



## Time Effectiveness

# Prioritizing Your Time

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**T**ime is a unique resource in that everyone is given an equal amount — a gift of 24 hours each day. How you invest that gift is a major factor in how you feel about your life.

Think of time as one of the tools that you have available to reach your goals. As with many tools, if you want to use time effectively, it may require some training (or retraining), determination and practice.

Even though the term “time management” is used a great deal, there really is no such thing as time management. Using time effectively is actually a matter of your own personal management.

Time goes by at the same rate no matter what you do. You can’t speed it up or slow it down. Unlike the other resources that you manage, there is no way to control time.

The best you can do is take charge of yourself in the framework of time, investing yourself in those things that matter most in your life.

### Efficiency or effectiveness

Do not confuse efficiency with effectiveness when it comes to developing your time use skills. Efficiency relates to doing a job right in as little time and with as little effort as possible. Effectiveness, on the other hand, relates to doing the “right” job right. Being effective

## CHALLENGES CHOICES

Working with your time means you are investing your time on the most important tasks. Efficiency implies that you are able to accomplish a great quantity of work. You evaluate efficiency by how much you have gotten done. Effectiveness, on the other hand, implies that you know how to set priorities and are able to focus your efforts on what really needs your attention. You evaluate your effectiveness by whether what you got done was what really needed doing.

### Learning to set priorities

Setting priorities is a matter of deciding what is really important. In this case “important” means important to you. What activities and roles give your life meaning? These are the parts of your life where you most want to succeed.

Everything in your life cannot be a priority. Lots of important things will compete for attention over your lifetime, but there are not enough hours in anyone’s lifetime to give attention to everything that is good and worthwhile.

Deciding on your basic priorities is a key exercise in moving toward more

### Defining priorities

List five aspects of your life that are meaningful to you —These are your basic priorities.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

effective use of your time. Your basic priorities provide a means for making time choices, helping you decide where it is important to invest yourself and where you can let go.

On a daily basis you also have to learn to set task priorities. Prioritizing tasks includes two steps:

1. Determining what needs to be done
2. Deciding on the order in which to do the tasks

How do you decide what work needs to be done? For the most part, it relates back to your basic priorities. To be effective in your time use, you have to weed out the work that does not fit with your basic priorities.

Learn to say “no” to tasks that look interesting and may even provide a strong sense of achievement but do not fit with your basic priorities.

You also have to be able to separate out the tasks that need doing from the busywork that tends to eat away at your time. Many tasks that fill your day may not really need doing at all or could be done less frequently.

Take note of the difference between tasks you need to do and those you want to do. Deciding the order in which to do tasks means you start with the "needs" list first and then move to the "wants" list.

Task prioritizing means working on the most important tasks first no matter how tempted you are to get a lot of less essential tasks out of the way.

## Set yourself as a priority

You need to be one of the priorities you set for yourself. This can feel unnatural for many women who are used to thinking of the needs of others. Think of meeting your own personal needs as taking care of a valuable piece of equipment.

You need routine maintenance — the care and attention you often direct at others also needs to be directed toward yourself. Think of taking time for yourself as comparable to changing the oil in an automobile. Over the long haul it is an important investment.

Insisting on time to relax and pursue some of your own, personal interests is not selfish. Rather it is like changing the filters on your furnace. It will keep you operating more effectively in the other areas of your life. One of the resources you bring to your life is attitude.

The right attitude can make any task much easier, any problem more solvable. It is difficult to have a positive attitude when you never seem to have time to do things you enjoy. Investing

some time in yourself is like refilling the ice trays — there will be something there the next time you need it.

## Critical skills for effective time use

Certain skills help in using time effectively. Most of these skills are mental. While it is not necessary to develop all of the skills, each makes a contribution to your ability to direct time usage.

■ **Time sense** is the skill of estimating how long a task will take to accomplish. A good sense of time will help you be more realistic in planning your activities. It helps prevent the frustration of never having quite enough time to accomplish tasks.

To increase your time sense, begin by making mental notes of how long it actually takes to do certain routine tasks like getting ready in the morning, running a load of laundry or delivering your child across town to baseball practice.

■ **Goal setting** is the skill of deciding where you want to be at the end of a specific time period. Goal setting gives direction to your morning, your day, your week and your lifetime. The exercise on deciding your lifetime priorities is a form of goal setting. Learn to write down your goals.

If you are like most people, goals are just wishes until you write them down. Keep your goals specific, as in "weed the flower beds in front of the house" rather than "work on the yard." Keep your goals realistic or you will continually be frustrated by a sense of failure.

■ **Standard shifting** is adjusting your standards as circumstances change. Your standards are what you use to judge whether something is good enough, clean enough, pretty enough, done well enough.

Perfectionists have very high, rigid standards, and they have trouble adjusting to the changing demands or circumstances of their life. Develop the ability to shift standards so you can be satisfied with less than perfect when your time demands are high, instead of feeling as if you are somehow falling short.

■ **Time planning** is outlining ahead of time the work you need to get done in a specific time frame. Sometimes time planning is as simple as writing out a "To Do" list to ease your mind from holding on to too much detail.

At particularly stressful times the "To Do" list may expand to include a more specific calendar of when tasks will be done. While a detailed time schedule can be too confining to use all of the time, it is a good way to take the pressure off at exceptionally demanding times.

■ **Recognizing procrastination** is a skill in itself because procrastinators can do an incredible job of hiding their procrastination from themselves. Procrastination is needlessly postponing decisions or actions.

You might disguise the procrastination response with an excuse like waiting for inspiration, or needing a large block of time to concentrate with your full attention, or needing more information before tackling a project.

It takes skill to differentiate between procrastination excuses and legitimate reasons for delaying a decision or action. Without the ability to recognize when you are procrastinating there is little chance of overcoming this immobilizing habit.

## The dynamic dozen

### Strategies for effective time use

Each of these methods can assist you in getting closer to your goal of becoming more effective with your time:

**1** **Assume ownership of your time.** Most people would be surprised if someone reached in their wallet without asking and helped themselves to the money found there. But how different is that from letting others help themselves to your time? Take ownership of your own time and do not allow others to make commitments of your time without your permission.

It is not selfish to keep others from squandering your time. Give your time freely when you want but don't make the mistake of undervaluing this resource, or feeling guilty when you do not allow others to waste it. Think of a time recently when someone wasted your time. How could you have handled the situation better?

**2** **Prioritize, prioritize, prioritize.** Continually check yourself to see that you are working on the most important things that need doing on any specific day. Helping your child talk through a problem he/she is having or discussing the day's events with a spouse or friend may be more important than getting the dishes done or a load of laundry completed.

Don't think of priorities only as jobs that need doing. As you remind yourself to direct yourself to the most important tasks first, you will find yourself letting go of tasks that really did not need doing after all.

**3** **Learn to say "No."** It is not that saying the word is so difficult. It is more the feeling of guilt that many women experience as soon as they use the word. Try focusing on the

important things that will get done because you used that two letter word to decline something which was not a part of your priorities. Looking at your past week, what are some things you should have said "no" to?

**4** **Protect your blocks.** Think of your day as several large blocks of time (the morning block, afternoon block, after-dinner block) with the blocks separated by natural interruptions. Where you have control, keep your blocks whole, scheduling appointments and meetings, running errands at the beginning or end of a block rather than in the middle. Having an appointment in the middle of a block leaves little time at either end to tackle a major piece of work. Keeping your blocks of time as large as possible gives you a sense of having more available time.

**5** **Delegate.** There's that "D" word. Delegating means assigning the responsibility for a task (not just the work) to someone else. That means you no longer have to do the job, nor do you have to remind someone else to do it. Being able to delegate some tasks is a way of freeing up some of your time for the jobs that only you can do.

You may have to use your standard shifting skill when you delegate. As someone else learns to do a task, do not be tempted to take over if they are not doing it quite right. You have to learn that "done" may be "good enough."

**6** **Think in terms of buying time.** There is an intimate relationship between time and money, where one can often be substituted for the other. The more hectic your schedule, the more reasonable it is to buy time by

selecting goods and services that save you from investing time. Paying someone to mow your yard or transport your children to baseball practice are examples of purchasing time. What are some of the other ways you can or do buy some time?

**7** **Learn to work with your biological clock.** Each individual has a peak time of day when their energy is at its highest and concentration at its best. Determine which time of day is your peak performance time and plan your work accordingly. Keep meetings and routine tasks for other parts of the day when you have the choice. What part of the day is best for you to do a task which takes real concentration?

**8** **Develop systems to keep things running smoothly at home.** Busy individuals often keep personal calendars. In a family setting, a master calendar is also useful. Make each family member responsible for noting their time commitments on the calendar and consulting the calendar for potential conflicts when they make plans.

After you have established the master calendar and have family members used to using it, work on a master bulletin board for posting reminders, announcements, and calling lists that each family member might need.

Tack up not only a list of emergency numbers but also frequently used numbers such as your kids' friends, the favorite pizza delivery service and the school attendance office. Then move on to establishing a central communication center.

Family members should have one place where they post messages for other family members and where they check for messages whenever they get home.

**9** **Set up a simple filing system.** At home and at work you need a filing system so that you can find important papers when you need them. Trying to locate important papers can be a real time waster. Keep your system simple using broad categories. For example, one file titled "Automobiles" can house everything from the bill of sale to receipts for auto repairs. A simple system will make filing go faster and there will be less temptation to put filing off.

**10** **Break down large jobs into manageable pieces.** One of the sources of procrastination is that some tasks can seem too overwhelming to even begin. Learn to break down a large task into manageable pieces and then begin with a piece you know you can handle.

The most challenging step on major undertakings is often the first one. Besides you will have a greater sense of satisfaction as you complete each individual portion of the task and this can keep you motivated to the end. Think of a major task you have ahead of you. How could you break it down into manageable pieces?

**11** **Work on overcoming procrastination.** Once you recognize that you are procrastinating, the next step is to begin overcoming this time-wasting habit. And procrastination is a habit, a habitual way of dealing with tasks you find distasteful or that make you fearful of failure.

When you see that you are procrastinating, make an appointment with yourself to take the first step toward completing the task. Determine exactly what that first step will be and then set a specific time in the near future to begin the work.

**12** **Reward yourself.** Celebrate when a major task is completed or a major challenge is met. One of the problems with a hectic life is that you can be so busy that you fail to notice the completion of a major piece of work. You just move on to the next job without celebrating your previous success. This failure leads to focusing on what is still left undone instead of enjoying what has already been accomplished.

Set up a reward system for yourself that serves as both a motivator to get certain difficult tasks done and an acknowledgment that you are making effective use of your time. Be it a bubble bath, two chapters in your new book, or a phone call to a friend, acknowledge your accomplishment by rewarding yourself.

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For further reading on the subject of time use look for these titles at your local library:

- Covey, S., Merrill, A.R., and Merrill, R.R. (1994). *First Things First*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Lague, L. (1995). *The Working Mom's Book of Hints, Tips, and Everyday Wisdom*. Princeton: Peterson's.
- Winston, S. (1995). *Best Organizing Tips*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co..

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- Lakein, A. (1973). *How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life*. New York: Peter H. Wyden Inc.
- Walker, D. (1988). *Making the Most of Your Time*. Kansas Cooperative Extension Service Publication C-964.
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