

time and task management



material minds

introduction

Most people these days are pressed for time. Work seems to expand to exceed the amount of time available and we are frequently stressed by deadlines and deliverables. Sometimes, it seems that the pressure will never end. And yet, you probably know managers who never seem stressed, who are unruffled by the demands of the day and who can meet deadlines. These productive managers are good at time and task management. Being good at these things is the way to a more enjoyable, stress-free career.

prioritization

Tim Ferris may just be my hero. This American author of *The 4-Hour Work Week* went from working 90-hour weeks to working, yes, just four hours a week. His prescriptions for simplifying your work life, concentrating only on the important stuff, and living a large life are a great dream but for most people this is just a dream. Most of us will need to go to work for 40 hours a week, not because we really need to be there for that amount of time but because we are paid by the hour, not for what we produce.

It seems almost obvious why time management is important but I always wonder why, if it is obvious, more people don't try to manage their time more effectively. For me, time management in itself is not the end game. The end game is personal productivity, getting more done with less effort. Managing time is an essential element of personal productivity. If you can manage your time better, you'll live a less stressed, more balanced life.

Managing Time

I think it may be time to forget many things we know about Time Management as many of the concepts now being taught were developed in an era without email and masses of data. These concepts were developed in an era with reasonable response time expectations and a pace of work that was entirely slow compared with today. People in the Time Management business have tweaked their teachings to make them fit to today but much of what they teach doesn't work today. While some of their teachings on goal setting and prioritization are good objectives, much of it doesn't work in today's environment. Much else of what they write on procrastination, multitasking, not taking breaks and thriving on being busy is a personal style. Unfortunately changing a personal style is probably not realistic no matter how good it is. I for one am easily distracted; in fact I can't help but being distracted as I enjoy it. I can't focus for very long. I'm also very good at procrastinating. Changing these things is just not realistic. Instead, you need to absorb them in your working style and work around them.

Go With The Flow

The first thing you need to do in order to manage your time more effectively is to go with the flow. Despite many exhortations from time management experts around the world, unless you work in a total cocoon, you will rarely be able to structure your day so that it goes exactly the way you want. The idea of blocking off time to concentrate on one activity versus another is very difficult in today's environment. Instead, you need to be flexible with your time and leave lots of unblocked time for interruptions.

This is somewhat like judo versus boxing. In boxing one would take a hit and attempt to make the hit reflect off one's body. In Judo on the other hand, the idea is to absorb the hit, moving with it so that the hit changes your direction and you accommodate it. Time management nowadays should be more like judo, accommodating the hit as opposed to trying to block it.

In terms of philosophy, this means that you should not be highly rigid in how you structure your day, how you do things, what you do. Instead you should remain flexible, able to withstand whatever comes your way and absorb it into your daily routine. In order to do this you will need to be very flexible in your planning. You will need to leave lots of time unscheduled and without to-do lists in order to accommodate whatever comes your way. If your style is structured then go with that but structure it in such a way as to allow for unstructured time. If your style is unstructured then allocate some small blocks for structure, nothing too much in either direction but enough to accommodate what the day throws at you.

Prioritization

If you have been reading other recommendations as to how to prioritize things, you will have found that people say that you need to establish a list of six priorities for a given day and start work on number one, not stopping until you finish that one then on to number two and so on down the line. While this method may have worked 30 years ago when there was less data and less communications, it was also helped by the fact that the required response time 30 years ago was a lot longer than it is today.

In fact, your priority list will change multiple times in a given day and you need to be flexible in order to change your priorities on the fly to meet the needs that crop up from time to time. I usually explain this to people by comparing priorities to having

to go to the bathroom. You just can't put "Going to the bathroom" on a list of priorities. At 9:00 am it may not be a priority but it may become a priority at 10:30. What if you have other things on your list though that you established as priorities? Do you work away on your list of priorities until you have finished them and then go the bathroom? Of course not. Insanity. Going to the bathroom is not on the list and you will go whenever you need to, not when your fixed and non-changeable schedule says you should. Unfortunately, emails and random visits from colleagues are much like bathroom visits. You can't plan for them ahead of time and you have to deal with them when they arise.

Don't get backlogged

Your priorities will not only change on a daily basis, they will change on a weekly and monthly basis as regularly scheduled events and responsibilities arise. The key to dealing with changing priorities is to go back to the concept of materiality. For each item that you need to complete, you will need to figure out whether that issue has a material impact on Quality, Cost, and Speed. If it doesn't have a material impact then deal with it that day and get it out of the way. This may seem like an odd recommendation as it then becomes a high priority for that day but unfortunately that is what you must do to make sure that you don't get backlogged. If it is immaterial you don't need to spend much time on it but it still must get done. If you leave it because it is not a high priority then it will never become a high priority and it and all the other low priority items will start piling up until such time as either you ignore them totally or have to play catch up. One key to remaining organized and managing your time is never to get backlogged.

To Do List

Everyone will tell you that you need to have a to-do list and they are very right. In fact you need to have three of them.

1. You need one to-do list for email. Fortunately, that list will be kept in good shape for you if you handle email properly.
2. The second list you need is for meetings and that list also comes packaged with your office software in the form of a calendar.

3. The third list you need is a list of all the things you need to do that are not on an email or in a calendar.

One of the keys to managing your to-do lists is to be constantly revising them. Your to-do lists should change every day and in fact they might change several times within the day. However you like keeping them is OK. Some people use special lists that they can cross off when they complete something. Others use sticky notes that they can throw out or others use software. It doesn't matter what you use as long as whatever it is, is easily visible at all times. The key to any to do list is that you have both the action item and a deadline on it. In fact if the deadline is a very firm one, it also helps to put it in your calendar so that you connect the action with the date. As with all else, don't be obsessive about the list. It is just another tool in being organized.

meetings

Scheduling Meetings

There are all sorts of rules for having meetings and we'll get to ways of making them more productive but first the issue is how to structure meetings into your working day. You know you won't be able to eliminate all meetings and you'll even have a hard time reducing them. They will fill up your calendar whether they are a priority for you or not. In many cases they are a priority for someone else and not for you but for the sake of playing nicely in the sandbox you'll need to accept them. There are several keys to when to have meetings.

1. Never have a meeting the minute you get into the office in the morning. Make sure that you have at least half an hour before the first meeting to deal with email from the night before and to figure out your priorities for the day and a to-do list. Your first meeting should ideally be at 9:00 am, letting you get in at 8:30 and deal with email etc. The 9:00 am first meeting is important for another reason that we shall discover in a second.
2. Unless they are all of one type, try not to have meetings back to back. If you can, allow for an hour between all meetings, as this will be important time for dealing with email and coworker questions and keeping current on them. Also, meetings have a habit of going overtime and since it is rude to leave early and arrive late then you are better off with a buffer between them.

Now, since most people have public calendars, all sorts of people will see that you have free time and try to schedule a meeting onto that time. If you let them do that, you are letting them take control of your priorities and letting them control your working day. If you allow this pattern to emerge then what will inevitably happen is that you'll have periods of time full of meetings and other periods with no meetings. This will result in being overloaded some days and completely underwhelmed other days.

3. The next key is to never finish the working day with a meeting. If you do, you won't be able to tidy up, deal with last minute things and plan for the next day. If you got in at 8:30, took an hour for lunch then leaving at 5:30 is reasonable. If your last meeting is at 4:00 till 5:00 you'll have lots of time to deal with last minute things and not leave for home feeling rushed or that you left a lot of things unfinished.

4. Finally, never book a meeting after 3:00 pm on a Friday. Having a few hours at the end of the week to wind down, clear out a few things that need to be done and plan for the next week is essential. Having no meetings at the end of the week will leave you feeling relaxed and in control. I used to try and stick with this one as well and colleagues always gave me a hard time when I wasn't successful and had to have a meeting late on a Friday.

By controlling when you have meetings you remove the risk that meetings will take over your calendar and you have time to get other things done.

Meeting Content

I am constantly hearing people say that they got nothing done one day as they spent most of the day in meetings. Actually this is a problematic attitude. Meetings are getting things done and in addition they are not exclusively for getting things done. A meeting has and should have a variety of purposes. They are not only about getting things done, they are about bonding, getting to know colleagues, sharing stories, having a good time and generally enjoying each others company. We are not meant to be solitary workers and meetings are a positive way of adding some enjoyment to the working day, as long as you actually enjoy the people you are meeting with. That being said, it is still possible to waste time in meetings.

There are all sorts of advisors who would tell you that it is critical to follow a certain set of steps in order to have a productive meeting. These would be to have a chairperson, set an agenda, record minutes and stick to the agenda. Having been in over 10,000 meetings in my working life I have to admit that the number of times that I have seen someone follow the proscribed method of having a meeting is less than a handful. These meetings are in fact among the worst I ever attended. People are not meant to work that way; they are more free flowing and extemporaneous than would be allowed for in a highly structured meeting.

The key to any meeting is simple. Just have an objective. That's it, a simple objective. If you're following earlier advice, the meeting should be about either of two things: developing a plan or working on removing obstacles. Meetings that are just used to update people about the status of one thing or another are a waste of time. Updates are better handled through regular reports as to status and the recipient can spend as much time as is necessary to get as much of a picture is necessary when it is a regular report.

Before any meeting and at the beginning of the meeting you should establish the objective of the meeting. As the meeting progresses, let it meander over different territory from time to time but if it strays too far or for too long then gently remind people about the objective of the meeting. Going with the flow means that you don't obsessively adhere to the objectives but every now and then make sure that you are making progress in meeting them. At the end of the meeting all you need to do is make sure that you met the objective and that there is a plan for follow up that is reinforced in an email by whoever owns the plan. Not too rigid or complex, just enough to be efficient

the nitty gritty

Projects

Finding time to get projects done is one of the many issues that managers have today. Projects are the things that are frequently important but not urgent. Also fitting into this category are such things as periodic reports. The problem people have getting to both of them is the same. So many meetings, emails, phone calls, and visits get in the way on a daily basis that there is no time to get to projects. Except of course, if you treat projects just like meetings and that is the key. If you have some project, report or something that is important to get done all by yourself then it is better to actually schedule time to do it. By scheduling time, this doesn't mean that you can schedule a whole day or two because in this environment, getting that much uninterrupted time is unimaginable.

Instead, book time to do projects in your calendar the same way you do meetings. Allocate them in the same time as you would allocate for meetings and try not to make that time anything more than two hours. Two hours is a key because most people can't concentrate for much longer than that on one thing anyway. If the project is going to take more than two hours then allocate multiple non-contiguous blocks in which you can get the work done. If an incredible amount of time is needed then even working at home for a half day here or there can work.

When you're in the middle of your allocated time (maximum two hours) just ignore email. Pretend it is just like being in a meeting and you don't have access to email. Two hours can't hurt in being unavailable. If you get a coworker dropping by just explain that you're busy and will get back to them in an hour or so. With no email, phone calls, or visits in two hours you can get a lot done. Scheduling enough of them will allow you to get to complete any project.

Email

Email. The bane of everyone's existence nowadays. It overwhelms, terrorizes and manages to make life miserable for most managers. The problem is that there is no getting away from it. Before you start dealing with email you need to get organized. Just as you would have file drawers and file folders for every paper you touch, so you should have folders and files for each and every project you are working on.

Organizing email by project means that it is easy to understand where an email would be filed and you can find it quickly without a search tool. (Although you can still use a search tool even when email is properly filed. As for items that you send, send yourself a copy and file that in the same project folder so that you don't need to go into the Sents at the end of the day and organize it.

The next thing you must organize is the order in which emails are presented. You should organize them, not with the most recent at the top but the most recent at the bottom. Organizing them at the top means that you can leave emails alone as they drop farther and farther down the window until they are out of site and forgotten. If the oldest ones are at the top it is saying that you have to deal with these first before you get to the newer ones. "First In First Out". Not "Last In First Out."

Your objective of all of this organization should be to have a relatively empty inbox. If you control the receipt to the bottom and have to deal with older ones first, filing them when you are finished in project oriented files then you will only have things in your inbox that you have not dealt with yet.

Now all the experts will tell you to handle email only once but that isn't very realistic. I figure if you limit yourself to handling each email only twice then you're doing well. Now if you've followed the other advice then you are scheduling projects like meetings and allowing plenty of time to deal with emails between meetings. In this way you should never have to deal with emails while you're in meetings. After all, that is just rude.

When you get back to your desk after a meeting then the first thing to do is to read all of the emails that you received while you were out. That is handling it the first time. Looking at all of it at once allows you then to prioritize your email instead of doing it on a first in first out basis. While you might think that the next thing to do is to deal with the most important email first, this is exactly the wrong thing to do. What you need to do next is email management. Get rid of all the email that does not need more than a two word reply.

1. Delete any junk email
2. File any email that does not need a reply in the appropriate folder.
3. File any emailed newsletters in a file to review on Friday afternoons or at lunchtime. This is a file that can accumulate, as it doesn't really matter if you ever read these.

4. Send replies or delegate quickly any things that can be handled by others.

If like most people, you are getting and sending an average of 110 emails a day, then about 10 or 20 of them will not fall into those categories. Dealing with the unimportant emails first in the manner specified above will take about five minutes every time you sit down to deal with email. If you have left an hour between meetings then you'll have lots of time to deal with the two or three important emails you get that require some work or a longer response.

Now to the ones that require some work, the key is to think about them for a while. Don't do them right away. Target though to get them dealt within 24 hours of their receipt. Giving yourself time to think about how to deal with them will mean that you handle them twice or even three times but that should give you time to figure out if they are material and how you can do the least amount of work possible and still meet the other person's needs. When you are ready and only when you are totally ready then deal with the mail and file it away. In this way you should be able to maintain an inbox that is relatively clean.

If you have something that you cannot deal with right away, send a response indicating when the person should expect a full response. If there is something that you need to follow up on then establish another folder for follow up items that you check once a day.

Visits with Coworkers

Part of the reason we work at an office is the friendship. Now there are people who don't actually like working with other people and they should be kept away, in closets or at home because work can be a very enjoyable place if you like spending time with colleagues. Instead of looking on questions from coworkers as interruptions, look on them as a time to build relationships and influence. Try to limit visits to time between meetings and instead of firing off emails willy nilly, actually go and try and interrupt them, shoot the breeze and deal with things that you would otherwise have dealt with in email. It will go a long way to getting things done in a friendly manner and provides a welcome break in an otherwise busy day.

Limit Out of Work Impact

The key to eliminating out of work impact of things like email is to limit how you use it outside of work. If you really must look at email or do work outside of work times then the best thing is to get it done all at once. Don't fritter away your time checking email every half hour as that means that you'll never ever leave work. Several keys to doing this are:

1. Have separate email accounts for home and work, not letting personal issues go to your work account. Some people even merge the two on their blackberry but this is just not advisable. If you only have one device then separating email on it is essential.
2. Only check your work email during the week at certain times. Probably the best time is first thing in the morning, just after you wake up. If you check it at night before going to bed, you'll end up thinking about work when you should be clearing your mind. If you look at it first thing however you'll get any warnings of the day ahead and it is OK to start thinking about work while you're getting ready for it. That's what you would do anyway.
3. On the weekend, the best thing to do is just check email once on a Sunday morning. If there is anything from Saturday then you can deal with it then. While you might get something on Sunday, you can deal with that first thing Monday morning.

These recommendations are the least you could do while going with the flow. If you want to be rigid and absolutely never deal with email during home hours then good luck, it doesn't usually work. While you can step up the work at home a notch if you are comfortable doing that, it isn't really necessary as you should be able to cover all the bases using these techniques.

Limit In-work Impact

The other thing you need to limit if you want to be effective at work is the impact that out of work activities has on your life at work. Just as you shouldn't be dealing with work communications while you're at home except on a pre-planned basis, you should also not be dealing with personal emails on work time. Since you're working outside the office on work time there is nothing wrong with a little use of work time for personal reasons but if you allow it, you are once again letting other people set your agenda, determine your priorities. The best day to deal with the personal stuff while at the office is to limit it to once or twice a day, maybe three times at the

most. At least at lunch, check your emails, deal with anything that needs it and return calls. It will ensure that everything gets done but it will also mean that personal stuff doesn't end up setting your agenda at work.

Organizing Paper

The promise of the paperless office is getting farther and farther away if you have a look at anyone's office today. The problem is not in the fact that people print paper out because it is actually easier to work with paper than it is to work entirely on a screen. With paper and screen work seems to be well balanced. The problem comes in keeping the paper. Since documents are stored electronically and in fact most people store multiple versions electronically, there is no need to store any paper except perhaps for contracts. Since most of us don't have many contracts to deal with then there should be no reason to store massive amounts of paper in massive filing cabinets.

You will still have some paper hanging around and the best thing to do is to put papers you need in a series of binders. Just as you have folders for emails and the folders are themed by project, so too you can have binders for paper. If you have a binder for each major project then you can have each binder contain the plan for the project, any outstanding issues as well as reports that are issued periodically. That way all of your paper is controlled and confined, is easily accessible and can be taken with you whenever you go to a meeting on the subject.

good enough, move on

Completing Tasks

To reduce work to its simplest elements whatsoever there are essentially only two elements to work. The first element is the set of tasks that you must get accomplished. The second element is the time that you have to do the work. The problem we are now dealing with is that the volume of tasks has risen steadily over the last 30 years due to the technology revolution and as a result, people who try to fit an increased volume of tasks within the pre-existing time window are overwhelmed. Those who do not try to fit the work into the old time window are working many more hours and are thus overworked. In order to solve these problems we have looked at Materiality, Failure and emphasizing Speed over Quality. Using this framework as a reference we can now address how these concepts can be applied. In the next chapter we'll look at managing time and in this one we'll look at tips for completing tasks efficiently.

KISS

While it is an overused concept, Keep It Simple Stupid really is a big time saver. Many people overcomplicate what they are trying to do instead of trying to make it as simple as possible. The first question you should be asking yourself when you set out to do anything is "What is the simplest way I can get this task done?" The problem is that keeping it simple actually takes much more planning time than one would expect. It goes hand in hand with the adage, "If I had had more time I would have written you a shorter letter." The key to keeping it simple is to spend a lot of time planning how to get something done. Extending the planning time will reduce the execution time dramatically, usually by much more than the extra planning time.

I worked for many years with a programmer who was excellent at this concept. When he had a piece of code to write, he would spend the first days doing anything but getting down to coding. He would surf the net, play games, and write letters to friends. All the while he was rolling the code over in his head, trying to figure out exactly how simple he could make it. Older programmers, from the days in which memory was scarce and expensive will know this game, as tight code was essential due to memory limitations. You had to spend a lot of time planning your code to make it as simple as possible. Well this friend was a mater of it. He actually didn't

start writing code until he had made it as simple as possible in his head. While doing other things he would roll the problem around in his head until such time as he was satisfied that he had reduced the code to its simplest possible structure.

This is where procrastination actually helps. If you're a procrastinator there are a few advantages to be gained. First of all, while you're putting off getting to some task, it is rolling around in your head, reminding you that it is still out there. Meanwhile you can be figuring out what is really necessary and what is superfluous long before you actually have to get down to the task. When you actually get around to doing the task, you will not have much time left so it is likely you'll emphasize speed over quality and thus spend much less time on the task than you would have otherwise. Now if you're going to try KISS then remember what we said about failure. Initially, it is likely that you'll blow it a few times but if you can react quickly you'll repair any damage and have a better sense of what minimum requirements actually are before you approach another task.

Good enough. Move on

There comes a point in time in completing any task when you must say to yourself, Good Enough, Move On. The problem is figuring out where that point is. Chances are that if you are asking yourself that question then the time was a while ago. Can you imagine a painter completing a work, Jackson Pollack in particular? When would he say enough is enough? It is not obvious. In fact many people ask painters why they stopped when they did. I'm not sure there is a satisfactory answer to this question. Over time you'll develop a knack for figuring out what is good enough. For now you need to look back to the concept of Materiality and figure out what level of quality is materially good enough.

One thing that will work to your advantage is the fact that most people don't spend any time reading things they get at work. They generally look for recommendations or conclusions, check that the volume looks right and make their minds up based on an overall impression. Spending all sorts of time working to perfect a document when no one is spending detailed time reading it is just a waste of time. Take a look at yourself for example. If you are actually reading this paragraph I'll be surprised. Why would I be surprised? Because by now you should have figured out what Good Enough Move On means and you should have skipped to the next section of this chapter. Since you are reading it then you are in a minority. I was struggling with what to say in this section when I realized that I probably had put enough info in. To fill it up and make it the same length as most sections, I thought it would be

entertaining to make my point by showing that you probably have skipped all sorts of stuff in this book and I should not spend too much time trying to get my explanations perfect, just get them down and move on.

Never do anything twice

While this concept works better for people managers than other types of managers and it does not work at all for people who are not managers, I have found it very useful for saving time over the years. By never doing anything twice, what I mean is that by the second or third time you have to do something, you should have figured out how to significantly reduce your time doing it. Over time you also need to figure out how to get rid of the task entirely or reduce it in significance so that it doesn't affect your regular work.

Let's look at preparing a monthly report. This is a typical task for managers of all types, whether they manage people, projects, products, accounts etc. Doing a monthly report can take a significant amount of time the first time you do one and hopefully it won't take quite as much time every succeeding time. Now I know you'll have to do the report more than once, in fact you'll have to do it every month but how you do the report can dramatically affect the time required. Think about accountants as managers of process. They need to put out financial statements every month (and over time it is well known that this drives them crazy.) After they have a system set up and the reports are producing the amount and type of information that is required, producing the monthly statement is just a matter of pressing a button in the financial software and it is produced. (Well most accountants will claim that it's not that simple but in fact if they are doing their jobs they will have done a lot to change process so they don't have to do anything twice.)

The first few times you do a report you'll be experimenting to figure out exactly what content is needed and whether or not you can get the information that is required. Once you have this figured out, your objective should be to be able to complete that report in as little time as possible, by not actually having to do the report again. To not have to do the report, there are three things you'll need to do, perfect the process automate its creation, and delegate responsibility for contents.

Delegate

One of the keys to not doing something twice is to delegate it. If you have a team of people to whom you can delegate work then you really have no excuse for being overworked and overwhelmed. In doing the report we were just dealing with, once you have figured out what is needed in the report then you should delegate responsibility for gathering and collating information to your team. It is their work you are reporting on in any case. Preparing portions of a report is also training them to become future managers as they are now connected with team metrics, are reviewing them regularly and are facing the same challenges that you do as their manager. While it may seem ironic, sloughing off work to employees is actually good for the employees as it gives them more responsibility and is good for their own development.

Delegation is one of the keys to success for a productive manager. If you can successfully delegate responsibility and authority then you won't be overloaded. When you consider that your job is also to develop your own direct reports then you'll see that delegating is not being lazy, it is doing your job properly. In the process of delegating, you have just stopped doing things twice, reduced your workload, and created time to deal with more strategic items that will enhance your enjoyment of work, and improve your chances for promotion.

Perfect the Process

Making a process perfect can be a great time saver. Much time is wasted flailing around by people who don't have a good process for getting things done. If you can imagine getting a group of people to write a report without any process you'll see immediately why process is necessary. Try for example, writing the conclusions to a report before you have your data ready. Try also collecting the data for a report before the month is over. Both of these examples are very simple things that are naturally part of any process for completing a report. You wait till the end of the month, collect your data, analyze the data, form conclusions and write the report. Doing it in an order different from this would not be effective.

By working on process, whether directly or through your team you can evaluate what adds value and what does not add value in terms of quality cost and speed. You can see how the existing process is flawed by examining each step for value creation and in this way discover just exactly what is needed in terms of process and what adds to busy work for the organization. Unfortunately this practice of process improvement adds to the creation of mundane work but it does serve to reduce work complexity and the things that can overwork and overwhelm individuals. As a

manager, process is one of your key responsibilities and it is one of the ways that you can have the most direct impact on corporate performance and work enjoyment.

Automate

Having delegated something though you cannot just step away from it entirely. Furthermore, if you've looked at process you should have identified ways in which something can be automated. As a manager, your job should also be to figure out how you can automate something so that the completion of it can be done with much less time. Now when you think of automation, you are probably thinking about having to find money to get a computer program written so that you can accomplish your task. Unfortunately, that is often the answer people come up with but there is often much that can be done to automate simple things without having to resort to coding. Word and Excel for example both give the user the ability to set up macros and other functions that allow for significant amounts of automation at virtually no cost. In fact, before proceeding to the step of getting code written to automate something, it would be better if you perfect the process, add as much low grade automation as possible.

To automate process you'll need to look for similarities between things instead of differences. For some reason, people naturally look at things and see differences between them instead of looking at things and finding similarities. If you look for similarities between situations you'll find generally a very large overlap between things that may have been seen before as different. Once you find the overlap you can easily see how to automate a process, leaving the differences out of the process and out of automation to be handled separately by members of the organization.

Reduce, Reuse, recycle

No, this isn't a lesson on the environmental impact of business. It is another philosophy to help save time. It goes along with the color cut and paste rule for efficiency. If you are doing something, try to find what you might have done before and try to reuse it for whatever you are doing. For instance if you have to prepare a project plan, use your last project plan as a template for the creation of the next one. In fact if you are good at this you will find that there is much background information in what you did last time that can be used for what you are doing this time. Another thing to do is to reuse work that has been done by other people in the

organization. If you are writing a proposal for instance, someone else might have written background descriptions of the organization, the team or the project that can be lifted directly into the new proposal. Since no one reads in detail, even something that has already been seen by the recipient can be reused and sent again.

If you are getting really good at this environmentally sound concept for work, the next step is to actually analyze what your team produces on a regular basis and create a purpose built library so that material can be reused time and time again. If it comes from a library there is also less chance that someone will try to redraft whatever has already been done, thinking it now part of corporate policy to use in the manner dictated.

Eliminate

If your organization is like most others then on an annual basis you are adding projects and process sometimes without much regard for what is already there. This is much like what is done in government in that they add program after program without killing off old ones. In this way, programs that were designed to help rural America in the aftermath of the Depression are still around on the books and costing money 75 years later. One problem with the knowledge economy is that there are not good metrics for how much effort it takes to complete something. Without metrics it is all too easy to add new process or projects without adding the people that are needed to get things done. To counteract this habit, at a minimum, one should be eliminating process, projects, products, or services whenever one is adding new ones unless there are new resources applied to the development and maintenance of the new items.

In fact if you are getting very efficient then on a periodic basis, whether or not new items are being added to the to-do list, the entire list should be examined in order to determine whether the things that are being done are still adding value. It is too easy to keep on doing things and being overloaded without taking the time to examine exactly what you are doing. The problem is that if you are already overloaded, it will take time to examine and eliminate superfluous tasks. Even though this adds time, in the long run it is worth it as it frees up much more than the time required to do the examination.

Ignore

Another neat trick is just to ignore new things and see if they go away. There are lots of make-work projects that are management brain farts that get introduced from time to time. One key to happiness is figuring out ahead of time which projects are superfluous and ignoring them. To ignore them you just keep negotiating longer and longer delivery dates until someone loses interest and the project disappears. You'll find that organizations actually do this a lot. Every year they set out grand strategic plans that lay out all sorts of projects that in reality they never get back to doing. Since there is usually not a good process to evaluate projects after the year is over, there is little punishment for failing to complete something that was originally planned.

The ignore trick works well but only for a certain length of time. If you find someone continuously asking for something and the time frames for completion getting shorter then they are obviously serious about the project. In this case you can react and reprioritize the request to meet an obvious need.

Pass the monkey

One way to implement the ignore trick is to ask the project initiator to do something for you connected with the project. If for instance, you ask the person to prepare a project outline or a written set of expectations you'll soon see whether the important or not. If the individual comes back quickly with something that is well prepared then you'll know that the item is of high importance. If on the other hand the individual does not get back to you with your request completed or takes a long time or does not pay too much attention to what you have requested then you'll know that the project is of low importance to them. You can then act accordingly and either allocate the time necessary to complete the project or ignore it altogether,

Passing the monkey also works if you get the initiator to assign some initial part of the project to someone else in the organization. How they act in ensuring that the initial work gets completed is another indicator that the project is of high importance. This action may also work to divert the project to another person in the organization entirely thus saving you from having to do the work at all.

Set limits

You must also set some limits for yourself in the amount of time you will actually spend working. This strategy cannot be incorporated unless you are also doing other things recommended in this chapter. If you aren't reducing work to its essential components, ignoring what you can, and delegating as much as possible, just setting limits to the amount of work you do, will get you farther and farther behind as time goes on. You'll end up with an enormous work backlog and a very pissed off manager waiting excessively long times for essential things to get done. If in the other hand you are diligently working only at what adds value and you still find yourself overworked and overwhelmed then the organization has a problem. It is likely that you do have too much to do, can't get it done in the time available unless material quality suffers, and need to talk to your manager about this problem.

Adding Value

The key to success with many of these approaches is figuring out exactly how you can add value to the organization and concentrating your time on the things that add the most value, ignoring the things that do little to add value. If you are doing a good job adding value for the organization, then employing a few strategies to ensure that your workload does not get too onerous is one of the ways of staying in control of your work environment. Unfortunately, excellent employees usually put extra effort in everything they do, working extra hours to ensure that they have added as much value as possible in all of their tasks. That approach works well if you are not overloaded but in fact if you are overloaded it doesn't get you the rewards for the effort you put in. In the long run, you will be rewarded only for things that add value for the organization. Doing an excellent job on things that do not add value will get you lots of praise but in the long run, an efficient manager will wonder why you are putting time in doing things that are unnecessary. You will be looked on as someone who cannot separate the strategic from the tactical and will not be seen as someone who can lead others to do what is essential. If you are truly adding value then it is unlikely that any of these strategies for what is essentially the "Lazy Manager" approach will backfire. Instead you will reap the reward for doing an excellent job in the things that count and you won't be overwhelmed.

Last Word

In outlining these ideas, I'm trying to find ways that you can save time without being obsessive, get organized without being obsessive. Whatever you do, you should do whatever is comfortable for you, not just whatever someone else says you should do. In all things there is balance and what works for me might not work for you. The

key is to go with the flow and do whatever is comfortable but achieves the objectives of an organized work life so that you can balance it with free time out of work.