

Skillbook

Essential Time Management

Time Management
Skills



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1. Introduction

Do you ever have more work than time available to do it in? If so, you're not alone! Many of us would love just a few more hours each day.

Unfortunately, you can't make the day any longer, but what you **can** do is, take control of the time you do have.

You might already use a To-Do List to remind yourself of tasks, but this **Skillbook** will guide you through the process of turning it into a detailed and practical plan of action, to help you organize your time and use it most productively.

You'll practice:

- Making a To-Do List.
- Prioritizing the tasks on your list.
- Building a schedule that allows you to complete your high-priority activities.

When you've finished this session, you'll have a solid plan for completing your work. You'll stop rushing from task to task, and you'll know what you need to do to get your job done. You won't just be busy – you'll be productive and effective as well.

2. Making Your To-Do List

It can be difficult to organize your time effectively because this, in itself, requires time. You can start out intending to plan your time, and then someone diverts your attention, or something urgent comes up on a project, and you lose focus. Then, what's left of your plan becomes a jumble of notes, that don't always translate into actions that you need to take.

Making a To-Do List is the best way to organize your time. It involves gathering all of your incomplete tasks in one place, so that you can work out what to do, and when.

Your To Do-List provides you with a clear plan of action. It should:

1. Capture everything that you need to do, including large and small tasks.
2. Break the larger tasks down into smaller ones.
3. Show which tasks are high priority.

Use the following exercise to create a To-Do List that works. We'll look at how to prioritize it in Chapter 3.

Action:



Using the table on the next page, take a few minutes to write down everything that you need to do. It's not important to think about time constraints at this stage. It doesn't matter if it's a job for today, tomorrow or next week – if you've got to do it, then write it down!

Don't worry if you miss anything off your list, you can come back to this section later, if necessary.

Tip:



Remember, this isn't a wish list of things that you'd **like** to do. These are the tasks that you **need** to complete. So, while you might like to go to lunch with a supplier or redecorate your office, these things don't belong on your To-Do List. There might, however, be a slot on the list for emailing your supplier to ask for his or her availability, or for getting cost estimates for your office.

To-Do List (First Pass)

[illegible]

Now, you need to make sure that the items on your To-Do List are actionable. In other words, each item has to be something that you can mark as “complete,” after only a couple of hours’ work.

For instance, an item such as “Organize away day” is not appropriate for a To-Do List, as there are too many steps involved in planning and organizing this. Instead, you need to record each individual step as a separate, actionable item.



Action:

On the next page, go through your To-Do List and break your larger projects down into smaller, actionable steps.

If you’re not sure what the steps will be for a new or upcoming project, divide it up as much as you can for now.

You’ll see that the revised list has an extra column on the right. This is where you ‘ll start prioritizing your items. Leave it blank for the moment, and we’ll complete it in the next stage, in Chapter 3.

To-Do List (Revised)

Task	Priority

3. Prioritizing Your Tasks

Now that you've created your To-Do List, you know exactly what you need to do. But, where do you start? Should you complete the easiest, hardest, quickest, or longest tasks first?

It's best to start with your most important tasks. Deciding what they are, however, can be difficult. Some tasks, for example, appear to be important because they have been marked as "urgent" by someone else. This is where you need to assess the real priority for yourself, and that's what this section is about.



Tip:

For more on the distinction between "important" and "urgent" tasks, and for more techniques on how to organize them, read our articles on [Eisenhower's Urgent/Important Principle](#) and [prioritization](#).

You also need to think about the impact that completing a task will have on your performance. There's no point slogging away at something that no one else cares about. If you're the only one who thinks it's important, then how important is it really?

Use these questions to prioritize the items on your To-Do List:

- **How valuable is the project to your organization?** If the item is part of a high-profile project, or if it will bring in a lot of money, it's probably a high priority.
- **Are other people depending on you?** If someone else's work hinges on you completing a task, chances are it's a priority, and doubly so if he or she's working on a high-priority project.
- **How valuable is the item to your manager?** If your manager thinks that the task is a high priority, then it is a high priority! If your performance evaluation is based on completing the task, then you know it's important.



Action:

Assign each task on the revised To-Do List, on page 5, with a letter from A to F. (A is very important and F is unimportant.) Record this in the right hand column. You can then redraft your list in priority order.

4. Scheduling Your Activities

How much work we get done is limited by the number of hours available to do it in, and by the interruptions and unexpected events that seem to be an everyday part of life.

Your schedule needs to reflect these realities. After all, the whole point of time management is to decrease your stress, as well as to increase your productivity.

Effective scheduling has five contributory actions:

1. Identify available time.
2. Block out essential tasks.
3. Block out contingency time.
4. Schedule high-priority tasks.
5. Use “discretionary time” for [high importance/low urgency projects](#).

Here, we’ll show you how to put these actions into practice.

Step One: Identify Available Time

Action:

First, on the Weekly Scheduler on [page 10](#), cross out the hours that you are not available to work.



Step Two: Block Out Essential Tasks

Action:

Then, block out the essential tasks that you must make time for, no matter what. (You’ll probably want to print out [page 10](#) and use a pencil, as you will almost certainly make changes later.)

These are the regular tasks or events that take up your time. If you hold a stand-up meeting every morning, for example, block that out. If you need to make time to discuss issues with your team, schedule this too, and so on.

Essentially, you need to make time for the regular, essential activities that your manager uses to determine how well you’re performing.





Tip:

Try to block out at least 15 minutes per day for planning and scheduling. You need to get serious about managing your time, if you want to do it effectively.

Step Three: Block Out Contingency Time

It's a good idea to block out time for handling those unexpected problems that crop up from time to time, so that you can deal with them comfortably, as they arise. These can be things like answering complex, non-routine customer service queries, that no-one else can deal with.



Action:

On the Weekly Scheduler, build in a “time cushion” for unexpected tasks. This adjustment will create a schedule that is a more realistic representation of your day and week.



Note:

We're not suggesting that you try to schedule interruptions – that's clearly impossible! However, when you give yourself extra time each day to complete unforeseen but essential tasks, you'll have sufficient “wiggle-room” to make up for lost time.

Step Four: Schedule High-Priority Tasks



Action:

With your updated To-Do List, schedule time for your important items; these are the A and B tasks that you can't avoid. Try to block out adequate time to do them and, where possible, rearrange your essential items to accommodate them.

Step Five: Use "Discretionary Time" for Important but Non-Urgent Tasks (Keep Reading if You Don't Have Any Discretionary Time!)

If there's any free time left in your schedule, this is your "discretionary time." You should use this to work on high importance/low urgency tasks, such as researching a potential new customer, or on developing the skills that will help you to achieve your career goals.

Refer back to your To-Do List and work your way down through your B to F tasks. These are the tasks that you want to do, even though they're not top priority. Ask yourself whether they really need to be done, and remove the ones that don't. Slot your remaining "discretionary" tasks into your schedule.

Tip:



You can only go so far with To-Do Lists. Once you have more than, say, 30-40 items on your list, you'll find that you start missing things. This is where you need a tool like an Action Program. This is an "industrial strength" version of a To-Do List, which incorporates short-, medium- and long-term goals.

Action:



By this stage, you've probably realized that your schedule is full and that you are massively over-committed. It's important to acknowledge this! So, work back through your To-Do List and Weekly Scheduler, and try, again, to cut away unnecessary activity. To do this you may need to decline some tasks, renegotiate your workload with your manager and reduce some of your personal development goals.

Weekly Scheduler

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
8 a.m.							
9 a.m.							
10 a.m.							
11 a.m.							
12 p.m.							
1 p.m.							
2 p.m.							
3 p.m.							
4 p.m.							
5 p.m.							
6 p.m.							

5. Key Points

Good time management is about knowing what to do, and when to do it.

Making a concentrated effort to manage your time can increase your productivity, job satisfaction and recognition. It can also reduce stress, because it lets you take back control of your time and to handle the demands of your job better.

Create a To-Do List that breaks down your activities into manageable tasks and shows the order of priority that you need to do them in. This gives you focus, and lets you direct your energy toward tasks with the highest payoff.

Remember to spend some time thinking about what your top priority tasks really are, and how important they are to you, your manager, your colleagues, and your organization.

Next, use your prioritized To-Do List to create a schedule to help you plan and manage your time effectively.

A prioritized To-Do List and a well-considered schedule are essential for managing time and workload effectively. Take time to make time, and you'll be happier and more efficient as a result.