

Making Everything Easier!™

2nd Edition

# Successful Time Management

FOR  
**DUMMIES**<sup>®</sup>  
A Wiley Brand

## Learn to:

- Accomplish more during the work day
- Organize your space for optimal productivity
- Get the most from your business travel
- Manage interruptions and end procrastination

Dirk Zeller



# Introduction

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Time is the only resource that people can't borrow, buy, or barter. And time refuses to follow one of the main tenets of the law of supply and demand: the idea that when the demand goes up to a high level, the supply will increase to meet the demand. People may use different amounts of time to accomplish results, but everyone is endowed with the same amount of time each day: 86,400 seconds.

Your ability to manage that time is really one of the top two causes of success or failure in your life. Investing greater amounts of time into a need, goal, objective, or even weakness can tip the balance of success in your favor. At numerous crossroads in life, I had to be willing to apply more time than my competitors to achieve a competitive advantage over them in the marketplace. I certainly didn't take for granted that my mental power was far superior to that of my competitors. Rather, my willingness to invest more time in certain tasks or use my time more effectively equalized the playing field.

Of course, if you invest too much time at work, you can be a success at the office but a failure at home. A true champion always has his or her pulse on home life and invests the right amount to keep vital relationships in life growing and thriving. The good news is that this book has both arenas covered. Congratulations on investing in yourself, your success, and your life!

## ***About This Book***

*Successful Time Management For Dummies* is about using your time more effectively to create greater results

at the office and at home. Note that in the spirit of saving you time, this is a reference book. In other words, you don't have to read it from cover to cover. Just look up what you need and put those ideas in action.

Personally, I think you should read every word of this book. I wrote it, after all! However, if you're the bare-bones-info type, you can skip the sidebars that appear throughout the book. Those gray boxes contain interesting, often anecdotal information that's related to the topic but not essential to understanding it.

This book

- ✓ Helps you with your organizational habits, discipline, systemization, goals, values, management style, persuasion, and even travel.
- ✓ Offers real techniques, strategies, and tools that I've personally used, taught, coached, and spoke about. I've seen them bring forth a bounty of results in my life as well as in the lives of countless others.
- ✓ Helps you mentally wrap your brain around the problems of time management.
- ✓ Explains how to establish a solid system that you can replicate over time.
- ✓ Introduces you to prioritization systems, time-categorization systems, time-blocking strategies, and appointment-setting strategies.
- ✓ Helps you grab back control and distill time management down to its essence.
- ✓ Sets you up for success and then helps you establish and align your goals with your time.
- ✓ Delves into prioritization strategies and tools.

- ✓ Takes you deep into the most important characteristics of a great time manager.
- ✓ Tells you how to time-block your way to greater success.
- ✓ Contains the tips for you to take your business and career to the highest level, no matter your job title.

## *Icons Used in This Book*

To help you navigate this book a bit better, you can rely on the icons in the book's margins. The icons act as little signposts pointing out the important info.



This bull's-eye icon points out little-advertised nuggets of knowledge that are certain to give you an edge in increasing your time-management skills.



This icon denotes critical information that you really need to take away with you. Remember these points, if nothing else. They address the issues that you come across repeatedly with time management.



Consider this the flashing red light on the road to making a sale. When you see the Warning icon, you know to steer clear of whatever practice, behavior, or response I indicate.



These icons tell you that I've cracked open the archives of my life experiences or my successful clients' life experiences to help illustrate a point.

# ***Foolish Assumptions***

When I wrote the book, I assumed a few things about you, dear reader:

- ✓ You want to use your time better. You expect to gain more time with your loved ones, you want to ramp up your success at work, or you're looking for a little of both.
- ✓ You know that effective time management isn't a one-stop fix; it's a comprehensive effort that requires looking at all time-draining culprits. You're willing to invest the effort needed to develop your time-management skills (or create them if they don't currently exist!).
- ✓ You're willing to be patient with yourself throughout the difficult process of self-betterment, knowing that in the end, all your efforts will pay off.

# ***Beyond the Book***

There is much more information available from your author, and from the *Dummies* brand, for your learning pleasure. Check out these resources to learn more about the art of successful time management:

Find the Dummies Cheat Sheet for this book at [www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/successfultimemanagement](http://www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/successfultimemanagement). The cheat sheet gives you a quick reference to help you manage your time and stay on track.

Extra online content can be found at <http://www.dummies.com/extras/successfultimemanagement>. Here, you can find short articles on ways to trim down wasted time. From how to plan a trip to getting your yard work done, you'll find these articles helpful.

# *Where to Go From Here*

In this book, I use the classic *For Dummies* fashion: You have easy access to the precise information you need when you need it. You can start at Page 1 and read through, or you can hop around, targeting the areas you need the most help with first. Keep this book close by to help you wring the most you can out of life in the scant 24 hours you have each day.

Part I is a good place to start because it helps you deal with the mental barriers to time management that can seem to form an unscalable wall. After that, you may want to pick topics that cause you the most challenge or frustration. For instance, you can check out [Chapter 16](#) for ways to beat procrastination or see [Chapter 18](#) so you can get a handle on upcoming meetings. On the other hand, if you feel you have your time strategy pretty much under control but are looking for a tune-up, you may go right to [Part V](#) first. There, I address how to take time management to the highest level through customized plans for your job or job title.

The truth is that no matter where you take your first plunge, the water's fine. You can find plenty of valuable information that you can use to increase your performance without increasing your hours at work.

## Part I

# Beginning the Revolution: Simple Steps to Start With



Visit [www.dummies.com](http://www.dummies.com) for great Dummies content online.

## *In this part ...*

- ✓ Learn how to remove key barriers from your life to encourage greater productivity. Assess where you stand in terms of time management.
- ✓ Create an organizational planning and implementation process, and discover the importance of setting up a system.
- ✓ Discover how the habits of tidiness and orderliness can save you hundreds of lost hours annually [md] imagine life without always looking for lost stuff!
- ✓ Understand that time is money; learn how you can calculate the value of your time.



# Chapter 1

## The Essence of Good Time Management: Organizing Yourself

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Understanding advance planning
  - ▶ Realizing 1,000 percent return
  - ▶ Assembling everything you need
  - ▶ Learning the three keys to personal organization
  - ▶ Stepping back to evaluate
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Time management boils down to a mindset of focusing on your priorities, goals, and objectives for a specific time period — a week, a day, or even an hour. It's the awareness that you are the one who lays claim to your success with the allotment of time you have for today.

Time management is a set of skills that are learned over time. The skills taught in this book — for example, of time blocking, single handling, controlling interruptions, and others — don't provide you with overnight success, nor can you implement or perfect them quickly. They require patience to fail, adjust, proceed, and then repeat the process many times. But by sticking with it, you can accomplish what needs to be done without too much stress and panic, and maybe have a little extra time left over.

This book is about taking control of the time you have in each day. Effective time management requires a little introspection, some good habits and organizational skills, and a handful of logistical and tactical tools. So take some time and get ready to learn how to manage it successfully.

## ***Planning in Advance***

The planning process for a project, your workday, or even a vacation is more vexing than the execution. Many people invest countless hours planning that perfect vacation to Hawaii. They research the different island options, review recreation activities, lodging, air travel, dining options, the list is endless. But few people plan their day or week with such zeal.

You have to fall in love with advance planning. You are likely faced each day with tasks you would rather not do, but frequently they seem to be high priorities. For example, most salespeople don't wake up each morning saying, "How exciting today; I get to call people I don't know and ask for their business!" Most moms don't get up and say in an excited tone, "I get to remind my seventh-grade son ten times to make sure he packs his homework before he goes to school!"

This is where advance planning brings big dividends to your life. Before your day begins — maybe the night before — plan to do the toughest but most important things first. Usually tough tasks become more challenging to complete throughout the day as more projects, deadlines, and emergency items crop up. So a good rule is to clear out the tough tasks first.

The sheer act of planning is the key to unlock your creativity, problem solving, mental strength, and clarity.

It also increases your mental and physical energy because you see the pathway to a productive day.

The better you use planning strategies and techniques, the more you can avoid procrastinating away what you don't want to do. At its base level, planning is simply creating a list. You increase your productivity by more than 25 percent by simply writing down what you need to accomplish. The advantages of creating a list are as follows.

### ***Achieving peace of mind***

Create your life as you wind down for the day so that you're ready to take on tomorrow. You likely are able to rest and relax more, knowing that your following day is planned. You sleep better when you don't have unresolved issues weighing heavy on your mind. You won't get that middle-of-the-night wake-up call of "Did I get that done?" You can achieve a deeper slumber by knowing you have your time and tasks under control.

### ***Activating your subconscious mind***

You also trigger your subconscious mind while you sleep. Because you have created your list, your subconscious works on that list while you rest. Your subconscious mind turns the challenges and problems over and over like a rotisserie, and eventually it comes up with strategies and solutions. Have you ever gone to bed with a problem or challenge only to wake up with a couple of new ideas on how to solve them? Your subconscious mind created those ideas while you slept. Always give your subconscious something to do at night by . . . handing it a list.

### ***The 1,000 percent return***

There is always a large payoff for planning. Many studies have indicated that for every minute of planning you save ten minutes in execution. That is a 1,000 percent return on your time with proper planning. Those numbers don't really illustrate a return of 1,000 percent; a monetary example can put the proper scope on it.

If you have \$10,000 and you got a 1,000 percent return in one year, at the end of the year you would have \$100,000. If you receive a 1,000 percent return the next year, you would have \$1,000,000. The initial investment went from \$10,000 to \$1,000,000 in less than two years. That's the type of return you can receive each day from planning properly.

Frequently the response I hear is, "I am too busy to plan." I have even tried to use that excuse myself. The truth is that even if you planned out everything in excruciating detail by forcing yourself to do it, you most likely would not invest more than a few minutes a day in the whole planning process. Strange as it may sound, sometimes you may need to slow down in order to speed up. Planning is the only pathway to greater productivity and quality of life.

The wasted time and mistakes you make are most likely related to a lack of planning. The most epic failures have commonality in lack of planning. My single most disastrous business failure came from lack of planning. I rushed into a decision without giving it the thought, planning, research, and care it deserved. It cost me a year of my life and hundreds of thousands of dollars in income. It was an expensive lesson on planning in time and treasure.

***Assemble all that is needed***

After you have planned out your day, a project, or even dinner, you then need to gather your materials to start and complete the project. I frequently cook with my kids, both Annabelle and Wesley. They get so excited that when we decide which recipe to make together they are instantly ready to crack the eggs and start mixing. I have to slow them down to read the recipe, gather all the ingredients, the measuring cups, pans to bake in, bowls, hand mixer, and so on. I want all of the tools on the counter in an organized fashion for a couple of reasons.

The kids and I might find a trip to the store is necessary for a missing ingredient before we start. That certainly will add time to the project. We could find something else to cook where we have all the ingredients, saving us a trip. We save time by not wandering around the kitchen from pantry to refrigerator to food preparation area. It saves time in cleanup because the mess is concentrated in one area rather than all over the kitchen. By assembling all that is needed, you save considerable time.

Before you start on anything, ask yourself these key questions:

- ✔ What data or information would make completing this quicker?
- ✔ Is there some information I don't have that would save me time for this project?
- ✔ Do I really have everything I need?

The cycle of planning, to gathering, to implementation is the cycle of success and efficiency. If you have to backtrack to gather resources after you've begun implementation, or go back to planning because your

execution is stalled, and the waste of your time in the backtracking is a significant loss.

## ***Handle everything – just once***

In today's technology world, you deal with less paper because of electronic documents; even with electronic documents you tend to handle and review them multiple times before acting on them. This review is as if you had paper stacked on your desk; it's just now in your computer and email inbox. The shuffling and reshuffling just happens inside your computer, so it seems far more efficient. The truth is you can just store more stuff easily so your productivity can really plummet.

If you're like me, at times you tend to hoard stuff. Because you can store so much in electronic files you tend to keep rather than purge. You can be more efficient with your time if you throw away documents, files, and paper that you don't need. Anything that is not relevant to your life, family, business, or goals, throw it out. Ask yourself, "Is there a negative consequence to throwing this out now?" If the answer is no, throw it out now.

If you need this information in the future, is there another place you could easily access it? The truth in our society is, information is becoming a commodity. Information is readily available, so keeping it because you might need it in the future only overloads you with files, documents, and stuff.

## ***Grabbing the Three Keys to Personal Organization***

Your personal organization is one of the largest influences of your success and happiness in your life.

Your personal organization skills and systems help you feel more fulfilled, productive, and achieve a mental state of wellbeing overall. There are three keys that you want to apply frequently to improve your personal organization. Take a look at the next three sections to key in on these skills.

## ***Stepping back to evaluate***

Evaluating your key work areas can reveal a lot about the person working there. By stepping back from your desk or work area, you can ask the questions, “What type of person works at this desk? Are they organized or unorganized? Does it appear they have an effective system in getting work done? What changes should they make in their organization? Would I trust this person with an important task based on this work environment? What are the reasons I would or wouldn’t?”

You need to have an honest evaluation with yourself, as if you hired a third party or neutral authority to review your work space. What do you see, and what would they see? Then repeat that process for your home office. Does it have the look from an outsider’s as a productive environment? What does your briefcase, computer files, car, purse, closet, house, yard, garage look like? Who is the person who would live this manner? Would you entrust this person with an important task to be completed?

## ***Developing neatness habits***

For some of us, including myself, this one is really tough. I admit of all the concepts, systems, and strategies this one is my Achilles’ heel. I am better at this by following some of my own counsel, but I am clearly a work in progress. There is no question we can save time and increase productivity by organizing or even cleaning up

our workspace. We all need a sense of order and organization to feel calm, relaxed, and in control of our surroundings. Your actual work environment can create a feeling of pleasure and satisfaction or stress and frustration. By instituting order and neatness, you can increase your productivity.

When you create this ordered environment, your self-esteem increases. You're more self-confident in a successful outcome. That self-confidence emotion creates a willingness to be creative, innovate, try new things, and take risks. You feel more in control with more power.

All this neatness removes the roadblocks of frustration and generates more energy. The higher energy level taps into your resources and determination to accomplish the task at hand faster and more efficiently. Establishing neatness habits has far-reaching benefits, reducing your time while increasing your wellbeing and the results you achieve.

### ***Refuse to excuse***

"Refuse to excuse" should be a life mantra and not applied only to time management. Too many people let themselves off the hook with excuses of why tasks and chores didn't get done or why these folks didn't accomplish their mission. People who are messy frequently make excuses to justify or cover up a mess. "That's just the way I am," or "I know where everything is," or "I work better this way."

When you review the time spent, messy people are deluding themselves into thinking they know where everything is located. Frequently a large part of their day is spent trying to find or remember where they put things, instead of being productive at the office or home.



Refuse to excuse a messy desk or work environment for this week. If you have to clear your desk to be able to start on a project, just do it. Take the one task or tool you need to work on, and clear the rest off your desk. If you have to put everything else in drawers, cabinets, closets, waste baskets, or even on the floor, do it. Test this on yourself. Unclutter your space. No excuses for a few days, and see how productive you become.

# Chapter 2

## Setting Yourself Up for Success

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### ***In This Chapter***

- ▶ Tapping into your time-management strengths
  - ▶ Building a solid system of time management
  - ▶ Facing up to time management's biggest challenges
  - ▶ Addressing issues with others
  - ▶ Applying time-management skills to all facets of your life
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Time is the great equalizer — everyone has the same amount in a day. No matter who you are, where you live, and what you do, you clock the same 24-hour cycle as the next person. One person may be wealthier than another, but that doesn't earn him a minute more than the poorest people on the planet.

If that simple fact seems a bit discouraging, think of it this way: You may not have the power to get yourself more time, but you *do* have the power to make the most of it. You can take your 365 days a year, 7 days a week, and 1,440 minutes in a day and invest them in such a way that you reap a return that fulfills your life and attracts the success you dream of.

That's what this book is about: taking control of how you spend your time to make sure you're using it how you really want to. You really are in control of your time, even though you don't always feel like it — even if you

have a job that demands overtime; even if you have kids who keep you in the carpool loop; even if you have dreams and goals that involve developing new skills or furthering your education.

All in all, discovering how to manage your time well is part mental restructuring and part creating a system. Effective time management requires a little introspection, some good habits and organizational skills, and more than a few logistical and tactical tools. But all are achievable, so if you have the time — and I assure you that you do — get ready for a journey that's certain to, if not buy you more time, show you how to make the absolute most of the 24 hours in your day.

## ***Getting to Know Yourself***

Although everyone gets the same number of hours to work with each day, what people don't have in equal amounts are other valuable assets: skill, intelligence, money, ambition, energy, passion, attitude, even looks. All these unique reserves play into your best use of time. So the better you understand yourself — your strengths, weaknesses, goals, values, and motivations — the easier it is to manage your time effectively. In this section, you look at your strengths and goals, think about how much your time is worth, and observe personal energy and behavior patterns that affect your focus throughout the day.

### ***Assessing your strengths and weaknesses***



As a young man, I thought I was good — okay, I admit it; I thought I was *great* — at a much larger

group of skills, tasks, and jobs than I do today. In fact, the older I get, the more I realize the list of what I'm *not* good at dwarfs the list of things I *am* good at. Being consciously competent at those few, however, gets me a lot further than being unconsciously incompetent, as I once was. Despite my poor academic record in high school, as a young adult, I was a quick study at what I needed to do to be as successful in life as I wanted to be. At some point, I saw the light and realized I needed to face up to what I had to do to get where I wanted to go.

First, I took stock of my assets: I tallied up my strengths, skills, and even my weaknesses. And I identified things I needed to work on and things I needed to leverage. That's when I realized that although some people were smarter, were more educated, had more money, and knew more influential people than I did, I had the same amount of time as anyone else. And if I wanted to get ahead, it was up to me to harness my time and invest it in such a way to get a greater return. My willingness to invest more time to gain the edge helped equalize the playing field for me and help me achieve the success I enjoy today.

Chances are that by this point in your life, you've discovered some skills that you come to naturally or perhaps have worked hard to acquire. Maybe you're a master negotiator. Or a whiz with numbers. You may be a good writer. Or you may have a silver tongue. Whatever your strengths, developing the handful that brings you the most return on your efforts, propelling you forward to attain your goals, is a more productive course of action than trying to be the best at everything. For most people, these strengths typically number no more than a half-dozen.

In addition to pinpointing your strengths, you need to identify the areas where your skills are lackluster. Then figure out which tasks are essential for meeting the goals you want to accomplish, and build those skills. Invest time in honing and maintaining your strengths, and improve the weaknesses that you need to overcome to reach your goals. **Remember:** To be successful, you need to be selective.

## ***Naming goals to give you direction***

You know how it is: When you're working toward something, keeping your focus is much easier. A woman may want to lose weight, for example, but perhaps she struggles to stick to a diet or exercise plan. But if her son's wedding is looming three months away on her calendar, she may be more inspired to stay on track, cutting back on second helpings and getting in workouts.



Your goals can serve as inspiration in adopting good time-management skills. After all, managing your time isn't really a benefit in and of itself, but managing your time so you can spend more of it doing what's important to you *is* — whether you're saving for a retirement of travel and adventure or buying the house in the perfect neighborhood.

Using your aspirations to fire up your time-management success means you have to identify your goals and keep them in the front of your mind. Pinning down what's most important to you may require some soul searching. Write down your goals — all of them — and follow these guidelines:

- ✓ **Cast a wide net.** Go for the big goals, such as joining the Peace Corps, as well as the not-so-big ones, such

as getting an energy-efficient car next year.

- ✓ **Think big.** Don't rein in your dreams because they seem unrealistic.



- ✓ **Be as descriptive as possible.** Instead of “build my dream house,” flesh it out: Where is this house? How big? What features does it have? What does it look like? When do you want to move in?
- ✓ **Don't limit goals to a single category.** Think about goals for your career, your personal life, your social situation, your financial status, and any other facet of life that's important to you.

The process of goal-seeking can be a fun and energizing experience, and it's one you can explore at length in [Chapter 3](#). You also see how your current time use can affect the forecast for your future.

## ***Assigning a monetary worth to your time***

Most people think about the value of their time as it relates to on-the-job activity. The fast-food worker knows he earns a minimum wage per hour. The freelance artist advertises a per-hour rate. The massage therapist charges for her services in half-hour and hour increments. But to be truly aware of the value of your time, you need to carry this concept into your personal life as well. The value of time in your personal life is at least as valuable as your work life time. In some cases, personal time is priceless.



One of the most important points to remember as you work through this book is that it's okay not to get everything done. What's critical is making sure that the *important* things are getting done. By assigning value to your time and using the skills you acquire from this book, you can clearly identify what's important and make conscious, wise choices. For example, if you need to save another \$200 per month because you want to start an account for your children's college education, you may determine that putting in an extra shift at work may not be worth the loss of time with your family, even at time-and-a-half pay. Or if you really detest yard work, then paying someone else \$50 to cut your grass may be a fair trade for the extra two hours of time watching the game.

## Throwing away money

I once saw a woman in a parking lot throw pennies on the ground. When I asked her what she was doing, she told me she'd just read about a multimillionaire who had calculated his worth, and based on the value of an hour of his time, he determined that it wasn't worth the few seconds it'd take for him to pick up a dollar bill from the sidewalk. She, however, had decided that although it was worth her time to pick up a dollar, she could afford to part with a few pennies.

I think she missed the point, but there's a lesson in this experience: You're always on the clock. Time is money, and yours has a value. Giving away your precious time without a sense of its value is like throwing money on the sidewalk. By knowing what your time is worth, you can prioritize those tasks that yield the greatest return, delegating or eliminating those tasks that provide little to no return on your time investment.

***Identifying your rhythm to get in the zone***

Athletes talk about being *in the zone*, a place where positive results seem to stick like a magnet. Well, I'm here to tell you that the zone isn't some magical place where wishes come true. Anybody can get there, without a lucky token or fairy dust. What it takes is focus, singular focus.



As an ex-professional athlete in racquetball in the 1980s, I can say I've been in the zone a number of times. And I've experienced that same distillation of focus and electric energy on work projects as well — times when my volume and quality of work was bordering on unbelievable. If you can get your focus under control, you can visit the zone every day and make great things happen.

If you know your rhythms — when you're most on, what times of day you're best equipped to undertake certain tasks — you can perform your most important activities when you're in the zone. Everyone works to a unique pace, and recognizing that rhythm is one of the most valuable personal discoveries you can make. Some of the aspects you need to explore include the following:

- ✓ How many hours can you work at a high level each day?
- ✓ What's your most productive time of the day?
- ✓ How many weeks can you work at high intensity without a break?
- ✓ How long of a break do you need so you can come back focused and intense?





## **Breakout! Sharpening your focus with time off**

About ten years ago, as I was evaluating my sales results, I puzzled over a drop in my numbers at the tenth week when I'd been working without a break. It didn't take me long to realize that my lower results reflected my drop in focus. And it's a pattern I could see in previous months. I realized the best course of action, rather than gutting it out, was to get out. I needed a vacation.

I also found that I didn't need a full week's vacation to return to work revitalized and refreshed. I simply needed a mini-break, about five days over the course of a long weekend to step away from the work routine and see the world through another lens, whether holing up with my family or making an escape to the beach. In the last few years, I've recognized again that span of time spent at work has been reduced from ten weeks to a nine-week schedule. It could be attributed to age, increased responsibility, pre-teen and teen children, or a couple of ongoing health issues. I have learned that getting out is still the best course of action.

To this day, I lay out my whole year in advance, now based on the nine-week rhythm. This ensures I use my time for maximum benefit. I'm either working at a high level, or I am out recharging myself for five days to come back strong.

## ***Following a System***

Effective time management requires more than good intent and self-knowledge. To keep your time under careful control, you need a framework. In your arsenal of time-management ammunition, you want to stock - organizational skills, technology that helps keep you on track, and planning tools that help you keep the reins on your time, hour by hour, day by day, week by week, and so forth.

Establishing a solid system you can replicate is a key to succeeding in managing your time. Systems, standards, strategies, and rules protect your time and allow you to

use it to your best advantage. These skills are applicable whether you're the company CEO, a salesperson, a midlevel manager, an executive, or an administrative assistant. No matter your work or your work environment, time management is of universal value.

## ***Scheduling your time and creating a routine***

Sticking to a time-scheduling system can't guarantee the return of your long-lost vacation days, but by regularly tracking your meetings, appointments, and obligations, you reduce your odds of double-booking and scheduling appointments too close. And by planning ahead, you make sure to make time for all the important things first.

For years, I've followed the time-blocking system, which I detail in [Chapter 5](#). The system ensures that you put your priorities first (starting with routines and then moving to individual tasks/activities) before scheduling in commitments and activities of lesser importance.

Such time-management techniques are just as applicable to the other spheres of your life. There's a reason why I advise you to plug in your personal commitments first when filling in your time-blocking schedule: Your personal time is worthy of protection, and you can further enhance that time by applying time-management principles.

### **The schedule will set you free**

Too many people feel that all this structure is too restrictive. They think the freedom they seek with their schedules and their lives is contained in a more flexible environment. They're afraid establishing a routine will keep them wrapped in the chains of time.

However, most people waste too much time figuring out each individual day on the fly. They react to the day rather than respond. Reacting is a reflex action that turns over your agenda to others, and that can't possibly lead to

freedom. Responding is a disciplined act of planning that determines where and how you'll invest your time.

For example, suppose you have a set place in your schedule to respond to phone calls and problems. You've established the routine of dealing with these issues in predetermined time slots. You can hold off on your response until later — when you're calmer, more focused, and in a problem-solving mentality — instead of reacting because you're dealing with the issue now.

Planning how to spend your time, which at first glance seems opposed to freedom, is the only pathway to the true mastery of time. With the right routine come simplicity, productivity, and freedom. The "what am I going to work on today?" or "what's my schedule today?" never happens. And when you get the important work out of the way, you free yourself to do what you really enjoy.

If you're a free spirit and what I'm suggesting just fried your circuits, start with a small amount of routine. Ask yourself, "Can I establish a daily routine to try it out? What can I do without having it send me into withdrawal?" Then implement a new routine every week. You'll add more than 50 new pieces of structure to your schedule in a normal work year and see a significant improvement in your freedom.

## ***Organizing your surroundings***

A good system of time management requires order and organization. Creating order in your world saves time wasted searching for stuff, from important phone numbers to your shoes. But even more, physical order creates mental order and helps you perform more efficiently.

Yes, your workspace should be clean and orderly, with papers and folders arranged in some sort of sequence that makes items easy and quick to find. Your desk should be cleared off, providing space to work. Your important tools — phone, computer, calculator — ought to be within reach. And your day planner, of course, should be at your fingertips. Your briefcase, your meeting planner, even your closet has an impact on your time-management success.

# ***Overcoming Time-Management Obstacles***

Anyone can conquer time management, but it's not always easy. If your experience is anything like mine, sometimes your days feel like a video game, where you're in constant threat of being gobbled up on your course to the finish line. But instead of cartoon threats, your obstacles are your own shortcomings (poor communication skills, procrastination, and the inability to make wise and quick decisions), time-wasting co-workers and bosses, phone and people interruptions, and unproductive meetings.

## ***Communicating effectively***

Communicating effectively is one of the best ways to maximize your time. One of the biggest time-wasters on company time is, no surprise, talking with co-workers. But what may be a surprise is that the abuse *isn't* a function of weekend catch-up discussions that take place at the water cooler or the gossip circle at the copy machine. Rather, it's the banter at the weekly staff status reports, the drawn-out updates of projects that never seem to conclude, the sales presentations that get off track. It's all the meetings that could be as brief as ten minutes but somehow take an hour or more.

At your disposal, however, is an amazing weapon for taming these misbehaving encounters: your words. With a few deft remarks, you have the power to bring these meetings to a productive close.

In [Chapter 14](#), I provide specific insight on which types of situations are most appropriate for each of the primary communication methods — face-to-face, verbal

only, and written — and I present plenty of ideas for communicating your message and posing questions strategically, succinctly, and successfully so your communication ends in results, action, and decisions — whether you're leading a meeting or simply attending it.

## ***Circumventing interruptions***

Interruptions creep into your workday in all sorts of insidious manners. Besides the pesky co-worker stepping into your office with “Got a sec?” interruptions come in the form of unproductive meetings, phone calls, hall conversations that drift into your office and distract you, even the “you've got mail” icon that creeps onto the lower corner of your computer monitor. You now have more of these interruptions than ever before. You get sidetracked by instant messaging and social media such as Facebook and Twitter. The list of five-minute-here-and-there interruptions is endless.

Additionally, most poor time managers interrupt themselves by trying to do too much at once. Study after study supports that multitasking isn't the most effective work style. The constant stops and starts disrupt a project, requiring startup time each time you turn back to the task. I truly believe being a good time manager at work depends on how you create, craft, and implement your interruption system and strategy. Each day, interruptions cost hours of lost productivity for businesses.

## ***Getting procrastination under control***

Sometimes, it's tempting to use interruptions as an excuse to postpone a project or a task. How nice to have someone else to blame for not getting started! And before you know it, you've found so many good reasons

not to do something that you've backed yourself into a really tight 11th-hour corner, and the pressure's on.

Say you're writing a 400-page book and you have ten months to complete the project. You have almost a year to put this thing together. Looking forward, your task requires you to complete 40 pages per month — little more than a page a day. That's too easy! You can afford to put it off for a while. Wait for a couple of months, and then you'll need to produce 50 pages a month. Still doable. But at some point, *doable* starts to morph into *impossible*. But when? When you're down to four months and pressured to crank out 100 pages per month? Or do you wait until the last minute and find yourself struggling to complete nearly 15 pages per day?

Procrastination has a lot of causes, but most of the reasons to procrastinate leave you headed for trouble.

### ***Making decisions: Just do it***

One of the easiest things to put off is making a decision. Even sidestepping the smallest decisions can lead to giant time-consumption. Think about it: You scroll through your email and save one to ponder and respond to later. You revisit a few times and still can't bring yourself to a commitment. So you get more email from the sender. To stave off making a decision, you ask a couple of questions, which requires more time and attention. By the time the issue is resolved and put to bed, you may have invested five times more attention than if you'd handled it at once.

Many factors create the confusion and uncertainty that prevent you from making sound but quick decisions. Often, part of the struggle is having too many options. Most people have a tough enough time choosing between pumpkin and apple pie at the Thanksgiving table. But