



Enough time

7 suggestions for reclaiming yours

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Introduction

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Value of time

What would you say if asked whether you had enough time? Most people would probably say that they had nowhere near enough time to achieve what they want or need to do. Yet those very same people can't seem to stop adding things to their already overloaded schedule. Even though time is a finite resource, they seem to believe they can continue to cram more and more in every day. The reality is that they end up never achieving anything because they just don't have enough time. Also in many cases the most important stuff gets overlooked or forgotten by more trivial items. Why? Simply, the time we all have available is finite.

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Knowledge workers may be constantly busy, but that doesn't make them either productive or efficient. It also doesn't mean that they are doing what is aligned with the strategic goals of their employer

– *Basex report: Information Overload: We have met the enemy and he is us Feb 2007.*



Why is time the most precious resource we have? Because we can never manufacture or create more. We can always earn more money but we can never generate more time, the best we can do is use what we have as effectively as possible. If you never seem to have enough time, do you actually know where your time is being spent? Do you actually know how much time you are spending on things or are you blindly trying to cram more and more in while in effect achieving less and less? Our time is a limited resource and we have to choose how we manage it carefully because once it is gone we can never get it back.

There is only so much we can all do in our day. Take away necessary functions like sleeping, eating and bathroom breaks and you end up with even less time. Have you ever stopped and asked yourself whether what you do at home, at work and with others is the best use of your time? Are there perhaps more important things that would give you greater pleasure and reward yet you seem to always stuck doing trivial and wasteful things? The choices we make with our time come at an opportunity cost. That being, what else could have been done with that time?

This document will provide you with seven simple steps to firstly help you understand where you are spending you time and then how you go about getting the most out of it. In the end, it is your time and it is up to you to manage it. You cannot complain about not having enough time if you allow random people, habits and distractions to constantly steal it away. In all of this, remember that there is no 'silver bullet', there is merely repetitive process of understanding, adjustment and understanding again. You'll never achieve one hundred percent

efficiency but hopefully this document will provide you with some suggestions that will enhance your existing toolbox of ways to make the most of what you've got.

There are many more additional strategies about dealing with time challenges that unfortunately this document can't hope to cover. More information about these can be found in the *Where to go from here* section at the end of the document.

If you are ready to start the process then read on.

1. Recording your time



The first step into better utilizing your time is to change nothing you currently do but simply start keeping track of exactly how you spend your time daily. What's important here is to record how you actually spend your day, not how you would like to or think you spend it. You need to provide yourself with an honest record of exactly where your time gets spent. The best bet is probably to buy a small note book that you can easily take with you everywhere, start each day on a new page and try and record where you spend your time as best you can for at least a week. If you miss a few things here and there don't worry, just record what you can.

The most important thing is that you record as much of your time allocation as you can.

At the end of each day, or at the beginning of the next, take a few moments to review what happened the previous day and fill in any gaps that may exist. Don't spend too much time analysing the results, just make sure you can account for as much of your time as possible over the week. This is exactly the process professions like accountants and lawyers perform on a daily basis. By closely tracking their time usage they can determine exactly how much has been allocated to each client and then how much each client should be charged. They realise that time is money (i.e. it is valuable).

After a week of recording you should start getting a pretty good idea of where your time is being spent. At the end of a week allocate an hour or so to examining the results you have collected so far. If you feel so inclined maybe create some categories to allow yourself to readily group your entries. Categories such as phone calls, emails, web surfing, relaxing and so on may help. Don't try and create too many categories to start with, just keep it simple. It may even help if you enter the information into a spreadsheet which will make analysis much easier.

Are you now able to get a better picture of where your time is being spent? Are you happy with the way that you've chosen to allocate it? Are there any simple changes that you can make

right now that will help? In many cases you'll probably find that you had no idea you were spending so much time doing certain 'wasteful' activities. If you do find some areas where you can make some simple changes then try and make them but keep your record taking going so you can determine whether any changes do in fact make a difference.

You don't need to continually recording every moment of everyday but when you feel that time is getting away and you are losing control it is always a good idea to go back to this simple method of recording where your time goes. Most people have no idea how they spend their time over a week. Therefore, they have no idea whether they have spent it poorly or wisely. You'd never spend your money without knowing where it's going would you? So why aren't you doing this with something more precious than money? Your time.

2. *Planning your time*

The next step in the process is to map how you actually want to spend your time. What do you want to achieve with the time you have? At this stage it doesn't matter how many things you put down just make sure that you get them all down, leave the sorting process until later.



When you have a look at your list you'll probably find that you are repeating a lot of small jobs on a regular basis. In many cases it makes more sense to batch these smaller jobs up into a single large job. A good example maybe how you deal with email. Are you interrupting your concentration to deal with each email as it arrives? A more productive approach would be to leave your email program closed until a certain time, open it, process all the emails in your inbox and then close it again. It may sound counter-intuitive to do less email to be more productive but the suggestion is that you at least try it and see whether it helps.

The same process can usually be applied to any number of repetitive jobs such as entering accounts, making phone calls and so on. Think of it like the way that you do laundry. You don't simply wash 2 socks because they've become dirty, that would be inefficient. You instead wait until you have a full load of laundry to reduce the amount of time that is spent washing. Shouldn't the same thing apply to other repetitive tasks you have?

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“Whoever has not two thirds of his day for him self is a slave”

- Friedrich Nietzsche



Also, when you look at your time usage report is there anything that you should be doing less of or totally eliminate? Maybe some time spent watching the TV could be better

allocated to other things. It is not a matter of eliminating what others may consider 'bad', it is simply a matter of examining your time usage report and asking yourself the question of whether this item is the best allocation of your time at that moment. Many people quickly find that there is a big difference between what they want to do and what they are actually doing. Planning allows you to better align what you want to do with what you are doing, which in the end makes you happier.

Importantly, we must also not neglect the time required for rest and relaxation. Ever wonder why you are so tired all the time and yet never seem to get anything done? The problem is you have not scheduled or allowed yourself 'down time' to recuperate. When a car runs out of fuel you pull into a petrol station and refill, the same applies here. You can never hope to achieve your ultimate potential in any aspect in your life if you're constantly running yourself down and not giving your mind and body enough time to recuperate. So when you start planning your time, don't forget that you need to schedule some 'down time', including enough sleep. It is pretty certain that once you start doing this you will not only feel better but you'll actually start achieving more because you have given yourself time to think about what task to perform next.

3. Prioritizing



The next step is to put a priority on all the items that you listed in the previous step. The guiding principle here needs to be the value of each item to your well being. In short, what are the most important items to you? If, for example, you are going to worry about something that you may not like doing then you should give it a higher priority because unless it gets done you are going to worry about it. Such worry will detract from time that you have allocated to other things. So if it needs doing then give it a priority so it gets done.

This is where most of the traditional time management solutions start kicking in by helping you prioritize what you need to get done. If you can find a system that helps you achieve this then use it but don't blinker yourself to the opportunity another system may offer. This whole process is one of constant adjustment and fine tuning. Remember, most systems that you find have been developed by someone else for someone else. To be successful for you, you need something that suits the way you are, the way you work and the way you think. That means that should feel free to borrow from others but make sure that you continue to customize it for what works for you.

A good example is the use of tasks in most email programs. Initially you put a task in your list and set a date on which you wish it to be completed. Given other circumstances, this task fails

to get completed by the assigned date and thus become an overdue task. If you keep using this system to prioritize your tasks you seem to end up with nothing but overdue tasks that you know you'll never get to. That's very depressing. Clearly, that's not the best way to help you set achievable priorities is it? All that is doing is reinforcing your poor allocation of your time.

Some tasks are repetitive and some need to be accomplished by a certain date such as paying bills. But other projects you may have on the go simply need somewhere to be 'parked' so they can be removed from your mind and dealt with at a latter stage (*Step 7 Closing the open loops*). So even though solutions like task managers are excellent they need to be implemented with caution and the mind set around helping you be more productive rather than simply being a mechanism to provoke guilt.

4. Value your time

You need to begin to appreciate that your time is valuable. If you find that you never have enough time to spare then chances are you have allowed your time to become 'too cheap'. You are simply allocating your time out as if you had an unending supply and we know that is not the case for anyone. You need to spend your time wisely because you only have so much to go around. In short, you need to understand that your time has a much greater value than what you probably currently assign to it.



When people or tasks crop up, you need to be able to determine whether they are worth your time. If someone came up to you in the street and asked you for \$100 you would probably want to know what they plan to use it for before you handed over anything. Do you do the same with your time? Do you allow things like emails and meetings to siphon your time away at work? Do you happily give up your time whenever anyone needs to ask you even the most trivial item? It is not that you make yourself inaccessible or unavailable, you need to evaluate whether the time that is being asked of you is really the best use of your time at that moment. If people know they can simply walk into your office and interrupt you at any time they will continue to do so because they know you're giving your time away for free. If you answer every email as it comes in immediately people know that when they email you they will receive an almost instantaneous response so they will continue to do that. Just like if you knew where they were giving away free money you'd keep going back again wouldn't you? By not valuing your time you are telling people that they are free to interrupt you at any point. Until you put a stop to this you will only continue to reinforce that behaviour in those around you. Don't be afraid, remember, you are not stopping them wasting their own time, just yours.

Again, it is not to say that you want to become inaccessible or distant you simply need to set boundaries with your time usage, because if you don't other people will. If people want access to your time then try and make sure that they respect it enough to start scheduling it with you, because there potentially is no end to how much others can ask of your time and attention. Make sure that they provide information about how they plan to use your time and what outcomes they require. Finally, do your best to ensure that they stick to the appropriate start and finish times because if not, then that time is lost forever. Also, don't forget the suggestion mentioned earlier about batching (*Step 2 – Planning*). Is there an opportunity maybe to have just one meeting covering all the topics rather than several different meetings?

In the end, if you don't control your own time then you are destined to have it controlled by others. If you let 'junk' into your world, don't complain about these things taking time from you when you let them in. By increasing the value of your time and you will soon find that you'll make much better use of it.

5. Automation



Invest some time into examining the repetitive tasks that you perform every week and see if they can somehow be automated. Technology provides many fantastic tools that can automate much of your work day yet most people fail to utilize them. Things such as email rules can automatically sort emails into different locations and priorities, readers can automatically download web stories for later review and automated search queries can keep you up to date with information as it changes. Other things like RSS readers can batch up news and articles for reading at suitable times.

In your analysis process have a look at what the most common tools and applications are that you use everyday. Spend some time understanding how you use those tools and how you can potentially use them better. One prime example is the way that people use a web site like Google to locate information on the Internet.

For most information, people understand that there is usually something out there somewhere on the Internet. To find that information they typically use a search engine, Google being the most popular of these. However, how many people have actually taken the time to learn and use the more advanced features of Google? Using things like advanced search and inline operators can greatly improve the success rate when looking for information. Yet the vast majority of people use technology tools in their most basic incarnations and are thus missing out on much of the power. Many people probably also don't realize that you can configure

Google to automatically provide you with search results everyday based on fixed search requests. This is an excellent way to keep tabs on a product, technology or even an individual company.

Many are also probably unaware that most desktop applications provide an automation facility via macros. In many cases you can record a sequence of steps in the application and then replay them again some time in the future via a single key press.

Spend some time examining exactly what technology tools you use everyday. Invest some time learning the more advanced features of these products such as keyboard shortcuts, advanced parameters, macros and so on. It is these features of technology that are designed to save your time and effort but most people fail to use them. Also, when you examine your time usage record, look for items that you can simplify via any sort of automation because the less that you have to do the more time you will have available to allocate on the things that you want.

6. *Eliminate distractions*

Firstly, it has been proven that multi tasking is a myth. What is in effect happening is simply task switching. This turns out to be more inefficient because there is a delay as the brain comes to grips again with the new task in front of it. By constantly swapping tasks the brain has to work much harder as it changes focus constantly. This constant change makes errors and oversights far more likely. We achieve much more when we focus on a single task until completion and then move onto the next one. By attempting to multitask we are in fact half caring about the stuff we are doing and the results show.



Secondly, you need to create an environment in which you can concentrate and be productive when required and that means eliminating distractions. One simple suggestion, as mentioned previously (*Step 2 – Planning your time*), is to close down your email program once you have finished processing email. This way, when a new email arrives you won't be tempted by the distraction to see what it is all about. Another is to schedule different read and send times for email. Most email programs support the ability to delay emails leaving the Outbox. This allows you to process all the information in your Inbox and have any replies be delayed until that process is complete. In that way you will not generally receive additional emails in your Inbox while you are processing. Thus, you can more easily complete the job of processing everything that is currently in your inbox so you can then focus your attention on other matters, rather than being constantly distracted by incoming emails.

If you have issues with human interruptions then try and establish a time in which you are not available. Ensure that you communicate this to all parties. Once they understand that you have placed a much higher value on your time as previously mentioned (*Step 4 – Value your time*) you should find that their interruptions will dissipate because they can no longer interrupt you immediately. Initially, you cannot completely cut yourself off from the world around you so start with something small, maybe just an hour or so first thing in the morning. If that proves successful then you can consider increasing that as others get used to your ‘buffer zone’.

Our ability to generate ‘power’ is directly proportional to ability to concentrate. If we allow distractions then we are mismanaging our commitments. If we need to focus on the task at hand we should do that rather than permitting ourselves to be distracted by something else, usually of a lower priority, demanding our attention. In today’s digital age we don’t realize that distractions are not passive, they seek us out and we must continue to work hard to control these compulsions or our time will suffer.

7. Close the open loops



This concept is one of the big take aways from David Allen’s book “Getting Things Done”. His premise is that the reasons things are on your mind is that you want them to be in a different state from what they currently are. This means that you typically haven’t clarified the outcome, haven’t decided on the next step or haven’t ‘parked’ the item somewhere where you can return to it later.

The concept is that you need to transform the stuff in your head into actions and you need to record these actions in a location where you can easily refer back to them. For most people the most convenient place is simply using a notebook. However, utilizing technology we can greatly improve that ability without too much additional effort. Storing information in digital notebooks has many advantages over traditional pen and paper solutions. Information stored digitally can be shared immediately, it can be indexed for easy reference and it can be backed up.

There is no single solution for every individual, it is a matter of determining what works best for each individual. In many cases this maybe a combination of both methods. The important thing is the end result (i.e. using time effectively) rather than how that is achieved. In that respect, as mentioned earlier, it is important that all avenues of improvement be investigated.

By removing things from your mind and getting them ‘down’ somewhere for easy reference later you will find yourself significantly ‘unburdened’ by thoughts that you can really not act on

and are in fact distracting you from the task in front of you (*Step 6 – Eliminating distractions*). Once you have something down on paper it becomes much easier to ask, 'What is the next action required here'. You don't necessarily need to ask 'How do I get this done' you just need to ask, 'What is the next action I need to perform to move this closer to completion?' Don't complicate things and get caught up in areas that are not relevant at this stage of the game, simply keep progressing the task one step at a time.

As mentioned previously, multi-tasking is a myth (*Step 6 – Eliminating distractions*) and only serves to make you less productive and inefficient thereby wasting time better spent elsewhere. Therefore work on closing the open loops and unresolved issues in your mind or getting them 'down' somewhere to free up your mind to better deal with the task at hand. That way you are not allowing 'loose ends' to steal away your time.

Where to go from here?



In the end it makes little sense if you work hard to improve your time usage in some areas and then fritter it away in others. Success in this process is about a comprehensive approach to the issues of time management. Time doesn't distinguish between work and leisure does it? Neither should you. Your goal should be to guard against time leakages that prevent you from utilizing time in way that you want.

I have already created a number of freely available documents that deal specifically with technology solutions for improving technology. You can find many of these at

<http://www.slideshare.com/directorcia>.

Other suggestions include:

- The list of resources that are provided at the end of the document.
- The blog <http://supportweb.ciaops.net.au/blog> also covers many aspects of working more effectively with technology.
- The Computer Information Agency "Overcoming Email Frustrations with Outlook" books available at <http://stores.lulu.com/store.php?fAcctID=3557478>

Further documents and information about improving your productivity can be found at <http://www.ciaops.com/>.

If you are interested in receiving information about any upcoming documents please send an email to director@ciaops.com asking to be added to our regular newsletter.

Conclusion

If you feel that you don't have enough time these simple steps should allow you to firstly recognize where your time is being spent, understand why you are spending time there and finally some simple ways to optimize your time and provide you with a greater sense of accomplishment.

If you have any feedback on the information provided here please contact director@ciaops.com.

Resources

Advanced Google search help -

<http://www.google.com/support/websearch/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=136861>

Google Guide - http://www.googleguide.com/advanced_operators_reference.html

Keyboard shortcuts for Windows - <http://support.microsoft.com/kb/126449>

Mac OS 10 keyboard shortcuts - <http://support.apple.com/kb/HT1343>

Word keyboard shortcuts - <http://support.microsoft.com/kb/290938>

Outlook keyboard shortcuts - <http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/outlook/HP030842231033.aspx>

Firefox keyboard shortcuts - <http://support.mozilla.com/en-US/kb/Keyboard+shortcuts>

Internet Explorer keyboard shortcuts -

<http://www.microsoft.com/windows/products/winfamily/ie/ie7/quickref.msp>

Creating an email rule in Outlook - <http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/outlook/HP052428971033.aspx>

Getting Things Done, Stress Free Productivity (David Allen) - http://www.amazon.com/Getting-Things-Done-Stress-Free-Productivity/dp/0142000280/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1249436745&sr=8-1

Rescue Time - <https://www.rescuetime.com/>

How Different groups spend their day -

<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2009/07/31/business/20080801-metrics-graphic.html>

About

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Robert has a degree in Electrical Engineering as well as Masters of Business Administration. He is also a Small Business Specialist and Microsoft Certified SharePoint Professional. Robert has over 15 years of IT experience in a variety of fields and positions, including working on Wall St in New York. He was the co-founder of Saturn Alliance, an IT systems integration business in Sydney, Australia. He continues his involvement with information technology as the Principal of the Computer Information Agency. Apart from resolving client technical issues, Robert continues to present at seminars and write on a number of topics for the Computer Information Agency. Robert can be contacted via director@ciaops.com.

Company – Computer Information Agency (www.ciaops.com)

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With special emphasis placed on the business benefits of technology the Computer Information Agency is unique in its ability to work with companies to improve and streamline their processes utilizing the technology they already have in place. The focus is on providing an improved end result for the business which in the long run leads to greater productivity and profitability. More information about the Computer Information Agency can be found at <http://www.ciaops.com>.

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