

# Don't Just Manage Your Time – Track It

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Decades ago we started to learn about the forthcoming paperless office due to the advent and widespread acceptance of technology. Well, that did not happen even though electronic document management and knowledge management have come a long way since then.

Then we moved on the era of ease of communication and away from fax machines.

Emails, cellphones, voicemail and video conferencing were the tools for the future designed to make us more effective and productive. A decade ago 40% of US workers called themselves 'very' or 'extremely' successful but by 2005 that number had fallen to 28%.<sup>1</sup>

A common retort is now *"We are never able to concentrate on one task anymore. You take a little chip out of it and then you are on to the next thing. It is getting harder and harder to feel like you are accomplishing something really worthwhile."*

The average time spent on a work computer is now around 16 hours per week, compared to 9.5 hours ten years ago. We are all now bombarded with email, computer messages, cellphone and telephone calls and endless meetings.

Many of us are moving faster and faster and still knowing and feeling that we are accomplishing less and less. From that same research, twelve years ago 82% of US workers said they accomplished at least half their daily planned work, but that number has now fallen to 50%.

So has technology made work easier and quicker? Obviously not. By speeding everything up it has paradoxically slowed us down by fragmenting what we do, and in a lot of cases people being unable to distinguish the important from the so-called urgent.

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## Keeping Track Of How You Spend Your Time Is Not Time Management

For effective time management, you have to apply a time management system that will help you see where changes can and should be made.

Keeping track of your many daily activities and analyzing how you actually spend your time, can help you determine what changes you need to make.

This is where many people's attempts at time management fail.

They look at a specific day in their Day-Timer or Outlook calendar or on their PDA which is packed with activities from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. and don't know how to really analyze the information.

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<sup>1</sup> Survey by Day-Timers

So they fall back on the tried and true by eliminating a few activities and prioritizing others. But they haven't really managed anything; they've just rearranged it.

All the perceived problems and frustrations of the day's activities are still there – and at the end of their day they are still just as frazzled.

## **Manage Your Time With Time Management Categories**

*How do you actually manage time?* The secret is in the categories.

Look at your calendar for tomorrow. It is probably already full of events and activities that you are hoping to accomplish. As you work, or afterward, you will be filling in the blank spaces.

Now look at the list and categorize it. How much time during your working day did you actually spend:

(a) Putting out fires

\_\_\_\_\_. An unexpected phone call. A report that's necessary for a meeting that should have been printed yesterday. A missing file that should be on your desk. How much of your day was actually spent in crisis mode? For most people, this is a negative category that drains their energy and interferes with their productivity.

(b) Dealing with interruptions. Phone calls and people dropping by your office will probably top the list when you're assigning events to this category. Once again, for most people, this is a negative category because it interferes with (and sometimes kills) productivity.

Looking at and answering email falls into this category also. For me the analogy is talking to someone, but when the phone rings [and without even knowing who it is] picking up the phone and ignoring the person you are meeting with.

Email is similar to this. How many of us are working away on a task and hear the 'ding' as an email arrives and immediately look at it? How more productive it would be if we only had our email on for say one hour per day.

(c) Doing planned tasks. This is the most positive use of time during your work day. You are in control and are accomplishing what you intended to accomplish. Planned tasks can include phone calls, meetings with staff, even answering email – if these are tasks that you have put on your agenda.

(d) Working uninterrupted. You may not be working on a task you had planned to do, but you are getting to accomplish something, and for most people, this is a very productive, positive work mode.

(e) Uninterrupted downtime. Times during the work day that are used to re-energize and regroup. Lunch or breaks may count if they are uninterrupted. We all need a certain amount of uninterrupted downtime built into our day to be productive during work time.

Realign your effort into categories which produce effective results.

Use categories to analyze your work week. Go through the entries of each working day and categorize them. Keeping a running total at the bottom of each day will make it easy to see just how you've spent your time each day.

You now have the data you need to make changes to the way you spend your time.

Are you spending too much time putting out fires? Then you need to make the organizational or physical changes to prevent or defer these constant crises.

Do you lack sufficient time to be effective at completing major tasks or projects?

**Finally, rearrange your effort to spend more time on your CSF's – Critical Success Factors, and not busy work.**

**After all it is only by achieving your CSF's that management or the Board will determine how effective you are in your role.**

You won't be evaluated on the fact that you received and answered about 46 emails a day – half of which were unsolicited!

**If you do what you have always done,  
you'll get what you have always gotten.**

- anon