

Time management: how to improve outcomes through management inputs

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"I am so sorry, I did not have time to complete the project on time, there is just not enough hours in a day to get all the work done!"

This dilemma of not having sufficient time is often a topic presented and discussed at workshops and conferences. Is there a way to improve your time management? Is there a quick solution to manage your time more effectively and to increase your and your team's productivity? Why is it that some people achieve so much more with their time than others? The highest achievers proved that it is possible and that the answer lies in good time management.

Time management is the process of organizing and planning through consciously dividing your time between activities with the ultimate goal of increasing effectiveness and efficiency. Time management is therefore the way that you organise and plan how much time must be spent on specific activities.

Time management techniques can improve your time management skills and improve your ability to function more effectively but it needs a conscious effort to shift your focus from activities to results. To put the saying *work smarter not harder* into action seems to be the only way to go as only then will you get more done in less time.¹

Time management starts with a commitment to change.

Why do we want to manage our time better?

The benefits of good time management include:

- Greater productivity
- Improved efficiency
- Less stress
- Increased opportunities for professional advancement
- Greater opportunities to achieve life and career goals.²

If time is managed ineffectively it may have the following consequences:

- Missed deadlines
- Very high stress levels
- Poor work quality
- Inefficient systems and team work
- Negative influence on your career path.³

Time Management techniques to master your time:

- The first step is to realise that being busy is not the same as being effective. A concerted effort must be made to shift your focus from activities to results.
- Try to understand what is taking up all your time during the day – keep a list of your conversations and activities. This will assist you in understanding how much time is spent on actions, conversations and interruptions that are counterproductive and waste time.³
- Organise and clean your desk – clutter distracts your attention and ability to concentrate. Plan your work area to facilitate efficiency and save time.
- Goal setting: the most important skill in the management of your time is the ability to focus your time on serving your goals.^{4,5}
- Prioritise:
 - This should always begin with eliminating the tasks that are not important and to focus on urgent and important tasks.⁵
 - Time management skills are about ensuring that you get the important work done.
 - Prioritising avoids the natural tendency to concentrate on the easy and simple tasks and to allow too many interruptions. The Pareto Principle (80:20)⁶ is a simple strategy to use when prioritizing– 20% effort achieves 80% of the result. Focus on the 20% that makes a great

difference rather than focusing on the 80% that has no or very little impact.

- Prioritise by grouping your tasks into three groups:
 - Tasks that are urgent and need immediate action.
 - Tasks that are important but not urgent.
 - Tasks that are not urgent and might be a waste of time.⁴
- Grouping will enhance your efficiency and effectiveness as tasks are arranged according to their importance.
- Self-motivation: You must be able to motivate yourself to take action, even when you are not feeling well or not motivated. You are responsible for your own results and without self-motivation you will experience high stress levels and pressure.
- Focus: it is important to realise that you can only do one task at any given time; if you want to get results, you must learn to focus and to block out distractions.⁵
- Planning:
 - Tasks may be dependent on each other, when planning a project or your day, always keep that in mind.
 - Proper planning can save a lot of time and reduce stress and pressure.
 - Always provide for alternatives by having an alternative plan ready.
 - Make use of a personal diary and keep it up to date.⁵
- "To do lists" are the simplest time management method but the most effective. "To do lists" will remind you of what needs to be done, but do not always improve efficiency. Use these lists to draw up a schedule; schedule appointments or time blocks for high priority tasks and actions.⁴
- Organise your work and deadlines through proper scheduling of tasks. These scheduled tasks must have a time allocated to the specific actions – a starting time and when the tasks must end.⁴ Have discipline to keep to appointments.
- Schedule time for interruptions, plan time to be pulled away from what you are doing. It is important to manage these interruptions effectively and keep to the schedule as we all tend to fall back into our old ways by letting it go.
- Start your day by allowing at least half an hour to plan your day. The most important time of your day is the time to schedule your day as the focus must be on the planned activities to manage the day effectively.
- Manage each activity, take a few minutes before a scheduled appointment to determine what the outcomes must be and a few minutes after the appointment to determine whether the results were achieved.³ Set a time to deal with correspondence and remember that a telephone call is much quicker than written correspondence.
- Allocate a time limit or a fixed time period to complete the task.
- Remember that it is impossible to get everything done

every day. Focus on the items with a high priority.⁶

- Put up a "Do not disturb" sign when you have to get work done and ignore or manage phone calls and e-mails. Don't allow interruptions such as phone calls or e-mails unless you have to attend to a crisis situation.¹
- Schedule time to attend to e-mails and to return calls. Block out distractions such as social media and instant messaging unless they generate business.^{5,6}

A nursing unit has its own challenges, but it interesting that the time wasters are similar to any other department and include:

- An open-door policy not well managed resulting in a lack of supervision
- Poor communication skills with an unwillingness to say 'No'²
- Poor planning – failure to set goals and objectives
- Failure to prioritise tasks
- Ineffective meetings and indecisiveness
- Poor filing system together with ineffective management of paper
- Procrastination
- Too much socialising.

Procrastination

In the professional environment people are so easily distracted by 'noise'. Whether it's emails, admin or politics, there will always be something that seems so much more important than the actual task. More often than not, people will get caught up with the nice to have activity rather than the critical work which creates more value for the business. Being ruthlessly focused means you have the ability to cancel out this noise and focus on what is important. It's a strength in itself to be able to say something is not critical. James Caan⁴

Time management is a tool to improve the work flow and the management of a work unit, it also improves quality of life. Proper and effective management of your time will decrease stress levels and improve work satisfaction. It must, however, be emphasized that there is no magic way to manage time; it starts and ends with a concerted effort to change current practices and implement tried and tested time management techniques.

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