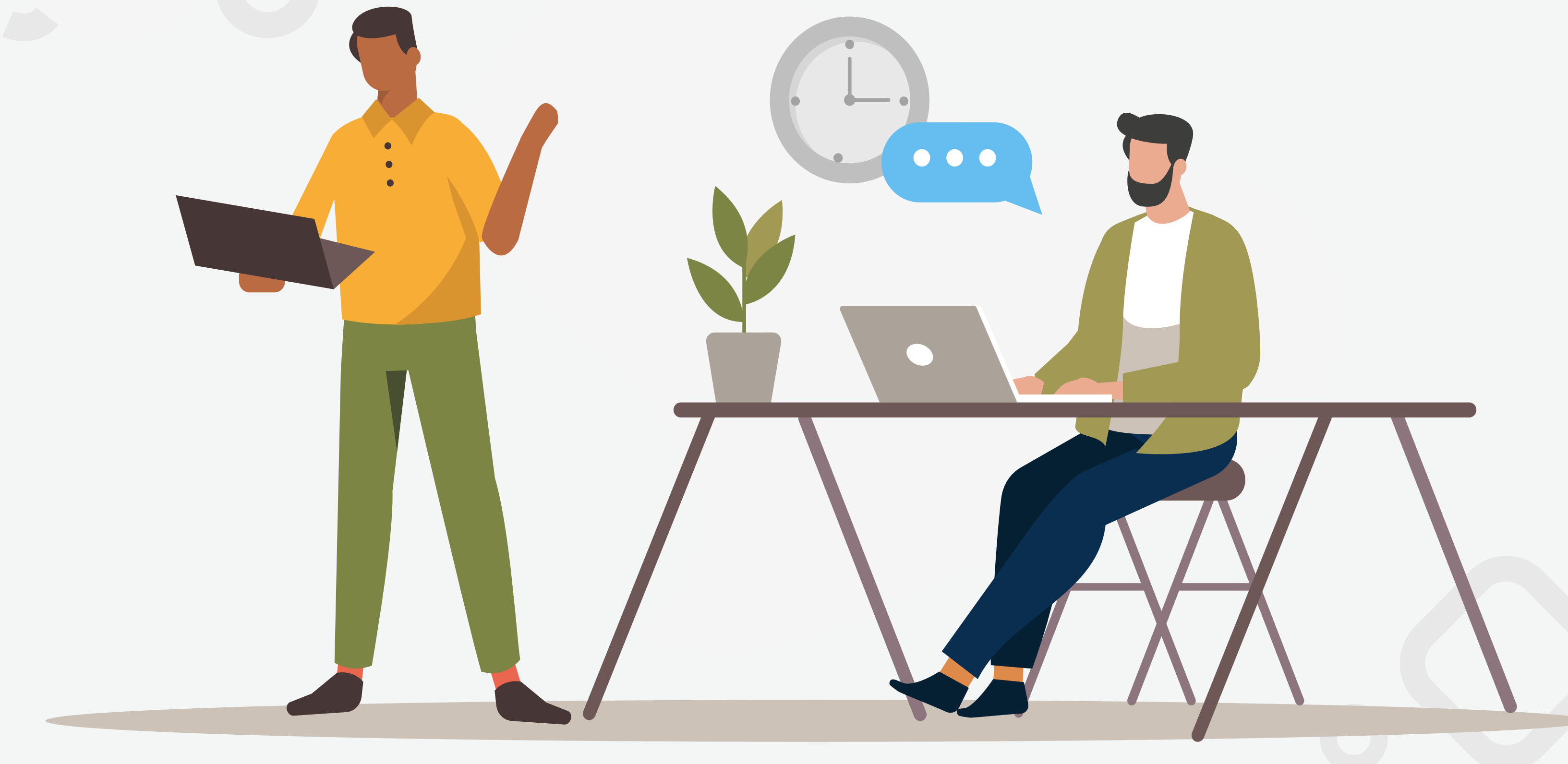
Skillbook

Beating the Time Bandits

Time Management
Skills



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1. Introduction

Which time-wasters throw you off your schedule, time and time again? And who's responsible for that ever-growing pile of unfinished work that's sitting on your desk?

You'll likely recognize the following three notorious time thieves. If stealing time were a crime, these bandits would be on everyone's "Most Wanted" list. They are:

1. "Topsy-Turvy" – known for rearranging your To-Do Lists at a moment's notice.
2. "'Just One More Thing' Jed" – loves to dash into your office and ask endless questions, whenever the mood takes him.
3. "The Meeting Room Marauder" – lurks in meeting rooms, waiting to add more and more items to your agenda.

If you've met these scoundrels, you'll know how dangerous they can be. No one has ever been able to arrest them, and they show no signs of retiring, so we advise you to arm yourself against their evil ways. Only then will you be able to keep them from stealing your precious time.

Fortunately, you've taken the first step to winning back control of your schedule, by downloading this **Skillbook**.

In just one hour, you'll learn how to:

- Tame your To-Do Lists, and create an Action Program that you can use to organize your tasks.
- Manage interruptions, so that you don't feel compelled to deal with everything on the spot.
- Make meetings more effective, with checklists and agenda planning.

These tools will help you to win back your precious time, to be thorough, and to organize your workload, so you'll be less stressed and more satisfied in your work. You'll also know exactly how to beat those pesky time bandits.

2. Taking Control of Your Time

Lost time is lost productivity. And when you're not productive, it's hard to reach your goals. Your relationships with your manager and co-workers can suffer, and you'll likely not progress in your career as you want.

What's worse, you'll most likely start going to work early and staying late, as a desperate attempt to get everything done. So, without effective time management, you'll be missing out on a lot of social productivity as well!

Action:

Make a note in the grid below of the things you'd be doing with your personal time if it hadn't been stolen by the workplace time bandits.

Activities for Stolen Time			
Early Mornings	**Lunchtimes**	**Evenings**	**Weekends**

Think about how stressful it is when you don't have enough time to meet your objectives and when you have little time for yourself, too. In the long term, it's unhealthy to be constantly under pressure, so you owe it to yourself to take action.

Let's make a start!

3. Tackling "Topsy-Turvy"

First, think about your To-Do List. Is it a mixture of large intimidating goals, smaller but fiddly tasks, and random requests from co-workers and managers?

If you've got a particularly long list, you might find it hard to know where to start. And when things get added to it, at a moment's notice, it can be a struggle to re-prioritize things.

We're going to help you take your To-Do Lists one step further by organizing them into Action Programs.

What Are Action Programs?

A typical To-Do List is an assortment of entries relating to a number of different projects that you're working on. "Take clothes to the cleaners" might be on the same list as "Finalize presentation notes with Bob," for example.

You probably have some entries that are much more complex. For instance, "Plan spring break vacation" or "Develop onboarding process for new employees." These entries aren't specific actions that you can complete in one step but they are a high priority. So where do you begin?

An Action Program can help you to:

- Create a list of everything that you need to do.
- Turn the list into actionable activities.
- Organize the list into self-contained projects.
- Keep track of the big picture.

Step One: Create an Actions Inventory

First, make a list of everything that you need to get done. Don't worry about sorting your tasks into personal/professional or long-/short-term. Treat this like a brainstorming session, where you write down anything and everything that you can think of, with no judgment or commentary.

Action:

Start brainstorming your all of your tasks in the Action Inventory on page 4. Stop after 10 minutes: you can return to finish the list later.

Tip:

You may want to create your list in a spreadsheet or word processing document rather than on paper. You will see how useful this is later.

Tip:

Write down everything that you can think of. Trying to keep track of it all in your head can be very stressful, and you'll inevitably forget something important. So put all of your reminders and small tasks into this list, then you won't need to remember them.

Actions Inventory

Step Two: Translate Your List Into Actionable Items

When you've created your Actions Inventory, you need to review each item and ensure that it has a logical next action.

Some items will be fine as they are (for example, "Pick up dry cleaning"). But for others, ("Do Stephanie's performance review") you'll need to think of the next step you need to take to progress.

Action:

First, look carefully at each item on your list, and decide whether you definitely need to take action. Consider deleting anything on your list that isn't strictly necessary.

Look at what's left on your list and make sure that all items are actionable. For those that represent larger projects, record the next step toward completion.

Step Three: Organize Your List

It's likely that your Actions Inventory is a jumble of actions, large and small, and in no particular order. The next step is to group actions into projects. A project is a coherent group of related activities, with defined first and final activities. Grouping your items in this way allows you to focus your attention on the things that need to be done next.

Action:

Go through your Actions Inventory and organize the activities into projects. Give each project an appropriate name.

If you created your list electronically, organizing your list will simply be a matter of cutting and pasting related activities. If your Actions Inventory is on paper, then you may want to redraft it to move items together.

This revised list is your Project Catalog, and it will form the main body of your Action Program.

Example

On your Inventory, you recorded "Complete Stephanie's performance review," and your next action is to "Review her personnel file." If you had also listed "Review Stephanie's training record" on your Actions Inventory, then you could move that action to sit within the "Complete Stephanie's performance review" project.

Step Four: Create Your "Next Actions" List

When you look at your Project Catalog, you may feel overwhelmed by how much you have to do. But, remember, you've just taken the first step toward taking control of your workload.

Now, create your Next Actions List. Next actions are those small steps you can take today, and over the next few days, to move your projects forward.

Action:

Go through the projects in your Project Catalog, and identify which of them you need or want to progress in right now.

Decide the next action that you need to take for each of them, and record it in your Next Actions List, on page 7.

When you add your Next Actions List to your Project Catalog, you've created your Action Program – a much more powerful and robust version of your To-Do List.

Here are some useful guidelines to help you work with your Project Catalog and Next Actions List each day:

- Keep your next actions small and practical. Ideally, each should take no more than two hours to complete. As you finish an action, tick it off your list – this will give you a sense of accomplishment, allow you to track your progress, and keep you motivated.
- If you find that a next action is still too large, put it back in the Project Catalog and break it down into smaller actions.
- If you have too many items on your Next Actions List, move some of the less important ones back to the Project Catalog. Wait until you have time to work on them before reinstating them on your Next Actions List, otherwise you risk becoming demoralized.
- If you need to make quick progress on a small number of projects, show only these on your Next Actions List. If, however, you need to work across several projects, then make sure that you use a prioritization system to decide which action to complete first. A simple ABC approach works well, where A is the most important, B is less important, and C can wait.

Next Actions List

4. Jousting with "'Just One More Thing' Jed"

Continuous interruption is the second classic time stealer that we're looking at in this session. While you can't avoid all interruptions, you can identify your most common sources of interruptions, and minimize the distraction that they cause.

Let's look at the steps that you can take to do this:

Step One: Keep an Interruptions Log

Often, the first step in dealing with a problem is to understand its root cause. For interruptions, this means that you need to know what or who causes them. Maybe members of your team are dropping in on you too often? Perhaps your phone is ringing constantly? Or you may have a stream of unexpected visitors.

Whatever the source of your interruptions, you need to track them. To do this, log every interruption that you have.

Record the following:

- The source of the interruption (person or event).
- When it occurred (date and time).
- The nature and purpose of the interruption.
- Whether it was valid and urgent.

Action:

Fill in the Interruptions Log on page 9 with every interruption that you've have had today, or over the last few days.

Tip:

Once you've worked through this Skillbook, keep the Interruptions Log with you for a full week. Record every interruption diligently – you'll probably need extra pages!

Interruptions Log				
Interrupter	Date/ Time	Description/Purpose of Interruption	Valid Y/N	Urgent Y/N

Step Two: Analyze Your Interruptions and Make a Plan

Look at your completed Interruptions Log and analyze the entries that you made:

- Are there recurring sources of interruptions?
- Do you get more interruptions at certain times of the day, or on certain days of the week?
- Are the interruptions valid?
- Are the interruptions urgent?

Action:

Think about who or what generally interrupts you. Then list these culprits on the Interruptions Plan on page 12.

For each main source of interruption, you need to decide whether to:

- Schedule it.
- Screen it.
- Delay it.
- Negotiate it.

Schedule It?

As you look over your list of interruptions, the ones that occur regularly may deserve to be made into scheduled activities. For instance, if you have a constant barrage of requests from team members and managers on Monday mornings, you might consider setting aside an hour of your time to field them.

Let people know that you are free for requests between 9 a.m. and 10 a.m., but, outside that time, you'll only deal with requests that are urgent or people will need to book in a meeting time with you to talk through them.

Scheduling your time in this way, will give you greater control over your workload, and you'll more likely spend an hour productively, rather than spending three hours trying to deal with requests while working on other projects.

Screen It?

There are some interruptions that you can screen. If you receive lots of calls and emails, consider logging these and answering them, later, when you have more time:

- Turn on your voicemail. (On some systems, you can hear the message live and decide whether you need to get back to the person immediately.)
- Switch off your email and instant message notifications, so that you don't get distracted by pop ups or sounds whenever you receive a new message. You likely don't have to answer messages as they come in – instead, set aside time to respond to them. (Bear in mind that this may not be appropriate in all roles, such as customer service.)

Delay It?

Delaying a request or question allows you to take some time to work out how to respond to it and resolve it. Just because someone asks for something right away, doesn't mean you have to do it, unless it's critical.

Instead, add the request to the Action Program that you completed in chapter 3, and decide where it belongs on your prioritized list of next actions.

Negotiate It?

Here you decide whether to attend to the interruption at all:

- Do you say "No?"
- Do you decide that it's not important?
- Do you delegate it to someone else?

You may be able to give a flat out "no" to some of the interruptions that come your way. However, this may depend on the nature of the request, and who is making it.

Learn to negotiate the interruptions that come your way. For example, if your boss asks you to do something you don't have time to do, let them know what you're working on, and ask them how urgent the request is. Then decide whether you can delegate the task to someone else. In some cases, the task may be more suited to someone else, in which case it can easily be handed off.

Continue to update your Interruptions Plan with your common interruption sources, over time, and decide how you should handle each type of interruption. That way, when they occur in the future, you can deal with them quickly and professionally, without having to decide what your response should be each time.

Interruptions Plan				
Culprit	**Schedule It?**	**Screen It?**	**Delay It?**	**Negotiate It?**

5. Managing the "Meeting Room Marauder"

Some meetings are essential and critical, but others can feel like time-wasting exercises. When introductions go on longer than necessary, when a discussion veers off track, and when analyzing the results of last night's soccer game is so much more interesting than why your department is 15 percent over budget, time gets stolen.

The best way to combat this is to be prepared and organized. When you have a clear plan in place, you're less likely to get distracted. And, when you take an organized approach to managing meetings, you'll be much more relaxed and focused, your resources will be ready, and participants will know what is expected of them.

Let's go over a step-by-step approach on how to achieve this:

Step One: Pre-Planning

Much of the success of a great meeting can be attributed to great planning. To plan an effective meeting, you need to consider the following six factors, so that you can develop an effective agenda:

- **Priorities** – what absolutely must be covered?
- **Results** – what do you need to achieve at the meeting?
- **Sequence** – in what order will you cover the topics?
- **Timing** – how much time will you spend on each topic?
- **Date and time** – when will the meeting take place?
- **Place** – where will the meeting take place?

Action:

Think about the next meeting you've got scheduled in. Then complete an Effective Meeting Checklist (on page 14) for it. (A space has also been provided for checking off each item as it's finished.)

Some of the items on the checklist may or may not be relevant to all meetings. However, it's a good idea to go through the full list each time to make sure that you've covered everything.

For items that are not relevant, write N/A in the comment column and check it off.

Effective Meeting Checklist		
Item	**Comment**	**Complete?**
Priorities		
Results		
Sequence		
Timing		
Date and Time		
Place		
Notes or Minutes of Last Meeting		
Data Required		
Resources or References		
Supplies		
Equipment		
Refreshments		
Other		

Step Two: Prepare an Agenda

With the pre-agenda planning finished, you now know exactly what you want to cover, why you need to cover it, and how long the meeting will be. You can use this information to create an agenda that can be circulated to all meeting participants. Make sure that you circulate the agenda before the meeting, to make sure that people are happy with it and can prepare what they need to.

By having a clear and organized agenda, everyone at the meeting knows what to expect, and it's easy to stay on track. Be sure to let people know that you **all** need to follow the agenda, and be clear when it's time to move on.

Action:

Using the Agenda Template on page 16, create an agenda for the meeting that you pre-planned in step one. You'll need to do the following:

1. Record the time, duration and place of the meeting.
2. Write a purpose statement – summarize why the meeting is being held, and what you intend to accomplish.
3. List each of the items or topics that you intend to discuss in order of priority. (This reduces the risks of skipping them if you do run out of time.)
4. Record how long you will discuss each item for.
5. Indicate who will lead the discussion or presentation of each item.
6. Indicate the intended outcome of each item – is it meant for discussion only, or do you expect a decision to be made?

Tip:

Always start and finish meetings on time, and try to avoid spending time recapping for latecomers.

Avoid using meetings for reporting, unless that is the purpose. Generally, reports can be circulated in advance, and valuable meeting time should be reserved for discussions and group decision-making.

Agenda Template					
Date	Time		Duration		Place
Meeting Purpose					

Topic/Item	Time Allocated (minutes)	Topic Leader	Objective (Choose one)
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			
8.			
9.			
10.			

6. Key Points

Managing your time effectively is a key skill in any role. When you're in control of your schedule, you're in a better position to protect your valuable time and your wellbeing. You'll also be more productive, satisfied and motivated.

There are three classic time wasters that can easily trip you up unless you get them under control:

1. Confused and unwieldy To-Do Lists.
2. Constant interruptions.
3. Disorganized, unfocused meetings.

To-Do Lists are very helpful in planning out your time and your objectives, but they can often become messy, overly-complicated, and forgettable. Take control of your To-Do List by using it to build a comprehensive Action Program. This will help you to group tasks, plan out your time, and prioritize tasks more effectively.

If interruptions are disrupting your time at work, it can be useful to start an Interruptions Log. Doing this enables you to analyze who, what and when interruptions are most likely, and plan your time out accordingly.

Finally, meetings are well-known "time sucks," so it's vital you know how to run them effectively. Use Effective Meeting Checklists and Agendas to make your meetings more organized and efficient. That way you'll ensure that no one's time is wasted, including your own – and you'll have more time to spend on the things that really matter.