

Time Management Tips

For Those Who Don't Have the Time

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Hey, got a minute? If not, you should skim this article anyway for a few tips on how to manage some everyday tasks more effectively and gain back a few of those clock ticks. If you're like me, three things that steal your time away are reading, e-mail and the cursed Smart Phone. Here are some ways I've tamed those time-eating beasts.

Reading

What's the quickest way to deal with a report or an unread book sitting on your shelf? Answer: Don't read it! Yes, don't read it. Is it really that important? Is it worth your time? If not, decide now to give yourself permission not to open it—in fact, get it off your shelf so it doesn't continue to tempt you; think of how much time you've saved.

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On the other hand, if you have reading you really, really need or want to do, here are some ways to read more efficiently:

For books, look for a book summary, Cliffs Notes, or Wikipedia synopsis (my favorite, because they're free!). Unless you're an English Lit major, you probably only want the key "nuggets," so let someone else slog through the tome and you can save valuable time by reading their notes.

Get an audiobook. If you commute or have other periods of mindless down time, make it useful and listen to those books you've always wanted to read but didn't have the time to. Also, many devices like iPods allow you to speed up the playback to 1.5-2 times normal speed, so you get through the book faster.

For technical books and reports, if there's an executive summary or chapter summaries, read those first and only dive into sections to get to the detail you think you need. Skim or skip the rest. If there isn't a prewritten summary, spend some time in the table of contents and really understand what's covered. Again, be selective and only dive into the sections you think you need to read.

Delegate. If you have a subordinate who would benefit from reading an entire report, have that person also write a summary for you. Or, for the "kinder, gentler" among you, have the subordinate use a highlighter pen on key passages they think you should read. Your interest will help incentivize your subordinates to more closely read and deeply understand the material, and provide you with the timesaving highlights. You also will have the benefit of a newly minted subject-matter expert with whom you can later consult and discuss the report.

E-mail

There are lots of tips for handing e-mail—far too many to cover here. I have included the top four simple tips here that have worked for me in high-volume e-mail environments.

Institute a simple but effective way to flag e-mail you send and receive. Use "ACTION:" or "INFO:" as the first word in the subject line to clearly indicate the purpose of each e-mail (you may want to use "ACTION REQUESTED:" if sending to a senior). Add "URGENT" to the above descriptors if time-critical. Always follow up an urgent e-mail with a phone call.

Rarely, if ever, use "Reply All," and make it your life's purpose to persecute your subordinates who do this to you. These can needlessly fill up an inbox.

Demand that subordinates who copy you on an e-mail include a summary clearly explaining why you need to read it. Digging out a key nugget or action in a lengthy e-mail thread can be time-consuming drudgery. Likewise, be judicious yourself, and extend the courtesy of writing a brief summary to others you copy on any e-mail. The practice is contagious.

Whipping out your phone every time it emits a horrid hip-hop riff or Beethoven prelude hurts your productivity.




Keep your Inbox empty or nearly so. If you hate creating a bunch of folders to file things, create one called "Archive" and move old inbox e-mail there. Outlook and other e-mail programs have good search capabilities to allow you to resurrect archived e-mail if you need to do so. Keeping a nearly empty inbox will get rid of distracting clutter and allow you to focus on the ones that require action.

Blackberries (or other "smart" devices)

Have you ever been in a crowded room when a cell phone chimes? It's like being at the OK Corral where everyone in the room reaches for their holster! Chimes for e-mail, text messages and routine calendar alerts break your concentration and keep you from getting the current task done. Here are two tips that may help.

Turn off e-mail notifications on your phone—permanently! You aren't Pavlov's dog, but you will behave like it if you become addicted to your "Crackberry" chime. Whipping out your phone every time it emits a horrid hip-hop riff or Beethoven prelude hurts your productivity. Check mobile e-mail when you decide the time is right, not every time your device beckons. Show that little e-critter who's really in charge!

Similarly, when you are occupied with scheduled meetings (or DAU classes!) turn off your text message chime, calendar alerts and phone ringer. It's boorish and disrespectful to interrupt a meeting or social gathering to go for your phone. Rather than risk sully your pristine reputation or derailing your train of thought, check your texts and phone messages when your meeting is complete. (If you're the really risk averse type, most phones will allow you to set up special alerts when bosses—or spouses—ring you up).

OK. That's it. I hope you picked up a useful tip or two. I won't take any more of your time. Have a productive day! 

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