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HEG77-78 It's About Time

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It's About Time

This NebGuide looks at a simple time management system.

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An unusual resource each of us has is time. It's unusual because you can't save it for tomorrow, you can't borrow today some you had left over yesterday, you can't lend it to someone else, you can't leave it behind, you can't take it with you.

You can do only two things with time; use it now or lose it forever.

Let's look at a simple, sensible time management system. This system, as presented or in some modified version, works for many people, and can help you organize and get more of what you want from the time you have. After all, that's the real purpose behind better management of your time: to find time to do what you want to do.

This time management system has four basic steps:

1. Deciding what you want to accomplish or what you want to have happen to you;
2. Determining activities to reach each of these goals;
3. Making a daily "to do" list;
4. Setting your priorities each day.

Let's look at each in detail. You'll need three blank sheets of paper.

Where You're Headed--Your Goals

Try this simple exercise. Spend two minutes thinking about your goals: immediate, short range and long term. Where are you headed in life? What do you want out of life? What do you hope to accomplish in the next month, year, five years, 10 years, 25 years, your lifetime? Then take a sheet of paper and for two minutes write down your goals.

Look over your list. There's probably something on that list which you've been saying for a long time that you're going to do: learn to play golf or play bridge; lose 10 pounds, trace your family tree, finish your college degree (or start it), actually do the macrame you learned so long ago but can't seem to fit into your schedule now. *Right now* is the time to promise yourself you'll do it--whatever that "it" is on

your list.

You just made a list of goals which you feel are important right now. If you had made such a list a year ago, it probably would not be identical to this. And if you make a goals list a year from now, it won't be identical to your present list.

Since people and their situations and circumstances change, their goals change, also. So expect to revise your statement of goals occasionally. It's only natural.

With your list of goals in hand, you're now ready for step two.

How To Get There--Activities To Reach Your Goals

Pick one of the goals you're really serious about. Take another sheet of paper, write that goal at the top and spend two minutes writing down what specific things you can do to reach your goal. These activities may range from a phone call enrolling you in a course to actually taking the course. Or, you may start with a physical checkup with your doctor to be sure you are fit enough to participate in an exercise program.

Set this list aside for a few minutes and go on to step three.

Today, Not Tomorrow--Your "To Do" List

So far we've thought about the future. Now let's get to a time period more immediate, like tomorrow. Take another sheet of paper and spend two minutes writing down what you have to do tomorrow. Be sure to include at least one activity from those you just finished in step two to help you reach your special goal.

This is your "to do" list--the most fundamental tool of successful time management. It serves as a "reminder" and as a definite "action plan" as you go through the day. It usually takes less than five minutes to put together this list each day, but it can repay your efforts many times over by helping you "discover" and use hidden time you may now waste.

Your "to do" list helps you:

- decide what to do when you're presented with a few minutes or hours you hadn't planned on;
- determine what *not* to spend time on. By freeing yourself from nonessentials, you'll make more time for what really matters to you.

How does it do this? Let's go on to the fourth step in time management and I think you'll see how.

The "ABC's"--Setting Priorities

Look at your "to do" list. Some of the things need to be done tomorrow, others are not so important. In fact, some of the things you put down actually could wait until another day.

The fourth step (and the one that makes the whole system work) helps you see at a glance what's important and what can wait. That step is determining priorities for your "to do" list.

One way to set priorities is to use three letters -- A, B, and C -- to indicate how important each thing is. Use an "A" in front of those things on your list which *must* be done tomorrow (be sure to include that special goal-related activity). The letter "B" is put in front of what you would like to get done, but could wait. A "C" goes in front of the least critical items on your list. These "C" activities take up time but really have little value for you or your family.

As you finish one thing, or have a few extra minutes, look at your "to do" list. It serves as a constant reminder of what you've already decided to do that day and helps you use any extra time. To make it all work try to do as many "As" and as few "Cs" as possible. That's putting your "to do" list in action. It's also practicing good time management.

Cut Out the Clutter--Eliminating "Cs"

When you come across a "C" on your list tomorrow, ask yourself what would happen if you didn't take care of it today. If the answer is "not much," don't do it. If the dusting, filing, washing or whatever can wait one more day, let it wait and you go on to accomplish the "As" and "Bs" on your list.

Of course, some "Cs" may become "Bs" and even "As" if you put them off too long. But, you'll know that just as you'll know when you can forget a "C" forever.

TWELVE TIME SAVERS

1. Write down all appointments on a calendar you can carry. Use only one calendar. Don't get caught in the "it was on my other calendar" trap.
2. Do two things at once whenever possible such as using television time to do your exercises, filing your nails when talking on the telephone, or paying bills when you have to sit in the doctor's or dentist's waiting room.
3. Select the night before what you will wear the next day.
4. Have a special desk or place to do your paperwork.
5. Set up a filing system. Remember a filing system is *not* a place to put things; it's a place to find things.
6. Always carry a book or small project so when you have to wait, you have something productive to do (or "waiting" time may be your "think" time--and we all need some time to think).
7. Plan big jobs for times when you won't be interrupted.
8. Use both hands whenever possible. Train your "other" hand--whichever one that is.
9. Schedule disagreeable jobs between agreeable ones.
10. Leave out often-used items, or at least put them in easily reached storage spaces.
11. Use the tools, equipment and appliances best suited for the job at hand.
12. Learn to delegate some jobs to other family or staff members.

Dealing With The Unexpected

If each one of us was an isolated being, this system of time management (and all other systems) would work beautifully. But, as we all know, none of us are that isolated and independent. Children, spouses, co-workers, bosses, the telephone, an unexpected visitor--all can put the best thought-out time management plan in a state of total chaos.

How can you deal with these unexpected (and expected) interruptions? The key is flexibility. Keep your plan and your thoughts about what you want to accomplish flexible. After all, if you don't accomplish all that's on your "to do" list today, there's always tomorrow and the day after that. In fact, you probably won't get all your list done. But, if you're flexible, that shouldn't bother you. And this shouldn't mean that making a list is a waste of time.

If you need to be really flexible, try making a weekly "to do" list instead of a daily one. It isn't so important to know exactly when you'll get something done. It *is* important to do some planning, and for most of us that means writing the plans down. Written plans (whether they are done daily or weekly or whatever) give you a sense of direction and a plan of action.

When you are flexible you'll take time for your children, do the errands your spouse asks you to do, and you'll be able to handle whatever else comes up.

You've Got The Basics -- Now To Put Them In Action

By looking at your goal sheet occasionally and revising when necessary, by remembering to include activities to reach your goals on your "to do" list, by making a "to do" list every day; and finally, by remembering to set priorities on your "to do" list before you start the day, you'll be headed for better management of your time. You'll probably find more time to do the things you've always wanted to do. Enjoy them. You deserve it.

Variations on a Theme

No one time management system works for everyone. You may have to take a suggested system, try it out, add ideas you get from other places, such as from your friend or neighbor who always seems organized. Then keep reworking the system until you find what works best for you. Because your circumstances change, your system of managing your time probably will change, too. The key is finding a system that works best for you.

TEN TIME WASTERS

1. **Procrastination.** Putting it off until later never works because later never comes, and you never get it done.
2. **Disorganization.** Clutter and not knowing what to do next wastes time and energy.
3. **Diversions and distractions.** Some (such as children and spouses) can't be ignored, but others can be (such as limiting telephone calls by promising you'll call back when you've finished what's at hand).
4. **Too much involvement** in outside activities.
5. **Making excuses** for not getting something done. Use that time to do it, not to apologize for not doing it.
6. **Regretting** past loss of time. It's gone--regretting will not bring it back.
7. **Doing everything yourself.** One of the biggest time wasters both in families and on the job. If someone else can do it, teach them how.
8. **Inability to say "no."** That one little word can save you precious time.
9. **Fatigue.** When you're tired, it takes you longer to do something.
10. **Inefficient meetings.** Be sure the meetings you are in charge of benefit those involved, and that they don't waste their time and yours.

(NOTE FROM AUTHOR: If you read this NebGuide but haven't done the simple exercises, I urge you to take time now. Get three sheets of paper and a watch, go back and read this NebGuide again, and do the exercises as you go. Try the system--you may find it works for you.)

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