Time Management Tips

Prioritising and Planning Time

With more demands on our daily working and personal lives, prioritising the challenges we take on and working in a smart way has never been so important. These time management tips have been designed to help you plan and prioritise your time more effectively.

The information below has been prepared and presented by KSL Training and should be used as a starting point to help you think about which tips if implemented, will help you the most in your daily working and personal life. You will also need to consider the policies and procedures of the company you work for, which we cannot take account of here.

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1. Tips for prioritising your time
2. Tips for planning and controlling your diary

1. Tips for prioritising your time

There are a number of simple guiding principles to follow when prioritising how you will spend your time whether at work or in your personal life. Listed below are a few of these principles that you can apply to your own situation:

Pareto’s Law: The 80/20 Rule

Pareto’s Law helps us to prioritise our time more effectively to ensure we focus on doing the right things at the right time. The concept works on the premise that:

- 80% of what we achieve takes 20% of our time
- 80% of what we achieve takes 20% of our effort

We therefore need to focus on the important 20% of our job role and ensure our core activities relate to achieving the business objectives. Taking some time to review how you spend your time in say one week, could help you to identify aspects of work that you get involved with that do not provide real benefit to the organisation or could be delegated to someone else whose role is more suited to the type of work.
In order to review your time, consider taking a typical week and logging down how you actually spend the time including all those unplanned telephone calls, quick interruptions and tasks you ended up completing that were really not that important or urgent.

**Urgent and Important Tasks**

To also help us schedule our priority tasks during the course of our day, week and month, we can use the Urgent and Important Grid to determine if and when we should schedule any particular task.

![Urgent and Important Grid](image)

**To Do Lists**

To ensure all key tasks are undertaken and not forgotten, some people like to write up a “To Do List” which will capture everything you need to do or manage yourself. If you are someone motivated by ticking off tasks you have completed, this type of list may work for you. However, you must be careful that some form of prioritization is awarded to these tasks to ensure you achieve the most important things for the business. You will also need to schedule time into the diary management system you use to achieve the high priority tasks. To help, categories are allocated to each of the tasks – see below.

**Task Categories ABC or HML**

When scheduling tasks to be undertaken within a diary or planner, some people find it helpful to categorise their lists of things to do into different categories. It is important if using these categories that you quantify what these A, B and C categories mean, e.g. for a customer service department

- Category A directly affects a customer – complete within 12 hours
- Category B complete within 2 working days
- Category C complete within 5 working days

Using the urgent and important principle, the categories would probably work as follows:

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• Urgent and important tasks will certainly fall into category A
• Urgent and non-important tasks are likely to fall into category B
• Non-urgent and important tasks are likely to fall into category C, although as the important task gets closer to the deadline, you may move this up to category B, particularly if they feature as an integral part of the business objectives
• Non-urgent and not important tasks could be challenged whether they are in fact that critical to be done at all or whether they need to be delegated elsewhere within the business

It is with this in mind that some people work effectively with grouping their tasks into HML, i.e. High, Medium and Low, and some like to use colour to see at a glance what needs completing with the highest of priority. Similar principles with the urgent and important tasks as in the ABC categories apply.

Setting Clear Goals/Objectives

As we have mentioned earlier, ensuring you are working to SMARTER objectives that focus on the key needs of the business, will ensure that you are prioritising your time in an effective way and undertaking the key tasks the business needs you to achieve. Regular scheduling and review of your job objectives with your manager will ensure that you remain constantly in touch with the business.

Check that your objectives are SMARTER, i.e.

Specific: States in clear terms what outcome, result or behaviour is to be achieved

Does it specify:

• Improved level of quality, quantity or use of resources
• A new/innovative result
• A faster timeline, or
• An improved behavioural outcome?

Measurable: Includes a description of the desired outcome and/or measurable results

• Will you know from information, data or observation when it is achieved?
• Does it specify – What? How much? How well?

Achievable: A realistic expectation, given time and resources

• Are sufficient resources, authority level and required skills in place?
• Does it require a stretch of effort?

Relevant: There is a clear link to the goals of the department, division, the company and its values.

• Will it matter when it is done?
• Does the objective support relevant goals?
• Does it deal with a key aspect of the job?
**Time Bound:** There is a time limit or deadline by which the objective must be achieved, and there may be a time frame to track phases of completion in an action plan

- When is the objective to be completed?
- Is there a timetable for milestones or checkpoints?

**Exciting:** The owner is motivated to achieve the goal/objective

- Which key task within the objective are you motivated to achieve?
- How can you motivate yourself to achieve any aspects/tasks that you do not currently relish or look forward to achieving?
- Can someone else help you? Do you need further clarity, help or support?
- How will completing the task help your personal/career development?
- How can you break up the task to make the activity more enjoyable?

**Reviewed:** There are scheduled reviews with your manager to review how well the objective is being progressed

- How frequently are you reviewing each objectives progress?
- Do you seek support or assistance if you are struggling achieving a particular part of your objective?
- What are you learning from reviewing the achievement of the objective?
- How are you applying what you have learnt from the achievement of one objective to another?

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**2. Tips for Planning and Controlling Your Diary**

Whatever method of scheduling system you use, a paper based diary to an electronic timekeeper to a virtual assistant, you need to adopt some guiding principles to placing tasks into the system if you are to utilize the time you have most effectively.

**Guiding principles for scheduling tasks**

**Allocate "Prime Time" in your schedule:** Reserve blocks in your schedule for activities that require your top concentration. This could be an hour to two hours each day, dependant upon your job role. During this time, make it clear to others that you are not to be disturbed.

**Prioritise achievement of core job activities:** Focus on the core activities that help the business deliver its key goals through your job objectives and key projects.

**Prioritise difficult tasks:** Discriminate between the routine and the difficult tasks and give the latter priority on your 'to do' lists or weekly schedule.

**Schedule similar tasks together:** Completing similar tasks together can save you time, as you do not have to repeat finding the same resources or information to help you each time.
Plan activities requiring high concentration levels: Schedule particular times for those activities that require a high level of concentration.

Use technology to help you: Consider the most effective method of communication with others. Can an audio or videoconference save you time conveying the same message face-to-face?

Ensure frequent accessibility and communication: Ensure frequent accessibility and communication through email, phone, etc so that you can achieve what you need to through others, and ensure your key contacts can normally communicate with you on a daily basis. This will reduce poor decision-making and wasting of time and personal effectiveness.

Allow sufficient time for the tasks you schedule: Unfamiliar tasks will often take longer than we originally thought, so better to schedule sufficient time and allow for unforeseen contingencies, than to find you are having to work in the evenings to cope or not finishing other important tasks.

Plan time in for managing and responding to change, the unexpected and emergencies: Change inevitably happens and emergencies do arise. Planning some time in your diary for these means that you can be far more effective in responding to these changes.

Schedule planning time for the following week and important meetings/activities in advance: Ensure that you always have sufficient planning time during the course of the week so that you do not find yourself having to prepare for work events during the evening. Also allow time for planning at either the beginning or end of the day (for the next day).

Avoid back-to-back meetings: If meetings are scheduled next to one another, it is unlikely that you would be sufficient fresh, focused and planned for the second or third meeting of the day without a sufficient break. It also means you are unable to address any emergencies easily or manage last minutes changes effectively.

Consider if the task could be delegated: If the task can be delegated, do it early on, delegate the whole job, provide a clear brief, establish a start time and agree a review time.

Keeping yourself motivated to achieve the tasks

Work for a set period: Force yourself to spend a set period of time before you allow yourself a break.

Take frequent breaks: Take frequent short breaks to avoid fatigue. Don't let yourself be distracted into another activity during the breaks, and be firm about their timing and duration.

Record successful results: Note the frequency with which tasks turn out to be less fearsome than expected. Use this knowledge as a reference to help overcome future anxieties.

Give yourself a reward: Reward yourself for removing difficult tasks from the pile.
Break down the task: Divide large tasks into bite-sized chunks in order to make it easier to get started on a project.

Start with the easiest stage: When you have broken down a project, pitch in at whatever stage is easiest to get the task underway.

Set clear goals: Set yourself clear goals for every work session and for the day (no more than three per day).

Set personal deadlines: Set your own deadlines for tasks where they are not externally imposed.

Avoid distractions: Ensure that your immediate environment is conducive to concentration. It should be as free as possible of external distractions and interruptions.

Prioritise your workload: Every day, decide on the most pressing matter, then work through the most urgent task first, followed by the less important tasks. This will help alleviate any feelings of being overwhelmed and, of course, make you more efficient.

Use peak concentration times: Recognise that there will be certain times of the day when your levels of concentration are higher. These will vary from person to person - all our body rhythms are different. There may also be times of the working week when your ability to concentrate is lower. For example, accumulated fatigue may mean that Friday afternoons are low concentration times.

Use colour in your scheduling system: People often find the use of a colour scheme to highlight different types of tasks and information more interesting or the eye than black and inspire them to complete the day.

Weekly Planners

To help you plan and control your diary/scheduling system, it is recommended that you have a weekly or monthly planner that enables you to focus on your key priorities in your business and personal life.

Only you can best determine which frequency works best for you, as it will depend on the nature of your work, your organisation's policies and procedures and your own body clock in terms of the time of day you work at your best. The example weekly planner provided below takes into account some of the guiding principles discussed in the earlier tips.

Example Weekly Planner:

This example weekly planner is based on the premise of a traditional working week. Please adapt it to suit your typical working week and add your personal time off to make it truly effective for you. Once you have completed an example working week for yourself, you can store the template and re-use each week. Obviously, some of the core activities will remain, so the time factor involved in producing this planner becomes negligible.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a.m.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09:00</td>
<td>Communication update e.g. email, voicemail, post</td>
<td>Communication update</td>
<td>Communication update</td>
<td>Communication update</td>
<td>Communication update</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00</td>
<td>Prime Time: Reading</td>
<td>Prime Time: Goal 1</td>
<td>Prime Time: Goal 2</td>
<td>Prime Time: Goal 3</td>
<td>Prime Time: Project Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00</td>
<td>Attend team meeting</td>
<td>1:1 review with manager</td>
<td>Communication update</td>
<td>Communication update</td>
<td>Clear up outstanding issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication update e.g. check emails and return phone calls</td>
<td>Communication update</td>
<td></td>
<td>Communication update</td>
<td>Communication update</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00</td>
<td>Lunch with colleague</td>
<td>Lunch with customer</td>
<td>Shopping</td>
<td>Lunch with mentor</td>
<td>Own time</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lunch</td>
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<tr>
<td>p.m.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13:30</td>
<td>Attend project meeting</td>
<td>Face-to-face meetings e.g. key clients/customers/colleagues</td>
<td>Face-to-face meetings e.g. key clients/customers/colleagues</td>
<td>Development time e.g. personal learning, networking, training colleague</td>
<td>Preparation and review time e.g. plan next week’s schedule, prepare for next week’s meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15:30</td>
<td>Manage emergencies</td>
<td>Thinking time</td>
<td>Communication update</td>
<td>Communication update</td>
<td>Resolve important/non urgent issues</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication update</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Communication update</td>
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<tr>
<td>16:30</td>
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<tr>
<td>17:30</td>
<td>Gym</td>
<td>Home</td>
<td>Swimming</td>
<td>Friend’s birthday celebration</td>
<td>Weekend away</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eve</td>
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Core Activities

Your Weekly Planner will be tailored to your own type of work as well as your work and personal priorities. However, most people’s job will be made up of some core activities such as:

- Planning day-to-day workload (to-do lists, prioritizing, getting things done)
- Medium to long-term planning (establishing the year’s objectives and steps to achieving them, planning projects or complex tasks)
- Implementing and achieving job results (objectives, projects, meetings)
- Working with customers and managing customer relationships
- Communicating with internal colleagues (meetings, emails, written correspondence, reading, phone calls)
- Managing and responding to changes and emergencies
- Managing/delegating others (letting go, handing over, allocating tasks, training others and following up)
- Managing work relationships (boss, team, networking)
- Personal development (acquiring feedback, learning time, appraisal)
- Review and follow up (creative and analytical time, monthly reports, review of projects/objectives, 1:1’s)
- Promoting healthy living (taking breaks, stress relievers, exercise)
- Travelling (to and from work, meetings, different work locations)

Considering these core activities as you plan your week ahead will help you to remain focused on the key priorities in your work and personal life.

We hope these tips are helpful to you in prioritising and planning your time more effectively. If you have any suggestions for future tips and articles, please let us know using our contact form.

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