10 Common Time Management Mistakes
Avoiding Common Pitfalls

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How well do you manage your time? If you're like many people, your answer may not be completely positive! Perhaps you feel overloaded, and you often have to work late to hit your deadlines. Or maybe your days seem to go from one crisis to another, and this is stressful and demoralizing. Many of us know that we could be managing our time more effectively; but it can be difficult to identify the mistakes that we're making, and to know how we could improve. When we do manage our time well, however, we're exceptionally productive at work, and our stress levels drop. We can devote time to the interesting, high-reward projects that can make a real difference to a career. In short, we're happier!

In this article, we're looking at ten of the most common time management mistakes, as well as identifying strategies and tips that you can use to overcome them. These ten mistakes are:

**Mistake #1. Failing to Keep a To-Do List**

Do you ever have that nagging feeling that you've forgotten to do an important piece of work? If so, you probably don't use a To-Do List to keep on top of things. (Or, if you do, you might not be using it effectively!) The trick with using To-Do Lists effectively lies in prioritizing the tasks on your list. Many people use an A-F coding system (A for high priority items, F for very low priorities). Alternatively, you can simplify this by using A through D, or by using numbers.

If you have large projects on your list, then, unless you're careful, the entries for these can be vague and ineffective. For instance, you may have written down "Start on budget proposal." But what does this entail? The lack of specifics here might cause you to procrastinate, or miss key steps. So make sure that you break large tasks or projects down into specific, actionable steps - then you won't overlook something important.

You can also use Action Programs to manage your work when you have many large projects happening at once. (Action Programs are "industrial strength" versions of To-Do Lists.)

**Mistake #2. Not Setting Personal Goals**

Do you know where you'd like to be in six months? What about this time next year, or even 10 years from now? If not, it's time to set some personal goals!

Personal goal setting is essential to managing your time well, because goals give you a destination and vision to work toward. When you know where you want to go, you can manage your priorities, time, and resources to get there. Goals also help you decide what's worth spending your time on, and what's just a distraction.
Mistake #3. Not Prioritizing

Your assistant has just walked in with a crisis that she needs you to deal with right now, but you're in the middle of brainstorming ideas for a new client. You're sure that you've almost come up with a brilliant idea for their marketing campaign, but now you risk losing the thread of your thinking because of this "emergency."

Sometimes, it's hard to know how to prioritize, especially when you're facing a flood of seemingly-urgent tasks. However, it's essential to learn how to prioritize tasks effectively if you want to manage your time better.

One tool that will help you prioritize effectively is the Urgent/Important Matrix. This helps you understand the difference between urgent activities, and important activities. You'll also learn how to overcome the tendency to focus on the urgent.

The Action Priority Matrix is another useful tool, which will help you determine if a task is high-yield and high-priority, or low-value, "fill in" work. You'll manage your time much better during the day if you know the difference.

Mistake #4. Failing to Manage Distractions

Do you know that some of us can lose as much as two hours a day to distractions? Think how much you could get done if you had that time back!

Whether they come from emails, IM chats, colleagues in a crisis, or phone calls from clients, distractions prevent us from achieving flow, which is the satisfying and seemingly effortless work that we do when we're 100 percent engaged in a task.

If you want to gain control of your day and do your best work, it's vital to know how to minimize distractions and manage interruptions effectively. For instance, turn off your IM chat when you need to focus, and let people know if they're distracting you too often. You should also learn how to improve your concentration, even when you're faced with distractions.

Mistake #5. Procrastination

Procrastination occurs when you put off tasks that you should be focusing on right now. When you procrastinate, you feel guilty that you haven't started; you come to dread doing the task; and, eventually, everything catches up with you when you fail to complete the work on time.

For instance, one useful strategy is to tell yourself that you're only going to start a project for ten minutes. Often, procrastinators feel that they have to complete a task from start to finish, and this high expectation makes them feel overwhelmed and anxious. Instead, focus on devoting a small amount of time to starting. That's all!
You might also find it helpful to use Action Plans. These help you break large projects down into manageable steps, so that it's easy to see everything that you need to get done, and so that you can complete small chunks at a time. Doing this can stop you from feeling overwhelmed at the start of a new project.

**Mistake #6. Taking on too Much**

Are you a person who has a hard time saying "no" to people? If so, you probably have far too many projects and commitments on your plate. This can lead to poor performance, stress, and low morale.

Or, you might be a micromanager: someone who insists on controlling or doing all of the work themselves, because they can't trust anyone else to do it correctly. (This can be a problem for everyone - not just managers!)

Either way, taking on too much is a poor use of your time, and it can get you a reputation for producing rushed, sloppy work.

To stop this, learn the subtle art of saying "yes" to the person, but "no" to the task. This skill helps you assert yourself, while still maintaining good feelings within the group. If the other person starts leaning on you to say "yes" to their request, learn how to think on your feet, and stay cool under pressure.

**Mistake #7. Thriving on "Busy"**

Some people get a rush from being busy. The narrowly-met deadlines, the endless emails, the piles of files needing attention on the desk, the frantic race to the meeting... What an adrenaline buzz!

The problem is that an "addiction to busyness" rarely means that you're effective, and it can lead to stress. Instead, try to slow down, and learn to manage your time better.

**Mistake #8. Multitasking**

To get on top of her workload, Linda regularly writes emails while she chats on the phone to her clients. However, while Linda thinks that this is a good use of her time, the truth is that it can take 20-40 percent more time to finish a list of jobs when you multitask, compared with completing the same list of tasks in sequence. The result is also that she does both tasks poorly - her emails are full of errors, and her clients are frustrated by her lack of concentration.

So, the best thing is to forget about multitasking, and, instead, focus on one task at a time. That way, you'll produce higher quality work.
Mistake #9. Not Taking Breaks

It's nice to think that you can work for 8-10 hours straight, especially when you're working to a deadline. But it's impossible for anyone to focus and produce really high-quality work without giving their brains some time to rest and recharge.

So, don't dismiss breaks as "wasting time." They provide valuable down-time, which will enable you to think creatively and work effectively.

If it's hard for you to stop working, then schedule breaks for yourself, or set an alarm as a reminder. Go for a quick walk, grab a cup of coffee, or just sit and meditate at your desk. Try to take a five minute break every hour or two. And make sure that you give yourself ample time for lunch - you won't produce top quality work if you're hungry!

Mistake #10. Ineffectively Scheduling Tasks

Are you a morning person? Or do you find your energy picking up once the sun begins to set in the evening? All of us have different rhythms, that is, different times of day when we feel most productive and energetic.

You can make best use of your time by scheduling high-value work during your peak time, and low-energy work (like returning phone calls and checking email), during your "down" time.

Key Points
One of the most effective ways of improving your productivity is to recognize and rectify time management mistakes. When you take the time to overcome these mistakes, it will make a huge difference in your productivity - and you'll also be happier, and experience less stress!