Time management strategies

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Introduction

Time is our most important non-renewable resource. For businesses that bill hourly, time is literally money. Yet it can be significantly more challenging to wrangle the hours in our days than manage money in a spreadsheet.

"How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives," writer Annie Dillard reminds us. Would you rather spend your work life absorbed in deep projects, building meaningful relationships, and solving important problems that make people's lives better? Or awash in a flood of frenetic energy as your attention is frittered away by endless emails, meetings, meetings that could have been emails…(you get the picture)?

Luckily, there are a ton of great time management strategies that anyone can adopt—it just takes a little practice. Below, you'll find four key time management techniques that will help you regain control over your schedule, get more done, and improve collaboration with your team.

1. Scrap your to-do list

Yep, you read that right. To-do lists aren't actually that effective. They provide too much choice, don't differentiate meaningfully between kinds of tasks, and lack the context of deadlines and other obligations. This can lead to problems, ranging from paralysis (where do I even begin?) to prioritization issues.

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. Using tools like the Eisenhower time management matrix can help identify which tasks are most deserving of your time and attention.

To take this approach a step further, it can be helpful to schedule work blocks for each task in your calendar. This is called "timeboxing" and it's an effective time management strategy because it eliminates the paradox of choice, contextualizes your work within your other commitments, and provides an implementation intention—a plan for when you're going to do the work you decided was most important.

Try it yourself

For individuals: Create a daily schedule
First thing in the morning, pull up your calendar and make a plan for your day (you can also do this the night before). Block off any meetings or other obligations first, then look at the time you have left. Try to reserve longer blocks of time for deep, focused work and shorter blocks for quick and easy tasks. If something comes up and disrupts the schedule you had planned, don't stress. Simply adjust your calendar based on what you can still realistically accomplish today and push off any less urgent tasks to tomorrow.

For teams: Practice "schedule syncing"
Timeblocking your day in a shared digital calendar, such as Google or Microsoft, automatically makes your work schedule visible to your teammates. But you can take this strategy a step further by planning regular review times between employees and managers. These review sessions don't need to be long (10 -15 minutes should do), but should provide managers and employees the chance to look at each other's schedules and ensure their priorities are aligned. This can be especially helpful for people who report to multiple managers—by regularly checking in, they can ensure that everyone is on the same page about how they spend their time.

2. Use timers to focus your attention and enter a state of flow

Ever feel so absorbed working on something that the world just fades away? That's flow. It's a happily humming state in which you're totally immersed in an interesting challenge, with razor-sharp focus that allows you to produce your best work. Flow is the crème de la crème of productivity (not to mention that it has a ton of emotional benefits). But amid all the distractions of the modern workplace, it's not always easy to get in the zone.

One way to make it easier to enter a flow state is to use timers to carve out an uninterrupted work block for yourself. You can follow an established time management technique like the Pomodoro Technique (working for 25-minute sprints with 5-minute breaks) or carve out whatever block of time works best for

you. You can time yourself using a dedicated time tracking app like Harvest, or just use the timer app on your phone.

Before you begin a timed work block, be sure to set an achievable, yet challenging goal for yourself, based on what you hope to accomplish. For instance, "write 500 words" or "debug 25 lines of code." Then, at the end of your work session, you can check back and see how well you did.

Try it yourself

For individuals: Create a pre-work ritual
Before starting a timer, mentally prepare yourself for the task ahead. Close your email, set your status as 'away' on Slack, don noise-canceling headphones, or do whatever you need to do to focus. By creating a ritual to mark the start of your work block—for instance, making a cup of coffee, closing extraneous tabs, and starting a timer—you create a routine and make it easier for your brain to associate these actions with entering a flow state.

For teams: Cultivate a culture of focus
To prevent teammates from distracting each other, it may be helpful to create a universally understood signal that someone is focusing and should not be disturbed. One great feature of the Harvest Slack Integration is that you can see what someone is working on via their Harvest timer. Consider making it a team practice that you check to make sure someone isn't absorbed in a deep work task before you ping them. You could also manually change your Slack status to show you're focusing, or use a visual cue, like wearing a silly hat (a thinking cap, perhaps?).

3. Process email and chats in batches

Email is the scourge of the modern worker. The average office worker receives hundreds of emails per day and studies have shown that it takes the average person around 64 seconds to get back on task after checking email. If you leave your email inbox open in another tab or app, you're leaving the door constantly open to distraction. It's too easy to "just have a quick look" and then get caught up responding to messages—much to the detriment of your other tasks. The fragmentation in your focus is particularly toxic to the flow state that's so essential

for productive work.

In recent years, the growing popularity of team chat has also introduced new possibilities for distraction. While apps such as Slack and Teams have made it easier than ever to collaborate, these tools come with their own set of problems. "Group chat is like being in an all-day meeting with random participants and no agenda," says Jason Fried, Founder & CEO of Basecamp, a company that, notably, offers a team chat product.

That's why it makes sense to limit checking messages—whether email or chat—to certain times of the day, so it doesn't negatively affect your other tasks. Productivity experts call this "batch processing." This strategy pairs particularly well with timeboxing. By designating time blocks to tackle your inbox and group messages at regular, specific times throughout the day, you remove the anxiety that you might miss something important. The rest of the time, you can put your full focus into working on your most important projects.

Try it yourself

For individuals: Designate times for email and messaging in your schedule
Schedule recurring times each day where you'll process emails and chat messages in batches (for instance, 15 minutes in the morning, 15 minutes in the afternoon, and 15 minutes at the end of the day). The rest of the time, close your inbox and chat window so you won't be tempted to look at them. **Pro tip:** You can snooze messages in Gmail and set them to reappear on a specific date when you need them. You can also use reminders in tools like Slack and Teams to resurface important notes during your set review times.

For teams: Set clear expectations around email and group chat
Establish team guidelines around email and group chat so people know they aren't expected to be constantly online. These guidelines could be as specific as establishing set "quiet hours" (for instance, no email or chat messages between the hours of 6pm and 8am) or as broad as laying out your team's general philosophy when it comes to messages. **Pro tip:** If you're clearing out your email inbox at the end of the day, schedule your outgoing messages using Microsoft office or a plugin for Gmail like Mixmax so they arrive the next morning and you don't foist the work stress on someone else.

4. Gamify time tracking

Tracking your time is one of the best ways to collect data on past projects and apply these insights to future work. For teams, especially ones that bill hourly, it's a key way of ensuring that pricing estimates are accurate and that projects remain on track. And on an individual level, it can be helpful too. Tracking your time is a great way to examine your work habits and see if there are parts of your routine you can optimize. Maybe you discover you actually are a morning person and should reserve that time for your most demanding projects. (Who knew?!)

While it's possible to track time on paper, for most people, it's much more practical to use time management software like Harvest to keep a digital record of your work. You can start a timer directly within the app when you begin a work block, or fill in your hours manually at the end of the day. You'll stay more consistent (and get the most out of it) when you make time tracking fun, so check out the tips below for ideas on how to gamify your time tracking practice.

Try it yourself

For individuals: Keep a deep work scoreboard
To motivate yourself to carve out time for deep, focused work, use your time log as a personal scoreboard. Try to set a challenging, yet achievable goal you can strive for. For instance, you might aim for 20 hours of focused time a week, about half of your total working hours. Consider: What daily or weekly "score" is attainable, but would still push you to the limits of your abilities?

For teams: Turn time tracking into a team sport
Teams can also use gamification to promote a culture that celebrates time tracking and makes the process more fun. For instance, at The Charles creative agency, gamification is baked into their time tracking process. "We do polls in Slack and get people to guess: Who sends the most Slacks? Who does the most work on a specific project? What was our worst burn project? How many hours were we over by?" says Aaron Edwards, CEO. "We try not to take it too seriously and have fun with it." These kinds of activities get the team excited about time tracking and—as a bonus—disseminate valuable insights that can help them as they're thinking about future work.

More time, fewer problems

Time flows steadily onward, whether we want it to or not. But by implementing some of the above time management strategies, you'll be able to make the best use of the time you do have, without feeling as though it's constantly slipping through your fingers. In turn, you'll be able to spend more time on the things that matter—leading to more meaningful projects, more meaningful relationships, and ultimately, a more meaningful work life.

Try starting with just one of the techniques above and trying it out for a few weeks. If it goes well, add another—this is called habit stacking and it's a useful strategy for adopting new behaviors by integrating them into old ones. For instance, if you start scheduling times to process messages, after a few weeks it won't be that big of a leap to start following a daily, timeboxed schedule.

Gain deeper insights into your time management habits and take your skills to the next level with Harvest, the best digital time tracking tool for teams. Start your free trial.

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