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EC90-431 Juggling Time, Work and Family

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Juggling Time, Work and Family



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JUGGLING TIME, WORK, AND FAMILY

Cheryl Burkhart-Kriesel, Sandy Hatter, and Kathy Prochaska-Cue

"I just don't have any time."

"I can't plan, people always interrupt me."

"Scheduling my time is too restrictive."

"Making a list doesn't work for me, I always lose it."

These statements sound familiar to many of us. They are just a few of the common reactions people have to the subject of time management. Everyone agrees that time is a valuable resource. Each of us has a limited amount of it to use for work, family and leisure activities. As more demands are placed on us, our decisions on how we use our time become more difficult. Making the most of it becomes a necessity.

To better manage time you first need to look at how two common time-wasters, procrastination and guilt, affect you. Then you are ready to learn how to set objectives and priorities, streamline your decision-making process, recognize scheduling hints and tools and effectively handle interruptions. Juggling the time demands of work and family, while working at a business in the home, requires additional considerations.

Your Worst Time Management Enemies

Procrastination and guilt — each can easily sabotage a time management plan. Teamed together they can drastically reduce productivity. Their use can become a habit. Strive to **unlearn** the tendency to put things off and to judge yourself by unrealistic expectations.

To understand procrastination you need to realize why you do it. Is it to avoid the feeling of success or closeness? Is it because you fear the results of the task? When you do procrastinate, is it at the beginning of a task or at the end? The answers to these questions may help identify the reasons behind the inaction.

Often the key to reducing procrastination is to find the right motivator. Will a change in the work environment energize you? Do you need to set up a system of rewards and positive reinforcement? The important thing is to move past the state of inaction

and **do** something. Once you get started on a task, momentum will build.

Guilt is best recognized by the "I shoulds" in life. "I should be doing better in my job" or "I should be a better parent" are common examples of guilt in action. Often this guilt is not appropriate. You either have unrealistic standards about yourself or you have no standard at all by which to judge yourself. Over a period of time the "I shoulds" drain motivation and create an atmosphere of hopelessness.

To combat the effects of guilt, set realistic expectations. Don't try to be a perfectionist. Focus on doing the things that are most important in life. If you follow that advice, the feelings of guilt usually diminish. Author Alan Lakein suggests that you ask yourself this question: "What is the most important thing I can be doing with my time right now?" The answer to that question can help you get back on track.

The First Step in Getting Organized

Before you can organize time, you have to know what you want and what you don't want from your life. To do this make two lists. Put "What I want more of" on the top of one list and "What I want less of" on the other. Write down at least ten items on each list. Some people may want to do this activity each day for one week to see if any new items appear on the lists. These records can be viewed as an inventory of your desires now. It also identifies your immediate or short-term objectives.

For long term objectives ask yourself, "On my 100th birthday, what will I tell people were my most important accomplishments?" Some real soul-searching is required to answer the question. The results of the exercise clearly bring forward what is most important to you in the future.

Once you know short-term and long-term objectives, you can design a time management plan that will work toward those results. Determining objectives is the single most important step in successful time management. Now instead of just doing many things right, you will be doing the right things!

By keeping the short-term and long-term objectives clearly in mind, your decisions about how to use time can be made much easier.

Prioritizing Your Time Demands

The demands on time can be put into three categories:

- 1) essential issues and concerns or priority A,
- 2) secondary efforts or priority B, and
- 3) marginal matters or priority C.

Sometimes these are referred to as A-B-C "to do" lists or the "must do", "should do" and "can do" lists.

Essential issues and concerns are those things that you **must do** to keep the family and work environment alive and well. You should be able to see how at least a few of these issues and concerns work toward your identified short-term and long-term objectives in life.

Secondary efforts seem similar to the first category but there is an important difference. While these efforts are very worthwhile and gratifying, they don't offer the greatest level of satisfaction and reward. This is because secondary efforts do not lead you toward your objectives in life. It is very easy to get side-tracked by these time demands.

The final group, marginal matters, are all the little things that often seem essential when really they are not. Some people feel that marginal matters must be handled first before moving on to other tasks. Unfortunately these tasks expand to fit the time allowed. You could spend virtually all of your time on these ever increasing demands and never work toward any of the things you want in life.

Successful time management requires that you focus efforts on priority A's—essential issues and concerns. Remember, it is working on these tasks that will lead toward your lifetime objectives.

Secondary efforts, priority B's, should be scrutinized very carefully. You may be able to adapt some of these demands to become more of a priority A item. For example, you find yourself heavily involved in a community organization. The rewards are gratifying yet it is taking you away from spending quality time with the family, one of your lifetime objectives. You might try to shift your role in the organization so responsibilities and activities can include family members in some way. This is just one example of how to alter a time demand. If it seems impossible to modify priority B's, consider the consequences if those demands were avoided partially or completely. The last priority area, C's, delegate, skip over, or ignore wherever possible.

As you work on each priority item, identify the things that can be done which produce the most results in the least amount of time. A classic rule in time management states that, "80% of the results come from 20% of the effort." If you really want to make an impact, target time and energy toward what really counts.

Streamlining the Decision-Making Process

A major time-waster is indecision. People can spend hours trying to make up their mind. It can be an agonizing process but it doesn't have to be. Dru Scott in "How to Put More Time in Your Life" suggests using a sequence of nine steps to get through the decision-making process. They include:

1. Clarify what you want most.
2. Study the situation or problem. Consider its history and forecast its future.
3. Compare alternative A with what you want.
4. Compare alternative B with what you want.
5. Seek out alternative C (better decisions are made with at least three alternatives).
6. Compare alternative C with what you want.
7. Compare the pros and cons of all three alternatives with each other.
8. Pick the alternative that best matches what you want.
9. Take action.

Unfortunately, most people usually follow the next sequence of steps. The thought process bounces from one topic to another.

1. "Shall I do alternative A or B?"
2. History of the problem situation.
3. "Shall I do alternative A?"
4. Advantages of alternative A.
5. Advantages of alternative B.
6. Other benefits of A.
7. Disadvantages of A.
8. More history needed.
9. No action.

It is easy to see how the second process keeps you going in circles...a real time-waster.

Another way to streamline decision-making, according to Scott, is to assign a time deadline to each step of the process.

1. Identify what you want most by ____.
2. Develop 3 alternatives by ____.
3. Compare alternatives and make decision by ____.
4. Implement decision by ____.
5. Evaluate results by ____.

It is important to follow the deadlines and to keep moving ahead. Once you have accomplished a step do not look back. Have faith that you made the best decision with the information available.

Scheduling Time

Once overall objectives are identified and priorities decided, activities need to be scheduled. This is the "nuts and bolts" of time management. The basic principles of scheduling are important to remember.

- * Include long-term objectives in your schedule. Coaching softball may not seem important in the long-term, but it may help toward improving your physical health or your relationship with your children.
- * Include time for planning, preparation, thinking, socializing, recreation and travel. People tend to schedule the urgent but not the important.
- * Allow for some unscheduled time.
- * Blocking time allows you to concentrate on a task. A 15-minute project may take 1 1/2 hours when interrupted (if family or co-workers are used to not having access to you during the lunch hour, use that time to work uninterrupted and eat at another time).
- * Use the power of habit. If you block time regularly it becomes a habit for you and for the people around you.
- * Identify and use prime time, both internal and external. Internal time is biological. Don't schedule heavy-thinking projects between 8 and 10 in the morning if you are the kind of person who doesn't come alive until after lunch. External time is when other people seem to need you the most. Recognize when this happens and don't plan your heavy-thinking projects for this time period.
- * When faced with a large or complicated project, use the Swiss cheese method. Break the project down into small tasks that can be easily accomplished.

There are also several scheduling tools that can aid in time management. They include a calendar, daily planner, and a listing of the repetitive tasks you perform on a daily, weekly, monthly and yearly basis.

A calendar. Choose one that will allow you to write down appointments and errands for the week, month, and year.

A daily planner. It should incorporate your prioritized A, B, and C "to do" list. It could be expanded to include a list of phone calls to be made and appointments and errands for the day.

A list of repetitive tasks. It is helpful to write down those activities/events that happen regularly, either on a daily, weekly, monthly or yearly basis. Recognizing when these things happen and planning other activities around them makes for a more realistic time management plan.

Handling Interruptions

Interruptions can ruin the best planned time schedule. They usually come in two forms, drop-in visitors and telephone calls. The golden rule in handling interruptions is: Be kind to people while being ruthless with time.

Usually interruptions are more of an issue of availability. If people know where you are, no matter how important the task or problem, you will be contacted. Interruptions are almost always immediate, usually legitimate, often pleasant and unfortunately many times are encouraged to happen.

Drop-in visitors. "Do you have a few minutes" is the frequent greeting. To minimize the problem, carefully examine your personal conduct and work environment. Try standing up when someone enters your work area. If possible, move to a more public area within the work setting (private areas, like offices, tend to encourage longer and more social conversations). Keep the conversation on the topic. Inform the visitor about the important work you are doing now. If the conversation is important, making an appointment to continue the discussion is appropriate. If your work is in an office setting, have a secretary or another individual screen your visitors. They can determine who should make an appointment. If all else fails, looking like you are not available, by closing your office door or working in another part of the building, may help you "hide out" from drop-in visitors.

Telephone calls. There are several problems associated with telephone interruptions:

- the long-winded caller,
- social calls,
- too many calls,
- returning messages from previous calls and having to leave a message (telephone tag),
- wandering conversations, and
- forgetting to communicate important points or questions.

These concerns can be managed by altering how calls are received and how people respond over the phone.

Screening telephone calls can save a lot of time and effort. It can be done by a person or by the phone itself. If you work at home, one line could act as your personal line with another line servicing your business calls. An answering machine could also be used. Encourage people to contact you by phone at a designated time, i.e., 11:00 a.m. - 12 noon.

Special Hints When Working from the Home

More and more people are choosing to work from their home. The increased work flexibility has its advantages and disadvantages. To have effective time management, special efforts should be made to:

- set up a work schedule,
- establish cues to start and stop the work day,
- rally the support of family and friends for the business, and
- keep yourself focused on the work.

Set up a work schedule. Sometimes a business dictates a particular type of schedule. If you own a cleaning business and the crews start at a set time each day, your day will revolve around their work time. It may be possible to schedule your work day around those times when you work the best, your biological prime time. Work can also be arranged around other priorities in life, like family or hobbies. Even if a schedule seems too flexible at first, use it and see how it works. Successful home-based businesses stress the importance of structuring the work day. Any schedule is better than no schedule when you work out of your home.

Establish cues for starting and stopping the work day. Some businesses have these cues built into their structure like the daycare provider who has children coming and going at particular times or a caterer who begins and ends each day according to the requests for services. Other individuals may not have automatic "prompts" to get their work started and stopped each day. A sequence of rituals are usually needed to trigger the individual into realizing "it's time to work" or "it's time to stop." Some rituals that could be used to start the day include:

- getting into work clothes,
- walking into the designated work/business area,
- turning on the answering machine or computer,
- seeing your children leave for school or your spouse go to work, and
- setting a timer to go off for a particular time.

To stop the work day all you would need to do is to reverse the action. Be creative and devise something that works for you.

Rally the support of family and friends for the business. When individuals work out of their home they are much more available to interruptions from family and friends. Household responsibilities do not go away. They are facing you all the time. Getting the support of family and friends is crucial because they will need to adapt expectations and behaviors if the business is to be successful. Here are some questions that need to be addressed:

- When is the house used for business and when is it used for family?
- Who is responsible for designated household tasks?
- How does the phone get answered?
- What areas of the house must be kept neat?

Keep yourself focused on the work. The home environment can encourage the home-based worker to drift away from their task. There is a dog to walk, garage to clean, papers to read or yard to mow. Getting side-tracked is very easy. To keep your focus, design a work environment that helps and not hinders you. It should have adequate space to work and store the needed supplies. A door can assist in blocking out sounds and visual distractions.

A system should be developed to let people know when you're working and when you are free. If you respond to verbal interruptions with "see me later" or "not now," you will undoubtedly get more interruptions. In contrast, if you tell the person "I'm free after 3:00 p.m." the interruptions will be minimized. A simple visual system can be devised. A sign on the work room door that says "In" means it's okay to come in and a sign that says "Out" means it's work time and interruptions are not appreciated. When interruptions do happen, make it easy to return to the task. Leave a reminder or a message of where you left off so you can return quickly to the project.

Individuals who successfully work out of their homes develop the ability to maintain deep concentration. They are so interested with the task at hand that everything else seems to disappear. They enjoy what they do...their work comes alive. Even when they take a break, their subconscious works for them. They come back to the project with a new idea or a fresh approach.

Miscellaneous Ways to Save Time

At work:

- Use the telephone, whenever possible, instead of making personal contacts.
- Make a list of frequently called phone numbers and tape it by the telephone for easy reference.
- Keep a running list of supplies used and replace them as needed.
- Design a checklist to keep track of progress on a lengthy project.
- Write a note to yourself on Friday for things that must be done on Monday.
- If you need to record mileage, keep a list of mileage to frequently visited areas. If you forget to write it down the day of the visit, the list will speed up the calculation.

- Eliminate unnecessary filing. If it is not important, toss it. Try to accumulate papers and file them only once a week.
- Develop a filing system that works and then use it. You might set it up by activities, subject matter, months, or by the alphabet.
- Use office organizers to your advantage. Accordion folders, color-coded file folders, notebooks, wipe-boards and many styles of calendars are available.
- Whenever possible, answer correspondence by writing a note on the original letter.
- Handle paper only once, either act on it, file it, or toss it.
- Designate a "special" place for important information.
- Color-code calendar events, files and projects to quickly identify them.
- Develop a file of "form" letters to keep from developing a new letter for each situation.

At home:

- Write down scheduled personal and family commitments on a calendar.
- Use easy-to-reach storage for often used items.
- Dovetail activities when possible, i.e., balance a checkbook while waiting to pick up children or unload the dishwasher while talking on the phone.
- Reevaluate your household standards and make changes in how you do things, i.e., air-dry dishes or use throws or comforters on the beds.
- Eliminate clutter. The less you have to clean, the better.
- Delegate tasks. Accept someone else's standard.
- Learn to say "No" to unimportant requests.
- If you find yourself avoiding a task, tackle the most unpleasant part first or do the easiest part first. The key is to get started.
- Consolidate similar tasks. If there is an accumulation of mail that needs to be answered, do it all at one time.
- Establish a message center. Areas by the phone and refrigerator are used often.
- Buy household food, cleaning and laundry staples in quantity if storage allows.
- Make it easy for family members to clean-up after themselves. Have plenty of cleaning supplies, waste baskets and laundry baskets available.
- Use the "carrot" approach when tasks need to be done. If everyone helps in completing a task, i.e., yard work on Saturday morning, a special treat will be planned.
- Designate a particular area as the morning "launching pad." (Collect backpacks, lunches, papers, money, etc. the night before.)

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