



# It's High Time for Time Management

*Who's making the most demands of your time?*

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**T**IME MANAGEMENT? NOW THERE'S a popular topic for authors, speakers, and consultants! There must be a stack a block long in the Library of Congress on how we can optimize our days and learn to plan and organize better. Personally, I've avoided writing about time management in "Managing Your Career" because I stick to subjects that I know. And I must confess that managing my time has always been a problem for me, as it is for many busy people.

Over the years, I have read books and asked advice of experts in this field. Universally, they have recommended analyzing who or what manages my time and how I spend it. And yet, it took me several years to actually try this. (Procrastination will be covered in a future article . . .) Because I have recently begun internally accounting for my time on an hourly basis for each project I work on, I have been forced to very carefully scrutinize the way that my day is spent. I've learned quite a lot about myself and about the process of good time management as a result.

## My Time Journal

Whether you bill your work or simply want to know where to squeeze in more job-search networking hours, keeping a journal can help you discover your own personal "time wasters." As long as I was making accurate records, I thought that I would also try to use the daily journal to organize my time for maximum efficiency. But I needed something to remind me to record my activities, so I purchased a small timer that attached to my belt that goes off with silent buzzing at regular intervals.

Each time I feel the vibration at my waist, I jot down my current activity and make note of what I have been doing for the last 15 minutes. It works great; I have become very efficient at billing my time accurately. But it was quite disturbing as well—the time journal clearly illustrated how much time I was actually wasting over the course of a week. I am ordinarily quite frugal, the kind of person who watches every dime, and here I had discovered that I'd been losing my most precious commodity—my own time.

## The Four Types of Time

I began an in-depth study of the topic in an effort to turn around my problem. I found that most experts agree that we live with four types of time during our working hours: boss-imposed, system-imposed, self-imposed, and subordinate-imposed time. Of these types, I had a problem with the self-imposed and system-imposed variety. In other words, I was continually caught up in paperwork (system-imposed) and wasted time on the Internet (self-imposed).

Although we can't get into a discourse on time management solutions in this short column, I would like to stress that so much of successfully optimizing your time involves being aware of where your day goes. Whether you are developing a time log or just paying closer attention to the clock, consider each of these four categories, and like the people in my examples below, work to make some improvements in each of them:

**Boss-Imposed.** Joachim waited outside the door to his boss's office. He had a 9:00 a.m. meeting with Susan, the principal investigator and department head. Unfortunately, Susan hadn't quite finished up her session with another manager, and Joachim was forced to sit outside and wait while the earlier meeting dragged on. It was always like this, he thought. No matter what time he was called aside for a meeting, formal or impromptu, there was always some wait while Susan finished up. Joachim decided that he had two options. For one, he could talk to Susan and get her to realize how inefficient these meeting times had become. Alternately, he could bring his laptop with him and get some work done in these little chunks of time. It took him only a moment to decide to bring the computer next time.

**System-Imposed.** Darren was making considerable progress on the project he was selected to oversee. He had established a reputation as someone who knew how to maximize every minute of the day. Darren knew that the real reason he succeeded was that he would put in extra time just to handle the paperwork. Like every other scientist in the program, that part of the job drove him crazy. Last month he did a time analysis and he found that he was spending more than 40 hours each month on various paperwork activities instead of doing science. That's when he decided to automate some of the repetitive stuff. He grinned as he filled in the first of the templates he had come up with. "What a time saver," he thought.

**Self-Imposed.** Personally, this one has been my biggest hang-up. I often find myself drawn into the Internet, when a search for more information about a new drug brings up movie reviews, or sends you off in a dozen

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interesting directions. It is so easy to get caught up in something else, and it took my time log to really drive this point home for me. I found that more than an hour a day fell in the category of "off-topic Web access."

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Amazon.com orders for CD's, or managing to post some editorial opinions in web forum discussions. Just recognizing that problem allowed me to become more productive and have less stress with the truly important things on my desk. This can also be a problem in the laboratory. How many times have you lost track of time wandering the Web? Simply setting a laboratory timer for a 10-minute Web surf can keep you on track. In other words, time your surfing, just as you time the steps in your experiments.

**Subordinate-Imposed.** Shelly was headed to a department meeting when she ran into one of her people, George, who asked to discuss a problem. He described an assay that had been working fine but was suddenly yielding unexpected results. Seeing the look of expectancy on his face, Shelly knew what she was in for. She'd had questions like these before from George and the other younger employees in her lab. She wouldn't be able to answer him on the spot, but she was obviously qualified to work on it. "I'll think about this and get back to you later today," she told George. As they parted company, Shelly realized that once again she had taken on a problem from someone who would be better off solving it himself. She promised herself that in the future she would empower her employees to solve their own problems, instead of allowing them to add to hers.

### **The Daily Rush**

Everyone is busy today. Because of this daily rush, we often aren't able to find the time to plan and strategize our career development. Job seekers who are in this mode make the mistake of simply relying upon a CV mailing to do the job for them, instead of finding the time to develop a list of networking contacts or attend an association's local event, for example.

If you wonder where your time went when you get home tonight, perhaps you should consider analyzing your day the way that I did. Although you will never free yourself from the demands that other people place on you during your workday, there will still be ways that you can find more time for the truly important tasks. Have you considered what you might do with an extra hour a day, or more? Try it! ■