

It's About Time: Time Management Simplified

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This NebGuide updates a simple, classic time-management system, originally described by Alan Lakein. This system can help you organize and get more of what you want from the time you have.

Time is a unique resource. While we all have the same amount of time, you can't save it for tomorrow, you can't borrow today what you had left over yesterday, you can't lend it to someone else, you can't leave it behind, you can't take it with you.

You can do only two things with time: use it now or lose it forever.

This time management system has four basic steps:

1. Decide what you want to accomplish or set goals;
2. Determine activities to reach each goal;
3. Make a daily "to do" list;
4. Set your priorities every day.

To look at each in detail, get three blank sheets of paper to do these exercises. If you are technology-savvy, have your electronic planner available.

What You Want to Accomplish — Your Goals

Try this simple exercise. Spend two minutes thinking about your goals: immediate, short range and long term. Where are you headed in life? What do you want out of life? What do you hope to accomplish in the next month, the next year, five years, 10 years, 25 years, your lifetime? Take a sheet of paper or your electronic planner. For two minutes, write down or enter your goals.

Review the list. There's probably something there that you've been saying for a long time you were going to do: learn to play golf; lose 10 pounds, trace your family tree, finish your college degree (or start it), actually do the hobby or craft you learned so long ago but can't seem to fit into your schedule now. **Right now** is the time to promise yourself you'll do it — whatever that "it" is on your list.

The list of goals just made is important right now. Since people and their lives change, their goals also change. If you had made such a list a year ago, it probably would not be identical to the one just completed. And if you make a goals list a year from now, it will be different than the present list. Expect to revise your statement of goals occasionally. Change is a natural part of life.

With the list of goals in hand, proceed to step two.

How To Get There — Activities To Reach Your Goals

Pick one of the goals about which you're really serious. Take another sheet of paper (or another space in your planner), write that goal at the top and spend two minutes writing down what specific things you can do to reach your goal. These activities may range from looking on the Internet to find a course, making a phone call to enroll in a course or actually taking the course. Or, you may start with a physical checkup with your doctor to be sure you are fit enough to participate in an exercise program.

Set this list aside for a few minutes and go on to step three.

Today, Not Tomorrow — Your "To Do" List

So far we've thought about the future. Now let's get to a time period more immediate — tomorrow. Take a third sheet of paper (or a third space in your planner) and spend two minutes writing down what you have to do tomorrow. Be sure to include at least one activity from those on the sheet finished in step two. This goal-related activity will help you eventually reach that special goal.

This third sheet (or space) is your "to do" list, what many experts consider as the most fundamental tool of successful time management. It serves as a "reminder" and as a definite "action plan" to go through the day. It usually takes less than five minutes daily to put together this list, but it can repay your efforts many times over by helping you "discover" and use hidden time that may now be wasted.

Your “to do” list helps:

- decide what to do when you have a few minutes or hours you hadn’t planned on;
- determine what *not* to spend time on. Freedom from non-essentials will make more time for what really matters.

The fourth step in time management describes how.

The “ABCs” — Setting Priorities

Look at your “to do” list. Some things need to be done tomorrow, others are not so important. In fact, some things on the list actually could wait until another day.

The fourth step (and the one that makes the whole system work) helps to see at a glance what’s important and what can wait. That step is determining priorities for your “to do” list.

One way to set priorities is to use letters A, B and C to indicate how important each thing is. Put an “A” in front of those things on your list which *must* be done tomorrow (be sure to include that special goal-related activity). The letter “B” goes in front of what you would like to get done, but could wait. Put a “C” in front of the least critical items on your list. These “C” activities take up time but really have little value for you, your family or your job.

After you finish something, look at your “to do” list. During the day, try to do as many “A’s” and as few “C’s” as possible. That’s putting your “to do” list in action by practicing effective time management. Your “to do” list serves as a constant reminder of what you’ve already decided to do that day and helps you use any extra time.

Cut Out the Clutter — Eliminating “C’s”

When you come across a “C” on your list tomorrow, ask yourself what would happen if you didn’t take care of it today. If the answer is “not much,” don’t do it. If the dusting, filing or whatever can wait one more day, let it wait and you go on to accomplish the “A’s” and “B’s” on your list.

Of course, some “C’s” may become “B’s” and even “A’s” if put off too long. But, some “C’s” just never become more important. You’ll know which “C’s” those are and when you can forget a “C” forever.

Dealing With the Unexpected

None of us are isolated and completely independent. Children, spouses, co-workers, bosses, the telephone, an unexpected visitor — all may be welcome and necessary interruptions but they can put the best thought-out time management plan in a state of chaos.

How to deal with these unexpected (and expected) interruptions? The key is flexibility.

Keep your plan and your thoughts about what you want to accomplish today flexible. After all, if you don’t accomplish all that’s on your “to do” list, there’s always tomorrow and the day after that.

Once the interruption is over, identify what you need to do now by using a variation of Alan Lakein’s famous and often-quoted question:

What is the most important thing for me to do *right now*?

Ask that question often during your day when experiencing interruptions or in getting bogged down. Use it to get back on track.

If a daily “to do” list is too much, try making a weekly “to do” list instead. It isn’t so important to know exactly when you’ll get something done. But it *is* important to do some planning. For most of us planning means writing plans down either on paper or electronically. Written plans, done daily or weekly or whenever, give a sense of direction and a plan of action.

You’ve Got the Basics — Now Put Them In Action

- Look at your list of goals regularly. Revise if necessary.
- Include goal-related activities on your “to do” list.
- Make a “to do” list every day (or at least every week).
- Set priorities for the activities on your “to do” list before starting the day.

Doing these four steps will lead to better management of your time. And you’ll find more time to do the things you’ve always wanted to do. Enjoy them.

Variations on a Theme

No one time management system works for everyone. You may have to take a suggested system, try it out, and add ideas from other places, such as from friend who always seems organized, from books or the Internet. Keep reworking your system until finding what works best. Because of change, your system of managing time probably will change. The key is continuing to find a system that works best for you.

(NOTE FROM AUTHORS: *If you haven’t done the recommended simple exercises, take time to do so now. Get a watch and three sheets of paper or your electronic organizer. Read this publication again, and do the exercises as you go. Try the system — you may find it works for you.*)

Time Savers

- Write down all appointments on a calendar you can carry, paper or electronic. Use only one calendar. Don’t get caught up in the “it was on my other calendar” trap.
- Do two things at once whenever possible such as: use television time to exercise; file paperwork when on the telephone; or pay bills when waiting for appointments.
- Select the night before what you will wear the next day. Have a “launch spot” in your home where you collect everything you needed to leave the next morning.

- Have a special place to do paperwork. Collect all bills and other papers there.
- Set up a filing system. Remember a filing system is *not* a place to put things; it's a place to *find* things.
- Always carry a book or small project so when you have to wait, you have something to do. Or "waiting" time may be your "thinking" time — and everyone needs time to think.
- Reserve large blocks of time for big projects when you won't be interrupted.
- Use both hands whenever possible. Train your "other" hand — whichever one that is.
- Learn to delegate some jobs to other family or staff members.

Ten Time Wasters

- **Procrastination.** Putting it off until later never works because later never comes, and you never get it done.
- **Disorganization.** Clutter wastes time and energy especially when trying to find something. Clutter also is a major distraction.
- **Diversion and distractions.** Some (such as children, spouses and bosses) can't be ignored, but others can be (limit telephone calls by promising you'll call back when you've finished what's at hand, turn off the television or the audio on your computer or get organized).
- **Too much involvement** in outside activities. Prioritize all outside activities. Which ones truly are necessary and fulfilling?
- **Making excuses** for not getting something done. Use that time to do it, not to apologize for not doing it.
- **Regretting** past loss of time. It's gone — regretting will not bring it back.

- **Doing everything yourself.** This is one of the biggest time wasters both in families and on the job. If someone else can do it, teach them how. Then let them do it.
- **Inability to say "no."** That one little word can save precious time. Learn to say it and mean it.
- **Fatigue.** When you're tired, it takes you longer to do something. Get the sleep and exercise you need.
- **Inefficient meetings.** Be sure the meetings of which you are in charge benefit those involved, and that they don't waste their time and yours.

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