Setting Priorities

Doing The Right Things At The Right Time
Setting Priorities

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One of the problems with managing time is knowing how to plan each day and, as the day progresses, deciding what to do next. What you have choose is what activity should take priority and get done now.

In the medium to long term there may be projects that require a lot of time and effort. What is the best way to fit these into a busy schedule with conflicting pressures on your time?

We all face choices and decisions that we have to make on managing our time, many times each day. Personally, I find that while it is easy to fill my time with activity and be busy, there are times when I look back and wonder if all that effort has actually achieved anything. Also, I am sure, like me, there are things you always wished you had done but never got round to them. So I am now going to explore how to set priorities, how to deal with competing priorities and the importance of managing your manager.

If you have a busy job or social life there are choices that you need to make when you are planning your time. It would be nice to be able to plan everything logically and work to a pre-prepared schedule, but life has a habit of getting in the way.

Everyone has 24 hours in each day. During that time we have to work, sleep, spend time with loved ones and spend a bit of time with ourselves. Why is it that some people seem to be so well organised and achieve so much?

Recently, I was working with Jan, who works in Customer Services for a Financial Services company in London. She has a very busy job answering customer queries and helping solve problems. At one point she said in a very frustrated voice “I wish the phone would stop ringing so I could get on with my work”.

The problem was that her frustration was very obvious in her tone of voice and was affecting the way she was responding to her customers. Customers with problems don’t want to talk to someone who is not concerned, or who seems to want to be somewhere else.

I had to point out to her, very diplomatically, that her job was answering the phone and that because of the nature of her job we had to look at different ways of her managing her time so that her customers continued to receive the service they deserved, but that she could also feel she was achieving her objectives.

She needed, first of all to decide exactly what the purpose of her job was. This is the first step in learning how to set priorities and deal with conflicting priorities.
Exercise

Write down in a single sentence what your job is and why it exists. For example, if you are in sales your job purpose could be something like “To achieve my sales targets as agreed with my sales manager, to retain existing clients and to grow my client base by 10% each year.”

Write down your job purpose. Keep it simple. Show it to your manager and get their agreement that it is correct.

The reason you need to be clear about your job purpose is to ensure that when you are setting priorities and deciding what to do next, that you can answer the question "Is this next task I am about to start moving me nearer to achieving my job purpose, or not?"

If it is, we define the task as being important. This is a specific definition for the purpose of managing your time. A job may need to be done and you may have to do it, but if it doesn’t move you nearer to achieving your job purpose it is considered not-important.

Another aspect of looking at priorities is to decide whether a particular task has a deadline attached to it. If it has a timescale it is classified as being urgent.

By combining important, not important, urgent and not urgent we can get 4 categories of task, which can be combined into what we call the priority grid. This is based on work done by Steven Covey in his book 7 habits of highly effective people, published by Free Press.

The Priority Grid

![Priority Grid Image]

Exercise

If you had 4 tasks to choose between; one from each quadrant, in what order would you do them. Write down your order of preference.

Most people say what they would do first is to tackle the task that is important and urgent. An example could be to present your business plan to your board of directors at their meeting on Thursday at 3 o clock. These are things that must be done now or very soon and take precedence over everything else.

The preferred next choice of most people is the important, not urgent task. These are the jobs that we keep putting off that can make a real difference to our effectiveness at work. An example could be to appraise the performance of members of your team.
Most people say they would then tackle the urgent but not important task. An example here could be to fill in your expense forms. These may have a deadline, but the task, in itself, doesn’t move you nearer to achieving your job purpose. The built-in time limits to these tasks ensure that these things do get done. The key is to do them as quickly as possible with the minimum quality required.

The final category that people say they would tackle is the not important, not urgent task. An example could be to make a coffee for yourself at work. There are many things that are neither important nor urgent. We often do them because they give us the feeling of activity, or being busy doing something.

This is not what happens in real life!

In reality, what happens is that people prioritise based on urgency rather than importance. What they actually do is different to what they say they would do.

The order most people prioritise tasks in real life is:

1. Important and urgent
2. Urgent but not Important
3. Not urgent and not Important
4. Important but not urgent

The real lesson here is that in reality, what gets left till last or doesn’t get done at all are the important, not-urgent tasks. Most of the really important things in our lives are not urgent; they can be done now or later. In many cases they can be postponed forever, and in too many cases they are.

Examples of these are long range planning, improving systems, self-improvement, writing an article, improving relationships. This is the area that truly determines effectiveness.

Where you have competing priorities, say for example you identify 3 important not urgent tasks, these in turn must be prioritised so you can begin working on the most important task first.

When we observe people at work, we see that most people set priorities according to urgency and this usually leads to three categories.

1. Must be done today
2. Should be done today
3. To be done sometime

Try setting priorities first in terms of importance by asking yourself:

1. Does this activity contribute directly to the purpose of my job?
2. Does it have a bearing on my short-term objectives?
3. Will it help me achieve my personal goals?

A final consideration is the TIME/BENEFIT RATIO; unimportant and perhaps non-urgent things are sometimes best done now, so leaving you free for more vital things. Then again it can be best to delay important items until you have an uninterrupted block of time.

The payback is that by completing more of the important, not urgent tasks you will be seen as being more successful and they may just have to promote you.
Have you heard of the Pareto principle? Vilfredo Pareto was an Italian philosopher who noted that 80% of the land in Italy was owned by 20% of the population. Management thinkers have taken the basic principle and applied it to a number of work activities.

For example, 80% of our effective work is done in 20% of our time. Note the word effective. In sales terms, 80% of our business comes from 20% of our customer base. In production terms 80% of product problems are caused by 20% of product defects and so on.

What this tells us is that we can be more effective by changing the way we prioritise work by identifying exactly what makes up the less effective 80% of how we spend our time. No one can be 100% efficient and there are things that have to be done that don’t directly contribute to our job purpose. However, by making small alterations in the way we prioritise our time we can achieve more of the important, not urgent stuff and achieve more.

Next time you make a list of things to do, remember, if there are 10 items on your list completing the 2 most important tasks will probably have the same impact as completing the other 8.

Tips

Write down your job purpose and agree it with your manager
Write down a list of what you want to achieve:
• Today
• This week
• This month
• This year

Categorise each item on your list according to importance and urgency
Tackle the important and urgent stuff first.

Get the not important stuff out of the way.

Start work on the important, not urgent stuff by setting some deadlines.

Make room in your schedule for completing the important not urgent stuff.

Exercise

Analyse the following 10 statements. For each statement decide which they are in:

1. Important and urgent
2. Urgent but not Important
3. Not urgent and not Important
4. Important but not urgent
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I must read the paper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I must attend the management training course next month</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I must prepare some induction training for new staff members</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. I must update my CV by next week</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. I must go down and put some more money in the parking meter</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. I must learn how to be more assertive with my manager</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. I must train the sales team on objection handling at today’s meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. I must review the way we deal with customer complaints</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I must learn how to use Outlook</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I must get my hair cut</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Answers. Although open to interpretation, most people say that statements 2 and 7 are important and urgent, 4 and 5 urgent but not important, 3,6 and 9 important not urgent and 1 and 10 not important and not urgent.

Managing your manager is an important part of setting priorities at work. Most of us, unless we run our own business, have a manager to report to. One of the most common faults of managers is that they often set very unclear objectives for the people they manage.

Some managers set objectives but keep changing them.

If you are going to have a clear idea of your priorities, your manager needs to be involved. Also, if you have conflicting, or competing priorities there needs to be clarification so you know you are doing what is required of you.
While it is right to tackle jobs in terms of their importance rather than their urgency, there are barriers to setting priorities that can frustrate your efforts to become a better time manager.

- You have unclear objectives
- You have conflicting objectives
- You have too big a workload
- You have insufficient resources (money/people/technology)
- You lack certain skills
- You work in a very reactive environment where things constantly change

This is where you need to have the confidence to manage your manager. In chapter 11 we will look at how to be more assertive. Being assertive means getting what you want and need without being aggressive. It is about having the confidence to meet with your manager and ask certain questions like:

1. What do you want me to achieve in the next month, 6 months, and in the next year?
2. What are my priorities?
3. How are we going to measure my progress and how often?
4. What standards of performance will you measure me by?
5. How will we communicate with each other?
6. What training will I need to do the job well?
7. What resources will I be given?
8. How often do we need to meet to discuss progress

You need to understand, as does your manager, that there will probably not be enough time to do everything, so you must find the time to do the most important things.

Also, despite the fact that you may work in the same office, it is still important to meet formally on a regular basis to discuss progress. The most common cry for help I hear when working with clients is members of staff saying “I don’t know how I am doing”.

Setting priorities can also be effective in making your life outside of work more rewarding and satisfying. Most of us today who work too hard work longer hours and get increasingly stressed.

How often do we get back home from work, grab something to eat, crash out in front of the television and fail to give our partner our full attention. They say about life that it isn’t a rehearsal. Sometimes we need to reassess where we are going and make changes.

Achieving the right balance between work and home is important to our relationships and our health. The same process for prioritising your work life can be applied to your family life and to what I call your you life. As we saw in chapter 2 the most successful time managers set themselves clear goals.

Once we have clear goals we can act on them. We can then prioritise them as with our work goals.
Think of some areas of your non-work life you would like to improve. Often later in life, when it is too late, we look back on the things we said we would like to do, or to do more of:

• Learn a new language
• Write a book
• Spend quality time with your children
• Spend quality time with your partner
• Take up a new sport or hobby
• Learn to salsa
• Run a marathon
• Take regular exercise

If you look at this list all the above items can be classified as important but not urgent.

Tips

Learn how to manage your manager
Make sure you have clear goals
Make sure you have the resources to do your job properly Agree how you are going to communicate with each other Start to apply these principles to your non-work life

Think about all those things you always said you would do
Start working on the important, not urgent stuff