



One More Time

Time Management for Those Who Don't Have the Time

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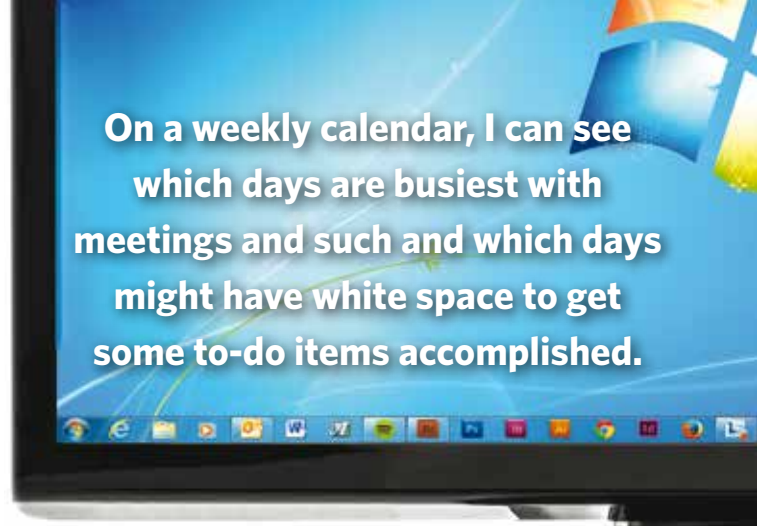
This is the third short article in a series on time management that I've written for *Defense AT&L* magazine. I think it is important for acquisition professionals to manage time wisely. If you haven't figured it out yet, time is your most important resource—personally and professionally. Anyway, I know you're busy, so let's dive in. ...

The "To-Do" List

Do you use a to-do list as part of your routine? If not, you are missing out on a simple but highly valuable tool. Start one. It doesn't have to be elaborate—in fact, simpler is better.

First, find a half-hour of quiet time and write out all the things that you can think of that you need to do on a sheet (or a few sheets) of paper. Don't worry about the order of the tasks right now, when you might get to them, or how complex or time consuming they might be. Just write down everything you can think of as you think of it.

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On a weekly calendar, I can see which days are busiest with meetings and such and which days might have white space to get some to-do items accomplished.

Look in your email for taskers you've received. Write 'em down; gather up all those scraps of paper and yellow Post-It notes and transfer the actions to your list; look ahead a week or two on your calendar and think about things you need to do to prepare for coming meetings and commitments. Write 'em down, and even add in those personal items you've been meaning to do (drop off your laundry, get a haircut or research prices on that new car you've had your eye on). Write those down too.

Don't get caught up trying to do any of the items yet, just get them written down. OK, done? Good. Bet you feel better about having all your to-do items in one place, don't you?

Now, review the list often during the day. As you get new tasks, add them to your list and mark those off that you get complete. Reviewing the list keeps the things you need to do front and center and, armed with this new awareness, you'll begin paring your list down and maybe even working off a few of those longstanding items you've been meaning to get to.

There's power in simply having a written list.

As you get more comfortable with your simple to-do list, you can add more bells and whistles in managing it. For that, I suggest you read David Allen's book, "Getting Things Done" (Penguin Group, 2001). Allen has some fabulous time-management tips that we frankly don't have time to get into here.

By way of a bonus tip ... when I was a program manager, I would keep my top 10 tasks written on a whiteboard in my office. That way, the most important tasks always were in sight and I could review them easily. One day, I found a subordinate sneaking into my office to copy down my list. I passed by and let her think she was unnoticed, but I kept using this stealthy delegation tactic throughout my tour.

The Calendar

Everyone has a calendar, right? Are you using it to your best advantage? Here are some tricks that work for me.

First of all, have just one calendar for all your commitments—work and personal. Otherwise, you'll end up double-booking yourself and miss your daughter's lacrosse match.

Next, I recommend doing your calendar updates and planning on a weekly basis. I usually do this every Thursday or Friday for the coming week. On a weekly calendar, I can see which days are busiest with meetings and such and which days might have white space to get some to-do items accomplished. In addition to putting meeting commitments in the calendar, I add appointments with myself and block calendar time for specific to-do list tasks and projects (like writing *Defense AT&L* articles!).

Of course, once the week starts, all bets are off. Like your calendar, mine is pretty dynamic and changes are inevitable. I have learned to live with that, and be flexible in moving things

around. I still try to work in as many to-do items as I can, making progress on them even if I don't have time to finish. At the end of every day, I take stock of what changed and what I accomplished, and update the rest of the week accordingly.

Delegating To-Do Tasks

If you manage people, chances are you can delegate a lot of your tasks. The challenge is to keep track of those tasks that other people are working on. The best way I have found is to keep a separate list of delegated tasks, along with the names of those responsible for them, and agreed-to dates for completions or updates.

It's easy to review this list weekly and note which tasks are due, then schedule short meetings, phone calls or emails with the responsible people to get updates on the tasks. Those that are complete can be crossed off on both the delegated and your master task lists, and new dates assigned to those that are not yet finished. I have found that following up regularly with subordinates keeps the pressure on for them to finish the work in a timely manner.

Summary

In this article, I've suggested that you create a master to-do list if you don't have one. The act of writing down the things you need to accomplish frees your brain from having to remember and declutters all those little yellow sticky-note reminders surrounding your computer monitor. I also suggest you preview and update your calendar on a weekly basis, blocking out some time for specific to-do items. Finally, when you delegate, continue to track the items until they are completed to your satisfaction.

Many of you know there are lots of "systems" and tools out there for managing your calendar and task lists. If you are just starting, though, paper works fine while you are shopping for automated solutions. But don't let finding the right tool be an excuse for further procrastination!

That's it. I hope you find these simple tips useful in helping you make the most of your most important asset—your time. ☺

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