

# Managing Time in the Workplace<sup>1</sup>

Derek Farnsworth, Jennifer L. Clark, Sara Walker, Allen Wysocki, and Karl Kepner<sup>2</sup>



Credits: Giii/iStock/Thinkstock.com

## Introduction

According to Time Management Training Institute, 50% of management time is spent processing information, and 80% of that information is of no value (Time Management Training Institute 2002). Therefore, effectively managing time is very important. The following presents five time-management tips for managers in the workplace:

1. Prioritize your tasks
2. Get the job done right the first time
3. Do not waste time
4. Delegate tasks
5. Avoid procrastination

## Tip 1: Prioritize Your Tasks

As a manager, there will be interruptions, questions, and probably some disasters throughout the workday. The key is to remain focused on important tasks and small jobs that must get done to prevent overlooking anything. According to Marshall Cook in *Streetwise Time Management* (1999), one of the best ways to prioritize is create a to-do list. Creating the list can be very important but there are a few *do's* and *don'ts* to remember. The first step is to list all the tasks that need to be accomplished, then to be most efficient, rank them in order of importance (MindTools.com 2015a, b). Remember to keep the list realistic. If the list is too long it will be discouraging and overwhelming. Some tasks may need to be carried over to the next day's list if they are not completed by the end of the day. If the high priority tasks are large, break them down into smaller jobs, which will be less overwhelming (Cook 1999).

The second step to prioritizing is asking *what is important* and *what is urgent*? When a task or job needs attention immediately, it is urgent. Something is important if it relates

1. This document is HR014, one of a series of the Food and Resource Economics Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date April 2002. Revised July 2019. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication.

2. Derek Farnsworth, assistant professor; Jennifer L. Clark, senior lecturer, Food and Resource Economics Department; Sara Walker, former graduate student; Allen Wysocki, associate dean and professor; and Karl Kepner, emeritus professor, deceased; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

to your core values or motivations in life (Cook 1999). Additionally, Cook (1999) states that every decision you make falls into one of four categories:

1. Urgent and important
2. Important, but not urgent
3. Urgent, but not important
4. Neither important nor urgent

Decisions that are *urgent and important* will need immediate attention and will impact life values. For example, you receive a telephone call that the conveyor belt at work has shut off, and you have to make a big presentation in two hours (Cook 1999). Both decisions need immediate attention, and both are important.

Decisions that have no sense of immediacy are *important but not urgent*. For example, long-term strategic planning or associate evaluations are two cases of important and timely decisions that need to be made, but are not necessarily urgent.

Decisions that do not relate to your key values are *urgent, but not important*. For example, a colleague needs to talk to you about a client or there that e-mails to answer.

All other decisions you make in the workplace are *neither important nor urgent*. Examples of these decisions are reading the newspaper or surfing the Internet.

Once you are able to categorize your decisions you will be able to prioritize better, which should help you manage your time more efficiently.

## Tip 2: Get the Job Done Right the First Time

Thirty percent of a manager's time is spent "fire-fighting," that is, fixing problems that do not have to be problems (Time Management Training Institute 2002). These problems are usually due to mistakes that managers and associates make as they execute their jobs. The key to avoiding mistakes is acknowledging the problems that cause the mistakes and then correcting them and determining what *to do* or *not to do* in the future to prevent them from reoccurring.

It is extremely helpful to question associates about what you are doing as a manager that is adding complexity to their

tasks. Be sure that you do not discipline the associates when they criticize tasks. If the associate suggests a solution, it is imperative that you follow through with the request. The benefit to this approach is gaining respect and trust from associates, solving problems in day-to-day tasks, and also minimizing the time spent on each job.

A watchful manager should be able to detect a pattern of mistakes and find a simple resolution to the problem. For example, if associates are having difficulty remembering how to use the photocopy machine, it may help to post instructions close to the machine to prevent wasting time. If time could be saved every day, it could be used for additional tasks (Cook 1999).

## Tip 3: Do Not Waste Time

When associates do not fully understand the purpose of their jobs, a lot of time is spent questioning the significance of specific tasks. This can result in tasks being done incorrectly, which wastes time. This is why it is important to spend some initial time explaining the procedure of the task, its purpose, and also its significance. The associate should work more efficiently if he or she understands the task.

Another way to eliminate wasting time is to reduce the time spent in meetings. Smith (1998) lists quick tips for more efficient meetings. As a meeting organizer or chairman, everything should be ready and prepared before associates arrive. Meetings should be organized so that associates can review and process the information and prepare ideas or questions before the meeting actually begins. This strategy would ensure more productive and interactive meetings.

## Tip 4: Delegate Tasks

Because the overall goal is effective time management, delegation can be a valuable tool in your time management tool kit. While delegating tasks may not actually save time, its real purpose is to give tasks to the appropriate people to increase management efficiency. For example, if you as the manager spend a lot of time supervising associates, it would be valuable to have an assistant to sort through messages, open your mail, and answer the phone. This requires a certain level of trust and confidence, and you must let the assistant accomplish the tasks in his or her own way.

It is also useful to "swap" or assign certain tasks to specific associates that complement their actions (Cook 1991). If one person likes answering the phone but hates to file paperwork, and the other prefers to file rather than answer

the phone, assign the responsibilities accordingly. Of course this would require observing your associates' actions and engaging in discussion with them regarding their *likes* and *dislikes*. As a result of this type of engagement, the associates should be more motivated, efficient, and productive.

## Tip 5: Avoid Procrastination

Time management is at its worst when people procrastinate. Some people procrastinate because they simply do not want to do a particular job. The job could be as simple as filing a stack of papers, or it could present more complex behavioral components such as fear of failure, lack of adequate information for the task, or engrained bad habits (Cook 1999).

Fear of failure is a common reason for procrastination. If fear has been identified as the problem, focus on the source of the fear and try to determine the consequences of action or lack of action. This should help reduce the fear so that tasks can be undertaken quickly (Cook 1999).

If procrastination is due to lack of information, consult with a supervisor or research the task to obtain the necessary information. Stop wasting time thinking about the problem and fix it.

Unfortunately, if procrastination is basically a bad habit, it is going to take effort to correct the problem. One suggestion provided by Cook (1999) is to focus on the positive benefits of completing the task.

## Conclusions

Focusing on these common areas of managing time should reduce the amount of time spent on each task. Prioritizing is simple once a to-do list is utilized that fits your style; this requires the ability to distinguish what is important and/or urgent during the day. Adjusting the way tasks are executed will save time and minimize procrastination. Delegating tasks to the most appropriate person will reduce wasted time for you and others. Finally, dealing with the sources of procrastination will go a long way to making you an effective manager of time.

## References

- Cook, M. 1999. *Streetwise Time Management*. Avon, MA: Adams Media Corporation.
- MindTools.com. 2019. *To-Do Lists: The Keys to Efficiency*. [http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE\\_05.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_05.htm)
- MindTools.com. 2019. *Prioritization: Making the Best Use of Your Time and Resources*. [http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE\\_92.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_92.htm)
- Smith, P.M. 1998. *Rules & Tools for Leaders*. New York: Perigee Books.
- Time Management Training Institute. 2002. <http://www.timemanagementtraining.com/>