Developing time management skills

Introduction

If you're looking to develop good time management skills, Victor Hugo—the 19th-century French author behind enduring novels like Les Misérables—is a great example of what NOT to do. Hugo was a master procrastinator. In fact, between a busy social calendar and the distractions of shiny new writing projects, he managed to delay writing his book The Hunchback of Notre Dame for more than a year past its initial due date.

His publishers, needless to say, were not pleased. Eventually, they became so fed up they issued Hugo an ultimatum: Deliver the book within six months or pay a hefty fine.

In order to make up for lost time, Hugo took extreme measures. In her memoirs, his wife Adèle describes how he locked his formal clothes away while he was working and wore only a large grey shawl, so he wouldn't be tempted to go out. Until the book was done, he couldn't socialize—unless he wanted to face the embarrassment of going out wearing nothing but the 19th-century equivalent of a snuggie.

Luckily, there are more effective ways of accomplishing your most important tasks than resorting to near-nudity. In this post, we'll outline the skills you need to develop so you can avoid making the same mistakes. By developing good time management skills, you'll be able to reclaim your time, take control over your workload, and maintain a healthy work-life balance—all things Hugo would have done well to learn.

1. Positive self talk

As cheesy as it may sound, good time management skills start from within. Psychologists have discovered that the way we perceive ourselves has a profound impact on how we act—if you label yourself as "having poor self-control" or being "bad at time management," that can function as a self-fulfilling prophecy. In fact, self-perception makes such a big difference that sometimes identity precedes behavior. This applies to many domains in life. Want to read more books? Start calling yourself a reader. Want to boost your physical fitness? Start referring to yourself as an athlete. If you begin to start thinking of yourself as "organized" or

"good at managing your time," chances are, you'll start to act like someone who has good time management skills.

2. Self-knowledge

It can be hard to know how to improve your time management skills if you can't identify what your problem areas are. If you're unsure of where to start, we recommend trying an experiment: For a week, log every hour you spend at work. You can do this in a dedicated time tracking app like Harvest, or simply in a spreadsheet or notebook. For each block of time you spend working on a task, make note of what you were doing and any distractions or interruptions that arose. Don't try to change your behavior or routine just yet—simply observe what happens. At the end of the week, review your log. How did it go? What issues did you notice? Review the other skills on this list and see if there's anything you can work on improving.

This will make it easier to slip into a deep work state more easily when you're there. And once you leave that space, your brain will register the shift as permission to relax into your evening or weekend, making it easier to power down and resist the urge to overwork.

3. Prioritization

Feel like you never make progress on your to-do list? You're not alone. Writing a to-do list might make you feel organized, but it's probably less helpful than you think. That's because a list provides an overview of everything you have to accomplish, but doesn't force you to make a plan on how you're going to achieve it. Without a game plan, it's easy to feel unsure of where to start, or fall into common productivity pitfalls like focusing primarily on your most urgent tasks and neglecting non-urgent but important ones.

To help practice prioritization, you can use time management tools like the Eisenhower Matrix to identify which tasks are most deserving of your time and attention. Here's how it works—instead of creating a to-do list, sort all your tasks into the four boxes below based on their urgency and importance. Focus the

majority of your attention on the urgent and important box, but don't forget to schedule time to complete non-urgent but important tasks—ideally sooner rather than later.

4. Organization

Being able to prioritize your tasks is a great first step, but your projects don't exist in a vacuum. Learning to prioritize can help you know what to work on, but it doesn't help you with when. You have lots of things vying for your attention and without that context, it can be difficult to make meaningful progress on important tasks. That's where your need to put your organization skills into practice.

Many people find it helpful to keep a daily timeboxed schedule to organize their work. Timeboxing is the act of assigning specific blocks of time on your calendar to different tasks. This strategy is effective because it puts your work in context of deadlines and other commitments, forces you to think critically about which tasks to prioritize, and most importantly, helps you set an implementation intention—a plan for how and when you'll complete your most important tasks.

5. Healthy boundaries

Coworkers always asking for something? A lot of distraction comes from not knowing how to say no to others. And while it's good to be a team player, often the best way to help your teammates is to help yourself first. There's a reason, after all, why airplanes advise you to put your own oxygen mask on before assisting others. But managing the influx of requests you receive can be tricky.

One helpful way of thinking about requests from coworkers is if you're not comfortable giving an absolute yes, you should say no. Think about it: If you can't offer an enthusiastic yes to a request—it's not aligned with your priorities, it's outside of your skillset, or you simply don't have time to take on anything else right now—the kindest thing to do is to gently turn it down. That ensures you protect your time for your most important priorities and don't sit on this task, saying you'll do it but procrastinating, which allows your coworkers to protect their time too.

6. Delegation

For people in leadership roles, one of the hardest time management skills to master is delegation. Until you become a manager, you spend your whole career doing things—but once you're in a leadership position, it's critical to spend less time doing and more time leading. If you find yourself becoming too involved in the tactical side of projects, take a critical look at your team. Who could step up and take on more responsibility or learn new skills? Remember—an important part of your responsibility as a leader is not just to deliver great results, but to help the people you're leading grow. This is a chance to not only reclaim your time, but develop their potential.

7. Mindfulness

While it may not be the first thing you think of when it comes to good time management skills, mindfulness plays a huge role in managing distraction. People with strong mindfulness skills are able to pay attention to their thoughts, recognize when they're veering off-task, and gently pull their attention back. Practice meditation or try this simple mindfulness exercise to help you get better at managing distraction.

1. **Pause and notice your emotions.** When you notice yourself feeling distracted, pause and take a moment to consider what preceded this feeling. Often, distraction is a reaction to discomfort. You might be feeling anxious about a deadline, worrying about your skill level, or simply craving a snack.

2. **Write down the trigger.** Make note of the time of day, what you were doing, and how you felt when you noticed the internal trigger that led to feeling distracted.

3. **Explore your sensations.** How did you feel before you got the urge to give into a distraction? Did you notice any physical symptoms, like a tightening in your chest? Make note of these as well.

4. **Surf the urge.** Try sitting with the discomfort using the "ten-minute rule": Tell yourself you can give in to the distraction (if you still want it) in ten minutes. This allows you to grow accustomed to the discomfort and see if it will pass.

Often it will disappear, but if it persists, it may be a sign that you need to pay closer attention to the discomfort. Maybe you feel an anxious pull to do more reading because you haven't completed enough research before starting a new project. Either way, sitting with the urge for a few minutes provides you with valuable internal intel.

About time

Thanks to the drastic measures he took, Victor Hugo did manage to finish his manuscript—with time to spare. And he didn't sacrifice quality. Nearly 200 years after its initial publication, The Hunchback of Notre Dame still holds cultural capital. While I don't recommend modeling your work habits on Hugo's, his example does show that even the worst time managers among us can turn bad habits around. That's because time management isn't something you're born with—it's a skill you have to work at. With some patience and a whole lot of practice, anyone can learn how to improve their time management skills.

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