

Skillbook

Time Management

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Skills



Mindtools

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Contents

1.	Introduction	1
2.	The To-Do List	2
3.	Eisenhower's Urgent/Important Principle	6
4.	Managing Interruptions	8
5.	Scenarios	11
6.	Scenarios: Suggested Solutions	16
7.	Key Points	18

1. Introduction

Do you wonder how some people are able to achieve so much with their time? Do you sometimes despair at how few tasks you complete, despite being so busy? Or do people get frustrated with you about tasks you haven't been able to finish? If so, you likely need to look at your time management.

It might seem strange to put time aside to learn about time management, especially if you already feel there are not enough hours in the day. However, those moments when you're feeling overwhelmed are exactly when you can benefit most from learning these skills.

The good news is that you can make a huge difference by using a few simple time management techniques. They can help you to be more productive and efficient, and likely feel a lot less stressed.

Getting things under control is largely a matter of:

- Having a clear list of what you need to do.
- Knowing when you need to have tasks done by.
- Understanding how to prioritize the items on your list.

In this **Skillbook**, we'll introduce you to three key time management techniques, and show you how to integrate them into your working life.

As you work through the Skillbook, you'll learn how to:

- Create effective To-Do Lists. These itemize tasks in a way that keeps you focused on the most important activities: the ones that will help you achieve your project or personal goals.
- Prioritize tasks, by understanding how to apply Eisenhower's Urgent/Important Principle to them.
- Reduce and control interruptions, so that you can concentrate your efforts efficiently.

We also feature two time management scenarios, in which people use their time ineffectively. This gives you the opportunity to determine why certain techniques work – and why others fail.

2. The To-Do List

It's a fact of life that some tasks are more important than others. Some obviously have a high priority, such as completing a presentation for tomorrow's meeting with your best client. Others may be equally important but have a lower priority, for example mapping your customers' experience of your company.

It then becomes a matter of analyzing each of your jobs to decide on their priority and importance. This is where a To-Do List comes in, and it offers a number of very useful benefits:

1. It consolidates all of the things you need to do into one physical list (either handwritten, or on your computer or mobile device). This makes it easier for you to analyze them than if they were scattered across several pieces of paper, or – worse still – kept in your head.
2. It can help reduce your stress. When you're feeling overwhelmed, the list gives you a feeling of control. You can manage your duties, rather than them managing you.
3. To-Do Lists are useful when dealing with a number of different tasks, or different levels of task. They also help you decide which of your commitments comes first.

Action:



Create your own To Do List, using the template provided on [page 3](#) or create one of your own. Simply fill it in with everything you have to do, then prioritize each task using the key A-F, where A is very important and F is unimportant.

Task	Priority (A-F) A = Very Important F = Unimportant

On your first run-through, you may find that you've assigned a high priority to too many tasks on your To-Do List, as shown in the example, below:

Task	Priority (A-F) A = Very Important F = Unimportant
Analyze sales force survey.	A
Check month-end figures.	A
Carry out Sandy's appraisal.	F
Write business case for Project Epsilon.	E
Update the communications plan for Project Delta.	A
Draw up agenda for next department meeting.	D

If this is the case, run through the list once more, and demote the ones that are really less important. Once you've done this, rewrite the list in priority order, as shown below.

Task	Priority (A-F) A = Very Important F = Unimportant
Check month-end figures.	A
Analyze sales force survey.	B
Update the communications plan for Project Delta.	C
Draw up agenda for next department meeting.	D
Write business case for Project Epsilon.	E
Carry out Sandy's appraisal.	F

You'll then have a precise plan, and will be able to tackle the items in order of their priority. By following your plan, you can be sure that the important jobs won't get swamped by less important, but equally time-consuming, ones.



Tip 1:

Many managers try to do too much themselves. One of the most efficient ways of managing time is to delegate tasks to team members, and to let them carry out lower-priority tasks while you concentrate on higher-priority ones.

Tip 2:

To-Do Lists fail when they are too big. If yours becomes too large, or you are working on several projects at once, consider creating an Action Program – this is an “industrial strength” version of a To-Do List.

Using To-Do Lists

Your role will define the way you use To-Do Lists. For example, if you're a salesperson who needs to spend time selling your product or service to customers face-to-face, then it would be counter-productive to develop a long list. You will likely have short lists, with tasks that can be completed every day, so that you can keep your motivation levels high.

If you have an operational role, or are working on a highly technical project, your list is likely to be longer and more complex, because accuracy and attention to detail will be vital to completing your goals successfully.

Chances are, the tasks on your list can't all be accomplished within a day. It may be more effective to keep one list, and "chip away" at it steadily. For example, low-priority items may not get completed for several weeks or months, while you carry out higher-priority tasks.

This is nothing to worry about – simply review your list each day, and check it against what's happening on the project.

If you discover that a low-priority item has suddenly become more important, raise its priority and proceed accordingly.

Prioritization

Prioritizing your tasks is key to using To-Do Lists successfully. It helps you make the most of the time you have available, and this, in turn, helps you to achieve your goals.

Knowing what your priorities are also helps you keep calm and focused when faced with competing demands on your time and resources. In other words, prioritization helps you bring order to chaos. But how do you decide what that priority order should be? Here are some simple approaches you can use:

- **Project Value/Profitability.** This is the most common basis for prioritization. The project that brings in the most money, the most prestige, or the most value has the highest priority.
- **Time Constraints.** Time is a priority on projects where the completion of one task is dependent upon the prior (or simultaneous) completion of another. For example, a carpenter can't frame a house unless the foundations have been laid.
The same is true for many business projects where other people are depending upon you and your team to complete your part on time. In such cases, the deadline is a priority for you.
- **Pressure From Above.** When your manager says, "You need to do this now," it's going to move immediately to the top of your priority list. They likely have a good understanding of the "bigger picture," so it would be wise to get the job done as quickly as possible.

However, in many cases, you may need a more sophisticated approach. In these situations, Eisenhower's Urgent/Important Principle is helpful for identifying your true priorities. We explore this in the next chapter.

3. Eisenhower's Urgent/Important Principle

This technique asks you to assess the urgency and importance of each task on your To-Do List. So, what's the difference between urgent and important?

- **Important** tasks are ones that lead you to achieving your goals.
- **Urgent** activities demand immediate attention and are often associated with achieving someone else's goals. We often concentrate on urgent tasks at the expense of more important ones, because the consequences of not dealing with them are immediate. Clearly, though, this can lead us to fail to achieve goals that are important to us.

Using a tool like Eisenhower's Urgent/Important Matrix can help you overcome the natural tendency to focus on urgent activities.

By separating out the really important activities from the urgent ones, you'll be able to concentrate on vital matters. Follow these steps to use the tool.

First, take your To-Do List and put each task into one of four categories, as shown in Figure 1, below.

Figure 1 – Eisenhower's Urgent/Important Principle

Important	Urgent and important. Do it now.	Important but not urgent. Schedule it to give yourself time to do it properly.
	Urgent but not important. Delegate it to someone with capacity.	Not important and not urgent. Stop doing it. It's unnecessary.
Not Important	Urgent	Not Urgent

Next, use the strategies described below to schedule your activities.

Important and Urgent Tasks

There are two distinct types of urgent and important activities: ones you could not foresee, and others that you've left until the last minute. You can avoid the latter by planning ahead and minimizing procrastination, but you can't predict or avoid every crisis. Here, your best approach is to leave some time in your schedule to handle unexpected issues and unplanned important activities.

If a major crisis arises, other activities may have to be rescheduled. If you have a lot of important and urgent tasks, think about how you could schedule similar activities ahead of time so they do not become urgent in the first place.

Important But Not Urgent Tasks

These are activities you can plan ahead for, and that will help you complete your work and achieve your goals. Make sure you have plenty of time to complete them, so that they don't become urgent.

Also, remember to leave enough time in your schedule to deal with unforeseen problems. This helps you avoid feeling stressed when a task suddenly becomes urgent.

Not Important But Urgent Tasks

Such activities can be a constant source of interruption. They prevent you from achieving your goals and completing your work. When you're faced with these tasks, ask yourself whether they can be rescheduled, or whether you can delegate them. See the following chapter, *Managing Interruptions*, for more information on this.

Not Important and Not Urgent Tasks

These activities are just distractions and they should be avoided. Some can simply be ignored. Others are activities that other people want you to do, but they do not contribute to your own desired outcomes. Say "No" politely and firmly, where you sensibly can.

If people see that you are clear about your objectives and boundaries, they won't ask you to do "not important" activities in future.

4. Managing Interruptions

Interruptions are the number one complaint that people have in terms of time management. While it's true that they can steal valuable time and energy away from essential tasks, it's important to remember that you can control them.

The key is to identify the interruptions, and then analyze their importance. The best tool to do this is an Interrupters Log – a simple record of the interruptions you experience in the course of a day.

Action:



Create your own Interrupter's Log (see template on [page 9](#)). Record every interruption that you experience for at least a week. Write down the name of the person who interrupted you, the date and time the interruption happened, and the nature of the interruption.

Then tick whether it was a Valid or Urgent interruption. In some cases, you'll find that interruptions may be both valid and urgent. In other words you should be interrupted and you were needed to deal with the situation.

From your Interrupters Log, you'll be able to evaluate how much time is taken up by these urgent, valid interruptions. You can then block this time into your schedule as "contingency time," that is time that you allow for unexpected tasks or emergencies.

Here are some more tips to help you to control interruptions:

- **Use Voice Mail.** Telephone interruptions can be real time-stealers. When you're on a deadline, or you need to focus intensely on a task, use your voice mail to screen calls, or have an assistant take messages for you. This way, you can return calls at a more convenient time, and in order of priority.
- **Catch Your Breath.** Here's a fact: most interruptions are not crises. They're routine matters that could be handled easily by others. So, don't get caught up in the "crisis mode" of the people doing the interrupting. The interrupter may well feel that the matter is urgent, but that doesn't make it so.
Take a few deep breaths to clear your head, so you can consider the issue objectively. Once you've done this, you can react appropriately to the situation.
- **Learn to Say "No."** This is one of the most powerful tools for eliminating or controlling interruptions. When it's done politely, firmly and in appropriate circumstances, most interrupters will accept the fact that they don't need to bother you with unimportant tasks. Simply tell them "No," and then give them a short explanation as to why you can't talk to them. For example, you might say, "I'm on a tight deadline for an important project right now, so I'm sorry but I'm not in a position to help at the moment."
- **Establish Boundaries.** By setting boundaries for yourself and communicating them to your team clearly, your people will know when you are available and when you are not. Make it clear that your "unavailable time" should only be interrupted with matters of extreme importance. To help your boundaries stick, you can agree on a signal with others in your office to indicate that you're unavailable. For example, you can wear headphones, or simply close the door to your office. This reduces interruptions and helps avoid hurt feelings.

5. Scenarios

In our scenarios, we look at two situations where people used their time ineffectively. As you read each one, make a note of your observations, and answer the questions at the end.

Scenario 1

A Product Launch

Leon's company is launching a new product into the marketplace. His part in the launch is to provide the sales team with the information they need to pitch the product to prospective customers. This involves writing and producing presentations, brochures and DVDs. In Leon's opinion, he has "a million tasks" ahead of him.

He grabs a notebook and jots down some of the things he can remember that need doing. When a colleague or his manager makes a suggestion or request, Leon adds it to the page in his notebook.

During the course of the project, Leon realizes that he's falling further and further behind on developing the materials for training the salespeople, and he's starting to hear complaints from his manager. In a bid to catch up, he decides to focus on the tasks he can finish quickly.

Two weeks later, Leon is a nervous wreck. He's not catching up. In fact, he's falling further behind, and receiving a barrage of complaints. His own complaint to his manager is, "There's just too much to do, and I can't get it all done in the time frame you've given me."

His manager has no sympathy, and points out that everyone else on the team is on time with their part of the project. Exhausted and dejected, Leon trudges back to his office, wondering why things have gone so badly.

Question 1:

What do you think went wrong with Leon's time management strategy?

Question 2:

What advice would you give him?

Scenario 2

Sally, the New Manager

Sally is a new manager, with a large team and a big workload. She's on a steep learning curve, as she's also new to the organization, but is looking forward to developing her skills and achieving a lot.

She has an open-door policy so she can get to know her team members, and they can get to know her. But she's finding it hard to concentrate because several members of her team keep dropping in to ask her about matters that they consider urgent. At the same time, she has to attend management meetings and training courses, as well as manage several projects.

There are a couple of vacancies on the team, so Sally is doing a lot of interviewing. She is also aware that several of the processes are out of date and inefficient, and she knows that she is expected to sort them out.

She needs to take time to manage and support her team, but she also wants to impress her boss, Margaret, with her own work.

Sally is feeling overwhelmed because she's being pulled in all directions at once by the demands on her time.

....And Her Impatient Boss

The situation is made worse by Margaret, who regularly hands her urgent assignments with no notice. A plainspoken, impatient person, Margaret insists that Sally take care of these items immediately, even though Sally feels that many of them are not that important when measured against the goals of her assigned project.

Despite the stress she's feeling, Sally has conscientiously kept a prioritized To-Do List, but has been having trouble completing important items on the list.

Sally is horrified one day to discover that she did not complete a technical manual in time for a product shipment date, causing a delay.

Since she's new to the job, Margaret is somewhat understanding, but she tells Sally in no uncertain terms that she needs to do a better job of managing her time and workload so that the situation doesn't recur.

Question 1:

What do you think went wrong with Sally's time management approach?

Question 2:

How would you help Sally out with her team members? *(The situation with Margaret, the boss, is considered separately on the next page.)*

Question 3:

How would you help Sally out with the management of her To-Do List?

Question 4:

What recommendations would you make to Sally for dealing with her boss, Margaret?

6. Scenarios: Suggested Solutions

Scenario 1: Suggested Solution

What do you think went wrong with Leon's time management strategy?

Leon jotted things down in a notebook, but did not create an itemized and prioritized To-Do List, which would have focused his attention on higher-priority items first. As he fell behind, he chose tasks that he could complete quickly. Items of more importance were neglected, and this resulted in complaints from his manager and colleagues.

Leon created unnecessary stress for himself by not having a prioritized To-Do List and by choosing efficiency (completing quick tasks) over effectiveness (tackling the higher-priority items first).

What advice would you give him?

Leon needs to remember that effectiveness, not efficiency, is his primary goal. He should avoid falling into the trap of doing many lower-priority items, and creating the illusion that important things are being done.

He should write a To-Do List, prioritize the items on it, and tackle the most important tasks first. This will please his boss and fellow team members, eliminate or reduce the unnecessary stress he created for himself, and, most importantly, get the task or project done effectively.

Scenario 2: Sally the New Manager

What do you think went wrong with Sally's time management approach?

While Sally's open-door policy was well meaning, she needed to realize that the constant interruptions it created were negatively affecting how she managed her projects and her time.

It's likely that few of the items the team members brought to her attention were genuinely urgent, and every interruption diverted her attention away from the prioritized activities on her To-Do List.

How would you help her out with her team members? (*The situation with Margaret, her boss, is considered separately on the next page.*)

In terms of interruptions, Sally should set clear limits with her team members, and establish times when she's available for one-to-one meetings. Also, she could request that people defer non-urgent matters to the regular team meetings, where they can be dealt with more effectively. This will give important time back to Sally – time she can spend on tasks that help her complete the project and achieve her goals.

How would you help Sally out with the management of her To-Do List?

Sally probably assigned too many items as top priority on her To-Do List. She should have used the Urgent/Important Principle to separate the truly important from the merely urgent high-priority items.

Clearly, she didn't use the principle because she missed completing the technical manual for the product shipment. This was a result of poor planning, demonstrated by the fact that she missed an urgent and important matter.

Once she uses the principle, she'll find that she can focus her attention on the important tasks, and not waste valuable time on items that appear to be urgent but aren't important. She may be able to delegate some of these tasks to members of her team.

What recommendations would you make to Sally for dealing with her boss, Margaret?

This is a tricky situation. Clearly, Margaret is a major source of interruptions. She is also the "culprit" in placing items she considers urgent on Sally's desk, but that Sally doesn't rank as important in terms of project goals.

However, Sally is also "the new kid on the block," and hasn't yet established her credibility with Margaret. But, one thing is for sure: Sally has to deal with the situation immediately, or trying to satisfy Margaret's demands will cause her to feel a lot of stress.

Since Margaret is described as "plainspoken," Sally needs to be polite and direct with her. Before meeting with Margaret, she should support her argument with as many facts as possible in terms of how Margaret's "urgent" items have diverted her attention away from more important project goals.

One strategy for the meeting might be to adopt a subtly flattering, but sincere, attitude. For example, Sally could say, "Since I'm new, I really want to learn from an experienced person like you, Margaret. Here's what's happening when you... What would you recommend I do?"

Hopefully, this tactic will defuse Margaret's impatience and, at the same time, position Sally as a person who's willing to learn in order to advance the best interests of her boss and her team.

It will also position Sally as a manager who's willing to take direct and immediate action – an attitude that Margaret may well appreciate.

7. Key Points

In this training session, we've looked at how to manage your time so you can be more productive and achieve your goals. We introduced you to three fundamental time management techniques:

- Creating effective To-Do Lists.
- Prioritizing tasks, using Eisenhower's Important/Urgent Principle.
- Reducing interruptions.

To-Do Lists help you itemize tasks and activities, so that you can focus on the most important ones that help you achieve your goals.

Eisenhower's Urgent/Important Principle is a tool to help you prioritize effectively, and determine which of your activities are important and which are, essentially, distractions to be avoided.

Reducing interruptions allows you to concentrate on your important tasks. You can do this by establishing boundaries for yourself and ensuring that your team members understand them. And by learning to say "No" politely, when it's appropriate to do so.