



Top 10 Time Management Traps

— By Laura Stack

403-670-5437

info@macinkconsulting.com

macinkconsulting.com

825 - 8th Avenue S.W.

Suite 4100 Calgary AB T2P 2T4

Trap #1: Prioritization

Setting workplace priorities is by far the most common time management complaint I hear, and it comes in two flavors: either the worker has problems juggling multiple projects and can't set his or her own priorities, or the boss has problems setting priorities for the employee. Often, the boss labels everything as equally urgent, leaving workers to throw up their hands in frustration and simply guess which project to focus on—which may cause drama and stress later on, if they guess wrong or the boss proves unreasonable. Whether the failure to set priorities is the boss's or the worker's, the worker ends up scrambling, and may soon fall prey to overwork and overwhelm (which represents another common time trap; see below). The solution, while easy to state, may be difficult to accomplish: firmly ask your boss to prioritize your projects. Then ruthlessly triage your task list, focusing first on the items that truly matter. Prioritize everything else according to relative value.

Trap #2: Interruptions and Distractions

This timewaster consists of anything unscheduled but routine that disrupts an individual's focus and thereby damages productivity at work. Meetings and crises don't count; they have their own categories. I imagine you could fill up a whole page (or more) with a list of the various interruptions and distractions that impact your workplace productivity: coworkers who drop in at random intervals; ringing phones; noisy neighbors; and micromanaging bosses. Communications issues, especially those involving email and phone calls, plague us all constantly, and represent almost a third of this category of complaints. Overcoming this particular trap requires a firm application of self-discipline. If something distracts or interrupts you, make the effort necessary to guard against it. If you have an executive assistant, have them guard access to you. Otherwise, tighten your focus. Use ambient sound or music to block out noise. Turn off your email alerts and close your browser. Forward your calls to voicemail when you have no time for calls and respond a few times a day. Go somewhere quieter for a while or work from home one day a week.

Trap #3: Overwork/Overwhelm

This problem boils down to: "There's not enough time in the day to do everything!" Given the human need for rest (and sanity), workers can push themselves only so far within the unforgiving limitations of the 24-hour day. Time is a constraint no one can bargain with or stretch. Take firm control of your time, jettisoning the unimportant tasks from your schedule, and maintaining an unrelenting, tight focus. Examine each task and determine if you've been overdoing it; in other words, can your downstream user make do with less? If the task really belongs to someone else, give it to them. To the maximum extent possible, find ways to delegate tasks to others, and practice purposeful abandonment: if you run out of time for something of minor relevance, let it go. Stop seeing your task list as a "must do" list, instead viewing it as a "want to do" list. These steps represent only the beginning of a valid prioritization effort, but taken together, they're big steps—and they can help you deal with the beast of overwhelm before it devours you.

Trap #4. Lack of Self-Discipline

For some people, the biggest time management problem is actually a lack of self-discipline: i.e., not having the willpower to say no to distractions, or to stick tenaciously to the task at hand. Many people won't admit it, however. Many employees are unable to concentrate or attempt to multitask too much. Too often, they lose track of the projects they're juggling, which echoes prioritization and planning issues as well. Others have problems with setting or sticking to goals...and a few just can't seem to get anywhere on time. To overcome these problems, fire up your willpower, crack the whip on yourself, and decide to concentrate on a task until complete. About a quarter of those with self-discipline problems see procrastination as a bigger issue than a simple lack of focus. Most often, they find themselves daunted by huge, complex projects. So in addition to applying tight focus to the problem, break it into smaller chunks you can handle more easily. Set milestones, buckle down, and get to work.

Trap #5: Disorganization

Many workers accept a high level of chaos in their lives, and as a result find themselves stuck in the time trap of disorganization. Information constantly gets lost or misplaced. Tracking action items, managing the boss (or subordinates), filing, planning, and overall project management sometimes overwhelms these workers, because they don't have a logical information processing system in place. Learn to use your email software to its fullest, establish a logical, simple organizational system, and process every piece of information as it enters your life. Don't let it pile up, and never dither about what to do with an item—whether a piece of paper, an email, a voicemail, or any other bit of information that crosses your desk. Always make time for planning. And occasionally, step back and look at the big picture, so you can see how everything is working. As necessary, take steps to fix what doesn't work, and be on the lookout for ways to improve efficiency.

Trap #6. Scheduling

Do you have problems getting things done in the time you have? Common complaints include an inability to properly estimate how long specific tasks will take (a skill that comes with experience), and deciding where on one's calendar to place each task. The second case requires thoughtful (and stringent) application of both task triage and prioritization, as well as a willingness to say no to new work when possible. You especially have to learn to let things go. You can't get important things done you're your calendar is burgeoning with unimportant meetings. Most of us prefer to do the easy, fun tasks first—an unproductive attitude at best. Instead, do the hard, high-significance things first. You can let go of the rest if time runs out.

Trap # 7: People Problems

Jean-Paul Sartre famously said, "Hell is other people"—and yes indeed, your coworkers can present a variety of difficulties when it comes to getting your work done. As I've already discussed, many workplace distractions emanate from others; who hasn't been annoyed by coworkers gossiping in the hall, or playing their music too loud? Upper echelon workers often find that management duties represent their biggest time challenges; but those come with the job. Productivity at work suffers more when people act as roadblocks and bottlenecks. A few seem to do it on purpose, often from sheer cussedness. Some don't care about your deadlines, so they don't get important information to you in a timely fashion. Others just can't seem to get anywhere on time, thereby wasting your time. And when a boss can't (or won't) make a decision, you might end up twiddling your thumbs until they do. Some bottlenecks you can go around. Some you can break by stepping in to help, or at least by asking the blocker flat out what the hold-up is. Whatever the case, try to smooth the way so you can get the workflow process moving again. If you can't, then accept the situation as something you can't change and move on to something else.

Trap #8: Crises

The time trap of the unexpected runs neck-and-neck with people problems in my informal survey. In fact, most workplace crises arise from human behavior in one way or another. Bosses dump urgent projects on you at short notice, slow coworkers keep dragging their heels until you can barely meet your deadlines, human bottlenecks tie up resources, and everything suddenly comes due right now. We've all been there—and we'll all certainly be there again. You can't do much when other people spin things into crisis, except react—which means you must remain perpetually flexible. Establish systems and processes in advance to handle the unexpected when it lifts its ugly head, including guidelines for each type of emergency you can imagine. When a crisis arises, practice SLLR: Stop, Look, Listen, and Respond. After you have a handle on the situation, spring into action. You may have to triage your to-do list again, with some tasks moving down or off the list as a result. If you've already scheduled a little extra time into your schedule, let it take up the slack. Do all you can to address the new work while letting as few of your normal tasks go as possible—and get all the help you can while doing so.

Trap #9: Work/Life Balance

It may sometimes seem like your organization doesn't want you to have a life outside of work, considering everything they pile on you. Workers tend to accept excessive hours as part of the background noise. Mostly, people just want a personal life, so they can pursue their hobbies, rest and relax, exercise, go to school, or (the #1 response) spend more time with their families. Again, the solution involves a strict adherence to self-discipline, ruthless task triage, and relentless prioritization, so you can make a big enough hole in your schedule to enjoy life outside of work. Focus on being efficient and productive at work, so you can achieve maximum results in minimum time, leave the office earlier, (can you get down to 10 hours instead of 12?), and get a life.

Trap #10: Meetings

No organization can function without face time; so inevitably, meetings take up some portion of the average worker's daily schedule. In some organizations, they get out of hand, directly harming workplace productivity. Finding enough time to actually fit in work when you regularly spend half the day in back-to-back meetings can be difficult. And before you accuse me of exaggeration, I do know people who've worked such jobs. When meetings go bad, the problem, again, tends to be because of oblivious people. They go off on tangents, won't get to the point, or simply can't communicate well; whatever the case, they err by wasting everyone else's time. Besides fighting this tendency in yourself, you can overcome the meeting trap by cutting down your commitments to meetings, going only to those you absolutely need to attend, and setting time limits you communicate to everyone as soon as you arrive. If you can, leave once you've made your contributions. If the meeting goes over the allotted time, politely excuse yourself, citing another meeting to attend.