



MIND TOOLS

Essential skills for an excellent career



Time Management Skills

How to use Time Effectively

- Time Management Skills

Mind Tools - Practical Thinking Skills for an Excellent Life!

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How to use Time Effectively

- Time Management Skills

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How to use Time Effectively

- Time Management Skills

This module discusses important personal time management skills. These are essential skills for effective people. People who use these techniques routinely are the highest achievers in all walks of life, from business to sport to public service. If you use these skills well, then you will be able to function effectively, even under intense pressure. They help you to get the most out of the limited time you have.

At the heart of time management is an important shift in focus:

Concentrate on results, not on being busy

Many people spend their days in a frenzy of activity, but achieve very little because they are not concentrating on the right things. This is neatly summed up in the Pareto Principle, or 80/20 rule¹. This shows that typically 80% of unfocussed effort generates only 20% of results. The remaining 80% of results are achieved with only 20% of the effort. By applying the skills in this module you can change this to ensure that you concentrate as much of your effort as possible on the high payoff tasks. This ensures that you achieve the greatest benefit possible with your investment of time.

The tools we will discuss are:

- Finding out how much your time is worth - *Costing Your Time*
- Checking how you really spend your time - *Activity Logs*
- Planning to solve a problem - *Action Plans*
- Tackling the right tasks first - *Prioritized To Do Lists*
- Deciding what your personal priorities should be - *Personal Goal Setting*

By the end of the module you should have a much clearer understanding of how to use time to its greatest effect.

¹ This is just one instance of the immensely useful Pareto Principle. See [Pareto Analysis](#) for more information.

Costing Your Time (7.1)

Function: **Finding out how much your time is worth**

How to use tool: The first part of your focus on results should be to work out how much your time costs. This helps you to see if you are spending your time profitably.

If you work for an organization, calculate how much you cost it each year. Include your salary, payroll taxes, the cost of office space you occupy, equipment and facilities you use, expenses, administrative support, etc. If you are self-employed, work the annual running costs of your business.

To this figure, add a “guesstimate” of the amount of profit you should generate by your activity.

If you work normal hours, you will have approximately 200 productive days each year. If you work 7½ hours each day, this equates to 1,500 hours in a year.

From these figures, calculate an hourly rate. This should give a reasonable estimate of how much your time is worth - this may be a surprisingly large amount!

When you are deciding whether or not to take a job on, think about this value” Are you wasting your or your organization’s resources on a low-yield task?

Key points: Calculating how much your time is worth helps you to work out how whether it is worth doing particular jobs. If you have to spend much of your time doing low yield jobs, then you can make a good case for employing an assistant.

Deciding Your Work Priorities (7.2)

Function: Finding Out What to Spend Your Time On

How to use tool: An important part of focusing on results is working out what to focus on! Many people work very hard all day doing little jobs that do not actually affect the quality of their work.

This section concentrates on three areas: clarifying what you enjoy, understanding what your strengths and weaknesses are, and working out both what your job is and what constitutes excellent performance.

Doing what you enjoy

It is important for your own quality of life that you enjoy your job. If you know broadly what you like and dislike, you will be more able to move your job towards doing things that you enjoy. This is important as you are much more likely to do your job effectively if you enjoy it than if you loathe it. Note that sometimes you will have to do unpleasant work!

Concentrating on your strengths

It is also important to know what your talents and weaknesses are. A good way of doing this is to carry out a [SWOT analysis](#). This provides a formal approach to evaluating your strengths and weaknesses, and the opportunities and threats that you face. It makes a lot of sense to find a job that suits your strengths, and where your weaknesses do not matter.

Understanding how to be excellent at your job

One excellent way of ensuring that you concentrate on the right things is to agree them with your boss!

You should ask the following questions:

- **What is the purpose of the job?** If possible, express this in a single sentence starting with the word "To". For example, "To ensure effective distribution in the South East..."
- **What are the measures of success?** Work out how your boss will decide whether you are good at your job or not. Find out what the key targets to be achieved are, and how achievement will be measured.
- **What is exceptional performance?** Find out what this is considered to be, and work out how to achieve it.
- **What are the priorities and deadlines?** You need to know this so that when you are overloaded with work, you know what to focus on.
- **What resources are available?** This ensures that you are using all the tools at your command.
- **What costs are acceptable?** This lets you know the boundaries within which you can move.
- **How does this relate to other people?** What is the broader picture within which you have to work?

If you have answers to these questions, you will know how to do your job in precisely the right way. If you know what exceptional performance is, you can plan to achieve it using all the resources you have available.

Key points:

This section gives you three ways of deciding your work priorities:

- Concentrating on what you enjoy
- Using a SWOT analysis to work out your strengths and weaknesses. This helps you to play to your strengths, minimize weaknesses, and move in the right direction.
- Finally it explains how to clarify your job with your boss, and concentrate on doing well in the areas he or she considers to be most important.

By concentrating on the right priorities you will ensure that you are always working as effectively as possible.

Activity Logs (7.3)

Function: **Checking how you really spend your time**

How to use tool: Activity logs help you to analyse how you actually spend your time. The first time you use an activity log you may be shocked to see the amount of time that you waste! Memory is a very poor guide when it comes to this, as it can be too easy to forget time spent reading junk mail, talking to colleagues, making coffee, eating lunch, etc.

You may also be unaware that your energy levels may vary through the day. In fact, most people function at different levels of effectiveness at different times. Your effectiveness may vary depending on the amount of sugar in your blood, the length of time since you last took a break, routine distractions, stress, discomfort, or a range of other factors. There is also some good evidence that you have daily rhythms of alertness and energy.

Keeping an Activity Log for several days helps you to understand how you spend your time, and when you perform at your best. Without modifying your behavior any further than you have to, note down the things you do as you do them. Every time you change activities, whether opening mail, working, making coffee, gossiping with colleagues or whatever, note down the time of the change.

As well as recording activities, note how you feel, whether alert, flat, tired, energetic, etc. Do this periodically throughout the day. You may decide to integrate your activity log with a [stress diary](#).

Once you have logged your time for a few days, analyze the log. You may be alarmed to see the length of time you spend doing low value jobs!

You may also see that you are energetic in some parts of the day, and flat in other parts. A lot of this can depend on the rest breaks you take, the times and amounts you eat, and quality of your nutrition. The activity log gives you some basis for experimenting with these variables.

Key points: Activity logs are useful tools for auditing the way that you use your time. They can also help you to track changes in your energy, alertness and effectiveness throughout the day.

By analyzing your activity log you will be able to identify and eliminate time-wasting or low-yield jobs. You will also know the times of day at which you are most effective, so that you can carry out your most important tasks during these times.

Action Plans (7.4)

Function: **Small scale planning**

How to use tool: An action plan is a list of tasks that you have to carry out to achieve an objective. It differs from a To Do list (see 7.5) in that it focuses on the achievement of a single goal. Wherever you want to achieve something, draw up an action plan. This allows you to concentrate on the stages of that achievement, and monitor your progress towards it.

To draw up an Action Plan, simply list the tasks that you need to carry out to achieve your goal. This is simple, but still very useful!

See the Mind Tools [Project Management skills](#) section to see how to manage more complex plans, particularly where you need to schedule multiple resources or dependent tasks.

Key points: An Action Plan is a list of things that you need to do to achieve a goal. To use it, simply carry out each task in the list!

Prioritized To Do Lists (7.5)

Function: **Ensuring you tackle all tasks, in the right tasks order**

How to use tool: A To Do List is a list of all the tasks that you need to carry out. It consolidates all the jobs that you have to do into one place. You can then prioritize these tasks into order of importance. This allows you to tackle the most important ones first.

To Do Lists are essential when you need to carry out a number of different tasks or different sorts of task, or when you have made a number of commitments. If you find that you are often caught out because you have forgotten to do something, then you need to keep a To Do List.

Whilst To Do Lists are very simple, they are also extremely powerful, both as a method of organizing yourself and as a way of reducing stress. Often problems may seem overwhelming or you may have a seemingly huge number of demands on your time. This may leave you feeling out of control, and overburdened with work.

Preparing a To Do List

The solution is often simple: Write down the tasks that face you, and if they are large, break them down into their component elements. If these still seem large, break them down again. Do this until you have listed everything that you have to do. Once you have done this, run through these jobs allocating priorities from A (very important) to F (unimportant). If too many tasks have a high priority, run through the list again and demote the less important ones. Once you have done this, rewrite the list in priority order.

You will then have a precise plan that you can use to eliminate the problems you face. You will be able to tackle these in order of importance. This allows you to separate important jobs from the many time-consuming trivial ones.

It may be that you carry unimportant jobs from one To Do List to the next. You may not be able to complete some very low priority jobs for several months. Only worry about this if you need to. For instance, if you are running up against a deadline for them, raise their priority.

If you have not used To Do Lists before, try them now as they are one of the keys to being really productive and efficient.

Key points: Prioritized To Do Lists are fundamentally important to efficient work. If you use To Do Lists, you will ensure that:

- You remember to carry out all necessary tasks.
- That you tackle the most important jobs first, and do not waste time on trivial tasks.
- That you do not get overly stressed by a large number of unimportant jobs.

To draw up a Prioritized To Do List, list all the tasks you must carry out. Mark the importance of the task next to it, with a priority from A (very important) to F (unimportant).

Redraft the list into this order of importance. Now, carry out the jobs at the top of the list first. These are the most important, most beneficial tasks to complete.

Personal Goal Setting (7.6)

Function: **Deciding what you want to achieve with your time**

How to use tool: Goal setting is a formal process for personal planning. By setting goals on a routine basis, you decide what you want to achieve, and then move step-by-step towards the achievement of these goals. The process of setting goals and targets allows you to choose where you want to go in life. By knowing precisely what you want to achieve, you know what you have to concentrate on to do it. You also know what is merely a distraction.

Goal setting is a standard technique used by top-level athletes, successful business-people and achievers in all fields. It gives you long-term vision and short-term motivation. It focuses your acquisition of knowledge and helps you to organize your resources.

By setting sharp, clearly defined goals, you can measure and take pride in the achievement of those goals. You can see forward progress in what might previously have seemed a long pointless grind. By setting goals, you will also raise your self-confidence, as you recognize your ability and competence in achieving the goals that you have set. The process of achieving goals and seeing this achievement gives you confidence that you will be able to achieve higher and more difficult goals.

Goals are set on a number of different levels: First, you decide what you want to do with your life and what large-scale goals you want to achieve. Second, you break these down into the smaller and smaller targets that you must hit so that you reach your lifetime goals. Finally, once you have your plan, you start working towards achieving it.

Starting to Set Personal Goals

This section explains how to set personal goals. It starts with your lifetime goals, and then works through a series of lower level plans culminating in a daily to-do list. By setting up this structure of plans you can break even the biggest life goal down into a number of small tasks that you need to do each day to reach the lifetime goal.

Your Lifetime Goals

The first step in setting personal goals is to consider what you want to achieve in your lifetime, as setting lifetime goals gives you the overall perspective that shapes all other aspects of your decision making.

To give a broad, balanced coverage of all important areas in your life, try to set goals in all of the following categories:

- **Artistic:** Do you want to achieve any artistic goals? If so, what?
- **Attitude:** Is any part of your mind-set holding you back? Is there any part of the way that you behave that upsets you? If so, set a goal to improve your behavior, or find a solution for the problems.
- **Career:** What level do you want to reach in your career?

- **Education:** Is there any knowledge you want to acquire in particular? What information and skills will you need to achieve other goals?
- **Family:** Do you want to be a parent? If so, how are you going to be a good parent? How do you want to be seen by a partner or by members of your extended family?
- **Financial:** How much do you want to earn by what stage?
- **Physical:** Are there any athletic goals you want to achieve, or do you want good health deep into old age? What steps are you going to take to achieve this?
- **Pleasure:** How do you want to enjoy yourself? You should ensure that some of your life is for you!
- **Public Service:** Do you want to make the world a better place by your existence? If so, how?

Once you have decided your goals in these categories, assign a priority to them from A to F. Then review the goals and re-prioritize until you are satisfied that they reflect the shape of the life that you want to lead. Also ensure that the goals that you have set are the goals that you want to achieve, not what your parents, spouse, family, or employers want them to be.

How to Start to Achieve Your Lifetime Goals

Once you have set your lifetime goals, set a 25-year plan of smaller goals that you should complete if you are to reach your lifetime plan. Then set a 5-year plan, 1-year plan, 6-month plan, and 1-month plan of progressively smaller goals that you should reach to achieve your lifetime goals. Each of these should be based on the previous plan. Finally, set a daily to-do list (see [7.5](#)) of things that you should do tomorrow to work towards your lifetime goals. At an early stage, these goals may be to read books and gather information on the achievement of your goals. This will help you to improve the quality and realism of your goal setting.

Finally, review your plans, and make sure that they fit the way in which you want to live your life.

Staying on Course

Once you have decided your first set of plans, keep the process going by reviewing and updating your to-do list on a daily basis. Periodically review the longer-term plans, and modify them to reflect your changing priorities and experience.

Setting Goals Effectively

The following broad guidelines will help you to set effective goals:

- **State each goal as a positive statement:** Express your goals positively. “Execute this technique well” is a much better goal than “Don't make this stupid mistake”.
- **Be precise:** Set a precise goal, putting in dates, times and amounts so that you can measure achievement. If you do this, you will know exactly when you have achieved the goal, and can take complete satisfaction from having achieved it.
- **Set priorities:** When you have several goals, give each a priority. This helps you to avoid feeling overwhelmed by too many goals, and helps to direct your attention to the most important ones.
- **Write goals down:** This crystallizes them and gives them more force.

- **Keep operational goals small:** Keep the low-level goals you are working towards small and achievable. If a goal is too large, then it can seem that you are not making progress towards it. Keeping goals small and incremental gives more opportunities for reward. Derive today's goals from larger ones.
- **Set performance goals, not outcome goals:** You should take care to set goals over which you have as much control as possible. There is nothing more dispiriting than failing to achieve a personal goal for reasons beyond your control. These could be bad business environments, poor judging, bad weather, injury, or just plain bad luck. If you base your goals on personal performance, then you can keep control over the achievement of your goals and draw satisfaction from them.
- **Set realistic goals:** It is important to set goals that you can achieve. All sorts of people (parents, media, society) can set unrealistic goals for you. They will often do this in ignorance of your own desires and ambitions. Alternatively, you may be naïve in setting very high goals. You might not appreciate either the obstacles in the way, or understand quite how many skills you must master to achieve a particular level of performance.
- **Do not set goals too low:** Just as it is important not to set goals unrealistically high, do not set them too low. People tend to do this where they are afraid of failure or where they are lazy! You should set goals so that they are slightly out of your immediate grasp, but not so far that there is no hope of achieving them. No one will put serious effort into achieving a goal that they believe is unrealistic. However, remember that your belief that a goal is unrealistic may be incorrect. If this could be the case, you can change this belief by using imagery effectively. See 8.4 for more information on this.

Achieving Goals

When you have achieved a goal, take the time to enjoy the satisfaction of having done so. Absorb the implications of the goal achievement, and observe the progress you have made towards other goals. If the goal was a significant one, reward yourself appropriately.

With the experience of having achieved this goal, review the rest of your goal plans:

- If you achieved the goal too easily, make your next goals harder.
- If the goal took a dispiriting length of time to achieve, make the next goals a little easier.
- If you learned something that would lead you to change other goals, do so.
- If while achieving the goal you noticed a deficit in your skills, decide whether to set goals to fix this.

Failure to meet goals does not matter as long as you learn from it. Feed lessons learned back into your goal-setting program.

Remember too that your goals will change as you mature, and adjust them regularly to reflect this growth in your personality. If goals do not hold any attraction any longer, then let them go. Goal setting is your servant, not your master. It should bring you real pleasure, satisfaction and a sense of achievement.

Example: The best example of goal setting that you can have is to try setting your own goals. Set aside two hours to think through your lifetime goals in each of the categories. Then work back through the 25-year plan, 5-year plan, 1-year plan, 6-month plan, a 1-month plan. Finally, draw up a To Do list of jobs to do tomorrow to move towards your goals.

Tomorrow, do those jobs, and start to use goal-setting routinely!

Key points: Goal setting is an important method of:

- Deciding what is important for you to achieve in your life
- Separating what is important from what is irrelevant
- Motivating yourself to achievement
- Building your self-confidence based on measured achievement of goals

You should allow yourself to enjoy the achievement of goals and reward yourself appropriately. Draw lessons where appropriate, and feed these back into future performance.

If you do not already set goals, now is a great time to start!

Moving On...

We have put a great deal of effort into developing and testing this e-book to make it as useful as possible. If you have any suggestions on how we can improve it for the future, then please let us know at mindtools@hotmail.com or through the Mind Tools web site at www.mindtools.com. Alternatively, if you have enjoyed this e-book and found it useful, please [let us know!](#)

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