



# Mastering project time management

# Introduction

One of the most important things you learn in project time management is this: That not all time can be spent—otherwise, you'll be spent, and have nothing left to give. You can think of your calendar a bit like a piece of artwork. The same way you appreciate the subject of a painting more when it's framed by blank, negative space, so too can you only maximize your creativity and output when your tasks have a similar buffer.

Good project time management, then, is about identifying what truly matters and surrounding it with a touch of nothing. This helps you remain productive without burning out.

Today, project time management is particularly important because so many notifications and messages prey on your time. Time is a resource you can never have more of and managing it is about knowing how to use what you are given. Thus, it can be useful to question convention and ask yourself what is necessary and what is merely procedural baggage—those habits we've inherited that may not serve us, like default hour-long meetings.

When you get good at project time management, you unlock extra time in your day, deepen your focus, and get more done—all in the same hours. Very often, project time tracking and project time management software play a supporting role.

Here are four strategies for managing your time and the time of others on a project:

## 1. Create a workback schedule

Beginning with your project delivery date, work backward. What are the key milestones you'll need to hit? What stakeholders will need to sign off on each phase? What dependencies are there? (For instance, do you need to have the text of a web page written before your designer can start working on the wireframes?)

It's never a bad idea to assume that most activities—perhaps all activities—will take 20% longer than expected. Humans have a tendency to underestimate how long it takes to do things thanks to the [planning fallacy](#)—an optimistic cognitive



bias that leads us to believe things will be easier than they actually are.

Create a schedule in reverse order to hit all those milestones. For instance, if you need to deliver a schematic by X date, you'll need to proofread the final designed version by Y date, which means the design needs to be complete by Z date, and so on, until you hit the project start.

If you've used project management and time tracking software in the past, use that historical data to be more precise. Review past, similar projects. How long did you think they would take, and how long did they actually take? If it's a difference of, say 10%, and that tends to be consistent across projects, tack it on.

Harvest can help sizing and resourcing new projects, based on historical data.

## 2. Keep a project time tracking log

"What gets measured gets managed" may be the most famous thing management theorist Peter Drucker [never said](#), but it holds a grain of truth. If you don't know how you and your team are actually spending your time, you won't know how to improve your project time management.

Project time tracking, or tracking how long each activity within the project takes, can give you insight into the project's health. It's a way to see how you're progressing in relation to your goals, and is important whether you bill hourly or by project.

For teams that bill hourly, project time tracking provides an incontrovertible record that clients can't argue with. For teams that bill by project, it gives you a sense of whether you have more time left or, much more common, have gone over.

The knowledge that you've spent too many hours on a project doesn't always allow you to bill that particular client more. But over time, the data can help you grow better at scoping.

Design agency [The Charles](#) uses [Harvest](#) for time tracking and to conduct retrospectives. "We can look at previous projects and say, 'Okay, well how does this stack up against this similar type of project? Oh, wait, we're way over. Why? Well, oh, because we mis-sold or misrepresented what we thought this was going to be'" says Aaron Edwards, CEO.

If nothing else, project management with time tracking keeps you honest. It's all well and good to think you spent a certain amount of time, and bill clients according to a feeling, But knowing the actual time it took can shift your thinking. You may be alright with this arrangement, but is your team? Your CFO? Are you really doing right by your own organization? Time tracking encourages you to at least consider it.

Now, there is one aspect of time tracking that's a bit paradoxical. It takes time to record time. If you have people filling out spreadsheets to track how much they worked, that eats into their work, and more precise measurement may come at a cost. Time tracking apps like Harvest reduce this load with easy-to-use mobile and desktop apps.

### 3. Prioritize work/life balance

Recall our talk earlier of negative space and filling some parts of your calendar with nothing? This is your opportunity. Give yourself and your team proper time off so you can really be on and present while working. That naturally leads to better work.

One study found that employees who take more than 10 of their vacation days off each year are twice as likely to receive a bonus or be promoted as those who don't. Time off may boost your immunity (top of mind, anyone?), increase marital satisfaction, reduce day-to-day stress, and if you spend some of that time sleeping in, make you more creative.

Good project time management clears the way for better work/life balance by giving teams more time to plan and spend less time scrambling to catch up. "Time tracking reveals if somebody is overburdened and that becomes an immediate conversation," says Michael Kucera, COO at the web design firm Zehner.

If you have a project time tracking app, managers can even monitor when employees are "overheating" and need to be told to take a break.

## 4. Continuously improve your time management in project management

After each project, conduct a retrospective. Make this part of your process, so you collect it even if you feel rushed to begin the next project, because it's only in measuring how you use your time that you can know how to improve.

In that retrospective, ask, what went well? What unexpected challenges arose? How did your estimates stack up with reality?

The more accurate your time data is, the better you can understand how time is actually being spent. Sure, a project may have run overtime, but do you really know why? If you're using a project time tracking and management software, you can drill down into specific activities that ran over. You can conduct reenactments and explore counterfactual questions like, "What would it mean for our profitability if this stage always occurred on time?"

If you really want insight, rank your project time management effectiveness for each project on a scale of 1-5 stars. You can then analyze the low-star and high-star projects in your time tracking tool to detect patterns when things run under or over.

Data like this helps you produce better estimates. And while it makes clients happy, it'll make employees even happier. Nobody likes to be rushed or fall behind and everybody likes to do the most with the time that is given. For that to happen, you need a little blank space around each task.

Some breathing room, if you will.

That way, projects aren't rushed.

People have time to prioritize their mental well-being.

And you can give each project your most creative output.

To start conducting better project time management today, create a workback schedule, keep a project time tracking log, prioritize work/life balance, continuously improve, and look into using a time tracking software.



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