

The importance of effective time management

According to Antoinette Lortan, Executive and Life Coach and owner of Human Mirror Coaching and Consultancy, effective time management plays an integral role in improving the quality of your everyday life by helping you to reduce stress, gain control and self-confidence, and give you a sense of achievement by increasing your productivity.



Time management is a deliberate act that should be constantly revisited to ensure that you are still making the most of the time at your disposal. Time management is the process of planning and exercising conscious control over the amount of time spent on specific activities to increase effectiveness, efficiency and productivity. Time management is straightforward, but it takes self-awareness and self-management.

Lortan teaches that effective time management is the key to personal success; it allows you to be in charge of your life, accomplish more, work more efficiently and make better decisions. "When you are pressed for time and have to make decisions, you are more likely to jump to conclusions and not fully consider all the options available, which leads to poor decision making," she says.

When it comes to practical application, it is important to start off by analysing how you currently go about managing your time. Do you have a monthly plan that you break down into weekly and daily objectives? Do you prioritise and re-prioritise your tasks daily before you leave the office? Effective time management starts with being able to prioritise your activities to determine whether they are urgent, important, both urgent and important, or neither urgent nor important. "People with poor time management skills tend to prioritise tasks, and therefore their time, according to who shouted last and loudest. Interestingly, loudness normally correlates with seniority, which discourages most people from questioning and probing the real importance and urgency of tasks received," says Lortan.

The following time management matrix has proven to be very valuable in assisting with the prioritisation of tasks and assigning time to them. Lortan explains that people tend to spend most of their productive time in quadrants 1 and 3, while any spare time is typically spent in quadrant 4, which consists of activities that 'steal' time, efficiency and productivity. She adds that most people spend the least time of all in quadrant 2, which is the most critical area for success, development and proactive self-determination.

	Urgent	Not urgent
Important	<p>1 - DO NOW</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> real major emergencies and crisis issues significant demands for information from superiors or customers project work with imminent deadline meetings and appointments reports and other submissions staff issues or needs problem resolution, fire-fighting, fixes serious urgent complaints <p>ACTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subject to confirmation of their importance and urgency, these tasks need doing now. Prioritise tasks that fall into this category according to their relative urgency. If two or more tasks appear equally urgent, discuss and probe the actual requirements and deadlines with the task originators or with the people dependent on the task outcomes. Help the originators of these demands to re-assess the real urgency and priority of these tasks. These tasks should include activities that you'll previously have planned in box 2, which move into box 1 when the time slot arrives. If helpful, you should show your schedule to task originators to explain that you are prioritising in a logical way, and to be as productive and effective as possible. Look for ways to break a task into two stages if it's an unplanned demand — often a suitable initial 'holding' response or acknowledgment, with a commitment to resolve or complete at a later date, will enable you to resume other planned tasks. 	<p>2 - PLAN TO DO</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> planning and preparation project planning and scheduling research and investigation networking relationship building thinking and creating modelling, designing, testing systems and process development anticipative, preventative activities or communication identifying need for change and new direction developing strategy <p>ACTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> These tasks are most critical to success, and yet, are commonly the most neglected. These activities include planning, strategic thinking, deciding direction and aims, etc., all crucial for success and development. You must plan time slots for doing these tasks and, if necessary, plan where you will do them free from interruptions, or 'urgent' matters from quadrant 1 and 3 will take precedence. Work from home if your normal place of work cannot provide you with a quiet situation and protection from interruption. Break big tasks down into separate logical stages, and plan time slots for each stage. Use project management tools and methods. Inform other people of your planned time slots and schedules. Having a visible schedule is the key to being able to protect these vital time slots.
Not important	<p>3 - REJECT (DIPLOMATICALLY)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> trivial and 'off-loaded' requests from others apparent emergencies ad-hoc interruptions misunderstandings appearing as complaints irrelevant distractions pointless routines or activities dealing with accumulated unresolved trivia duplicated effort unnecessary double-checking boss's whims or tantrums <p>ACTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scrutinise these demands ruthlessly, and help originators — even your boss and senior managers — to reassess the real importance of these tasks. Practise and develop your ability to explain and justify to task originators why you cannot do these tasks. Where possible, reject and avoid these tasks immediately, informing and managing people's expectations and sensitivities accordingly; explain why you cannot do these tasks, and help the originators find another way of achieving what they need, which might involve delegation to another person, or re-shaping the demand to be more strategic, with a more sustainable solution. Look for causes of repeating demands in this area, and seek to prevent re-occurrence. Educate and train others, including customers, suppliers, fellow staff and superiors, to identify long-term remedies, not just quick fixes. For significant repeating demands in this area, create a project to resolve the cause, which will be a quadrant 2 task. Challenge habitual systems, processes, procedures and expectations, often justified with: "We've always done it this way." Help others to manage their own time and priorities, so that they don't bounce their pressures on to you. Question old policies and assumptions to see if they are still appropriate. 	<p>4 - RESIST AND CEASE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> unnecessary and unchallenged routines 'comfort' activities; computer games, net surfing, excessive cigarette breaks chat and gossip, face-to-face and telephonic social and domestic communications silly emails and text messages daydreaming and doodling interrupting others reading irrelevant material unnecessary adjusting, tidying, and updating equipment, systems, screensavers, etc. over-long breaks and canteen/kitchen visits embellishment and over-production passive world- and TV-watching aimless travel and driving <p>ACTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> These activities are not tasks; they are habitual comforters that provide a refuge from the effort of discipline and proactivity. These activities affirm the same comfort-seeking tendencies in other people; a group or whole department all doing a lot of this quadrant 4 activity creates a non-productive and ineffective organisational culture. These activities have no positive outcomes, and are therefore demotivating. Often, they may be stress-related, so consider why you do these things, and if there's a deeper root cause, address it. The best method for ceasing these activities and removing temptation to gravitate back to them is to have a clear structure or schedule of tasks for each day, which you should create in quadrant 2.