizing your work according to the 80:20 rule? That means doing the 20 percent that gives you 80 percent of the results you are looking for first.

Stress management experts say that only 2 percent of the average person's worrying time is spent on things that might be helped or somehow improved by worrying. The other 98 percent of time is wasted – 40 percent of things never happen, 35 percent of things you can't change, 15 percent of things turn out better than expected, and 8 percent are useless, petty worries. An obvious (though hard to abide by) conclusion: consciously refuse to worry about anything unless you have good reason to believe that worrying about it can actually do some good.

Consider what you are doing that could be done by someone else. Can you trade services or hire help to accomplish that task? Are you efficient or effective? The efficient person tries to figure out the best way to get from point A to point B. The effective person figures out if the trip is even worth the effort.

Can you batch tasks? Can you make most of your phone calls between a certain time? Can you schedule meetings on just one day a week? Can you run your errands on the way to or from work? Consider doing things when others aren't doing them. Eat lunch at 11:45 or 1:15. Dine out on Wednesday or Thursday night instead of Friday or Saturday night. If you went to work 15 minutes earlier or later, would you miss the traffic rush?

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Time theft comes from many things – interruptions by visitors and telephone calls, “fire-fighting,” meetings, paperwork, and procrastination. How do you waste time? If you work 240 days a year and you spend 15 minutes a day on hold, you lose 60 hours a year. Reading and writing unnecessary memos may take you 32 minutes a day or 128 hours per year. Unnecessary meetings waste 72 minutes a day or 288 hours per year. Just those three activities alone total 476 hours or 59.5 work days! What could you accomplish with that extra time?

How can you save time with phone calls? Are your calls screened so you take only those that you need to? Have you established a preferred time for calls? Do you group outgoing calls? Do you minimize socializing? Have you considered standing while you are on the phone?

Have you determined your “prime time”? This is the time of day that you are most productive. It is during this time that you should do important, difficult, or complex tasks. During your “down time” – when you are more sluggish – you should plan to make phone calls, attend meetings, or do busy work. Do you have a “To Do” list? Can you delegate anything on that list? Have you considered your prime time and controllable time? Making daily plans and checking off completed actions gives you a sense of accomplishment.

For some people, the issue with time management is a lack of organization. Here are 10 steps for getting organized:

1. File, don't pile. Take the time to make complete files, and keep your filing up-to-date. If you pile instead of file, you might have trouble finding things.

2. Don't be a “pack rat.” It is virtually impossible to keep everything organized. Some things are not worth the trouble. These should be thrown away.

3. Get organized in manageable pieces. You can't organize everything at the same time. Break the problem down into manageable pieces, and set yourself a completion schedule for each piece.

4. Organize your organizing. Make a list of things that need to be organized, and prioritize the list. (Be sure to consider whether those at the bottom of the list are worth the effort.) Start at the top and work down the list.

5. Make and maintain dated “tickler” files. A “tickler” file is simply a file organized by dates, for example, by months. Maintain a file for each month and put notes in it about whatever needs to be done that month. Then the notes will be there waiting for you when the time comes. An alternative is to insert a blank page in your planning calendar and put them on one page so you don't lose those little pieces of paper.

6. Set goals for yourself. Be specific and include deadlines. Break complex problems into manageable units. Saying you want to be rich someday is not a goal; it is a dream. But saying you want to earn a specific amount by a specific time, is a goal.

7. Set deadlines for yourself. Be realistic, yet push yourself some, too. Remember if you don't have time to do it right, when will you have time to redo it?!

8. Make and follow to-do lists. If you don't get everything done, transfer what is left over to the next list.

9. Be realistic. Unrealistic goals, schedules, to-do lists, etc. are detriments to getting organized.

10. Prioritize. The key to being organized is not in having everything under control, but in having the right things under control.

If you are a procrastinator, take these eight steps to improve your time management.

1. Analyze your fear of doing a task.
2. List the tasks and projects you need to complete and set a target date to accomplish each.
3. Plan your time.
4. Tell someone you trust about your plan. This makes you more accountable for following through.
5. Give yourself a deadline.
6. Do the hardest task first.
7. Learn to recognize the excuses.
8. Reward yourself for small accomplishments.

Finally, use those small bits of time to accomplish many tasks. For example, in 5 minutes you could make an appointment, make a list, write a note, water plants, file your nails, or clean out your purse. In 10 minutes you could buy a card, order tickets for a concert, repot a plant, clean up your desk. In 30 minutes you could go through backed-up trade publications or newspapers, or exercise. Do you keep reading material not only in your bathroom, but in your car for those times you are waiting for a child or spouse?

One final thought from Horace Mann – Lost: Somewhere between sunrise and sunset, two golden hours, each set with 60 diamond minutes. No reward is offered, for they are gone forever.

So, how do you spend your 1,440 minutes each day? ■

Linda S. Eck, MBA, RD, FADA is a professional speaker, writer, and consultant. She directs the DMA program at Lehigh Carbon Community College (Schnecksville, Pa.) and is a consulting dietitian in long-term care for Genesis Eldercare Hospitality Services. Contact her at LSECK-RD@AOL.COM or 20 Worman Lane, Bernville, PA 19506.

More on Time Management at Annual Meeting

Linda Eck, MBA, RD, FADA will provide even more valuable time-saving tips during her presentation, “Time Management Techniques,” at DMA's 42nd Annual Meeting in Norfolk, Va. this summer. Eck's session is scheduled for 8:30 – 10 a.m. on Thursday, July 25.