



UNIT-16

Time Management

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- Better organize yourself and your workspace for peak efficiency.
- Plan and schedule your time efficiently.
- Learn how to set priorities.

Unit 16

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Overview of Time Management

Time management is an essential skill for an effective administrative assistant. People who use time management techniques are usually the highest achievers in life and business. If you learn time management techniques, you'll be able to work effectively, even under pressure.

The key aspect of time management involves a change in focus. You must concentrate on the end result, not just on staying busy. Many people find themselves very busy throughout the day, but they don't achieve much because they are not focusing on the right things. The famous Pareto Principle, sometimes called the "80:20 Rule," sums it up nicely: 80 percent of the unfocused effort generates only 20 percent of the results.

By using time management techniques, you can optimize your time and energy by focusing on results that have the greatest payoff. This will ensure that you'll get the greatest benefit from the time you have available.

Controlling Procrastination

If you've put off important tasks from time to time, you are like many people. We all sometimes procrastinate to some degree. One of the first keys to effective time management is to not let procrastination stop you from achieving in your career. The key to controlling your urge to procrastinate is to recognize when you are doing it and to take action to better manage your time and effort.

People procrastinate when they put off something they should be doing in order to do something else that is more enjoyable. People who procrastinate may work just as long and hard as everyone else, but they spend their time on the wrong tasks. Sometimes this comes from not being able to prioritize tasks effectively.

If you spend the day being bombarded with one thing after another, you might focus on the most recent task, considering it always to be the most urgent even though an earlier project might actually be more important. Similarly, you might decide to tackle the endless list in the order the tasks were assigned, even though that list might not be in priority order.

Feeling overwhelmed by an assignment is another cause of procrastination. You can't figure out how to get started, or doubt you have the skills to complete the job, so you put it off in favor of doing other things you feel capable of accomplishing. The problem is that the challenging assignment isn't going away.

Other causes of procrastination include waiting for the right mood to take on an important task, being afraid of failure, being too much of a perfectionist, or not having good decision-making skills.

Whatever the reason you find yourself procrastinating, you must be honest with yourself and take action. The first thing you should do is make sure you understand the priorities of your assignments. Communicate with your boss or the individual making the assignment and find out when it is due. When there is a conflict between two projects, get help to determine which is more important. Many times your boss may make a request early in the day, only to have a more important assignment come up later. By asking your boss which task takes priority, it's easy to focus your effort where it is needed most.

Maintaining an Activity List

To get a better idea of how you are spending your time and what you are actually accomplishing, make a list of your daily activities. After you've recorded several days of activity, analyze the list to see how much time you've spent doing low-priority tasks.

As you examine the list, start by eliminating tasks that are not your responsibility. Are you doing things that someone else in the organization should be doing? Are you doing personal activities at work or sending non work related emails?

Try to reduce the number of times you switch between tasks. For example, rather than stopping every half hour to read and reply to email, you could schedule time twice each day to focus solely on email.

Use your activity list to help prioritize your To-Do list. Schedule the most challenging tasks for the time of day when your energy is highest.

Creating Action Plans

Whenever you find yourself facing a large project that seems overwhelming, it's time to create an action plan. An action plan is a list of all the tasks you need to accomplish in order to complete an entire project. It's different from your To-Do list because it focuses on a single goal.

To create an action plan, first list all the tasks that need to be accomplished to achieve the goal and put them in the order they need to be completed. As you put tasks on the list, try to break each task into smaller subtasks. Listing a few items may cause you to think of others.

Keep the action plan nearby as you begin working through the plan item by item. If additional tasks are needed that were not on the original plan, revise the plan and work from the new version.

After you've completed the project, go back and review the final version of your action plan. Could you have done anything differently? Were you missing some steps? Would a different order of tasks have been better? Use your action plan as a learning experience to make improvements in the action plans you create in the future.

Keeping a To-Do List

If you feel overwhelmed by looming deadlines or sometimes forget to do something important, you badly need to start keeping a To-Do list. A To-Do list is a prioritized list of all of the tasks you need to accomplish. The most important tasks are at the top of the list; the least important are at the bottom.

Many people who become effective at time management say that keeping a To-Do list is one of the main reasons they are successful. By keeping a list in one place of everything you need to do, it's difficult to forget something. If you review the list each morning and reprioritize it, you can easily tell what needs immediate action. Without a To-Do list, you have to juggle everything in your head. When you accede -tally forget to do something, people will think you are unreliable. With a To-Do list, you're organized and more responsible. Because of this, keeping a To-Do list can be critical to the success of your career.

To create a To-Do list, start by writing down all the tasks you need to accomplish. Larger projects should be divided into smaller tasks, similar to an action plan. Keep subdividing larger tasks until each item on your To-Do list will take no more than one to two hours to complete. Once you've written everything down, you can prioritize your list by assigning letters or numbers. For example, all items that have a high priority should be assigned the letter A. All items that have extremely low priority should be assigned the letter F. Continue to prioritize your To-Do list using letters B, C, D, and E. After your first pass, review the high-priority items and see if any of them can be demoted. When you are finished prioritizing, sort the list, putting the high-priority tasks at the top of the list. You may find it easier to use word-processing software to create your To-Do list, since it is simple to revise and sort.

People use their To-Do lists in different ways. Some create a smaller daily version with a list of all the items they plan on completing that day. They then review the master list each morning and create a new daily To-Do list.

You may find that some of the low-priority tasks are carried around from one To-Do list to the next for several weeks or even months. There's no need to worry about this, though you should not forget about such items entirely. If one of the low-priority tasks has an imminent deadline, you'll need to raise its priority level.

Scheduling

So far this chapter has focused on organizing your daily tasks. Scheduling is where your plans become reality. Scheduling is the process during which you examine the amount of time you have available each day, and you plan how you will use it to accomplish the tasks you've identified. By scheduling time to work on each task, you will understand what you can realistically accomplish. You'll be able to make the best use of the time you have available, designating time for those must-do items. You'll be able to schedule time for the unexpected, so you'll be prepared for the twists and turns business life may throw your way. As a result, you'll reduce your stress level by not overcommitting to others. A schedule allows you to take control of your time and your life.

Scheduling is best if you do it regularly, such as the beginning of each week or month. The first step is to determine the times each day when you will work on your tasks. This depends on the nature of your job and your personal situation. Next, block out the time in your schedule. If you use calendar software or Microsoft Outlook's calendar feature, you can schedule work time in your calendar to keep other people from scheduling meetings for you during these periods.

After scheduling your work time, the next step is to review your To-Do list and schedule the high-priority tasks in your work periods. Make sure you leave time available for the unexpected and schedule contingency time.

The time that is left in your schedule is your discretionary time. This is the time you can use to learn new things, plan, organize yourself, and prioritize. If you find that you have little or no discretionary time, you need to revisit your list of tasks and determine if they are all absolutely necessary or whether they can be accomplished in some abbreviated way.

Further Reading:

- ✓ Allen, David. *Getting Things Done*. Penguin Books, 2001.
- ✓ Baca, Claudia M. *Project Management for Mere Mortals*. Pearson Education, 2007.
- ✓ Covey, Stephen. *The Eighth Habit*. Free Press, 2005.
- ✓ —. *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Free Press, 2004.