

Six Steps to Transform Your Use of Time



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"What did I accomplish today?" It's a common question. A busy manager feels as if every day flies by and there's nothing to show for it. A person looking for work feels guilty if he isn't spending 8 hours a day job-hunting. A newly retired executive laments that her day has no structure.

Many people use time unconsciously. They don't focus on what they're doing. They don't focus on the meaning of what they're doing. When people burn through time unconsciously, they feel as if they haven't accomplished anything that matters. Here are six steps to get you thinking and feeling differently about your use of time so that you always feel you are making progress.

Step 1: View time as a gift and your use of time as a conscious choice.

Time is a finite resource. Each minute, hour and day comes but once. Start treating your time as valuable and irreplaceable.

Notice how you talk about time. Words have power. Give up *killing, wasting, taking, passing* and *spending* time. Instead, choose to *invest, devote, give, reserve, offer, add, apply, schedule, provide* and *make* time. There's a different impact when you tell yourself that you're going to "spend time" on expense reports than when you say you're going to "invest time" on expense reports. The first expression feels draining. The second expression clearly has a return on investment.

Be aware of what you're doing and why. Awareness leads you to making conscious decisions about your time. When you value your time and are aware of your activities, you exercise conscious choice. You consciously *choose* to go to a meeting or work on a task, watch a kitten video or call a friend. Because you value your time, each choice aligns with something you care about. That alignment assures you experience a day filled with activities that matter to you.

Step 2: Identify things that you really want to do and reframe the ones you don't.

If you're currently working, work is a good place to start this identification process. What are the elements of your job that you really enjoy? It's likely that those are aspects of your job that take advantage of your strengths. Moments when you are doing this work are the moments when you're "in the zone." You feel fully engaged and time seems to stop. Put these "in the zone" items on a list, with a big star next to them. The starred items will be important in step four.

Add the rest of your work requirements to your list, phrasing the description of each item positively. For example, perhaps you're a manager and you don't enjoy holding weekly staff meetings. Describe this task in a way that lets you tap into something you do enjoy. If you love to learn, you might write, "learn from my staff," instead of "hold staff meetings."

If looking for work is your focus, put job-hunting activities on your list. That includes time for networking, looking for position openings, applying and

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interviewing. Phrase the activity using words that generate a positive feeling. For example, instead of saying, “check job boards and email alerts,” you might write, “discover a great opportunity on a job board.” Although finding work is your top priority, don’t make it your only priority. It can be discouraging to spend 8 hours every day job-hunting. You have a unique opportunity to do things that you never had time to tackle while you were employed full-time. Add some of those to your list, especially if one or two are things that you feel passionate about. This is a great opening in which to learn something new, volunteer, connect with family and friends and generally expand your horizons. Not only will these things be a constructive use of your time off, they will provide you with a succession of small accomplishments to keep you mentally and emotionally confident.

The world is full of possibilities when you voluntarily stop working full-time. Pull out your “bucket list.” Brainstorm ideas, giving yourself permission to include on your list anything you’ve ever wanted to do. Consider your strengths and your passions. What activities can feed your desire for purpose and fulfillment? Perhaps some type of work is desirable. Identify the work circumstances in which you are happiest, and test possible job descriptions against these criteria. Add specific work goals to your list. These are the things that you “get” to do. Feel grateful and do a happy dance!

Step 3: Take care of yourself.

The oft-quoted columnist Doug Larsen said, “For disappearing acts, it’s hard to beat what happens to the eight hours supposedly left after eight of sleep and eight of work.” Somewhere in those eight hours is time you could devote to taking care of yourself. Consider how to nourish your body, mind, emotions, spirit and relationships. Write down the ideas you come up with for each of these five areas. Imagine feeling as good as you possibly could about yourself and put everything you imagine on the list. Be as specific as you can be. For example, if it would make you feel great to be more physically fit, don’t simply put “exercise” on the list. Come up with the specific activity that would increase your physical fitness and be a lot of fun. Put that on your list. Next, go through the list and read each item out loud. If saying it out loud makes you feel happy or puts a smile on your face, then circle it. By the way, if you aren’t getting 8 hours of sleep, this is the time to start. Numerous medical studies demonstrate the value of sleep and rank it above diet and exercise when listing the elements of a healthy lifestyle.

Step 4: Plan a balanced week.

Divide each day of the week into distinct segments: segments for sleep; segments for meals; segments for physical activity; segments in which to focus on work; segments for creativity and play; segments when you focus on the people in your life; segments for activities that enhance you and how you feel about yourself. Allocate time for each. Your segments are designed to provide you with periods of

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focus. *Focus* means, “focus.” Do your best not to multitask. Contrary to popular belief, multitasking does not make you more productive.¹

Go to the lists you made in steps two and three. Using the example chart at the end of this article as a guide, begin to add the items from your lists to segments. Adjust the time allocations as necessary. Check for balance in each day and across the week. Does each day include the segments that are most important to you, i.e. those that you starred or circled in steps two or three? Close your eyes and imagine what it would be like to experience a day or a week in your new plan. Do you sense a feeling of balance and completeness? If not, make some changes. You can choose to change your segments; the time allocated to a segment or to change an activity. For example, if you realize that committing to participation in a weekly golf league prevents you from spending time with family, you might commit to playing golf once a month, taking a golf lesson once a week and going with the family to the chip and putt on the weekend. Your brain will provide you with plenty of ideas. It will be your heart (how you feel about it) that tells you if you’ve gotten it right. On my website (www.excella-llc.com) there’s a template you can download and use to design your weekly segments and allocate time. You’re ready to start using your new plan.

Step 5: Keep track.

You created a plan with the intent of accomplishing a variety of goals. If you aren’t tracking what you’ve achieved, it can be as if it didn’t happen. People who skip this step often lose their connection to their accomplishments. A tracking system can be very simple. Some people get motivation from a basic to-do list. If you’re one of those people, use this familiar tool for tracking. A special pad of paper or an app on your tablet can help you formalize the tracking step. Further cement the tracking habit by making the process of creating and maintaining the tracking list an explicit part of your focused work time. Tracking can act as a kickoff to your workday. Alternatively, you can record accomplishments through the day or during the last 15 minutes of your workday.

Not a to-do list person? That’s okay. Studies have found that peoples’ motivation to complete tasks increases when tasks are tied to goals and associated with values. Associating a mundane task with a deeply felt value changes the way that people view the task. For example, purchasing a birthday card may feel like a chore. When it is associated with a deeply held value, such as one’s love and commitment to family, purchasing the card is not only easier, it has a clear feeling of accomplishment. Online goal tracking applications, some with a values component, are available to support this approach. They give you good visibility to your progress and can be highly motivating. The best use a SMART methodology where goals are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely. Some are reviewed at: <http://www.sitepoint.com/goal-setting-tracking-tools/>.

¹ <http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/224943>

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Step 6: Give yourself credit

Reflect on the day and pat yourself on the back for what you've accomplished. Reflection takes many forms. Write a journal entry about your day, week or month. Create a ritual in which you consciously take credit for what you accomplished and clear the slate for what will come next. Tell someone else what you've accomplished, preferably by phone or face-to-face, not via Facebook, text or blog. The experience is much more powerful when it's validated in the moment by someone who cares about you.

When you are focused and aware, tapping into your passion, taking care of yourself and recognizing your own accomplishments, the way you experience your daily routine will be transformed. Working with a coach gets you in touch with your strengths, values and goals to speed up your movement through these steps. It helps you remove any obstacles that get in the way of your creative process and reinforces your forward progress. Complete these six steps and there will still be just 24 hours in a day but your day will feel full of possibilities and purpose. When you close your eyes at night, you will fall asleep knowing that time has served you well.

Example of a completed Weekly Plan

Weekly Planner							
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday (available for longdistance travel)	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
12:00 - 7:30 a.m.	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep
7:30 - 7:45	Eat	Eat	Eat	Eat	Eat	Check email	Check email
7:45 - 8:15	Exercise - Weights	Exercise - Elliptical	Shower, Dress & Drive to Work	Exercise - Weights	Shower, dress & drive to work	Eat	Eat
8:15 - 8:30	Shower, Dress & Drive to Work email	Shower, Dress & Drive to Work	Work - Quiet Time email	Shower, Dress & Drive to Work email	Work - Quiet Time email	Shower, Dress & Drive to Golf Course	
9:00 - 12:00	Exec. Team Meeting of the Month! Update plans to show PROGRESS! Learn from Clients via phone calls	Work - Meeting Five Zone email	Learn from Sales via phone calls Learn from abstract reports Open Share meeting() email	Strategic Planning Time email	Weekly Webinar - Internal email	Exercise - GOLF	Church
12:00 - 12:30	Eat	Eat	Drive to Driving Range	Eat	Drive to the T	18th Hole	Eat
12:30 - 1:00	Meditate	Meditate	Hit Golf Balls	Meditate	Request call with JK		
1:00 - 5:00	Weekly Webinar - External Learn from Finance Track last week's accomplishments email	Work Open Share meeting() Learn from Market Research email	Work Product Demo Stand Up email	Work Marketing email	Shower, Dress & Drive Meditate, Open Share Learn from CEO email	Five	Long walking run
5:00 - 6:00	Travel Home	Travel Home	Travel Home	Travel Home	Travel Home		Dinner
6:45 - 7:30	Family Dinner and Conversation	Family Dinner and Conversation	Family Dinner and Conversation	Family Dinner and Conversation	Five	Family Dinner and Conversation	Family Dinner and Conversation
7:30 - 8:00	Book Lesson	Outdoor Practice	Outdoor Practice	Outdoor Practice			
8:00 - 9:00	Volunteer Work for the University	Reading	Volunteer Work for the community	Reading	Date Night	Five	Five
9:00 - 9:30	Telephone Calls to Family						
9:30 - 11:00	Five	Five	Five	Meet with inside-the-team	Date Night	Five	Game of Thrones
11:00 - 11:30	Check email	Check email	Check email	Check email	Check email	Check email	Check email
11:30 - 12:00	Meditate - Quiet Time	Meditate - Quiet Time	Meditate - Quiet Time	Meditate - Quiet Time	Meditate - Quiet Time	Meditate - Quiet Time	Meditate - Quiet Time

