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7 Foolproof Practices For Maximizing Your Time

You will never have control of your time unless you take control of your time.



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IMAGE: Getty Images

We need to think differently about time. It's not as if we haven't been trying. Time-management courses have been around for decades, and work/life balance has become a cliché. Some question whether work/life balance is even possible.

Others argue we shouldn't be talking about balance at all, but time or life choices. Many people feel they don't even have a choice about their time in a fast-paced, high-pressure world, which makes the whole about which vocabulary to use entirely moot.

The fact is, you will never have control of your time unless you take control of your time. That means stopping long enough to get a handle on what's happening, reflecting on whether it's working, and learning new ways to maximize the time you've got.

Here are a few shortcut strategies for maximizing your time that I teach my executives and entrepreneurs--they're simple and you can do them in your head or on a piece of paper:

Modeling. Modeling your time means figuring out what the ideal schedule would look like. You sit down with a pencil and a sheet of paper and sketch the way you'd like the next stretch of time to look. In just a few minutes you can design your ideal week, or even day, month or year. It will take time to turn the model into reality, but now you know what's possible.

Define your time. This means figuring out what "types" of days you need, just as you have different kinds of clothing (professional acquaintances, neighbors, college buddies), you can also have different kinds of days.

For example, types of days can be: meeting days (when you are available to meet with others), work days (you keep to yourself to do your own work), flex days (a flexible day to provide a cushion for spillover activities), admin days (catching up on paperwork), or days off (for rest and renewal). You can also go by half days or even two-hour blocks if a full day is too long.

Defining your time allows you to get into one mind-set for a particular type of activity and stay there, so you can find your rhythm.

Make appointments with yourself. It's a strategy so simple I'm always amazed more people don't use it more often--set a meeting with a specific purpose and be there to get the job done. Some tasks might include: e-mail catch up, coaching appointment, read up on industry news, review financials, or strategic planning. For example, you might set aside the first Monday of every month to review financials.

Breaking time rules. You can escape the rules of time, like that you must work 8-10 hours per day or that you must be available by phone and e-mail at all times. You might start defining the length of your workday by the result you achieve instead of the hours you've worked. Time rules don't necessarily mean working less, but they do mean working with more freedom and choice.

Making time rules. For efficiency and quality of life, you can apply your own rules to how you'll use your time. Here are a few examples from other leaders and entrepreneurs I have worked with:

- Never open e-mail before planning the day.
- Never schedule a meeting before 9 or after 4.
- Turn off my computer after 7pm.
- Spend no more than one evening away from home per week for a work event.

Time rules, even small ones, have the advantage of being concrete and explicit, making it easier to hold yourself accountable.

Replace multitasking with "unitasking." Multitasking is a fact of life in a high-speed world, but many studies have shown that it actually cuts productivity. The strategy behind "unitasking" is to do one thing at a time, even for a short time. This will improve concentration, calm you down, and allow you to get more done in less time.

Considering that on average only about three minutes out of every hour are used with maximum focus, you can improve your rate of concentration with just five minutes at a time. Then fifteen. Then twenty. You don't have to unitask all the time, just when it counts.

Power down. This means turning off technology. Free yourself the excess--just because you can take your laptop with you in the car and perch it on the passenger seat doesn't mean you should. Not only does misuse of technology undermine the quality of your work, it also can strip away your gains. So just take the occasional step to power down when you can, turn off the technology, and do what will bring you progress and fulfillment.

The goal here isn't to stock you up on more complicated notions of how to manage time. Instead, these strategies are meant to take what you already know about time and twist it--just a little bit--so you see powerful new possibilities. These shortcuts for maximizing your time are your exit off the fast track. You can do things much more quickly, easily, and enjoyably than the rest of the world by taking a different route--one of your own design!

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