



TIME MANAGEMENT & PRODUCTIVITY

A Practical 8-Step Guide



TIME MANAGEMENT AND PRODUCTIVITY ARE CONSISTENT BUSINESS BUZZWORDS FOR GOOD REASON.

When executed well, both concepts contribute to better individual and organizational performance. However, the two terms should not be used interchangeably because they are different ideas.

Time management is a skill (which can be learned, practiced, and honed) that contributes to better productivity. Practicing good time management gives you the space you need in your day to complete work. Productivity is the measure of how much work has been completed in a period of time. The key word in that definition is completed—work for the sake of work is not productivity. Using time management skills to clear a few hours to work on a specific project will not be effective if that time is not spent productively.

In a study conducted by the National Center on the Educational Quality of the Workforce (EQW), increases in workforce education level were far more effective at increasing productivity than increases in the value of equipment (a 10 percent increase in both produced a productivity gain of 8.6 percent for education versus a mere 3.4 percent increase for upgraded equipment). This means that when we are equipped with the skills we need, we are far more likely to see increases in productivity than if we buy, say, a new standing desk.

Teaching employees how to avoid the behaviors that reduce productivity can provide a strong return on investment. For example, the American Psychological Association reports that multitasking reduces productivity by 40 percent.¹ Learning the skills that enable employees to avoid falling into this trap can increase productivity.

Interruptions are another example of the high cost of poor productivity. According to a Washington Post article, “Interruptions and information overload eat up 28 billion wasted hours a year, at a loss of almost \$1 trillion to the U.S. economy.”² One researcher found that interruptions take 372 minutes or 6.2 hours every day, or 31 hours a week. That’s almost a full-time employee’s whole work week in productive time lost due to interruptions alone. Productivity and time management are both critical elements of a successful workforce. You need to be able to manage your time in order to be optimally productive. With practice and training, employees can learn the behaviors that lead to better time management and higher productivity. This guide includes eight steps for improving time management skills and boosting productivity, as well as tips and practical exercises you can start doing today.



TIME MANAGEMENT

Like any skill, time management takes practice. Building new behaviors doesn't happen overnight, but if you practice these four habits, you will find that you have more time in your day to be far more productive.

1. Stick to a Schedule

This might seem like a basic step, but it can be very effective. Schedule your time each day to make sure you complete all of the work items on your list. Don't just schedule appointments and meetings—block out time to work on specific tasks. Think about your productivity levels throughout the day and schedule around your own behaviors. If you are more productive in the morning, make sure you have time carved out to maximize that period of high output.

It may seem obvious, but it's important to look at your schedule at the beginning of each day, before diving into email or responding to the first question that was asked of you. Starting your day with a clearly outlined schedule will help ensure that the tasks you have prioritized will get completed because you are not just reacting to issues as they arise.

Practical Exercise

For the next week, schedule time in your day to complete specific tasks. Put it on your shared calendar so people know that you are busy, and be sure to leave time open to handle the issues that pop up throughout the day. For example, you might block out time from 9 to 11 a.m. to focus on a particular project and leave time before lunch to address emails and answer questions. Be specific when scheduling your time and create mini goals for each block of time.

2. Set Expectations and Deadlines

Entrepreneur Jason Fried, CEO of Basecamp and author of multiple books about working smarter, has said, “We like to bully deadlines. Pick on them; make fun of them; even spit on them sometimes. But what a terrible thing to do. Deadlines are actually our best friends.”

When a task doesn't have a clear deadline, it will inevitably fall to the bottom of the list in favor of items that are more urgent. However, those ignored tasks will eventually become urgent, causing unnecessary stress and possibly impacting your quality of work if you don't have enough time to thoughtfully complete them. When others ask you to do something, set a realistic expectation about when it will be completed. Unless it's truly urgent, the most recent request doesn't need to go to the top of your list. Even projects that don't have hard external deadlines should be given clear deadlines and a plan to achieve them.

For managers, it's important to set clear timelines with employees—and help them when necessary—so they know how to prioritize their work. Less experienced employees can also benefit from being told how long specific tasks should take because they might not yet have a sense of this.

Practical Exercise

Take a look at your to-do list and give deadlines to every task, even if you plan to do it today. For the next week, every time somebody asks you to do something, ask them when they need it completed. If you're a supervisor, include a deadline with every task you assign.

3. Break up Work into Manageable Chunks

Some tasks might require a significant amount of time (or brain space) to successfully complete, but when you think of how you can fit your work into these discrete time blocks, the tasks can feel more manageable, whether you'll complete them in 15-minute chunks or an hour at a time. Larger projects that feel overwhelming can cause you to spin your wheels, but if you break them up into smaller steps, you will be able to see constant progress.

On the other hand, smaller tasks that should only take 15 minutes can stretch out if you don't set a cutoff time. Don't forget to use some of the time in your day for breaks.



The Atlantic³ reported on a study that highlights the importance of taking breaks throughout the workday: “DeskTime, a productivity app that tracks employees’ computer use, peeked into its data to study the behavior of its most productive workers. The highestperforming 10 percent tended to work for 52 consecutive minutes followed by a 17-minute break.”

It’s important for employees to understand that being busy is not the same as being productive. Taking breaks throughout the day doesn’t mean that employees are not getting work done—it can actually make them more productive.

Practical Exercise

Remember that schedule you created in Step 1? Add two breaks per day to it. You can take more than that, but having a couple in your calendar will prompt you to follow through. Even if you don’t feel like you need a break, step away from your desk and do something else for at least 10 minutes. You’ll come back with renewed focus for the next task.

4. Make Lists and Prioritize

Writing a list of everything you need to accomplish can be intimidating. For many people, it's a very long list and just the sight of it causes stress. However, if you organize your lists and prioritize the tasks on them, they will feel more achievable.

Create multiple lists so you can focus on one area at a time. These might include lists for home, work, and personal tasks, or project-specific lists that you can zoom in on when you are focused on that piece of work.

The other common pitfall with lists is that they don't get used. Once you write your list, you must reference it often throughout the day to remind yourself what remains to be completed and which items are most important. When writing a list, use action words such as write, call, and review. Avoid vague words such as plan, create, or discuss.

Practical Exercise

If you don't already have a to-do list, write one today. If you do have one, think about how you can organize it to be more effective. Start with a master list of everything you plan to do, then create mini lists that include those items. For example, you might create one list that includes everything you plan to do this week, and then each day, create a daily to-do list that pulls from those items. Every morning, write a new daily list that includes everything that you didn't cross off yesterday and some of the tasks that linger on your weekly list.

PRODUCTIVITY

The next four tips are intended to help you get the most out of your time. After you have scheduled time to complete the tasks you have prioritized, you must use that time wisely.

5. Eliminate Distractions

We live in a distracting world of chiming email apps, buzzing cell phones, and the expectation that everybody is always accessible. These distractions are not going away, so you have to learn how to manage them.

Electronic distractions are some of the easiest to avoid. In order to be optimally productive and manage the time you have set aside for a task, it may be necessary to:

- Turn off your cell phone
- Close apps that you are not actively working in
- Silence your email notifications
- Close your email app
- Turn off messaging apps or indicate that you are busy

At times, you might need to physically separate yourself to indicate to others that you do not want to be interrupted. This might involve closing your office door, scheduling time to work solo in a conference room, or taking advantage of remote working benefits.

If there are predictable distractions that you can't eliminate, schedule around them. For example, if one of your coworkers routinely interrupts you at 3 p.m. while they're on a coffee break, plan to take your break then, too.



Communicate your intentions by letting people know that you are planning on a block of focused time and will not be available for questions or email responses. When people know you're not available, it decreases the chances that you will get interrupted with non-urgent requests.

For leaders, create a culture in which it's okay, or even encouraged, for people to eliminate distractions. Reset the expectation that every employee is always available and be respectful of each other's time.

Practical Exercise

Next time you sit down to do focused work for a set period of time, close your email and messaging apps, silence your cell phone, and do whatever you need to do in your physical space to indicate that you should not be interrupted. If somebody interrupts you, assess the urgency. If it can wait, let them know when you'll be available to address it. Try this several times throughout the week to see how much more productive you can be.

6. Discourage Multitasking

Being a good multitasker is a myth. Although you might be able to quickly shift gears or do multiple things at the same time, that doesn't mean you're multitasking well. Every time you start a new task, leave, and return to it, it takes time, and that time adds up.

Take the time to focus on the task at hand and concentrate on it until it's complete. If other ideas pop into your head, rather than fully shifting gears, write them down and return to them later.

Practical Exercise

If you don't already have a to-do list, write one today. If you do have one, think about how you can organize it to be more effective. Start with a master list of everything you plan to do, then create mini lists that include those items. For example, you might create one list that includes everything you plan to do this week, and then each day, create a daily to-do list that pulls from those items. Every morning, write a new daily list that includes everything that you didn't cross off yesterday and some of the tasks that linger on your weekly list.

7. Reward Yourself and Others for Work Well Done

Gallup reported that employees who received praise and recognition regularly had higher individual productivity. Being rewarded for accomplishments is highly motivating, encourages employees to keep up the good work, and may even inspire others to try to get the same results.

Rewards can come in many forms, such as:

- One-on-one praise
- Recognition of a larger group
- Automated rewards based on productivity
- Financial benefits
- Gifts (the size of the gift is not particularly important— even a coffee could affirm the good work. It's the thought that matters)

Employees should also be encouraged to reward themselves when work tasks and projects are completed successfully and on time. This type of self-motivation can help people push through a challenging task if they know they have something to look forward to upon its completion.

Practical Exercise

If you don't already have a to-do list, write one today. If you do have one, think about how you can organize it to be more effective. Start with a master list of everything you plan to do, then create mini lists that include those items. For example, you might create one list that includes everything you plan to do this week, and then each day, create a daily to-do list that pulls from those items. Every morning, write a new daily list that includes everything that you didn't cross off yesterday and some of the tasks that linger on your weekly list.

8. Use Tools and Technology

One of the benefits of living in the digital age is that we have countless tools to help us be more productive. Of course, they must be used wisely or they can actually be more distracting and contribute to inefficiency.

The digital tools you can use to promote productivity include:



Messaging apps that enable quick communication in the workplace



Electronic planners for scheduling and notifications



Email shortcuts that save time when responding to common requests



Timer apps to put time limits on tasks



Collaborative apps that allow employees to work together efficiently

Gamification can also be used for certain types of work to measure performance, track progress, and provide rewards.

Practical Exercise

Ask your team what tools they use to help them be more productive. Many people have their own systems that could work well for other individuals or the group as a whole. Choose a couple new technologies to test and see if they help you become more productive.

CONCLUSION

Can productivity and time management be taught? Yes; these are teachable skills that can be practiced and improved over time.

The first step is getting everyone to recognize that their current behavior is not as conducive to productivity as they think it is. To do so, training will be an important element. Time management is not a theory, and as such, the training for it should allow people to actually interact with the skills and test them with practical exercises. Experiential learning is a great option for time management training because it teaches people why it's important, why they should care, and how to change their behaviors based on that knowledge.

Learning to recognize the barriers to productivity— interruptions, multitasking, poor time management, and so on—and giving people the tools they need to overcome those hurdles will lead to more productive employees.

Skills training with Eagle's Flight can help you develop and nurture the time management behaviors that lead to more productive employees. One of the greatest benefits of the experiential training offered by Eagle's Flight is that participants have a shared experience they can reference in the days, weeks, and months after the training. When a coworker uses their new skills to handle an interruption or avoid distractions, people will understand why they are doing it and will be respectful of their approach.



Since our founding in 1988, Eagle's Flight has developed and refined a framework for creating predictable, sustainable behavior change. We specialize in experiential learning and provide organizations with a better outcome by truly engaging the learner. Successful organizational development programs require ongoing work, but this can easily get lost in the shuffle of daily tasks that feel more urgent. Partnering with a provider that has a strong track record of helping organizations achieve long-term measurable change will help ensure that your development goals are met.

If you would like to learn more about how Eagle's Flight can support your corporate culture goals, contact us today.

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